Lethal Subcultures

FULL REPORT
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SHORT REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Subcultures are defined as groups of people unified by a deviant perspective. Lethal subcultures are similarly defined, but with the additional criteria that subcultures either produce or endorse lethal violence as part of their aesthetic or behaviours.

- A range of subcultures could plausibly be included in this category including some aspects of Jihadism, the extreme-right, incels, some skinhead scenes, various youth gangs, criminal subcultures, and so-called dark fandoms.

- There is an extensive history of subcultural studies, but in the context of terrorism studies, subculture has been used a way to explain the emergence of Jihadism in Western context, as a form of status frustration (Cottee 2011).

- This early focus on status frustration has since been critiqued, but the broader stylistic role of subcultures within terrorist settings has been emphasised (Pisoiu 2014; Hemmingsen 2015).

- Jihadist internet activism in particular has been identified as an example of subculture focused activism in which Jihadis online were forced to navigate the tension between advocating for Jihad without participating physically (Ramsay 2012; 2020).

- The term lethal subculture is intended to recognise that alongside the strategic goals of any violent extremist or terrorist movement is a wider subculture with its own values and norms, reflected in its specific uses of subcultural material, internal dynamics, and approach to subcultural capital.

- Overall, despite being only too willing to present themselves as overtly violent and extreme, from a strategic perspective, lethal subcultures have the potential to represent a drag on the violent achievements of extremist and terroristic groups. Actual violence is conducted by a relatively small subset of actors while the majority pursue their own aims and are perhaps distracted by what else the culture has to offer.

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INTRODUCTION

News reporting, legislation, policy, and investigations often contribute to the impression that violent extremists and terrorists are organised, disciplined, and strategic, luring vulnerable young people into distorted worldviews that prize atrocity, hatred, and malevolence. Despite the overt militancy of violent extremist spaces however, actual terror attacks remain rare, and those that do take place are often poorly planned and unaffiliated, or only partially affiliated, to groups. Although some terrorist spectaculars have caught headlines and policy attention, many more attacks and plots are largely ineffectual, never matching up to the violent rhetoric common in these spaces.

This short report applies subcultural theory to the problem of violent extremist organisation, conceptualising violent extremism as a lethal subculture. Subcultures are traditionally defined as groups of people unified by a deviant perspective; the label is often applied to youth movements such as punks, skinheads, goths, and teddy boys. Lethal subcultures are similarly defined, but with the additional criteria that subcultures either produce or endorse lethal violence as part of their aesthetic or behaviours. A whole range of subcultures could plausibly be included in this category including some aspects of Jihadism, the extreme-right, incels, some skinhead scenes, various youth gangs, criminal subcultures, and so-called dark fandoms. Theoretical insights in this short report are drawn from a range of disciplines including criminology and cultural studies as well as terrorism studies. This report goes on to suggest that non-violent roles available in lethal subcultures may actually offer some protection against engaging in some violent behaviours by providing access to goods that participants find unobtainable in mainstream society. This may act as a displacement activity, reducing the time and resources available for more violent action.

SUBCULTURES BASICS

Subcultures are groups of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do, and where they do it.

(Gelder 2005: 1)

Subcultures are usually identified as groups of people that stand apart from mainstream norms, often framed as being somehow opposed to the 'normal' way of things: disordered as opposed to ordered, wandering as opposed to rooted (Gelder, 2005). However, subcultures are not wholly without values, they have internal logics, norms, and ways of being of their own.

One study argues that all societies make and to some degree enforce various rules, and deviance occurs where individuals choose to break or reject those rules (Becker 1963: 8). Rules can be legal or social, enforceable or ignored. Although focused more on criminology than sociology, this perspective helps us to understand more about the internal logic of subcultures. Subcultures are spaces and populations that operate on different social rules (norms) from the rest of us.

