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Anders Breivik and an Imagined War:
Brutality Fueled by Insecurity and Vengeance

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War and Nationalism:

Anthropological Perspectives on Ethnic Conflict,

War, and Genocide

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Introduction

Throughout human history, the reasons behind conflict and war are constantly muddled. What seems to be a rational process in employing war in revision can be deemed as problematic and irreconcilable, but can also be revised to be both heroic and dignified. Our conceptions of war reflect our conceptions of history, that being history is constructed. History is constructed to be perceived in a certain way by those recording it. But those conceptions of history influence our reality and lead to real conflict because our conception of history breeds hate. The history of conflict is riddled with propaganda and hate-mongering, wars are carried on the backs of biased information and on ideology.

Much is the same when it comes to vengeance. Simone de Beauvoir (1946) poses this question on vengeance, “Is it well-founded? Can it be satisfied?” (247). The fact is it doesn’t matter, whether or not revenge was built upon reason, vengeance is created in an unreasonable fashion, because vengeance itself is unreasonable. Enacting vengeance gives no tangible benefits to a person, enacting vengeance cannot reverse what has been done, it cannot drastically change the ways in which people act. What an act of vengeance does instead is breed even more contempt or hate from those who it is acted upon towards the actor of revenge. As Gandhi states, “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.”¹ The second question, “Can it be satisfied?”, indicates that vengeance is normatively understood to gratify or recompense the actor of vengeance. But vengeance is an act of hate, and that hate will never disappear, even after vengeance has been enacted. Vengeance leads to brutality and cruelty because it is an entity constructed from pure hate, not from any ulterior motives.

The case of Anders Breivik is infamous for its brutality and xenophobia. It is traditionally seen as a racially motivated crime, due to Breivik’s hatred of Islam. He is seen as extremist and irrational, as an exception. But this simplification is damning to the study of violence. Anders Breivik was influenced by a series of constructions and imaginings, of false histories, on which he centers himself. Through analyzing the case of Breivik the unstable groundings that violence and hate are built upon can be revealed, and the power of mythic narrative and the role of vengeance in creating violence are stressed.

¹ Mahatma Gandhi, as cited in O’Flynn, Pauline. “A Question of Vengeance.” *Philosophy Now* no. 69, 2008.

Anders Breivik and Constructing a Tradition

On July 22, 2011, Anders Breivik, a 32-year-old Norwegian man bombed the government district of Norway and then proceeded to the island of Utøya and went on a killing spree. In total 77 people were killed, 69 of those were participants of a summer camp at Utøya island hosted by the Workers' Youth League (AUF), the youth branch of the ruling centre-left Norwegian labour party. He considered himself a modern-day crusader, and his actions were described as driven by the hatred of Islam and of Muslim immigration to Europe. And while this may be a large part of his ideology, hatred of Islam is much too simple of an answer, and the reasoning behind this attack is much more complex, it is an act of insecurity, an act of vengeance upon an imagined threat.

The brutal nature of his attacks reminds us of many racially motivated acts of violence throughout history, whether it be acts of genocide or hate crimes, these racially motivated acts all have one thing in common, they target that race which they pit themselves against. Breivik's case is much different, he does not enact his rage upon a mosque or a Muslim community, he instead targets those politicians in power and the children of those politicians. In fact, Breivik actually within his manifesto aligns himself with the Muslim jihadist groups in their mutual hate for European governments. His brutality and mass murder instead evolves from a sense of paranoia and an insecurity in identity. He does not hate Muslims themselves but instead what they represent, that being an upending or change of the status quo. They represent a threat to his identity and in doing so justifications for his acts of violence are predicated upon an imagined threat and an imagined war. Islam and banding against it is a way for Breivik to claim an identity, he claims to be a crusader, harking back upon the medieval legend of the heroism of Christianity vs Islam, ignoring the nuances and realities of some of the most vicious conflicts in history. What Breivik is operating upon is pure delusion, but what it shows us are important aspects of brutality, violence, and extremism, whereas extremist ideology is not a product of hate of a specific community, but instead what they represent. Never in Breivik's life had he had a bad personal experience with a Muslim person, nor did Adolph Hitler ever have a poor experience with a Jew. Instead, extremist ideology is propped up by scapegoating, and what scapegoating does is create a sense of vengeance. This group has or will do something, therefore "justice" must be enacted against them.

