



Circles of Rage: An Interview with Julia Ebner

24 November 2017

Julia Ebner, specialist on extremism, examines the rise in Islamist radicalization and the concurrent rise in far-right extremism and how these two feed off one another.

Q. Your book, *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far Right Extremism*, was published in September of this year. The book explores the interaction between the ‘new’ far-right and Islamist extremists. Why did you decide to start researching this topic and what are the main goals of the book?

I wrote the first lines of *The Rage* in the week when Jo Cox was murdered, a few days after the Orlando attack happened. Both events deeply moved me and made me want to understand why we see this simultaneous rise in Islamist and far-right extremist inspired violence.

Therefore, the primary goal of the book was to explore how different forms of extremism amplify one another and how this ultimately allows the fringes of society to shape the political discourse and bring about societal change. I wanted to look deeper into the dynamics at play, which have driven polarisation, deepened societal rifts and created an atmosphere of hate and division in European and American countries in recent years.

Q. You use the term “renaissance of the far-right” in your book. In what ways are current far-right movements in Europe and the US similar to past far-right movements and how are they different?

Today’s far-right movements play on very old tropes, meta-narratives and conspiracy theories that are deeply embedded in both European and American thinking (although we don’t tend to admit that). Calls for a push-back

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against the ‘other’ under the pretext of the preservation of our ethno-cultural heritage and in defence of an alleged invasion by foreign forces is, of course, not new. However, far-right movements have managed to reinvent themselves in recent years, reappearing with different – often socially more acceptable – faces. And these new faces can unfortunately be very appealing to young generations: they are typically educated, good-looking and hip. As extreme-right movements are increasingly adopting guidelines and policies on optics, public representation and the use of symbols, old neo-Nazi stereotypes don’t really apply anymore to today’s far-right.

The migration crisis and the wave of jihadist attacks have provided the fuel for such dangerous hybrids of old ideologies and new faces. Due to the current political context, most far-right movements now place an emphasis on solving what they call the “Islamic problem”, although this often comes in tandem with anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, and thus a perceived “Jewish problem”. Ultimately, the “new” right’s culprits are still the same as those of traditional far-right movements: ethnic and religious minority groups, the political establishment and the media.

Q. The media is afforded much attention in your book, where you describe how extremists capitalise on media coverage, both online and offline, to help frame their narratives. Do you think that the way the media covers extremism, both violent and non-violent, enables it and, if so, what needs to change in the way the media covers extremism?

Terrorism has attracted a disproportionate amount of unchecked reporting, inconsistent language and sensational coverage for the sake of economic gains, sometimes at the cost of political stability and national security. The hyper-sensationalisation of jihadist attacks has contributed to remote

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radicalisation and inspired self-starter attacks from both Islamist and far-right extremists. In many ways, the media has also played into the hands of extremists by heightening public levels of fear and intimidation.

Against the background of rapidly evolving media landscapes, news outlets operate under increasingly interconnected and competitive conditions. The constant scramble for clicks is at the heart of traditional media outlet's struggle for survival and has made journalists' profession a delicate balancing act between commercial interests, freedom of press and responsible reporting.

High journalistic standards, linguistic nuance and critical engagement with raw footage and primary source materials will be needed to avoid the media becoming one of the strongest propaganda instruments for extremists. In France, news outlets such as Le Monde and La Croix have made an excellent start by passing editorial guidelines that no longer allow for the publication of the names and pictures of terrorist perpetrators to avoid both glorification and fearmongering. The good news is that it is entirely in our hands to reward high-quality journalism with clicks and donations. Hopefully, the next generation of readers will demand more critical engagement and better moral standards instead of higher entertainment values.

Q. On the same subject, the book devotes a chapter to the ways adversarial extremist groups engage with each other on the Internet. How do Islamists and the far-right interact online and how does this interaction allow them to amplify each other and thrive?

The strong symbiosis of Islamist and far-right narratives ('The West is at war with Islam' and 'Muslims are at war with the West') has fuelled mutual hatred in the online space, with the potential to be mainstreamed on social media.

Extremists on the two opposing sides interact on at least three levels: they utilise each other as amplifiers of their narratives, as recruiting tools and as legitimisers of violent action.

While jihadists serve extreme-right attempts to portray the entire Muslim community as hostile, Islamist extremists use far-right extremists to paint the entire West as Islamophobic.

The far-right's instrumentalisation of Islamist extremism becomes especially evident in the aftermath of terrorist attacks. At the [Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#), we found massive spikes in online hate speech against Muslims after the Westminster Bridge and Manchester attack. This is in line with my observations on white nationalist private chat rooms on the encrypted Discord application. Meanwhile, ISIS Telegram channels shared pictures of the extreme-right Charlottesville rally, referring to it as an incident that revealed "the true, racist nature of America". Islamist accounts also used the election of Donald Trump and the high support levels far-right parties across Europe as a recruiting argument, saying "it is necessary for Muslims to unite to defend themselves against their global oppression by the West".

