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Going Underground: Excitement and Edgework in Violent Extremism

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Abstract

This paper explores the emotional reactions of violent extremists as they undertake various backstage performative acts. Deception and evasion tactics are sometimes implemented by violent extremists to avoid detection and protect their networks or plans. This demonstrates the agentic power of negative (background, missing, latent or hidden) phenomena in driving social change: actors can exercise resistance while apparently 'doing nothing'. On the other hand, empirical research, although scant, demonstrates that alongside some of the traditional considerations around terrorism, there also needs to be reflection of the phenomenological foreground and the existential attractions that often govern people's emotions. Building on the work of Simmel, we consider excitement to examine the increased existential attractiveness, fascination, and allure of social activities that are held out of reach. We argue that this could encourage people to engage in what Lyng describes as edgework, whereby members perform in highly dangerous, transgressive, and violent activities. This paper explores the fascination, mystery, and seduction of remaining undetected and aims to provide insights into the complex interplay between edgework, excitement, and violent extremism.

Introduction

The concept of nothing has recently come to the attention of sociologists. Following Scott's (2018, 2019, 2020a, 2020b) original theorisation of negative social phenomena as being subjectively meaningful, other scholars have explored the significance of non-events and lost experiences. Not taking direct action or publicly displaying a role can be just as important and consequential as more overtly performative identity work. For example, Banister (2025) has recently explored the meanings of material non-consumption and Leinonen (2025) studied the experiences of older people during the pandemic who refused to be labelled as weak and vulnerable. In this discussion we expand the theoretical framework to criminology, focusing in particular on the topic of violent extremism. Although, of course, terrorism is a dramatic form of action, we want to examine the ways in which extremists seek to remain undetected. As we shall argue, they use techniques and strategies to conceal their intentions, behaviour and identities, in order to give the false appearance of 'doing nothing'. This demonstrates how powerfully destructive forces can be effectively disguised by apparently innocuous forms of social life.

In the following discussion we begin by setting out the theoretical framework of the sociology of nothing, distinguishing between acts of commission and omission (Scott, 2019). We then detail how this can be applied to the actions (or inactions) of violent extremists: for example, through the strategic non-disclosure of extremist sympathies, encrypted online communication,

and social disengagement from the groups in the off-line world. Drawing on the work of Katz (1988), we argue that it is important to examine the phenomenological foreground of subjective meanings and motivations that make terrorists activity exciting and seductive. We argue that Simmel's (1908) theory of secrecy is relevant to understanding the appeal of restricted knowledge and why these actors might decide not to reveal information about themselves. Managing these deviant aspects of identity can be exciting but upholding this performance requires hard work. Here we suggest that Lyng's (1990) concept of edgework is useful in explaining the attractions of this form of existential labour. This suggests a paradox whereby the appearance of doing '*nothing*' is a meaningful form of social action (Weber 1922) which may accomplish '*something*' dreadfully spectacular.

The Sociology of Nothing

Our analysis draws upon the theoretical framework of the sociology of nothing. This is an approach devised by Scott (2018, 2019, 2020a, 2020b) to explore the realm of negative phenomena: things that do not empirically exist or manifest but yet are still subjectively meaningful to the individual. For example, we can experience missing people, lost opportunities, surrendered aspects of a previous lifestyle, or frustrated career ambitions. Scott argues that these negative phenomena can be just as important as positive ones (things that do exist or happen) in shaping self-identity. This demonstrates the analytical process of reverse-marking (Brekhus 1998), which brings latent, unnoticed or recessive forms into the foreground of the perceptual field. Phenomenologically, subjects relate towards these objects through noetic acts (Husserl 1913) in memory, imagination, and consciousness. These acts include wishing, missing, waiting, yearning, hoping, and remembering (Scott 2020b).

Scott understands these negative phenomena through a symbolic interactionist lens, inverting Blumer's (1969) concept of symbolic social objects. That is, instead of asking which 'someones' and 'somethings' figure prominently in a person's life, we should turn our attention to the 'no ones' and 'nothings' that they care about. These could include no-body figures, no-thing material objects, non-selves, non-events or no-where places. An individual may orient their thoughts, feelings, and behaviour towards these negative symbolic social objects as central features of their identity, building their life-story narrative around them (cf. McAdams 1993). This in turn can evoke counterfactual emotions about the alternate (im)possibility. For example, a grieving widower may reminisce sadly about his wife, while a young woman who cannot afford to attend university may feel resentful at her foreclosed future paths.

