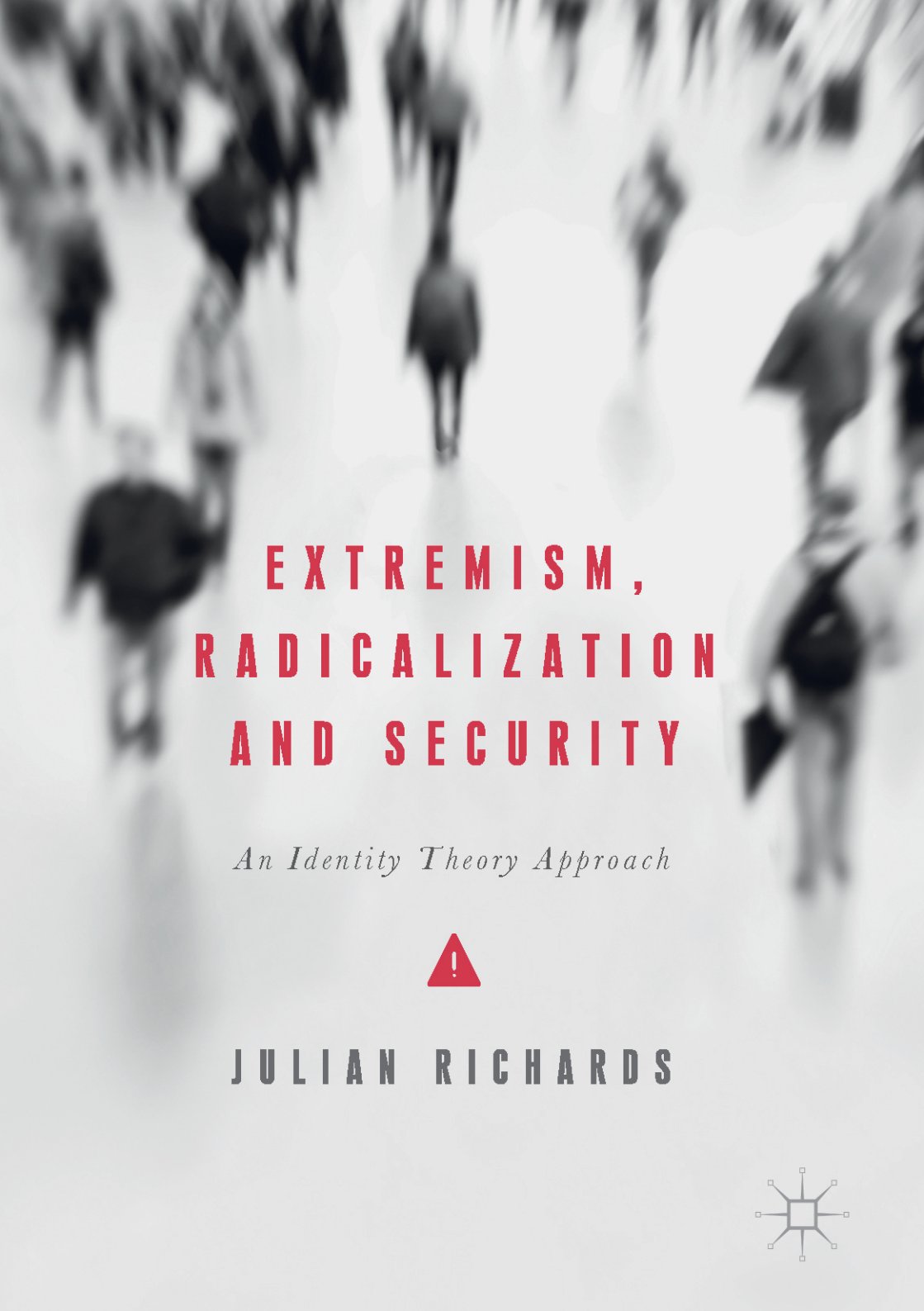


A blurred, high-angle photograph of a large crowd of people walking, likely in a public square or on a wide street. The people are out of focus, creating a sense of movement and anonymity. The colors are muted, with a lot of greys and soft tones.

