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The missing spirals of violence: four waves of movement-counter-movement contest in post-war Britain

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Since the Second World War, Great Britain has witnessed a recurring escalation and de-escalation of confrontations between extreme right-wing or anti-minority protest groups on the one hand and, on the other, militant anti-fascist or anti-racist groups, and latterly also a number of extreme Islamist groups. In this article we trace the outline of four waves of these movement – counter-movement contests in order to engage critically with ideas of what some academics have called “cumulative extremism”. Contrary to the tenor of much of the public, policy and academic debate around such contests, we draw attention to what we describe as the missing spirals of violence. In order to better explain and accommodate these empirical findings, we argue that it is important to resist the temptation to reduce “cumulative extremism” to a process of “tit-for-tat” violence. We outline four factors that have been particularly important in shaping patterns of interactive escalation, de-escalation and non-escalation in the case studies described: the broader strategic aims of activist groups; dynamics of intra-movement control and leadership; the actions of and activist’s interactions with state actors; and emergent movement cultures and identities.

Keywords: cumulative extremism; radicalization; extreme right-wing; anti-fascism; British National Party; English Defence League

Introduction

In recent years, concern that hostile encounters between extreme Islamist groups and extreme right-wing and anti-Muslim groups might not only undermine community cohesion, but also give rise to more serious political violence has fuelled growing interest among policy makers (see HM Government, 2013, p. 22; Home Affairs Select

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Committee, 2012, pp. 20-21), practitioners and scholars in what Roger Eatwell (2006) has called “cumulative extremism [CE]” – “the way in which one form of extremism can feed off and magnify other forms [of extremism]” (p. 205) – or what other scholars have referred to as “tit-for-tat radicalisation” (Jackson, 2011); “cumulative radicalisation” (Bartlett & Birdwell, 2013); the “connectivity between extremisms” (Ranstorp, 2010) or “reciprocal radicalisation” (Holbrook & Taylor, 2013).¹ In the United Kingdom in particular, academics, policy-makers, practitioners and media observers have watched anxiously the evolving dynamic between extreme Islamist groups with their roots in the now-banned Al-Muhajiroun (AM – “The Emigrants”) and vociferous anti-Muslim and extreme right-wing groups like the English Defence League (EDL) and the British National Party (BNP). Eatwell and Goodwin (2010) even claim CE could be “more threatening to the liberal democratic order than attacks from lone wolf extreme right-wingers or even al-Qaida-inspired spectacular bombings” (p. 243).

The concept of CE appears to offer interesting possibilities for strengthening our understanding of patterns of contentious politics involving extreme political groups. Since at least the 1980s social movement scholars have encouraged that greater attention be paid to the “competitive” nature of escalation (della Porta, 2013) and the way tactical radicalisation can emerge from cycles of innovation and adaptation involving opposing movements (McAdam, 1983; Zald & Useem, 1987). Furthermore, by evoking a more interactive and relational understanding of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation CE represents a welcome shift away from an overwhelming focus, at least in the current context, on extreme Islamist groups. Yet there are also reasons for caution. First, in order to ensure that policy-makers, practitioners and academics from different disciplines are not talking past or at cross-purposes with one another, there is a need for further interrogation of the concept and the explanatory work it is being used to do – are we talking about the adoption of increasingly radical ideologies or only about a shift towards violent tactics; do analyses of CE refer only to the “spirals of violence” usually posited at the core of the process or also to wider community polarization; is it still CE if the groups are only loosely coupled; and where do state actors fit within models of CE (Busher & Macklin, 2014)?

There is also an urgent need for detailed empirical work that enables us to evaluate the utility of this raft of concepts and tease out the complexities and contingencies of the processes that they purport to describe. One of the more worrying characteristics of discussions about CE has been a tone of grim inevitability about how

escalation by one group “is bound to draw a response” from the other, leading to “a tit-for-tat spiral of violence and terror” (BBC, 2013). This is problematic on two levels. First, as Bartlett and Birdwell (2013) highlight in their essay on the events that followed the killing of a British soldier, Lee Rigby, in Woolwich on 22 May 2013 by two Islamist militants, it is far from clear that even the most horrific acts will necessarily generate “spirals of violence”. Second, narratives about “inevitable” processes of escalation may also feed into a more general tendency towards risk inflation in discussions about “radicalisation” and “extremism”; a tendency that, as David Anderson QC (2013), warns, is likely to encourage over-reaching of security apparatus and play into precisely the kind of politics of fear on which extreme political groups tend to thrive.

