

1.8. Instigators and Perpetrators of Collective Violence (David Mandel)

Author: David R. Mandel

Organization: Defence R&D Canada – Toronto

Contact Information: drmandel66@gmail.com

Psychological theory geared towards understanding collective violence, whether by violent state or non-state actors, has tended to focus on three groups: victims, perpetrators, and bystanders (e.g., Baumeister, 1997; Miller, 1999; Staub, 1989). In this paper, I propose that the category “perpetrators” needs to be refined or, rather, divided (also see Victoroff, 2005). Specifically, those who instigate collective violence need to be distinguished from those who subsequently carry it out. We may call the former instigators and the latter perpetrators.

The main point is that instigators play a critical role in the origination of collective violence, whereas perpetrators play a critical role in its execution, and the latter tend to operate in

the service of instigators. Of course, in some instances, the two sets overlap. The lone-wolf terrorist epitomizes the case of strong, if not perfect, overlap, but also illustrates its limits. As the complexity of terrorist operations and the size of a terrorist organizations increase, the likelihood of instigators and perpetrators being one and the same steeply diminishes. As organizations grow, they also tend to grow more complex and, accordingly, the functions of their various members tend to become more differentiated. This is no different for organizations of violence. Hence, we should not be surprised to see a division of labor there too.

Instigators: Why Study Them? Why Don't We Study Them?

Given that it is the goals, plans, and acts of instigators that set in motion a complex, causal chain of events leading to collective violence, the importance of understanding the "psychology of instigation" should be evident. The significance of examining instigators, however, has often been downplayed in favor of understanding how presumably ordinary members of society can be led into becoming perpetrators of collective violence. For example, as Staub (1989) stated in reference to the Holocaust, "there will always be wild ideas and extreme ideologies. For us the question is how the German people came to follow a leader and a party with such ideas, and how they came to participate in their fulfillment" (p. 98). The implication here is that Hitler was possessed by these crazy ideas, and what is really important is not why he became possessed but rather why he was able to influence other "normal" people.

One reason for this focus is social psychology's aim of formulating accounts that generalize to the mass of ordinary people. Instigators of collective violence, with their "wild ideas" do not seem to fit this mold. These theorists do not deny the importance of instigators, but view them as largely inexplicable in terms of the psychological processes used to describe "ordinary individuals." Consider Milgram (1974): "The psychological adjustments of a Wehrmacht General to Adolf Hitler parallel those of the lowest infantryman to his superior, and so forth, throughout the system. Only the psychology of the ultimate leader demands a different set of explanatory principles" (p. 130, my italics).

Another reason for the reluctance to focus on instigators may be the concern that people will misconstrue explanations of their behavior as exculpatory statements. Indeed, this concern may be well founded as Miller, Gordon, and Buddie (1999) found that explaining a perpetrator's behavior increased the likelihood of their participants condoning that behavior. Other possible reasons include the fact that perpetrators greatly outnumber instigators, and perpetrators tend to carry out the actual killings; thus, they may seem more important to understand. I would argue, however, that it is precisely because instigators can lead so many others to participate in acts of collective violence, or stand idly by while it unfolds, that we need to try to understand them as well as their followers and bystanders.

Characteristics of Instigators

Non-interchangeability

A defining feature of instigators, which serves to distinguish them from perpetrators, is the non-interchangeable role that they serve in the development of collective violence. Kershaw noted this when he wrote, "whatever the external circumstances and impersonal determinants, Hitler was not interchangeable" (1998, p. xxvii). Accordingly, most perpetrators will pass a counterfactual test of "undo-ability," whereas most instigators will fail the test. The same could not be said even for top-ranking Nazi perpetrators of the Final Solution, such as Himmler or

Heydrich. In rerunning history with Hitler, one can imagine substitutions for the others that would still leave the core features of the historical episode intact. Perhaps a substitution of Heydrich would have slowed the Final Solution and saved many lives that were lost, but it would not have prevented the Holocaust—at least, that is not easy to imagine but for Heydrich. In a similar vein, we can easily imagine substitutions of individual 9/11 terrorist hijackers and, yet, still imagine that the attacks would have taken place in essentially the same manner with different perpetrators. The same cannot be said for bin Laden. That is, it is much easier to imagine: “No bin Laden, no 9/11.”

I am not aware of any study that has formally tested the non-interchangeability of instigators hypothesis. Nevertheless, I suspect that if one were to elicit the views of terrorism and political violence scholars or counter-terrorism practitioners about the non-interchangeability of instigators and perpetrators, a reliable and large difference would be found. This hypothesis could quite easily be tested in future research.

