

In: J. Holzer, J.R. Meloy, E. Corner & E. Drogan, eds. (in press). *Mental Health Aspects of High Threat Groups*. Oxford University Press.

Stochastic Terrorism and the Authoritarian Mindset

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Abstract

The authors introduce a series of terms, some original to them and others not, that define the abnormal psychology within high-risk groups: stochastic terrorism, incitement to violence, linguistic pragmatics, poliregression to narcissistic and paranoid states within a large group, rhetorical accelerationism, authoritarian followership, and the contamination of the political body. Out of this thicket of old and new terms emerge concepts worthy of integration, and provide for the patient reader a deeper understanding of the violent signals that may arise amidst the Constitutionally protected social and political noise within a democracy. Incitement and stochastic violence are highly interrelated concepts, yet one is a legal concept and the other has no place in the law. They are often distinctly different in their real world presentations. Both can be analyzed with the assistance of linguistic pragmatics, which deals with the meaning of language as derived from both words and the context in which they are uttered. Further, rhetorical accelerationism adds an additional layer of context to the analysis of rhetoric as a tool to persuade, vis-à-vis the shocking speed with which such messaging might travel online and selectively influence interested receivers. Responding to rhetorical devices and their enlargement on social media, a paranoid large group or an authoritarian follower may each resort to violence and response to inflammatory leadership rhetoric, though by somewhat different psychological pathways. Whether wittingly or not on the part of the violent actor, such violence may ultimately achieve some goal of the original speaker.

Keywords: stochastic terrorism, extremism, pragmatics, authoritarianism, rhetorical accelerationism

Introduction

Most are familiar with the famous question, *will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?* Worthy of a Shakespearean drama, this true incident preceded the murder of Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Beckett in 1170. Henry II of England was at odds with the Archbishop, who had just excommunicated bishops supportive of the King. Furious, Henry II gave a speech to his household filled with inflammatory rhetoric. Variations differ somewhat, but Henry II is credited with this suggestive lament: “What miserable drones and traitors have I nurtured and promoted in my household who let their lord be treated with such shameful contempt by a low-born cleric! Will none of these lazy insignificant persons, whom I maintain, deliver me from this turbulent priest?” (Barlow, 1986). It was surely clear to anyone who heard the King speak that he considered Beckett a menace to the Crown and had to be ‘dealt with’. Following the speech, four knights traveled to Canterbury to confront and arrest Beckett, though they ultimately murdered him when he refused to come quietly (Lyttleton, 1772). It has never been credibly proposed that Henry II ordered the violence and his specific intent is not known. However, the available evidence suggests that the King’s speech set in motion a chain of events directly leading to murder and making that murder much more likely to occur than if he had never spoken.

Phenomenology of stochastic terrorism

This incident exemplifies stochastic terrorism. From the Greek *stokastikos*, meaning “proceeding by guesswork” or “skillful in aiming” (Keats, 2019), a condensed definition of stochastic terrorism is an act of violence by a random and unknown actor triggered by rhetorical

demonization of an outgroup or targeted individual. It describes a pattern that cannot be predicted precisely but can be analyzed statistically (Kayyem, 2019). The ultimate violence against the targeted person cannot be known in advance, but it does become more probable following injection of the inflammatory rhetoric into the public discourse (Amman & Meloy, 2021).

Although stochastic terrorism ends in a violent incident, it is thought to be a process rather than an event (Amman & Meloy, 2021). A charismatic public figure, or an organization or network with effective communications, employs rhetoric hostile toward a targeted group or individual during public or mass communications. The objective of the rhetoric is to achieve some social or political goal, which will be characterized by the speaker as societally beneficial, e.g., overcoming the harmful influence of an outgroup who seek to take over the government, or becoming president of the country in order to defend it from dark forces led by the targeted opponent. Unknown to the speaker, an unrelated receiver from among the masses absorbs and reacts with anger, contempt, or disgust (Matsumoto, Hwang & Frank, 2016), perhaps mirroring perceived emotions of the speaker or adding their own fear and anxiety to the mix, or both.

Negative emotions, especially fear and anxiety, may be purposefully provoked by the speaker to prove the need for their leadership; they may also attempt to substantiate some perceived or actual growing harm posed by the outgroup (or targeted individual) to the speaker and/or the speaker's in-group—both of which are positioned as special and persecuted (Cap, 2017; Berger, 2018). The inflammatory rhetoric may range from grandiose declarations that the target poses a threat, to 'jokes' about violent solutions, or a description of the shared problem posed by the target. Specificity regarding violence is typically not offered, thereby likely insulating the speaker from blame for whatever may happen next.

