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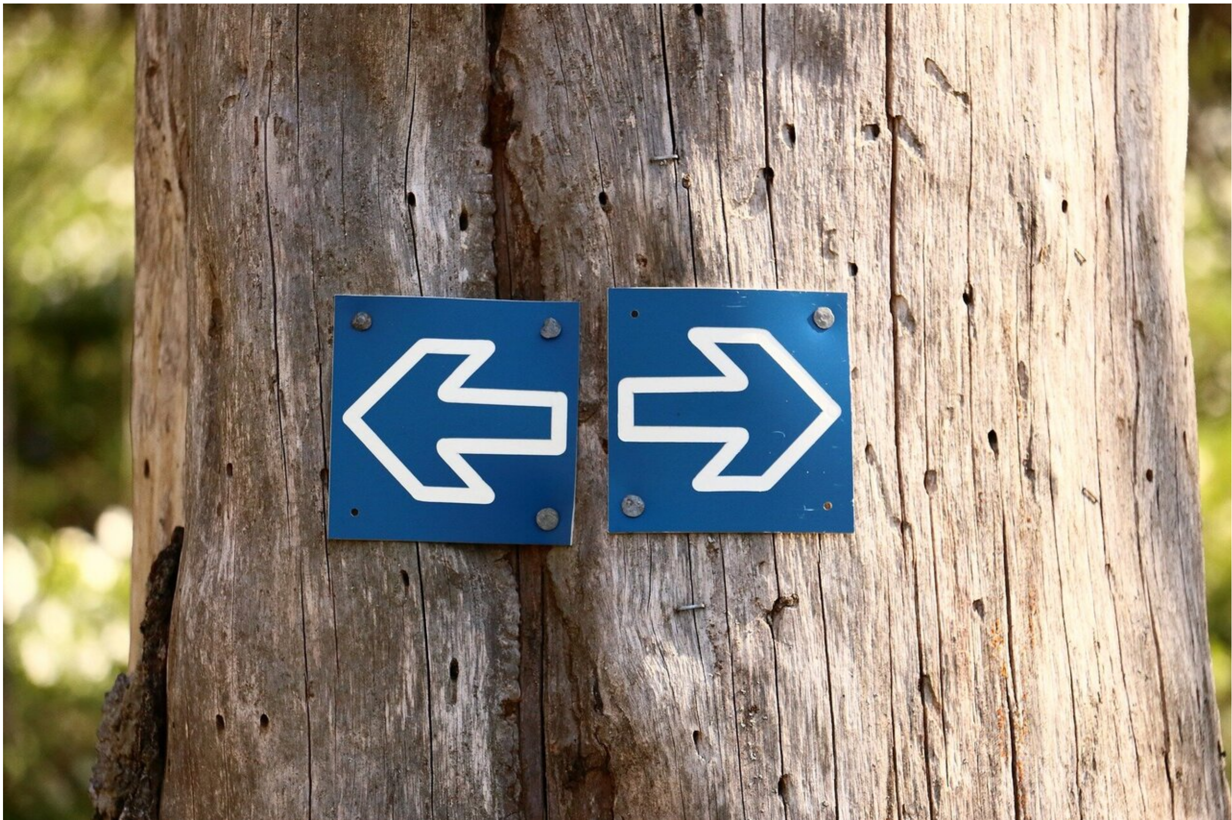
Partners in crime? A historical perspective on cumulative extremism in Denmark

April 14 2020, by Chris Holmsted Larsen



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The conceptual framework of cumulative extremism (CE) is characterized by a certain elasticity, which renders the concept in a no man's land between political, social and historical approaches. In his

original definition, Roger Eatwell understood CE as: "the way in which one form of extremism can feed off and magnify other forms [of extremism]." This particular concept has hitherto primarily been applied to help explain patterns of mobilization and counter-mobilization between British Islamist and counter-jihadist groups.

Here, CE will be utilized as an explanatory model for the violence between the extreme Danish Left and Right from the 1970s and onward. Escalations of political violence are influenced by stimuli and restrictions from many actors. CE dynamics between the extreme Right and Left does not take place in an isolated space—it interacts with a range of societal factors, such as the State—e.g. anti-terror legislation, CVE strategies, policing of protest and general law and order. Furthermore, political opportunities in the form of access to formal democratic platforms can have both a radicalizing and de-radicalizing impact. A further strong factor is transnational dynamics. This includes transfer of ideology, repertoires, alliances, as well as logistic support. Last, but not least, media is a factor, and increasingly social media.

The 1970-80s: the epoch of Left-extremist violence

The Danish scenario in the 1970s only partly conforms to the CE framework of mutual radicalization, for two main reason, one was the strong transnational framework of the Cold War and the second was the collective memory of the Nazi occupation during the Second World War. This reinforced a popular resilience against Right extremist violence and mobilization, which arguably remains an important explanation for why this has remained a fringe phenomenon in Denmark. Despite recurrent attempts to adapt to the new trends, the National Socialist (NS) Right remained isolated and inactive until the last decade of the cold war.

