

# FROM SPARKS TO FIRE

*TEXT: MICHAELA HUTTERER*

Stormed parliaments or racist attacks in the US and Germany: politically motivated violence is on the rise. Most of the time, these incidents seem to be isolated, the actions of individual perpetrators. Nevertheless, researchers do recognize terrorist patterns in these acts. James Angove at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Crime, Security and Law is exploring the question of how this “stochastic terrorism” arises and how it can be countered.



A pre-announced attack: the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, by supporters of the outgoing U.S. President Donald Trump was anything but spontaneous and random. As early as December, Trump had called for protests on that day; in his speech on January 6, he then sent those present straight to the Capitol.

“Stop the steal,” an angry crowd chants as they make their way to the Capitol in Washington D.C. at around 12:45 p.m. on January 6th, 2021. In a moment, the count of the Electoral College ballots during a joint session of the Congress will begin, and Joe Biden will be confirmed as President-elect. Earlier, the election’s loser, Donald Trump, had spent over an hour railing against Democrats and “weak Republicans,” fueling the memorable narrative of the stolen election. He exhorted then Vice President Mike Pence to “do the right thing” in the Senate and called on his faithful to give “weak Republicans [...] the pride and courage they need to take back our country.” At the end, he sends his supporters across Pennsylvania Ave. to the Capitol, and he himself drives back to the White House. Hours later, he appeals to them via Twitter to “remain peaceful.” By then, his supporters had already spent two hours

battling with security guards, storming barricades, smashing windows, and chanting their way through the building: “This house is ours,” they shout, filming themselves. “Stop the steal.”

“When political violence occurs, it is often tempting to point the finger at those who committed the violent act,” James Angove, senior researcher at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Crime, Security and Law in Freiburg, explains. “However, on closer examination, the phenomenon of modern political violence today proves to be extremely complex.” Angove, who has a Ph. D. in philosophy, approaches the topics of terrorism and security policy through a philosophical lens at the Max Planck Institute. What is it that incites people to commit acts of violence against minorities, dissidents, or state institutions? Is it the charismatic



PHOTO: REUTERS / JIM URQUHART

leader who has a hypnotic effect on their followers? Or is it their rhetoric, which calls for violence vaguely and indirectly in coded language, often referred to as “dog whistles” and thus remains below the threshold of criminal incitement?

“We are seeing an increase in political violence worldwide, which is characterized by this indirectness,” James Angove explains. These acts of violence can be statistically modelled and predicted, but individual, concrete cases cannot. The acts appear random, disjointed, and seemingly without any discernible network or group identity. Nevertheless, a pattern can be discerned. This phenomenon is being discussed under the term “stochastic terrorism,” which refers to the terrorist strategy of using extremist narratives, lies, conspiracy theories, and hate speech in the media and online fo-

ums to instigate physical violence against individuals, groups, or the state itself. There is no question that Donald Trump incited the January 6 attack on the US Capitol two years ago with his speech. In 845 pages, the House committee collected evidence of Trump’s involvement and recommended that the Department of Justice bring criminal charges against the former president, accusing him of a “multi-part conspiracy” for issuing false claims regarding election results, obstructing congressional proceedings, conspiracy against the US government, and inciting violent sedition in a precedent-setting case.

Whether there will be a prosecution or even a sentence is a matter of debate. Trump wisely never shouted “storm the Capitol” and has always denied any intellectual authorship. In light of this, the committee members conducted more than 1,000 interviews, held 10 public hearings – some even on prime-time TV – and collected more than a million documents that shed light on Trump’s role on the day of and in the run-up to the events of January 6. So, what is Trump’s legal culpability? Is he as much a perpetrator as the more than 800 individual Capitol rioters who have been investigated so far (according to media reports)? Is he obliged to take responsibility for the violence?