A broad array of groups have been researched as subcultures. Gelder (2005) traces the pre-history of subcultural studies to literary interest in criminal and vagabond classes in 16th Century England. Since then, the number of differing groups considered through a subcultural lens has exploded to encompass groups as diverse as dance cultures (Thornton 1995); graffiti artists (Macdonald 2005); tattoo enthusiasts (Atkinson 2005); and punk music fans (Laing 2005). From the perspective of terrorism and extremism studies, three distinct approaches to subcultures are relevant, roughly

aligning to the idea of subcultures as criminal spaces, as spaces for politics and resistance, and finally as spaces for fun and self-expression.

Early work on subcultures focused on the idea of deviance, and in particular criminality, identifying deviant subcultures as being criminogenic. Cohen's (2005) 1955 general theory of subculture frames human action as attempts to solve varying problems. Subcultures arise gradually as groups of people try to resolve tensions around their own status in mainstream culture by seeking to collectively define new criteria to help establish status, building new norms in the process. This process is self-reinforcing, cleaving to a new set of norms results in rising status within the deviant group but at the cost of lower status in the societal mainstream. As those in the new subculture become increasingly ostracised from the mainstream culture they begin to devalue it further, questioning its validity and the value of its judgement. This general framework was combined with the idea of social strain to produce a framework of delinquency which saw subcultures forming as a response to individuals being 'blocked' (unable to progress) at the cultural level within mainstream cultures (Cottee 2011: 735). Criminality did not arise from direct material need but more from traditions engrained in certain segments of society that viewed themselves as unable to prosper when playing by mainstream rules.

An alternative, and more politicised, interpretation of subculture emerged from a group of researchers commonly referred to as the Birmingham School in the 1980s. Rather than a source of criminal deviance, subcultures were interpreted as a form of proto-political resistance. Inherent in the Birmingham School was the greater attention paid to the expressive aspects of youth subcultures (Clarke et al 2006: 4). Rather than just delinquent, youth subcultures were stylistically vibrant, and style itself was taken as an expression of politics. Cultures were intermixed with social class and ordered in patterns of domination and subordination (Clarke et al 2006: 5). Youth subcultures, for the Birmingham School, are ill-fated attempts by young people to resist the hegemony and domination of the upper-classes which is seen as inherent in the emergence of a growing middle class in Britain ("embourgeoisement") (Clarke et al 2006). One key theory to emerge is that of bricolage, the idea that those within subcultures were able to take the common components of everyday mass culture and reappropriate them into new signs and meanings (Clarke 2006: 149; see also: Miller-Idriss 2019).

A third school of thought on subcultures emerged partly as a reaction to the Birmingham School's politicisation of subcultures. Sarah Thornton's analysis of youth dance cultures in the UK emphasised popular culture as being more than the lowest rung on a social ladder, arguing that subcultures contain their own rungs of social status with actors jockeying for social power via the accumulation of subcultural capital: insider knowledge specific to the subculture (Thornton 1995: 163). Thornton was critical of the politicisation of subcultures suggested by her forebears, arguing that the difference that the club kids she researched prided themselves on could not be interpreted as some form of innately progressive resistance to class domination.

Likewise, the political expression she did see was usually interpreted as the aestheticization of politics rather than being genuinely political. Incorporating political messages into the subculture was simply a way of punching it up and giving it greater impact. Impact was all the greater where the subculture could be positioned as at odds with or condemned by the mainstream; headlines about the dangers of rave culture only made it more appealing (Thornton 1995: 167). Subcultures allowed participants to play at politics, appropriating various political statements and messages, into what was essentially a form of self-expression as opposed to a political movement in waiting.

The idea of a subculture has since fallen out of favour in cultural studies. Researchers have interpreted it as being too rigid and totalising, suggesting that participation in subculture is an all or nothing prospect

for young people when the realities are that many of those who are embedded in subcultures are part-timers, able to switch between norms and values as needed. Subcultures have since been replaced by concepts like Neo-tribes that seek to reflect a more fluid approach to subcultural participation (Bennett 1999). For the purposes of terrorism and extremism studies however, and for the purposes of this report, the concept of a subculture retains its value. This does not suggest that even a violent extremist subculture is all engrossing, even extremists have interests outside of Jihad and race war. The next section develops the idea of a subculture in terrorism studies in more depth.