The extreme Left followed a different trajectory, with tactics that

shifted between peaceful and violent means. The Soviet loyal Danish communists abstained from political violence and pursued a parliamentary strategy supported by extra-parliamentary means. As such, they served as a moderating break on the extreme Left, because violent means risked harming their parliamentary aspirations and simply because Moscow subscribed such a popular strategy.

Except from occasional violent plots, the extreme Left remained relatively inactive until the late 1960s. But as in many Western European countries, the youth rebellion became a watershed in terms of political violence. The radicalization of the New Left, which was fueled by violent protests against the war in Vietnam, provided revolutionary stimuli for violent strategies. The emerging anti-imperialist movement consisted of smaller extremist fractions, each with their particular brand of revolutionary modus operandi. This spilled over into riots, occasional bombings and attacks on political opponents. Although Denmark is generally considered a peaceful country, this is a truth with some moderations. Political violence, ranging from street violence to terrorism was a recurrent phenomenon in the second half of the Cold War. Many of these attacks were not 'home-grown' and could be attributed to foreign conflicts, represented by militant Palestinian, Armenian, Kurdish and Turkish extremist groups. However, some of these cooperated with homegrown Danish groups, notably the terror group known as the Blekinge Street Gang, which from 1972 to 1989 procured weapons and robbed banks for the PFLP. In 1988, members of the group killed a policeman in the wake of a robbery in Copenhagen. It was these strong transnational dynamics that primarily fueled Left extremism and violent radicalization during the Cold War.

This trajectory kept its momentum throughout the 1970s and spilled over into the 1980s, where a new generation of radicalized house squatters (BZ) appeared. As the BZ radicalized, these evolved into experienced street fighters who armed with powerful slingshots, Molotov

cocktails, cobblestones and barricades, proactively engaged police in street battles. By the end of the 1980s, the core of this movement had radicalized to the brink of terrorism e.g. committing sabotage against companies, engaging in solidarity with the Baader-Meinhof Group and flirting with the terrorist methods used by urban guerrilla groups.

The 1990s: revival of the extreme right and anti-fascist violence

By the late 1980s, the BZ had lost its violent momentum. The Danish police had learned to adapt to the innovative street fighters. Furthermore, the BZ was an urban movement that grew out of the worn-down working-class neighborhoods of Copenhagen. As the Danish economy slowly began to recover from the deep crisis of the 1970s, these areas entered a phase of rapid gentrification, which diminished these groups' recruitment potential. By the 1990s, this was amplified by the end of the Cold War and a stalemate of the revolutionary Left. The extreme Left needed a new fighting cause that could galvanize the movement—this was to be anti-Fascism.

This reorientation merged with a transnational awakening of the NS movement, which gained momentum from a concurrent violent skinhead subculture. This likewise affected Norway and Sweden, which also struggled with violence committed by a resurgent NS movement. In the late 1970s, the Danish NS had reorganized under the umbrella of the Danish National Socialist Movement (DNSB), which gained international leverage thanks to party leader Povl Riis-Knudsen's position as the general secretary of the transnational NS network WUNS. Furthermore, the strategic position between Germany and Sweden made the Danish NS a logistic hub for extremist propaganda. This generated economic resources for a more proactive public mobilization. Fermented by their German and Swedish allies, the DNSB now initiated a campaign

of public marches and establishing strongholds in the form of fortified houses.

The extreme Left had not been seriously challenged by fascist groups since 1945. This perceived threat triggered a violent counter mobilization, which entwined with the anti-Fascism of the moderate Left. The decisive turning point came in 1992 were a parcel bomb killed a member of the Trotskyite group International Socialists. The perpetrators were never caught, but it is considered plausible that they were to be found in the emerging Combat 18 and Blood & Honour. The deadly attack sparked public outrage and made possible a broad alliance under a common anti-Fascist umbrella. This created a cooperative space for peaceful as well as violent anti-Fascism. The later manifested in Anti-Fascist Action (AFA), which grew out of the violent sections of the BZ movement in 1992.

The DNSB's attempts to become a street-movement could only take place with support from Swedish, German and English allies. Even so, these were greatly outnumbered by counter-demonstrations and could not be completed without the massive police protection. The NS' fortified houses did not herald a lasting revival of the DNSB. Instead, these houses became a powerful magnet for a short-lived surge in anti-Fascist violence and mobilization. Despite the political violence, the threat from the new NS never evolved into a threat to political stability. However, it is a strong case for the relevance of CE processes in the radicalization of extreme Right and Left groups, showing how both extremes use each other to support political aims and galvanize militants within the groups.

