

# NEGATIVE YOUTH ENGAGEMENT: INVOLVEMENT IN RADICALISM AND EXTREMISM

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## INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that youth civic participation and political engagement are essential components of a healthy, functioning society. Youth engagement is vital to political socialization and participation; young people represent future electorates and publics, and initial experiences of democratic engagement are likely to resonate into adulthood.<sup>135</sup> However, it is also crucial in helping to build human and social capital, and at the most fundamental level, it strengthens young people's understanding of their own roles as citizens and the attendant rights and responsibilities.

An alternative to positive youth engagement may simply be apathy and disengagement, which remains a significant problem worldwide.<sup>136</sup> However, disaffected youth can also choose to engage in what may broadly be termed radical or extreme activity.

This might range from simply espousing intolerant, extreme or fundamentalist views to actively participating in radical or extreme groups and causes or engaging in illegal political activity such as violent protest and even terrorism. This is the potential negative side of youth engagement that, far from promoting human rights, social mobility, civic responsibility, political socialization and youth development, actively works against them and is the focus of this thought piece.

Defining radicalism or extremism can be somewhat problematic. Historically, radicalism has often reflected the predominant political ideologies and social currents of its time, either by resonating with or echoing some aspect of them or by emerging in opposition to the status quo. Consequently, the definition of what is radical is largely contingent upon the milieu from which it emerges. Another consideration is that many movements initially considered radical or extreme gain acceptance and legitimacy over time and eventually enter the mainstream; examples within the past century include the emergence of movements advocating decolonization, civil rights, women's liberation and environmental concerns. It is essential, then, that extremism or radicalism be considered within its contemporary sociopolitical context, and that those exploring this

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**135** Robert Arthur Franklin, *Packaging Politics: Political Communications in Britain's Media Democracy*, 2nd ed. (London, Arnold, 2004).

**136** United Nations Development Programme. *Enhancing Youth Political Participation throughout the Electoral Cycle: A Good Practice Guide* (New York, 2013), p. 11. Available from [http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/electoral\\_systemsandprocesses/enhancing-youth-political-participation-throughout-the-electoral.html](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/electoral_systemsandprocesses/enhancing-youth-political-participation-throughout-the-electoral.html).

concept remain cognizant of the historical subjectivity that accompanies the identification and labeling of an individual or group as radical or extreme.

For the purposes of this thought piece, it is posited that radicalism or extremism involves at least one of the following:

1. The acceptance or espousal of beliefs, ideas and attitudes that clearly contradict or fall outside the range of acceptable or mainstream views within that particular society; an example would be the racist and intolerant attitudes of neo-Nazi groups in contemporary Europe.
2. The employment of illegitimate methods or strategies to actualize ideas and beliefs, irrespective of the legitimacy and mainstream acceptability of those ideas. For example, while most people would accept that animals have rights and should be protected from unnecessary harm, violent attacks on people and research facilities that carry out testing on animals would be considered illegal and an example of radical or extreme activity.

Radicalism and extremism operate on or outside the periphery of mainstream society and are characterized by the espousal of beliefs and ideas or the use of methods and strategies that are not considered acceptable within a particular societal context.

## ANALYSIS OF CURRENT TRENDS

Radicalism and extremism are largely perceived as youth phenomena. Indeed, historically, certain youth demographics have been drawn disproportionately

to these sorts of activities and movements, and exceptionally large youth cohorts, or “youth bulges”, often make countries more susceptible to political violence.<sup>137</sup> It is also possible to identify violent groups that not only target youth audiences, but whose very existence centres around a youth identity. For example, the Red Guards in China were a violent paramilitary youth social movement mobilized from universities by Chairman Mao during the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, the very name of the group may sometimes reflect a youth demographic; the name al-Shabaab in Somalia literally means “the Youth” in Arabic,<sup>138</sup> and the name of the Taliban in Afghanistan stems from the Pashto word for “students”. Most strikingly today, jihadism, in the guise of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, is almost exclusively associated with young men under the age of 25<sup>139</sup> and originates in regions experiencing a substantial youth bulge.

