



BRIEFINGS: RECIPROCAL RADICALISATION

FULL REPORT

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These briefings were delivered as part of a CREST Workshop on Reciprocal Radicalisation organised in London in May 2018, and attended by thirty-five practitioners from the UK government, police, probation and the prison service. Papers and discussion during the day included interactive escalation of rhetoric and violence between extremist groups, signs and causal factors, the impact of the state, mainstream and social media, and potential opportunities for intervention.

About CREST

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1. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Reciprocal radicalisation (and related terms, including cumulative extremism and co-radicalisation) is the idea that extremist groups fuel one another's rhetoric and/or actions, including violence. It emerged as a concept after the 2001 riots in Northern England linked to the presence of extremists, and was further embedded following the establishment of the English Defence League in response to demonstrations by Islamist extremists in 2009. In 2015, reference to reciprocal radicalisation was made in the UK Government's *Counter-Extremism Strategy*. Despite finding a footing in both academic and policy circles, the empirical evidence for reciprocal radicalisation so far has been mixed. Analyses also suggest that relationships between extremist groups are more complex, and are mediated by the state, digital technology, and the news media.

1.1 CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Various terms were used during the workshop in addition to 'reciprocal radicalisation', including 'cumulative extremism', 'interactive escalation' and 'movement/counter-movement conflict'. 'Micro-radicalisation' was also used, to refer to the everyday escalations of conflict that occur, for example, on street corners or in classrooms.

In an attempt to clarify the subject area, several distinctions were made, one between words and deeds (the substance of the interaction), and the other between different processes that might be triggered as groups interact with one another. When academics, policy makers and practitioners refer to 'reciprocal radicalisation', some are referring primarily to 'a war of words' or rhetorical escalation, whilst others may focus explicitly on reciprocal acts of violence, such as those which took place during the 2001 riots.

Additionally, it is important to reflect on the nature and depth of the interaction. Is the engagement between groups superficial – e.g., a short-lived war of words or violent exchange – or does it extend further and deeper?

Does the 'radicalisation' of one group lead newcomers to be drawn into, ideologically engaged and practically mobilised in another?

The common ground between those who favour one term or interpretation over another is the idea of 'interaction' between those with opposing positions.

1.2 THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THE INTERACTION

During the discussion, multiple examples of reciprocal radicalisation and many different types of actors were referred to. Participating bodies included extreme right or left-wing movements, religious groups (especially Jihadist or Islamist, but also others with religio-political aims), nationalist separatist enclaves, ethnic groups and radical single issue groups. The roles and interventions of nation states and other state actors were also highlighted.

Attempting to model interaction between groups is complex. Some engage with one another via the public, raising the question about how much public support different groups require and for what purposes. Groups also pick and choose issues and opponents for practical as well as ideological reasons. This diversity of perspectives should be appreciated, rather than the assumption being that groups can straightforwardly be categorised as enemies, competitors or allies.

Although occasionally marked by a single exchange or event (sometimes referred to as 'a spike' in violence or in the expression of hatred), the interaction between opposing groups was generally understood to be dynamic and to develop over time. Reference was made to 'spirals' of violence and the 'escalation' of conflict. Violence doesn't necessarily appear to trigger violence from opponents immediately. It may also be difficult for groups to shift from one course of action to another (such as from non-violent to violent action).

Despite being presented – and presenting themselves – as opposing forces, the parties involved in a conflict were understood to draw on a common pool of resources. They often shared language and narratives

(e.g., of an imminent war between Muslims and non-Muslims), imagery (e.g., the Crusades, Saladin) and sometimes referred back to a particular event or memory (but from different perspectives). They borrowed from one another, sometimes referring to one another's propaganda material. Occasionally they saw themselves as 'learning from their enemies', in terms of both strategy and tactics.

1.3 CAUSAL FACTORS

Although different cases of interactive escalation are inevitably shaped by their unique temporal, geographical, social and ideological contexts, several generic factors were highlighted. On the side of the groups themselves and their members, driving factors included the rise of new youth subcultures, the quest for identity and significance, anti-establishment standpoints (e.g., anti-school, anti-state, anti-authority), the decline of traditional masculinities, hate and discrimination (e.g., Islamophobia, anti-Semitism), territorial and other local claims, grievances and a desire for revenge.

