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Psychological Determinants of Individual Radicalisation

Abstract: The paper aims to define the psychological foundations of lone wolf activism. The analysis that facilitated attaining this goal was based on the Nietzschean concept of resentment theory of compensatory reevaluating values that explain the relationships between inferiority and fundamentalism, fanaticism, and ideologically motivated violence. Based on a phenomenological examination of the phenomenon, the author demonstrates that lone wolf activism is founded on two psychologically and sociologically determined successive processes. The first one occurs when a sense of personal inferiority becomes the source of an envy-based hostile attitude toward the world. Later on, this feeling, due to personality defence mechanisms, which bring about the falsification of “primary desires” and the generation of “secondary desires”, transforms into fundamentalism. The second process takes place when, as the result of fundamentalist legitimisation that arise on the level of social rivalry, given fundamentalism is destituted, resulting in fanaticism. The author believes that the knowledge of both processes is necessary to recognise and combat the terrorist activity of lone ideologically motivated individuals.

Keywords: *lone wolf terrorism, resentment, fundamentalism, fanaticism*

Introduction

Lone actors are increasingly becoming the object of interest of security institutions. However, it has not always been so. Until the mid-1990s, the “western world” had not taken the “lone actor” terrorism particularly seriously, mistakenly believing that only organised militant groups could pose a significant threat to public security. The Oklahoma City bombing conducted by two men and the increasing number of attacks on public institutions by solitary individuals has significantly changed this way of thinking. The far-right theorists (supremacists, anti-abortionists, and supporters of racial divisions) such as Joseph Tomasi, Luis Beam, William Luther Pierce, Tom Metzger, and Alex Curtis also contributed to the popularity of the lone actor ideology (Kaplan, 1997, pp. 80–95).

At the beginning of the 21st century, the lone actor strategy was adopted by radical Islamists. In 2003, an article posted on the extremist Islamist website Sada al Jihad (Echo of Jihad) encouraged the Al-Qaeda supporters to take action independently without waiting for the instructions. In December 2004, a Syrian holding Spanish nationality who called himself Abu Mus'ab al Suri (in fact, his name was Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Setmariam Nasar, born in 1958) published a book in Arabic titled "The Military Theory of the Global Islamic Resistance Call" which called the Jihad-motivated lone actors to commit terrorist acts. In 2003 the FBI admitted that extremists acting solo could pose a serious threat to the state in the coming years (Jonston & Risen, 2003). In 2007, Robert S. Mueller, the director of the FBI, confirmed these predictions, stating, among other things, that: "The threat from domestic terrorists or extremists, acting together with other like-minded individuals or as lone actors, has become one of the most serious internal threats that we must face" (Mueller, 2007). On June 2, 2011, Al-Qaeda produced, through its media wing As-Sahab, a movie called "You Are Responsible Only for Yourself", in which they encouraged individual attacks in the places of residence. The film's main message is: "Do not rely on others, act on your own" (MEMRI, 2011).

An objectively speaking, a lone wolf is an individual with a considerable potential for aggression. The strength of their motivation is based not on exogenous impulses – objective, depreciative situations that feed the declared ideology, but only those internal (endogenous) – personal complexes and shortcomings not related to the declared ideological goals (Kruglanski et al., 2014, p. 79). If the strength of these internal motivations is resentimental (to which I am inclined in these considerations), the situation becomes even more serious. It is then that the uncompromising attitude appears, which goes hand in hand with the inability to compromise, and the possibility of weakening the motivation under the influence of, for example, triggering the self-preservation instinct or simple compassion for the potential victims, significantly decreases. If such an individual gains the possibility of multiplying their destructive power (e.g., by access to weapons of mass destruction), it should be expected that such a possibility will almost certainly be realised.

Psychological Background

Researchers of terrorism are rarely willing to explain radical behaviour by reference to situational factors (including the so-called catalysing events¹). They are often prone to explain such behaviour by referring to internal features, most often personality². This tendency,

¹ A catalyzing event is a situation that is such a strong experience that the subject under its influence decides to break with the current „moderate mode of functioning” and opt for radical actions.

² In addition to personality traits, some early researchers pointed to causes of physiological nature, such as vitamin deficiency (Lombroso) or hearing defects (David Hubbard).

sometimes argued to be the result of an attribution bias³, was particularly characteristic of the psychological research of the 1970s when terrorism was linked to psychopathy and of the 1980s and 1990s when paranoia was considered a probable cause (Laqueur, 2001, p. 80). Both views have been criticised numerous times for their simplifying nature and the flawed underlying methodology. An alternative to the presented approaches is that terrorists are essentially sane individuals whom any extraordinary personality traits cannot characterise. Can these kinds of observations apply to lone wolves?

