2 Bringing grievances back in

> The discourse of the 'war on terror' has a clear political purpose; it works for someone and for something; it is an exercise of power.
>
> (Jackson, 2005, p.2)

Violent action by non-state actors based on political and ideological motives has appeared in different forms throughout recent European history: Anarchist groups around the turn of the 20th century, the Suffragette movement in the UK, communist volunteers from all over the world fighting against the Franquist regime during the Spanish civil war, resistant groups against Nazi Germany before and during WWII, Irish revolutionaries fighting British rule, revolutionary left-wing violence (most prominently in Italy and Germany) and right-wing terrorism in various European countries, to name only a few. Currently, we are witnessing the rise of white supremacist groups across North America, Europe and Australia (Auger, 2020).

Violence with links to the Arab World has mostly been the product of groups resisting the occupation of Palestine, active via hostage taking, assassinations and airline hijackings throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In the Arab World itself, non-state political and ideological violence in recent history has primarily taken the form of anti-colonial struggles against British and French rule throughout the region after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the 20th century. Though inspired by Pan-Arabism, the efforts often remained confined to the local national context and specifically aimed at defying the colonial rulers, such as the Great Iraqi revolt against the British in 1920, the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt during and its opposition to British imperial rule, the Libyan revolt against Italian occupation or the Algerian revolution against French occupation. Gradual decolonisation of the Arab World did not result in the reduction of oppositional violence, mainly because the newly established governments soon opted for authoritarianism. The nationalist forces that once paved the way for independence came to be perceived as threats, including Islamic political movements that had been allies during decades of anti-imperialist struggles. To preserve themselves, post-colonial Arab states engaged in heavy-handed repression of Islamic political movements from the 1960s onwards. The widespread

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repression throughout the region provided a narrative of collective suffering at the hands of post-colonial regimes that had betrayed the cause of the Arab people, which set the foundations of the modern ideology of Pan-Islamism that prevails to this day. Pan-Islamism is at the core of the terrorist group Al-Qaeda, which emerged out of the involvement of Arab Mujahideen in the Soviet–Afghan War (1979–1989) – funded and supported by the US government – and evolved to become the main representative of pan-Islamist anti-imperialist violence worldwide. Through the attacks on 11 September 2001 (9/11), four coordinated aeroplane attacks in the United States claimed by Al-Qaeda, pan-Islamist violence grew to worldwide prominence (Abu Rumman, 2014; Mohamedou, 2018).

The *GWOT*, the rise of the *Preventive State* and the anti-radicalisation business

There had been large-scale violent attacks by non-state actors before 9/11 – none, however, as devastating and costly in human lives as 9/11. Crucially, on a symbolic level, it was the first time the violence that the United States had become very familiar with abroad, at the global periphery – through the various wars waged after WWII – struck back into the heart of the metropolis. 9/11 was the birth of the 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT), an imperial-militaristic project that sought to eradicate terror in its roots by invading Afghanistan and Iraq, at the price of *collateral damage* in the form of human suffering and death. While some saw this as a reaction to the attacks, the GWOT might be better conceptualised as a continuation of US foreign policy and an escalation of a vicious cycle of death and destruction (e.g., Kundnani, 2014; Mohamedou, 2018; Sanders, 2020).

While after 9/11, the efforts to counter and combat terrorism were directed to locations in the Global South, this changed around 2004 and 2005. The attacks in London, Madrid and Amsterdam led to the emergence of the notion of *radicalisation*, meaning *homegrown radicalisation*, focusing on individuals born and bred in Western countries that turn to jihadist violence (Neumann & Kleinmann, 2013). From then on, the image of a 'foreign enemy' was complemented with the image of a 'domestic enemy' who had 'radicalised' to the point of attacking the country he had grown up in. Efforts and policies of counterterrorism were then complemented by efforts to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism. Kundnani (2012) suggests that the counterterrorism efforts of the US and UK governments shifted from a 'shock and awe' strategy to one of conquering the 'hearts and minds' both abroad and domestically, where the concept of radicalisation emerged as a vehicle to discuss the *process of becoming a terrorist* (as Neumann (2008, p.4) put it, 'what happens before the bomb goes off?') which had until then been taboo.