This article represents an initial step towards the kind of empirical work that is required. In it we trace patterns of escalation during four waves of movement – countermovement contests involving the British extreme right since 1945: between Mosley’s fascists and the 43 Group in the late 1940s; between the National Front (NF) and the Socialist Worker Party (SWP) in the 1970s; between an assortment of extreme right-wing groups and anti-fascist or left-wing groups in the 1980s and 1990s; and finally the three-way interactions between anti-Muslim groups, extreme Islamist groups and anti-racist groups that have unfolded since the emergence of the EDL in 2009. The first three case studies were selected because they comprise the most violent waves of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation involving the British extreme right during this period. The fourth case study is included because it has been in this context that the concept of CE has really taken root.

Each case study is based on a time-series analysis of interactions involving the main protagonist groups, examining the style and intensity of violence used. We also analysed participant accounts of these interactions, using memoirs written by activists and interview and observational data accumulated by the authors over the course of a series of research projects and several years (Busher, 2015; Macklin, 2015). We limit our focus to processes of *tactical* escalation. We do not explicitly examine processes of *ideological* radicalisation. We understand tactical escalation to mean a quantifiable increase in physical violence. This might comprise a substantial increase in the numbers of people who are perpetrators or targets of the violence, or a step-change in the level of attempted physical harm e.g. from non-lethal to lethal force.

This is only an initial step: more detailed event analysis is required. We are also aware that the UK case has its own particularities. There is a need for similar analyses in other national contexts. However, the descriptive account of these case studies nonetheless enables us to sketch out some of the key empirical challenges for theories of CE. Following a brief introduction to the four case studies, we discuss patterns of escalation, non-escalation and de-escalation, before outlining how discussions about CE might be adapted to better accommodate these findings.

Four waves of movement – countermovement contest on the streets of post-war Britain

The 1940s: Mosley's fascists and the 43 Group

Following the Second World War, British fascists, predominantly followers of Sir Oswald Mosley, erstwhile leader of the British Union of Fascists (BUF), sought to reconstruct their political movement following the five-year hiatus imposed upon them by internment, bans on their organisations and publications, and the moral stigma attached to their politics after a war against Nazism and Fascism had put them firmly on the wrong side of the national narrative. Their attempt at a political resurrection ostensibly took place through book clubs, paper sales, meetings, marches and electioneering, but these activities were supplemented by a variety of violent acts including intimidation, racist vandalism, attacks on opponents' premises, and assaults on individual Jews and anti-fascists. This resurgence took place within the broader international context of the violent end of the British Mandate in Palestine, in which the targeting of British servicemen by Jewish terrorists prompted anti-Semitic riots in many British cities during the summer of 1947; incidents that the extreme right were quick to exploit (Macklin, 2007, pp. 45-48).

State actors responded to resurgent fascist activity with tactics ranging from covert surveillance to the banning of provocative marches and parades on public order grounds. Myriad anti-fascist groups also mobilised. Many pursued institutional responses like legislation banning fascist organisations. Others however, favoured violent, direct-action. The best documented of these was the 43 Group, founded by 43 Jewish ex-servicemen outraged at the recrudescence of fascism on London's streets (Beckman, 1992, p. 18).

Between 1946 and 1950, 43 Group activists used multiple tactics against the fascists. Their foremost strategy however was to "out violence" them. Outdoor fascist

meetings were the scene of regular confrontations between fascists and anti-fascists, most famously at the so-called “Battle of Ridley Road” in Dalston, east London, which took place between August and October 1947. Between April 1946 and June 1948 police arrested 41 fascists and 121 anti-fascists (Renton, 2000, p. 110) as a result of confrontations across London.

1970s: The NF, the SWP and the “Battle of Lewisham”

Confrontations between extreme right-wing and anti-fascist groups gained momentum again during the 1970s, following the formation of the NF in December 1966. For much of the 1970s low-level violence, often comprising extreme right-wing activists and anti-fascists attacking one another’s street stalls, was, in the words of then leader of the Young National Front, “endemic” and “woven into the very fabric of life for active members of the NF” (Pearce, 2013, pp. 54-55).

This low-level violence was “magnified manifold” through the NF strategy of “march and grow” and the response that these events elicited from numerous left-wing groups amongst whom the largest was the Trotskyite SWP.² NF marches became the focus for dozens of confrontations between opposing groups and, often, with the police as they sought to impose order. The largest clash took place on 13 August 1977: the “Battle of Lewisham” in south London, where 3,000-5,000 anti-fascists opposed an NF march of 500-600 persons. In the ensuing melee 110 people were injured, including 56 policemen, with 210 arrests.

Mid-1980s – early 1990s: AFA and the extreme right

Street violence escalated again in the 1980s, though the organisational dynamics were somewhat different. Both the extreme right and anti-fascist scenes were more fragmented than they had been in the 1970s. The NF remained the preeminent force on the extreme right, but its collapse following the 1979 general election had given rise to several other groups, including the BNP, that simultaneously supported and competed with one another. Physical force anti-fascism became dominated by Anti-Fascist Action (AFA), formed in July 1985 in response to the resurgent militancy and racist violence of the extreme right – manifest most notably in June 1984 when skinheads attacked an open-air festival for the unemployed organised by the Greater London Council (GLC) (Copsey, 2000, p. 159). An umbrella group, AFA brought together radical left-wing and anarchist activists whose individual political foibles were set aside to oppose the “common enemy”.