EXTREMISM, RADICALIZATION AND SECURITY

An Identity Theory Approach



JULIAN RICHARDS



Extremism, Radicalization and Security

Julian Richards

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Julian Richards
University of Buckingham
Buckingham, United Kingdom

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For Lynne

PREFACE

The year in which this book was written was a truly extraordinary one in politics and society. In Britain, a long and bitter campaign leading up to the referendum on whether to leave or remain in the European Union (EU) – a campaign which seemed to be based as much on myth as on any solid fact on both sides of the debate – culminated in a seismic shock to the political and economic establishment with a decision by a majority of the voting public to remove the country from the Union. The campaign managed to turn politics on its head and deliver complex alliances that rode roughshod over traditional party boundaries. As far as Britain was concerned, if there was any doubt that postmodern and postmaterialist politics had resolutely arrived, it was dispelled during 2016.

On a much darker note, the referendum campaign had also seen the murder of the Labour MP, Jo Cox, by a man supporting Far Right ideology; the first time a sitting MP had been killed in Britain for more than twenty-five years. The period before and after the June 2016 referendum was also marked by an upsurge in abuse and intimidation directed at immigrant communities and ethnic minorities, some of it at a very serious level. It seemed as if the overthrow of traditional politics was revealing a dark underbelly of us/them intersubjective politics, with all its attendant security concerns.

Such a populist political wave and its accompanying acrimonious rhetoric have been repeated across many parts of the world, as evidenced by the election of Donald Trump; a fitting finale to a most surprising year in world politics.

While all this was happening, many parts of Europe continued to experience a number of serious terrorist attacks, many of which seem to masquerade under the banner of a zero-sum sectarian ideology. Many of these incidents are bound-up in the ongoing maelstrom of politics in the Middle East, and in the intractable conflict in Iraq and Syria, but there is also an apparent ideological underpinning in the shape of rejectionist us/them discourse. This seems to strike at the very heart of European and Western identity.

All these security concerns and developments come together in the question of why selected individuals in our society choose to turn to extreme violence against their neighbours as a way forward.

This book attempts to address this question by adopting a theoretical approach rooted in matters of identity.

Clearly for some, identity theory is an unhelpful deflection from the deeper structural questions of socio-economic and political inequity in society. Some will even suggest that to consider individual motivations in violent attacks somehow opens the door to a moral justification for terrorism. Instead, argue such critics, we should be focusing squarely on the top-down effects of radical and extreme ideology.

The argument presented in this book, however, is that an identity-based approach that begins with a bottom-up analysis of why individuals may be motivated to turn to violence is not only of critical utility for observers and policy-makers alike, but seems to be becoming ever more prescient in an environment of heightened identity politics in contemporary society.

Within such a thesis, this book takes the view that identities are social and political constructions based as much on myth as on any reality. This allows for a detailed and critical look at discourses across different realms of identity politics and commentary, and a deeper understanding of the way in which identity is manipulated and shaped to pursue political agendas.

The case study of Britain is the centre of focus in this book, but this absolutely does not exclude the significance of other environments and societies when considering questions of identity and security. Frequent reference is made in this book to parallel and contrasting factors in other contexts outside of Britain, with the overall aim of encouraging further research and assisting our collective understanding. Indeed, promoting such a comparative analysis is one of the central aims of this book.

A further key factor is the question of policy decisions and approaches which flow from the academic debates and critiques. I often say to my own students that they must always consider the “so what?” question in their analysis. What I mean by this is that, while it is interesting to debate particular moral, ethical or political questions, what should the people paid to translate these into sensible policy do with our money? This book asks such questions in the context of the British policy experience, not least since British counter-terrorism and counter-extremism policy have been uniquely bound-up in questions of “suspect communities” and “threats within”. Such controversies and debates are explored in this analysis, again with the aim of stimulating similar discussions across a variety of environments.