Catalysts of Violence

Instigators often achieve their non-interchangeable position by appealing to a mass audience. They may offer hope to their followers, usually in times of social crisis in which many are searching for meaning and a sense of belonging in their lives. This hope is energizing and provides a common vision, but it is often a vision that rests on hatred, distrust, and justification of violence. Hitler capitalized on Germany's high propensity for violence during a period of dramatic social unrest and consolidated immense power in the process. In exchange, he imparted a new form of coherence to an unstable social system, albeit one that culminated in incalculable misery and destruction and that proved to also be unstable. In so doing, his role was figural against a background of other enabling conditions and transformed those conditions. As Yehuda Bauer put it, Hitler was "the radicalizing factor" (1994, p. 308). Bauer's statement is indicative of an important point about instigators. It is characteristic of instigators, but not perpetrators, that they serve a catalytic role in the development of collective violence. The characteristic fits bin Laden as well: his key role as Al Qaeda's first in command, quite arguably, has been to incite and sustain widespread hatred toward the West and Israel. That is why the periodic releases of his tapes calling for renewed jihad are damaging even if they are short on specifics. They inspire the idea, “Be creative. Find your own way of carrying out jihad. That is your duty to God.”

The catalytic function served by instigators does not mean, however, that they are “initial causes” of collective violence. Rather, instigators increase the propensity for collective violence and intentionally act to accelerate its pace and direct its focus once it has started. For example, the racial anti-Semitism propagated by the Nazis under Hitler had as one of its own proximal causes the many anti-Semitic German writings and speeches of the late 1800s. If Hitler had not been exposed to these ideas as a young adult, it is unlikely that he would have turned out to be “Hitler” (Mandel, 2002b). Few instigators of collective violence construct their justifications for violence without influence from a mix of ideas that have already permeated the instigator's culture to some extent. In this sense, instigators can be seen as the conduit between the cultural background and the expression of violence that they help bring to the foreground.

Cross-spectrum Power Holders

In his analysis of power in contemporary societies, Alvin Toffler (1990) defined three forms: low-grade power relies on physical force or the threat of violence, medium-grade power relies on control of capital wealth, and high-grade power relies on access to, and control of,

information and knowledge. A critical factor that distinguishes instigators from other perpetrators is the acquisition of power across this power spectrum. Instigators are likely to achieve higher positions of authority than perpetrators (including dictatorial or even quasi-messianic status). The roles that even high-ranking perpetrators take on tend to be shaped and sanctioned by these ultimate leaders (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989). Unlike most perpetrators, instigators may attain the power to mobilize armies, paramilitary forces, and the police. Although the ability to achieve control over state apparatus may be limited for non-state instigators, their power in this regard will still tend to be greater than that of the perpetrators they lead.

Instigators are likely to have greater powers than perpetrators in many other respects as well. They tend to have better control over sources of financing and use of organizational resources. If they rise to power as state leaders they will have greater powers to change laws, while as non-state actors they will have greater powers to challenge the validity of existing laws that do not serve their interests. Unlike perpetrators, a key task of instigators is to influence the attitudes of the masses in ways intended to serve their strategic intent. In short, instigators not only have the power to authorize individuals to participate directly in collective violence, they also have greater powers than perpetrators to shape bystanders' reactions to these events and establish the social parameters for depersonalization and stigma (Goffman, 1990) and dehumanization and moral exclusion (Bandura, 1999).

Propagators of Nationalism

As LeBon (1896) emphasized over a century ago, the effective instigator energizes his followers by agitating their emotions and by appealing to the sentiments that guide their reason. In modern history, nationalism has been one of the most effective political strategies for accomplishing this goal (Hobsbawn, 1992; Smith, 1986), and its success is fundamentally due to its psychological power. On the one hand, nationalism creates an egotistic sense of in-group cohesion by emphasizing the shared greatness of a people. On the other hand, it exacerbates feelings of threat by pointing to the nation's precariousness, feelings of hatred by pointing to those deemed responsible for its hardships and failures, and feelings of insult due to the belief that one's nation has not received the respect it deserves. As Isaiah Berlin noted long ago in an essay entitled, *The bent twig: On the rise of nationalism* (reprinted in Berlin, 1991), nationalism is often motivated by some form of collective humiliation. The same message was articulated decades later in Staub's (1989) book, *The Roots of Evil*, and later still in Stern's (2003) *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*. It is interesting to note that when bin Laden in his August 23, 1996, Declaration of War Against the Americans Who Occupy the Land of the Two Holy Mosques issued a call for jihad, the call was for "a guerilla war, where the sons of the nation, and not the military forces, take part in it" (Federation of American Scientists, 2001). That is, bin Laden appealed not to Arab or Muslim states, but to the "Moslem nation."

Chiot (1994) has documented that, in case after case, twentieth-century tyrannies have been characterized by a combination of perceived national superiority coupled with perceived national threat and/or a collective sense of insult from the outside world. The Nazi image of a German master race threatened by an international Jewish plague that mocked Germany and her people illustrates the point. Similarly, bin Laden points to the "humiliation and disgrace" hurled on the Islamic world by the West "for more than eighty years" (Lewis, 2003). The reference to "eighty years" may not be evident to most Westerners of our generation, but it would not fail to have significance for Muslims likely to recall that in 1918 the Ottoman sultanate, the last great

Muslim empire, was defeated, occupied, and later partitioned by the British and French empires into Iraq, Palestine, and Syria (and later Lebanon). As Bernard Lewis (2003) points out, these insults must be understood in historical context, both in terms of the geopolitical reality that since the birth of Islam, Muslim empires ruled most of the civilized world for the next millennium and were exporters of civilization to the emerging West, and also in terms of the religious tradition of jihad, with its dual connotations of militant struggle and duty to God.