Hence, since the mid-2000s onwards, states have been concentrating their efforts on stopping acts of terrorism through the prevention of radicalisation (and 'extremism'), a phenomenon seen as a precursor to terroristic violence. As a result, states intervene when no punishable acts have been committed yet. Such preventionist logics have contributed to the exponential growth of screening

tools, projects and initiatives, designed to detect, assess and contain potential risks to society as soon as possible. These tendencies have been referred to as the *Preventive State*: A paradigm of security governance that includes control and surveillance practices put in place to prevent perceived risks, increased powers for security agencies, expanded criminal liability, pre-trial detention, and indefinite incarceration (Zedner & Ashworth, 2019). Generally speaking, the GWOT in both its international and domestic outlook has included and justified acts of torture, drone killings, arbitrary offshore detention, the use of *agents provocateurs*, targeted surveillance and selective criminalisation (Abbas, 2019; Codaccioni, 2019; Kundnani, 2014; Leman-Longlois, 2012; Sanders, 2020).

The expansion of resources, laws, policies, institutions, initiatives and companies with the aim of dealing with terrorism and radicalisation has also been dubbed the 'anti-radicalization business' (Kublitz, 2021 p.66) or the 'extremism industry' (El-Ojeili & Taylor, 2020, p.8). Apart from public actors, the private sector is increasingly involved in the so-called 'fight against radicalisation and extremism' (Kublitz, 2021; Kundnani, 2014).

El-Ojeili and Taylor (2020) provide a compelling analysis of the extremism industry as symptomatic of a dominant *post-hegemonic liberalism*, which ensued the thriving and successful neoliberalist project of the 1990s following the demise of the Soviet bloc. Post-hegemonic liberalism, they argue, has emerged as a way to counter the upsurge of antisystemic movements and ideas that threatened the neoliberal capitalist world order. The seeds of contemporary concern with extremism are to be located in the period of 'combative neoliberalism' (p.10) during the 1970s, which aimed to destroy collectivist competitors to hegemonic power. The rampant growth of the extremism industry from the 2000s onwards can then be understood from the vantage point of post-hegemonic liberalism, where knowledge needs to be produced on the threats and risks associated with antiliberalist contestations as a way to delegitimise, dehumanise and ultimately incapacitate these movements. This is largely achieved by depoliticising movements and actors and removing them from a social interactionist understanding of modern social relations. The authors suggest that antisystemic movements cannot be understood without looking at the role that neoliberalism plays in their existence: in the case of the Middle East's susceptibility to the 'extremist contagion' (p.12), the phenomenon has to be studied in the context of prior hopes of nationalist and socialist solutions, postcolonial economic dependency, Western interference, structural adjustments, repression and the frustration of popular hopes and expectations. For the European and North American context, Kundnani (2014) also attributes a central role to liberalism. The liberal state, he argues, presents itself as *a*-political and a neutral spectator, absolving itself thereby of its role in creating the conditions under which identitarian political violence occurs. This self-image, however, neglects that liberalism has itself developed a normative model of identity, a 'way of life into which lesser peoples needed to be civilised' (Kundnani, 2014, p.287). Thereby, in the context of the war on terror, the liberal state engages itself in a form of identity politics and conveys that one identity politics needs to be substituted by another, i.e., that ethnic,

cultural or religious affiliations needed to make space for the identity imposed by the liberal state.

Academia: A key stakeholder in the 'Global War on Terror'

Part of Foucault's legacy is the idea that all political and social forms of thought are inevitably caught up in the interplay of knowledge and power. There is, according to Foucaldian thought, no objective *truth* regarding social and political knowledge, but always a discursively forged and sustained *regime of truth*, dominant in a particular context, setting and time (Foucault, 1980). And the dominant truth about a certain phenomenon impacts has real-world repercussions for the individuals we associate with it. Stuart Hall describes this impact as follows: 'It may not be true that single parenting inevitably leads to delinquency and crime. But if everyone believes it to be so, and punishes single parents accordingly, this will have real consequences for both parents and children and will become 'true' in terms of its real effects' (Hall, 1997, p.49). Thus, when, as academics, we produce knowledge, we should be aware of the power structures that we were influenced by and that we inevitably end up feeding into. Given the devastating impact of the so-called 'Global War on Terror' in terms of human rights violations and the increased acceptability of Islamophobia and racism in populist, certainly, but in public discourse, more generally, producing knowledge on politico-ideological violence is inevitably an exercise of power that must be handled with caution.