Some of the critical strands of research in this area have suggested that much academic debate and indeed government policy have been based on limited empirical data. This book somewhat rejects such a charge in its entirety, but does acknowledge that we are a long way from having conducted anything like enough empirical research on how an individual’s identity is shaped and formed; and what the link is between identity and security in our societies. The answers to such questions remain of the highest significance in social studies and policy development, and it is hoped that this book generates at least some further steps towards an understanding.

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An undertaking of this complexity is not possible without the help and advice of a good many friends and colleagues. There are many people to thank for helping me to complete this task.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACT	Affect Control Theory
AfD	<i>Alternatif für Deutschland</i> (Alternative for Germany)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BFP	British Freedom Party
BNP	British National Party
CAIN	Conflict Archive on the Internet
CESB	Counter Extremism and Safeguarding Bill
CIRA	Continuity Irish Republican Army
CNN	Central News Network
CONTEST	Counter Terrorism Strategy
CTSA	Counter Terrorism and Security Act
DG	Director-General
DPP	Danish People's Party
EDL	English Defence League
ETA	<i>Euskadi Ta Askatasuna</i> (Basque Country and Freedom)
EU	European Union
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
FPÖ	<i>Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs</i> (Freedom Party of Austria)
FOIR	Freedom of Information Request
GWOT	Global War on Terror
HUT	<i>Hizb-ut Tabrir</i> (Party of Liberation)
ICSR	International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence
ICT	Identity Control Theory
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and <i>al-Shaam</i> (Syria)
JIC	Joint Intelligence Committee

LeT	<i>Lashkar-e Toiba</i> (Army of the Pure)
M5S	<i>Movimento 5 Stelle</i> (Five Star Movement)
MAPPA	Multi-Agency Police Protection Arrangements
MASH	Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub
MI5	Security Service (Britain)
MQM	<i>Mohajir Qaumi Mahaz</i> (Mohajir National Movement)
MP	Member of Parliament
NF	National Front
NI35	National Indicator 35
NPCC	National Police Chiefs' Council
NUS	National Union of Students
NYPD	New York Police Department
PEO	Prevent Engagement Officer
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
PTA	Prevention of Terrorism Act
PVE	Preventing Violent Extremism
PVV	<i>Partij voor de Vrijheid</i> (Party for Freedom)
RAF	<i>Rote Armee Fraktion</i> (Red Army Faction)
RIRA	Real Irish Republican Army
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
SNP	Scottish National Party
SVP	<i>Schweizerische Volkspartei</i> (Swiss People's Party)
TACT	Terrorism Act
TPIM	Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measure
UAF	United Against Fascism
UK	United Kingdom
UKIP	United Kingdom Independence Party
US	United States
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

Introduction

1.1 INTRODUCTION

It seems clear in the twenty-first century that, when considering security, the question of identity has become an inescapable component of the picture. In attempting to simplify increasingly complex narratives in a globalizing world, politicians, journalists and citizens in general will often try to explain the troubling scene before them by “othering” a particular group, and drawing a distinction between that group and themselves.

Trying to understand complex problems is, of course, an entirely natural pursuit. Human beings, as the psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2012) observed, have a natural and powerful desire to make sense of the world before them by developing a story that links pieces of information together into causal inferences. That is how conspiracy theories develop and become so popular in some parts of society, and, perhaps more controversially, how religions have developed to help people make sense of events that might otherwise seem inexplicable.

Alongside attempts to explain the human condition, however, society has also seen far too many episodes in which a perceived security threat or problem in society has been met with an industrial-scale othering of a whole community. From the Jews in 1930s Germany to the Tutsis in 1990s Rwanda, not to mention countless other episodes of sectarianism and ethnic oppression, we can see that identity politics sometimes become inextricably linked with conceptualizations of security threats and how to respond to them.

