

Trust in times of terror and risk?

Group analytic perspectives on countering violent extremism (CVE)

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Dear Ms Stumptner, dear colleagues,

I am honoured that my colleagues Julia Berczyk and Christoph Bialluch have been given this opportunity to tell you a bit about their work with the family counselling centre HAYAT and the Diagnostic-Therapeutic Network Extremism at this interesting international conference. Once again, we would like to express our thanks to Ms Stumptner and to the committed organisers of the conference who so readily accepted us into the programme.

The two projects, HAYAT and the Diagnostic-Therapeutic Network, combine two different approaches to the prevention of radicalisation and extremism. HAYAT – Julia Berczyk will tell you more about it later – is primarily based on a systemic approach, whereas our Diagnostic-Therapeutic Network (DNE) is committed to working with depth psychology and psychoanalysis. Both projects are part of an “architecture of prevention” that distinguishes Germany from many other European countries. In a way, both of them are “model or pilot” projects. Several years ago, Germany began to offer governmental prevention programmes to support the contribution of NGOs to the prevention and intervention of radicalisation and extremism. In the prevention of Islamism, HAYAT was among the very first of these projects. And DNE, which was founded in 2015, is one of the few projects in Germany that systematically seek to collaborate with medical and psychological psychotherapists to prevent radicalisation and extremism. Both projects are also very manageable, we are not a large organisation: five people work at HAYAT and the core team at DNE consists of three people. Since many of you do not come from Germany, I would like to give you some insights into the specific German social field of conflict in which both of these projects are active and will describe these from a psychosocial and psychoanalytic perspective

Arguments

During the “2015 wave of refugees”, a division in German society manifested itself. One part of our society – those celebrating an apparently manic “culture of welcome” with open borders – found itself confronted with another part of society – those who wished to close the borders, who felt threatened, and who, to some degree, had a paranoid sense of being

infiltrated. The consequences of this division continue to have an impact on a political level and can still be felt in the everyday activities of our projects. The fact that we all live in a globally interdependent world means that German society must also increasingly face the effects of wars and violence that know no borders. We have a growing responsibility (in both social and psychological terms) to address the complex processes of traumatising that are the result of war and violence – a fact that many politicians and large portions of society would rather acknowledge with one blind eye: people know and yet they would like to remain ignorant. The facts are acknowledged, but their impact is often denied. The dominant wish among the citizens is to be able to live in a sheltered Germany as if on an island of the blissful.

The current “architecture of prevention and security”, which includes nongovernmental projects, is deeply shaped by this wish. The field in which projects like HAYAT and DNE are active is therefore very contradictory: these projects are aimed at preventing radicalisation and extremist criminality, but they are also part of a “social defence system”. This dichotomy makes it difficult to analyse the deeper social and psychological dynamics, i.e. the cause of the symptoms. Your profession, the group analysts, will likely be needed to a much larger degree in the future. But I would like to explain my arguments a bit more:

The attack in Hamburg

Two weeks ago, when I was preparing my speech, a refugee carried out an attack in Hamburg. It was a knife attack killing one person and injuring seven others, some of them seriously. The attacker, a 26-year-old man from a Palestinian family, was born in the United Arab Emirates and arrived in Europe as a refugee. He lived in a variety of European countries for eight years without being permitted to stay in any of them. He arrived in Germany during the “wave of refugees” in 2015 but was denied asylum. According to the media, there had long been signs that worried the authorities. These included heavy mood swings, a deep-rooted inner conflict between a western lifestyle and the lifestyle of a religious Muslim as well as the wish to study here in Germany on the one hand and to return to Palestine to help his father build a house on the other. Exemplary cooperative behaviour in encounters with the authorities stood in contrast to a contempt and disdain of western society as an enemy to Muslims. The young man's behaviour became more and more bizarre: loud calls of Allahu Akhbar, rigid Koran recitations, a world that seemed to include only good and evil, black and white. Other refugees were concerned and worried that he might do something destructive. So they informed the authorities who recommended a psychiatric examination that never took place.

The man's mental state finally became increasingly unstable until the knife attack took place, an impulsive act born of a spontaneous decision. While in custody, the perpetrator is said to have declared that he wanted to be treated as a “terrorist” and to “die a martyr”. According to Michael Rustin the “jihadist ideology of martyrdom” had become an ideological container for both this man’s mental condition and his unrepresentable and unbearable experiences. What Rustin writes about racism may also apply to the jihadist ideology of martyrdom: “Beliefs about race, when they are suffused with intense feeling, are akin to psychotic states of mind, ... The mechanisms of psychotic thought find in racial [jihadi] categorizations an ideal container. These mechanisms include the paranoid splitting of objects into the loved and hated, the suffusion of thinking processes by intense unrecognized emotion, confusion between self and object due to the splitting of the self and massive projective identification, and hatred of reality and truth.” (Rustin)

Fear, right-wing populism, and a lack of critical reflection in the political centre

