Online Radicalisation: A Contested and Contestable Term

Reviewed by Joshua Sinai[*]

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Julia Ebner, *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2017), 280 pp., US $15.36 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-7883-1032-1.

Julia Ebner, *Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists* (London, England, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 368 pp., UK £9.89 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-5266-1679-1.

Julia Ebner, *Going Mainstream: Why Extreme Ideas Are Spreading, and What We Can Do About it* (London, England, UK: Ithaka Press, 2024) 304 pp., US $28.59 [Hardcover], US $14.56 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-8041-8378-6.

Few topics in the study of contemporary terrorism warrant more attention than Islamist and far-right wing extremism, particularly in Europe and North America, and possible solutions to mitigate and resolve these threats. With that in mind, this review explores three recent books by Julia Ebner that combine the application of social science theories on radicalisation into extremism with extensive field research. Dr. Ebner, an Austrian researcher and author based in London, is a postdoctoral affiliate at the Calleva Centre for Evolution and Human Science at Magdalen College, Oxford University, and a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in London.

In **The Rage** (2017), Ebner explains that she began studying radicalisation into extremism around 2015 when it had become a pervasive threat in Western societies, especially with the proliferation of far-right wing extremism. Her first book was written to understand the "drivers and dynamics" of what she terms "the vicious circle of spiraling extremism known as 'reciprocal radicalization'" (p. xviii) that characterised those who became Islamist and far-right-wing violent extremists. In explaining the term reciprocal radicalization, Ebner cites the work of British academic Roger Eatwell, who introduced the concept of 'cumulative extremism', in which one type of extremism feeds off and magnifies other types of extremism in what Matthew Feldman termed a 'tit-for-tat extremism' (p. 10).

To gain insights into their motivations and beliefs, Ebner went undercover to infiltrate far-right extremist groups such as the English Defence League (EDL), and Islamist extremist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, penetrating their social media sites and participating in some of their demonstrations. In these cases, which are detailed throughout the book, she found similarities in their rhetoric and *modus operandi*, with both "inciting hatred against the other, which is presented as representative of society as a whole. Both sides feel under attack in their collective identity and dignity" (pp. 9-10). Also, both shared a common enemy scapegoat in the form of their society's establishment, with their grievance messaging directed towards their target constituency of disenfranchised youth (p. 11). Interestingly, she notes that both were misogynistic, with the far-right wing extremists promoting a hyper-masculine "Manosphere" (p. 10). What makes both types of ideological extremism so potently pervasive, she notes, is their effectiveness at using social media-based communication strategies to radicalise and mobilise their adherents (p. 11).

To counter both types of ideological extremism, Ebner concludes that both need to be addressed simultaneously by "challenging both sides' binary worldviews and to create a stronger sense of collective identity that reunites rather than divides our societies" (p. 198). This is done through education, which is intended to empower them with critical thinking skills, and private sector initiatives that bring together current and former adversaries to overcome their enmities towards each other (pp. 205-206). These recommendations can easily apply to confronting other types of extremism as well.

In **Going Dark** (2021), Ebner's ideological extremism landscape was expanded by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which she noted had "given rise to a staggering infodemic that spreads even faster than the virus itself" (p. xi). Exploiting grievances over government-mandated measures such as lockdowns, facial masks and vaccines, "conspiracy theory-driven protests" inspired by QAnon-type conspiracy communities were expressed in social media and street demonstrations, particularly in the US, Europe, and Australia. Attesting to the widespread appeal of conspiracy theories, she found that the QAnon conspiracy movement grew to an estimated "4-5 million aggregated followers in at least fifteen countries" (p. xii).

Based on the numerous cases detailed throughout this book, one finding is that individuals are especially "susceptible to conspiracy theories and extremist ideologies in times of personal or collective crisis" (p. xiii). As Ebner explains, "[e]mbracing simplistic versions of a more complex reality can be tempting, especially when that reality is so starkly opposed to what we want it to be" (p. xiv). Extremist ideologies, such as QAnon's conspiracy-laden theories, are appealing as they provide their own invented simple explanations and answers to what would otherwise require greater expertise to be knowledgeable about the subject (p. xiv).