The extreme Left had success in propagating the anti-Fascist violence as a last stand defense of democracy and minorities against the alleged inertia of the Danish police and parties. But while violent anti-fascism subsequently was narrated as an explanation for the defeat of the NS

(including in some researchers' conclusions) it actually helped to create a counter-narrative of NS victimhood, in which they narrated themselves as a chastised political minority. This ultimately reinforced NS recruitment, mobilization and propaganda. As such, this is a case of CE in which the two sides efficiently used the threat of 'the other' to counter-mobilize and propagate.

The 2000s: rise of counter-jihadism and crisis of anti-fascism

By the end of the 1990s, the NS movement's crisis was compounded by external pressures and in particular transnational changes. As a new century approached, the skinhead-movement had lost its subcultural appeal and internal strife over leadership and resources, combined with an evolving digital revolution, made the Danish NS expendable as a physical hub for white power-propaganda. The DNSB managed to preserve one fortified house, but it could no longer mobilize for public manifestations. Hence, the NS movement ceased to exist as something that the counterpart could mobilize against.

The Danish extreme Right had never been a unified movement. Concurrent with the NS an ultra-nationalist tradition had evolved into a much more complex phenomenon. These protests were originally dominated by the anti-immigrant Danish Association. Contrary to the NS, they abstained from violence and instead lobbied and interacted with the emerging populist Right, embodied at first in the Progress Party and later the Danish People's Party. But the extreme Left responded with the traditional militancy that had been applied against the NS. However, both this and an attempt to associate the anti-immigrant movement with the NS had little success. The extreme Left had no efficient response to a movement, which primarily utilized the media and the democratic framework to pursue their political objectives.

After 2000, political violence decreased significantly in Denmark. The remaining Right groups lacked activist appeal and public manifestations became rare. However, the counter-jihadist current gave way to new anti-Islamist groups and sentiments. Groups such as Stop the Islamization of Denmark and the Danish Defence League emerged in 2005 and 2010. These broader transnational trends interacted with a homegrown Danish Right extremism.

The crisis in the DNSB erupted into open conflict over succession of leadership, which caused fragmentation of the party. In 2011, breakaway rebels formed the Danes' Party (DP). Despite public denial of their NS heritage, the DP was in reality a modernized NS party, modeled on the German NPD, Greek Golden Dawn and Swedish The Swedes' Party. Six years of attempts to move beyond the inertia of the NS movement followed, but was met with stiff resistance from the media and political opponents. Hence, in the summer 2017, the closure of the party was announced. This coincided roughly with the emergence of Nordfront, the Danish chapter of the Scandinavian Nordic Resistance Movement (NMR), which merged traditionalist NS ideology with a certain renewal of organization and political practice.

Much had also changed on the extreme Left. The heir to the BZ, the autonomous movement, with its militant black clothing and helmets, and armed with homemade truncheons and Molotov cocktails, was a violent subculture, which lasted less than a decade. Even though this ceased to exist as a unified movement by the mid-1990s, the remnants could still occasionally mobilize for violence into the first years of the new century.

One way to offset the crisis the activist focus was shifted towards the defense of the squatted house Ungdomshuset. This strategically shifted between peaceful means of protest and wild outbursts of violence and destruction, and it lasted to the final demolition of the house in 2007. Eventually, in 2007, the Danish police raided the house. The occupants

had long been anticipating this and had stockpiled homemade siege-weapons for a small war. But they had not expected the police's anti-terror unit's entry from above, abseiling from helicopter. The squatters where caught by complete surprise and years of conflict ended without bloodshed.

However, enraged supporters responded by building barricades and engaging in street fights, where 436 rioters were arrested. In the following period, an unfamiliar peace descended upon Copenhagen. One immediate consequence was that a historically significant source of political violence had vanished. It is likely that this hub of Left extremism would have perished anyway, e.g. due to the rapid gentrification and changing generational dynamics. However, the demolition cut this timeline short.

Cumulative extremism in Denmark

As I have illustrated, traditional CE, did not apply to the scenario of the 1970s, where strong transnational dynamics and revolutionary violence dominated. However, the CE can help explain the Left-Right violence from the late 1980s until the beginning of the new millennium. Today, Denmark stands out in terms of a comparatively low level of Left- and Right-wing extremist violence. Furthermore, public debates about immigration have put pressure on moderate Leftist parties, which generally have embraced stricter rhetoric and policies, this again seem to have taken some steam out of mobilization on the militant Left, which was hinged on broader alliances. The extreme Right has been affected by similar political dynamics. The relative success of the populist Right in effect channeled anti-immigration policies and anti-Muslim sentiment it into the parliamentary arena. The populist Right has nothing to gain by associating with fringe Right extremist groups, which have remained isolated and weak. Still, this could be offset by renewed forms of activism, driven by ideological changes like identitarian politics on

culture and ethnicity and renovated antifeminist stances, combined with transformations following the ongoing digitalization and diffusion of social media.

Provided by University of Oslo

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