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Introduction to the Special Issue: The complexity of terrorism – Victims, perpetrators and radicalisation

Abstract

This special issue examines the complex relationship between radicalisation, victimhood and political violence thus addressing an important gap in the literature. The interrelatedness of victims and perpetrators has been long recognised in the field of criminology and victimology in the case of non-political violence, but it is has been often ignored in the case of terrorism and political violence. The key aim of this volume therefore is to assist in enhancing our understanding of this interrelatedness with a particular focus on the relevance of narratives, roles and identities of victimhood for both the victims and perpetrators of terrorism and political violence. A second, more policy-relevant dimension is to examine the role of victims and perpetrators in averting the perpetuation of a victim perpetrator cycle and thus contributing to the prevention of the continuation of terrorism and political violence.

This special issue has its roots in an international multisite study that examined the complex relationship between radicalisation, narratives of victimhood and political violence.[1] A key focus of the project was to understand how all parties to the violence could and do assist in efforts at de-radicalisation and countering violent extremism (CVE).

Given these aims, we began with a focus on victimhood - broadly conceived - by attending to the relevance of narratives of victimhood constructed and utilised by both victims and perpetrators of terrorism; this includes individuals who could reasonably be included simultaneously in both categories. A second key dimension is a focus on the role of victims and perpetrators in their efforts to avert the perpetuation of a cycle of violence whereby historic, personal and community narratives of victimhood sustained a justification and/or motivation for participation in political violence trans-generationally. More specifically, this involves an analysis of the work of former perpetrators (or *formers)* and victims as they attempted to prevent and curtail political violence through their participation in deradicalisation programmes, counter narrative initiatives and restorative justice and youth education schemes across Europe.

This special issue presents some of the key findings from the study. It is composed of a series of articles from researchers associated with the project that examines issues of relevance to a victim-perpetrator cycle and its relationship to radicalisation more generally. These perspectives have their origins in a variety of disciplines: criminology, psychology, victimology and the political sciences and as such reflect the disciplinary origins of the researchers and their

academic homes. Each paper represents the work of the scholar/s who sought to address the research questions as they interpreted it and according to its relevance for their chosen context. We hope that the insights delivered by this international and multidisciplinary effort will help to enhance our understanding of both the complexity of and interrelatedness of the parties to political violence, an issue we believe is worthy of significant and rigorous study.

Victimhood and Terrorism

Terrorism is predominantly understood by reference to the nature of the perpetrator, their ideology, their motivations and their justifications. Driven by an inherent desire to *understand* why individuals are driven to such extreme and indiscriminate violence we have, perhaps inadvertently, simplified terrorism to the point at which other parties impacted by the violence have been side-lined in our research efforts. Terrorism is fundamentally a communicative act whereby the recipients of the violence, whomever they may be or whoever they may represent by virtue of their individual or social identity, serve as a conduit for the communiqué of the terrorist actors.[2] However, the victims of terrorism, the messengers for the violent act, are rarely the focus of our investigative efforts. Victims of terrorism are a party to terrorist violence, as are their families, their communities and, at times, their governments; and therefore understanding the experience of victimhood in this context is vital if we are to comprehend the entirety of the complexity of terrorism.

The relationship between victimhood and the emergence, maintenance and decline of terrorist campaigns is fundamentally under-researched. Problematically, when the question of victimisation is examined in the terrorism literature, it features as an isolated, conceptually bereft notion often portrayed as irrelevant to the act itself and the aims of the perpetrators. A belief that the victims are merely in the wrong place at the wrong time is a naïve and unfortunate construction that fails to take account of the fact of repeat victimisation, the relevance of social identities and the political and social contexts to terrorist campaigns; this is particularly the case where terrorism occurs as part of an on-going political conflict. There is some recognition that perceptions of victimisation, linked to notions of oppression, grievance and injustice serve as so called root causes that act as pre-conditions for an individual's involvement in violence, however, moral objections to and methodological difficulties in achieving such correlations have often prevented these issues being sufficiently addressed.[3] How these root causes are mediated by feelings of victimisation (personal or vicarious) in the process of motivating mobilisation and political contestation -either violent or non-violent- is a complex subject that requires rigorous investigation.