AFA militants argued that the decision to wind up the SWP-dominated Anti-Nazi League (ANL) in 1982 (see below) had allowed the extreme right to organise “virtually without threat of sanction”. To counter this development AFA employed their own violence as a tool of “first resort” (Birchall, 2010, pp. 77, 121). They adopted similar tactics to the 43 Group; attacking extreme right-wing meetings, paying “home visits” to key activists to further demoralise them (Birchall, 2010, p. 165). Skirmishes involving AFA and the extreme right became a regular occurrence in London, Yorkshire, Lancashire and elsewhere. Two of its most high profile confrontations included an AFA attack on an event organised by Blood and Honour (B&H), the neo-Nazi music network, in Hyde Park in 1989 and a further attack on B&H activists in 1992 as they gathered at Waterloo railway station. The “Battle of Waterloo” lasted several hours, resulting in 44 arrests and Waterloo, Charing Cross and several underground stations being closed.

From 1990 onwards, against the backdrop of the BNP’s “Rights for Whites” campaign, the BNP also became a focal point for AFA’s activities. Meanwhile, BNP activists, local sympathisers and football hooligans attacked anti-racist marches in Thamesmead and Bermondsey (Birchall, 2010, pp. 219-248; Collins, 2012, pp. 245-251). In 1991, in response to AFA’s activities, the BNP formed a “stewards group”, Combat 18 (C18), who quickly gained notoriety for particularly vicious attacks on SWP paper sellers and ethnic minorities (Collins, 2012, pp. 282-284). In the early 1990s, some militants from both sides of this contest took part in even more serious attempts at political violence associated with the Troubles in Northern Ireland (see below).

2009 – present: AM and the EDL

Organised anti-minority protest on British streets was sporadic from the mid-1990s onwards as the BNP invested its energies in its electoral ambitions. It became a more regular feature again in 2009 with the emergence of the EDL. The EDL was formed in Luton, Bedfordshire, in response to the heckling of a home coming parade of the Royal Anglian Regiment by militant Islamist activists. The first official EDL demonstration in June 2009 garnered only a handful of activists but the demonstrations soon expanded, the group drawing much of its support from the fringes of the football hooligan scene (Copsey, 2010) as well as from an assortment of established extreme right groups, “patriot” groups and “counter-jihad” networks (Busher, 2013). At their peak, EDL demonstrations drew somewhere in the region of 2000-3000 attendees. These events

served as a focal point for verbal, and sometimes physical, altercations with a variety of opponents including the SWP-backed Unite Against Fascism (UAF), smaller Antifa groups and local Asian youths, some calling themselves the Muslim Defence League. EDL activists have in turn regularly confronted Islamist rallies.

In spite of the efforts of state actors to manage this contest, with a combination of increased surveillance, the proscription of some extreme Islamist groups, and multiple prosecutions of activists from all sides, usually for public order offences, EDL and Islamist activists have continued to provoke one another. For example, Islamist activists announced they would march through Wootton Bassett in January 2010, a town synonymous with the repatriation of deceased soldiers from Afghanistan, and have publicly burnt remembrance poppies on Armistice Day; while some EDL activists have vandalised mosques, desecrated the Koran or deliberately incited Muslims with defamatory chants about Allah and the prophet Mohammed.

In 2012, six Islamists were arrested after a failed attempt to detonate a bomb at an EDL demonstration in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire. Then in 2013, the killing of Lee Rigby by two extreme Islamists, one linked to AM, prompted angry mobilisations by a number of groups including the EDL and BNP, as well as a sharp (if, as we discuss below, short-lived) rise in anti-Muslim hate crime, including several serious physical assaults and attacks on mosques.

The missing “spirals of violence”

There can be little doubt that in each contest wave, the opposing groups “co-evolved” (see Oliver & Myers, 2002) with one another. Without the actions of Mosley’s fascists, the 43 Group would not have formed. The run up to the “Battle of Lewisham” in 1977 was characterised by a co-evolution of “squads” to protect members of the opposing groups but whose activities also escalated the contest. AFA was formed in response to the increased militancy of extreme right-wing activists in the mid-1980s, which in turn provided the justification, if not the motivation, for extreme right-wing activists to establish C18. And the early momentum of the EDL can only be understood in the context of public outrage at the deeply provocative actions of a small number of extreme Islamist activists. In each case and on all sides, the expressed views and actions of their opponents helped the other group’s reinforce and validate their own views and actions: each group effectively embodying for the other the problem they claimed was afflicting their societies as a whole. Furthermore, these often violent encounters with

opponents built mutual fear, loathing, suspicion, and resentment, as well as providing contexts in which activists forged bonds of solidarity with co-activists. However, in none of the four cases do we find the kinds of “spirals” of violence that have been invoked in some of the discussion about CE. We make four specific observations.