In addition to being spurred on by the words or actions of an opposing group, rhetorical or violent escalation could be sparked by the intervention or actions of others (e.g., the media, state actors, external provocateurs).

The importance of recognising the spatial, and principally urban, dimension of interactive escalation was also stressed. Often opposition groups were understood to be drawn from distinct and segregated areas, with conflict taking place in transitional zones. In many cases, even groups in direct competition talked past each other in regard to space, with some intent on claiming local spaces with others taking a more global approach. The need for caution was stressed in order to avoid conflating the rhetoric and actions of a small number of extremists with wider communities and their grievances.

Also noted was the impact of internal conflict and competition, with some of the most contentious debates taking place *within* rather than *between* extreme movements. Niche groups were sometimes seen to use external threats and negative depictions of outsiders to help distinguish themselves from those within their own ideological family. For example, a group might wish to be seen as the one 'true' heir to a

tradition or as the only committed or effective body in the fight against an external opponent. This raises the question of whether a rhetorical attack by one group on an ideological opponent is all it seems, or whether it is in fact a tactic used to advance a claim against a competitor within the same extremist milieu.

1.4 WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF RECIPROCAL RADICALISATION? WHAT SORTS OF DATA AND RESEARCH METHODS ARE AVAILABLE AND APPROPRIATE?

Irrespective of whether reciprocal radicalisation, cumulative extremism or interactive escalation was the favoured term, there was an acknowledgement of change over time in the relationship between two or more groups or positions. For research to be conducted, this requires the collection of data over a period of time (e.g., at various data points) and from sources which represent or communicate the views of the various parties.

Researchers might expect to see opinions about an opponent changing, attitudes hardening, perhaps an increased number of references to the other, and of an increasingly hostile or violent nature. Incidence of performative opposition (through protest marches, demonstrations, street activity and public theatre), hate crime, and physical violence may also occur.

Such expressions are likely to be textual or visual in kind – in print media, posters, websites, social media, graffiti, on dress and other forms of iconography – or they may take the form of embodied public practices. Inflammatory and/or negative references to an opposing group in propaganda material, online posts or comments, sermons or public lectures, and in pictures and videos may be used. Actors are likely to draw on shared imagery, historical events or narratives, though from differing perspectives. They may make reference to old wounds, historical grievances and existential threats involving the other. Communal antagonism towards a foe may be kept alive through 'commemorative extremism', including parades and marches, other public acts of remembrance and online commemoration. The practice

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of these commemorations can also descend into cycles of performative one-upmanship.

Examples from a variety of case studies showed how movements ‘curated’ references to others in texts, images, symbols and events for a variety of ends, such as creating distrust and doubt, stirring up grievance, inciting hatred, hooking supporters, spreading conspiracy theories, encouraging imitation, dehumanising others, generating fear, and calling for action. Visible differences and perceived differential treatment between communities become points of conflict and lenses through which to view the world. Frequently these efforts look to frame even non-radical opposition (such as civil rights movements) as ‘extremist’ or ‘existential threats’, linking disparate or separate elements to help achieve a sense of threat.

The diversity of types of data, sources, locations and platforms, and the need to map change over time, suggest a range of relevant research methods, both quantitative and qualitative, including linguistic analysis, discourse and narrative analysis, visual and frame analysis, and ethnographic methods. They all have a place in research on interactive violent escalation. The analysis of historical as well as contemporary cases of conflict between different kinds of groups or milieus can also improve our understanding of the mechanisms and stages of reciprocation and/or escalation, the catalysts, and any opportunities for intervention. The role of gender – both in terms of actors and the symbols and images they use – should not be overlooked.

In any social environment, a certain level of conflict is normal and not a cause for alarm or intervention. Drawing the line between what is normal and a spiral of words or deeds that may lead to crime or violence in any given context remains largely a matter of interpretation (in the absence of appropriate evidence-based research). There is a need for a dynamic relational approach in order to understand escalating conflicts in terms of both their historical and socio-political context (‘arenas of interaction’), and the everyday, local relationships and events that drive them (‘micro-radicalisations’). Distinguishing between posturing – which certainly has its place in local social relations – and an incipient move to violence remains difficult. More often than not, tit-for-tat gestures and movement/counter-movement conflicts stop short of violence, hence the need to more fully understand the ‘internal

brakes on violent escalation’.