The argument I put forward here is that academia is not a neutral and objective bystander in the global fight against terrorism, radicalisation and prevention. The academic world has been a key stakeholder in the fight against terrorism, by producing knowledge on the root causes of terrorism and the best ways to prevent such acts of large-scale violence. The rise of the so-called *terrorism studies,* a field that focuses specifically on terrorism and political violence after 9/11 quickly established itself as a discipline that tends to ignore the knowledge that has been produced in other disciplines before 9/11, as Jackson (2012) suggests

> How is it that the 'known' knowledge of the causes and resolution of violent political conflict (including conflicts where terrorism was present), which has accumulated from decades of conflict analysis and peace research, among others, remains largely 'unknown' within the terrorism studies field? Why is it that within terrorism studies research continues apace on questions related to terrorism's causes and effective responses without reference to the key scholars and existing studies of peace and conflict studies?
>
> (p.12)

It seems that this condition is at least partly due to the *New terrorism* thesis, which originated in the United States (Crenshaw, 2008). Put simply, *old terrorism* is associated with a form of violence that is comprehensible, with perpetrators assumed to have sensible political goals that can be negotiated and that are local (often territorial) in their orientation. States could bargain with the 'old' type

(Laqueur, 1999). *New terrorism,* on the other hand, is postulated as being irrational and megalomaniac, and associated with unlimited and unnegotiable goals. The role of religion, especially Islam, is put forward as a new driving force behind this violence. 'Old' terrorism is human and could be contained; 'new' terrorism is barbaric, monstrous and must be destroyed. The 'new' terrorism thesis resonates with Silke's observation that 'in dealing with extreme violence of any kind, there is a tendency to regard the perpetrators as psychologically abnormal and deviant' (Silke, 2004, p.178).[1] Following, I will present what I suggest as the three major biases in the study of terrorism and political violence, namely orientalism, state-centrism and depoliticisation.

Orientalism

The appeal of the *New terrorism* thesis can be better understood through a postcolonialist and constructivist, arguably Foucaldian, reading of Western knowledge production. The Western-centrism of academic knowledge production, which has been problematised elsewhere (Agozino, 2003; Al-Kassimi, 2018; Keet, 2014; Moosavi, 2018), is particularly pronounced when it comes to the study of politico-ideological violence. The pseudo-objective study of the Middle Eastern dangerous terrorist paved the way for Orientalism's renewed entry into force, three decades after Edward Said (1978) developed the concept and analysed its role in Western knowledge production. Almost all studies of terrorism considered as relevant are produced by researchers working in European and North American universities (Campana & Lapointe, 2012), who study phenomena and movements that are predominantly located in the Middle East and North Africa (Schuurman, 2019). It may be hardly surprising then, that 'persistent stereotypes, glib generalizations, and inaccurate assumptions about Islam and the Arab World underlie even the best terrorism research' (Mockaitis, 2003, p.211) – a statement Schuurman (2019) suggests remains valid almost two decades after 9/11. The seemingly objective study of PIV then mainly comes down to the analysis of 'violence at the periphery' through a prism defined by the metropolis, as cogently suggested by Mohamedou (2018). This might be particularly true in the case of criminology, which has been criticised for its traditional complicity with state power and imperialist projects in legitimising the control of colonial Others (Agozino, 2004; Bull, 2004; Kitossa, 2012), through what may be called processes of 'epistemic othering' (Keet, 2014).

Proper engagement with these foundational epistemological forces is hampered by the fact that the social sciences, especially criminology, continue to be dominated by positivist epistemologies (Ahmad & Monaghan, 2019; Tauri, 2013). In essence, positivism and its reliance on empiricism as the only source of genuine knowledge tend to ignore the extent to which academic research may be a site of persisting imperialist and oppressive structures and dynamics. Western science today perceives itself as post-ideological[2] and anti-racialist – an ideology which consists of dismissing racism as a relevant object of inquiry and refusing critical examination of the political conditions that enable racialised and racist

practices and politics (Boulila, 2019). Anti-racialism is a form of racial denial, 'characterised by historical amnesia, through which the histories of colonialism and slavery are not deemed important for the way race operates in contemporary Europe' (Boulila, 2019, p.1408). In fact, the radicalisation literature struggles to account for grievances related to historic experiences of suffering and large-scale violence, such as those produced by colonial-imperialist projects and slavery (Agozino, 2003; Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010; Mohamedou, 2018). Prominent radicalisation scholars consider colonisation to be a 'thing of the past' (*une vieille antienne tiers-mondiste*, Roy, 2015) and downplay its pertinence for contemporary forms of PIV. A similar tendency was affecting the field of social movement theory, dominated by white male researchers, who were unable to capture the importance of the interplay between past and present, local and global systems of oppression and failed to predict the Black protest movements. African-American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, on the other hand, had long pointed to 'the relationship among racism, colonialism, slavery, western empire building, and capitalist development. He theorized them as overlapping, mutually reinforcing systems of domination' (Morris, 2019, p.134). Hence, considering the Western-centrism of terrorism studies, the persistent focus on Islam and Muslimness as a central factor in terrorism research can be understood as a continuation of an orientalist tradition of thought (Said, 1978).