Such rhetoric is then typically repeated across news and social media outlets, resulting in amplification of the message and, eventually, degradation and dehumanization of the target

through repetition and saturation of the hostile messaging (Decety, Pape & Workman, 2018). Upon reaching their personal tipping point—the point at which violence becomes both justified and necessary to avert an imminent and likely existential harm—at an unpredictable time understood only by the would-be attacker, the previously unidentified consumer of the rhetoric mounts an assault against the target or outgroup as they perceive it. This was observed in the assassination of Yitzak Rabin in 1995, the so-called Pizzagate attack in 2016, and the foiled kidnap-murder plot against Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer in 2017. In each case, the attacker(s) mobilized to violence after being bombarded by negative, inflammatory rhetoric and subsequently concluded violence was justified and necessary to avert what they believed would be imminent and existential harm. This effect has also been documented by Matsumoto, Frank & Hwang (2015) in examining the emotional content of speeches prior to violent and nonviolent events.

The speaker's original intent could range from naïveté about violence stemming from their words to full hope and expectancy that violence will occur. This process has been chronicled in numerous events well-known across history, including the case examples referenced above and the January 6, 2021, violent incursion at the U.S Capitol as discussed by Amman & Meloy (2021, 2022).

Incitement versus stochastic terrorism

Incitement to imminent lawless action including violence and stochastic terrorism can potentially overlap, but typically will not. In the United States, incitement stemming from words is a Constitutional construct, as a carve-out of speech that carries no First Amendment protection. As discussed in another Chapter in this volume, inciting speech is not protected when it is intended to incite or produce imminent lawless action and is likely, in fact, to do so (*Brandenburg v. Ohio, 1969*). In the determination of incitement, violence or other lawless action

is not required to occur, but there is a 'likelihood' requirement tying the probability of lawless action to the inciting speech. There is also an 'intent' requirement in the incitement doctrine, whereby the speaker must intend to incite imminent lawless action, which can be difficult to prove. In stochastic terrorism, violence must have occurred to complete the process, and there is no intent requirement on the part of the speaker (Amman & Meloy, 2022).

There are similarities between stochastic terrorism and incitement, too. In both, there are multiple players involved. Stochastic terrorism specifically envisions one or more recipients of the inflammatory rhetoric, who could act after reaching their tipping point (Amman & Meloy, 2021). In incitement, there logically are other players in addition to the speaker because incitement is not a one-person concept. In both constructs, the speaker and listeners need not be known to one another (Amman & Meloy, 2022). Also, the likelihood requirement in the incitement standard connects to the probability element in a stochastic process (Amman & Meloy, 2022).

Stochastic terrorism, unlike incitement, is not a legal term. It has no meaning in the law (Amman & Meloy, 2022). For one thing, this process requires multiple and independent actions by separate people with their own agendas and mindsets (Amman & Meloy, 2022). The 'downstream' actor - the violent offender, can be, and typically is, held liable in relation to the specific crime committed. However, the 'upstream' actors - the speaker and any amplifiers, would typically lack the required subjective mindset or *mens rea* to be held responsible for an act of violence committed by someone with whom they have never communicated (Amman & Meloy, 2022). There can be no conspiracy because they do not know each other and are not collaborating. So, while this term has great utility for academic discussions to describe a serious and practical problem, especially during times of intense political and social conflict, it should not be confused with a legal standard.

In the rest of this chapter, the authors describe aspects of analysis important to understanding stochastic terrorism. A discussion of linguistic pragmatics allows for critical dissection of rhetorical devices often used in leadership speech to course. Rhetorical accelerationism, a descriptive term for the speed and saturation of both true and false information through social media echo chambers, provides depth to an understanding of the amplification stage of a stochastic process. Large group psychoanalysis, vis-à-vis paranoid regression of a group, took on particular relevance after January 6, is therefore presented here. Finally, the authors conclude with a discussion of lone actor terrorist threat assessment and proximal warning behaviors of particular relevance.