As with all definitions in social research, victimhood is not an uncontested notion. Apart from the complexity inherent in defining and conceptualising the phenomenon, the experience itself is not a static manifestation: the trajectory of victimhood will differ substantially between individuals and even during the different stages of a person's life.[4] Furthermore being a Victim of terrorism is both a very private traumatic event, but also a very public and political experience.[5] In the aftermath of a terrorist attack, society often equates the *strength* or *resilience* of a nation to deal with terrorism with the recovery of its victims. The weight of expectation lies

heavily upon the individual victims and the responsibility for allowing society to *move forward* often rests on those individuals who have experienced tremendous personal loss. The politicisation of the victims and their experience can and has led to their voices being silenced due both to the political implications of acknowledging the lifelong impact of terrorism but also the vulnerability of society to political violence more generally.[6]

As mentioned, victimhood as an academic notion is highly contested, in addition victimhood as a political designation is similarly disputed. Ethical and moral issues plague the political framing of victimhood. Being recognised as a victim in the case of terrorism and political violence depends not only on the identity of the perpetrator (particularly if there is state involvement in a terrorist attack) but also on one's own personal history, at times, one's family history but also the political and social context to the violent act.[7] Much relies on for example if the victimising experience occurs in the context of a divided society and/or as part of an ongoing conflict as opposed to a one-off catastrophic attack.[8] The setting dictates the trajectory of victimhood in a number of ways: it includes or excludes an individual and their family from some aspects of victim support, it prevents or promotes the perpetuation of narratives of violence and it can sustain violence through the development of a *victim-perpetrator cycle*, whereby individual involvement in violence is encouraged by their families' or their own experience of victimisation. The context that surrounds such experience is fundamental to understanding how individuals react to victimisation - whether it be to engage with victim support activities, involve themselves in political activism or peace movements, contribute to counter radicalisation efforts or choose to participate in the violence that they perceive as having led to their victimisation in the first place.

Responses to violent victimisation: From the *victim-perpetrator cycle* to *altruism born of suffering*

As explained above, victimisation as a result of political violence, is in the first instance an extreme personal traumatic experience and, as with all traumatising experiences, it can result in a range of consequences for the individual and their family. However given the inherently political and public nature of terrorist victimisation often there are a range of reactions to the violence that are witnessed amongst the survivors and the victims families; the complete rejection of political activism, to disengagement from meaningful social interaction, to intense political lobbying, from the formation of support groups, to advocacy work and media interaction.[9] However different, sometimes polar, responses to victimisation can be experienced by the very same individual across his or her lifespan.[10]

In this special issue we are particularly interested in the responses emerging from victimisation that are distinctly social and political: either aggressive (participation in retaliatory violent action) or restorative (contribution to initiatives aiming at preventing violence). The former can be encompassed by the central concept of 'victim-perpetrator complex', the later by the idea of 'altruism born of suffering'. Importantly these are not mutually exclusive categories and do not represent the entirety of possibilities chosen by the individuals in question, but are relevant given the focus of this particular research. The victim-perpetrator complex, in the most literal sense, refers to a relationship between individuals who have been personally victimised and then

choose to engage in violence leading to the victimisation of others. Alternatively it can be used to refer to the likelihood of a victim and a perpetrator being one in the same individual. Finally it also encompasses the interactive element of any engagement between the victim and the perpetrator of political violence both prior to and after the violence experienced.

This notion itself is not new, and in fact, it has a significant history in criminological and victimological literature. We find in the former the established concept of the 'penal couple' - the notion that an offender and a victim are the two constituent parts of a criminal act- and the understanding that, even if it is commonly assumed that victims and offenders are distinct categories, there is significant overlap in these populations.[11] It is well known that offending and victimisation are partly affected by common factors (educational and parental background, for instance) and there are important socio-demographic similarities between victims and offenders (gender, age, residence, etc.).[12] In fact, criminological research has shown that 'offenders are more likely than non-offenders to be victims, and victims are more likely than non-victims to be offenders'.[13] There have been a range of theories used to explain this link such as routine activity/lifestyles theories (victims and offenders share the same space and routines) [14] or low-self control explanations (offenders' acts are not governed by social and group restraints as they put themselves in situations where they are both likely to commit a crime as well as becoming a victim).[15] However, conceptualisation of this relationship in the case of terrorism and political violence is effectively absent.