Most of the time patterns of violence were fairly stable, in terms of style and degree

Each of the contest waves were characterised by violence. However, rather than continuing to “spiral”, following the initial emergence of the contest the majority of activists on all sides operated within and rarely deviated far from what soon became established “repertoires” (Tilly, 1978) of action. Generally, these have been dominated by street-based violence, albeit often using weapons like bottles, bats and CS gas, particularly in the 1970s and the 1980s-90s, sometimes combined with attacks on symbolically important property (mosques, synagogues, political bookshops etc.) and individuals (e.g. racist attacks and attacks on rival activists). Yet attempts to use lethal force have been rare even when participants have had the ideological capacity (Dobratz & Waldner, 2012) and the physical access to firearms (see Lowles, 2001, p. 69). The 43 Group used targeted violence to demoralise fascists and deny them the physical space to operate. However, even though some activists, traumatised by the Holocaust, described feeling emotions “ranging from choleric anger to a cold hard desire to kill the perpetrators” (Beckman, 1992, p. 18), when they saw people promoting fascism and anti-Semitism, they did not set out to use lethal force against British fascists. In subsequent contest waves, even where more militant groups were formed to deal with a perceived physical and political threat from an opponent i.e. the evolution of the “squads” in the 1970s or the formation of C18 in response to AFA, there was not a concomitant escalation in tactics *per se*. Street fighting continued to dominate in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and though there were outliers – such as Tony Lecomber, the east London BNP organiser jailed in 1986 after a bomb he was carrying in his car exploded near to the offices of the Workers Revolutionary Party – there was no concerted move towards the adoption of lethal force or to the use of firearms or *regular* use of explosives by either side. In the contemporary context, activists associated with groups like the EDL have tended, by and large, to adhere to an established tactical repertoire of street protest and online activism.

When activists have strayed away from established action repertoires, such as a number of racist murders and occasional uses of firearms or explosives – often by

“solo-actors” like David Copeland or Pavlo Lapshyn – the main organisational players within these opposing movements have usually sought to distance themselves, at least publicly, from these acts and their perpetrators.

Instances of increased violence did not always beget greater or even further violence

Though opposing groups were undoubtedly responsive to one another, there was not a straightforward or consistent pattern of increased violence by one side being met with greater, or even further, violence by their opponents. For example, racist murders in the late 1970s were met with multiple responses, including marches, vigils, continued street “battles” and even some assaults on individual extreme right-wing activists but not with counter-murders. Similarly, while instances such as the killing of Lee Rigby have provoked angry reaction from anti-Muslim and extreme right-wing activists, the main anti-Muslim and extreme right-wing groups have favoured tactics such as legal (if sometimes provocative) protests, vigils, and online and offline harassment of Muslims instead of violent retribution of a similar magnitude.

In the 1990s, though the violence meted out by AFA led to the formation of C18, this was followed shortly after by the BNP actually innovating tactically away from violence and towards electoral activity, which in turn made it harder for AFA to operate (Hayes & Aylward, 2000, pp. 60-61) – a kind of cumulative de-radicalisation. As Copsey (2011) notes, “contrary to expectations, far from destroying the BNP in a war of attrition, militant anti-fascism actually *encouraged* its modernisation” (p. 130).

When interactive escalation did take place, the process was often (relatively) short-lived: These were more spikes than spirals

Across the case studies, there were two slightly different, although sometimes intersecting, patterns of interactive escalation. First, there were processes of interactive escalation that unfolded over a period of several months, such as the build up to the “Battle of Lewisham”. In April 1977, a 1,200-strong NF march in north London had been confronted by 3,000 anti-fascists resulting in 81 arrests, of which 74 were anti-fascists (Haringey Trades Council, n.d.). SWP had declared its commitment to physically opposing the NF in 1973 but this was the first time it had succeeded on such a scale. The sight of an NF march reduced to “an ill-organised and bedraggled queue” (Copsey, 2000, p. 125) energised left-wing militants and encouraged the future use of such strategies. Anti-fascist resolve to physically confront the NF stiffened further in May when the NF polled 119,063 votes in the GLC elections (Ibid., p. 126) – polling

over fifteen percent of the vote in five seats in east London (Husbands, 1977) – provoking fears the NF was approaching a “take off” point as a political movement (Taylor, 1982, p. 131). Within this already febrile atmosphere, the arrest of twenty-one black youths in Lewisham, accused of a spate of muggings, acted as a catalyst for what was to follow. The SWP-backed Lewisham 21 Defence Committee began campaigning for their release. When attacked in Lewisham town centre by NF activists, the SWP Central Committee responded by organising “counter-gangs” (Birchall, 2010, p. 31) or “squads” (Hann, 2013, p. 264) “and the whole thing escalated from there” (Ibid., pp. 264-265): on 2 July, a Defence Committee march was attacked by NF activists, resulting in over 50 arrests (McNee, 1983, p. 91), and shortly after this the NF called the “anti-mugging” march from New Cross to Lewisham that would become the “Battle of Lewisham”.

