

12 The taste of radicality

Thrill-seeking and adventurism

It was a sort of freedom. Freedom of doing whatever you want – is there anything more beautiful than that?

(Adnan, Lebanon)

Several authors have suggested that engaging in PIV, whether locally or by travelling to a conflict zone, is accompanied by an excitement for adventure and a sense of bravado (Crettiez, 2016; Githens-Mazer, 2014; Sageman, 2011). These ideas correspond to theories of thrill-seeking in criminology and sociology, where offending is seen as performing a break from the mundaneness of everyday life by creating ‘magical environments’ (Katz, 1988, p.54) and where excitement is derived from the ability to defy conventional norms. Ferrell (1999) described this as ‘intense and often ritualised moments of pleasure and excitement [that] define the experience of sub-cultural membership and, by members’ own accounts, seduce them into continued subcultural participation’ (p.404). Katz (1988) similarly argued that people who engage in deviant activities are not necessarily involved for a particular end product, but also for the excitement of escaping from normal, mundane lives, a phenomenon that has also been described as ‘escapism’ (Crettiez, 2016). Others point out that, while mainly ideal-driven, young individuals who develop an interest in groups that engage in PIV are also motivated by glory and thrill (Sageman, 2011; Sieckelinck et al., 2015).

Expressions of joy and enthrallment, thrill-seeking, juvenile exaltation, feelings of satisfaction, bravery and adventurism are common themes throughout the narratives. Engaging with them through the prism of grievances is difficult because they are generally downplayed and tend to be disconnected from the actual grievances that are at the basis of engagement. This makes them hard to identify and explore during the interviews: It almost seems like they are too ego-centric, too individualistic and too narcissistic, in a way, to fit the narrative of an altruistic engagement for collective justice. It is important to briefly present them nevertheless since they seem to have transversal relevance for politico-ideological mobilisation within various spectra. These feelings are usually gratifying and can contribute to maintaining engagement.

A very common theme in the narratives is the interviewees' fascination for combat, the military, rebels and militias, martial arts and heroic fighters. Max, for instance, explains

I've always been fascinated by combat. I have always loved this, martial arts, the historic films on wars.

(Max, Switzerland)

This fascination is very compatible with the rational foundation of combat masculinity. However, the emphasis on personal enjoyment presents a subtle yet important departure from the virtue-based narrative of taking responsibility to defend the collective.

For some interviewees, an admiration for militias was around since their childhood. In many ways, militias were the epitome of brave resistance against powerful invaders and oppressors, and the image of the victorious underdog seems to be particularly attractive to some. Bader, for instance, tried to join Palestinian factions in his teens already

I just knew I didn't want to become an engineer, I wanted to become a military officer [laughs]...I went to a camp. After Hariri was killed, and then July War, etc. I went to the camp...Al-Badawi...the Palestinians who were there would call me that the militias were exposing, doing a military exhibition, so I would go up there...I liked the militias! I went to join them. All the Palestinian factions. But because I am Lebanese, after what happened in the camps, only Palestinians were allowed to join.

(Bader, Lebanon)

Apart from this general fascination for combat, experiences of success produce feelings of pride and self-esteem. Several interviewees describe feelings of excitement during protests or political campaigns, some of which they co-organised, others in which they merely participated. For Ziad, the experience of organising mass protests, and witnessing the power of the masses, was in itself greatly inspiring to him, regardless of the outcome. It opened him up to the possibilities of mobilisation, while cementing his belief that a more sophisticated political organisation was required to enact lasting change

There was a lot of excitement...there were demos every Saturday...and I remember it hitting like 150,000 at one point...so there was a lot, of lot of excitement. you know, people really felt that they might be able to prevent it or something like...I didn't think we'd be able to prevent it, you know... I mean like I was I was raging...but I was like they're not going to listen, right...like it would take a lot more than just demonstrations to make them listen...but I still took it as very inspiring that that many people were coming out...it showed that there was rage against this war... it showed that nobody believed the lies that that were behind it right... so it was a big deal

for me...the possibility that mass action can happen right...and you know it made me want to like work even harder to like well...we need to organize right it's one thing for this kind of like spontaneous outpourings of mass anger to come out...but if they're not channeled...then they can't, they can't break the ruling class and force a change.