State-centrism

Another important characteristic of terrorism and radicalisation research is its proximity to the world of policymakers and political stakeholders. The concept of radicalisation, for instance, was developed by state actors and policymakers, before being adopted by academics (Neumann & Kleinmann, 2013). Even more problematically, many of these researchers entertain close links and have interests that overlap with those of state institutions (Jackson, 2012; Schmid, 2013; Silva, 2018). The most prominent researchers in the field are closely tied to law enforcement and intelligence agencies, such as Marc Sageman, former CIA officer and scholar-in-residence at the New York Police Department (NYPD) (Kundnani, 2012). Given radicalisation experts' positionality, one may therefore justifiably speak of radicalisation research as being a form of 'embedded expertise' (Mills, Massoumi & Miller, 2020, p.127). As a result of this, findings of such embedded experts are heavily skewed towards individualistic, psychological-culturalist and state-centrist assumptions about the radicalisation process (Ahmad & Monaghan, 2019). In his updated version of Kundnani's (2012) *Radicalisation: the journey of a concept*, Silva (2018) cogently demonstrates that

> governments ignore research critical of status-quo surveillance, intelligence and policing strategies in favour of questionable 'indicator' and 'evidence-based' studies attempting to identify the cultural, theological, psychological or even social characteristics of those in the so-called radicalisation process. (p.45)

Focusing on the individual is likely to cause significantly less institutional discomfort than considering the state and state actors as being involved in a dialectic with terrorists and non-state actors more generally (Duclos, 2020; Kundnani, 2012; Qureshi, 2020). As Kundnani (2014) writes

> An objective study would examine how state and nonstate actors mutually constitute themselves as combatants in a global conflict between the West and radical Islam and address under what conditions each chooses to adopt tactics of violence, paying close attention to the relationships between their legitimizing frameworks. Such an approach has the advantage of being consistent with what is known about the biographies, actions, and self-descriptions of terrorists themselves and those who publicly support terrorist violence.
>
> (p.141)

Although Silke and Schmidt-Petersen (2017) suggest that 'while a great deal of the recent work on terrorism is of mediocre or questionable quality, there is still more high-impact work being published now than at any previous time' (p.700), others judge the field's evolution less favourably. Schuurman (2019) examined the dominant topics in terrorism research from 2007 to 2016 (3,442 articles in leading academic journals) and found that there has been a persistent focus on jihadist forms of terrorism (in 74.5% of the articles), at the detriment of research into other forms of non-state political violence. The field also continues to heavily underemphasise state terrorism (mentioned in 2.1% of articles). This is unsurprising, according to the author, given that terrorism studies have traditionally construed political violence as something reserved for non-state actors, while foregoing that states have been the most active users of political violence throughout history. Another indicator of the field's state-centrist orientation is the fact that the research priorities and findings tend to mirror the terrorism-related concerns of states and match their counterterrorism interests. As Stampnitzky (2011) observes, 'the state has been not just the primary sponsor of knowledge-production, but also the primary consumer of research' (p.7) in the field of terrorism studies. The field of terrorism research continues to be driven by political and societal preoccupations. This may be understandable to a certain extent, yet it prevents in-depth engagement built on developing state-of-the-art knowledge on these topics. Another problem that both Schuurman (2019) and Kundnani (2012) point to is the desire and willingness of often self-proclaimed 'terrorism experts' (gaining legitimacy through sensationalist claims likely to be picked up and promoted by the media) to cater to the needs of governmental institutions and policymakers. De Koning (2020) writes about a 'security gaze' through which academic knowledge is used and misused by prosecutors and other public stakeholders to securitise individuals associated with particular forms of 'Muslimness'.

Given its genealogy and object of research, the field of criminology is particularly prone to producing state-centrist research and thereby dismissing the role of states and state agents as enactors of violence and harms themselves, including their complicity in criminal phenomena such as terrorism (Moosavi, 2019; Piché,

2015). Many concerns have been raised as to the state-centrism of criminological research, which has led some to speak of *administrative criminology*, including the tendency to sideline research that provides findings critical of states' use of power and violence (Belknap, 2015; Turner, 2013; Walters, 2003; Young, 1986). Scholars of state crime as well as the zemiologists (proponents of the study of social harms rather than crime) have pointed to the importance of recognising states as active criminal actors. Clement and Scalia (2020) argue, compellingly, that it is crucial to understand labelling processes in the 'War on Terror' which aim to produce and maintain the image of a 'public enemy', and the way they tend to obscure the dialectic relationship between state and non-state actors when it comes to crime and terrorism.

