

Chapter 44

Surveillance and Resistance: Online Radicalization and the Political Response

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides readers with an overview and discussion of the manner in which the Internet and social media has facilitated movements, ranging from Aryan Nations and the various European Defence Leagues, to the Global Jihadist Movement and anarchist groups. As the phenomenon of netwar and online recruitment evolved after 9/11, extremist movements motivated by illiberal and apocalyptic ideologies have found the Internet a congenial space for organization, dissemination, education and radicalization. This chapter examines the difficulty liberal political democracies have in censoring these groups and the ideas they promote. Civil rights organizations immediately condemn state electronic surveillance as an invasion of civil liberties, and present the liberal democrat with an acute moral and political dilemma. This chapter finally considers the tactics democratic states might prudently adopt in order to preserve the national interest.

INTRODUCTION

The security of a nation relies not only on officials who maintain the physical protection of assets, but also on the ways in which personnel protect the nation from harmful mindsets that seek to cause havoc or destruction. Voegelin, the Austrian philosopher who fled the Third Reich in the wake of the *Anschluss* (1938) argued that the ideological fanaticism of the Nazis was not only a moral and political mistake, but also a spiritual perversion. More precisely, so far as the political religions of the twentieth century, fascism, Stalinism, Maoism and more recently the Salafism of the Global Jihadist Movement (GJM) are concerned, the meaning or substance of religious phenomena moved from a spiritual concern with transcending the mundane world towards the realisation of imaginary fantasies of immanent apocalypse and the fashioning of this worldly utopias. These fantasies, as Barry Cooper observes, are not “always recognized for what they are because the image of an earthly condition of perfected humanity” was, in

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Europe, before 1990, expressed in scientific, or, more accurately, “scientistic” language (1999, p.4). This was not, of course, the case with revolutionary Islamic thought, but it remains the case with other ideological social movements of both left and right that have evolved since 9/11, whose animating political religions focus upon the renunciation of God. This is the case with both race based and anti-capitalist social movements, which, like al-Qaeda also pursue, what Ernest Sternberg terms, “world purificationism” (2010, p.64). We will briefly discuss the commonalities between these evolving political religions and Islamism before examining the western state response and its implications both for future war and the future of western, secular, liberal democracy.

BACKGROUND

The Extremist Right After 9/11: Cultural Nationalism and Political Activism

As Emilio Gentile, following both Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin argues, totalitarian ideologies, whether of a Marxist-Leninist or a national socialist provenance, attribute ‘sacred status to an earthly concept’ whether that concept is the race, the nation, the proletariat or, in more recent green left thought, the planet itself (2000, pp.18-19). This sacralisation of the political provides the space for an apocalyptic clash between the world waiting to be born and the doomed quotidian order that resists it. Such an ideological perspective, as Hannah Arendt classically explained, reveals a decadent past about to perish, a present that reveals the opportunity for radical change and the potential for realizing an ideal future (1951, pp. 472-479). Those who possess the ideological key to history, moreover, accept the necessity of violence to bring about the new order. In fact, the politically religious mind considers violence both clarifying and purifying. This is a view embraced by all modern revolutionary creeds whatever their nationalist, fascist, Marxist-Leninist, Maoist or Islamist provenance, since the nineteenth century.

The concept of three ages that informs such politically religious thought: a corrupt past, the divided present, and the purified third age waiting to be born, ultimately revives, in a modern guise, a tradition of hermetic and gnostic speculation that dates from the millennial speculations of Cistercian monks like Joachim of Fiore (1145-1202) and subsequently elaborated in the chiliastic practice of Anabaptist and radical sectarian “saints” in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe who sought to realize the ideal of the age of perfection (Voegelin, 1974, p.268 & Cohn, 1969). An analogous process of perfectionism and purification occurred in the salafist and Wahabbist interpretations of Islam in the course of the nineteenth century that culminated in Sayyid Qutb’s apocalyptic politically religious reinterpretation of the message that Mohammad had received in seventh century Mecca.

In contrast to religiously focused ideologies, race based ones emphasise the *palingenesis* or rebirth of the nation or race through a purgative process of ethnic cleansing. Classically exemplified in Third Reich ideology and practice, Roger Griffin contends that all fascist ideology shares the sense of living at an imminent turning point in contemporary history when the dominance of the allegedly bankrupt forces of conservatism, individualistic liberalism and materialist socialism finally give way to a new era where an activist nationalism triumphantly reasserts itself (1991, p.32). From this perspective violence is necessary to overcome national degeneracy and eliminate parasitical elites who have betrayed the nation and aborted its rebirth. This apocalyptic nationalist vision informs the white supremacist thought that has exercised an extremist, but minority presence in western democracies since the early days of the Cold War, the era of European decolonization and the US fear of international communism. Post

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