

A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO RADICALIZATION, TERRORISM AND MASS MURDERING

The case of Anders Breivik

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Abstract

Anders Breivik is an individual known to have conducted one of the most devastating terrorist attacks in the history of Europe. All evidence suggests that he acted without the direct support of any group or organization. This article addresses the matter of why, but mainly how an individual can radicalize his thoughts and actions to the point of committing mass murder. The present study analyses Anders Breivik's pathway, from political radicalism to extremist thoughts and, finally, terrorism. An analysis of the Norwegian shooter's discourse, from his manifesto, based on Bandura's moral disengagement model proves to be useful, as it explains some of the mental processes involved in the phenomenon of political violence. Other scholars like Horgan, Borum, and McCauley & Moskaleiko were also brought to the discussion. All psychological traits should be considered in accordance to their correlation with personal history and situational factors. Understanding and applying psychological models is a crucial task for countering radicalism and political violence, regardless of the analyst's professional background.

Keywords: *big data; intelligence analysis; artificial Intelligence; prediction capability.*

UMA ABORDAGEM PSICOLÓGICA PARA A RADICALIZAÇÃO, O TERRORISMO E A VIOLÊNCIA EM MASSA:

O caso de Anders Breivik

Resumo

Anders Breivik é um indivíduo conhecido por ter conduzido um dos ataques terroristas mais devastadores da história da Europa. Todas as evidências apontam para o fato de ele ter agido sem o apoio direto de qualquer grupo ou organização. Este artigo discute aspectos ligados aos porquês, mas principalmente a como um indivíduo alcança tamanho grau de radicalização em seus pensamentos e ações a ponto de cometer assassinato em massa. Uma leitura do manifesto escrito por Breivik ajuda a delinear um quadro de seu modelo ideológico. O presente trabalho analisa a trajetória percorrida por Breivik entre o radicalismo político, o pensamento extremista e o engajamento em uma ação terrorista. A análise do discurso apresentado no Manifesto publicado pelo extremista norueguês a partir da teoria do desengajamento moral de Bandura revela-se útil para a compreensão dos processos mentais envolvidos no fenômeno. Também é utilizada a produção de autores como Horgan, Borum e Mcauley & Moskaleiko. Os traços psicológicos associados ao comportamento terrorista devem ser considerados a partir de sua correlação com o histórico pessoal e a presença de fatores situacionais. Compreender e aplicar modelos da psicologia é tarefa crucial para analistas de contraterrorismo de todos os campos profissionais.

Palavras-chaves: terrorismo, radicalização, extremismo, desengajamento moral, psicologia, Breivik.

INTRODUCTION

On the 22nd of July 2011 a bomb was detonated in a white van parked right in front of Oslo's Cabinet Building (høyblokken), the office of Norway's Prime Minister. The explosion killed eight people and destroyed an important part of important governmental facilities. It took about half an hour for media vehicles to confirm that neither the Prime Minister, nor any other member of the government was injured in the attack. As the security and emergency forces coordinated first response efforts, 32-year-old Anders Breivik stepped down of a ferryboat at the Island of Utoya, where the annual summer youth camp of the Norwegian Labour Party was taking place. There, he shot and killed sixty-nine people, before the first members of a police team arrived at the island. Breivik then surrendered without any resistance. On the previous day, to about 7000 online contacts, the attacker had posted a compendium, consisting of around 1500 pages of far-right ideology and an operational guide, called "2083 – A European declaration of independence". This was the first mass violence event on Norwegian soil since the German occupation during World War II (Eriksen, 2012).

When listening or reading about the attacks of Oslo and Utoya, all kinds of questions shall come to mind. Some might ask how an individual, apparently acting alone, could cause that amount of casualties and stay loose for enough time in order to attack in two different places, acting with such cruelty against his own fellow citizens. Also, how this could happen in such a highly organized and well-developed country,

also known for its reputation of having a peaceful and welcoming society as Norway (Lars H. Thorkildsen/Håkon Kavli, 2009). However, maybe more important among all questions, why he did it, and how we could prevent that from happening again. Those are all common issues that come to mind when talking about lone actors (or lone wolf) extremism.