In more recent times, the problems of globalization, which Aldrich (2009:889) describes as the “underside of a globalising world”, have led to similarly simplistic, if not quite so apocalyptic otherings of communities perceived to be at the heart of problems. In late twentieth and early twenty-first century Europe, for example, security debates have become intertwined with debates about migration, societal change, and terrorism driven by ideology. In general terms, Western European society has become immeasurably safer than it ever was, not least when compared to the situation a hundred years ago, when the continent found itself in the early stages of two world wars to rival all previous conflicts. This might be one of the reasons why sudden violent events as the gunning-down of citizens by terrorists in European cities, are met with such consternation by a public no longer attuned to death and destruction. It might also explain the rise of populist, xenophobic politics by Western political actors who perceive that globalization is causing an irreversible change to the very nature of European society. For them, such changes are doubly frightening when conceptualized in terms of an “us” and “them”, or good versus evil struggle.

Politics and political discourses are not, of course, black and white processes that deliver the “truth” about human society. Perhaps even more than in previous times, the process of globalization has meant a growing and complex intertwining of political, social, cultural and economic spheres of society across national boundaries. There has been much talk about postmodernity, and questions have been raised as to whether the traditional Westphalian state may be facing its demise. The Arab Spring showed that entrenched authoritarian regimes, which had been a staple feature of the Middle East for most of the second half of the twentieth century, could be swept aside (at least in places) by popular revolutions. The results may not have been uniform, or indeed indicative of progress as the bitter and miserable Syrian civil war demonstrates, but the point was made that political history could be changed. Europe and other parts of the world were not immune to the new atmosphere in the air. In Spain, for example, the very name of the *Podemos* movement, which holds the balance of power in parliament at the time of writing, echoes the point made earlier by President Obama in the US that the people *can* make changes. Thus is ushered in a postmodern politics in which traditional left and right cleavages are realigning themselves. (In Britain, the political aftermath of the EU referendum vote in 2016 has caused turmoil within both mainstream political parties of the right and left.)

1.2 IDENTITY AND THE BRITISH CASE STUDY

Explaining such political complexity is a difficult business, and the best that democratic leaders can do is to offer ideas and narratives around which particular constituencies can cohere. In early 2006, the British Prime Minister of the time, Gordon Brown, addressed the Fabian Society in London. Brown was speaking just six months after the first major terrorist attack on British soil of the twenty-first century, in which 56 people had died and hundreds more had been injured in a coordinated set of suicide bombing attacks on the transport network of the British capital. Because the attacks, as it later transpired, had been conducted by British citizens, much of the debate about what had happened and how, focused on questions of national identity. Brown noted that:

When we take time to stand back and reflect, it becomes clear that to address almost every one of the major challenges facing our country . . . you must have a clear view of what being British means, what you value about being British and what gives us purpose as a nation . . . I would argue that if we are clear about what underlies our Britishness and if we are clear that shared values – not colour, nor unchanging and unchangeable institutions – defines what it means to be British in the modern world, we can be far more ambitious in defining for our time the responsibilities of citizenship; far more ambitious in forging a new and contemporary settlement of the relationship between state, community and individual; and it is also easier too to address difficult issues that sometimes come under the heading ‘multiculturalism’ – essentially how diverse cultures, which inevitably contain differences, can find the essential common purpose without which no society can flourish (Brown 2006).

The terrorist attacks of 7 July 2005, to which Brown explicitly referred in a list of challenges including “how we equip ourselves for globalization”; relationships with the US and Europe; and issues to do with citizenship and governance, were seen as an episode that had the potential to divide communities beneath the level of national identity. The argument was that a set of “values” could unite the nation across ethnic or sub-national identities, and that multiculturalism was the key: indeed, multiculturalism itself represented one of the supposed core values of the national identity.

This book examines the salience of identity to contemporary security debates in the West, focusing as a case study on Britain in terms of identity formations, threats, and security policy. Questions of how complex and

contested notions of “radicalization” and “extremism” are discussed and debated in the contemporary context are viewed through the lens of identity theory. The key area of analysis concerns the interplay between micro- and macro-levels of identity construction. Applying these to security allows us to ask such questions as whether individuals become violently extreme through processes specific to themselves as individuals (an essentially “bottom-up” perspective) or whether grander societal processes of radicalization and recruitment by leaders and organizations are paramount (a “top-down” perspective). In addressing this question, this analysis will follow the core tenets of Stryker’s (2008) structural symbolic interactionism, which stresses the symbiotic relationship between individual and society. However, while it is accepted that no individual can operate completely in a vacuum and is the product of his or her environment and history, it is also postulated here that every individual’s journey into violent extremism is specific and context-bound. This inevitably reduces the significance – while not ignoring the effect completely – of top-down actors in the process.