This victimisation of the in-group and the demonisation of the out-group helps both fringes of the political spectrum to gain support and recruit new members who are looking for simple solutions to complex questions. The idea of an inevitable war between Muslims and non-Muslims is then used to justify pre-emptive violent action or legitimise terrorism to intimidate or defeat the opponent.

Q. How does geographical location effect the likelihood of extremism being embraced by certain individuals and why do some areas become

“radicalisation hotbeds” whilst others do not?

The dynamics that create radicalisation hotbeds are complex and multi-faceted but as a general rule Islamist and far-right extremists tend to concentrate in the same geographic areas. One explanation is that they thrive in similar environments, where high temperatures of political and socio-economic grievances provide good conditions for growing their support base. They often rationalise (legitimate) frustrations of local communities that feel left out by tying them to their black-and-white narratives before offering utopian solutions. Extremists are extraordinarily good at spotting such windows of opportunity and tapping into political vacuums by making usually empty, yet at first sight appealing, promises.

Q. Though there are nuances, violence seems to be an interlinking theme of both far-right and Islamist narratives. As you explore in your book, there is a common belief in far-right and jihadist circles that there may be some form of final violent confrontation between Muslims and non-Muslims in the future. Yet out of those holding sympathy for violence and believing in its inevitability, only a few are willing to engage in it. Though it is certainly still a heavily debated issue, what do you think is the link between violent and non-violent extremism?

There is little doubt that ideology is a central element of terrorism and political violence of all forms. Extremism always starts with the dehumanisation of “the other”, whatever identity group this “other” is. Non-violent and violent representatives of both the Islamists and the far-right extremist spectrum share the same ideological foundations. The idea of an inevitable war between races or cultures feeds into the atmosphere that ultimately legitimates, incites or escalates violence against the alleged enemy. The atmosphere created by the

rhetoric of non-violent extremists therefore fuels hatred that often translates into violence, in the form of a “pre-emptive” push-back against “the Muslim invaders” or a “defensive” jihad against “the evil West”.

The highly emotional debate on the relationship between violent and non-violent extremism often misses the point: the relevant question is not one of guilt but one of consistency. Many on the far-right of the political spectrum condemn non-violent Salafists and Islamists for providing the ideological inspiration that make jihadists carry out violent attacks. Yet, when challenged about their own role in inspiring far-right terrorism and hate crimes they react with indignation and denial. The opposite reaction can be observed among members of non-violent Islamist organisations who often fail to recognise their own role in driving jihadist terrorism. This shows the blind spots we have in regards to the harmful ideas that emanate from our own culture: it is always easier to condemn alien forces and thoughts. Acknowledging that every culture has the potential to give rise to exclusivist, intolerant and potentially harmful ideologies, which may inspire violence against the out-group, is key to tackling today’s rise of extremism.

Q. Towards the end of the book, you discuss ways of “breaking the vicious circle”. Antidotes to extremism you suggest include “mobilising the middle”. Why do you feel this is a potent method to combat extremism and what steps can be taken by policymakers to empower the middle ground?

The danger of terrorism is that it empowers the fringes, which is why extremists’ voices are currently heard so much louder than those of the middle ground. We have allowed extremists to shape what is discussed in political debates and what the media reports. To combat extremism effectively, we will need to reclaim these spaces, determine the direction of the political discourse,

and shape narratives before they do. Policymakers can drive forward such efforts by providing the middle ground with the knowledge, tools and incentives needed to organise effective counter-speech movements that push back against hatred both online and offline. A good start would be to resist the temptation of giving in to the loud voices on the fringes and to avoid political overreactions to terrorism such as the introduction of intrusive laws that cut down on civil liberties. Terrorist attacks are truly tragic and painful for those directly concerned. But, ultimately, their long-term effects are what makes them really dangerous, as they have the potential to destabilise the pillars that our democratic systems are built upon.

Image credit: Pixabay.



Julia Ebner is author of ‘The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism’ and Research Fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD). In cooperation with Facebook Germany, Julia leads the Online Civil Courage Initiative (OCCI) to counter online hate speech. On the basis of her research, she advises parliamentary working groups, frontline workers and tech firms, speaks at international conferences and writes for Guardian and the Independent. Before

joining ISD, Julia spent two years working for the world’s first counter-extremism organisation Quilliam, where she led research projects on terrorism prevention for the European Commission and the Kofi Annan Foundation, and

gave evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee on far-right extremism. In her role as coordinator of the pan-European network Families Against Terrorism and Extremism (FATE), she carried out radicalisation-prevention projects across Europe and North Africa.

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