Depoliticisation

In line with orientalist and state-centrist tendencies, the field of terrorism and radicalisation research is epistemically dominated by individualist and psychological-culturalist approaches. The focus on religious, cultural, ethnic or psycho-pathological factors contributes to a *masking of the political* (Burgat, 2016; McEvoy, 2003; Sedgwick, 2010). Individualist approaches, therefore, serve another important tendency of terrorism studies, namely the *depoliticisation* of the phenomenon and its actors. Structural, sociopolitical, geopolitical and historical factors remain largely excluded from the analysis (Ajil, 2020; Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010; Jackson, 2012; Kundnani, 2014; Lafaye & Rapin, 2017; Mohamedou, 2018).

Former US president George W. Bush shaped the agenda of depoliticisation in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 by claiming that

> we're not facing a set of grievances that can be soothed and addressed. We're facing a radical ideology with unalterable objectives to enslave whole nations and intimidate the world. No act of ours invited the rage of the killers – and no concession, bribe, or act of appeasement would change or limit their plans for murder.[3]

This statement resonates with Pomerantz' (2001) assertion that, to 'explain terrorism', emphasis should be put on 'mental difficulties as opposed to legitimate economic, political and religious grievances' (pp.2–3). As a result of these new *working hypotheses*, protagonists of PIV have been voided of their political agency and studied, usually from a distance, as actors whose ostentatiously political outcries ought merely to be understood as attempts to excuse or mask their *actual* intentions. Political grievances are considered as pretexts and cover to engage in violence or as post-facto excuses to reduce guilt or alleviate responsibility (Dawson, 2019). This potential instrumentalization, misperception of or overemphasis on grievances can lead analysts and researchers to discredit them in the study of politico-ideological violence (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Dawson, 2019).

The example of how the organisation of the so-called 'Islamic State' has been studied and analysed is telling. Mohamedou (2018) argues that the 'overwhelmingly under reductionist and sensationalist mainstream journalistic approach and through policy-oriented security expertise' has led to a 'focus on the group's extreme violence and its alienating discourse' and thereby 'prevented deeper examination of the political and social conditions behind its rise' (p.2). He goes even further by suggesting that

> the understanding of that violence of the savage has become boxed into a discussion on terrorism that strips it of its political nature and moves to discuss anthropologically the Muslim, Arab, Brown, Black or Southern perpetrator and the scriptures of their nominal religion.
>
> (Mohamedou, 2018, p.20)

Similarly, Crenshaw (2008), argues that the New terrorism thesis mainly serves the purpose of justifying the GWOT. It makes life easier for both policymakers and analysts, for existing knowledge can be dismissed by focusing on *New terrorism*, which is essentially regarded as *religiously driven terrorism*: 'If analysts can safely assume that religion is the cause of terrorism, they need not look for other more complex explanations that necessitate linking religion to other political, social, and economic factors' (Crenshaw, 2008, p.136). Maney et al. (2012) point out that approaches to terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11 have largely stigmatized insurgents and ignored political repression and structural violence as sources of armed conflict' (p.29). French Muslim scholars and practitioners agree that discourse on terrorism and radicalisation tends to 'exaggerate the religious dimension', 'obscure the political and geopolitical dimension of the emergence of extremist movements' and propose that the 'motives of jihadists are of the psychological, psychanalytical and religious sort, while in reality they are primarily of the political sort' (quotes in Geisser et al., 2017, p.200). The 'anti-radicalisation business', Kublitz (2021) suggests, was only able to thrive and travel across the borders because it developed a specific language that, 'by delinking words from historically and socially grounded phenomena […], decontextualises violence and reduces complex political and historical conflicts to a seemingly simple problem' (p.71).

