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Terrorists Are Not Snowflakes

The West has started treating would-be terrorists as children in need of protection from radical ideas. That's as dangerous as it is insulting.

BY **SIMON COTTEE**

APRIL 27, 2017

Something profound and seismic is happening in the way Western societies understand terrorism, and jihadi radicalization in particular.

Until now, the terms of the debate were set by two master narratives about terrorists, usefully categorized in an *Atlantic* article published just over 30 years ago by the Irish intellectual **Conor Cruise O'Brien** as the “hysterical stereotype” and the “sentimental stereotype.” The former saw terrorism as a form of pathology perpetrated by “disgruntled abnormal[s]’ given to ‘mindless violence,’” whereas the latter characterized it as a form of political resistance mounted by “misguided idealist[s] ... driven to violence by political or social injustice or both.”

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In the years since the publication of O'Brien's article, however, these two narratives have gradually lost their intellectual and cultural prominence, thanks in part to the enormous impact of Hannah Arendt's **thinking** on the "**banality of evil**" and the enormity of the 9/11 attacks, which, as terrorism scholar Peter Neumann **observed**, made it "very difficult to talk about the 'roots of terrorism,'" still less to sentimentalize terrorists. In their place a very different paradigm has emerged, driven by efforts to rethink the problem of terrorism in response to the rise of al Qaeda and, more recently, the Islamic State. At the center of this paradigm is the notion of the terrorist as an *infantilized "other"*: a marginal person whose outstanding characteristic is vulnerability. You might call it the "snowflake theory of terrorism."

This view is clearly an advance on seeing terrorists as either crazed fanatics or warriors for justice, but its paternalistic implications are just as dangerous as those implicit in the two paradigms it displaced.

The explanatory rhetoric of the snowflake theory of terrorism could not be more different from that of the earlier two paradigms. Far from being a symptom of psychological dysfunction or political injustice, terrorism, in this new reframing, is redefined as a "risk," borne mainly by the would-be perpetrators of terrorism rather than the would-be victims of future terrorist atrocities. Far from seeing terrorists as perpetrators of violence for political ends, this theory recasts them as victims of "extreme" ideas propagated by manipulative "groomers." Nearly always, the terrorism or "risk" in question is the contaminant of jihadi-based terrorism, although the proponents of this paradigm commonly insist that it also applies to other forms of terrorism, including that of the far right.

These explanatory tropes and motifs underpin the prevailing ideology of "**countering violent extremism**" in both Europe and North America. In Britain, for example, the **2015 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act** makes it perfectly clear that terrorism is a "risk" to which people can be "drawn into." It's now a legal requirement for specified authorities, including schools, colleges, universities, and child care services, to conduct **risk assessments** to **identify** individuals "vulnerable to radicalization." In a 21-page **document**, which provides statutory guidance for the relevant authorities listed in the 2015 act, the word "risk" appears 67 times. In all cases, the risk in question relates to the "risk of individuals being drawn into terrorism." The word "vulnerable," in the context of "vulnerable to radicalization," appears 13 times.

In his [remarks](#) at the [Leaders' Summit on Countering ISIL and Violent Extremism](#) in September 2015, President Barack Obama similarly used the language of safeguarding in reference to radicalization. “And finally,” he said, “we recognize that our best partners in protecting vulnerable people from succumbing to violent extremist ideologies are the communities themselves — families, friends, neighbors, clerics, faith leaders who love and care for these young people.”

The same tone of paternal care informs a lot of media commentary on Western members of the Islamic State, who, it is claimed, were “brainwashed” or “groomed” by recruiters into joining the group. Referring to the [three East London schoolgirls](#) who absconded to Syria in February 2015, Sara Khan, the founder and co-director of the anti-extremism NGO Inspire, [wrote](#) in the *Independent* that “they were groomed,” adding, “Just like child abusers groom their victims online and persuade them to leave their homes and meet them, male jihadists contact women through social media and online chatrooms, and build trust with them over time.” Hayley Richardson, in *Newsweek*, similarly [insisted](#) that “ISIL are using similar online grooming tactics to pedophiles to lure Western girls to their cause.” In 2015, the *New York Times* ran a [feature](#) on a lonely and mentally unstable young woman from rural Washington who had been befriended online by Islamic State supporters and “flirted” with the idea of going to Syria. Despite the idiosyncrasies of her case — the only Muslims she knew were those she had met online — and the fact that she had never set foot in Islamic State territory in Syria and Iraq, the *Times* asserted that her story may “provide clues about how ISIL recruits new members around the world.”

