Tackling Extremism in Britain: Challenging Cameron’s Ideas

admin  July 23, 2015  JUST's Articles

Following a keynote speech by David Cameron, on the government’s response to the extremist and terrorist threat, Dr. Joshua Skoczylis, Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Lincoln, argues that the PM has failed to address the conditions and context that lead individuals and groups to support such ideologies.

Many will not be surprised by Cameron’s remarks on extremism and terrorism. Indeed, the rhetoric used was predictable as he further outlined the Conservative Government’s responses to non-violent and violent extremism and terrorism. No longer held down by the shackles of their late coalition partners, the Conservative government believes it can finally ‘confront and defeat this poison.’ Although, different forms of extremism are mentioned throughout, his message focuses on jihadi extremism and all other forms of extremism that undermine the Conservative’s ideology of neoliberalism, which are embodied by the ambiguous notion of British values. His message however, is flawed for two reasons (1) there is a denial about the real root causes of extremism; (2) Cameron’s solution is based on surveillance and intimidation of those who oppose British values, while failing to take the radical steps needed to tackle extremism. Cameron challenges the notion that extremism is a response to social injustice, inequality and other real and perceived grievances. In his short sighted and significantly flawed historical account of Western interventions abroad he completely ignores the negative influence colonialism and globalization have had on many developed nations around world, and indeed British communities. Rather, neoliberal market reforms that have pushed millions into poverty are seen as desirable, as ‘social good’. Cameron, of course, denies the link between neoliberalism and extremism. Many extremist ideologies are being shaped by anti-neoliberal ideas and are on the rise in Europe and across the globe. Yet, Cameron denies that UK government policy, including the Iraq war, had anything to do with the rise of jihadi extremism in the UK and abroad. There is ample evidence to suggest otherwise. Isis rise is, for example, a direct failure and rejection of the neoliberal experiment imposed on the Iraqis by the US and the UK. Putting mountains of evidence aside, Cameron still insists that it is extremist ideologies, which are to blame and not conditions and context that led individuals and groups to support such ideologies. The reasons for someone searching out such ideologies are varied and usually include real and perceived grievances, which are often linked to perceptions of social injustice, inequality and an affiliation with the victim whether they be an individual, group, community, nation or identity. Extremism ideologies facilitate expressions of discontent rather than being the cause of it. This difference is significant, as tackling the expression will only lead to more extreme positions on both sides. Cameron’s response assumes that there is a linear connection between extremism and violence; hence the government must crack down on all forms of extremism that challenge the status quo. Interestingly, the evidence suggests that most people will go through a phase of supporting some sort of extremist ideology in their life time. Only a
very tiny minority will ever engage in activism, resulting in peaceful protest or civil disobedience rather than violence. There is certainly no linear relationship between radicalism and violence. When it comes to Islamism, however, this relationship is presented as fact – hence it must be supressed, unless of course they conform to ambiguous British values. However, there is nothing British about these values. Rather, they are universal values, which were used as early as the 18th century by French revolutionaries. Giving them the prefix ‘British’ leads to division within society. Those considered British, and those perceived as subversive. Being a devout Muslim may mean you fall foul of the high bar set. This debate feeds into and legitimates anti-immigration rhetoric. Doings so pushes the blame on to the other, which are usually ethnic groups and migrants, while we remain blameless as extremism is cast as a ‘foreign import’. This sort of rhetoric is another cover for the ‘us versus them’ agenda: you are either with us or against us – you cannot be both. As Hobsbawm noted, we all have multiple identities; you can be Scottish and British, and European, you can be a father and friend. Multiple identities can be complementary and not necessarily opposites. Yet, this does not seem to apply to immigrants and Muslims, who are coerced into forsaking their identities having to espouse British values, which most already do anyway. On the one hand, Cameron argues that ‘we respect different faiths’ but then emphasises that this is conditional on them supporting ‘the British way of life.’ This assumes that there is one British way of life. Believes and lifestyles in Britain are diverse and vary significantly from community to community, from region to region, and will also differ dramatically depending on our religious and political ideologies. Cameron’s solution is to crack down on those who oppose British values. Cameron’s strategy is built around surveillance and restricting the rights of those who are perceived to oppose the status quo. The rights of the few are trampled upon for the security of the many. Cameron assumes that restricting the rights of the few will actually enhance security. But what it will do is the exact opposite, as marginalised groups are driven towards extremist ideologies rather than away from them. This is the case not only in Muslim communities, but also for other groups who feel they have been left behind by globalisation. Current Conservative government policy towards the young will create exactly the type of spaces this extremism strategy is hoping to tackle. Young people are being sold the ‘American Dream’ while removing the opportunities for the young to achieve this. Such policies will create fertile breeding grounds for all forms of extremism, sowing the path towards future civil unrest.

In their attempts to stem extremism, this government will draw on an ever-increasing net of agencies, private and voluntary organizations, and individuals to share information under the banner of ‘safeguarding’. In some ways, it is moving down a very authoritarian pathway using methods very similar to those used in Eastern Germany. There will be little real engagement with the root causes, rather individuals will be coerced to adopt British values or find themselves treated as extremists and/or terrorists. Real debate will be absent and there will be little effort in tackling the social and economic conditions that may lead people down the route of extremism. Proposed legislation will provide the police and security with evermore powers, and the police will lock up ever more individuals for minor thought crimes, which have caused little or no harm. But what happens when they are released? The seed of extremism has been planted; the scene has been set and extremism will flourish not because of extremism ideology but because consecutive governments have failed to address the root cause of extremism here and abroad.

Dr. Joshua Skoczylis, Lecturer in Criminology, University of Lincoln
Progress of Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in the Family Environment

Stop and Search

Terrorism Theresa May Tories

West Yorkshire

Follow Us