While extremism predominantly draws young men to its fold, women are not entirely immune. Indeed, not only have women been drawn to political radicalism and extremism throughout history, but they have also played crucial leadership roles in movements associated with women’s rights, universal

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<sup>137</sup> Henrik Urdal, “A clash of generations? Youth bulges and political violence”, *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 50, No. 3 (11 September 2006), pp. 607-629.

<sup>138</sup> The group’s full name is Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (Movement of Striving Youth).

<sup>139</sup> Akil N. Awan, “Transitional religiosity experiences: contextual disjuncture and Islamic political radicalism”, in *Islamic Political Radicalism: A European Comparative Perspective*, T. Abbas, ed. (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 207-230. Available from [http://works.bepress.com/akil\\_awan/8](http://works.bepress.com/akil_awan/8); and Marc Sageman, “Islam and Al Qaeda”, in *Root Causes of Suicide Terrorism: Globalization of Martyrdom*, Ami Pedahzur, ed., Cass Series on Political Violence (New York, Routledge, 2006).

suffrage, civil rights, and animal and environmental rights. In the 1970s, when extreme left-wing radicalism was prevalent throughout much of Europe, women were sometimes considered far more ideologically extreme than even their male counterparts. For example, West German counterterrorism units were apparently ordered to “shoot the women first” when encountering the Baader-Meinhoff Gang owing to the supposed danger they posed as the group’s most ideologically committed members.<sup>140</sup>

However, this perception of women as ideologically extreme has been the exception rather than the rule. Women involved in radical or extremist groups have generally been depicted using biological, psychological or sexualized stereotypes linked to assumptions about what is “appropriate” female behaviour,<sup>141</sup> thereby divesting them of political and personal agency. Even today, at a time when women are increasingly drawn to radical movements, this characterization still appears to hold. For example, young women who have attempted to join the Islamic State, in contrast to their male counterparts, have been labelled sensationally by the media as “jihadi sex brides”, with terms such as “vulnerable” and “sexually groomed” used to account for their actions.

## ACCOUNTING FOR THE RISE OF YOUTH RADICALISM AND CONDITIONS THAT FOSTER YOUTH EXTREMISM

There is no simple cause-and-effect calculus that accounts for the rise of youth extremism; however, it is possible to identify certain critical factors that might make young people more susceptible to radical narratives or provide the impetus for their participation in radical structures and activities. Three of the most important factors—identity crises, political disenfranchisement, and socioeconomic inequality—are explored below.

### Identity crises

The nexus of radicalism, extremism and youth is primarily the transitional stage of development into adulthood and the presence of unresolved issues relating to identity formation.<sup>142</sup> Of course, this search for identity and belonging is an intrinsic part of adolescence and early adulthood and occurs among young people everywhere. However, as the case studies of many radicals will attest, this process appears to take on an urgency and prominence in these individuals that belie its ubiquitous and often mundane nature. Identity crises inspired by alienation, racism, dislocation, globalization, changing value systems, anomie and a host of other issues produce a heightened state of vulnerability and might compel individuals to seek solace in beguiling narratives that offer a safe and welcoming community of like-minded “outcast” individuals.<sup>143</sup> In this respect, the need to belong and the dynamics behind the appeal of such groups as the Islamic State, which offers an identity based on a global religious

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**140** Eileen MacDonald, *Shoot the Women First*, 1st ed. (New York, Random House, 1991), p. xiv.

**141** Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London, Zed Books, 2007).

**142** Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 1994).

**143** Akil N. Awan, “Antecedents of Islamic political radicalism among Muslim communities in Europe”, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 41, No. 1 (2008), pp. 13–17.

fraternity of believers, or of Neo-Nazi groups, which offer an identity based on racial purity and cultural solidarity, are not entirely dissimilar to the appeal of gang culture identities to some young people.