Many researchers claim that this is not possible. According to Hewitt, while most terrorists are essentially “normal”, there is some overrepresentation of mentally disturbed persons among lone wolves (Hewitt, 2003). Likewise, Pantucci (2011), and Spaaij (2012, p. 50) claim that the story of many lone wolves is essentially a story of mental and social disorders. The concept of “personality disorder” is not particularly precise. However, many of the most famous lone actors (Volkert van der Graaf, Franz Fuchs, Theodore Kaczynski, David Copeland) had documented mental health problems. What led to them is distinctive. Many theories explain this issue. The most famous among them are the concepts of frustration-aggression and narcissism-aggression (Posłuszna, 2016).

The concept of frustration-aggression, created by John Dollard et al. (1939) and then developed by Leonard Berkowitz (1989, pp. 59–73), explains aggression as a reaction to frustration that hinders the possibility of achieving important personal and social goals. According to Dollard, aggressive behaviour always presupposes the existence of frustration and vice versa: the existence of frustration always leads to various forms of aggression (Dollard et al., 1939). Concerning political violence, its further development is the relative deprivation theory formulated by Ted R. Gurr in “Why Men Rebel”. Relative deprivation is the feeling that one has been deprived of something to which one has a legitimate right. Gurr states that such a feeling does not have to be based on an objective state of affairs. It may be the result of the subjective perception of the subject – someone may be subjectively deprecated in relation to their expectations, while someone else perceives their situation as satisfactory and, conversely, what the observer perceives as an extreme deficiency or absolute deprivation does not have to be perceived as such by the subject experiencing these conditions (Gurr, 1970, pp. 24–25). Therefore, not everyone reacts in the same way to the experienced scarcity and evil. Those who encounter the discrepancy between the expected values and the achievable values that reach a critical level experience frustration, resulting in political violence. Suppose we associate frustration with the inability to achieve important goals of a non-subjective (external) nature. In that case, we will have to recognise that eliminating this inability by making the goals be achieved will eliminate frustration and, as a result, also aggression. In other words, if external goals are achieved, aggression will

³ The attribution bias here is that we explain other people’s behavior by referring to their internal characteristics (what they are like) and explaining our own behavior in terms of situational features (events beyond our control).

disappear. The problem of aggression seems relatively simple to solve, at least in theory. We persuade the aggressive actor to consider modifying their goals, induce them to abandon them, or simply satisfy them. There are many variants, and the conclusion is one: the people whose aggression is rooted in the frustration related to the failure to meet externally defined goals can be negotiated (Pośluszna, 2015).

The concept of narcissism-aggression leads to more pessimistic conclusions about negotiability. This concept links aggression with the occurrence of narcissistic disappointment, defined as serious and lasting damage to the self-image, which has its source in the inability to meet the expectations posed by the ideal ego or the desired standards of behaviour (patterns recognised as objectively valuable). The result of such disappointment is, according to the proponents of this concept (Lasch, 1979, pp. 33–41), narcissistic aggression driven by the need to defend the self against the destructive self-condemnation, directed mainly toward those objects that represent properties imposed by the ideal ego or the desired standards⁴. Directing aggression toward the “foreign objects” is highly useful for the subject. Thanks to these actions, they can regain self-confidence and lost self-esteem. According to Richard Perstein, narcissistic aggression “put in the service of political terrorism” is extremely attractive to the subject also because it allows, in a way, to build a new, better identity – strong and omnipotent – on the rubble of the old, weakened self (Pearlstein, 1991, p. 172). According to Martha Crenshaw, people who tend to be narcissistic also usually have some emotional deficiencies that blind them to the negative consequences of their actions (Crenshaw, 1986, pp. 379–413). One cannot negotiate with such people, modify their goals, or get along with them in terms of values. They are characterised by axiological and pragmatic rigidity, resistant to any form of persuasion. It is because it is not about the goals declared in the ideological postulates. Of course, they do exist, but they are somewhat of a substitute, secondary character.