Sociologists have shown how, conventionally, people tell biographical stories in terms of real or actual episodes: positive formation, development, and 'becoming' themselves (Becker 1963, Strauss 1959). However, Scott (2019) argues that, through practices of reverse biographical identity work (cf. Holstein and Gubrium 1995) we can tell equally poignant tales about alternate, unmade selves and thwarted *non*-becoming. Narrative scholars often focus on accounts of lived experience, but sometimes it is our *unlived* experiences that personally matter more. In Scott's (2019) previous work, she showed how tales of lost experience fell into thematic categories, such as silence, invisibility, emptiness, and stillness.

Scott argues that '*nothing*' is a meaningful form of social action (cf. Weber 1922), which can be accomplished in two ways. Acts of commission involve intentional decisions not to do something or become someone. These could be acts of refusal, rejection, avoidance or surrender. Commission can also occur through the actions of others or be external circumstance, such as losing someone or having something taken away. Examples of 'doing nothing' by commission include turning down a job offer, boycotting a product, ending a relationship or gender transitioning. Acts of omission occur more passively, by default, and without conscious intention. This is where we end up if we fail to do anything or nothing happens to us: there is a lack, deficiency or absence, and a sense of being without. Some omissive objects are personally significant and can be highly meaningful, whereas others only become relevant when noticed and questioned by others. Examples of 'non-doing' by omission include agnosticism, asexuality and being involuntarily childless.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, Scott (2019) suggests that 'nothing' is a social process that is routinely accomplished through everyday encounters at the micro-level. For example, significant others (Mead 1934) such as family or friends may have a dissuasive influence, leading us away from paths we might otherwise have taken. Individuals may also look to their peers and local networks to learn how to interpret the meaning of different action paths, before deciding which of them (not) to take. Cultural script also provides normative guides to conduct, by teaching us that certain activities will be regarded as deviant or conformist. This may lead some actors to withdraw from mainstream communities and associate more with a marginalised group. Processes of exclusion and marginalisation can thus emerge at the micro-social level and be negotiated between social actors.

Building on this theoretical approach we explore how the sociology of nothing can be applied to violent extremism. It is possible to imagine how people who are involved in this form of behaviour may engage in both omissive and commissive acts in relation to negative phenomena. For example, they may intentionally not attend a planned attack or choose to leave a group or an organisation. Omissively they may not be aware of certain ideologies or discourses that would lead them towards action. However, the focus of this article is on how and why actors may wish to *appear* to be 'doing nothing' when in fact something else may really be the case. Beneath their calm and conventional manner, they may be strategically engaging in (violent) extremist activities. This resonates with Goffman's dramaturgical theory (1959) which considers how social actors engage with impression management by performing versions of their identities 'frontstage' which may be contradicted by the 'backstage' reality. The appearance of doing nothing can be seen as a sophisticated and exciting process. As Lakhani and Hardie-Bick (2020) have argued, extremists who are determined to cause mass destruction are usually very quiet about their intentions. They keep everything undercover. Their parents and friends may have no idea they have joined a terrorist network and may have no idea what they are planning. As we will show, maintaining this level of secrecy can be exciting and may be an important motivational factor.

Nothingness and Violent Extremism

The concept of violent extremism has, over the past few decades, proliferated and become ingrained within mainstream political, media, and societal discourse. A dominant theme here is the consideration that this type of involvement and these types of actions can occur both overtly and covertly. Recent, and not so recent, geopolitical developments have seen a shift of the Overton window and the increasing normalisation and mainstreaming of (particularly) far-right violent extremism, with the emboldening of extremists and extremism both online and offline. From the 'golden age' of Islamic State and their open use of Twitter for communication (Berger and Morgan, 2015), attack planning, recruitment, financing, and general community building, to far-right extremists use of prominent social media platforms such as 'X' (Conway et al., 2023), to the formation and street mobilisation of far-right violent extremist groups in the US and worldwide including the Proud Boys and the congregation of various far-right (including violent) extremists in large-scale action in Charlottesville (Winter, 2017), to the open recruitment tactics employed by these groups (Miller-Ildress, 2020), violent extremists have at various points in recent history felt encouraged and safe enough to overtly display their ideologies and hatred, animosity, and hostile action (including violence) towards out-groups (see Berger, 2018 for a discussion on in-group/out-groups).