There remains a need for theoretical hypothesis testing, systematic cross-case comparisons, and the development of time-lines of escalation. These would extend the evidence base, improve research rigour and deepen understanding of different stages and mechanisms, all of which would further support practitioners to identify when intervention might be necessary or effective. In their absence, there has been a tendency to conflate the escalation of rhetoric with violent action (and the ‘sayers’ with the ‘doers’), and to assume that an intensification of negative interaction is synonymous with radicalisation. Furthermore, in the absence of a common approach (in terms of research questions and methods of analysis), it has been difficult to compare cases (between different groups, in different geo-political locations and time periods).

1.5 SOCIAL MEDIA AND VIOLENT ESCALATION

There is little evidence of a direct link between social media incitement and hate crime or acts of political violence. Social media data and discourses aren’t always a proxy for, or reflective of the discussions and beliefs of wider movements. The vast majority of online contributions are made by a small group of ‘super users’, often resulting in a difference between online and offline enemies. There is also no neat divide between the online and offline spheres, with some online material recycled from physical and/or historical publications.

A temporary spike in the volume of hate posts or comments often follows a violent attack or event, but their content may not represent an escalation of conflict (e.g., a call to action). A large number of posts may simply (re)circulate news stories by online opinion leaders (‘trusted sources’). Curating and reframing non-radical material from a broad range of sources (e.g., both left and right leaning newspapers) is a tactic used by groups to add a veneer of legitimacy to the narratives they put forward.

Following terrorist attacks in 2017, digital influence engineering was used to encourage ideologically opposed groups to adopt more extreme positions, to incite anger and trigger escalation, with the aim of

creating doubt and distrust. A number of distinctive digital behaviours has been identified, allowing appropriate interventions to be designed.

Platform providers are increasingly regulating ‘kill speech’, and to a lesser extent ‘calls to action’, but simultaneously groups are responding by ‘getting behind take downs’.

The possibility of posting counter-narratives in the immediate aftermath of attacks was raised as a way of balancing content.

2. ABSTRACTS

Full text of all these papers can be found at:

<https://www.radicalisationresearch.org/debate/briefings-reciprocal-radicalisation/>

Abstracts are provided below.

2.1 PANEL 1: THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO RECIPROCAL RADICALISATION

Paul Evans (Research Information Communication Unit Head of News and Analysis)

Reciprocal Radicalisation and the Shared Extremist Narrative – A Communications Practitioner Perspective

Tahir Abbas (London School of Economics and Political Science)

The Hyper-Intersectionality of Far Right Islamophobia and Islamist Radicalisation

This theoretical and conceptual paper discusses the nature of the reciprocal radicalisation of far right and Islamist extremists in the UK context. Both camps feed off the otherisation of groups presented as oppositional to their local and global identity formations, with far right groups wanting to reclaim certain locales as part of a process of ‘taking back their country’, whereas Islamist have no claim on the local, focusing their attention on globalised identity politics. Both these groups are experiencing the fragmentation of masculinities, where men, displaced because of the shifting economic contours of post-industrial societies,

the impact of deindustrialisation upon traditional labour market practices and the withering of national identities in the light of neoliberal globalisation, are retreating into violent hegemony as solutions to their malaise. The response on the part of the state is to reinforce a narrow historical reading of society and the closing down of discussions relating to diversity, inclusion and multiculturalism rather than focus on equality, integration and social interdependence in the light of widening inequalities, a decline in political trust and increasing cultural division.

Gavin Bailey (Manchester Metropolitan University)

“Is it because they is...”: Microradicalisation, Reciprocal Radicalisation, and Explanation

McCauley and Moskaleiko define radicalisation as movement towards greater conflict, and as such draw attention to process. Indeed, this means that the object of study is not just the moment in which an individual, group or society jumps over a line from legal to illegal conflict, but all the processes before and after this. I argue here that this begins with microradicalisations, that is the small everyday escalations of conflict that occur in classrooms, street corners and elsewhere. These escalations are of conflicts between citizens, and between citizens and those with some power over them (police, teachers and others). Further, even such microradicalisations are subject to common-sense explanations in terms of communal difference and conflict: each party can see that the other is X, because they are Y. This, I argue, provides a way that the extremist group and societal components of Busher and Macklin’s ‘reciprocal radicalisation’ can be connected.