Studies from victimology have challenged simplistic interpretations of victims and perpetrators, problematising the commonly held conceptions of the innocent victim and the culpable perpetrator.[16] Victimisation as a precursor to further violence is well-understood in this research. The subculture-of-violence explanation outlines how retaliation for past victimisation often supports the choice to engage in further violence;[17] a the sense of entitlement sustained by personal direct, indirect or vicarious victimisation serving to provide a justification for one's own violent acts.[18] Indeed it has been recently posited that the most common reason for the perpetration of violence lies in a moral justification of aggression.[19] This links with the criminological concept of crime as self-help or 'taking the law into one's hand': 'the [victimised individual's] expression of a grievance by unilateral aggression such as personal violence or property destruction'.[20] Retaliation is intended as a punishment or an expression of disapproval, for compensation or restitution; it can be meted in the heat of the moment or methodically long after the quarrel, as an immediate response to an assault or following a long series of minor transgressions. Yet again, retaliation may not always be directed at the original perpetrator, it can be random instead, targeting any arbitrary or symbolic victim and/or done in anger in response to a perceived slight.[21] These practices can be reinforced by group norms and social identity dynamics[22] and can conceivable act to sustain violence for many months or years, or in the case of a conflict situation, across the generations.

So far, in addressing these issues, the focus has been predominantly upon the perpetrators and victims of 'non-political' crime, for example physical and sexual assault, hate and non-hate crime, gang violence and amongst those who report their decision or desire to seek retribution toward their aggressor. In the comparatively few studies that have considered this question in

situations of protracted armed conflict, often it is found that reality clashes with the black and white identities of innocent victim and culpable perpetrator as individuals can be both victimised and be responsible for victimising others over a period of time.[23] A victim–perpetrator identity can inherently co-exist within certain categories (i.e. child soldiers and female members of armed groups). It can mutate by the person being first a victim of violence and then joining a violent organisation leading to the individual suffering unlawful force, ill-treatment or torture as a result of belonging to an armed group.[24] This process has attracted attention from transitional justice scholars given that such 'complex victims' can represent a thorny issue for transitional societies dealing with victims reparations, peace processes and reconciliation.[25]

Nonetheless, due in large part to the moral outrage that accompanies acts of terrorism and its construction as an existential threat to identity, security and way of life; the possibility that victims of and perpetrators of terrorism might be one and the same person has generally been avoided in terrorism studies literature. In effect, it appears common, as is reflected in (AUTHOR NAME)'s article in this issue, that the act of participating in terrorism prohibits any claims to victimhood that an individual may have made in the past. This of course highlights the subjectivity surrounding the notion of victimhood, an issue that is commonplace in much of the criminological and victimological literature more generally. In addition, in the case of terrorism and political violence an added concern relates to the danger that recognising perpetrators as victims can serve to legitimise the violence carried out against others in the past, depriving them of their agency and absolving them of their responsibility in perpetuating the suffering.[26] Moreover, as evidenced in the (AUTHOR NAME) paper in this issue, narratives that justify past

violence can be used to ferment what ultimately becomes the inter-generational transmission of violence.

However, it is clearly not the case that the experience of victimisation is a precursor to violence for all victims, and social researchers have substantiated this finding across many contexts.[27] In fact research supports the proposition the experience of victimisation encourages individuals and groups to seek an end to violence through various means. In a review of the existing criminological literature, Ousey et al. found evidence that the experience of victimisation can act to increase the incidence of offending in some instances but also that the likelihood of offending can be reduced by one's own previous victimisation.[28] This is illustrated in research that addresses the notion of a 'victimization-termination' link where an instance of traumatic victimisation can act as a branching point, motivating the individual to reconsider first and renounce later their involvement in crime and violent activities: 'victimisations sometimes mark turning points toward the end of criminal careers'.[29]