However, much of this type of activity remains covert. Within the more recent scholarly discourse, there is much emphasis on the online element in this regard. This can be demonstrated through the strategic use of anonymity in terms of usernames, profile pictures, and other sensitive information, on both mainstream online spaces such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, alongside more obscure sites including Telegram, the chan boards, and specific far-right spaces such as Parlour. Although these markers may indicate allegiance towards a particular group or ideology, they mask the users' identities. The implementation of online protection strategies such as virtual private networks (VPNs) or shifting (all or some) activities to the dark-web also hold much value to extremists. However, as appropriately argued by those such as Whittaker (2022a; 2022b), even though there has been a general proliferation of the

use of online spaces by the public more generally and (violent) extremists alike, the offline should not be undervalued with many seeing a more blended online-offline reality, particularly through the increasing use of mobile technologies where the internet is accessible 'on the go'. Wider empirical research has demonstrated the importance of offline concealment. Within Lakhani's (2014) conversations with former jihadists, the secrecy of activities related to an extremist nature were a prominent feature throughout the research, as exemplified by the following respondent quotes:

"...[it's] very exciting the fact that nobody else knows...and that kind of ego thing where 'look I'm doing something really cool', and also the fact that [you] know sometimes that the police or authorities are on the trail and trying to evade all that..."

"...many meetings took place, we went to many places, clandestine meetings, very secretive, very private...after a while it became exciting to the point where it was adventurous, you know, something different...it was like basically what we were looking for."

Here, Scott's (2018, 2019, 2020a, 2020b) sociology of nothing becomes particularly relevant. As discussed earlier, particularly acts of commission in this regard refer to the deliberate and conscious choices people make to not do or be something. Within extremist networks, individuals may engage in forms of strategic inaction, where withholding information, suppressing visible signs of ideological commitment, or avoiding detection become integral to their involvement. These are proactive actions where individuals intentionally avoid engaging in behaviour or adopting identities that are expected or normative within their social context. These forms of non-action are not passive but represent calculated efforts to navigate social structures, evade scrutiny, and maintain operational secrecy. The ability to appear as though 'nothing' is happening is often central to the security and sustainability of extremist activities. Despite this avoidance, these acts are still significant because they communicate a form of social agency and have meaning within a broader social structure. This aligns with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework, where the 'frontstage' self conforms to social expectations while the 'backstage' reality is one of hidden meaning. Thus, in many instances these people can exist within a liminal space. The strategic non-disclosure of extremist sympathies, whether online through encrypted communications or offline through social disengagement, exemplifies how commission functions as an active form of participation. The cultivation of particular identities or the concealment of them allows people to blend into mainstream society while privately maintaining extremist convictions, both within online, offline, and blended settings and spaces.

Thus, the sociology of nothing not only compels academics to move towards a more complex framework to understand extremism, but to also theoretically focus on an aspect that is often taken as somewhat obvious. It urges recognition of the ways in which absence, concealment, and strategic non-engagement shape extremist activity. Whether, as mentioned, through avoiding state surveillance, selectively withholding affiliations, exercising anonymity, or maintaining a facade of normalcy, these acts of non-doing are not mere voids but are instead meaningful and consequential choices that sustain extremist movements. As demonstrated above within the empirical quotes from Lakhani's research (see Lakhani, 2014; Lakhani and Hardie-Bick, 2020), these types of tactics are not only essential and instrumental but can also be psychologically and socially rewarding. The thrill of deception, something referred to as 'sneaky thrills' by Jack Katz (1988), and the sense of belonging within a covert network all point towards the value of the existential attractions of violent extremism, urging a stronger consideration of the phenomenological foreground.

