Book review: ‘The rage: the vicious circle of Islamist and far-right extremism’

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Julia Ebner's new book explores the symbiotic relationship between Islamist and (other) far right extremism, how Islamist and anti-Muslim narratives feed each other, and how we can challenge both.

While its roots predate 2001, Islamist terrorism has plagued the world since the turn of the millennium. This brutality has found a place in our media and captured the imagination of many western people. This ideology, inextricably opposed to secular, democratic values has not only shocked many, but appealed to a surprising number of people, inspiring followers, violence and even music videos. However, the counter-movement that mirrors it, one of nationalism, racial supremacy and isolationism, has not found such a unique spot in the public imagination. White nationalism and racism have always existed in Europe, but few understand how such groups are becoming energised in light of this recent onslaught of terrorist activity, and fewer still appreciate the symbiotic relationship that sustains far right groups and Islamists, and how both extremes nurture the same toxic narrative.

Considering that Julia Ebner has written 210 pages on some of the most unpleasant ideas, organisations and people in Europe, and indeed the world, she has achieved a remarkable feat in making *The Rage* superbly readable. In her writing she utilises her expert background in counter-extremism to present both the data and her conclusions in a considered and insightful fashion. Whilst the topic means this is not a fun read *per se*, it is both fascinating and informative. In fact, it can become unnervingly easy to absorb large amounts of information very quickly from her writing, and only later does the unsettling realisation that she is describing the very fabric of civil society being in jeopardy, actually hit home.

In Ebner's introduction she borrows from Yuval Harari, co-opting the idea of our society as being defined and governed by a series of narratives. Ebner then sets about the unnerving task of proving to the reader that "as extremists have been good at telling stories about corrupted political institutions, rigged democratic systems and 'fake' media, today's world order is in danger of crashing". Yet when these narratives are deconstructed, for all their irreconcilable differences, they also possess striking similarities. Ebner pays relatively little attention to the specificities of Islamists' religious beliefs or the death cult theology that empowers suicide bombing, but she makes an insightful observation about what is identical between these groups. They are both victims of a fabricated 'war' between Islam and all Muslims, and the West, both fighting to restore the glory of a mythological past age. For the Islamist, Ebner describes the objective and the methods for implementing Sharia universally, and for the nationalists she identifies many strains of desire to return to a 'pre-immigrant' Europe.

It is a deeply detailed and meticulously fair *who's who* in the world of extremism and elucidates both the ideas and the people at the heart of these issues. Not only does she give encyclopaedic detail regarding a plethora of groups and their connections, but she also concisely explains how stated non-violent extremist groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and the EDL, have both ideological and material connections to groups espousing explicitly violent readings of these ideologies, and many of those who start down this path are, often unwittingly, ferried to their dismal climax.

Despite the deeply despicable nature of many of the people she both researches and encounters, Ebner remains sympathetic throughout, honouring her introductory promise not to dehumanise anybody. Not only does she take a large amount of interest in the lives and actions of those radicalised, but also pays careful attention to the conditions outside of their control that led them down this path. Specifically, in her penultimate chapter *The Geography of Hate* she explores the cities in the world where reciprocal acts of violence and intimidation fuel the growth of both extremes, and the horrible social conditions in which these people have grown up. Perhaps Ebner could be more careful about avoiding presenting racists and religious fanatics as merely the victims of socio-economic disparity and personal hostility, but her deeply detailed analysis drives home a conclusion she made very early in her journey: "If I had been taught a different narrative, I would have thought, acted and reacted differently." It is far easier to sell someone with the 'wrong' background the idea of a martyr's paradise or immigrant scapegoats.

Ebner's book powerfully explains a phenomenon that is challenging the modern world. Increasing radicalisation and a disappearing centre ground, both socially and politically, risks pushing our European identity to breaking point, and we will not like what comes crashing out. What she makes absolutely clear is that the solution to extremism is not more extremism. Ebner also convincingly demonstrates that, should the West seek solace in its reactionary far right and the nationalists behind it, and its Muslim minority put their faith in fundamentalists and identity politics, this will only fuel the cycle and raise the stakes. The solution – reclaiming the centre ground, a rational space for dialogue and a rejection of hatred – is precisely what she has achieved with this book. Certainly her work will, at points, chill you to the core when you are forced to confront some of the inhumanity that exists within our societies, but it will also leave you feeling hopeful, and that the world would be a better place if just a few more people would read it.

Buy 'The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism' by Julia Ebner

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