Similarly relevant for this special issue, is the fact that violent victimisation can lead to altruism and non-violence, a phenomenon referred to as 'altruism born of suffering' in which highly negative events can, in fact, enhance motivations to engage in pro-social behaviour - including actions aimed at out-group members.[30] Individuals who have suffered difficult experiences (such as forms of collective violence) may become inspired to help other disadvantaged members of society with a view to preventing further suffering. In many instances individuals who have experienced persecution, torture and even mass genocide have subsequently devoted themselves to care for others in need.[31] In this case the consequence of experiencing violence is enhanced

empathy for other victims and potential victims and ultimately the outcome is a range of prosocial behaviours. It is the victimising event, and the accompanying personal experiences that occur in the aftermath, that promote this cognitive opening for psychological change that acts to reinforce a preference for a pro-social response.[32] Indeed, the desire to react altruistically rather than violently toward those who contributed to their victimisation can, in fact, serve an important psychological function for the victims: it acts as an effective coping mechanism emerging from the process of meaning making in light of a life altering experience and can serve to enhance self-respect, promote social integration, inoculate against the risk of mental illness and act as a coherent frame through which to situate their negative experience.[33] Importantly, as Vollhardt argues, 'altruism born of suffering can emerge on a continuum of increasing inclusiveness and scope - ranging from short-term activism with ones in-group to long-term prosocial behaviour benefitting outgroup members'.[34] So, apart from the individual psychological benefits to such activity, there are long-term and societal manifestations of this form of altruism. That is to say, victims' altruism can serve to benefit not only of members of one's in-group who share a 'common fate' but also act to increase solidarity between sections of society more generally.[35]

In sum, in responding to the violence afflicted upon them, past research has shown that individuals may use their own victimisation to justify their own personal motivation for violent retaliation but others will be driven to behave altruistically, supporting others and working towards the prevention of future violence and more positive social change. The latter finding from victimology is especially useful in our efforts to understand victims' participation in counter- and deradicalisation programmes and this is elaborated upon throughout this special

issue particularly in (AUTHOR NAME)'s analysis of victims organisations' preventative initiatives in Basque Country.

Victims, radicalisation and political violence

While significant efforts have been made to identify *the causes*[36] of radicalisation and any pathways to violent political action that might exist [37], what has received far less attention is the role of victimisation as a motivator or justification for radicalised action in response to the perceived (or actual) threat from an out-group. Such claims of victimhood are often dismissed but it is crucial that we develop a nuanced understanding of the role of victimisation both as a motivator and a justification for involvement in political violence.

It is useful to approach this issue through the related notions of grievance and injustice and their relationship to victimisation more generally. Individual or collective victimisation -either real or imagined, conceived personally or collectively- is often closely associated with grievance and feelings of injustice or oppression that are intertwined with social discontent and ultimately political mobilisation. Indeed, Borum[38] has concluded when looking at radicalisation into violent extremism that 'based on a review of the existing literature, three motivational themes - injustice, identity, and belonging - appear to be prominent and consistent.' To this triad, we argue, we need to add the notion of victimisation. In recognition of these key elements, Sageman developed a trajectory that can be viewed as a four stage process:

> first, a sense of moral outrage about a perceived injustice in the world; second, 'an enabling interpretation', such as that there is a war on Islam, which places this

> outrage in the wider context of a moral conflict; third, personal experiences, such as of discrimination, which become 'another manifestation of the war on Islam'; and, fourth, mobilising networks.[39]

Sageman's conclusions are pertinent for two reasons. First he reinforces the idea that moral outrage about real or perceived injustices in the world is an important motivator for identity consolidation and wider framing in radicalisation. The second is the likelihood that a sense of injustice -when strong enough- can serve as a mobilising factor for action. In other words, whatever grievance has been identified, when sufficiently persistent, can become internalised to the degree that personal action is required. This does not necessarily mean action in the form of violence, but personal action at any level. When the sense of injustice becomes strong enough to be internalised and elicit a sense of moral outrage, a person develops a sense of victimhood; whether vicarious or (in)direct. This is important in that it identifies the relationship between notions of injustice and victimisation and positions injustice not merely as an abstract idea but a key issue that impacts directly on an individuals moral judgement, social identity and ultimately ones willingness to act.

