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THE RADICALISATION PENDULUM:

INTRODUCING A TRAUMA-BASED MODEL OF VIOLENT EXTREMIST RADICALISATION

Do the pros and cons of extremist involvement work against each other to maintain commitment to the cause, but at a cost to the individual's mental health?

THE NEGATIVES

It should not come as a surprise that being a violent extremist – either as a group member or relatively isolated adherent to an extremist cause online or offline – takes a heavy toll on mental and physical health. Many accounts by former extremists and terrorists from a wide variety of different ideological backgrounds recount (for example) substance abuse, intergroup violence, toxic stress, regular conflicts with the authorities, or traumatic experiences such as witnessing torture, rape, and death.

Ample empirical research has also confirmed that extremism and terrorism are generally not sustainable life choices. At some point or another, most extremists and terrorists will have to face the substantial physical and mental costs attached to this 'career path', often leading to disengagement or even deradicalisation.

THE POSITIVES

On the other hand, personal accounts and empirical research also regularly mention positive aspects of membership in extremist groups or involvement in these milieus. Former extremists and terrorists often tell stories of loyalty, camaraderie and friendship; fun, adventure, and excitement, as well as strong feelings of collective and social identities, purpose, belonging, and direction in life.

Extremist environments and terrorist groups use norms and values as part of their ideology to legitimise individual harmful actions such as violence. These values can have the effect of reducing feelings of guilt and shame by perpetrators of violence. Supporting the cause, ideology, or group earns rewards,

status, and respect. Some larger and better-funded terrorist organisations have even included vacation and retirement packages for members who have earned it.

In short, there is limited but growing evidence that somehow extremist environments and terrorist groups might be able to protect their members against the toxic psychological and physiological effects inherent to their own nature.

HR, HARM, AND HEALING

However, there is more to it than just the positive or negative effects of membership in extremist or terrorist groups and milieus. Organisations may try to counteract the toxic experiences associated with involvement. Depending on their skills and sophistication, they may be more or less successful in engaging in human resource management. Vera Mironova provides an excellent in-depth exploration of this in her 2019 book 'From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists: Human Resources of Non-State Armed Groups'.

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Beyond organisational efforts to mitigate the negative outcomes of involvement in violent extremism, I propose that traumatic and quasi-therapeutical effects lie at the very core of the psychological process of radicalisation. Radicalising towards violent extremism is, in other words, harmful and healing simultaneously.

How does this work? In her 2017 book 'Terror, love and brainwashing', Alexandra Stein argues that the relationship between extremist and terrorist groups, their leaders and followers are rooted in the creation and experience of trauma in the form of disorganised attachment. In this type of attachment, the caregiver (here: the group, milieu or leader) is – at the same time – the source of threat and harm. Consequently, the person caught up in this process seeks support from the source of the trauma, leading to more trauma and more attachment in the hope of healing.

THE PENDULUM

I think there is something even deeper at work beyond the relational level. Political theorists and philosophers studying the functional components of ideologies, such as Martin Seliger, have argued that these complex systems of political concepts (as Michael Freeden calls them), such as 'justice', 'honour', 'violence', 'power', must include a problem definition.

This can include a grievance (called 'diagnostic framing' by social movement researchers); a proposed solution to the problem (or 'prognostic framing'); and a future vision for a world without the previously stated problem. These three elements are communicated through different mechanisms, including social and emotional processes. Intellectual reflection is neither necessary nor required to become ideologically radicalised.

This is one of the most common misconceptions regarding this process. You can be a fully committed and convinced (i.e., radicalised) violent extremist without ever having shown an interest in its theoretical foundations.

The key to interpreting the radicalisation process lies in understanding the dysfunctional relationship between the problem and the solutions provided by the violent extremist group. The solution rarely results in the group achieving their vision of the future. However, they provide agency, efficacy, and importantly, generate further conflict and grievances.

The result is a near-constant emotional 'pendulum' keeping the person in a permanent drift between positive and negative emotional states and poles. While the future vision remains in constant potential reach, it is almost never attained. Oscillating between the problem (negative, trauma-inducing) and the solution (positive, quasi-therapeutic) has profound and lasting effects on mental health, personality, and neurobiology. Unfortunately, we are only at the very beginning of fully understanding the deeper psychological effects and mechanisms of violent extremist radicalisation informed by these processes.

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