Katz and the Phenomenological Foreground

Within his seminal work on deviance, Jack Katz (1988) makes one of the most important, yet unappreciated, reflexions on studies of understanding engagement in criminality; something that has arguably remained important throughout the years. Katz asserts that '[t]he study of crime has been preoccupied with a search for background forces...to the neglect of the positive, often

wonderful attractions within the lived experience of criminality.’ (ibid, 1988: 3) Essentially, Katz makes the argument that alongside understanding the motivations of criminality within various socio-economic (and other) criminologically well-trodden structural background factors, scholars should consider the value of the experiential ‘foreground’. Here, Katz also points out that, traditionally, much focus and prominence has been given to the psychological backgrounds of individual offenders. Within studies of radicalisation towards violent extremism also, as has been demonstrated in the numerous writings over the decades, many scholars focussed on various ‘root causes’ at the micro, meso, and macro-level (see Busher et al., 2024; Schmid, 2013). However, Katz in relation to deviance and criminality in general, and others such as Lakhani and Hardie-Bick (2020) in relation to violent extremism, stress that what is missing from the literature is the focus on perpetrators’ experiences of committing crime. Thus, there needs to be value given to the often-neglected foreground, i.e., the seductive qualities of engaging in deviance, that being the sensual and emotional aspects of crime. This is about emotions, adventure, excitement, sex, romanticism, etc., including Katz’s analogies of sexual climax with shoplifting, or the almost uncontrollable build-up of rage for some who commit murder.

By shifting attention from the background to the phenomenological foreground, Katz reveals a range of addictive feelings and sensations that serve to encourage perpetrators to engage in further criminal acts. The adrenaline rush, the intense excitement, and sense of adventure provide a series of emotional transformations and a powerful contrast to the usual, safe, predictable, and all-too-familiar mundane reality. Engaging in criminal behaviour involves taking high-consequence risks and offers the chance to negotiate boundaries between order and chaos (see Hardie-Bick, 2015; Hardie-Bick & Bonner, 2016; Lyng, 1990, 1993). Thus, Katz argues that it is the quest for adrenalin, excitement, and feelings of transcendence generated by criminal endeavours that serves to motivate further criminal acts. His contemplations invert traditional criminological concerns and demonstrates the need to pay attention to the sensual and emotional foreground factors involved in violating social expectations and committing criminal acts.

Within more recent, albeit scant, studies on violent extremism, there has been similar emphasis on the phenomenological foreground, particularly through the lens of ‘existential attractions’. Cottee and Hayward (2011: 965) discuss this at length and outline that the concept, primarily, refers to:

...a set of feelings, concerns, aspirations or desires relating to one’s moral self—to one’s being- in-the-world. It is contended here that terrorism, for some terrorists, is an existential choice concerning the kind of life they want to live. For these particular individuals, it does not make sense to say that they are “pushed” or “driven” toward terrorism by distant psychological, political or ideological forces. Rather, it is more accurate to say that they are drawn to terrorism: that they allow themselves to be seduced by its own appeal; that they seek it out on their own initiative; that they are beckoned by its own peculiar magic; and that once they give themselves over to it, they find it thrilling, compulsive, intoxicating—the elevated experience of their lives.

Fundamentally, Cottee and Hayward argue that not all people will be pushed or driven towards violent extremism by ideological factors (alone) but are pulled towards it by several existential attractions. This, in some way, relates to longstanding arguments that not all terrorists are radicalised (in our traditional understanding of the concept) and sometimes become involved for other reasons (Horgan, 2011; Borum, 2011). Ideology is, of course, not unimportant, and ideology and wider considerations of existential attractions do not need to necessarily be mutually exclusive (Lakhani, 2014). Thus, Cottee and Hayward (2011: 965) suggest there are various existential attractions that draw people to adopt a ‘life-mode or way of being’ that engages in violent extremist activities. For some violent extremists, participating in these types of groups or engaging in violence is an ‘existential choice’, a choice that is accompanied by a sense of adventure and ontological security, outlined primarily as three existential motives: the desire for excitement; the desire for ultimate meaning; and the desire for glory. It is the first of these,

i.e., the desire for excitement, that this paper has been and continues to be primarily concerned with.

Wider empirical research has also placed great emphasis on the value of the phenomenological foreground and specifically the existential attractions of excitement (see Lakhani, 2014; Lakhani and Hardie-Bick, 2020). Lakhani (2014), for example, talks about how he was particularly struck by the significance of the phenomenological foreground and excitement when interviewing former violent extremists who were once part of various jihadist networks, including al-Qaeda; the juxtaposition of on the one hand demonstrating high levels of regret for their involvement and previous actions set against the adventure and excitement displayed when talking about highly perilous situations that involve evading security services to handling weaponry:

“...there’s a chance for adventure...I got some military action and we fired guns, Kalashnikovs, M16s, hand grenades, 36mm canon and all this stuff, incredibly exciting. It would give you an adrenaline rush...”