SUBCULTURES AND TERRORISM

Debates around subcultures and style have largely played out in isolation from terrorism studies; seemingly asking different kinds of questions and focusing on different interests. However, subcultural themes have at times emerged from within terrorism studies, two prominent examples being Thomas Hegghammer's (2017) edited volume on Jihadist Culture, and Lööw and Kaplan's (2002) volume dealing with "oppositional subcultures" which touches on several topics relevant to the extreme-right. Most relevant here is Cottee's explicit application of strain theory, status frustration, and cultural blockage to Jihadism, in particular building on Sageman's earlier analysis of the Al-Qaeda terror network and its dissolution into "Leaderless Jihad" (Cottee 2011: 732-3).

Cottee argued that Sageman's findings, in particular those addressing the "third wave", could be explained by strain theory. In essence, Jihad was a form of subcultural response to strain, representing attempts to resolve the tensions surrounding status frustration, global injustice and the cultural uprootedness experienced by second and third generation European Muslims (Cottee 2011: 736). Cottee noted that such an explanation went a long way to fleshing out the character of Jihadists, moving them on from being 'alien' fanatics to unmistakable products of Western cultures (2011: 741).

Cottee's analysis of subcultural strain and Jihadism was given more empirical heft through the work of Daniella Pisoiu who tested Cottee's application of strain theory, along with some of the theories associated with the Birmingham school (e.g., Bricolage), on a small number of cases from Jihadist and right-wing milieus in Germany. Crucially Pisoiu chose to focus her analysis on the German Autonomous Nationalists as opposed to the more traditional (and by that point dated) skinhead scene. Pisoiu found limited support for the assumption that extremists were under strain, finding little evidence of the kinds of blocking assumed to lead

to status frustration (Pisoiu 2014: 14). Pisoiu did hone in on the concept of style in her analysis, rejecting the Birmingham school's concept of subculture as only a weak resistance, describing young people who saw cultural material as a tool in a wider arsenal to deploy to political ends (2011: 17). Pisoiu, as Cottee, focused on radicalisation as her key question, interested in why individuals would radicalise (i.e., participate in extremist subcultures).

So far we have focused on the criminogenic applications of subculture, i.e., structure, however, the stylistic interpretation of subculture is also present within the literature. Cottee (2011) addresses the idea of "Jihadi cool" developed by Sageman (2008:150). He concludes that we know little about the "interior life-worlds" of Jihadi subculture, largely due to lack of data (Cottee 2011: 743). Cottee argues that terrorism scholars need to pay far greater attention to the voices of terrorists, in particular the consumption of Jihadi images, movies and music in a subculture "drenched in violent defiance, delighting in breaking taboos and the mocking of civilised norms" (Cottee 2011: 744). Pisoiu (2014: 23) ends her analysis similarly by suggesting that more work was needed not just on radicalisation, but also incorporating understanding of individual "life worlds" within extremist subcultures.

This challenge was taken up in part by Hemmingsen's (2015) account of the Danish Jihadist subculture (termed a counter-culture) which argued that Jihadism, as well as being a political and religious project, was also an identity and subculture (Hemmingsen 2015: 3). This was a response to Cottee's use of strain theory, suggesting that the 'push' factors that Cottee described in terms of subcultural strain, were equally complicated by the 'pull' factors associated with the Danish Jihadist counter-culture (Hemmingsen 2015: 4). The security aspect of Jihadism lent weight to those who dressed and acted like they belonged, making them feel like they

were being taken seriously, as well as providing access to "action and adventure" (Hemmingsen 2015: 12).

Most notably, Hemmingsen noted the way in which the Jihadists had previously moved between other available subcultures including the far-left and far-right (in one case). Similar findings have also been recorded about the right-wing political "wanderers" (Linden & Klandermans 2007; Goodwin 2011). Jihadism was seen as one (prominent) subculture among many different options, this makes little sense if Jihadism was just a political or religious project, but makes a good deal more sense if we interpret Jihadists as subcultural seekers: seeking out subcultures that meet their needs to rebel and reject the norms and traditions of their parents and wider society. When a particular subculture stopped meeting those needs, whatever the specifics were, then they simply moved on (Hemmingsen 2015: 11).