The nexus of youth radicalism also stems in part from the exposure at this formative stage to new ideas and theories provided by expanding social networks and educational opportunities. The university is both historically and pedagogically the home of radical ideas, revolutionary beliefs and subversive thoughts, precisely because it is often the setting in which students receive their first independent exposure to the political world around them. Many of the great political movements first emerged on university campuses and were no doubt considered unorthodox or radical at the time. Intoxicated by new causes that animate them and struggles that inspire them, students are inevitably filled with genuine—if somewhat naïve and unrefined—enthusiasm and idealism. However, that is part of growing up, of healthy political socialization and development; students experiment not only with sex, drugs and music at university, but also with ideas.

Add to this heady mix issues relating to rebellion against social and parental mores, crises of authority, and intergenerational conflict, and it is easy to understand why radicalism often takes root among youth. In West Germany in the 1970s, young people rebelled against the State and society by joining extreme left-wing groups. These young people broke starkly with their parents by labelling them the “Auschwitz generation”, pointedly accusing them of lacking a moral compass and of being complicit in the Holocaust.<sup>144</sup> Even today, many of the anti-austerity and inequality movements such as Spain’s Los Indignados (15-M), Mexico’s

Yo Soy 132, and the Occupy movement in the United States are partially founded on the principle that young people are unwilling to pay the price for the excesses and fiscal irresponsibility of earlier generations.

## Political disenfranchisement

Increasing political disenfranchisement and disillusionment with traditional political processes, institutions and structures<sup>145</sup> are also central to understanding young people’s alienation from conventional politics and mainstream civic and political engagement. Young people who do not believe that the issues of concern to them are being addressed through politics and public policy<sup>146</sup> often take to the streets and engage in protest and demonstrations. Where “legitimate” forms of protest prove unsuccessful, individuals may begin to countenance illegitimate and violent forms of protest including rioting, public disorder, sabotage and even terrorism.<sup>147</sup> Consequently, a gravitation towards radicalism or extremism might be interpreted as one of the ways in which young people seek to air their frustrations and grievances and to attach themselves to structures that ostensibly allow them to feel that they are being empowered socially and politically. Radicalism

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<sup>144</sup> Hans Kundnani, *Utopia or Auschwitz: Germany’s 1968 Generation and the Holocaust*, Crises in World Politics (London, Hurst Publishers, 2009).

<sup>145</sup> Andrew Mycock and Jonathan Tonge, eds., *Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission: Young People and Politics* (London, Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom, 2014). Available from [https://www.psa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/PSA%20Beyond%20the%20YCC%20FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://www.psa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/PSA%20Beyond%20the%20YCC%20FINAL_0.pdf).

<sup>146</sup> David Marsh, Therese O’Toole and Su Jones, *Young People and Politics in the UK: Apathy or Alienation?* Political & International Studies Collection (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>147</sup> Akil N. Awan, “Transitional religiosity experiences: contextual disjuncture and Islamic political radicalism”.

or extremism may be particularly appealing to young people at this stage of their lives, especially if their initial tentative yet idealistic forays into political activism have failed to produce the desired results.

## Socioeconomic inequality

Socioeconomic pressures can play a key role in influencing a young person's susceptibility to radicalism and extremism. High rates of global youth unemployment (exceeding 10 per cent over the past three decades)<sup>148</sup> and other, broader forms of socioeconomic inequality have been the focal point of youth grievances for some time. The anti-austerity and inequality movements in Europe and the United States and the violent protests that have erupted in Cairo, Caracas and many other parts of the world are largely predicated upon the sorts of socioeconomic inequalities that disproportionately impact young people. Indeed, the youth bulge within many societies in the Middle East and North Africa and the associated lack of employment and other opportunities for youth are widely seen as constituting one of the principle precursors of the risings that took place in that region.<sup>149</sup>

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**148** International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends 2013: Recovering from a Second Jobs Dip* (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2013), p. 11, available from [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_202326.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_202326.pdf); and International Labour Organization, *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2013: A Generation at Risk* (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2013), available from [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_212423.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_212423.pdf).

