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Liberalism and extremism

Societal preparedness against extreme individuals

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The Norwegian background

On 22 July 2011, Norway was victim of the first and only terrorist attack on its soil and the first instance of political violence since the end of the Second World War. The attack consisted of two distinct events, the one about 2 hours after the other.

The first was a car bomb explosion. The bomb was placed in front of the building that houses the Prime Minister's offices in the governmental quarter in central Oslo. The bomb, which was made of a mixture of artificial fertilizer and fuel oil, was estimated to be approximately 950 kilograms. Its explosion killed 8 and injured 30 others, and caused heavy damage to several buildings in the quarter

The second event was an armed attack on a youth summer camp on Utøya, an island in the Tyri Fjord just outside of Oslo. The summer camp was an annual event organized by AUF, the Labor Party's youth organization. A heavily armed gunman dressed in an ordinary police uniform opened fire. Of the over 600 people on the island 69 were killed and 66 were injured.

A Norwegian man named Anders Behring Breivik has been charged and has confessed to having committed the attacks.

The ongoing criminal investigation in Norway has generated immense amounts of information about how the attacks were conceived, planned and carried out. Breivik was well-supplied for the attacks in terms of weapons and equipment, and well-prepared in terms of ideas and arguments.

Yet what is most remarkable about the case from the point of view of the extremism it represents is that the activities Breivik undertook in preparation for the attacks were all more or less within the margins of the law.

On the one hand, the preparation for the attacks took place within the limitations set by international and Norwegian laws and conventions for the regulation of the flow of both weapons and the nitrogen-based fertilizer used to make the bomb.

On the other hand, the *ideas* which formed the basis for his own extreme views were already circulating within the norms and limitations of the free Euro-American press, protected by the principle of free speech.

How should we understand Norwegian and other extremism? What relation does it have to the norms and values of our liberal society? Why does extremism become violent?

Approaches to extremism

Approaches to understanding violent extremism vary widely. Psychological approaches seek to understand violent extremism as part of an internal determinism or linked to group influence. Sociological approaches try to draw lessons from group interactions and institutions. Cultural analyses focus on cultural interactions and above all conflicts. Political approaches underscore the channels of political expression and the availability of political institutions for enacting changes. Legal approaches focus on the function of local, national and international regulatory measures.

But like most scholarly approaches, these attempts to come to grips with violent extremism reflect as much their own starting points, premisses and values, as they do the object they seek to study.

My first point of departure is that extremism is linked, in intimate and complex ways, to the rich and paradoxical problem of liberalism and the *liberal society*.

Violent extremism in all its forms grows in a paradoxical way out of modern liberal society. It is paradoxical because, in more or less all cases, it is on the one hand a reaction to the values of liberalism and, on the other hand, made possible by the channels of free self-expression that are made available by liberal society.

Let us try to sort out and clarify the constellation of liberalism in which violent extremism exists and operates. This will let us draw a number of conclusions about what options are available to us for confronting violent extremists.

The first contradiction of liberalism

We understand modern liberalism as consisting of several different elements. In general terms, 'liberalism' refers first and foremost to the *autonomy of the individual*. This autonomy is most commonly associated with a systems of rights and freedoms, themselves protected through democratic arrangements.

The link between liberalism and extremism becomes clear when we consider the strange *paradox* at the heart of liberalism.

The spirit of liberalism has two moments: On the one hand, we assert a principle under the sign of a certain kind of universal validity. My opinion, as an individual, is valid without any question. I have a sacrosanct right to hold my view. Yet, on the other hand, and paradoxically, by asserting my point of view, I assert and confirm the legitimacy of those who disagree with it, those who hold a contradictory point of view.

Thus, for example, I assert, as a liberal, the right of all children to schooling until the 13th class; yet again, as a liberal I recognize and respect those who think the contrary.

It is not just a matter of freedom of expression. It is an assertion that, on a certain level, two claims can be true at the same time.

Liberalism is tolerance. It expresses tolerance of something on one level, which, on another level, is not allowed.

Just how much and often we tolerate the point of view of someone with whom we disagree, and how much divergence actually constitutes extremism, varies from culture to culture. When it comes to extreme views, the principle of liberalism (that extreme ideas should find free expression) comes closer and closer to a certain practical limitation.

In other words, for example, we can tolerate opinions that hold that there should be no private property, but accepting the *reality* of this is far more dramatic.

Liberalism cannot always tolerate in practice the ideas it tolerates in principle. In this way tolerance always lies in a strange, perhaps impossible, place between full recognition of the divergent point of view and full rejection of it.

This is certainly the case with extremism: we must tolerate it as an idea, and we cannot tolerate it as a reality, simply because its reality, extremism in practice, violates liberal principles. It is iliberal. It denies the basic principle of liberalism, namely tolerance.

The second contradiction of liberalism

Now we need to push this reasoning one step further.

In the logic of liberalism, we accept differing points of view of different individuals. Liberalism corresponds to tolerance. But, if we look more closely, we can see that the tolerance at the core of liberalism is its heart and soul, a necessity. Without tolerance, liberalism is nothing. Without *something* to tolerate, liberalism is meaningless. In other words, liberalism cannot tolerate not being tolerant.

Liberalism *depends* on difference of opinion, *depends* on debate, dialogue, discussion. If society were completely homogeneous, and everyone shared the the same culture, religion, the same values and views, there would simply be no liberal society.

Liberal society, like democracy, enacts itself by negotiating with the differences inside it, by striking compromise with the minority cultures, and minority ideas. What is different, what is extreme, is not only acceptable within liberal culture, it is necessary to liberal culture.

Thus, not only do divergent views have their place in liberalism, but they emerge out of liberalism. As a consequence, liberal society contributes to generating difference, even extreme difference.