Also relevant here are close analyses of Jihadist subcultures which have sought to identify structure and roles within Jihadist spaces, particularly online. Internet Jihadists were identified as engaging in somewhat stable careers, persisting for several years without achieving martyrdom. Internet activism itself was thought to offer several different "satisfactions" which both served to keep activists engaged in the internet Jihad and resistant to charges that they were hypocritical, not following through on the violence they seemed to advocate for others (Ramsay 2012: 57).

This created an inherent tension in which the internet Jihadi seemingly was never forced to "cash in his cheque". Resolving this tension required the online Jihadis to talk up the value of online Jihad, arguing that individual expertise and status became too important to risk or lose in physical Jihad, creating in the minds of the online Jihadis an effective barrier to violence (Ramsay 2012:68). Internet Jihad, according to the arguments of its practitioners, became a justified, effective and non-violent (at least not directly) form of Jihad.

LETHAL SUBCULTURES

The concept of a lethal subculture is not a replacement for other approaches to thinking about violent extremist or terrorist organisations such as Sageman's Leaderless Jihad or Griffin's (2003) groupuscules. Instead, lethal subculture is simply a recognition that alongside the notionally strategic goals of any violent extremist or terrorist movement is a wider subculture with its own values and norms, reflected in its specific uses of subcultural material, internal dynamics, and approach to subcultural capital (Malthaner & Waldman 2014).

To put this as simply as possible, for a small segment of any society, especially those who find themselves detached from mainstream norms and values for whatever reason, violent extremism is one of several deviant perspectives on offer that may potentially allow them to attain their goals.

We know from research on mainstream subcultures that the internal dynamics of lethal subcultures are likely to be structurally complex, dependent on internal knowledge (subcultural capital) that marks individuals as having differing levels of status.

Patterns of terrorist violence, both in Jihadist and extreme-right spaces also strongly suggest that lethal subcultures are not automatic pathways to terrorism and violence, but that the majority of those engaged in lethal subcultures will not go on to participate in terrorism: the number of 'supporters' vastly outstrips the actual number of participants.

One way to understand this is to conceptualise the various 'roles' on offer in lethal subcultures. While only a few take on the role of 'martyr' or 'saint', vastly more are involved in distributing propaganda, networking with others, publishing ideological material, and engaging in social media debates (conceptualised variously as media Jihad or meme warfare).

These specialised roles, offer the rewards of subcultural participation, meeting needs going unmet in mainstream society, but do so without directly engaging in violence.

LETHAL SUBCULTURES AND CONSTRAINT

One consequence of lethal subcultures is the constraints they impose on violent action. Most violent extremist groups or collectives fall far short of their potential for engaging in violence and terrorism. Research has explained this as a series of brakes or barriers on violent action, usually attributed to group dynamics and strategic concerns.

Various strategic, organisational, and other incentives operate at the group level to check violence (Simi & Windisch 2020). Interviews with 34 former right-wing extremists between 2012 and 2016 revealed a range of barriers to mass-casualty violence including the idea that it was: counter-productive, personal distractions such as drugs and alcohol, internal organisational disputes, and a failure to disengage morally from the act of killing. Another approach focused on various forms of breaks such as the idea of violence as counter-productive; moral restraint and the presence of some ethical principles; the need to preserve established group identities (ego-maintenance); soft definitions and relationships with out-groups; and the drive for organisational survival (Busher & Bjørgo 2020).

Another approach has been placing the idea of subculture at the heart of constraints on violence. Some work on the dynamics of Jihadi fandom for example highlights the way in which subcultural participation can oftentimes be at odds with assumed strategic and organisational goals. Jihadist 'fans' for example have been analysed as being enmeshed in participatory cultures in which they seize control of ideological material, repurposing it to meet their own needs. These needs are not always entirely convergent with the broader strategic interests of a group or movement. One study of online Jihadists for example noted that the aesthetic components of jihadist propaganda represent a threat to the more ideologically proscriptive doctrine (Ramsay 2020: 189). The deeply ironic qualities of much extremist online participation leaves precise doctrine vulnerable to subversion, appropriation and mutation by supporters driven as much by their own needs and interests as a commitment to a common strategic goal.