**149** United Nations Development Programme, *Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.08.III.B.3), available from <http://arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/ahdr2009e.pdf>; and United Nations Development Programme, *The Arab Human Development Report 2012—Empowerment: The Will of the People*, 10th ed. (New York, 2012).

Young people today are facing an uphill climb that has become dauntingly steep. Many have limited prospects for employment, decent shelter and upward social mobility. Poverty, low educational attainment, and disproportionately high crime rates among youth have become endemic in certain settings. Youth experiencing these challenges as well as prejudice and societal marginalization may find “solutions” to their predicament in extreme organizations and movements. The two young Frenchmen who carried out the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris in early 2015 hailed from one of the *banlieues* situated around the capital. These largely working-class suburbs are often characterized as environments with high rates of unemployment, crime and drug use, as well as institutional racism and endemic cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement. It is in these types of settings that radical groups might offer an escape from a potentially bleak future or a criminal past.

War and conflict have a tremendous impact on negative youth engagement. Young people in conflict zones, and particularly those in “failing States” (which often result from periods of long, drawn-out conflict), are likely to gravitate towards violence or violent actors because, somewhat ironically, such contexts are seen to offer security and a chance to meet basic survival needs. Many young people in the Syrian Arab Republic and Afghanistan, for example, have joined the Islamic State and Taliban respectively, not necessarily because of any ideological commitment or religious appeal, but simply out of financial necessity and the need to survive.

Periods of insecurity or poverty heighten young people's vulnerability, rendering them far more susceptible to coercion and manipulation by extreme

demagogues, gangs and violent criminals. It is believed, for example, that Ajmal Kasab, the lone surviving terrorist from the 2008 Mumbai attacks in India, may have been coerced to participate after his impoverished family was promised Rs 150,000 by Lashkar-e-Taiba upon the successful completion of his operation.<sup>150</sup>

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUTH AUDIENCES

Online platforms, in particular Internet-based social media and web 2.0 platforms, have collectively become the principal arena for youth political and social engagement over the past decade. This is largely a positive development, as these platforms are ostensibly conducive to the “levelling” of hierarchies of knowledge and power<sup>151</sup> and have reinforced the democratizing and egalitarian nature of the new media environment. However, the appropriation of these technologies has also contributed significantly to the rise and increased visibility of youth radicalism and extremism.

There are a number of reasons that might account for the intersection of youth, technology and radicalism. Principally, this nexus is a function of young people being “digital natives” rather than “digital immigrants”.<sup>152</sup> The former are defined as native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet. Conversely, those who were not born into the digital world but have at some point adopted various aspects of the new technology are considered digital immigrants. For young people today, there is little that is new about the new media environment; rather, it is the only media environment with which they are familiar. For this

younger generation of political actors, social interaction and other everyday activities take place largely within this media environment, whether it be social networking, shopping, dating, playing video games, watching movies, reading news, listening to music, or learning. In fact, most activities in the “real” world now have virtual counterparts that may appear to be more appealing to a certain age cohort (digital natives), so it is not surprising that their political activism or radical escapism should similarly take place within this arena.<sup>153</sup>

One of the paradoxes of the new media environment is that while it provides access to staggering amounts of information and data and exposes users to new perspectives and experiences, it also allows individuals who gravitate towards extremism to find (or consciously place) themselves in highly cloistered, immersive environments that effectively cocoon audiences from alternate realities and interpretational frameworks. These online environments can give rise to an insular virtual community that venerates the radical ideology or community at the expense of all else while stifling almost any form of debate, discussion or dialogue.<sup>154</sup> These forums essentially act

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<sup>150</sup> Akil N. Awan, “Spurning ‘this worldly life’: terrorism and martyrdom in contemporary Britain”, in *Martyrdom and Terrorism: Pre-Modern to Contemporary Perspectives*, Dominic Janes and Alec Houen, eds. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 248.