Linguistic pragmatics

Pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics that deals with the meaning of language as understood from the combination of words and their context (Horn & Wood, 2004). Because rhetorical tools are an integral part of the stochastic process, the application of pragmatics is helpful in recognizing and understanding them. It is important to note that rhetorical devices used in stochastic terrorism are also readily found in benign leadership speech - which is often inherently coercive as leaders try to leverage speech to rally public support around a common goal (Cap, 2017). The following section details legitimation techniques used in leadership speech and often found in a stochastic process, and places it in the context of Proximization Theory.

Legitimation is a tool of affirmation and may be the most frequently used rhetorical device in stochastic terrorism, if for no other reason than it has several manifestations. In general, legitimation been recognized as the purposeful deployment of rhetoric to establish both the speaker's right to be obeyed (Chilton, 2004) and to secure wide public mobilization around a

shared goal (Cap, 2017); such goals may be benign or malignant.¹ An example of a benign, shared goal is framing a mainstream political party's platform as the rightful agenda of the US. A malignant alternative to standard political speech was exemplified when Hitler described the Jews as racial tuberculosis, in pursuit of racial purity by the Nazi regime between 1933-1945 in Germany (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.).

In public discourse, speakers engage in legitimation through a variety of rhetorical techniques, including praise, assertions, implicature, emphasizing personal consequence, and urgency. At all times, legitimation can be aided by praise of the speaker and their authority, which can be accomplished by either the speaker themselves or supporters (Cap, 2017).

Assertions are statements of ostensibly undeniable facts or historically accepted ideas. Using assertions establishes common ground between the speaker and the audience. They are often deployed sequentially to build up credibility for desired actions or policies, especially controversial ones (Jary, 2010). Since the dawn of the social media age, the world has been progressively transitioning to a state where multiple realities exist among groups who no longer share a common set of accepted facts (Amman & Meloy, 2022). The long-term effect of this state remains to be seen, but these different and sometimes oppositional understandings of the world are likely reinforced or broken down by the way in which group members circulate either insularly or broadly.

Implicature, on the other hand, implies truth rather than stating fact. It is an advantageous mechanism to the speaker in that it allows for subjectivity by the receiver which in turn allows the speaker to communicate an idea without openly committing to it (Amman &

¹ *Delegitimation* is a related and opposing technique that involves *attacking* the motives, justification, intelligence or even sanity of the opposing figure or outgroup. Blaming and scapegoating, marginalizing and devaluing can all be techniques of delegitimation, during which the speaker is essentially clarifying the difference between "me/in group/good" and "other/outgroup/bad" (Cap, 2017).

Meloy, 2021). A clever speaker who knows their audience well could imply something questionable without having to say it outright and have faith that the audience will interpret it in a certain way. If the result is undesirable blowback, the speaker can simply cancel the interpretation by adding more content (Cap, 2017).

Emphasizing *personal consequence* is also helpful in legitimation. Audiences are known to be receptive to threatening expectancies and visions when they believe them to be personally consequential (Cap, 2013). Therefore, a key to legitimation rhetoric is to clarify for the audience that some harm will personally impact them if the speaker's chosen course of action is not adopted (Matsumoto et al, 2016; Cap, 2017; Berger, 2018).

An important thread tying all of this together is the communication of *urgency* and need to act quickly in order to stave off the threatening expectancy, often characterized as an existential threat (Berger, 2018; Meloy et al., 2023). Whether specifically conveyed or independently concluded by the listener, action must be taken before time runs out to do anything at all.

A cohesive theory has been developed which accommodates all of these techniques and their use in threat rhetoric: Proximation Theory (Cap, 2017). According to Proximation Theory, for the vulnerable receiver in the stochastic process outlined above, this cocktail of rhetorical techniques can ultimately result in subversion of one's self-image (Amman & Meloy, 2021). For example, these techniques may lead to reclassification of offensive violence as defensive in the receiver's mind to avoid cognitive dissonance: the often-disturbing realization that one's thoughts and actions are contradictory (Amman & Meloy, 2021).

Rhetorical accelerationism

In addition to the rhetorical devices themselves, it is valuable to consider the way in which they are transmitted in modern society. Evolutions in communication technology, and particularly the arrival of social media, has resulted in a tectonic reorganization of the way people give, receive, and react to information. We refer to the reorganized flow of information in the social media age as *rhetorical accelerationism* (Amman & Meloy, 2022). With this term, we describe the way social media echo chambers amplify ideas rapidly and exponentially and produce chain reactions resulting in actions by both foreseeable and unforeseeable actors. The word *rhetorical* describes the use of persuasive linguistic techniques rather than purely explanatory language; *acceleration* describes the enhanced magnitude and speed of information spread regardless of its quality.