The second key thesis in this book is the Foucauldian notion of identity as mythical, in the sense that it is constructed (and indeed performed) as a liminal phenomenon and is not a display of essentialist categorizations of human society (Foucault 1972). Such a notion also allows for consideration of identity politics and narratives as fine examples of political myth.

Like many states, Britain forms a particularly interesting example of Benedict Anderson’s (1991) “imagined community”. Unlike most of its European neighbours with whom it shares a close and in some cases intertwined history, the state of Britain is composed of a form of federal union of devolved states, with varying degrees of autonomy away from the central parliament in London. Indeed, the second most populous element of this union – Scotland – narrowly voted not to break away and become an independent state in a referendum in 2015. Renewed calls for such a move have followed the 2016 EU membership referendum. Many have observed how a notion of Britain was “imagined” after the formal signing of the union in 1707 between Scotland, and England and Wales, creating a larger state unit which is still often confused as being synonymous with England and Englishness (most usually by the English themselves; Croft 2012:57). As the 2016 referendum showed, such a union could yet unravel again to create newly imagined communities.

The question of Britain and what it does or does not comprise at the macro level is the first element of Britishness and its complexity. The

second element concerns how British society has and still is transforming through the period of globalization and the heightened mobility of populations this entails. For Britain, some of the picture here relates to the history of colonialism and post-colonial connections, including some significant periods in the post-war period in which citizens of certain Commonwealth communities were encouraged to migrate to the country to alleviate labour shortages in specific sectors of the economy. Many of these migrant communities have settled permanently in Britain and had families, leading to a range of complicated “hyphenated identities” that display an amalgam of Britishness and identity relating to a former post-colonial setting. Overlaid on this picture is a more recent experience of migration to Britain from a range of places, including from former Communist Bloc countries in Eastern Europe who have joined the European Union (EU) and taken advantage of freedom of movement. Such migrants have been joined by refugees leaving fragile and fractured states such as Iraq and Syria. The resulting picture of British society is a very multicultural one, which, in its sheer diversity, rivals many other places in the world and certainly other parts of Europe.

Gordon Brown’s address in 2006 suggested that an effective multiculturalist policy could hold together an otherwise frail society that might easily be pulled apart by forces on the darker side of globalization. By focusing on generic and agnostic values as a unifying force, differences in identity below the level of the state would become less important. Indeed, such differences could be a force for good and make Britain *better* equipped for globalization than many of its peers. This positive vision of a form of separation of church and state to resolve problems and move forwards had lost some of its lustre a few years later. In 2011, a subsequent British Prime Minister, David Cameron, was casting doubt on the merits of a “state multiculturalism” that had led to a dangerous situation in which communities could increasingly grow apart from one another within the national space (Number10.gov [2011](#)). Cameron called for a new doctrine of “muscular liberalism” that would strengthen and reassert the notion of Britishness and the values supposedly underpinning it. The catalyst for this thinking was security: the Prime Minister was speaking at the Munich Security Conference, and was suggesting a link between fissiparous communities and security threats such as terrorism.

Part of the issue is again to do with globalization, but, in this case, a perhaps surprising tendency noted by many for the media to actually fragment its messages and constituencies (Gamson et al. [1992:386](#)). Most of the

hypothecation about the effects of globalization assumes it to have the homogenizing effect of cultural imperialism, whereby local and regional cultural expressions gradually succumb to an agnostic and all-encompassing global culture. But in actual fact, there are two processes that seem to be doing the opposite in many cases. Globalization has allowed a flowering of media outlets away from the original hegemonic powers in the field, such as CNN and its Western counterparts. (On its launch, the slogan of Russia's RT News was "Question more", implying that we should not just blindly follow what the Westerners were telling us.) At the same time, the development of social media has meant a shift towards the consumer in news consumption: citizens can now choose the news outlets to which they would like to subscribe rather than be dependent on news pushed towards them. In effect, citizens can choose the narratives they wish to consume.