Concept of Ressentiment

An interesting modification of the concept of narcissism-aggression, which best describes the behaviour of lonely wolves, is the concept of resentment created by Friedrich Nietzsche. Ressentiment is a complex of “hateful emotions – envy, jealousy, lust for revenge”. It is based on an overwhelming feeling of helplessness, which arises when the subject fails to achieve important values (when they feel inferior in some important aspect). All people do not share such a feeling of helplessness, but only by those who, due to their various mental and physical defects, long-lasting depreciation, have limited opportunities to cope with the challenges posed by the reality – “tailored” for people free from these defects and

⁴ According to Robert Robins and Jerold Post, the process of shaping narcissism is triadic. It consists of: “1. a narcissistic claim of rights that inevitably leads to 2. disappointment at the unsatisfied narcissistic needs, which causes narcissistic anger at 3. rejection of ,entitlement’ (Robins & Post, 1999, p. 29).

inabilities. People who are weak and inept must suffer, and it is extremely painful suffering because it is based on a negative self-image (Nietzsche, 1995, p. 27). This suffering is always accompanied by strong hatred, both toward the world, led by unattainable values, and toward those who represent these values. Hatred naturally breeds thirst for revenge, but it cannot be immediately satisfied. The sources of such dissatisfaction may, of course, be diverse. Most often, however, such a source is the fear of admitting inferiority to oneself or failing to confront the “better” who lives in glory and grandeur, which they do not deserve. This anxiety has one important feature (especially when it is long-lasting), it strongly affects positive self-esteem, poisons, raises doubts, causes pain. Therefore, the person who experiences it must act – they must create (of course unconsciously) strategies that will allow them to rebuild the lost sense of self-dignity. One such strategy is to suppress hatred, anger, jealousy, and the lust for revenge. Thanks to this “surgery on emotions”, their source and immediate painful cause (a specific situation or the perpetrator of suffering) is forgotten. Of course, suppression does not eliminate jealousy, anger, or the lust for revenge. These emotions still exist, but they are less “legible” and less “expressive”, making them easier to be detached from the real resentimental cause and easier to interpret or give them a new direction. Suppression, however, does not solve the problem. The suppressed emotions do not cease to have a “subcutaneous” effect on the psyche. They do not cease to hurt, arise bitterness, fester and cause unhappiness.

Ressentiment is inferiority, a sense of failure, the experience of losing dignity, and finally, the helplessness in the face of the Other’s power. These are very unpleasant feelings that make it necessary to develop a strategy to deal with them somehow. These strategies are based either on the falsification of some phenomena or the false identification of values. In the first case, we deal with a phenomenon often described as the “sour grapes effect”; in the second, with revaluation.

The “sour grapes effect” is about finding that objects that cause the resentimental emotions do not represent cherished values. The value of “sweetness” is not denied, but it is proclaimed that these grapes are not sweet (this particular person is not wise, talented, beautiful, and a given culture is “valuable”). The depreciation, in this case, is about things – not values. The re-evaluation strategy is more sophisticated. It consists of depreciating the desired but unattainable values (or the desired but unattainable order of values) and establishing new values, allowing one to perceive themselves positively and give them a chance for success. This strategy no longer denies the value of sweetness but believes that sweetness is not a positive value, which results in a negative attitude toward certain manifestations of the value (regardless of who the carrier is).

The re-evaluation of values consists of the depreciation of the desired but unattainable values (the object of the actor’s original desires) and glorifying those they feel condemned to (secondary, vicariously created desires). This strategy is, of course, a falsification of the actual desires and aspirations. However, it is thanks to it that a man of resentment ceases to experience, at least on the level of consciousness, jealousy, and anger due to the lack of

certain values – the worth of which is depreciated by them, and thus those who are characterised by them stop (at least on the level of consciousness) to cause jealousy or envy. They seem to belong to another world, becoming at best worthy of being pitied. From now on, the only and indisputable objects of pride will be those values which the actor themselves represents (and which they have re-created). It is on their basis that they will build their new mental and axiological “backbone” – the solid foundation of their faith and the source of undisturbed strength. Now they no longer experience resentment – on the surface, the feelings are beautiful and pure, while the soul is raging with a deep, inside-consuming desire to murder. Now (in their own eyes) they are no longer tormented by personal desires. They no longer seek revenge, but bring justice, punish the bad, restore the balance in the world, or, through their actions, enable the good to exist. They are no longer a meaningless individual, tossed by their own drives, but a part of a larger whole. The whole that gives them power and allows them to participate in something bigger that transcends them. Empowered by a higher force, they have a mission – not to achieve any immediate goals, but to permanently repair the world.