Algorithmically driven information spread across social media platforms seems difficult if not impossible to predict or control (McDavid, 2020). The old saying about a lie circling the world before the truth has put its pants on (Quoteinvestigator.com, 2014) was prescient of what is happening today. A concerning and influential study of the then-Twitter platform found that false information spreads dramatically faster than true information, even when accounting only for human post/repost behavior (Soroush, Roy & Aral, 2018). The study found that fake news stories were 70% more likely to be retweeted than truthful news accounts; truthful news stories took about six times longer to reach 1,500 people than fake news stories did; fake news stories cascaded to a depth of 10, about 20 times faster than facts; and falsehoods were retweeted by unique users more than facts were at every depth of cascade (Soroush, Roy & Aral, 2018).

Social media spread of information occurs both vertically and horizontally. Vertical spread is referred to as a cascade, and occurs when information is reposted within a single platform. Horizontal spread is when information moves onto another platform. False information does not stay on the platform from which it is launched, but rather spreads across platforms

(Dvoskin & Timberg, 2021). For those more dependent on group validation than quality information, facts often do not change opinions. Even when caught peddling falsehoods online, when a user is suspended or banned from one platform, they simply move to another where they can continue on as if nothing happened (Kang & Goldman, 2016).

Rhetorical accelerationism describes an online phenomenon, but it is a result of very human behavior—the tendency of individuals to affiliate with and accept information from like-minded others. Subcultural and social groups form echo chambers both offline and online, but intensive social media use certainly magnifies the acceleration effect. This is likely due to the many factors unique to the online environment, including but not limited to speed, ease of use, perceived anonymity, and a potentially large ready-made audience (Amman & Meloy, 2022). Persons with a tendency to unduly submit to strong leadership, demonstrate aggression in the name of their leaders, and fervently believe everyone should follow certain social norms, tend to strongly rely on like-minded fellows for affirmation and support (Dean & Altemeyer, 2020). For these people, rhetorical accelerationism is even more impactful due to two additional concepts. First, consensual validation occurs when consensus of the group is more important than the actual truth of whatever is being considered. Second, the *ad populum* fallacy is the belief that if ‘everyone’ believes something is true, then it must be true because of that shared belief. Such beliefs become simplistic, binary, and absolute, and transform into extreme overvalued beliefs if not challenged and can mobilize some individuals to violence (see Meloy & Rahman chapter, this volume).

Authoritarian Followership

Individuals who can be described as authoritarians tend to strongly demonstrate and rely on consensual validation (Dean & Altemeyer, 2020). They are of particular interest when considering stochastic terrorism. For the reasons set out below, an authoritarian follower may be

a likely candidate to act out the final stage of a stochastic process, as opposed to an authoritarian leader.

Social scientists have not yet agreed on a single, unified understanding of authoritarianism; in fact, authoritarianism has proven difficult to measure (Heller et al., 2020). However, the construct of right-wing² authoritarianism (RWA) developed by Altemeyer (1981, 1988, 1996) may have the greatest applicability to stochastic terrorism in the current era. Altemeyer described three defining characteristics that distinguish the RWA person from others: a high level of submission to the perceived legitimate leaders of society, a high level of aggression in the name of those leaders, and a fascist³ interpretation of conventionalism whereby everyone must follow the norms set forth by their leaders (Dean & Altemeyer, 2020).

According to Altemeyer (1981, 1988, 1996), prototypical RWA persons will be highly obedient to what they perceive as the will of their chosen and perceived rightful leader; will embrace aggression in support of their chosen leaders; and will be insistent that others do as their leaders do. Following the construct, these individuals may be among the most likely to act out the final stage of a stochastic process—targeted violence—from among those who have such a propensity. The good news is most people still reject political violence (PPRI, 2024). However, a recent survey found that four in ten Americans (PPRI, 2024) have some degree of receptivity to authoritarian appeals as measured by the RWA Scale (Altemeyer, 2007) and the Child Rearing Authoritarian Scale (PPRI, 2024), consistent with an approach validated by

² It should be clarified that “Right” in right wing authoritarianism is not synonymous with a right-leaning political philosophy, and in fact often fails to coincide with it (PPRI, 2024). Instead, “right” is taken from the old English “riht” meaning correct, proper, or lawful (Altemeyer, 2007).