Much like a sense of victimisation, Schmid[40] posits that grievances can be adopted vicariously and serve to act as a mobilising device by allowing individuals and groups to adopt a cause somewhat removed from their lived experience, albeit relevant due to a shared history and social identity. Many examples of vicarious grievances exist from the experiences of the Irish Diaspora in the USA in response to the Troubles in Northern Ireland[41] to the Al Qaeda narratives regarding Western intervention in Muslim lands and the importance of the notion of the Ummah in encouraging action based on a shared religious and social identity.[42] What

matters here is that an individual does not need to be personally victimised if s/he becomes convinced that that the community s/he identifies with or feels s/he belongs to is impacted. It is, so to speak, the other side of the feelings of altruism we referred to in the previous section since the person identifies with the fate of the (real or constructed) community and commits the atrocities on its behalf. In fact ironically, participating in political violence on *behalf* of an identity group is often constructed as altruistic by those who do the violence. This issue and the emotional impact of feelings of grievance and victimisation is explored in (AUTHOR NAME)' article in this issue, which illustrates how in the UK deradicalisation programme the goal is not necessarily to change the beliefs of the participants ('a pre-radical state of mind') but to ensure that grievances are channelled in a constructive, non-violent manner.

In addition to the issues of vicarious grievance and victimisation as motivating factors, an important and related aspect that needs to be mentioned here is that of oppression. Although routinely mentioned in social movement theory,[43] oppression is often missing from the radicalisation discourse. The importance of including oppression in any discussion on radicalisation is that, as radicalisation occurs and if mobilisation follows, there is often a reaction by government to suppress dissent.[44] When government uses state power to suppress dissent there is commonly a sense of oppression by those engaged in contentious political protest.[45] Such a reaction forms the fundamental elements of Crelinsten's[46] concept of how opposing dyads can become locked in an escalating cycle of action/reaction. Thus, the cycle that starts with radicalisation leading to mobilisation resulting in suppression and in this cycle victimisation becomes referential.

Thus critically important in understanding the notions of radicalism, radicalisation and violent extremism is the interactivity of victimhood, injustice, mobilisation, grievances, and oppression.[47] Framed within or against a divisive narrative linked to group identities, values and culture it creates the manichean view that the world truly is divided into two camps; us and them, good and bad, *tawhid* (oneness of God) and *shirk* (polytheism), etcetera. Here ideology (be it nationalism, Islamic extremism or a right wing dogma) can lead to the perception that violence is a necessity and can also serve as a justification for the act itself. The personal experiences or interpretations of grievance, victimisation etc. and the opportunity to frame this within a coherent narrative creates an oppositional stance against an identifiable enemy. Therefore it must be recognised that narratives are a crucial element in this process.

In the case of both terrorism and other political violence narratives of victimisation are known to legitimise violence against other individuals and/or groups.[48] Narratives are powerful because they link instances of personal grievances and frustration (young Muslim feelings of discrimination within European societies) with vicarious victimisation (conflict and foreign invasions in the Muslim world) and with collective responses and prescriptions for action (jihadism against European societies and governments). Thus, if grievances do need 'a trigger event or 'cognitive opening' linking grievances to an enemy who is held responsible for them'[49] then narratives play an essential part in the process.

Through narratives of violence against one's group, cycles of violence are generated. Narratives alluding to a community's victimisation in the past can serve to promote conflict in the present time due to the feelings of anger and humiliation that they provoke[50] but especially if these

narratives become instrumentalised by political leaders.[51] This is characteristic of intractable conflicts where a legacy of victimisation and transmission of inter-generational narratives constructed around it can result in an 'ethos of conflict'.[52] Such ethos, collective memories and collective emotional orientation interact in the configuration of a particular worldview that provides meaning to social life under conditions of long-term protracted conflict. Undoubtedly the interaction between narratives and victimisation, political violence and counter-radicalisation is complex and constitutes a key theme in this special issue as reflected in the articles by (AUTHOR NAME).

In sum, as we know there are many and diverse pathways to terrorism, however the path is not fixed; ideology and personal grievances may be significant in many cases, as may social networks, inter-group dynamics, status-seeking or even feelings of thrill and excitement. There are a wide range of push and pull factors that combine leading to routes into violence.[53] Yet, in order to have a fuller understanding of the process, we need to realise that there is often a link between victimising experiences and radicalisation: perceived, vicarious, historic, direct and indirect.

The role of victims and former perpetrators in de-radicalisation

The notion of a victim-perpetrator cycle can also serve as a useful mechanism to examine questions of desistance, disengagement and deradicalisation. When rooted in the individual, social and political realities of the context to the offending, prevention and desistance can become distinct possibilities.[54] If we consider the role of direct victims and their families in these

processes, their contribution lies in rehabilitative attempts to achieve desistance from offending through creating understanding of the consequences of the violence for those impacted. As (AUTHOR NAME) describe in this volume, this connects to research that consistently demonstrates the importance of lack of empathy as contributing factor in crime.[55] The understanding that victim awareness, empathy and contact have a role in desistance from offending is well embedded in rehabilitation programmes in many countries[56] although little is known about how this might look in the case of terrorism and political violence.