Joel Busher (Coventry University) and Graham Macklin (University of Oslo)

Towards a Situated Analysis of “Reciprocal Radicalisation”

Concepts such as ‘cumulative extremism’ and ‘reciprocal radicalisation’ have been circulating in policy and practitioner discourses for much of the last decade. As they gained traction in policy and practitioner discourses they also became a focus of academic attention. We were among those who sought to engage with such concepts. We saw in them opportunities for researchers and analysts of ‘extremism’ to draw on insights from the wider research on the relational dynamics of contentious politics. However, we also

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identified a number of ways in which they could come to comprise an ‘explanatory fiction’. In our article in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, we made six proposals about how to achieve the conceptual clarity required to realise the analytical gains while mitigating against the potential analytical losses. In this paper we situate those proposals within a wider conceptual framework. We ground this framework in recent research that deploys the concepts of ‘players’ and ‘arenas’ (Jasper & Duyvendack 2015a; 2015b) to articulate the dynamic nature of mobilization and counter-mobilizations by both non-state and state actors.

2.2 PANEL 2: EMPIRICAL APPROACHES TO RECIPROCAL RADICALISATION AND THE EXTREME-RIGHT

Sean Arbuthnot (St Philip’s Centre, Leicester)

Reciprocal Radicalisation – Practical Experiences of Prevent Support

There is no single pathway to radicalisation and every referral that receives support through Prevent and Channel is unique. Extreme ideologies may be broadly similar, but personal circumstances, grievances and vulnerabilities are often varied. However it is often striking how extremists who are seemingly at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum often feed off each other, use similar language, prey on similar vulnerabilities and speak in the same general terms about a “them and us” mentality. In some respects, the extreme right wing and Islamist-inspired ideologies can therefore be seen as two sides of the same coin. This presentation will consider how reciprocal radicalisation can manifest itself at a grassroots level through an examination of local case studies concerning individuals who were at risk of radicalisation and received support through the Channel programme. It will also reflect on how we can effectively tackle reciprocal radicalisation by considering what made these particular interventions successful.

Paul Jackson (University of Northampton)

The British Extreme Right, Reciprocal Radicalisation and the Language of Self-Defence

The term ‘reciprocal radicalisation’ has been much discussed in recent years. The term ‘radicalisation’ points to a turn towards a simplification of politics, one

that is steeped in clear, emotive dichotomies that urge action, and the term can also be used to indicate a turn towards violence. Meanwhile, ‘reciprocal’ suggests this is a two-way process, as different groups feed from each other to construct radicalised worldviews. One element that is important to consider when exploring reciprocal radicalisation in the extreme right is the ways these groups will construct a legitimising discourse of defence, using powerful, impassioned stories that discuss others who are deemed to be ‘radical’, to underpin a worldview that is deeply cynical and only loosely related to reality. This paper will briefly examine this issue empirically, contrasting tropes in samples of contemporary British neo-Nazi online media, and similar though distinct British anti-Muslim ‘counter-Jihad’ online media. It will explore how constructions of radicalised others – in forms such as Jews and Muslims; left wing groups, such as anti-fascists; and supposedly corrupt liberal and establishment elites – combine in powerful, affecting ways in these extreme right discourses to legitimise radical responses. Importantly, such ‘enemy’ groups are repeatedly framed as ‘extreme’ and posing an existential threat by the extreme right. Constructing opponents as people who are already radical is crucial for extreme right discourses, as doing so frames aggressive actions by the extreme right as a legitimate defence from attack that was started by others.

Samantha McGarry (Lancaster University)

Reciprocal Radicalisation as a Strategic Choice? A Case Study of National Action

The speed with which National Action moved towards violence and celebrating terrorism raises questions about the extent to which their escalation was a response to Islamist terrorism. This paper will summarise the findings of a granular level analysis of National Action’s websites, pamphlets, forums, videos and media coverage to analyse this possibility. The way in which the group integrated anti-Muslim rhetoric into prevailing narratives about ‘race war’, anti-Semitism and ‘white rights’ was particularly evident in their street activities. Their approach, including encouragement to ‘learn from enemies’, suggests a strategic and instrumental response to increase recruitment, radicalisation and mobilisation – whilst the response of individual members committing violence appeared primarily reactive. Although National Action’s behaviour suggests an intensification of extremism linked to Islamist terrorism, there are

equal indications that this was a result of competition within the Far Right. This may suggest Reciprocal Radicalisation ought to be considered as a movement-wide phenomenon.