In the framework of lethal subcultures, overall strategic incentives are balanced against by the needs and interests of individual supporters. For every soldier there are countless propagandists, networkers, ideologues, and other distinctive subcultural roles that do not involve violence. As participation is motivated by individual interest and needs, strategic goals are vulnerable to being compromised as they are subsumed by individual interests (Ramsay 2012). In the Jihadist context this manifests as 'fan boys' operating online, invoking specific forms of Salafi Jihadism without fully understanding them (Ramasay 2020). Although limited, research on the extreme-right, including anecdotal evidence from work with German young right-wingers strongly suggests a similar lack of understanding amongst some in the extreme-right (Miller-Idriss 2017: 68). Overall, despite being only too willing to present themselves as overtly violent and extreme, from a strategic perspective, lethal subcultures have the potential to represent a drag on the violent aims of violent extremist and terroristic groups. Actual violence is conducted by a relatively small subset of actors while the majority pursue their own aims.

CONCLUSION

Using subcultural theory to address violent extremism and terrorism is uncomfortable. Comparing Jihadist, extreme-right, or other extreme milieus, to relatively benign groups we typically think of as subcultures such as goths and dance fans, or even some more of the overtly violent ones such as teddy boys and skins, could be seen as minimising the threat that they pose.

The main application of subcultural theory in terrorism studies has been to the question of radicalisation, suggesting that the process of formation and recruitment may be common to both subcultures and extremists. However, research has stressed the need to look beyond external push factors and take seriously the appeal of these spaces, especially for young people. Extremism and terrorism are more than traps for young people to become caught in, they are also alternative life-worlds in which norms and values are entirely and deliberately at odds with the prevailing conditions outside.

Just as more benign subcultures provide an opportunity to escape and to challenge mainstream norms, so do extreme ones, only with the added potential for mass casualty violence. Most importantly, subcultures are diverse and structured. Research on subcultural capital suggests that social power inside subcultures is contested and contingent on an individual's subcultural knowledge, authenticity, and credibility. Lethal subcultures are not just stairways to terrorism, but instead provide access to a wide range of activities, most of which are not violent.

Lethal subcultures provide access to outlets for creativity; social relationships; feelings of belonging and distinctiveness; unavailable, or perceived as being unavailable, for many within mainstream societies. At the same time, these goods are bound up in subcultural production, consumption, style, and taste. While these are all at least superficially related to the cause and the ideology, they are often difficult to police and uncontrolled by any higher authority or doctrine, making them vulnerable to mutatio

One consequence of lethal subcultures is it becomes easier to understand the sheer number of barriers to violent action, even within notionally violent and extreme subcultures that seem to outwardly celebrate violence. The limitations on violence imposed by extremist groups are already well documented, but many of these limits also come from within the broader social environment that people inhabit. Many of the roles on offer in extreme subcultures could be undertaken indefinitely without ever resorting to violence. Producing propaganda, organising, undertaking financial activities, and other roles can all be interpreted as contributing to the overall aims of the ideology, without the need to engage in direct violence. Likewise, for those that do engage in direct violence, access to the goods provided by subcultural participation ends, either when they enter prison or die.

The next steps then are to begin the process of mapping examples of lethal subcultures in greater depth, drawing on existing theoretical and empirical insights (e.g., Ramsay 2012; Thornton 1995) to evaluate the different opportunities offered by lethal subcultures and assessing the potential for violent and other types of offending. This process is also informed by our earlier work on protective factors and theorisation around the Good Lives Model and strength-based approaches to risk *(see: link to protective factors report)*. Specifically, a fuller understanding of the mechanics of lethal subcultures will aid in assessing risk and developing alternative, pro-social approaches, to meeting specific needs bound up in engagement in lethal subcultures.

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