Other processes of interactive escalation unfolded over a much shorter time frame, usually taking place around key symbolic events, such as elections or high profile instances of political violence. There have been sharp upticks in anti-minority aggression after events such as the killings of two British soldiers by Jewish militants in Palestine in 1947, the London 7/7 bombings in 2005, the burning of remembrance poppies by an extreme Islamist activist at a Remembrance Day memorial in 2010, and the murder of Lee Rigby in 2013. Future research on CE will need to unpack how these patterns of more or less sharp interactive escalation relate to one another and to longer-term processes of radicalisation and polarisation.

What is also important however is the brevity of these “spirals” of violence. This is most apparent in the spikes of violence around and after key symbolic events. As troubling as the anti-Muslim violence after the killing of Lee Rigby was, it quickly subsided, even if not immediately to pre-attack levels (Feldman & Littler, 2014) – a pattern that has also been observed after other terrorist attacks (Deloughery, King, Asal, & Rethemeyer, 2013; Hanes & Machin, 2014). Yet even with processes of interactive escalation that unfolded over a longer period, violence usually did not remain beyond the bounds of established repertoires for very long. For example, shortly after the clashes in Lewisham in 1977 there was further violence between fascists and anti-fascists prior to the Ladywood by-election in Birmingham and an arson attack on the SWP headquarters. However, within a few weeks the clashes returned to something more like their previous scale and intensity. Indeed, apart from another upturn in confrontations in the build-up to the 1979 general election, when anti-fascist

demonstrator Blair Peach was killed in a clash with the police as anti-fascist activists sought to prevent an NF meeting on Southall, these confrontations gradually wound down. For a while, SWP activities continued to be protected by “squads” of militants but by 1978 the party had begun distancing itself from direct action anti-fascism. In November 1977, some SWP activists formed the ANL a broad-based, popular front campaign involving the wider Labour movement against the NF, and over the next few years would go about expelling many of the “squadists” from the party (Renton, 2006, pp. 169-173). Meanwhile electoral and street-based support for the NF plummeted, collapsing into acrimonious factions following its disastrous showing at the 1979 General Election. Though the NF transformed into “a younger, aggressive organisation of young thugs” (Pearce, 2013, p. 59), it was unable to mobilise on the scale that characterised earlier clashes.

Contest escalation often occurred at the intersection with other more violent contests

In some of the most serious instances of violent escalation i.e. where protagonists have set out to use lethal force, it is far from clear that this is directly attributable to the movement – countermovement contest in question. For example, in the early 1990s, a handful of activists from both left-wing and right-wing groups were arrested and charged with offences relating to serious political violence. Liam Heffernan, a militant in Red Action (RA), one of the core components of AFA, formed in 1982 after many of its activists were expelled from the SWP for “squadism”, was arrested in November 1992 and subsequently jailed for 23 years for conspiring to cause explosions and membership of the Irish National Liberation Army. Then in January 1993, Patrick Hayes, a leading figure in RA and the London AFA organiser, was jailed for 30 years, together with another man, after being found guilty of offences including planting a bomb outside Harrods department store in Knightsbridge, which injured four people. Meanwhile, extreme right-wing activists like Terry Blackham, a leading NF activist, were jailed for gun-running to Ulster Loyalists in 1993.

While these individuals were very much part of the respective left-wing and right-wing scenes – Hayes was described as playing a “crucial role” in AFA “right up until he was lifted [for the terrorist offences]” (Seaton, 1995)³ – and while their involvement in this movement – countermovement contest undoubtedly shaped their political socialisation, there is reason to be cautious about situating their actions squarely within the contest between AFA and their various extreme right opponents.

Although RA was an anti-fascist group, its political identity has been described as “definitely more Irish Republican than British Labour movement” (Birchall, 2010, p. 329). RA supported the Republican armed struggle and many of its militants had direct contact with, and were often directly affected by, events in Northern Ireland (Ibid.). Though Hayes used terrorist violence in support of the Republican cause, he did not do so in support of anti-fascism. Furthermore, the actions of Hayes and Hefferman were problematic for many AFA activists (Hann, 2013, p. 357) and their arrests exacerbated underlying tensions within the AFA coalition (Birchall, 2010, pp. 310-311).