(Ziad, Canada)

Ziad's quote reveals his critical posture regarding the fact that many people may be in for the excitement and the adventure of mobilisation in the streets, without sufficient consideration for the necessity of strategic thinking and organisation. In fact, the narratives reveal that protests and clashes with the police are exciting, especially to the more seasoned activists who have gotten beyond the first moral shocks of experiencing state violence first-hand. Interviewees were usually among the ones clashing with security forces and their accounts clearly demonstrate their enjoyment of the action and the violence

We organised the protests, things were busting and moving, it was cool! We were young and we were able to move things, we were happy. When it was a big mess and everything, I liked that.

(Richard, Switzerland)

Describing a situation where he and a group of friends faced an intervention by the police, Daniel describes the excitement he felt during the clashes

The cops entered through the windows and we started fighting with them. It was funny. They tried to come through the windows, so they came one by one and we were ten on the other side. A big fight, it was quite funny! And then they chased us through the streets during the whole night!

(Daniel, Switzerland)

Daniel also described another situation where he joined a protest abroad in joyful anticipation of the clashes that were going to happen

We were a group of five. We organised a trip to join this protest. Like 'going to combat'. To go fight, in fact. And it was really cool!

(Daniel, Switzerland)

Richard's description of his journey into the conflict zone in Syria reveals a similar form of excitement

It was tough. We were in commando mode, on the river, knowing that the [soldiers] were ready to shoot at us anytime. Walking through the mud, for eight hours [...] then we passed the border in commando mode, it was quite funny.

(Richard, Switzerland)

While it may seem counterintuitive, such descriptions of tough conditions are all narrated with joy and excitement. In fact, attraction for the roughness of combat or similar situations appears to be mixed with bravado and adventurism, and often a sense of pride. I found this somewhat juvenile exaltation about combat to resonate strikingly with a French ethnographer's soberingly honest self-appraisal of conducting field research on Syrian fighters engaged in the civil war

This terrain provides this inebriation of an uncertain adventure, of joining these men who give their lives for a cause they consider just. In a way, there is this excitement of peril and the unusual. War produces a whole series of experiences, many of which do not fail to excite. The most decisive one is, without a doubt, that of being with these men whose actions will determine the future. To that, add the morbid curiosity of experiencing bombings, its manifestations and effects. Finally, there is probably also this pride of being courageous and accepting to experience these critical situations at the risk of one's own life.

(Huët, 2015, p.46)

Elements of thrill-seeking were present in the narratives, often in ways reminiscent of combat masculinity. The thrill is related to the very action during combat operations, carrying weapons or escaping from enemy fire. This excitement was also sometimes put in relation to a feeling of freedom and autonomy, which would probably not have been around in peacetime

During the fighting, nobody was commanding me. Whatever was forbidden, it was allowed for me. It was a sort of freedom. Freedom of doing whatever you want – is there anything more beautiful than that?

(Adnan, Lebanon)

At other times, it was combined with expressions of sacrifice, even of relationships with family members. This may be seen as what I suggested earlier as being a dedication to the idea of *jusqu'au-boutisme*

It was a lot of enthusiasm, excitement. We could do whatever we wanted. We had lot of energy we wanted to get out. I mean, I was young...yes. In the end, my father didn't have any control over me anymore. He told me either this house or Osama Mansour [the gang leader]. I told him Osama Mansour. I had so much energy, I wanted to get rid of it.

(Zakaria, Lebanon)

In the following quote, the excitement joins an expression of appreciation for the clarity provided by being involved in the fighting

When I was over there, I didn't feel like coming back. Because it's epic! Because you don't have the same problems. I never asked myself questions

about money, accommodation or even the purpose of my life. Really. Like the purpose of my existence. It was clear. There was this clarity: you go sleep there, eat there, and you are here for this.

(Daniel, Switzerland)

Their self-perception as virtuous, brave and fearless fighters was also expressed by several interviewees, including their ability to manipulate weapons and their sophistication in battle and tactics, as well as their lethality in combat. This is expressed by both Adnan and Amir

And then things developed. I could throw 10–15 grenades without even looking. I learned this over months, from one fight to the next. Each time, I learned something new. It started with the jift (a rifle), then we got grenades, rifles, PKC, etc.

(Adnan, Lebanon)

But I was one of the main fighters, and I was one of the most dangerous, I would be very hurtful. I would hurt them a lot. Because they would hurt us also. Our families, the people from our neighbourhood. They had no mercy with us, so we had no mercy with them.