Could re-evaluation of values be used to explain the phenomenon of violence, including the violence of lone wolves? Undoubtedly, it is not difficult to find values that fit into the scheme of re-evaluation. Let us start with the overarching value, that is, the one that is the starting point of all resentimental feelings and emotions. This value is, of course, power. Power is a success (usually translating into access to specific material resources), community respect, and a sense of agency. In modern times, this success goes hand in hand with having certain values, which we will call base or primary values. These are individualism, hedonism, secularism, democracy, freedom of individual self-determination, materialism. When power becomes unattainable for various reasons (e.g., it is hampered by a lack of education, money, or cultural competences), the values with which it was associated (primary values) must be re-evaluated and discarded. Secondary values replace them – artificially created, not being the primary object of desires: asceticism, community hierarchy, tradition, decency, orientation toward the afterlife. Secondary values are the product of pure compensation. They are characterised by the opposition to the original values (they are in some way their contradiction). They must be easily achievable for the resentimental subject. They cannot become the subject of disappointment or frustration. Therefore, they are usually part of the tradition, the “cultural endowment” of a given group or community, such a resentment lifetime waiting to be activated.

Can secondary values be produced without any costs? Is it possible to just (without suffering psychological consequences) move from primary values (which were the object of desires and the guarantor of power) to secondary values (artificially created as a result of compensation)? It does not seem psychologically possible. Please remember that the essence of re-evaluation is the falsification of desires. A man of resentment must convince themselves that their old desires, directed toward values that were unattainable for them, were a mistake, while the new ones – properly directed, right, and truly authentic. If they

successfully operated on their desires, that is, if they had wiped out the primary desires and replaced them with fabricated (artificially constructed) secondary desires, they would undoubtedly be successful. The problem, however, is that the primary desires embody what they want, and the secondary desires are imaginary (born in the struggle to maintain self-esteem) and therefore inauthentic, wavering, weak. Therefore, re-evaluation of values can never be completely successful. Always the “true values” (those toward which the man of resentment turns in their original desires) will, as Scheler used to say, “shine through” the illusory values which are to hide them (Scheler, 1977, pp. 55–56). In this way, an emotional dissonance arises inside the subject of resentment, and a double axiological awareness builds up over it (Pośluszny, 2012, pp. 154–167).

Undoubtedly, the volatility of the secondary axiological preferences and emotional dissonance must raise doubts in the subject of resentment as to the reliability of the value system they have created. Therefore, it can be expected that the next element of the strategy will be the necessity to validate them – to gain certainty by creating metaphysical references to the Absolute that the system of values constituted by resentment is the only right and true one. As Richard Smith noted, people of resentment must constantly make themselves believe that their way of looking at and evaluating reality is correct and unquestionable. However, they always do it dishonestly – they selectively collect information about the reality, ignore the unfavourable part, and deny troublesome facts – so that no doubt that the valence of the chosen system would enter their consciousness (Smith, 1993, pp. 140–141). This drive for legitimacy at all costs chokes the spirit of scepticism (a healthy need for criticism). Thus, fundamentalism becomes inscribed in the legitimization of secondary desires.

Nevertheless, fundamentalism is not without problems. It is always exposed to confrontation with other fundamentalisms and their legitimations. There may also be further doubts in such a situation – this time about the exceptional, absolute status of the fundamentalist legitimations. How to maintain these legitimations in such a situation? Some insight into the issue can be found in the description of research carried out by Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter (Festinger et al., 2008). The research aimed to verify the assumptions of the theory of cognitive dissonance. The key question is why, in a situation of cognitive dissonance (a tension caused by divergent beliefs), people tend to distort their views on reality rather than assume that they were wrong. A sect convinced that on December 21, as a result of a great flood, the world would end, became the object of the research. Only the members of the sect who were to be saved from death by the intervention of extra-terrestrial creatures from the planet Clarion were to avoid this end. These creatures were to take the cult members to safety by flying saucers⁵. In preparation for the galactic expedition, the sect members abandoned their jobs, gave away money and possessions, and even abandoned their loved ones. The group of researchers wondered what would happen if the prophecy was not fulfilled at the time announced. As the term of the world cataclysm

⁵ One of the sect members Marian Keech communicated with these creatures.

began to draw closer, the peaceful and fairly closed sect began to actively recruit members and use various propaganda measures that it had avoided before⁶. On December 21, when the prophecy did not come true, against the common-sense expectations, the members of the sect (after a temporary breakdown and subsequent rationalisation, according to which the Earth was spared a cataclysm due to the deep faith of the cult's followers) did not abandon their faith. On the contrary, they began to spread it extremely actively (one might say fanatically).