This article addresses some of those questions, with more emphasis given to the 'how' than the 'whys'. Lone wolves, here defined as extremist attackers that act without any direct group or organizational support, tend to have such a number of different profiles, that it may be almost impossible to pinpoint one of them just by putting together a list of personal features. Horgan (2017) says that "neither psychological nor other research has revealed qualities unique to those who become involved in terrorism, or the existence of singular pathways into (and out of) terrorism". However, some scholars indicate that the radicalization process, and even more, the preparatory actions for a terrorist attack, are much more susceptible for data collection, analysis and categorization (Bakker & de Graaf, 2011).

Focusing on Breivik's case, one should start asking about his victims. Why did he choose those specific individuals and those specific buildings to send his message? A reading of Breivik's manifest draws a clear picture of his ideology. According to him, cultural Marxism and the Islamisation of the Continent are a deadly threat to the very existence of the "indigenous people of Europe" (Breivik, 2011). According to his *compendium*, it all starts after World War II, with the notion of political correctness as

the basis of an entire establishment, built up from the pillars of the Marxist ideology, to oppress any form of nationalism, as well as the manifestation of traditional western European values. Breivik takes the 50's as the Continent's golden years and, at the same time, his picture of a perfect future:

“Most Europeans look back on the 1950s as a good time. Our homes were safe, to the point where many people did not bother to lock their doors. Public schools were generally excellent, and their problems were things like talking in class and running in the halls. Most men treated women like ladies, and most ladies devoted their time and effort to making good homes, rearing their children well and helping their communities through volunteer work. Children grew up in two-parent households, and the mother was there to meet the child when he came home from school. Entertainment was something the whole family could enjoy”.

(Breivik, 2011, p. 19).

So, from Breivik's point of view, the logic of choosing the government and the young Labour Party members was made for their value as symbols of everything Breivik denounces: Marxism, multiculturalism, globalism and so on. When considering his world view, the apparent contradiction between his violent attacks and Norway's open and welcoming society disappears completely. Breivik did not commit mass murder in spite of his nation's current values. He did it because of them. Moreover, he selected his targets, because they are an image of everything he hates about his country (and Europe as well). It was the perfect “example of what an effective lone wolf attack can look like” (Pantucci, 2011, P. 35). Apparently random, but meticulously planned and prepared. A result of one man's

mind, but drawn from a broader ideology. Based on specific circumstances and opportunities, but built up from a gradual process of radicalization of thought and behaviour.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Horgan (2005) shows that violent extremism is the end state of a process resulting from a series of push and pull factors, that could be divided in three basic moments: becoming involved, remaining involved (or 'being' a terrorist), and leaving terrorism behind. The author also demonstrates that it is impossible to establish an exact formula, or a combination of factors that will result in political violence. Feelings of injustice, social exclusion or deprivation, grievances, marginalization (push factors), as much as social dynamics, propaganda, a charismatic leadership, and personal bonds (pull factors); they all play an important role in a terrorist's mind and behaviour. Nevertheless, they alone are not enough to predict violence.

Vergani and his colleagues (2018), discuss a third set of driving forces, playing a decisive role on the path between radical ideas and political violence: the personal features. They can be mental health conditions, personality traits or even some specific demographic characteristics, as gender, age and nationality. Their systematic literature review shows, that radicalization is a “mechanism that entails a real or perceived political grievance, a perceived reward or appeal of violent extremism and a personal vulnerability” (Vergani et al, 2018, p. 30).

In the particular case of lone wolves, McCauley, Moskalenko and Van Son (2013)

indicate some greater influence of those personal factors. Comparing lone wolves to school shooters and assassins, the authors find that “depression, grievance, unfreezing, and weapons experience are the common characteristics uncovered” (2013, p. 19). In a later article McCauley and Moskaleiko elaborated on a two-pathway model towards terrorism:

“Statistical studies indicate what may be called a disconnected-disordered profile: individuals with a grievance and weapons experience who are socially disconnected and stressed with a psychological disorder. But at least three of our case histories do not fit this description: Zsulich, Waagner, and al-Balawi had social skills, solid social connections, and no sign of mental disorder. Rather these individuals have a caring-consistency profile: they felt strongly the suffering of others and a personal responsibility to reduce or revenge this suffering”.

(McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2014, p. 83).

For both profiles, the authors emphasise the role of situational factors, like the access to weapons and other resources, as well as an opportunity to act. In Breivik’s case, it seems more plausible to argue that he followed the path of the socially disconnected killer, who consistently spent years feeding his mind with radical ideas at the same time that he pursued a number of forms of putting together the means to execute his plan. McCauley and Moskaleiko (2010) also focused on the difference between activism and radicalism, meaning that a person can have and advocate the most radical ideas without ever engaging in any violent or illegal action. They demonstrate the difference between radicalization of opinion and radicalization of action (2010, 2014).