³ Fascism is government by emotion and will over reason, fear over facts, and doom over hope. The leader decides what the people fear and then rules by their fear. Fake problems are generated, and then go away once the leader assumes power (Timothy Snyder, Oct. 22, 2024, *Substack*).

Engelhardt et al (2021). Further, adherents to Christian nationalist and RWA views are roughly twice as likely as the larger public to support political violence (PPRI, 2024).

Although the authors are not aware of attitudinal surveys intended to measure authoritarianism among the January 6 defendants, it can be conjectured that numbers of them could be counted as RWAs. High submission was evident among several defendants who expressed that they believed themselves to have been following the orders of former President Trump on that day—including an attack on the Capitol. For example, Defendant Garrett Miller said, “I believed I was following the instructions of former President Trump. I also left Washington and started back to Texas immediately after President Trump asked us to go home” (Rubin et al., 2021). High willingness to aggress in the name of the chosen leader was self-evident in what happened at the Capitol that day, including physical violence against Capitol Police, damage to the Capitol itself, and threats of predatory violence toward named members of Congress (GovInfo, n.d.). For example, Washington D.C. Metropolitan Police Officer Michael Fanone was one of the law enforcement officers assaulted at the Captiol on January 6. In his testimony before the United States House Select Committee on the January 6 Attack, he said,

“At some point during the fighting, I was dragged from the line of officers and into the crowd. I heard someone scream—“I got one!” As I was swarmed by a violent mob, they ripped off my badge. They grabbed and stripped me of my radio. They seized ammunition that was secured to my body. They began to beat me with their fists, and with what felt like hard, metal objects. At one point, I came face-to-face with an attacker, who repeatedly lunged for me and attempted to remove my firearm. I heard chanting from some in the crowd—‘Get his gun!’ and ‘Kill him with his own gun!’ I was aware enough to recognize I was at risk of being stripped of and killed with my own firearm. I was electrocuted again, and again, and again with a taser” (ABC News, 2021).

Finally, high conventionalism was evident generally in some defendants via their associations and creeds, such as the Proud Boys who strongly endorsed ideas of misogyny and western cultural superiority (GovInfo, n.d.; www.start.umd.edu, n.d.). The authors have previously argued that legal incitement to imminent lawless action and stochastic violence may potentially overlap, but in many cases will not as their respective elements are not identical (Amman & Meloy, 2022). The January 6 violent incursion at the US Capitol might be a case of overlap, though it would at minimum require a broad reading of *Brandenburg* that allows a “temporally wide but topically cohesive swath of speech that [lays] a foundation of readiness to react violently to inflammatory speech at a specific moment,” under *Hess v. Indiana*’s allowance of circumstantial evidence (1973).

The contamination of the political body

One of the most insidious means of magnifying the risk of stochastic terrorism, solidifying an authoritarian following, and amplifying rhetorical accelerationism, is the use of the language of anger, contempt, and especially disgust to contaminate the body politic. The emotions of anger, contempt, and disgust - the acronym ANCODI is used by researchers - have been studied and determined to be the key emotions associated with political intergroup aggression and hatred (Matsumoto, Hwang & Frank, 2012, 2016, 2017).

From a functional perspective, “Anger facilitates the removal of obstacles, contempt makes a statement about inherent moral superiority, and disgust helps to eliminate or repulse contaminated objects” (Matsumoto et al., 2017, p. 94). All humans are capable of these emotional states, and they are both distinctive as well as related to each other. The facial musculature of each of these emotions has also been mapped and is found cross-culturally (Ekman & Friesen, 1971; Ekman, 2007). Matsumoto et al. (2012, 2016) found that political leaders expressing anger, contempt and disgust toward an outgroup - typically characterized as

presenting an imminent, existential threat - lead to aggression and violence toward that outgroup, whereas other emotions, including anger alone, did not correlate with aggressive acts. Matsumoto and colleagues also noted that a shift appears to occur from a temporary assessment of a group's behavior (anger) to a permanent assessment of the nature of the group (contempt), to its future status (disgust). In a more recent study, Matsumoto et al. (2017) demonstrated that these emotions *cause* hostile cognitions toward specific groups.