Festinger does not provide any in-depth psychological explanations of his research. It is not his intention anyway. It does not change the fact that the case he described contains some analogies to our considerations, giving rise to a hypothesis regarding the sources of fanaticism (a hypothesis that is worth examining more closely – also empirically). Following the path outlined by Festinger and transferring the conclusions of his research to the considerations of interest to us here, it can be presumed that in a situation where fundamentalist values and their legitimations cannot stand in the face of doubts provided by other fundamentalisms (other competing visions of the world), occurs a sharpening of faith in its metaphysical grounding. This faith is followed by fanatical activity (on the spiritual or physical plane) to dispel the doubts. This fanatical activity is not only (as was the case in fundamentalism) intellectual protection against the doubts generated by the subject themselves, but a reaction to external threats which may, after all, result in the loss of faith. When the threats are “serious”, when they strongly attack the worldview built on secondary values, they must result in frustration (related to the pain of inferiority), which becomes aggression and violence under favourable circumstances. Whether this happens depends on many factors, particularly whether the ideology to which the fundamentalism refers accepts or condemns violence (or encourages other, non-violent forms of discharging frustration).

Summary

The concepts of narcissism-aggression and resentment draw attention to the feeling of subjective undervaluation as a factor that pushes the subject toward hatred and violence. The research on the biographies of terrorists confirms its causative role. The conclusion of most of them is that terrorists are people who have experienced (or still experience) a deep humiliation in their lives that violates their sense of order and values (which is a source of frustration and then aggression), or questions the value of their self (which becomes a source of narcissistic disappointment, which then turns into aggression). Often this humiliation took place early in life. Based on interviews with IRA leaders, psychologist Jeanne Knutson stated that “they were all victims of terror, all experienced a violation of their personal boundaries, which damaged or destroyed their sense of security” (Volkan, 1997, p. 160). This violation

⁶ There were, inter alia, contacts with the press, radio and television.

has sometimes been associated with the beatings, abandonment or divorce of the parents, sexual abuse, or rejection by the peer group.

In the case of lone wolves, the depreciation that violates the sense of security and personal worth seems to be extremely strong (let us remember that lone wolves act alone, without the psychological support that a group usually gives). Volkert van der Graaf, the future killer of Pim Fortuyn, experienced a severe depression that lasted for several years, as a result of which he took his life after his girlfriend broke up with him. Franz Fuchs was also depressed and planned to commit suicide after failing to find a partner and having a permanent job. Another lone wolf, Theodore Kaczynski, experienced severe depression in the late 1980s, which reportedly lasted until 1994. Most likely, it was caused by the experience of humiliation and violence in his childhood. According to psychiatrists, Andreas Breivik also suffered from severe mental disorders causing great discomfort, and according to the diagnosis of several psychiatrists, it was possible to diagnose narcissism, borderline disorders, dissocial narcissism, and psychopathy (Gardell, 2015, p. 30).

Of course, a methodologically important issue is the ability to recognise the mental mechanisms that build the personality of a lone wolf. Does the value re-evaluation mechanism really occur? Is the concept of resentment the one that best describes the lone wolf phenomenon? Admittedly, we do not have reliable psychological evidence here. It is hard to imagine that they would exist – for at least several reasons. Any attempts to find self-deprecating events or life phases, for example, are doomed to failure. Not only because we often lack reliable, biographical evidence in this matter. The point is also that the importance of these events or phases is assessed purely subjectively. The state of depression itself, which would be its result, may be poorly noticed or even unregistered by the environment and sometimes even by the individual itself. In short, it is impossible to introduce an objective gradation of events as those that trigger an overwhelming sense of inferiority, depression, aggression, and re-evaluation in an individual. We are also not sure whether the inferiority, even if it did exist, was later (as a result of subsequent events) “countered” by other experiences of a more affirmative nature. Such doubts do not mean that any speculation about the association of lone wolves with the phenomenon of resentment is purely contingent. Even a fairly superficial analysis of the biographies of lone wolves highlights many essential features of resentment, such as a strong re-evaluation of the value system (usually the one that was the dominant system for the individual), equally strong evaluation of the new system (a visible signal that a re-evaluation has taken place), large irritability about it, a sense of superiority, mission, uncompromising attitude in pursuing axiologically defined goals. Finding in an individual this kind of essential features for resentment does not mean the existence of the phenomenon itself. These characteristics only justify the possibility of its occurrence. The next step in substantiating the thesis that resentment is the source of the lone wolf’s motivation is jealousy, envy, and a strong desire for revenge. Again, it must be admitted that it is difficult to find reliable evidence of their occurrence in a biography of a lone wolf. We can only conduct an analysis that makes their occurrence more probable

(data selection and gradation). Does this apply to all lone wolves? Although many cases prove this thesis probable, unfortunately, we will never be 100% sure about it. However, the explanatory power of the concept of resentment is, it must be admitted, considerable. Until we find a perfect one, it is worth sticking to it.

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