Sidelining of grievances

The combined effect of these epistemological issues afflicting knowledge production on politico-ideological violence – **orientalism**, **state-centrism**, and **depoliticisation** – must be seen as a major obstacle to proper engagement with its object of inquiry. Terrorist violence is studied from a distance by individuals who rarely share anything with their research subjects, on every imaginable scale. It is analysed through a lens that attributes axiomatic legitimacy to the state, while the nature of the violence itself is about defying and attacking state power. A state-centred approach will systematically fail to incorporate the missteps and abuses

that are either brought about or promoted by state actors (or from which they may benefit) into the analysis of the phenomenon, thus missing an important component for a holistic understanding. And finally, the violence and its agents are portrayed as a-political subjects mainly motivated by religious fanaticism, while their declared motives have always revolved around politics and geopolitics, even when embedded in a religiously tainted lexicon. Crucially, criminology's increased engagement with terrorism has not disrupted these forces. Despite its potential for critical reflexivity, it is the field's positivist mainstream that has taken on the study of the phenomenon, thereby mostly reproducing the already existing epistemic dysfunctionalities (for a mapping study, see Ahmad & Monaghan, 2019).

The combination of the field's epistemological handicaps is also responsible for the sidelining of grievances as an object of inquiry. Grievances have always been there as a central element in the formation of groups and movements that engage in politico-ideological violence. Bin Laden himself clearly stated that the motives for his actions were the harms produced by US foreign policy in the Arab World. In his 'Message to the American People', on 29 January 2004, he wrote

> God knows that it had never occurred to us to strike the [Twin] Towers. But after it became unbearable and we witnessed the oppression and tyranny of the American-Israeli coalition against our people in Palestine and Lebanon, the idea came to my mind. The events that affected my soul in a direct way started in 1982 when America permitted the Israelis to invade Lebanon and the American Sixth Fleet helped them in that. This bombardment began and many were killed and injured and others were terrorised and displaced. I could not forget those moving scenes, blood and severed limbs, women and children sprawled everywhere.
>
> (quoted in Mohamedou, 2018)

One may and must disagree as to whether grievances justify violence or not, but their centrality in the study of terrorism cannot be contested: 'It is known that terrorism, as a conflict strategy, is driven by grievances and, in the case of anti-American terrorism, by US military intervention overseas' (Jackson, 2012, p.14). However, as Mockaitis notes, 'The Al Qaeda attacks have produced no serious reassessment of US foreign policy nor even the recognition that the soft core of support surrounding bin Laden's extremists might have roots in legitimate grievances' (Mockaitis, 2003, p.211). Whenever reports on terrorist attacks include the self-declared motives of the perpetrators, these motives virtually always involve elements related to domestic repression or international politics and foreign policy. Considering this, the absence of proper engagement with grievances is all the more startling. Borrowing from Foucault (1980) and drawing on Jackson's (2012) arguments, I suggest that grievances can be considered as *subjugated knowledge* in terrorism research, sidelined by a hegemonic discourse shaped by the *New terrorism* thesis.

Of course, acknowledging political grievances is politically unpalatable in the post-9/11 context. Many analysts refrain from trying to explain *why* out of

fear of appearing to *empathise with* or *justify* terrorism (Crettiez, 2016; Neumann & Kleinmann, 2013). Also, grievances usually point to uncomfortable truths about past (and sometimes present) wrongdoings of today's dominant powers. In currently dominant forms of political violence, grievances tend to be related to situations in the so-called Middle East, where the foreign policies of dominant European and American powers have wreaked much havoc over the past century, and more recently, under the banner of the GWOT. It is difficult to accommodate the idea that large-scale violence in 'peaceful' Western countries could be anyhow related to the foreign policy of their governments, and that therefore they may hold a share of responsibility (Blakeley, 2017; McCauley, 2017; Burgat, 2016). McCauley (2017) puts it cogently when he writes that 'our blindness to seeing terrorism as interaction saves our image as blameless victims and eases our way to violence as retribution for terrorist violence' (p.88). Publicly voicing grievances is also likely to attract harsh criticism. The following statement by the UK-based think tank *Quilliam Foundation* about the NGO Cage is illustrative in this respect: 'It's very, very important to uphold human rights in counter-extremism work, but for an organisation like Cage to focus entirely on grievances and allow those to be extrapolated in a radicalisation process is surely part of the problem and not part of the solution' (Porter, 2015). Also in the British context, counterterrorism police reportedly produced a pamphlet stating that 'believing Muslims were oppressed was a sign of extremism' (El-Bar, 2020).

Another aspect of terrorism research hampering the acknowledgement of grievances is its association with self-attributed collective victimhood. McCauley (2018) contends, for instance, Olivier Roy's (2015) insistence on dismissing any link between youth in France and the suffering of Muslim populations in other parts of the world. This is an argument that is frequently put forward by researchers focusing on jihadist manifestations of violence that affect European or North American countries. It contradicts, however, the fact that vicarious victimisation and feelings of belonging to an imaginary collective are present in a variety of causes, from activism for animal rights to mobilisations for climate justice.