Adolph Hitler, the Chancellor of Germany 1933-1945, was a master at characterizing outgroups as disgusting, often by portraying them as carriers of disease. Other world leaders have also used the language of disgust, as noted by Appelbaum (*The Atlantic*, October 18, 2024):

Adolf Hitler used these kinds of terms often. In 1938, he praised his compatriots who had helped “cleanse Germany of all those parasites who drank at the well of the despair of the Fatherland and the People.” In occupied Warsaw, a 1941 poster displayed a drawing of a louse with a caricature of a Jewish face. The slogan: “Jews are lice: they cause typhus.” Germans, by contrast, were clean, pure, healthy, and vermin-free. Hitler once described the Nazi flag as “the victorious sign of freedom and the purity of our blood.”

“Stalin used the same kind of language at about the same time. He called his opponents the “enemies of the people,” implying that they were not citizens and that they enjoyed no rights. He portrayed them as vermin, pollution, filth that had to be “subjected to ongoing purification,” and he inspired his fellow communists to employ similar rhetoric. In my files, I have the notes from a 1955 meeting of the leaders of the Stasi, the East German secret police, during which one of them called for a struggle against “vermin activities”... by which he meant the purge and arrest of the regime’s critics. In this same era, the Stasi forcibly moved suspicious people away from the border with West

Germany, a project nicknamed “Operation Vermin”...Mao Zedong also described his political opponents as “poisonous weeds.” Pol Pot spoke of “cleansing” hundreds of thousands of his compatriots so that Cambodia would be “purified.”

The results were the deaths of millions of individual citizens within their own countries.

The Presidential candidate Donald Trump accelerated his use of the language of disgust during his campaign in 2024, particularly in the weeks prior to the election. As Appelbaum wrote, “He has said of immigrants, ‘They’re poisoning the blood of our country’ and ‘they’re destroying the blood of our country.’ He has claimed that many have ‘bad genes.’ He has also been more explicit: ‘They’re not humans; they’re animals;’ they are ‘cold-blooded killers.’” (*The Atlantic*, October 18, 2024). Candidate Trump was subsequently elected President by a majority of those who voted, and won the Electoral College by an undisputed 312-226 votes. The Electoral College are representatives from each of the fifty states who formally cast votes for the election.

Disgust is a universal, evolved and adaptive emotion that keeps us safe from real contaminants and toxins in our environment. When we react with disgust to such things as snakes, spiders, maggots, cockroaches, dead animals, or spoiled food, we pull away suddenly and reactively, protecting our body from being contaminated or poisoned (Davey, 2011). We also use two particular facial muscles⁴ which help to keep our mouths closed so that the contaminant cannot enter our body. Disgust, and its sudden onset - a primitive, bodily, visceral, muscularly distinctive emotion - ensures our survival. The reader of this chapter may even find that they experienced feelings of disgust as they read the above paragraphs. If individuals or groups - such as Jews, immigrants, or people of color - are defined and labeled as contaminants or toxins, anger is not the primary emotion that is aroused. Are we angry at

⁴ Disgust is represented by a specific facial muscle pattern involving M. corrugator and M. orbicularis oculi. The intensity of disgust is stronger in a state of hunger than under oversaturation and is altogether stronger in females than in males (Wolf et al., 2005).

snakes, spiders, maggots, cockroaches, other vermin, or the decomposing corpse of a dead animal? No, but many of us are disgusted by them, and the impulse is to eliminate them and purify our surroundings; disgust bypasses anger and goes straight to homicide (Meloy & Kupper, 2024).

One does not need to be angry at immigrants, nor even contemptuous of them. However, if the rhetoric stimulates feelings of disgust and a desire to cleanse the environment, the impulse is to eliminate them. Deportation (or “remigration”) may be a temporary solution, but often is too tedious and becomes mired in bureaucratic red tape - as it did in Germany with the “Jewish problem” prior to World War II (Ushmm.org, 2019). The Final Solution was a cleansing of the German “volk” or common people, and the most efficient means were gas chambers (Ushmm.org, 2019).

Large group psychoanalysis

Yet another aspect of stochastic terrorism to be considered is the potential for regression by a large group. Mass psychology research has addressed contexts ranging from small groups to genocidal dynamics to state level geopolitics (Bion, 1961; Kernberg, 1998; Dutton, 2007; Volkan, 1988, 2013; Robins & Post, 1997). Of special relevance here is regression of the large unstructured group (Kernberg, 2003a, 2003b), a process we have called *poliregression*, from the Greek *polis*, or body of citizens (Amman & Meloy, 2021). The prefix *poli-* captures both the sense of a people as well as a body politic, and the suffix refers to regression, which is collective psychological movement to a more primitive and elementary state of mind, not unlike developmental regression in an individual (Le Bon, 2002/1920).