The case of the extreme right activists was different insofar as there was never a simple synergy of interests between their cause and Ulster Loyalism (McAuley, 2013). Groups like C18 who briefly flirted with Northern Irish politics quickly lost interest, immersing itself instead in football-related violence and its own struggle for control of the white power music business (Lowles, 2001, pp. 75-77). However, as with Heffernan and Hayes, although some extreme right activists helped supply the Loyalists with weapons or organised attacks upon pro-Republican marches in England, extreme right activists did not use these firearms against their opponents even when they had access to them (Ibid., p. 69).

In the contemporary contest, it is once again unclear the extent to which incidents of, or attempts at, more serious violence by Islamist militants can be cast as a reaction to the activities of groups like the EDL. Britain’s extreme Islamist scene have multiple opponents, including Shi’a Muslims, and though the EDL may provide confirmation to some Islamist activists of British society’s supposedly entrenched “Islamophobia”, most Islamist activists situate themselves more within an existential struggle against what they consider to be the illegitimate authority of Western secular democracy than within a direct contest with the EDL or their off-shoots. Even in the case of the would-be bombers of the EDL rally in Dewsbury, 2012, a note written by them addressed not just the EDL but also the Prime Minister and the Queen, indicating that this attack was not only a reaction to the EDL, but more broadly targeted at “the enemies of Allah and his messenger” (Whitehead, 2013). Leading Islamist figures have themselves cast doubt on claims about the impact of the EDL on their patterns of recruitment or political activities, pointing out that their *modus operandi* has changed little since 2009.⁴

Towards an explanation for the missing spirals of violence

These missing, or at least truncated, spirals of violence are clearly problematic for theories of CE. If the concept of CE or “cumulative radicalisation” is to add anything to our capacity to analyse, understand and respond to these contests, it is imperative that we are able not only to explain where escalation does take place, but also for where it does not, or for where escalation starts to take place but then falters (see Oliver & Myers, 2002).

We propose that a first important step towards resolving this problem is to avoid reducing CE to a process of “tit-for-tat”. While opposing “extremist” groups undoubtedly interact with and influence one another, there are a number of other factors that shape the nature and outcomes of these interactions. In the case studies described here, there would appear to be four factors that are particularly important if we want to better explain and understand these patterns of contest escalation, de-escalation and non-escalation.

Movements’ strategies and their broader aims

To some extent, strategic decisions by the opposing movements did centre on the specific movement – countermovement contest. Threat assessments regarding their opponents were a prominent theme in accounts of decision-making by these groups. For example, escalation was often justified, even motivated, by narratives about the growing strength of their opponents or concerns about a looming “point of no return” after which it would be too late to challenge their opponents. Conversely, perceptions of declining strength of their opponents led activists to proactively reduce the intensity of their own actions – the 43 Group wound down its activity in 1949 when they felt that “the fascists were beaten” (Beckman, 1992, p. 177). Similarly, C18 became less of a focus for AFA activists after activists felt they had already “destroyed” C18’s credibility (Birchall, 2010, pp. 335, 338).

However, strategic considerations usually extended beyond the specific movement – countermovement contest. Even groups ostensibly acting as counter-movements were not entrained exclusively on just one opponent, with the possible exception of the 43 Group. Most groups and their activists were engaged in multiple contests with multiple opponents and their actions shaped by efforts to influence political decision makers and to engage, or at least not alienate, broader constituencies (real or imagined) of support. For the SWP, for example, the anti-fascist struggle was only one of several conflicts and issues with which they were engaged; their clashes

with the NF in the 1970s forming just part of a broader escalation of “political violence” and industrial militancy in Britain during that decade (Clutterbuck, 1978).

These wider aims and strategic goals inevitably shaped decisions about tactics. For example, concerns that the kind of violence seen at Lewisham limited rather than broadened their struggle (Smith, 2009, pp. 67-69) were at least one of the reasons the SWP drew back from physical force anti-fascism after Lewisham and why the “squadists”, who were increasingly viewed as a “political embarrassment” (Hann & Tilzey, 2003, pp. 87-89), were gradually expunged from the party (Copsey, 2000, p. 130).

Similarly, on the extreme right in the early 1990s, the recognition by the BNP leadership that “street gang politics” was un conducive to their broader political aims, which felt increasingly achievable with the election of a BNP councillor in Millwall on the Isle of Dogs in September 1993, was at least one of the reasons for their gradual disengagement from street violence from 1994 onwards.

Intra-movement dynamics

As well being shaped by interactions between opposing movements, patterns of contest escalation were also shaped by intra-movement dynamics. This happened through two main mechanisms. The first relates to the issue of control within the movements. Radicalisation usually emerges at the margins of movements (della Porta & Tarrow, 1986) because movement leaders, who often aspire to engage with more formalised political processes, seek to discourage forms of radicalisation they perceive to be politically counter-productive. Where leaders have limited control of the margins of their movements, or where they lose control, it is more likely that tactical radicalisation will occur.