On the other hand, whenever grievances are engaged with, they tend to be construed as risk factors, or used to criminalise political dissidence by people associated with Muslimness (see Kundnani, 2014). Risk assessment tools used by criminal justice professionals to evaluate the risk of recidivism, and screening tools, designed to *detect* and *measure radicalisation* have been developed for the phenomenon of PIV specifically. Such tools postulate feelings and expressions of grievance as, essentially, 'risky' behaviour. The tool ERG22+ (Lloyd & Dean, 2015, p.46) lists the 'need to redress injustice and express grievance' as the first item. 'Personal grievance and moral outrage' is the first of ten distal characteristics used by the tool TRAP-18 (Meloy & Gill, 2016, p.7), which is widely used by law enforcement agencies. Display of 'strong feelings about political, religious or other injustices or felt discrimination', whether perceived in the individual or collective context, constitutes a 'high' risk for the second item of the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment (VERA) tool (Sadowski et al., 2017, pp.338–339). Meanwhile, Kundnani (2014) argues that

> academic attempts to substantiate a link between radicalization indicators (such as expressions of religious ideology) and terrorist violence fall flat when properly scrutinized. Such studies always seek to trace the ways in which an individual's belief in a radical ideology emerges, on the assumption that radical ideologies cause violence—but this is precisely what needs to be demonstrated rather than assumed. In fact, expressing particular religious beliefs or anger at foreign policy are poor *predictors* of the likelihood of an individual becoming a terrorist.
>
> (p.193, emphasis added)

Hence, as a combination of the abovementioned tendencies and pressures, I argue that grievances have become sidelined in the study of politico-ideological violence, although they remain at the core of engagement processes.

Choosing the prism: Making the case for grievances

In this work, I suggest centring analysis on the socio-structural drivers involved in PIV, based on the narratives, views and perspectives of the main actors themselves. Using an individual-based approach to study aspects located at the macro level may seem counterintuitive. However, as Abu-Lughod (2013) suggests, the story of the individual may reveal the nuances and complexity of the real, allowing for the analysis of geopolitical, sociological, economic, cultural and other factors at the global, regional and local levels. There seems to be an interplay between the collective and the individual, the global and the local, the big story and the small story, in the phenomenon of politico-ideological mobilisation and violence, which may be captured through an in-depth engagement with the feelings, views and experiences of the individual.

The notion of *grievance* encompasses feelings of injustice, frustration and indignation, usually about socio-economic and political conditions of inequality, abuse and neglect. Focusing on grievances is, I suggest, helpful in avoiding deterministic and voyeuristic tendencies, for grievances, by essence, refer to the socio-structural conditions under which forms of PIV may emerge. As shown above, terrorism and radicalisation research is plagued by a predominantly positivist, individualist and essentialising focus on cultural-theological, ethno-racial and psychological factors and therefore in need of more structuralist perspectives (Ahmad & Monaghan, 2019; Silva, 2018). As Lafaye (2017) cogently argues: the current paradigm of 'radicalisation processes' and individual 'tipping points' directs analytical attention mainly towards the individual's evolution. It is rather oblivious to the fact that it is perhaps not so much the individual that changes (supposedly, towards more 'radicality'), but the socio-structural and geopolitical situation that evolves to the point of intolerable injustice.

I further suggest that, from an epistemological standpoint, a grievance-based analysis can create more room for critical and reflective approaches to the study of PIV. To get a sound understanding of the grievances experienced by groups and individuals, researchers will be tempted to privilege the 'voices from below',

those of individuals directly affected or involved, via inductive, qualitative and ethnographic approaches. Such methods expose researchers to the complexity of trajectories into and out of PIV, the realisation of which may promote critical reflexivity and nuanced analysis.

More generally, I would argue, as elaborated in Ajil (2020), that by accounting for structural socio-political factors (using grievances as a prism), it may be possible to restore the political agency of protagonists of PIV and contextualise their engagement and actions, digging deeper into what they are reacting *to* or acting *against.* Using grievances, we may better capture the inherently *reactive* and *defensive* character of PIV, which is how violent action tends to be perceived and justified by those engaging in it, namely as a violent *re*action, or 'counter-violence' to some form of perceived or experienced injustice. The perpetrators of such forms of violence do hold profound convictions regarding the socio-political strains at the basis of their engagement in violence and the 'rightness of their actions' (Taylor & Quayle, 1994, p.103). By engaging with PIV as a 'counter-attack', a 'legitimate' retaliatory attack, revenge, payback and a redressal of grievance, we may be able to demystify contemporary forms of political violence and uncouple scientific analysis from the hystericising nature of public discourse. This is in line with the research of Huët (2015) in the context of Syrian rebel fighters, who found that engaging in fighting is the continuation of a process of dissatisfaction with socio-political conditions.

