

Brexit, Trump and the Rise of Jihadism as Rejection of the Political Status Quo

Written by Joshua Skoczylis

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JOSHUA SKOCZYLIS, NOV 15 2017

In his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published almost 70 years ago, Orwell describes a dystopian world which in many ways resembles the world we live in today: “a world of fear and treachery and torment a world of trampling and being trampled upon, a world which will grow not less but more merciless as it refines itself.” In the last decade governments around the world have increased their surveillance capabilities dramatically, but despite this onslaught of covert surveillance, political violence appears to be on the increase. Blaming austerity and a decrease in police numbers, as some have argued, is simplistic and ignores many important points, not least the fact that extra police may well not have stopped most of these terrorist attacks we have seen in the past year in the UK and around Europe.

Of course, we need to be kept safe from extremists and terrorists. But does the Government’s current approach really work? With each new attack, governments around the globe bring in new counter-terrorism laws which lead to a further erosion of our civil rights and media coverage of terrorism further alienates and demonizes the ‘other’. In the current climate those ‘others’ are Muslim and immigrant communities.

The reality is, that unless there is a fundamental shift in government policy, extremism and political violence will flourish in the years to come. Let me be clear, I am not talking just about tackling jihadism, but extremism across the political spectrum. Just look at Europe and the USA, which has seen a proliferation of far-right extremism.

Surveillance remains at the heart of counter-terrorism, but, more surveillance and censoring of the internet, in particular, social media sites, will do little to stop the proliferation of extremism. Politicians want us to believe that the problem are extreme ideologies, not the wider socio-economic, cultural and political context. This simplistic assumption encourages simplistic solutions: more censorship, counter-narratives, and increased surveillance of those groups deemed risky.

More surveillance will only strain the already fragile relationship between the state and affected communities, undermining trust and perceptions of legitimacy. Add to this, the ‘othering’ of these communities by politicians and the media, and it should come as no surprise that they will feel more and more isolated from wider society.

We should remember that disaffected communities are key to fighting extremism. It is the information they share with the authorities which is need to tackle issues of extremism and terrorism within society. Turning off this flow of information will further hinder the work of the police and intelligence agencies.

Ignoring the good work that these communities can do is also counter-productive, any such approach will do little to help counter-terrorism and little to tackle the associated problems. Surveillance is an invaluable tool, but when it becomes all pervasive, it becomes counterproductive, because communities are no longer willing – at times justifiably so – to share information or even step in themselves for fear of being branded sympathisers. Securitising the political space and limiting freedom of expression will allow extremism to flourish unchallenged in public and private spaces.

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Of course, there is a problem with the extremist ideologies, and related content is easily accessible on the internet. Yes, social media sites need to do more, but the real problem lies elsewhere. Why it is that people are exploring such extreme content in the first place, and why are they sharing it? The internet is not the problem, it is just another medium of communication. We must ask ourselves why so many people are seeking out more and more extreme ideologies.

There needs to be a recognition that extremism is driven by the socio-economic, cultural and political context, and failed neoliberal policies of the last few decades. Austerity imposed on Britain, Greece and across Europe has left millions behind. Levels of poverty and inequality are on the rise even among the most affluent countries, while social mobility stagnates. There is a growing frustration with the current status quo and a real sense of injustice.

Governments around the world need to step back and start addressing the real issues its citizens are facing. The issues are diverse, but things such as racism, gender inequality, political dissatisfaction and socio-economic inequality need to be addressed, and they need to be addressed now.

Extremism will continue to flourish as long as people continue to feel left behind, alienated and disaffected by the political 'mainstream'. Brexit, the growth of the far-right, Trump's election and the rise of Jihadism across Europe are all symptomatic of the rise of 'extreme' ideologies – a rejection of the political status quo. In the long run, the current trajectory does not benefit anyone, but in the short term 'disaster capitalist' are generating huge profits from the back of the misery that neoliberalism, conflict and terrorism has created. The solutions to extremism and terrorism lie in a rejection of the status quo. The difficulty is that current socio-economic policy have become so mainstream, that even the centre-left has adopted them. It is the power of the elites and political short-sightedness which make progress difficult. The majority of politicians remain wedded to neoliberal ideology as it has hugely benefited the elites and political class.

This, however, pits groups who essentially all share the same frustrations and sense of being left behind against each other, while politicians offer nothing but the usual solutions. The neoliberal system is broken. Divide and rule. This will not change unless governments and politicians are willing to tackle the status quo and make changes that better the lives of millions. If they do not, the proliferation of extremism and political violence will only increase. Civil unrest, and worse, are inevitable unless the voices of the many are heard and their concerns addressed.

About the author:

Joshua Skoczylis is a Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Lincoln. He completed his PhD in Law at the University of Leeds, an MSc in Criminology at the University of Oxford and an undergraduate on the same topic at the University of Central Lancashire. He has published a number of books, chapters and articles on counter-terrorism, extremism and public policy.