“I was effectively a book worm...and I got some military action...I can remember the sense of adventure and you’re gonna take part in global war...so young Muslim men like many other men have that sense of adventure.”

As with Katz’s (1988) assertions, Lakhani (2014) does not ignore or place less emphasis on background factors. More so, he points to the inclusion of additional considerations relating to the often-seductive phenomenological foreground. Wider sociological and criminological literature, such as that of Simmel and Lyng, explores these concepts, particularly in the context of secrecy and excitement.

Secrecy and Excitement

This raises the question of what the phenomenological lived experience of being a violent extremist is like. We suggest that two key motivations are secrecy and excitement. These experiences have been theorised by Simmel (1908) and Goffman (1969) in different but related ways. Simmel argues that social interaction is dialectical which involves a tension between two opposing forms of practice. In relation to secrecy, Simmel argues that this may manifest as seeking a balance between wanting to know about others whilst being cautious about revealing aspects about oneself. Secrecy can serve a necessary function by protecting us from being totally known about and vulnerable to exploitation. Furthermore, sharing a secret with others can create a sense of solidarity and cohesion within a group such as a secret society. This serves to reinforce the members identity as both insiders and outsiders as they constantly reflect on the information and knowledge they share.

These ideas were developed by Goffman (1963) in his discussions of managing deviant and stigmatised identities. Goffman argues that such actors practice self-presentation and impression management through techniques of information control whereby they are careful and strategic about how much they what and how much they choose to disclose to others about their personal situation. He argues that a stigmatising attribute can be discrediting (visible and apparent) or discreditable (able to be hidden or disguised). The latter may lead to forms of secrecy as the actor is concerned not to blow their cover and give the game away. For example, a person with epilepsy may decide to not to tell anyone apart from close family and friends as they anticipate as being treated differently. In everyday life they may seek to pass undetected and hope that they will not have a seizure in public. They may seek support from two groups of significant others, the *own* (who share the stigma) and the *wise* (who do not share the stigma but are accepting and understanding).

Violent extremism is, of course, not a mundane form of everyday social behaviour. Nevertheless, some of the same ideas and principles may apply. Goffman (1969) refers to a form of conduct that he terms ‘action’, which is defined as both ‘problematic’ and ‘consequential’. Respectively this means that the outcome is uncertain and unpredictable and that the long-term

effects are fateful for self-identity. The term action describes activities that involve a practical gamble. For Goffman, 'serious action is a serious ride' (1969: 199) and can 'be found wherever the individual takes consequential chances perceived as avoidable' (1969: 145). As Goffman explains:

On the one side are the safe and silent places, the home, the well-regulated role in business, industry and the professions; on the other are all those activities that generate expression, requiring the individual to lay himself on the line and place himself in jeopardy during the passing moment (Goffman 1969: 204-205)

Whilst individuals usually aim to reduce the 'eventfulness' or 'fatefulness' of their moments, some individuals are all too willing to risk their 'future estate on what transpires in the seconds to come' (Goffman 1969: 137). As Goffman notes, these eventful activities are intentionally 'sought out' and 'embraced'. Goffman uses game theory and gambling metaphor to argue that action is strategic and tactical, even fun in the sense of being risky and thrilling. The dialectic between knowing others while avoiding being known about is reflected in interactions that push the boundaries of concealment and revelation.

In the case of violent extremism this could involve people hiding their true intentions to blend in with the crowd to appear 'normal'. For example, a suicide bomber boards a subway train with other commuters wearing an unremarkable backpack and quietly sits among other passengers before detonating the device; a perpetrator hires a van from a rental company under the guise of moving house but uses that van to run down people in a busy Christmas market. In both cases the actor 'passes' (Goffman 1963) in the front stage region of the scene while concealing their backstage motivations. Using the strategy of 'mystification' (Goffman 1959) they maintain a barrier between these two identity regions so the audiences around them have no idea of what is really going on. This explains why family and friends of the perpetrator often react with surprise and shock when they hear about the attacks. This is a character completely at odds with the person they thought they knew. This demonstrates the power of appearances. The perpetrator can appear to be doing nothing out of the ordinary whilst engaging in behaviour that is dramatically transgressive. Sometimes, these individuals will even loosen ties with family members (Wiktorowicz, 2005), as they are most likely to recognise any cognitive changes and offer what Lofland and Stark (1965) describe as 'countervailing forces' (Lakhani, 2014).