Breivik is an example of someone that was a radical on both dimensions, had access to the tools and was able to put himself in a situation that allowed him to engage in a behaviour that materialized his radicalism.

Bandura (2016) defines moral agency as a whole set of behaviours that keep the individual consonant with his concept of right and wrong. These actions often include “negative self-sanctions for conducts that violate one’s moral standards and the support of positive self-sanctions for conducts faithful to personal moral standards” (Bandura 2016, p. 17). Discussing the human capacity to engage in violence, the author describes a series of psychosocial processes that work in order to weaken, or even disengage, the restrictions on an inhumane conduct. He classifies them as the four different dimensions (*locus*) of moral self-regulation: behaviour, agency, outcome and victims.

In the behavioural *locus*, an individual can disengage morality, by investing his conduct with moral endings (Bandura, 2016). For example, a soldier can say that his killings in the battlefield will assure the security of his nation, and the very existence of his people. Another way to do it would be through a palliative comparison. The same soldier could argue that the battles he fought would assure a sooner ending to the war, preventing more suffering for both sides in the conflict. This could all be reinforced by the use of euphemistic language, like, for example, “killings in the battlefield” could be replaced by “neutralizing the enemy’s capabilities”. In Breivik’s *compendium*, he talks about assuring the security and the existence of the indigenous people of Europe, by

neutralizing the Islamic menace (Breivik, 2011).

In the agency *locus*, Bandura demonstrates how people can evade personal responsibility for their actions by blaming others, or even dispersing it so widely that no one could really bear it. An executioner, working on a lethal injection facility, could find comfort in the notion that he is just a link of a greater process formed by a judge, a jury, his fellow executioners, each one with a small responsibility doing a hard job in the name of his country and its constitutional values. Alternatively, a jihadist could argue that it is not about him killing people, but his hand as a small instrument of his people, acting by the will of Allah. Breivik, on the other hand, depicts the Muslims as violent invaders, and himself as only one of many cells of resistance in the name of “the peoples of Europe” (2011, p. 779), preserving western values, protecting Christianity and their very existence as Europeans.

At the outcome *locus*, the injurious effects of violence are disregarded, or at least minimized. Therefore, using the soldier’s example, he could say that he does not have the time to think about the enemies as other human beings suffering, as he is just shooting at the opposite direction of a threat, by instinct, as he was trained to do. He could just say that killing is just a normal part of fighting. This seems even easier for commanders, at a further distance from the battlefield, designing strategies on top of maps, charts and numbers. In Breivik’s words: “Some innocent people will die in our operations as they are simply at the wrong place at the wrong time. Get used to the idea. The needs of the many will always

surpass the needs of the few” (2011, p. 846).

Finally, at the victim *locus*, attackers tend to dehumanise their targets, labelling them in a deleterious way, or portraying them as a dangerous threat; thus, acting against them is a mere act of self-defence. “In this mode of self-exoneration, perpetrators view themselves as victims forced to behave injuriously by wrongdoers’ offensive behaviour or by force of circumstances. By viewing themselves as victims, they may feel self-righteous in their retaliatory actions” (Bandura, 2016, p. 19). Breivik fills his *manifesto* with numerous examples of violent, cruel and supremacist behaviours attributed to Muslims. When describing his mission, he portrays himself as a “Justiciar Knight Commander”: according to him, a self-appointed individual with the authority to act as a judge, jury and executioner on behalf of the indigenous people of Europe (Breivik, 2011). Explaining the role of a Justiciar Knight, Breivik affirms: “Never forget that it is not only your right to act against the tyranny of the cultural Marxist/multiculturalist elites of Europe, it is your duty to do so.” (Breivik, 2011, p. 846).

Bandura (2016) demonstrates how these regulatory cognitive mechanisms can modulate moral self-sanctions over harmful practices. It provides an individual with the means to preserve his self-image and a sense of self-righteousness while acting harmfully. The author discusses the applications of his model to explain morally disengaged violence in all sorts of situations, like the gun industry, capital punishment and even at the corporate world. He also discusses the applications of this theory as an analytical model to understand terrorism and the

influences of discourse, propaganda and ideology to shape one's view of the attacks, the victims, and the consequences of the terrorist strategy.