In the case studies we have described, it is notable that violence above and beyond established action repertoires has tended to involve those activists that are most detached from wider movement structures and constituencies of support, or where control structures have degraded. For example, while the ANL was located in the broader Labour/trade union movement, as are the anti-fascist groups at the forefront of anti-EDL campaigning, some of the most combative anti-fascist groups, such as RA “often had nothing more to anchor it [to the wider anti-fascist movement] than a sense of political responsibility drawn from its own analysis” (Birchall, 2010, p. 26). Similarly, while some EDL activists have carried out acts of violence, movement

leaders and organisers have usually sought to minimise public disorder during official events (Busher, 2013). It has been as the movement fragmented that activists associated with splinter groups, like the North West Infidels, have deployed far more violent tactics (see Traynor, 2013).

A second mechanism through which intra-movement dynamics shaped patterns of escalation relates to competitive intra-movement processes, sometimes called “outbidding”, whereby one faction defines itself against the other by the use of increasingly violent tactics (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011, pp. 125-128). For example, an attempted letter-bomb campaign by a C18 faction emerged as much out of activists’ attempts to differentiate themselves from less action-orientated factions within both C18 and the broader extreme right scene as it did out of the group’s interactions with left-wing opponents. Indeed, intended targets of the letter bombs not only comprised anti-fascist and racist-targets, but also rivals within the extreme right-wing scene. AFA offers a similar, if less tactically radical example. Though it had always provided a physical response to extreme right-wing mobilisation, it was, Copsey (2011) argues, the re-emergence of the ANL and groups like the Anti-Racist Alliance in 1992, that led AFA “to differentiate itself from this competition by further emphasising its physical mettle” (pp. 127-128).

The role of state actors

The literature on the effects of repression on protest highlights the complexity of this relationship: while repression might stymie protest (Feierabend & Feierabend, 1966), this may only be a short-term effect (Earl & Soule, 2010), and while in some instances state repression may generate “backfire” effects (Hess & Martin, 2006), such effects are likely to be mediated by factors such as the relative strength or weakness of the social movement organisation (Titarenko, McCarthy, McPhail, & Augustyn, 2001) or by the extent to which activists perceive the repression as (il)legitimate (Opp & Roehl, 1990). What is clear, however, is that any satisfactory account of “CE” *must* also include an analysis of state actors’ role in this process.

In each of the case studies it is possible to trace the influence state actors, particularly the police, have exerted. This is most easy to see with regards short to medium term effects. By interdicting numerous bomb plots by extreme right-wing and Islamist activists or more routinely through protest management, the police have often served to minimise or control violence. On other occasions, such as in the run up to the

“Battle of Lewisham” when the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police rejected entreaties from the local authorities to apply to the Home Secretary to ban the march (McNee, 1983, pp. 91-99), it might be argued that state actors failed to restrict violent escalation (after the summer of 1977, several bans were imposed to restrict NF marches). There are also occasions where it might be argued that police actions actually precipitated violence. For example, during an ANL march on the BNP bookshop in Welling, southeast London, in 1993 anti-fascists clashed with police *not* the BNP – whose activists were corralled inside the bookshop. The most serious violence occurred *after* mounted police charged the demonstrators, backed by riot police (Copsey, 2000, pp. 175-177).

Perceptions of the legitimacy of state actors also play a crucial role in longer-wave processes of contest framing, which in turn shape the structures of motivation and justification available to activists. It is unlikely to be coincidental that two of the most striking escalations of violence – those by RA militants in the early 1990s and by Islamist militants – were conducted by activists that explicitly denied the legitimacy of, and therefore sought to challenge, the state itself (see della Porta’s (1995) account of violent left-wing movements in Italy and Germany).

What is interesting about the British case is how infrequently this transition of the state from arbiter to opponent has taken place. Activists in extreme right-wing, extreme left-wing or anti-fascist groups in Britain have certainly not viewed the state as benign or benevolent. There have been repeated claims by all sides about state bias in favour of their opponents (for instance Macklin, 2005), and extreme right- and left-wing groups in Britain have also articulated forms of ideological opposition to the political authorities of their day (see Copsey, 2011, p. 127). There have however been very few instances in which groups from the left or the right have developed a sustained campaign of violence directed at the state, even after the deaths of anti-fascist activists Kevin Gately (1974) and Blair Peach (1979) during clashes with the police as anti-fascists sought to disrupt NF gatherings in Red Lion Square and Southall respectively. There are likely several explanations for this. In part, Britain’s wartime resistance of “Nazi Germany”, and to a lesser extent its subsequent involvement in the cold war, have closed down symbolic space available for extreme groups of any hue. The claims made by left-wing militants in Italy about the need to “carry on their fathers’ Partisan movement against a ‘fascist state,’” or by left-wing activists in Germany about having “to resist with all means the new ‘Nazi’ state to avoid repeating their fathers’ mistakes

and redeem their shame”(della Porta, 2008, p. 227) could not have seemed so credible in Britain. But what also seems likely to have contributed to this is how policing of political extremisms has, at least historically, been framed as a public order issue; how, outwith of a number of exceptional circumstances, the basic right of groups to protest have, for the most part, not been infringed; and how, where restrictions have been imposed upon protests, they have been applied to both sides of the contest. The extent to which the increased profile of counter-terrorism policing and a growing policy focus on challenging “the ideology of extremism” (HM Government, 2011, p. 1) affects the credibility of claims that policing is primarily about public order rather than ideas and ideology in the eyes of those drawn to these contests remains to be seen.