(Amir, Lebanon)

Justin also expresses a certain form of bravado, when he explains, with a smile, that he has experience handling weapons

I've been shooting for a long time. with pistols. I know how to use them. That's something that's widespread here. You know here in the country, there are a lot of weapons. And of course, the fear is greater at the moment. I won't deny that.

(Justin, Lebanon)

In a similarly gratifying manner, some interviewees express pride regarding the sense of fear that their warrior-like appearances instil in people

When we the guys, the Islamists, who have some extreme thinking, came here for the first time, the people were shocked, they were afraid. We didn't do anything, but they were afraid. Even a guy from the Jabal said they were afraid.

(Bader, Lebanon)

Evocative of the same idea, Salim expresses his regret that nowadays, people do not fear the Palestinian resistance fighters anymore

In 1987, when you were in Tel Aviv, as a Palestinian...the moment you had your hands in your pockets, the entire street would be empty within

seconds...Nowadays, nobody cares. Nobody fears Palestinians anymore. That's the result of the Oslo accords.

(Salim, Canada)

Some interviewees also described a sense of bravado expressed by those who went to Syria to join the fighting. When they would mention it, their narration would be accompanied by a disapproving undertone, as if one was not supposed to go fight in Syria to be able to boast, but because of a sincere conviction of the need to fight

In the end, I thought it was important to fight here first. Why should I leave my neighbourhood? And I was asking the guys here all the time: Why are we going to Syria? I told them the goal shouldn't be financial, or so you can boast with having been to Syria.

(Walid, Lebanon)

Overall, there is undeniably a particular taste for radicality, especially around physical mobilisation and engagement in combat. This *taste of radicality* – the thrill-seeking, the adventurism, the excitement – is a transversal theme across the narratives and must therefore be considered *per se*. However, it constantly competes with the rational arguments put forward for engagement, of which most revolve around responding to grievances. A grievance-based approach will struggle to shed light on the variety and complexity of the feelings involved in the taste of radicality and might benefit from other concepts associated with thrill-seeking and adventurism. However, it is important to avoid a voyeuristic lens that focuses exclusively on the taste of radicality. All the narratives clearly demonstrate a complex relationship between excitement and a sense of responsibility and genuine grievances. Expressions of thrill-seeking and adventurism are only a minor part of an extensive interview during which interviewees present mainly arguments based on political and ideological convictions for engagement. However, it is natural that there are also individuals who are driven mainly by these feelings and less by ideological convictions. There is an important risk of romanticising violence and hiding activism and mobilisation, especially physical, under the guise of political narratives. This risk is particularly pronounced when it comes to mobilisation in the streets or travelling to combat zones. Interestingly, with respect to the fact of travelling to a conflict zone in the Arab World, in the narratives of several interviewees from Canada and Switzerland, an orientalist worldview can be identified, where the Arab World and the Middle East are thought of as exciting and exotic. Whether this is due to perceptions of the role of the community in the Arab World, the role of religion or the social and political upheavals, the narratives sometimes display a naïve romanticisation of the Orient. Hence, although the study of thrill-seeking is difficult and somewhat contradictory to a grievance-based approach, a holistic understanding of PIM and PIV will need to engage with the variety of motives that are driving and maintaining engagement.

References

- Crettez, X. (2016). Penser la radicalisation. *Revue Française de Science Politique*, 66(5), 709–727.
- Ferrell, J. (1999). Cultural criminology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25, 395–418.
- Githens-Mazer, J. (2014, 8 July). The four types of the returning jihadi. *RUSI Analysis*. Retrieved from <https://rusi.org/commentary/four-types-returning-jihadi?page=120>.
- Huët, R. (2015). When the miserable become enraged: An ethnographic study of the Syrian mujahedeen (2012-2014). *Cultures and Conflicts*, 97(1), 31–75.
- Katz, J. (1988). *Seductions of crime: Moral and sensual attractions in doing evil*. New York: Basic Books.
- Sageman, M. (2011). *Leaderless jihad: Terror networks in the twenty-first century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Sieckelinck, S., Kaulingfreks, F., & De Winter, M. (2015). Neither villains nor victims: Towards an educational perspective on radicalisation. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 63(3), 329–343.