THE TRAJECTORY TO TERRORISM

According to his *compendium*, shortly before becoming concerned about politics, Breivik had been a member (or an acquaintance) of a number of street gangs, including Pakistani Muslim ones. He describes this part of this life as his “graffiti phase”, affirming that he had been a very active and well-known member of the hip-hop movement during the 90s (2011, p. 1387). He, however, portrays his contacts with Muslims as pragmatic alliances in order to keep security and respect at the streets of the multicultural and sometimes violent Oslo. Breivik describes what he calls a “Marxist-jihadi youth” movement, as a number of hypocrites and violent people that literally “hijacked segments of the hip-hop movement and used it as a front for recruitment” (2011, p. 1391). He also claims to have suffered, or being involved in, “8 unprovoked assaults and multiple threats and attempted robberies by Muslims” (2011, p. 1394).

Breivik uses his early contact with young Pakistanis as an additional proof that he knows what he is talking about when describing his worldview. For him, the violent attacks perpetrated by Muslims against white Norwegians are no less than a sample of what is happening all around Europe: a new wave of Islamic domination. Moreover, he concludes that his multicultural society

depicts Marxists and Muslims as perpetual victims and gives them a free pass over any demonstration of violence against white Europeans as if it was just a reaction against some form of historical oppression: “This is still the case in all Western European major cities. They are allowed to consolidate, while we are not” (2011, p. 1390).

From those roots, Breivik's trajectory towards radicalism, from thought to action, began with traditional politics, according to him, at the age of 16:

“I broke with the hiphop movement and my network when I was 16 and later joined the Progress Party youth movement, a moderate cultural conservative youth movement of the Progress Party. This became the period where I decided I wanted to dedicate my life to politics in order to contribute to change the system” (Breivik, 2011, p. 1397).

He describes being gradually frustrated with traditional politics and democracy, portraying his Party as being more a part of the problem than a solution, since it would give a false hope to the people, misleading them to believe in the system. In 2003, he ran for a position as a member of Oslo's City Council, but was defeated, in his opinion, due to lack of support from the Party and some undermining movements from his opponent Jøran Kallmyr, then Leader of the Progress Party Youth: “I don't blame him for backstabbing me like that though. After all, he had invested so much more of his time to the organization than I had. He deserved it while I didn't and I would probably have done the same thing if I was him” (Breivik, 2011, p.400).

At the time he was running for the City

Council, Breivik said he was already affiliated to the organization he claimed to be behind his attacks: The Knights Templar (Pauperes Commilitones Christi Templeque Solomonici – poor fellow-soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon - PCCTS). Breivik put himself as one of its founding members, though, until this moment, no evidence exists of such organization, and no trace of the other members described at the manifest has ever been found.

Breivik claimed to have attended a meeting in London, in the year of 2002. He described undergoing some screening process, before being called to meet his new PCCTS fellows, during those days at the UK. There they would have been instructed about strategy, ideology and operational doctrine of their new order. On the last day, all members would have been strictly advised not to meet each other again, aiming to preserve the existence, the purposes, as well as the efficiency of each individual cell.

In Breivik's words, "those were not sessions where regular combat cells were created. It was more like a training course for pioneer cell commanders" (2011, p. 1379). He defined the strategy of his new fellows as a long-term one (50-100 years), consisting of single man, or small cells, aiming to perform an attack every 5 to 12 years, so each new event did not obfuscate the effect of the previous one. Their long-term goal would be no more ambitious than to seize power over Europe, getting rid of any trace of Marxism, multiculturalism along with reversing the Islamization of the Continent.

The *compendium* has a whole chapter instructing readers about operational aspects

of being a Knight Templar. The author discusses tactics, training and preparation methods, and even formulates a list of targets with priority evaluations. His topics go from how to build and maintain a cover, to how to prepare oneself physically, with training and even cycles of steroids and stimulants. Breivik's operational manual is a meticulous and detailed one, for example, when describing how to obtain the right ingredients and materials for bomb making:

"You don't start the separate phases until you are completely done with each sub-phase. You DO NOT initiate two or more phases at the same time! You always start with the hardest part – the acquisition of TNT/dynamite/semtex or similar substances, then move on to the next phase.

(Breivik, 2011, p. 853).

