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What do ‘middle class’ terrorists tell us about the link between poverty and terrorism?

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Introduced in 2006, the Prevent workstream of the UK’s counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST) has provided a focus for often heated debates about what drives people to support or take part in violent extremism and terrorism in the UK. Six months after the new Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition government announced an extensive review of Prevent, David Cameron used his speech to the Munich Security Conference 2011 [1] to set out his position in relation to these debates. He distanced himself from what he referred to as the ‘hard right’ and the ‘soft left’. He criticised the ‘hard right’ for their failure to distinguish between Islam and Islamic extremism. He then criticised the ‘soft left’ who, he claimed,

compil[e] a list of grievances and argue that if only governments addressed these grievances, the terrorism would stop. So they point to poverty that so many Muslims live in and say, ‘get rid of this injustice and the terrorism will end’. *But this ignores the fact that many of those found guilty of terrorism in the west and elsewhere have been graduates and often middle class.* [2]

I do not intend to comment here on the position that Cameron outlined in his speech. I don’t propose to argue that there is a link between poverty and terrorism [3], or that we should not be interested in the fact that many of those convicted of terrorism offences are university educated and middle class. [4] Instead, I focus on the argument that Cameron made use of in this excerpt from his speech. I want to point out why such comments about ‘middle class’ terrorists tell us little about the lack of links between poverty and terrorism, and rather more about the ongoing problems we face with the way evidence is marshalled to support competing grand narratives about the ‘roots’ and ‘origins’ of extremism and terrorism.

The argument Cameron makes is that, since a considerable proportion of people arrested under terrorism laws in Western countries are well educated and not from poor backgrounds, it cannot be claimed that poverty is one of the main factors that push people towards extremism and terrorism. This is not a new argument. It has been raised by Laqueur [5] and was mentioned in discussion several times during a recent government-run review of the evidence linking various social, psychological, political and economic factors to an increased risk of participation in



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terrorism [6]. The main problem with this argument is that it knocks down a straw man. It attacks only the crude proposition that there is a *correlation* between being poor and participation in terrorism – that poor people are more likely to become terrorists than more wealthy people (presumably because they are angry or frustrated by their relative lack of wealth). Yet this is certainly not the most credible argument linking poverty to extremism and terrorism. Indeed, such an argument would be a relic from the increasingly outdated practices of trying to produce terrorist profiles or enumerate the factors that most accurately predict who is likely to support or take part in terrorism [7].

Any relationship between poverty and terrorism is likely to be far more complicated [8]. It is plausible for example that when it can be claimed that poverty is concentrated within a particular population, this can give credence to narratives of systemic injustice, which in turn might be used to legitimise political violence by some of the people who identify with or claim to represent that population [9]. The existence of highly educated and middle class terrorists would have no bearing on such an argument because in this argument poverty is not conceived of as a measurable category to which individuals can be objectively allocated and which then impacts on that individual. Instead, poverty is understood as a ‘social status’ [10] that is of symbolic value because it has the potential to connote injustice and provide a grievance around which to construct a shared identity and mobilise support. Based on this understanding of the relationship between poverty and terrorism, the relevant question would not be whether a person has grown up in a ‘poor’ household, but whether they identify with populations that they perceive to be disproportionately affected by poverty.

It seems then that the existence of ‘middle class terrorists’ tells us nothing about *whether or not* poverty contributes to extremism and terrorism, although it might tell us something about *how* it does (or does not). The persistence of the ‘middle class terrorists’ argument does however provide a worrying example of the way that information about terrorists and terrorist organisations is sometimes converted into evidence and used to support or discredit arguments about how we should respond to extremism and terrorism. In the last few years there have been growing calls within terrorism studies to shift the discourse away from ‘root causes’ of why people become terrorists [11]. This is because the evidence that we have highlights the complexity and heterogeneity of the causal mechanisms in operation, with different factors becoming salient among different groups of people for different reasons at different times. However, as Cameron’s speech well illustrates, there is still considerable political capital to be gained from talking about and setting out plans to address the ‘roots’ and ‘origins’ of extremism and terrorism. Unfortunately, such endeavours and the pressure that they create to convert



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information into evidence risk undermining efforts to achieve genuinely evidence based counter-terrorist strategies.

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Notes:

[1] 5th February 2011

[2] My emphasis

[3] Several authors have expressed doubts about a direct link between poverty and terrorism. See Krueger, A. and Malečková, J., (2003) 'Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?' *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, (17:4) pp. 119-144; Schmid, A.P. (2004) 'Statistics on Terrorism: The Challenge of Measuring Trends in Global Terrorism', *Forum on Crime and Society*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (4:1) pp. 65-6

[4] This might for example tell us something about the intersection between terrorist organisations and class identities, or about claims that extremist or terrorist organisations seek to recruit in universities.

[5] Laqueur, W. (2004) *No End to War: Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (Continuum) London.

[6] The Counter Radicalisation Policy Intervention Assessment (CoRPIA), delivered by the Defence Science Technology Laboratory

[7] Horgan, J. (2008) 'From Profiles to *Pathways* and Roots to *Routes*: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism,' *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, (618: 1) pp. 80-94

[8] Gurr, T. (2005) 'Economic Factors,' in *Addressing the Causes of Terrorism*, Club de Madrid <http://www.safe-democracy.org/docs/CdM-Series-on-Terrorism-Vol-1.pdf>. Accessed 11/2/2011

[9] Krueger, A. and Malečková, J., *op. cit*

[10] Sahlins, M (1974) *Stone Age Economics* (Tavistock Publications) London

[11] See for example Horgan, *op. cit.*; Silke, A (2004) 'The Road Less Travelled: Recent Trends in Terrorism Research,' in *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements, and Failures*, ed. Andrew Silke (Frank Cass) London, pp.186-213