At the level of lived experience this can feel exciting, risky, and thrilling for the perpetrator. In the tactical game of strategic manoeuvres, they may feel they are several steps ahead of their opponents. They anticipate winning the game with their devious skills and knowledge. They hold the secret of their true intentions in a complex interplay of credibility and persuasion. Goffman argues that interaction questions of personal honesty or deception are not important; all that matters is the surface appearance. They need their actions to appear innocuous so that they seem to be just doing *nothing*. From the audience's perspective the definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas 1928) is that 'nothing unusual is happening' (Emerson 1970). Meanwhile for the actor the risk of being discovered creates a seductive thrill that gives an edge to their performance because the consequences of losing are so fateful. If they are detected and prevented from carrying out the attack, they would face criminal proceedings rather than glorified martyrdom. This makes their phenomenological experience exciting as they attempt to find the delicate balance between success and failure.

Edgework and Extremism

These ideas from Simmel and Goffman were developed by Lyng (1990) with his concept of edgework. Building on Hunter S. Thompson's (1967) original use of the term, he applied this to a range of activities that transgress everyday boundaries (see Lyng 2005). Lyng has defined edgework as 'the ability to maintain control over a situation that verges on complete chaos, a situation most people would regard as entirely uncontrollable' (1990: 859). These situations 'all involve a clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an ordered existence' (1990:857). For example, research applying this concept has been conducted

through empirical studies of drug use (Reith 2005), financial risk-taking (Smith 2005), ultimate fighting (Lyng et al 2009), sadomasochism (Newmahr 2011), probation work (Mawby and Worrall 2013), skydiving and climbing (Hardie-Bick and Bonner 2016), and humanitarian assistance (Roth 2015).

The metaphor of the edge refers to maintaining the delicate balance between order and chaos, particularly when there is a serious risk of psychological damage, bodily injury, or even death. The actor experiences a seductive thrill of excitement as they bridge the gap between these two states of existence and test the limits of their capabilities. The personal challenge is to get as close to the edge as one can without falling off. As Lyng recognised, this may be appealing in the cultural context of late-modernity, with its decline in skilled labour and climate of risk aversion:

While labour becomes increasingly deskilled...skilled performance is always demanded in edgework; while most workers have little control over the conditions of their labour, "controlling the seemingly uncontrollable" is experienced in edgework; while forced concentration or mental detachment is often required in performing occupational roles, highly focused attention occurs automatically in edgework; and while the self-involved in performing institutional roles often seems artificial, an authentic, fully embodied self-arises in edgework. (Lyng 2008: 124)

At the phenomenological level this provides a particular form of enjoyment. Lyng discusses the how the exercise of precise control under such extreme, high-risk conditions can lead to feelings of personal satisfaction and a renewed sense of authentic selfhood. The activities have realistic and clear goals, require high levels of focus and concentration, and offer the opportunity to experience empowering self-determination. These features are often absent from the mundane routines of everyday life. Lyng describes how edge workers experience 'alterations in perceptions and consciousness' and a 'purified and magnified sense of self' (Lyng 1990: 860). This can be linked to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow (see Hardie-Bick 2015) in that the subjective experience during the activity involves a loss of self-consciousness and an altered sense of time.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 2002) argued that flow occurs when we are totally immersed in the moment to such an extent that we lose our usual state of reflexive self-awareness. He defines flow as:

the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 4)

Csikszentmihalyi argues that one's sense of self emerges stronger *after* rather than *during* the activity: 'what slips below the threshold of awareness is the concept of self, the information we use to represent to ourselves who we are' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 64). It is only afterwards that self-consciousness returns and allows the individual to reflect on what they have accomplished. For example, the climber who reflects on how they successfully reached the summit of a difficult route will feel a powerful sense of personal achievement. They have demonstrated to themselves and others that they have the skills to triumph over the dangerous conditions. This can make participating in high-risk activities intrinsically rewarding.