Furthermore, taking grievances as an analytical entry-point enables us to broaden the picture. While extreme forms of PIV are rare and committed by a small group of people, grievances are more widespread, and can be more intuitively related to. It allows us to ask questions such as: Why do people experience grievances? What are they about? How do they deal with them? How do they act upon them? How do they conceive of their actions considering these grievances? In other words, how are grievances involved in action? And when and how does this action become violent? How do individuals desist, disengage and de-mobilise? The focus on grievances enables us to consider inaction, non-violent action as well as violent action, thereby doing justice to the human heterogeneity and social complexity at the basis of violence. Zooming in on grievances allows for a transversal analysis of trajectories towards violence. It also allows for the comparison of both state and non-state actors across various sociocultural and historical contexts. Haggerty and Bucerius (2018), for instance, found that political grievance is used to mobilise both conventional soldiers and 'terrorists'. McEvoy (2003) strongly argued for increased emphasis on the political to enable a discussion of PIV practised by liberal democratic states. Others (Blakeley, 2017; Kaldor, 2013; Sommier, 2002) similarly argue for the elevation of both non-state and state violence to the same level of analysis, since both employ various forms of large-scale violence, which must be equally scrutinised.[4] Widening analysis beyond the currently dominant parochial focus on *jihadist radicalisation* is likely to counterbalance some of the exceptionalising tendencies of the current study of PIV. At the moment, jihadist radicalisation is treated as an analytical category *per se*, while a large array of *non-jihadist* forms of engagement for causes in the

Arab World is neglected, although precisely such engagement may provide crucial insights into why individuals choose to pursue violent tactics when it comes to causes and conflicts related to the Arab World. What, for instance, distinguishes individuals who travel to the Syrian conflict to join Christian militias, from those joining Kurdish groups, or from those joining Islamist groups? Such crucial questions remain largely unaddressed. By focusing on jihadist violence exclusively, in a sort of negative feedback loop, academia seems to produce biased findings that are fed back into the political sphere, thereby continuously reinforcing and narrowing both academic and public perception of the issue at hand.

Finally, securitisation and criminalisation in the post-9/11-era have led to the erosion of democratic and civil liberties and increasing disregard for fundamental human rights (Codaccioni, 2019; Jarvis & Lister, 2013; Kundnani, 2014). These tendencies disproportionately target the convenient Other. The post-9/11 era has therefore not reduced grievances but *generated* grievances through new (or renewed) forms of harm and injustice, that potentially foment rebellion, resistance and violence. A quote by Horst Herold, former president of the *Bundeskriminalamt* during Germany's era of widespread left-wing violence, is particularly telling in this respect

> In my opinion, it is the political powers that must change the circumstances in which terrorism can arise…there is no point in banging on people's heads, or taking their heads right off, as some demand; we should instead be concerned with exerting influence on historical causes and effects.
>
> (Aust, 2017)[5]

A focus on grievances may enable us to critically assess policies aimed at preventing or countering PIV by taking a holistic look at their impacts and effectiveness.

Notes

1 The New terrorism thesis resonates with the so-called New Wars thesis, proposed by scholars like Kaldor (2001), which suggests that the nature of contemporary conflict has fundamentally changed, and that, among other things, ethnic and religious conflict has become more widespread than conflict based on political ideologies. The thesis has been criticised for exaggerating the peculiarities of contemporary conflict (Newman, 2004).
2 Read alongside El-Ojeili's and Taylor's argument, academia's claim to post-ideology stands in conformity with its implantation in a system dominated by post-hegemonic liberalism.
3 Graduation Speech, United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, June 1, 2002.
4 Conventional and unconventional forms of war tend to resemble each other, so that it is now wrong to distinguish terrorism from state warfare by saying that it [terrorism] ignores the laws and conventions of war, attacks civilians and is always indiscriminate and arbitrary. For these characteristics can, all in all, nowadays be applied to many forms of state violence. (Sommier, 2002, p.475)
5 Original version in Aust (2017, page unknown), author translation.

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