Or consider journalist Kurt Eichenwald’s recent [article](#) for *Newsweek*, titled, “How Donald Trump Is Fueling ISIS.” According to Eichenwald, the president’s rhetoric and policies send “a new message ... that reinforces the jihadi extremists’ propaganda and increases the likelihood that more Americans will die in attacks.” Imagining the response of Western Muslims to Trump’s use of the phrase “radical Islamic terrorism,” he writes, “The emotional reaction of Muslims who are torn about whether to fight against the West would be strong.”

“ISIS could not have asked for more,” he continued, ventriloquizing this time for the terrorist group that the world’s vast majority of Muslims condemns. “If such words can anger an ally as important as the Turkish president,” referring to Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s [rejoinder](#) to German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s use of the term “Islamist terror,” “what impact does it have on ordinary Muslims being bombarded with the ISIS message that they are in a fight to save Islam?”

This image of the terrorist as an infantilized and emotionally immature “other,” acutely sensitive to the slightest linguistic slur or trigger, reflects a deeper structural shift in the culture of contemporary Western societies, where, since at least the early 2000s, the **language of risk and protection** has come to inform and shape a growing number of social practices and organizations involving adults. This language finds its most ostentatious — and, of late, infamous — expression on college **campuses**, including the **one** I’m writing this **from**.

The idea that terrorism is a “risk” to “vulnerable” Muslims has at least three unfortunate social consequences. First, as former U.S. Ambassador Alberto Fernandez recently remarked, it is profoundly demeaning. It portrays Muslims, according to Fernandez, “as if they are easily swayed yet dangerous children susceptible to becoming terrorists because of immigration policy or harsh words that supposedly hurt their feelings.” It has also given rise to the pernicious argument that this group should be protected from words and ideas that risk offending their presumed religious beliefs or affiliations, for fear that not doing so will “push” them toward jihadi groups. Just as the safeguarding movement on U.S. campuses presumes, in the **words** of Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, “an extraordinary fragility of the collegiate psyche,” so does the radicalization discourse presume an extraordinary fragility of the psyche of Western Muslims. Far from protecting Muslims, “safeguarding” exposes them to what the Pakistani-Canadian writer **Ali A. Rizvi describes** as “the racism of lowered expectations.”

Second, it depoliticizes jihadis and their would-be emulators by denying their agency as political actors, whose embrace of jihadi rhetoric and violence is predicated on reason as much as emotion. To reframe the Islamic State as a “risk” to “vulnerable” Muslims is to deny its **potent intellectual challenge**, and how its dual-message of Western **moral degradation and Islamic authenticity** can speak to even the most resilient and precocious of Muslims. Of course, stupid and naive people have joined or attempted to join the Islamic State, but many more have been **highly intelligent** and politically engaged, demonstrating great resilience and bravery by making it to Islamic State-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq.

Third, the recategorization of terrorism as a “risk” to impressionable Muslims inverts the perpetrator-victim relationship, whereby the former is transformed into the latter. It’s like saying domestic violence is a “risk” to the person who beats his wife. But, of course, like domestic violence, terrorism is a risk primarily borne by those who are on the receiving end of it (most of whom are Muslim). It is pernicious to argue for greater protections for Muslims against inflammatory speech from a counterterrorism perspective in the same way that it would be pernicious to argue that potential wife beaters should be shielded from slights directed at them from their wives. And it should go without saying that hateful and dehumanizing rhetoric targeted at Muslims is wrong precisely because it is hateful and dehumanizing, and not because, according to some engrained, **neo-orientalist** expectation, Muslims will lash out violently and indiscriminately against those who espouse this rhetoric or are somehow tenuously connected to it.

Terrorism is a form of political violence, and those who engage in it must be taken seriously as autonomous moral agents. No doubt the Islamic State has captivated the imaginations of many **young Western Muslims**, and it can hardly be disputed that the number of young people involved in Islamic State-related terrorist plots in the West has risen in the past few years. In a recent **study**, Robin Simcox found that from September 2014 to December 2016 there were 34 Islamic State terror plots or alleged plots in the West involving 44 preteen and teenage participants.

Yet the number of young people involved in terrorism should not be exaggerated. In a 2015 **report** on Western defectors to the Islamic State and other Sunni jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq, the journalist Peter Bergen and his colleagues found that the average age of the 474 individuals in their dataset was 24. This is young for an adult but is clearly beyond adolescence. In another **study**, carried out the same year, Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes reported that of the 71 individuals charged with Islamic State-related activities in the United States since March 2014, the average age was 26. Moreover, the total number of teenagers involved in Islamic State-related terror plots and defections to jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq is still minuscule and does not remotely justify the reframing of terrorism as a child protection issue, still less the mass thought-policing of Muslim communities, where many young people are suspected of harboring “extreme” ideas. In Britain, of the **3,955 people referred** to the government’s deradicalization program in 2015, 415 were 10 years old or under, while 1,424 were between 11 and 15. The ideology behind this program and the broader radicalization discourse on which it draws justify these stigmatizing interventions as “safeguarding” the very individuals they stigmatize.