In a community context, this means that sub-national identity groups could now more easily live within a chosen identity-oriented narrative and culture than they could before, while simultaneously living within a metropolitan and multicultural environment such as Britain. In Brown's pro-multiculturalism thinking, this might not matter as long as a set of central values are understood and followed: indeed, it could even make British society richer. More recent views expressed by Cameron, however, start to argue the opposite, and to suggest that a widening gap between sub-national identities in their cultural expression and narrative could actually be a problem for the state, in that disenfranchised and embittered ghettos could develop into a "threat within".

This more negative and pessimistic reading of the situation is also pertinent when considering the rise of the Far Right in recent European politics: a process that some have described as "cumulative extremism" (Mughal 2014). A couple of years after Gordon Brown's rousing address to the Fabian Society, the otherwise unremarkable British town of Luton revealed itself to be a fascinating microcosm of the risk of cumulative extremism. In the Summer of 2009, a radical Islamist pressure-group called *Al Muhajiroun*, which was subsequently proscribed by the UK government, mounted a small but noisy demonstration at the event of a parade of British soldiers returning from deployment in Iraq. The provocation of the demonstration, which lambasted the soldiers for being "butchers of Baghdad" among other things, caused an angry reaction in the town. Later in the same year, two new groups emerged which demonstrated an overlap between them in terms of membership. The first was led by a renowned football hooligan called Jeff Marsh, who announced the

formation of a new pan-UK football supporters' group called Casuals United. This group, perhaps confusingly, proclaimed itself to be against "Muslim fundamentalists". At around the same time the English Defence League (EDL) also emerged in Luton with the same professed agenda. In August 2009, the EDL mounted its first major street rally protesting against the spread of "militant Islam" in Birmingham, initiating a series of demonstrations across the country, some of which attracted upwards of 2000 supporters (Richards 2013:181).

There was much consternation at the time of the EDL's formation, as it seemed to be a revival of the dark days of the 1970s and 80s, when the Far Right and neo-nazi National Front had mounted a number of angry demonstrations in British cities, many of which had descended into street violence. (The target of such groups, as will be discussed later, was not so much Muslims but any non-white communities.) Despite the EDL claiming to be open to a rainbow coalition of supporters – including Muslims – who were opposed to the rise of "militant Islam" in Britain, the group has clearly been a focal point for neo-nazi and xenophobic sentiments within white British society. Indeed, the leader of the EDL, Tommy Robinson, formally announced his resignation from the group in 2013, claiming it had been hijacked by Far Right extremists (although his motivations for subsequently joining the anti-extremist think tank, the Quilliam Foundation, have since been questioned (BBC 2013)).

There were also fears that the EDL were symptomatic of a wider wave of rising Far Right extremism across Europe, which was manifesting itself both as the rise towards unprecedented levels of power for political parties such as the *Front National* in France, *Jobbik* in Hungary and various "people's parties"; and the rise of street-level pressure groups such as Pegida (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*) in Germany. In Britain, where Far Right parties have never won a single parliamentary seat (with the exception of the populist UK Independence Party (UKIP), which won one seat in the 2015 parliamentary elections), the EDL has proved itself to be something of a false dawn for its supporters, with gradually waning attendance and interest in its rallies. At the same time, the pattern of low-level racism and sectarian animosity in Britain, including anti-semitism, should not be underestimated. A study by Teeside University in 2014 of incidents of "cumulative extremism" found that, while the police in England and Wales were recording a gradual overall decline in hate crimes including religious-motivated attacks, the proportion of such incidents directed at Muslims was rising.