To understand violent extremism through this lens we can consider Lyng's (2008) distinction between the two parts of the concept: 'edge' and 'work'. The ability to negotiate the boundaries of the edge requires great skill, practice, concentration and determination. To control the situation and master these environments demands hard work, both physically and mentally. Violent extremists need to suppress their emotions, such as fear, and focus purely on the task at hand. They also have to manage their outward social appearances using dramaturgical skills of self-presentation and impression management (Goffman 1959). This can involve practices of hiding and concealment. For example, in the scenarios above, the man on the subway train must appear nonchalant whilst knowing that he is about to cause devastation. The person hiring a van must blend in with wider society and not let others see his backstage feelings of resentment and

disaffection. However, all of this labour is invisible. While the actors themselves know how hard they are working and how much effort they have invested in the preparations, to the outside observer they appear to be simply to be doing nothing. Until the moment of their 'success', they give the impression there is nothing important to see (cf. Emerson 1970).

Conclusion

This paper has taken a sociological approach, grounded in Scott's (2018, 2019, 2020a, 2020b) 'sociology of nothing' theoretical framework, to illuminate an aspect of violent extremism that is often not necessarily overlooked in the literature, but more so rarely theoretically grounded. Through acts of commission, with consideration of Goffman's notions of backstage performative acts, deception and evasion tactics are sometimes implemented by violent extremists to avoid detection and protect their networks or plans. This demonstrates the agentic power of negative (background, missing, latent or hidden) phenomena in driving social change: actors can exercise resistance while apparently 'doing nothing'. Using Katz's (1988) ideas around the phenomenological foreground, this paper has argued that these acts of deception can, for some, be thrilling and exciting; holding parallels to considerations around the existential attractions of violent extremism.

Katz's work has, though, received undue criticism with some arguing that he fails to acknowledge the critical background factors when considering why some people engaging in deviance, merely focussing on the foreground. However, this analysis of Katz's work is misinterpreted where he does in fact refer to the value of background factors but simply points out that we have often overlooked the sensual and emotional factors that could pull people towards criminality. As Lakhani and Hardie-Bick (2020) argue within their work on the role of excitement within violent extremism, foreground and background factors are not mutually exclusive and often co-exist. What is important to remember here is – without of course sympathising or empathising with their causes or actions – violent extremists are merely human, with similar wants, needs, desires, and motivations as the rest of society. When society considers violent extremists, it is psychologically far easier to consider them as the 'other'. This is because it creates social, cultural, subcultural, and political distance between us and them. Considering them to be like us in many ways can, of course, be daunting. But academics, sociologists in particular, need to deconstruct the situation and understand it in its reality; even though we find their actions barbaric. It is only when we do this, can we begin to find solutions to this issue.

This, more broadly, points to an issue within terrorism studies. The fast-paced nature of the industry and the pressure for immediate policy relevance often prevent scholars from reflecting theoretically on their work and empirical findings, particularly sociologically. In fact, there have been some who have advocated for deeper sociological involvement when trying to make better sense of contemporary issues within the study of violent extremism, including Stephen Vertigans (2011: viii) who emphasised that 'sociological insights should be positioned within studies of terrorism to help push the boundaries beyond the media-friendly images of pantomime villains, Hollywood styled attacks and heart wrenching victims.' More recently, some scholars have attempted to directly address this issue, arguing that sociology, as a field of academic study, one that underpins numerous other disciplines and subdisciplines, plays a crucial role in understanding the complexities of human societies and their myriad interactions, and thus helping us to better understand the causes and motivations behind violent extremism (see Lakhani and Amarasingam, 2025). The value of sociology lies in its capacity to provide insightful analysis and comprehensive understanding of the social dynamics that shape individual behaviours, societal structures, and global processes.

Thus, through taking this sociological approach, this paper has illuminated that acts of commission help to maintain levels of secrecy which, in turn, can be exciting and can act as an important motivational factor drawing people towards violent extremism. Similar to Becker's (1963) contemplations of 'outsiders', the desire to be part of this subculture becomes increasingly attractive for some; considered to be 'cool' and exciting (Lakhani and Hardie-Bick, 2020). As Simmel (1908) appositely argues, that which is restricted becomes more desirable and valuable, as people have a fascination with the mysterious and unreachable. The thrill of

uncertainty is an existential attraction which makes violent extremism a form of edgework. Whilst it may be uncomfortable to consider how terrible acts can be intrinsically rewarding, it is nevertheless important to understand how these subjective meanings take shape in the phenomenological foreground.

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