Within restorative justice programmes[57] much of the added benefit for offenders is sought by encouraging understanding of the damage caused to the victim.[58] The ultimate avenue for victim awareness is conceptualised in this context as victim-contact. An increasing body of research addresses victim awareness, victim empathy and victim contact in desistance from crime.[59] Based on the limited and mostly anecdotal experience of victim-offender encounters in cases of terrorism and political violence, it appears likely that participating terrorist offenders share similar experiences to non-terrorists but also that contact occurs only after desistance has taken place.[60] It begs the question whether rehabilitation programmes for terrorists should include similar victim awareness and empathy components to their non-terrorist counterparts. Here, the political nature of the act in question makes the implementation of policy more complex: restorative justice in the aftermath of terrorism is a tricky process, precisely because of the vicarious, political dimension of terrorism;[61] in addition to issues surrounding amnesties, peace processes and the existence of narratives that support and sustain the justification for the original violence.

As a result any discussion on victims and radicalisation cannot be complete without reference to the role of narratives. Governments and international bodies such as the European Commission believe that victims have an important role to play in counter-narrative efforts designed to prevent violent extremism. Victims testimonies are seen to act as moral counter-narratives because they expose the pain and suffering that emerges from the use of violence for a political cause; they can also serve as alternative narratives given that they promote through their stories tolerance, non-violence, the sanctity of human life and other fundamental values.[62] Because of their own life experience, victims possess the credibility and trust-worthiness that is necessary in the messenger. Beyond the symbolic and moral value of their moral message, it is thought that the emotional appeal that victims' testimonies carry (a crucial element in the success of any narrative, as elaborated in (AUTHOR NAME)'s piece) can serve to establish a connection with a wide audience.

However, the presence of competitive victimhood can be an important, perhaps inherent, obstacle to the success of victims' involvement.[63] It is frequently observed in situations of violent conflict (such as ethnic and civil wars or terrorism in divided societies) whereby members of an in-group emphasise the pain suffered by their community while understating or ignoring the out-group's trauma. [64] A lack of empathy for the suffering experienced by opponents suggests an additional hurdle to increasing empathy in extremists and radicals, as we will see in the articles in this issue focusing on Northern Ireland and Basque Country.

Another unexplored subject is the involvement of former combatants in peace work and de-radicalisation efforts. One way in which formers can affect the process is through defector

narratives, an issue that has featured in the discussion around returnees from Syria in recent times.[65] Disillusioned former members of ISIS have for instance spoken about why they have turned against the group and their stories have highlighted the contradictions between the expectations of foreign fighters and the realities on the ground.[66] Former militants' testimonies may help to de-glamourise the carefully-managed image of the group, exposing the reality behind militants' propaganda. In addition, formers–as-victims are credible messengers through their lived experience, this time because of their role as insiders. They may also have particular traction with a difficult to access audience – potential or active militants. However the role of former combatants as deterrents or advocates for desistance is a controversial one. When addressing jihadist radicalisation for instance, this is challenged by the 'conveyor-belt' perspective: even if former perpetrators argue that the use of violence is wrong, merely by still advocating for a radical ideology they can still set others into the path of violence. [67]

As described in the paper by (AUTHOR NAME) in this issue, many Republican and Loyalist ex-prisoners work now in their communities promoting peace in Northern Ireland. They participate in restorative justice initiatives and cooperate with community policing upon their release. Yet their transition from paramilitaries into peacemakers has not been widely accepted in Northern Ireland and at the very least is viewed with scepticism. Formers' peace work in theie communities raises concerns that their new role allow them to act as gatekeepers, which reinforces their influence but may diminish other community leaders' and political representatives' input.[68] The participation of former perpetrators in violence prevention or even restorative justice schemes can also be problematic for victims and their families,[69]due in part to the potential of formers to control the historic narrative surrounding their role in and motivations

for participation in violence.[70] These are only some of the challenges that the involvement of former perpetrators in counter-radicalisation programmes entails.