## Kindred spirits meet on the Internet

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For experts, this precisely demonstrates the pattern of stochastic terrorism: individuals seemingly direct their violence against the state system, its representatives or institutions, or against people of a certain race, origin, religion, sexual orientation, or political persuasion – spontaneously, in isolation and without any connection to known terrorist groups. “In terrorism research, the idea of the socially isolated lone perpetrator who does not seem to belong to any political group has persisted for a long time,” Angove reports. But in the meantime, there are findings such as those of a research group at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle on the development of terrorist groups that point in a different direction: right-wing violence forms not only in groups with strong personal ties, such as the traditional neo-Nazi scene or the *Reichsbürger* movement, but also in Internet subcultures. This entails like-minded people exchanging ideas primarily online in forums and via messenger services, explains Michael Fürstenberg, a political scientist and member of the research group.

When an 18-year-old shot ten people and injured three others outside and inside a supermarket in the US city of Buffalo in mid-May 2022, he streamed his crime for at least two minutes before the streaming service



stopped the broadcast. Investigators believe the suspect had a racist motive – eleven of the thirteen victims were people of color. On the internet, the perpetrator referred to right-wing conspiracy theories and previous acts. U.S. President Joe Biden condemned acts like this “perpetrated in the name of a repugnant white nationalist ideology.” This white supremacist terror is based primarily on one narrative: the so-called “Great Replacement” or “White Replacement.” This is understood by adherents of right-wing ideologies to be the deliberate and orchestrated “replacement” of “white” Americans and Europeans by immigrants. It has also been described using the term “immigrant invasion,” or in German “*Umvolkung*” or “*Personalwechsel*.” According to media reports, the Buffalo shooter was a fan of Fox News, whose former anchor Tucker Carlson is said to have spoken of “replacement theories” more than 400 times before the shooting. The perpetrator who killed 51 people in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019 also referred to this right-wing doctrine, just like the perpetrators of the El Paso (2019) and Pittsburgh attacks (2018), and before that the Utøya murderer in Norway (2011).

24 This racist doctrine is not a new one and has frequently shaped U.S. immigration policy over the past 150 years, experts say. Ideological and pseudo-scientific texts have often been used to justify social resentment and methods of discrimination, such as Madison Grant’s book *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), which is said to have influenced Roosevelt’s policy and entered into petty dinner conversation in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s social novel *The Great Gatsby*.

According to a May 2022 AP Research poll, one-third of Americans surveyed believe in “the threat of replacement.” The FBI sees domestic terrorism as one of the main threats for the future. Attacks such as the one in Buffalo are classified as belonging to this form of terrorism. In total, the FBI investigated 850 cases of domestic terrorism in 2019. Yet white populist hatred is certainly not a uniquely U.S. problem. In 1973, Frenchman Jean Respaill wrote *Le Camp des Saints*, a cult book of the new right, almost at the same time as Jean-Marie Le Pen founded the Front National. In 2011, Renaud Camus once again addressed the fear of immigration with his book *Le Grand Remplacement*. Last August, Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orban spoke openly at the annual summer camp of his right-wing populist Fidesz party about the danger of “replacement by migration” and “a multiracial world.” “The phenomenon

should be seen as a global one – not least because an effective ‘influencer’ can act and broadcast from anywhere to spark this political violence,” James Angove explains. “Technological means and cultural trends also enable this form of violence in the UK and Germany – or in Brazil, as witnessed in January after Jair Bolsonaro was voted out of office.”

But why is extremist hatred able to spread so widely? A study by the Max Planck Institute for Human Development shows that, especially in established democracies such as Europe and the USA, digital media foster polarization and populism and hence have a destabilizing effect. According to the study, trust in politics and democratic institutions such as parliaments is particularly damaged. Trust in the traditional media is also on the decline. Crucially, this also increases the overall

level of ignorance within society. After all, many social media users obtain their information according to the mantra “news finds me”: they no longer actively inform themselves using a variety of sources, instead expecting important news to reach them via their network and sophisticated algorithms. This promotes exchange among like-minded people within their own “echo chambers,” and as a result, the danger of radicalization increases and the restraining threshold for openly articulated hatred decreases.