Narcissistic and paranoid regression of large group

Kernberg (2003a, 2003b) has outlined the two stages within a large unstructured group. First, there is a free-floating narcissism within both the group and the leader, a benign and self-adulating sense that the group is special. There is a dependency on the leader, and a passivity within the group, as it revels in the belief that all its basic needs will be addressed, and cause for concern is nonexistent. The second stage, often mirroring the primitive psychological defenses of the leader, is poliregression to a paranoid state, wherein the group believes it is facing an imminent existential threat, and violence is mandated, as described by Kernberg:

A group involved in a paranoid regression becomes hyperalert and tense, as if there were some danger against which it would have to establish an aggressive defense. The group selects a leader with a strong paranoid potential, a hypersensitive, suspicious, aggressive and dominant person, ready to experience and define some slight or danger against which he and the group following him need to protect themselves and fight back. The members of the group, in turn, tend to divide between an 'ingroup', rallying around the group leader, and an 'out-group' who are suspect and need to be fought off (Kernberg, 2003a, p. 685).

There is a rhetorical sleight of hand often used by such a leader. Since the threat that is preached is both imminent and existential, there is a need for violence against the threat (Amman & Meloy, 2021). Members of the large group who have never been violent and who consider themselves nonviolent persons, are nevertheless persuaded to participate in violence without any cognitive dissonance. This is because the violence that is made necessary by the pending threat posed by the out-group is presented as *defensive*. It is justified to preserve life and liberty in the moment, akin to the concept of "last resort" (Meloy, Amman, Guldemann & Hoffmann, 2023). In fact, the defensive violence may be sanctified if framed and approved by the dominant religion of the group.

Within the paranoid group - now feeling both special and persecuted - inflammatory speech is presented by its charismatic leader. The threat posed by the outgroup is described as imminent and existential. The leader's rhetoric can be very persuasive and reinforce a perceived pressure to act before it is too late (Berger, 2018; Meloy et al., 2023). Extreme overvalued beliefs as described by Rahman et al (2020) are clearly identified and dearly held by the group which are simple, binary, and absolute: "we must act, and we must act now!" (see Meloy & Rahman chapter, this volume, for further elaboration).

Terrorism risk assessment

Measuring violence risk in relation to stochastic terrorism, especially within a group, is challenging. In theory, the violent actor in a stochastic process is unseen and unknown until the attack. It is for this reason that understanding of proximal warning behaviors and distal characteristics associated with terrorist violent offenders is even more critical. When an engaged receiver of inflammatory rhetoric is identified and appears to meet elements described in this chapter such as displaying ANCODI, endorsing an imminent and existential threat, expressing justification and necessity of violence to ward off that threat, a structured assessment of the person's characteristics and behaviors is likely appropriate and may be necessary, for risk assessment. The Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18), a structured professional judgment tool for assessing risk of violent action by lone actors (Meloy, 2017), offers insight into the characteristics of potential end-stage actors in a stochastic process. The TRAP-18 was developed with 18 total items, 10 distal characteristics and eight proximal warning behaviors. The proximal warning behaviors measured by the TRAP-18, as the name suggests, are behaviors that occur in close temporal proximity to a violent attack, after distal characteristics have taken hold, as discovered through time sequence analysis and predicted by the theoretical model (Meloy, 2017; Meloy et al., 2021; Meloy & Gill, 2016). These

proximal warning behaviors, first catalogued as such over a decade ago (Meloy et al., 2012), have been found to cluster among terrorist attackers, in contrast to non-attacking individuals of national security concern in a multidimensional scaling analysis (Goodwill & Meloy, 2019). In particular, three proximal warning behaviors have been found to distinguish between terrorist attackers and individuals of national security interest who do not attack: pathway, identification, and last resort warning behaviors. We focus most closely on those here and their relationship to stochastic terrorism (Bockler et. al., 2021; Challacombe & Lucas, 2018; Meloy et al., 2018).