When attempting to apply a victim/perpetrator perspective in deradicalisation efforts, there are other issues that also must be attended to. It is important for instance to disentangle deradicalisation from disengagement or desistance.[71] In the case of terrorism and political violence there are often expectations that change is synonymous with the degree to which the terrorist actor shows signs of being *reborn anew*, disparaging his former self and his former actions, and expressing contrition, remorse and guilt. While this can indeed be a sign of the desired change in the erstwhile perpetrator[72], it is not the only, and probably not the most likely, course that will lead the former perpetrator to desist from violence in the future.

Maruna's work[73] shows that many offenders who desist from the perpetration of violence instead view themselves as more rather than less moral: overcoming the conditions that led them to violence in the first place is felt to be evidence of this fact, a point that will be later examined in this special issue in the cases of de-radicalisation programmes in Europe and ex-prisoner initiatives in Northern Ireland. Instead of disparaging their former selves, they maintain a strong sense of continuity with their past selves, attributing their actions to causes outside of their control. As applied to the terrorist population this implies that they can maintain that their ideology, religious attitude and/ or political position is still accurate, but find other more effective (i.e. non-violent) ways of attempting to achieve these goals.[74]

The point here is that in counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation policy different issues have become conflated. For instance, where the attempt to validate the victims' perspective on the events is fused with counter-radicalisation initiatives, remorse, guilt and shame are shoehorned as prerequisites for de-radicalisation. In many situations, however, the effectiveness of this approach is questionable; humiliating the violent actor may serve a cathartic purpose for the victim but is not necessarily conducive to encouraging engagement in de-radicalisation or desistance initiatives. Whether the perpetrators acknowledge their wrongdoing is often unrelated to their allegiance to peaceful solutions. It might well be that an emphasis on the victim's experience and the perpetrators wrongdoing will hamstring these attempts, an issue that is addressed in (AUTHOR NAME)'s piece. Decoupling the process from this moral limitation may open up the opportunity to consider its use at a later stage; however the message that is most likely to foster successful de-radicalisation/desistance initiatives may well be at odds with the one necessary to acknowledge the voice of the victims.

In sum, our examination of the extant body of knowledge has uncovered a series of important themes that relate to the concept of victim-perpetrator complex and its importance for the study of terrorism and political violence. This is a notion that we believe can serve to illuminate essential dimensions of the processes and practices of political violence including its impact on individuals and groups, how such impact is interpreted by victims and their varied personal and social responses to these traumatic experiences. It is also central to perpetrators' victimhood claims and how these claims facilitate participation in terrorism. It draws attention to the centrality of the public narratives of victimhood for the intergenerational transmission of violence and an 'ethos of conflict' that is integral to intractable conflicts. It highlights the importance of the role that both victims and perpetrators can play for the prevention of violence and radicalisation. And finally, it brings to light the complex interaction between (claims of) grievance, group oppression and individual and vicarious victimhood in political violence.

Outline special issue

All abovementioned issues have been addressed by the contributors to the special issue. The members of the research team behind this volume have carried out fieldwork using ethnographic data collection methods in four sites across Europe. Methods included semi-structured and unstructured interviews, focus groups and participant observation. Each site was chosen as it represented not only a specific historical incidence of political violence, but also because they represented ideologically diverse campaigns. The research locations were Northern Ireland (NI), England (London/Birmingham), Northern Europe (Netherlands, Germany, Sweden and Denmark) and Spain (Basque Country).

programmes.

As a product of this multisite project this special issue has been divided into five contributions linked to the individual contributions of the project partners. This introduction seeks to situate the research in its broader context as well as outline some of the key academic arguments that underpin the study. The first article is the work of both (AUTHOR NAME) and was based on research conducted in Northern Ireland. This section focuses on the relevance of and construction of victimhood as a social identity. It also examines how victimhood is used as a

resource to justify involvement in political violence as well as a tool in seeking to prevent the proliferation of further violence. One of the aims of the paper is to problematise the simplistic understanding of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' categories in the Northern Irish context by offering an analysis more attuned to the complexities of the violence and its aftermath. As evidence of this complexity, the analysis shows how former perpetrators working on peace initiatives use the notion of victimisation to facilitate their transition into a new role – as a mechanism to justify their initial involvement but also as a motivator for their violence prevention efforts (peace work as a way to pre-empt others' from going through similar experiences). In this study both notions of victims-perpetrator and altruism born of suffering come closely together.