The Columbine killers (Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris) were not victims of bullying. There were no counts or recollection of the boys being bullied, but a central theme of Eric Harris' diary is rejection, of him taking the ultimate revenge over those who "made fun of him". What is notable here is that his feeling of rejection extended from insecurity. The same paranoia is fraught in the words of Anders Breivik, as he fears a takeover of Europe by Islam and claims he will be a martyr in fighting for the cultural and racial purity of Norway. That may explain why he turned himself in to the police, he sees himself as a hero and believed that he would become the "Grand Master Knight Commander" of a legion of Christendom. What fills his head are delusional dreams of power, fame, and superiority. He wants to be celebrated, to be seen, a status which he severely lacked before the incident when he was just a normal Norwegian man. The brutality of his actions comes from the perception of him redeeming his people, avenging those who have lost their sense of freedom from an "invasion" by Islam. Vengeance for him has value, as it is a way for him to be relevant. In Nico Frijda's article, *The Lex Talonis: On Vengeance*, he writes, "Revenge by groups has been shown to be considerably fiercer than when one reacts as an individual, and the same probably applies when one acts individually as the representative of a group" (285). Breivik is not an individual but an individual representing a group. He sees himself as part of a tradition of Christian crusaders, part of a war between Christianity and Islam. He is enacting brutal violence in a part of a collective, he is saving those "threatened" by migration and modernity.

Through his delusions, Breivik places himself centrally in a "tradition" of conflict between Christianity and Islam, even naming his manifesto *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*, it referencing the 1683 Battle of Vienna in which "Europeans" defended themselves against the Islamic Ottoman Empire. He predicts that Europe will defeat Islam once again in 2083 and him being a key part in launching the war between Christians and Muslims. His manifesto is mainly a compilation of texts copied and pasted from far-right websites, putting him once again in the center of a community. But what is wholly ironic is that in his war against Islam he instead targets mainly white Norwegians, those which he claims to represent "cultural Marxism" now the dominant ideology of the west. His motives behind the killing are once again not due to a hatred of Islam, but to an identity crisis, and a perceived shift of power dynamics away from people like him, heterosexual white Christian males.

Rationality and A Threatened Identity of a “Collective”

Feminization and demasculinization are key components of brutality and vengeance. In the introduction of 2083 Breivik copies almost verbatim from a document called “Political Correctness: A Short History of an Ideology.” (Richards 2014, 45). This particular document is focused on “cultural Marxism”. This is the entire introduction to Breivik's piece and in no place does it mention Islam, as the rest of the manifesto does. It instead focuses on this concept of “cultural marxism”, which isn't about labor exploitation or the proletariat, but instead focuses on how Marxist ideas are infiltrating western society. It is a cultural upheaval in which multiculturalism, feminism, and political correctness are a threat to the hegemony of white males, and masculinity and femininity will blend making an androgynous society. Similar to his vision of reclaiming the imagined heroic crusader, here he is now reinstating the image of the heterosexual patriarchal male. The center-left government of the Norwegian labour party is representative of this shift for Breivik and the Utøya summer camp is seen as a “sexual free for all”, full of sexually free young people (Richards 2014, 45). Breivik is destroying the unknown and the new, he is destroying that which upends the rigidity of the past. Femininity, like Islam, is something, new, something unknown, something that challenges his own conceptualization of society. His fragile masculinity is perceived as being challenged, even though he of course has no proof of this.

Breivik believes that he will be the first of many carrying out terrorist attacks in Europe. This is a process of revenge. He is acting out toward a society that he sees as straying away and betraying his own identity and beliefs. But Breivik was also able to find like-minded people on the internet, he compiled their ideas and could then act out as a representative of “a collective”. Self-esteem and self-identity are closely dependent on the identity of one's group. If an offense is committed to the group then revenge emerges. Vengeful desire is encouraged by that belonging to a “collective” and a threat to that “collective” in this case modernism causes vengeful acts.

While it is true that Breivik is irrational in his thought process his actions are not something to just prescribe to mental illness, to a lone gunman. The brutal nature of his attacks is capable of more than someone who has a mental illness. But simply having a mental illness, such as depressed people, psychotics, or victims of bullying does not explain their extreme rage, many psychopaths do not even express rageful violence (Dutton, et al., 2013, 551). One reason for

explaining the aggression in mass shooters is paranoia. Paranoid personalities are suspicious and have a pervasive mistrust of others. A paranoid individual is obsessed with revenge and justifies it as “payback” (Dutton et al., 2013, 551). Paranoid systems, mass paranoia, become common precursors of genocide, used to “otherize” an outgroup (Dutton, 2007). So what is important to remember is that even though the tragedies of July 22, 2011, were committed by a single man, they have striking similarities to the mass genocides of the past.

Breivik is a neo-nazi, as well as a celebrator of the crusades. Both events represent the brutality that can be acted upon by the masses. Breivik himself was an avid reader of far-right bloggers and writers and was like many radicals today, drawn to internet forums and communities. This is where an imagined war was constructed. A narrative was built and a community constructed, reminiscent of the Andersonian “imagined community”. A mythic narrative is one that tells a collective tale of origin, purpose, and destiny against villains and obstacles (Cloud 2018, 43). Breivik is another person who was been part of a constructed narrative, one that has led to violence, the Rwandan genocide, Holocaust, pretty much any act of violence has been spurred by a constructed narrative, fueled by propaganda, and led to brutal actions. Breivik’s own insecurities and paranoid delusions are fueled by an echo chamber of information distributed through internet forums and radical media, these act as his propaganda. These pieces of information pit one side against the other, constructing modernism as a threat to Breivik, one which he feels he must act against. This is not something that is abnormal, this is not an exception, this is a trend.