Movement cultures and identities

A fourth factor that shaped activists’ decisions about whether or not to escalate violence was the emergent movement, cultures, and identities. In the last two decades, a wide-ranging literature has emerged on how cultural processes – the negotiation of group identities; the development, performance and reproduction of group rituals; emotions; processes of framing, or the production of internalised moral orders – shape, even comprise, social movement activism (Jasper, 2007; Larson, 2013; Virchow, 2007).

In the case studies we have described, on some occasions these processes facilitated escalation. For example, in each contest wave we find groups or factions for whom physical confrontations with their opponents comprised an important part of their group identity. When SWP activists first adopted strategies of physically opposing the NF, activists saw their actions as “the litmus test” to distinguish between those serious about “a revolutionary alternative” from “careerists and hacks” (International Socialism, 1976). Later, as the SWP moved away from physical strategies of opposition, direct action both gave AFA a distinct political identity and provided a basis for bonds of solidarity within the group. Processes of group identity construction also help explain why we see more dramatic forms of escalation at points of intersection with other more violent contests. As well as what were essentially processes of capacity building – with activists being introduced to skills and resources that could be transferred to other contexts (Hegghammer, 2013) – intersections with more violent contests altered activists’ cultural reference points, thereby enabling shifts in some activists’ notions of what comprises justifiable force. For example, as RA’s official history notes of the group’s support for the IRA: “Another eminently practical benefit in accepting the use

and need for [the IRA's] armed political struggle," was "that any ethical reservations about our own use of violence for political ends, in this case physical force anti-fascism, was underscored and legitimised" (Red Action, n.d.).

However, cultural processes also inhibited violence. Decisions by activists on all sides to broadly uphold limits to their violence, even when the opportunity presented itself, were often described with comments about how it was just not what they (collectively) did. Accounts of street violence are peppered with recollections of more experienced activists stepping in when someone had "had enough" (for instance Birchall, 2010, p. 297) – Vidal Sasson, the famous hairdresser active with the 43 Group as a teenager, recalled being told before an attack on a fascist march: "We're not here to kill, we're here to maim" (Wilén, 2008).

Conclusion

Concepts of "cumulative extremism" have gained considerable traction in recent years, especially in policy and practitioner communities, but increasingly in academic circles too. Our aim in writing this article is not to be dismissive of these concepts, but to highlight some of the real-world nuance and complexity that they must be able to deal with if they are to prove a useful addition to the vocabulary that we use to talk about terrorism and political violence.

In the first part of this article we drew attention to the fact that although opposing movements may be responsive to one another, it is far less evident that these interactions will always, or are even likely, to produce substantial and sustained spirals of violence: a) most of the time patterns of violence were fairly stable, in terms of style and degree; b) violence by one actor often did not beget greater or even further violence; c) periods of interactive escalation were often (relatively) short-lived; and d) it was unclear that the most serious instances of violent escalation could be attributed to the movement – countermovement contest in question.

In the second part, we have proposed that if analyses of "CE" are to accommodate such empirical complexities, they will have to extend beyond talk of "tit-for-tat" processes to incorporate a range of factors that mediate how opposing groups react to one another. These include, but are not limited to: a) movements' strategic considerations and broader social and political aims; b) dynamics of intra-movement control and leadership; c) the actions of and activists' interactions with state actors; and d) emergent movement cultures and identities. Further research is required on these

patterns and processes of interactive escalation. In particular, there is a need for research that addresses how processes of interactive escalation can gain energy from and/or act as a catalyst for the evolution of longer-term tensions and animosities, and for research that details and makes comparisons across interactive escalation between different sets of actors in different national contexts. In the meantime, policy makers, practitioners and academics alike might do well to err on the side of caution when making claims about CE and “spirals of violence”.

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Notes

1 This last of these terms appears favoured by government ministers, see,

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/security-ministers-speech-for-the-far-right-special-interest-group-conference>

2 The SWP was originally called the International Socialists (IS) but changed its name in January 1977.

3 BBC News, ‘Warrington bombing linked to Red Action group,’ 2 September 2013 available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-23632246> [Accessed 23 April 2014] hypothesises a link between the 1993 Warrington bombing by the IRA which killed two children and Red Action.

4 Personal communication with a researcher conducting fieldwork with these groups.