The second piece presents research conducted in England by (AUTHOR NAME). It examines the application in practice of deradicalisation schemes organised by the UK government that involve the participation of mentors. The findings are based on field work with both individuals convicted of terrorist offences as well as those working with the offenders in a counter terrorism/de-radicalisation setting. In a thoroughly researched paper, (AUTHOR NAME) looks at the mentors and their background, the constraints under which they work, their relationship with the participants and how the latter view the programme itself. He offers here a critical analysis of the schemes illuminating the pitfalls, strengths and weaknesses; and the challenges that exist in ensuring successful reintegration of the participants in these programmes.

The next two pieces are closely connected and focus more explicitly in the role of narrative in elucidating both victimhood and participation in terrorism, including the potential process of de-

radicalisation or desistance from political violence. The first is a theoretical examination of the use of narrative as a paradigm for studying victimisation and radicalisation. (AUTHOR NAME) unpack the connection between these terms by examining how the stories that radicals construct about their own lives can play a role in their pathway to radicalisation. Drawing from established academic research from humanities and the social sciences on the subject, the authors examine in depth the key themes of identity, emotions and culture and how they interact in personal and collective narratives of victimisation.

The value of this narrative approach to the study of the problem becomes clear in the next article where (AUTHOR NAME) have gathered the views of a large network of practitioners working on desistance and deradicalisation schemes in a number of European countries. The empirical investigation considers the role of victimological processes in de-radicalisation and shows how meaning making in reaction to personal or collective victimisation are regular features of radical behaviour. However, victimisation is not a sufficient cause in itself; one factor amongst many others that affect the pathways to radicalisation.

The final contribution is by (AUTHOR NAME), who examines the international violence prevention efforts carried out by Spanish victims groups. He analyses their involvement in the formulation of counter-narratives and alternative narratives. An important finding emerging from this analysis is that the international work carried out by these groups can be partially explained by their interest in confronting the efforts of political movements linked to ETA whereby they seek to export internationally a vision of the conflict that exempts ETA from responsibility and

justifies its violent campaign. The article demonstrates how this international activism is closely connected with domestic efforts at violence prevention, bringing back into perspective the importance of altruistic responses to victimisation.

The special issue concludes with a commentary by Max Taylor where he reflects on the connections between the special issue and broader debates in the field of terrorism studies. Taylor's piece is a call for multidisciplinarity in the study of terrorist victimisation and a discussion on the potential role that civil society organisations can play in fostering research in this area but also a reminder and justification of the importance of 'a complex area, where legitimacy, victimisation, and aggression combine'.

In summary, this special issue contributes to the field by examining how victimhood is mobilised as a motivator for political violence and the importance of communal identity and narratives in the process. It has also indicated that victims can play an important role in the prevention of terrorism and political violence: victims can offer a legitimate and sobering voice, particularly for youth at risk as well as the general public. By appealing to the emotional instincts of their target audiences, they can become an essential tool to challenge extremist propaganda that promotes violence especially in the pre-radicalisation space. In the post-radical space, we would expect a resistance to victims narratives. Instead work must be initially on the individual level and here the challenge is to disentangle emotional investment from rigid identity positions and public narratives of oppression and injustice. In this sphere, evidence shows that the impact is greater when formers and victims tell their stories together. It must be said however that the support of family and community networks is still vital in the process. Importantly, success should be judged not necessarily on the former radical asking victims for forgiveness but in the person reengaging with the community.

Based on these insights, we believe this special issue can serve to set out an agenda for this research area moving forward. Given that the role of victims and perpetrators in countering violent extremism violence has only recently started to attract attention in the field of terrorism

studies, there is no lack of important questions that deserve further examination. These include, for instance, the mechanisms that facilitate or impede the intergenerational transmission of narratives of violence, the way the choice of medium affects the resonance of victims' voices in an audience, the impact that the joint participation of victims and perpetrators de-radicalisation programmes has in recidivism rates or the relationship between victim activism and counter-narrative work. We hope, in sum, that this collection of papers can serve to inspire a more systematic examination of the connection between (in the words of Max Taylor) the 'hinterland of victimisation' and the vexed question of radicalisation.

Notes

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