Even among the small number of young people involved in terrorist plots or terrorist groups, it needs to be acknowledged that, as the sociologist Frank Furedi has **observed**, “it is not the ‘vulnerable’ but often the more idealistic and intellectually curious who are attracted to extremist ideas.” And this means taking them and their ideas seriously and not treating them as the whitest of “**snowflakes**” in need of protection.

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THE REAL SHAME IN PAKISTAN

Germany Has an Arrogance Problem

One country's moral evangelism is the rest of the world's intolerable smugness.

BY **PAUL HOCKENOS** | APRIL 27, 2017

One year ago, Germany was named the “best country” in the world, according to a poll by the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School. The poll relied on criteria measuring entrepreneurship, power, public education, and quality of life, among others. But for a growing number of Germans, the important thing was that it offered confirmation of their own self-image. Their country slipped to fourth in this year’s poll, behind Switzerland, Canada, and the United Kingdom, but that seems unlikely to do much to dim the self-confidence of a country enjoying a surging economy and growing international cachet.

Whether the field is migration or manufacturing, fiscal policy or renewable energy, Germans increasingly believe that they, and they alone, know best, at least judging from the attitude newly on display everywhere from newspaper columns to parliamentary speeches to barroom chats over beer. In German the phenomenon is summed up in one word: *Besserwisserei*, a know-it-all attitude, which the Germans themselves admit is somewhat of an engrained cultural trait.

But it's increasingly clear that one country's allegedly evidence-based *Besserwisserei* is another country's intolerable smugness. Just ask Germany's European neighbors, and others, including the United States, where resentment of Germans has been percolating for years, under constant threat of bubbling over.

Resentment is only one part of the problem posed by Germany's self-satisfaction. The other is the growing threat that cultural vanity will begin to shade into self-defeating political egotism. *Besserwisserei* may be a cultural trait that reaches back centuries, but Germany wields more power in Europe today, particularly in the European Union, than at any time in recent memory. And the Germany of Chancellor Angela Merkel hasn't hesitated to throw it around. The rest of Europe certainly notices that things are increasingly done Germany's way, even when the German way arguably — or as some of the country's critics suggest, plainly — isn't best. The big question for the future of Europe might be whether Germans will notice, too.

The charges of egotism and high-handed behavior are relatively new. In the 1949-to-1990 Bonn Republic, West Germany was a humble subordinate of the Western alliance. Its meekness and rock-solid commitment to the good of the EU, in which political power was more widely distributed than it is today (mostly in the direction of Paris), stemmed from the World War II crimes committed by Nazi Germany. The postwar country's sovereignty was held in check by the Western allies (and in the east by the Soviet Union), and its leaders fought to loosen the corset bit by bit through benevolent deeds. The West Germans were on their best behavior so as not to look aggressive or power hungry. Unification was a taboo topic, while national pride was shunned. And it was playing the good Germans (and the good Europeans) that paved the way to German unification in 1990. By then, most — but not all — of Europe trusted Germany, understanding it as a democracy willing to sacrifice its immediate interests for a European community that returned Germania to the family of normal countries.

The difference, explains Sir Paul Lever, a former British ambassador to Germany and author of *Berlin Rules*, is that Germany is in the driver's seat. "Germany is more powerful than ever, especially within the EU, not because it chose to be, but because there's no one else there capable of leading right now," he says, pointing to France's weakened position in the union. But Lever's not of the opinion that the Germans are conceited, rather "they're simply following their own self-interest because now they can," he says, noting that other European countries have freely chosen to fall into line.

German high-handedness is eliciting angry charges of "moral imperialism" from Hungary, and its central European neighbors, including Slovakia, Poland, and Croatia, largely concur. Meanwhile, during the first round of the French presidential election, candidates from more than one party chastised Merkel for dictating a German eurozone policy. "We order it, you obey, and *tout suite*," is how the German publisher Wolfram Weimer critically summed up Germany's new modus operandi during the bailout negotiations in an article titled "Virtuous Totalitarianism". U.S. economist Paul Krugman repeatedly blasts Germany for "moralizing" on European fiscal policy, namely Germany's obsession with budget discipline, which he considers entirely counterproductive. Since Germany's setting of the onerous terms for the eurozone's recovery packages, beginning in 2011, surveys in Europe show that many fellow Europeans consider Germans arrogant, insensitive, and egotistical (while, strangely, praising their dependability and influence in Europe).