The unsettling implication of this observation is that also extreme ideas are a natural consequence of liberalism. Extremism is a bi-product of tolerance, a natural result of the liberal society.

Still, this doesn't explain the relationship between liberalism, extremism and violence. How should we now understand violent extremism and how should it be addressed in society?

Violent extremism/extreme violence

We know that violent extremism is dependent upon liberalism in crucial ways. First, we know that certain extremists have claimed that their campaigns are provoked by and directed against liberal modernity and its decadence. They see liberal institutions as part of the *problem* and violence as the only way to transcend the failure of democracy. Second, violent extremism is, from a logistical point of view, made possible by the nature of the liberal open society. The free access, free circulation, freedom of expression and, not least, availability of a range of goods, have certainly been crucial for plotting and carrying out virtually all the extremist violence of recent memory.

Yet these explanations do not go far enough. They are not self-critical enough.

In order to take the analysis a step further we will need to unpack the relationship between extremism and the violence carried out in its name.

What is the difference between 'extremism' and 'violent extremism'. Are they natural or accidental partners?

To answer this question, we can start by a fundamental observation. All societies, from liberal to authoritarian, from democracies, to informal communities to business partnerships, have one trait in common: they rest upon a *bond*. This bond is not a given. It is not a necessity, cannot be taken for granted, no matter what the setting.

More importantly, this bond cannot be forced. It is incompatible with force. Thus force, or even violence, as an expression of a social pact is simply incoherent.

Based on this observation let's pause and make three intermediate conclusions about violent extremism.

Firstly, no argument that claims that violence as a necessary and unavoidable means to advance society's ends can, in the end, be coherent. This is because violence as an end is at odds with society as an end.

Secondly, violence cannot coherently and adequately *promote* any views, let alone extreme views. Violence simply does not *communicate* doctrines or messages.

Thirdly, violence can never go *far enough*. There is not enough violence in the world to overcome the dissent that will be generated by the violence. The economy of societal violence is an open, not a closed, one.

Yet, for better or worse, these questions remain purely philosophical. Violence, in a large number of its forms, among these, terrorism, is *already* illegal, *already* thoroughly dealt with by police and investigative agencies. Violence is uncontroversial.

It is also important to note that a certain kind of extremism corresponds with an acute need for unity and coherence. Extremism dismisses compromise. It sees in compromise the notion of impurity, of an acceptance of moral or technical standards that are beneath those that a given matter is worthy of.

Violent extremism dialogues with no one and nothing. Despite the perception of perpetrators that they are 'sending a message', violence is neither a language nor a message. We can talk of violent language; we can talk of a message of violence; and we can even talk about a violent message. In a certain narrow sense it is true that language can do violence; and we must also admit that language and social relations in general channel power. But violence does not in itself communicate, because its target is the subjective, human relation that make language, communication and social relations possible at all.

Let us ask, then, what measures are available to society to address extremism.

Societal insecurity

In order to answer this question, we need to take one step backwards. The most general background for the emergence of violent extremism from liberalism on a more or less global scale is a certain kind of globalization of security and insecurity.

Around the end of the Cold War, we began to see a shift in the way security is experienced in our societies. Instead of a global preoccupation with the East Bloc-West Bloc ideological battle for national security, the concept of security began to take on meaning on a number of levels, from the individual and local group level, to regional and trans-national group level. Horizontally, an array of thematic understandings of security and insecurity, from religious security to identity security, food security, health security, etc. became visible. The 1994 Human Development Report famously launched the concept of *human security*, providing the first of a number of institutional arrangements that would support and advance this new way of understanding security.

The consequences of this really quite massive paradigm shift have been slow but clear in coming. During the Cold War the threats to our security were threats to the sovereignty of the nation state and sovereignty was the primary mode of understanding the right to security. Threats were external, they came from outside a border, outside a wall or window.

Today, certain globalization processes have led us to a situation where this model no longer holds. Threats today are among us, they surround us and penetrate us. The next health crisis is already brewing in our midst, climate change touches entire regions, pollution is not limited to national interest areas, and the most feared terrorists are the homegrown ones.

Insecurity has become a challenge to society because it has become a product of our society. The challenges to our security do not come from outside, but rather from within society. It is by being who we are, perfecting the ideals of the modern liberal society, that we become complicit in our own insecurity.

It is in this logic we must locate *violent extremism*. For, violent extremism is the ultimate *reflexive* social problem for liberal society. Violent extremism must be considered as a symptom of our own society and not as some foreign aberration.

Preparedness instead of prevention

What then should be our political response to the insecurity caused by violent extremism?

We live in a world far beyond the Cold War logic of prevention and protection, of security understood as an effort directed toward an enemy that we seek to keep our society free from. It can no longer be a question of keeping our societies clear of the dangers that threaten them. For the threats are already here, already present. They are indeed the necessary bi-product of our own societies.

Preventing extremism and violent extremism is not an option, both for empirical and for principled reasons. We must not seek to restructure our societies so that dangers are kept outside or somehow ghettoized. Our political objectives must revolve far more around *living with* dangers and developing societal resilience against them.

To purify our societies from extremism, to eliminate danger, exclude foreign menaces, only repeats the extremist gesture and cancels the principles of liberal society.

In line with the changes in our world, we need to update our view on what it is to secure our societies:

- Instead of 'us' against 'them' it must be far more a matter of 'us' in relation to ourselves;
- Instead of a logic of war, we must insist on a logic of criminality and criminal justice;

- instead of protection, we must look for preparedness;
- instead of armed police, we must develop those institutions that advance societal trust;
- instead of road blocks, we must to seek integration;
- instead of surveillance, we need to be build communities.

In short, instead of a bunker society, we must seek to enhance and develop the liberal society, despite its inherent contradictions.