<sup>151</sup> Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>152</sup> Marc Prensky, “Digital natives, digital immigrants”, *On the Horizon*, vol. 9, No. 5 (October 2001). Available from <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf>.

<sup>153</sup> Akil N. Awan, Andrew Hoskins and Ben O’Loughlin, *Radicalisation and Media: Connectivity and Terrorism in the New Media Ecology* (London, Routledge, 2011), p. 55.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

as echo chambers or rhetorical force amplifiers, predisposing users to unreserved acceptance of the radical perspective and effectively grooming vulnerable young people online for extremism.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Radicalism is not always a bad thing. It usually indicates a political awakening among young people—the presence of latent energy and a desire to change the world for the better. One might contrast the negative youth engagement of radicals (no matter how problematic) with the widespread political apathy among youth in recent years, as evidenced by chronically low voter turnout in virtually all democracies. The most important question one might ask is how the very same energy hijacked by extremists and radicals might be directed towards positive, healthy outcomes. Achieving such a goal requires that certain key issues be addressed, as outlined in the recommendations below.

***Support political empowerment.*** The best way to address political disillusionment and disenfranchisement is to restore political agency to young people. They must be provided with the means to become agents of positive change within their own societies. Conventional political literacy and socialization are important, but alternative forms of engagement that may be more appealing to youth

need to be supported as well. Young people must genuinely believe that they can become effective agents of change.<sup>155</sup> They require access to mechanisms through which they can air their grievances against the political establishment. Further, when young people express dissatisfaction with political elites or the status quo through protests and demonstrations, they must be taken seriously, and appropriate action must be taken to mitigate their concerns and address their grievances. If their criticisms and frustrations are ignored, they may seek resolution through more negative modes of political engagement. It must be acknowledged that in some cases it will not be possible to cognitively change extremist beliefs and attitudes. However, in these scenarios, it may be possible to disengage young people from violence, to delegitimize violence as a response, and to aim for political socialization focused on more legitimate modes of political engagement.

***Create inclusive identities.*** Every effort must be made to create progressive and inclusive forms of citizenship and belonging, to prevent the marginalization of youth and other disadvantaged populations, and to respect diversity. Human rights and individual freedoms must be protected. Steps must be taken to ensure that avenues for youth civic participation are created so that young people feel they have something vested in the State and society. Grievances and narratives of victimhood, whether real or perceived, must be addressed so young people can see that their concerns are taken seriously. Intolerance, sexism, racism and xenophobia must be eliminated, and their highly corrosive effects on community cohesion, healthy identity development and civic responsibility must be acknowledged.

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<sup>155</sup> James Youniss and others, "Youth civic engagement in the twenty-first century", *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, vol. 12, No. 1 (March 2002), pp. 121-148.

## ***Address socioeconomic inequality.***

Governments and other stakeholders must address all forms of socioeconomic inequality. In much of the developing world, there must be a push for better governance and transparency and greater democratization. The international community must uphold its responsibility in tackling these issues, particularly in post-conflict settings. In the developed world, policymakers must address democratic deficits, income disparities and fiscal irresponsibility and work to eliminate barriers to upward social mobility.

As has been demonstrated by the examples offered here, young people can be powerful agents for change.<sup>156</sup> In order to ensure that their efforts are directed towards positive change, young people must be provided with the tools and means to achieve their potential. This must be done not only to diminish the appeal of radicalism and extremism but because all individuals deserve to live in free and fair societies. It is essential to invest in younger generations, as they represent the shared future of society.

## **REFERENCES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING**

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<sup>156</sup> See, for example, the roles of youth in post-conflict reconstruction in Stephanie Schwartz, *Youth in Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Agents of Change* (Washington, D.C., United States Institute of Peace, 2010).