According to bin Laden, “hostility toward America is a religious duty, and we hope to be rewarded for it by God” (PBS Frontline, 2001). The reframing of calls for violence as “duties” or “moral obligations” is a popular technique of instigators to legitimize collective violence. By linking the perpetration of terrorism to a religious duty, bin Laden uses God as the ultimate authority. In effect, bin Laden has claimed that if you fail to try to kill Americans, you have failed in your duty to God. Such messages can instill powerful feelings of moral obligation to an ideal or cause. Hannah Arendt (1965) noted in her famous report of the Adolf Eichmann trial how a strong sense of obedience to Hitler and his ideals served as an important source of Eichmann’s diligence in overseeing the transport of Jews to death camps during the Holocaust—so much so that Eichmann was willing to violate orders by his superior, Heinrich Himmler, toward the end of the Holocaust to stop transporting Jews to the death camps in order to follow what he believed was Hitler’s wish.

Nationalism and religious fundamentalism play upon a key aspect of human social cognition—the tendency to categorize individuals into groups. As we know from Tajfel’s (1981) classic work using the minimal group paradigm, people will discriminate in favor of ingroup members and against outgroup members even when the basis of social categorization is trivial (such as when an experimenter tells participants that their test scores reveal a preference for paintings by either Klee or Klimt). Nationalism is particularly effective at creating this sense of us versus them because nations (unlike states) tend to be defined in terms of features that are of high personal and social importance, such as ethnicity, race, religion, ideology, and language (Azzi, 1998). Consequently, the nation is likely to be seen not merely as an aggregate but as a cohesive entity (Campbell, 1958). For example, German *völkisch* nationalists conceived of their nation as an organic whole whose members were united by blood bonds that went back to the beginning of human history (Stackelberg, 1999). Religious fundamentalism goes even further: not only are there blood ties, there are also duties to God that serve to unite the ummah or nation of Muslim believers.

What Motivates Them? Concluding on an Unanswered Question

For those of us who share very different political views, social perspectives, and cultural ideals from the instigators and their movements we wish to better understand, it may be tempting to think that instigators are savvy manipulators of the public that use nationalism merely as a means of political expediency and power grabbing. To be sure, successful instigators will use the sentiments of the masses to gain power and will do so strategically. But, it would be shortsighted to think that instigators were merely being Machiavellian, but that, privately, they were unconvinced of their own arguments. Rather, it appears that in many cases the motivation to instigate comes from a genuine sense of the same sentiments that instigators propagate or incense in their supporters.

Surely, there are numerous psychological factors that play a role in each case history. As I have argued elsewhere (Mandel, 2002b), Hitler’s rage seems to have been provoked in no small

measure by an extreme form of threatened egotism, which as Baumeister, Smart, and Boden (1996) define, refers "both to favorable appraisals of self and to the motivated preference for such favorable appraisals, regardless of whether they are valid or inflated" (p. 6). These authors have reviewed considerable literature indicating that violence is more likely to be carried out by people with high but unstable self esteem than by people with either high and stable self esteem or low self esteem. There is of course an interesting parallel between this person-level characterization of the threatened egotist and the group-level characterization of the threatened nation. Both share the elements of positive self-regard and a need for such positive appraisals, coupled with a sense of frustration that their deserved standing has been marred. But, it is unclear how well threatened egotism serves as an important psychological factor if we look across the spectrum of instigators. For instance, whereas Hitler met with much personal failure and was on the brink of destitution by the start of WWI (Kershaw, 1998), bin Laden came from one of the wealthiest Saudi families and there is little evidence, at present, that his doctrine of threatened Muslim nationalism is driven by a parallel threatened sense of self.

Perhaps a more likely generalizable candidate for the indication of figures who may turn out to be instigators of collective violence is totalistic thinking, by which I refer to a constellation of factors including intolerance of ambiguity, an undifferentiated view of key issues, and an overriding confidence in the veracity and moral soundness of one's own belief and the falsity and moral corruptness or "evilness" of those who adopt alternative views (Mandel, 2002a). Totalistic thinking has been central to many examples of armed conflict and collective violence. For Hitler, Germany was locked in a mortal struggle with two possible outcomes: utopia or perdition, with the Jew as the mortal enemy of the German (Mein Kampf means "my struggle"). For bin Laden, the struggle is between the true Moslem believers and the rest of the world (one connotation of the term jihad is "struggle"). We see in these statements two key factors. First, there is a reduction of perspectives to two sides that are seen as diametrically opposed and, thus, not in a position for negotiation. Second, the stakes of the conflict are ultimate, thus conveying the clear message: If the ends were ever to justify the means, the time is now. These aspects of the totalistic mindset may prove to be important preconditions for "radicalization" (Mandel, in press), that imprecise term often used these days to convey what goes on before the terrorists' bombs go off.

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