Even though it is hard to determine exactly which were the main situational factors concerning his decision to attack, it is safe to assume that Breivik's experiences with Muslims, together with his failed attempts to participate in formal politics, played an important role in his trajectory to violence. Breivik's writings indicate a number of turning points in his life, one of them being the Serbian conflict. "He claims that in 2002 he travelled to Monrovia, Liberia, where he sought out an individual Serbian nationalist who was living there and he was obviously very impressed by him" (Pantucci, 2011, p. 31).

Less on the "whys" and more on the "how", one can argue that Breivik, not only in his writings, was giving a number of indications that he was an individual already capable of breaking the law, shifting from radical

thoughts to violent actions. Records show that he had been involved in number of minor offences (graffiti phase), frauds (selling fake university documents) and other activities (attempting to buy weapons at the Czech Republic's black market) that could have potentially flagged him as a threat (Hemmingby & Bjørgo, 2018). If someone could have put together those previous actions along with his online activity (searching for like-minded individuals and putting together a list of about 7000 contacts) and the purchase of fertilizer, it would have been possible to appoint him as a high priority target; someone engaged in "unambiguous terrorist activity" (Borum, 2011, p. 58).

Maybe this is the greatest issue about preventing lone wolves' violence: their loneliness forces them to raise their level of exposition in order to be able to act, but, at the same time, their lack of any ties, or connections, leads to security and intelligence services disregarding them as a potential threat.

It is, of course, a lot easier to align all the variables and make sense of it after an attack. One cannot really blame it on security services' flaws. The position of some scholars is that post event analysis is not about pointing fingers, but serving the purpose of updating theoretical framework, analytical models, as well as constantly reviewing methods and the workflow of intelligence production in order to prevent future attacks (Bakker & de Graaf, 2011).

ASSUMPTIONS

Being a perfect example of a lone wolf

attack, maybe Breivik is also a perfect case for learning and preventing future events of political violence. What can be learned about him in order to prevent and counter radicalization into violent extremism?

First, his moral disengagement can be described as a multidimensional and comprehensive one. Examples of all four dimensions of Bandura's model could be found in his writings:

- behaviour: just assuring the security of the indigenous people of Europe;
- agency: preserving Western values, protecting Christianity;
- outcome: innocents will die. They are simply at the wrong place at the wrong time;
- victims: globalists are sponsoring the Muslim invasion. It is our duty to liberate Europe from them.

A correlation between behavioural variables and situational factors is also an important element of concern. This makes sense regarding McCauley, Moskaleiko and Van Son's (2013) study of school attackers, assassins and lone wolves. Finding a positive correlation between variables like personal and political grievance, slippery slope, risk (or status) seeking, unfreezing and the access to weapons and targets, they suggest that a prevention strategy is a matter of knowledge and communication, as well as involving different actors (psychological services, VA associations, families) in the task of identifying and dealing with possible offenders.

Nowadays, technology and social media make it easy for an individual to publish his ideology as much as make his actions reach a considerable audience, even without any support of a mass communication enterprise. Terrorism is mainly about spreading a message. Recently, in Christchurch, New Zealand, 28-year-old Brenton Tarrant opened fire at two local Mosques, killing 50 people and injuring around other 50. He also published an online manifesto and managed to broadcast his attacks live on the internet. When explaining his motives, he wrote: “to most of all show the invaders that our lands will never be their lands, our homelands are our own and that, as long as a white man still lives, they will NEVER conquer our lands and they will never replace our people” (Tarrant, 2019, p. 5). Among his inspirations to engage in political violence, he cites Anders Breivik as the only true one.

The formal broadcasting industry, even though not anymore in control of all means of publication, still attains a crucial role in interpreting the acts, portraying the perpetrators, as well as the victims, and making sense of what happened. When

trying to understand the radicalization process and the possibilities to prevent lone actor violence, it is imperative that the discussion about outcomes and narratives not only advance as a research topic, but also as a major concern to security forces and public policy makers.

Both future studies and intelligence analysis could keep focusing on trying to detect and understand behavioural signs of moral disengagement, changes in discourse and social dynamics, lack of empathy towards a specific population, motivations and activities shifting towards a specific focus. All those psychological traits should be considered in accordance to their correlation with personal history and situational factors. Preventing and countering radicalization into violent extremism is a multidisciplinary task. When dealing with individuals, and how their personal histories and relationships shape their worldview, motivations and actions, understanding and applying psychological models is a crucial task for analysts of all professional fields.

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