First, *pathway warning behavior* is a reference to the pathway of violence model developed earlier this century (Calhoun & Weston, 2003). In the context of terrorism risk assessment, pathway is measured by the presence of late-stage markers including research, planning, and preparation for attack, as well as implementation (Meloy, 2017). By the time pathway markers are occurring - and hopefully observed by others - it seems likely the end-stage receiver in a stochastic process has already internalized and emotionally reacted to the inflammatory rhetoric, committed to a violent solution, and is beginning to mobilize.

Second, in a TRAP-18 analysis, *identification warning behavior* can take on any one of a number of complexions, including a psychological desire to be a pseudocommando or adopt a warrior mentality (Dietz, 1986; Hempel et al, 1986); a close association with weapons or other military or law-enforcement paraphernalia; psychological identification with past attackers or assassins; or setting oneself up as a soldier or agent of a particular cause or belief system (Meloy et al., 2015). When considering the characteristics of a receiver of inflammatory rhetoric targeting an outgroup or person as posing a threat, self-identifying as a warrior or soldier of the cause facilitates mobilization for violence both psychologically and practically. In addition, when fixation is present, an operational evolution from fixation to identification--what the person thinks about all the time to whom he becomes--also discriminates between attackers and non-

attackers (Meloy et al., 2018; Challacombe & Lucas, 2018). Although the identification we write of is a psychological one, it is often advertised through words or visuals, such as, but not limited to uniforms, e.g., Anders Breivik constructed his own military uniform before his 2011 attack in Norway (Meloy et al, 2015); photographic imagery, e.g., Seung-Hui Cho took “selfies” with weapons and tactical gear later brought to his 2007 killings at Virginia Polytechnic University, including two that seemed to carry identification meaning only—they were not used (Meloy et al, 2015); and statements or manifestos, e.g., Elliott Rodger released both video and written statements in advance of his 2014 mass murder in Isla Vista, California, establishing himself as an avenging figure enacting retribution against women of the world (White, 2017). The mental state involved with identification behavior facilitates and reinforces both the intention to act violently and the acquisition of capability to do so as a self-appointed warrior. In the context of stochastic terrorism, we think this self-appointment comes after receiving perceived direction from the deliverer of the threat rhetoric, usually viewed as the leader of the people or the cause. This identity as a soldier is important to stochastic violence; without it, enthusiasm and righteous indignation may be felt, but without an intent to physically aggress toward the outgroup and the energy to mobilize (Amman & Meloy, 2021).

The third proximal warning behavior that consistently distinguishes between attackers and non-attackers in TRAP-18 research is *last resort*. Last resort thinking involves an internal experience of crisis in relation to the objective preoccupation—in the case of stochastic terrorism, the object is the threat posed by the outgroup. There may once have been superior alternatives to violence but those are now seen as lost or withdrawn, rendering violence both necessary and urgent. All consequences for violent action have been accepted. As the self-appointed soldier adjusts his thinking around the necessity of violence, he may experience a fresh sense of drive or even destiny in the anticipation of decisive action (Meloy et al, 2023).

This warning behavior often follows a triggering or precipitating event such as inflammatory rhetoric in a stochastic process. Themes of imminence of harm and compression of time in which to act to ward off the threat are important in triggering last resort thinking in the self-appointed soldier. The need for temporal acceleration is the final piece for the listener, whose intent and capability has already been established.

Conclusion

The authors have delineated the difference between the phenomenology of stochastic terrorism and the legal concept of incitement to violence. Although at first blush these two concepts seem, and indeed are, highly interrelated, their real world applications are likely quite different. Such terminology is critical to understanding the positioning of a leader and his followers, and the degree to which language can now be weaponized and rhetorically accelerated through social media to build a following, as well as enhance the risk of violence to advance an extremist belief system. Linguistic pragmatics and rhetorical accelerationism are worthy lenses through which to view the use of rhetoric to coerce. Other phenomena may follow: the stimulation of disgust in the followers due to the contamination of the body politic, obedience to a perceived message by an authoritarian follower eager to aggress, or the narcissistic and paranoid regression that can be seen in large unstructured groups - what we call *poliregression* - and the dangers of targeted violence that evolve from such phenomenon. The chapter concludes with reinforcement of how a stochastic process renders even more important the proximal warning behaviors associated with violent terrorist offenders. Three specific proximal warning behaviors in particular facilitate the threat assessment of an emerging violent signal from the social and political noise that is inherent in a democracy: pathway, identification, and last resort.

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