There was also a clear link between specific incidents of terrorism, such as the murder of the British soldier Lee Rigby in London in 2013, and a spike in anti-Muslim attacks, some of them involving serious violence (Feldman et al. 2014). Furthermore, the 2016 referendum vote to leave the EU also appears to have encouraged a spike in racist attacks on minority communities (BBC 2016).

1.3 GLOBALIZATION AND EXTREMISM

The picture here is linked to globalization, in the sense that the economic downturn of 2008 onwards has placed stresses on European labour markets, and made them more susceptible to the effects of inward migration, especially at the socio-economically lower and unskilled end of the market. This has allowed populist political leaders to articulate the problems being faced as being caused by an “out-group” of immigrants, with clearly defined identity labels. The very name of the English Defence League (which demonstrates the ongoing confusion between Englishness and Britishness) shows that it is all about identity politics, and the linkage of that with security. Many observers, including President Obama, have suggested that the surprising vote by the British public to leave the EU in the 2016 referendum was a worrying manifestation of the anti-globalization, populist political movement’s ability to overturn traditional politics (Reilly 2016). His concerns have subsequently been deepened by events closer to home in the shape of Donald Trump’s victory in the US presidential elections. The pessimist’s argument is that there is a deep iceberg of risk here in Western society which relates, in David Cameron’s words, to “failed multiculturalism”.

The terrorist attacks in 2005 by a group of British citizens had catalysed this debate. More recently, the phenomenon of Western European citizens travelling to Iraq and Syria to join the fight for Islamic State (IS) has also raised the temperature in the debate about identity and security. Many of the more robust commentators in politics and academia have suggested that a choice to become a jihadist means that citizenship must be renounced: in effect, that pursuit of violent jihadism is incompatible with the right to have a European national identity (Elgot 2014). Of course, state citizenship is not necessarily the same as ethnic or religious identity, and the two levels of identity can and do overlap in extremely complicated ways.

The global terror threat at the beginning of the twenty-first century has been described as something “new” by many commentators. First appearing in discourses on terrorism in the late 1990s (Laqueur 1999:58), the

notion of “new terrorism” rapidly gained momentum after the 9/11 attacks in the US in 2001. The British Prime Minister at the time of those attacks, Tony Blair, spoke of the “calculus of risk” having changed after the attacks, whereby terrorism could, for the first time, reasonably be linked with the threat from nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, since the terrorists no longer appeared to set any boundaries on the number of casualties they wished to cause (BBC 2004).

Writing about the same time and using a historical notion of distinctive “waves” of terrorism, David Rapoport described the latest period of terrorism as “religious”, which allows for a notion of “fanaticism” and unbounded “extremism” (Rapoport 2002). The salience of these words and concepts, which some critics reject as being too relative to be of utility, is at the centre of analysis in this book.

For a country such as Britain, a key question is whether and how the terrorist threat has changed. Firstly, older threats such as that from Irish Republicanism and Loyalist sectarianism in Northern Ireland could be considered to be more bounded in both the specific nationalist objectives being contested, and the degree to which death and destruction would be undertaken by the groups involved. At the same time, analysis shows that many more people died during the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland during the latter part of the twentieth century than have succumbed to “Islamist” threats more recently in Britain. More importantly, despite the differences between the two periods, some have suggested a similarity in the way in which a particular group of citizens have been identified by the state as a “suspect community” at the core of the problem (Pantazis and Pemberton 2009).

With the advent of Al Qaeda and terrorist attacks attributed to it, however, macro identity factors have become arguably more important in security discourse. The experience of the “Prevent” strand of the British counter-terrorism strategy (called *CONTEST*) is highly indicative in this regard. Designed to be part of a multi-agency and holistic response to counter-terrorism constituted by four ‘P’s (Pursue, Protect, Prepare and Prevent), the Prevent policy was the part of the strategy that dealt with the longer-term societal elements of the threat, encompassing such contested and complicated notions as “radicalization” and its effects on individuals moving towards expressions of violent extremism.

Prevent now encourages strong reactions from many in counter-terrorism policy fields. The initial phase of Prevent, under the Labour administration of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, followed the traumatic episode of the