What's ignited the latest storm of unhappiness with the Germans is the country's whopping trade surplus (\$271 billion in 2016), which balloons from year to year with no apparent end in sight. The problem with this is that Germany's surplus leaves many of its trading partners, such as the United States but also France and southern Europe, with unbalanced current accounts in their bilateral trade with Germany, which exacerbates their (in some cases, chronic) export-import imbalances. At worst, a sustained negative trade balance adversely affects growth, stability, and employment. Germany's surpluses have grown so large that even the International Monetary Fund takes it to task for the sin.

There's wide agreement, among German economists too, that the country's export prowess is in large part the product of a low euro, low oil prices, and relatively low wages in Germany. Indeed, German exports benefit immensely from a euro that, for Germany, is undervalued. (The value of the one-size-fits-all common currency has to fit, as best as possible, every economy in the 19-member eurozone. The compromise rate is thus comparatively high, say, for Greece, Italy, and even perhaps France, while disproportionately low for Germany.) Critics, such as the IMF, claim that Germany, at the very least, has to rectify the imbalances by spending more and raising wages. The balance-negative eurozone countries say Germany has to give back, too — not just take.

"The reason why Germany is so successful in exports," David McAllister, a leading German Christian Democrat, told Foreign Policy, "is that its products are highly competitive, of very high quality. We carried out hard reforms to make this happen," he says, referring to measures streamlining the welfare state and unshackling the labor market. McAllister, a believer in balanced budgets, acknowledges the disapproval going around, but responds, "Those countries criticizing Germany might like to ask themselves why they aren't as successful, and instead of complaining look at why Germany is, and learn from that."

In other words, do it our way and shut up about it.

The surplus is just one place where the Germans tend, in the eyes of their peers, to wax pedantic and treat economic policy as a moral cudgel. There is no better example than Merkel's famously lecturing the indebted countries of southern Europe to run their economies like the typical Swabian *hausfrau*, who is industrious, penny-pinching, resourceful. The implication, which some German politicians expressed out loud, was that in contrast with the Swabian housewife, the southerners were lazy and spendthrift. Moreover, Germany has managed to impose its fiscal conservatism on Greece and the other southern European economies: austerity, debt reduction, tight loan repayment schedules.

It's not just that Germans seldom acknowledge the economic misery that many of their European neighbors are forced to endure. Germany, for example, boasts an all-time low youth unemployment rate of 6.6 percent, while in Greece and Spain 48 and 42 percent, respectively, of young people are out of work. It's also that German conservatives feel inclined to crow about their newfound influence — a little too loudly. In 2011, in front of the Bundestag, Christian Democrat [Volker Kauder](#) announced, "Now all of Europe is speaking German!" — referring to the budget discipline that all eurozone countries have signed up to now, some of them against their better judgment.

Not everyone agrees that this amounts to arrogance. Philosopher Wolfram Eilenberger denies that any apologies are in order. “Even when Germany does something obviously decent and generous, like taking in so many refugees, it’s accused of arrogance and unilateral behavior,” he says. “We can’t be as humble as we were in the Bonn Republic, because Germany has more responsibility now that it can’t shirk. There’s a new Germany that’s not aggressive or intolerant.”

Of course, another reason German smugness can get under the skin is the fact that Germany simply isn’t nearly as universally superlative as it might prefer to think. A close corollary of *Besserwisserei* has always been hypocrisy. So Germany may browbeat other countries about their deficits today, but other Europeans remember that **in the 2000s**, when the German economy was in the dumps, and again during the financial crisis, Berlin consistently ran budget deficits in excess of eurozone rules — and avoided penalties for it. The deficits were critical for Germany to get its economy going again.

Meanwhile, Germany insists that other countries follow its lead on climate change, shutting down nuclear power stations and switching to clean energy generation. But Germany is Europe’s **biggest burner** of dirty coal (seventh in the world), and it’s not on track to hit the Paris Agreement’s reduction targets for 2020. Its best-selling export is big, expensive, gas-guzzling luxury automobiles, including diesels. The Dieselgate scandal caught Volkswagen and other German car manufacturers cheating on emissions tests.

And it’s no accident that the scandal was uncovered in the United States, far from the reach of German political and cultural power — nor that Germany’s discussion about the scandal has been just as focused on how the German auto companies in question can be saved rather than about the financial or moral atonement they might owe. “It’s obvious that the EU should take over emissions testing and that the commission should impose huge fines on Germany,” Lever says. “But it won’t, because it’s Germany, that’s why. It shows how much power Germany has now.”

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