Nico Frijda (2014) writes, “Vengeful desire only very partially appears in violent acts. Most of it remains at the level of desire and is expressed in fantasies. However, vengeful fantasies, it seems, are remarkably violent even in the everyday instances...” (268). Vengeance and violent vengeance at that is common. That is because the feeling of betrayal or of hate is common, an “us vs them” paradigm is omnipresent throughout our daily lives. Everything is pitted in a binary, and for Breivik, this binary is constructed between him and modernism and what represents modernism in Europe, Islam, feminism, and liberalism. A concept that Frijda introduces is that of “The Law of Comparative Feeling”, in which one’s pleasure and pain are measured relatively by one’s fortunes and misfortunes. This is when scapegoating comes into play, as those who see themselves as misfortunate turn that pain or suffering on to others. They become jealous and vengeful because of the perception that that person’s life is good and theirs is

bad. What is important here is that there is a perceived notion of disjoint in lives, that one is happier than the other. This extends from propaganda and paranoid and insecure feelings within someone. Anders Breivik and other extremists see their lives as threatened and as worse than others because they themselves feel emasculated, insecure, and powerless. Someone like Breivik sees power being taken away from his imagined community of far-right, pro-terror extremists, from the white heterosexual Christian European man. That migrants and liberals are taking power away from him. But this is completely unfounded. In no way does Breivik give tangible evidence that his life is worse off because of the society that surrounds him.

That is what is most important in studying vengeance and extremism is that even though someone like Breivik might be irrational, the vengeance and extremism that courses through him is present in many others. The hatred he feels is not an exception, and his irrationality is a reflection of the irrationality of extremism and vengeance itself. An act of vengeance, as previously mentioned, does not have any sort of tangible benefits. An act of vengeance does not reverse a previous event, an act of vengeance is only a display of rage, an outcry, it is destructive, not constructive. Breivik has committed an act of vengeance one that has been wholly constructed by him. He has created a war, one in which he is a hero pitted against the evils of modernity and liberalism. This construction of his enemies as evil then allows him to have vengeance towards them, Muslims are part of a tradition of war, what he is enacting is part of thousands of years of exchanged vengeance, in which Christians and Muslims battle. He feels emasculated and insecure and places those insecurities upon that which he sees as different, he is paranoid and delusional. Any person can fall to this paranoia, any person can be radicalized, and any person can commit brutal acts. Throughout human history, we constantly see brutal acts of violence in the name of an ideology, and ideology is a construct, a symbol for someone to paint their own emotions on. That is why the case of Anders Breivik is so important, is because something that may be dismissed as irrational or crazy is part of a consistent pattern of humans enacting violence upon others because of an irrational claim towards vengeance.

Conclusion

After Breivik killed 77 people in cold blood, gunning teenagers down ruthlessly while they were at a summer camp, he expressed no remorse in court. When arrested by police he was

wholly concerned with a small cut on his finger. In fact, in 2018 we expressed regret for his actions saying, “I regret that I completed the actions on July 22, 2011, and if it was possible, I would not have done it.”² In Breivik’s eyes, his actions were inevitable and necessary. Never was he in doubt over whether killing his victims was wrong. He lacked empathy, something common in psychopaths, but the psychological evaluations of the man did not conclude he was a psychopath. He truly saw his victims as beneath him, he saw them as irrelevant, and part of a necessary act, of an imagined war.

Breivik in his future court proceedings issued a Nazi salute, and when he was called upon to reenact his actions by the court at Utøya, he calmly and coldly described his actions. Breivik sees himself as part of a group, part of a collective, he is a neo-Nazi and a white supremacist. He built his ideology and beliefs not on truth, but on bias and insecurity. He saw the lines melting away between his conceptions of masculinity, he saw the binary of the separate roles of men and women disintegrating. He used Islam as a way to channel a fantasy of a binary he so desperately needed, Christianity vs Islam. He used these fantasies to construct a threat, a threat that he perceived was destroying his own values and life and the lives of his collective. He then carried out an act of vengeance on this threat, a cold act of brutality.

It is interesting to note that Breivik’s parents divorced when he was one year old and were both members of the Norwegian Labour Party, the party he would carry his attacks out upon years later. Maybe his insecurities and hatred started here, practically from birth. But what matters is those insecurities existed, and insecurity is a universal emotion. All humans have it, and all can be exploited by it. That is why the study of someone like Breivik is important, although his actions may seem to be stemming from insecurities and may be seen as irrational, irrationalities and insecurities exist inside every human. The desire for vengeance and even violence, are common, and it is important to recognize how ideology and biases can construct hatred. The histories and information we are presented with can influence not only how a person sees the world, but how they can hate it.

² Anders Breivik, 2018, as cited in Garza, Victoria. “VG: Breivik Says He Has Regrets.” Norway Today, February 16, 2018.

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