In this context, acts of violence that seem random but exhibit terrorist characteristics flourish. According to studies by the Terrorism Research Group at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, there is growing international recognition of an impending wave of right-wing terror. The researchers are working on the basis of a model developed by

the U.S. political scientist David Rapoport. According to this model, terrorism has developed since 1880 in four overlapping waves, each lasting about 30 to 40 years. The anarchist wave (until the 1920s) was followed by an anti-colonial wave that lasted from the 1920s to the 1960s. The wave of the New Left (1960 to 1990) was followed from 1980 by the current, religiously motivated wave of Islamist terror. This is likely to weaken gradually, and a new era could be about to begin. “The strengthening of anti-liberal and right-wing extremist forces is a trend that has already become apparent with the rise of populists like Victor Orbán and Donald Trump and has been confirmed in the recent attacks in Christchurch, Halle, and Hanau,” Carolin Görzig, head of the group, wrote in a feature article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 2020.

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## SUMMARY

The strategy behind stochastic terrorism is to use mostly far-right extremist narratives to spark physical violence against individuals, groups, or the state itself.

Social networks and increasingly sensationalist reporting in the traditional media facilitate the spread of such acts and fuel the ideology behind them.

The research recommends strengthening democracy, ensuring understanding between hostile camps, and fostering people’s resilience to incitement online.

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How can we respond to such a wave of unpredictable terror? “There are several options,” says James Angove. For him, the worst approach is to hastily tighten laws, as demonstrated by the fear-driven anti-terrorism legislation passed in the U.S. in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, which increased Islamophobia and in turn fueled the spiral of violence. “Stochastic terrorism is an expression of authoritarian violence within a democracy,” Angove recognizes. Against this, he says, the most effective countermeasures is strengthening democracy and reinforcing its underlying values. These include, first and foremost, the importance of truth in political discourse. “Stochastic violence is a consequence of the crisis of truth, reason, and deliberation,” Angove says. In speeches, targets are maligned, dehumanized, and often portrayed as a threat to the safety of the audience; conspiracy theories help to reinforce or characterize this threat.

## Media as an accelerant

“In addition, governments have always used a kind of moral panic or fear of ‘folk devils’ to justify authoritarian decisions,” Angove says. According to studies by the British sociologist Stuart Hall, the British government created a supposedly new enemy image of the “mugger,” essentially young and black, in the early 1970s in order to enforce stricter laws in their own country. Thanks to several reports in the media, the population soon classified muggers as a new and growing threat. The government thus achieved a broad social consensus to tighten the law, despite the fact that existing laws already provided for

the punishment of robbery. This mechanism is also used by radical leaders, who create ideological images of their enemies and opponents and lower the inhibition threshold for violence through consistent demonization and even dehumanization.

Angove sees great importance in promoting factual exchange between opposing camps, ensuring that conspiracy theories find less of an audience, rabble-rousers are unmasked, and rhetorical excesses of political personalities on the web meet with greater public criticism. Each and every individual must take responsibility for this, as must the media. In particular, they must not become the accomplices of right-wing assassins by reporting uncritically, insensitively, or through a sensationalist lens. Perpetrators seek attention for their deeds and look to bolster their reputation among peers by filming their acts and leaving footprints behind. By showing film clips, naming perpetrators, or even describing their confused and incoherent thoughts about their acts of terror as a “manifesto,” the media behave – consciously or unconsciously – exactly as the perpetrator hopes they would. A report in the evening news on TV, or at least in the online news, promises enduring notoriety. Reporting becomes an accelerant.

At the same time, citizens themselves must become resilient against hate speech and hostility to democracy. Science makes an important contribution to this. It reveals patterns, recognizes connections, and seeks solutions without rashly restricting freedoms.

[www.mpg.de/podcasts/sicherheit](http://www.mpg.de/podcasts/sicherheit) (in German)

GRAPHIC: MICHAEL FÜRSTENBERG BASED ON RAPOPORT, D.C.: THE FOUR WAVES OF MODERN TERRORISM: IN: ATTACKING TERRORISM: ELEMENTS OF A GRAND STRATEGY (EDS. CRONIN, A. K.; LUDES, J. M.). GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY PRESS, WASHINGTON, D.C. (2004)

The ups and downs of violence: terrorism has gone through several waves, each lasting about 40 years, according to political scientist David Rapoport. The terrorism research group in Halle sees signs of an impending wave of right-wing violence.

- ❶ Continuation/renewal of the religious wave
- ❷ Waning of the religious wave
- ❸ New wave (right-wing extremism?)
- Cross-wave organizations (e.g., IRA, PLO)