Every act of terrorist violence, whether the attack in Hamburg or other terrorist or extremist acts of violence, such as those that occurred in Ansbach, Würzburg, Wuppertal, or in Lower Saxony, instils fear among the people. The emotional structure of fear in our modern society, which already has a large impact, can turn into panic in the face of such acts of violence. This panic gradually infiltrates our daily social lives, leading to distrust and resentment, and is taken up by the political and public spheres. In recent years, we have increasingly been witnessing how right-wing populist movements and parties take advantage of the moral panic of the people. Right-wing populism focuses these fears on certain groups of people (Muslims) and uses them to justify political demands. In the end, this process contributes to the polarisation of society and undermines the humanitarian foundations of coexistence. It is a process that the jihadists of ISIS wish to encourage. They hope it will feed insecurity, divide society, and sow distrust. ISIS is playing with the paranoid fears of society and aims to claim responsibility for as many of these acts as possible, even if they were not “organised or ordered by ISIS”. They are also conducting a kind of psychological warfare.

Democratic parties are thus put under enormous pressure and sometimes even fall back on the populist style and forms of “symbolic politics” themselves. In doing so, they hope to demonstrate their capacity to take action and preserve the pretence of control and competence in order to “reassure” the citizens. With this in mind, it is no wonder that political parties reacted to the knife attack as they did: “How could this happen, why wasn't it prevented? Why wasn't this refugee deported long ago? Why was he not arrested or admitted to a psychiatric

institution?” The populist side of the debate acts as if every mentally ill refugee should be immediately deported. And, finally, people asked: “Who is to blame?” The authorities must have failed.

The German sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer, who spent many years researching the quality of democratic culture in Germany, once diagnosed a “structural lack of reflection in the political centre” as the key aspect that is threatening democracy. His diagnosis is confirmed here, as this example clearly shows how politics and the media are contributing to a process of division: for example, much of the public debate on the attack primarily emphasised the “religious radicalisation” of this refugee. This “terrorist act of violence” made the “symptomatic” level, which appeared to be self-explanatory, the subject of the discussion. By contrast, the deeper dimensions, i.e. what led to the knife attack, the psychological impact of the “unbearable” – the psychotic fear, the desperation, and finally the hatred that makes such an “enactment” of terrorist violence possible– were scarcely brought to public attention.

Especially now when we are facing an election, some of our politicians and a large part of the population are united in a dynamic of defence: they barely acknowledge the interdependency of mental and social problems that develop from cross-generational experiences of war, asylum, exile, and migration, while the associated dynamics of fear, trauma, and experiences of loss that continue to exist in our society are exacerbated. Society's inability to tolerate intense emotions, which are the result of a shared sense of susceptibility in a world shaped by wars and terror, is disproportionate to the social security and economic wealth of our country. It would appear as if this “susceptibility”, or social suffering as Hoggett puts it, were the “otherness of the modern age” that we would like to flee from as long as it cannot be controlled by social engineering.

The ambiguity of the new architecture of prevention and security

For some time now, we have seen how new political governments in Germany attempt to establish a sense of security in the face of deep-rooted uncertainty. The goal is to develop an anti-terrorist architecture that aims to make society more “resilient”. For example, Bavaria now permits unlimited preemptive detention for so-called “potential threats”, i.e. for people who are believed to be capable of carrying out a terrorist attack. New software technology should help determine who is a direct “potential threat” and who is less dangerous. Even children who show signs of radicalisation can soon be observed by the secret services. These are just a few examples. It is often still unclear which of these measures have been thoroughly

thought-out and are reasonable, and which are the result of a populist style of “symbolic politics” that only pretends to be justified while it actually creates new threats to democracy. If the democratic and constitutional foundation of our society is undermined, then new conflicts threaten to arise. The British psychoanalytic social psychologist Paul Hoggett used the term “double suffering” to describe the consequences of these dynamics. He pointed out that human experiences of powerlessness and violations of psychological integrity can produce new violence, destruction, and traumatisation, because “experience which cannot be thought about and voiced, will often find expression in action. Here the action is unreflexive and the individuals suffering ‘speaks through’ their behaviour.” By reenacting traumatic experiences, victims become perpetrators, often in a desperate triumph of short-lived power and superiority that, if not contained, will lead to more social destruction and further erode the foundations of our society.

Outlook

Governmental intervention and prevention programmes against radicalisation and extremism are one result of this political dynamic. The aim of these programmes is to help contain social processes of disintegration and polarisation. They should contribute to the inner peace of society, and yet they are based on a concept of “social defence”. As such, they are part of the “prevention and security architecture” and their objective is to shield politicians and political parties from the emotional work involved in analysing the destruction and trauma that result from terror. On the other hand, the government has found it very difficult to provide these programmes with the required funding, long-term perspectives, and structures that would allow them to develop further and contribute to the prevention of violent extremism and the protection of democracy. In addition, these projects have become a kind of “receptacle” for a wide range of conscious and unconscious expectations on the part of governmental actors, the police, security authorities, municipalities, and citizens. But until now, little research has been carried out on the psychological and social dynamics of politics and the operations of everyday project work. Within this context, group analysts and psychoanalysts could make an important contribution by helping to establish a “reflective prevention architecture” that is capable of thinking critically about itself as well as playing a role in the self-authorisation of civil society.

But now I would like to give the floor to my colleague Julia Berczyk.