



Evidence Briefing

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Youth Extremisms

Mainstreaming extremism in the political process

In response to recent political events in Europe and North America through 2016 and forthcoming elections in 2017 in which parties and candidates of the populist radical right (PRR) and extreme right will be highly visible, the fourth of our six seminars on 'Youth Extremisms: Understanding across Ideological and Religious Contexts' was dedicated to understanding processes of the mainstreaming of extremism in contemporary political discourse and process.

Participants from a wide range of academic disciplines and from European NGOs and government agencies working in the counter-violent-extremism area, considered the impact of extreme right parties on the political discourse in Europe, America and India, young people's responses to hate speech and anti-Muslim sentiment and the value of programmes designed to combat racism, anti-Semitism and violent extremism.

Key Discussion Points

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- 'Populism' is a slippery term since it is compatible with different ideologies and forms of government. It might be thought of as 'thin ideology' constructed around core contradictions between: 'elite' and 'people'; and 'us' and 'them' (usually 'foreigners').
- Opinion was divided on whether populism can be a positive force. Some thought it was always exclusivist; populist leaders claim exclusive representation of the voice of 'the people'. This makes populism anti-pluralist rather than anti-elitist. Others thought that the lack of a priori association of populism with any one ideological content meant it held the potential to be a force for reinvigorating democracy.
- The high visibility of extreme right and PRR parties is shaping the political landscape. Even when such parties under-perform electorally (e.g. the PVV in the 2017 elections in the Netherlands), the political debate shifts in the direction of the extreme right as other parties accommodate elements of their agendas.
- Anti-establishment rhetoric is a recurrent feature of the PRR and many actors present themselves as movements or projects rather than traditional parties and use provocation as a political strategy. This shifts the political terrain and is difficult to counter through the mainstream political process.
- The internet is an important site for conducting (a new form of) nationalist politics. This is evident in the example of young, highly educated, entrepreneurial urban Hindu nationalists who see themselves as forging a strong new India through activism in social media based, leaderless networks.
- Extremism is being mainstreamed in society. A rapid response survey (by the Southern Poverty Law Centre) in US schools revealed that 80% had experienced increased student anxiety due to the US Presidential election campaign and 2,500 incidents of bigotry and harassment directly tied to election rhetoric were recorded.
- In this climate space becomes contested. The marking out of certain city spaces as 'hotbeds' of terrorism, in the context of wider over-representation of Muslims in the media and national imaginary, creates a sense of being under suspicion among young Muslims. Meanwhile, in the US context, university campuses have become sites of contestation of hate speech and the creation of safe spaces ('sanctuary' campuses).

Implications for Policy

- The increasingly routine encounter of hate speech is a major challenge for policy makers. Policy priorities include providing: a mechanism for tracking incidents and generating reliable data; and teacher training that equips teachers to discuss these issues in class.
- PRR parties and movements are dynamic, draw on a range of diverse constituencies and are particularly effective in encouraging previous non-voters to participate in elections.
- This makes it difficult to predict the fortunes of such parties and how to respond to them.
- Condemnation strategies may be effective in some cases. The success of the new German party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) might be attributed partially to the inability to stigmatise it when it first emerged because a core constituent of its members were drawn from the neo-liberal elite. The anti-establishment rhetoric of many parties, however, means that condemnation strategies may prove counter-productive in other cases.
- The mainstreaming of extremism requires the mainstreaming of counter-extremism messages also. Anti-racism and anti-Semitism should be incorporated into routine youth work and youth work training manuals.
- De-radicalisation programmes are an essential tool for states and individuals affected by violent extremism but they require rigorous evaluation. Lack of standards can lead to failure to recognise recidivism, re-radicalization or inoculation against CVE interventions.

About the Project

Youth Extremisms: Understanding across Ideological and Religious Contexts seminars are funded under the ESRC Research Seminar Series (Grant Reference: ES/N008812/1). The seminar series runs January 2016-December 2017 and consists of six thematically focused one-day seminars on issues concerning youth engagement in radicalism and extremism across ideological and religious contexts. The seminars bring together academic researchers, civil society actors, policy-makers, government and community actors from across Europe and North America and facilitate constructive dialogue on some of the most serious challenges facing society today.

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Further information can be found at:

<http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/sociology/research/projects/youth-extremisms/>.

Registration for future seminar events can be obtained from the Seminar Series administrator, Stephanie Rinaldi (Stephanie.Rinaldi@manchester.ac.uk).

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The views expressed in this evidence briefing are those of the author and not necessarily those of the ESRC.