Mark Littler (University of Huddersfield)

Terrorism, Hate Speech and the 'Cumulative Extremism' Hypothesis on Facebook

The growth of the digital space has transformed the way that extremist groups organise and recruit, pluralising voices and granting them a reach unprecedented before the arrival of social media. Unsurprisingly, the interaction between extremist groups, and in particular, the concept of 'cumulative extremism', has rapidly become a touchstone in academic and policy discussions of movement-counter-movement dynamics, with particular attention paid to the interplay between real world violence and online activity. The extent to which the pronouncements of online groups influence offline action remains subject to intense debate, despite a growing body of scholarship according a key role to social media as a forum for incitement to real world violence. Despite the frequency of these assertions, however, there is little empirical research that can sustain the drawing of such a link. This paper attempts to address this shortcoming, presenting the results of analysis exploring the impact of the Bataclan spree shootings on the social media communications of the EDL and Britain First. Highlighting the fact that there was little meaningful difference in the content of their pre and post-attack communications, this paper argues that the impact of social media in facilitating cumulative extremism has been exaggerated, and that more nuanced models of social media influence need to be developed in order to explain the phenomenon of cumulative extremism.

2.3 PANEL 3: RECIPROCAL RADICALISATION IN OTHER CONTEXTS

Alex Carter (Teesside University)

Interactive Escalation, and De-escalation, in Northern Ireland from 1966-1976

Recently the concept of Reciprocal Radicalisation (RR) has gained currency amongst journalists, academics and policy-makers. Despite this, there is a dearth of empirical research into the idea. Furthermore, the

extant literature on the subject has thus far been limited to the development of movement-counter-movement conflicts between social movements in England. In order to address this gap in the literature, this paper will explore the escalation of the Troubles in Northern Ireland from its onset in the 1960s through to its peak as a lethal conflict across the 1970s. Unlike any of the case studies which have focused on the mobilisation of combative social movements in England, the Troubles did escalate to the point of civil war. Thus, this study reveals important details on the factors which are conducive to the development of processes of RR. Further by comparing state interventions at the onset of the Troubles with later more effective interventions, the paper will shed light on ways in which RR may be interrupted.

Julia Ebner (Institute for Strategic Dialogue)

Rhetorical and Strategic Allies in the Digital Age

Terrorist attacks have had creeping societal and political effects, driving inter- and intra-community divisions and accelerating the rise of both Islamist and far-right extremism, in particular across Europe and the US. I will speak about the spiraling torrent of hate between different forms of extremism, drawing on her field research, interviews with members of extremist groups and digital analytics work. The paper will provide insights into the complementary strategic trajectories and tactics of Islamist and far-right extremists and explain how the two extremes have become rhetorical allies by feeding into the same narrative of an imminent civil war between Muslims and non-Muslims. As well as giving examples of how extremists on both sides have used each other's words and actions as recruiting arguments and legitimisers of their own activities, I will discuss the role of the media and new technologies in accelerating this dynamic. I will end by addressing the challenges that this global and cross-ideological interconnectedness of extremisms pose for policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders in the radicalisation and terrorism prevention field.

Martin Innes, Colin Roberts, Andy Dawson and Diyana Dobрева (Cardiff University)

Complex Conflict Dynamics and Digital Influence Engineering: How Russian Bots and Trolls Impacted Social Reactions to the 2017 Terrorist Attacks

This paper uses systematically collected social media data to examine the aftermath of the 2017 UK terrorist attacks, and how Russian influence and interference

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measures sought to amplify social divisions and tensions across different points of the ideological spectrum. Extending and elaborating Roberts et al's (2017) analysis of conflict dynamics following the terrorist murder of Lee Rigby in 2013 that was informed by Randall Collins' work, the current analysis attends to how such processes are now inflected and shaped by geopolitical interests. Specifically, we show how particular forms of 'digital influence engineering' were used to encourage ideologically opposed groups to adopt more extreme positions. Empirically, a particular focus of the analysis is upon how a range of 'soft facts' (in the form of rumours, conspiracy theories / propaganda / fake news) were used to try and trigger collective anger that in turn induced processes of reciprocal radicalization.

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