The spread of ideologically extremist conspiracy theories, Ebner finds, has 'real-world consequences.' For example, "[i]n the UK, proponents of the 5G conspiracy theory set phone masts on fire across the country. In Germany, protestors used Nazi-era slogans and anti-Jewish conspiracies and attacked several news reporting teams. And in the US, armed protestors stormed the Michigan State Capitol" (p. xiv). The author also notes that, like their predecessors, the new generation of ideological extremists are tech savvy, while cyber innovations, such as artificial intelligence tools and their capability to create deep fakes, have vastly expanded their ability to reach and deceive wider audiences (pp. 254-256).

In an interesting chapter on "Ten Predictions for 2025," the author cites experts on radicalisation on extremism such as Daniel Kohler, who argues that "New means of online communication and issue-based mobilization" are enabling extremists to organise themselves in new ways that are not dependent on formal group organisations (p. 266). And in the concluding chapter, "Ten Solutions for 2020," Ebner recommends a comprehensive approach, such as utilising technological companies to counter extremist content through monitoring and counter-narratives, and even 'hacking the hackers' by hacking and embarrassing them (pp. 274-278).

And in her most recent book, **Going Mainstream** (2024), Ebner highlights the shift from ideologically extremist movements as "radical fringes" without 'political relevance' in their societies to the "mainstreaming of these ideas" in which their "alternative media ecosystems" have become influential (pp. viii-ix). This is manifested by the gaining of political power by political leaders embracing extremist ideas in countries such as the United States, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Austria, and others (p. viii). The author notes that 2016 represented an important transformative period, especially with the passage of Brexit in the UK, which was influenced by a Russian-led disinformation campaign, and the US presidential election of Russian-favourite Donald Trump. The significance of these two events, the author observes, was the introduction of a new communication strategy by extremist political leaders that is "based on exacerbating societal tensions through strategic provocation, triggering powerful emotional reactions from potential voters as well as opponents, and undermining belief in institutions" (p. xi). Ebner highlights a prominent example of the so-called mainstreaming of extremist ideologies with former President Donald Trump's urging of his followers to storm the US Capitol Building on January 6, 2021, in an attempt to disrupt the certification of the results of the November 2020 presidential election.

As in her previous books, Ebner went undercover to examine the nature of contemporary extremist groups and movements, such as the Alt-Right (whose Great Replacement theory has inspired several terrorist attacks), QAnon, Neo-Nazis, and pro-Russian extremists who promote Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, with numerous case studies detailed throughout the book. In the concluding chapter, Ebner highlights the need to address the "underlying structural and psychological sources" driving susceptible individuals into adopting extremist ideologies and joining their movements (p. 202). This includes understanding the aspirations of the young generations, such as Gen Z, who are drawn to extremist beliefs through social media sites such as TikTok (p. 210).

Finally, the author recommends solutions such as urging the Internet's technology firms to assess how their algorithms "amplify the most radical voices and what can we do to support those that stand up for respectful dialogue on the most controversial topics?" (p. 202). In another solution, the author recommends applying artificial intelligence and virtual reality tools to be used as early detection mechanisms against extremist beliefs and disinformation (p. 221). This reviewer would add that a solution to the pervasiveness of far-right wing and Islamist extremist messaging is for national leaders who promote them (for their own partisan political purposes) to start disavowing them and call on their adherents to cease believing in wild conspiracy theories, ranging from election result denials to opposing the need to be vaccinated against future pandemics, that have no basis in reality. Until this happens, it will be difficult to counter such extremist ideological beliefs.

As a corpus of work, Ebner's three books represent an indispensable contribution to the literature on latest trends in radicalisation into violent extremism and the governmental, private sector, and academic/public policy research institute programmes that are required to counter what has become one of the most significant security threats facing the global order.

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About

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