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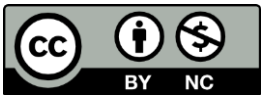

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EXAMINING 'PREVENT' FROM A FORMER COMBATANT PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – *I investigate how those who engaged in political violence in the UK understand Prevent's preemptive rationality, and how Prevent conceptualizes the trajectory towards 'terrorism' in relation to the testimony of those who engaged in 'terrorist' violence and were convicted of terrorism offences.*

Methodology/Approach — *I take the assumptions that Prevent makes about risk (from the Prevent Strategy and other documents), and test these against the testimony of former combatants from 'the Troubles'.*

Findings – D*espite the trajectory towards violence not being considered to differ fundamentally nor demonstrated through evidence to* operate *differently from one era to the next, the premise of Prevent's assumptions of the movement into violence and former combatant testimony are entirely foreign to each other.*

Originality/Value – *Although militants from 'the Troubles' (a conflict ending in 1998) and Prevent (established in 2003) are speaking about the same country and narrating their 'truth' within 5 years of each other, the differences in how former combatants and Prevent understand the trajectory towards violence have not been considered. This has remained a significant omission of terrorism scholarship.*

Keywords: Radicalization, Prevent, the Troubles, Northern Ireland, Counter-radicalization, Terrorism

INTRODUCTION

'Counter-radicalization' has become a buzzword in policy circles, with the British 'Prevent' programme, developed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, becoming a pioneer and being exported to other countries as a paragon of risk-management (Thornton and Bouhana, 2017). Prevent operates in its epitome through its 'corrective' intervention scheme, Channel, which acts on individuals deemed most at-risk of moving towards enacting or supporting terrorism, before they become engaged in criminal behaviour. Yet just five years before Prevent was invented, 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland had concluded through a political settlement. This ended three decades of what the British government considered terrorism, yet unlike Prevent it did not mobilize a preemptive, cognitive reshaping of supposedly 'at-risk' individuals. In 2012, then-head of the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism (OSCT) Charles Farr remarked that the "drivers of radicalization" of Northern Irish violence and the contemporary post-9/11 violence in mainland Britain are "not fundamentally" different (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2012, Q309). So whilst the fundamental reasons people become engaged in violence were not understood to have shifted, Prevent appears to be constructed on significantly a different conception of what constitutes 'risk', and how to manage it. As will become clear, its functionality appears to ignore the experience of those who engaged in violence during the latest Northern Irish conflict – those upon whom it would have wished to act, had it been operational at the time. Northern Ireland, as part of the UK, is technically covered by CONTEST, although police and criminal justice are devolved matters and so the Prevent Duty does not apply there (HM Government 2011). Yet Prevent alleges to tackle "all forms of terrorism" (HM Government, 2011, p. 39), the Channel programme monitors and intervenes upon those posing Northern Irish-related 'extremism' concerns (Counter-Terrorism Policing 2018), and indeed, officials have said that Northern Ireland-related 'extremism' has been tackled by Prevent (Dearden, 2017). A change in policy concluded the Northern Irish conflict, yet a psychology-informed, individual-intervention solution was deployed to respond to contemporary citizen-violence (Knudsen, 2018). With such different approaches to manage both 'eras', the premise of this chapter is: how do these two worlds of knowledge (not) speak to each other? With violence preemption now conceived as a useful technology to avert the materialization of risk, how do the assumptions underlying preemptive programmes such as Prevent compare with the

testimony of those who have actually engaged in violence themselves? Utilizing interviews with 33 Northern Irish interviewees, primarily former combatants, this chapter unpicks some of the assumptions made by Prevent about those whom it would have sought to stop becoming involved in violence.

The chapter builds on numerous critiques of dominant radicalization theories by anticipatory risk-governance literature, a field which contests the scientific and moral validity of counter-terrorism interventions on non-criminal behaviours and thoughts (Heath-Kelly, 2012,2017a,b; Aradau and van Munster, 2012; Scarcella, Page, and Furtado, 2016; Elshimi, 2017; Silva, 2018; Martin, 2018; Knudsen, 2018; Altermark and Nilsson, 2018; Stephens et al., 2019; Pettinger, 2019; van de Weert and Eijkman, 2019). It is also informed by the significant historical terrorism literature, which consistently draws a different conclusion than the individualized and pathologized conclusions of contemporary radicalization literature, by pointing to political environments as producing, or at least contributing to violence (Crenshaw, 1981; Ross, 1993; Silke, 2003; Bjørgo, 2005; Pape, 2005; Burgess and Ferguson, 2009; Basra, Neumann and Brunner, 2016; Crone, 2016). The following chapter brings together these literatures, by juxtaposing Prevent's (much-criticized) preemptive modality with the stories and narratives of those who have engaged in the very activity the 'counter-radicalization' programme alleges to curtail. An investigation of how these differences operate is particularly apposite and long-overdue, given how the eras are understood so differently, especially taking into consideration Farr's comments.

30 of my 33 Northern Irish interviewees were formerly members of proscribed groups, and all but one had carried out acts of violence or preparation for violence during the conflict for which they had been imprisoned. Of the 30 former combatants, 26 semi-structured interviews were accompanied by 10 political walking- and driven-tours in Belfast and (London)Derry. 11 interviewees were from various loyalist groups (often members of several groups during the conflict), 15 were former Irish Republican Army (IRA) members, and 4 were former Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) members. The final three interviews were with the former chief prosecuting counsel of Northern Ireland (Interviewee 42) who had prosecuted "a couple of hundred" terrorist cases in the crown court and "a lot more in the petty sessions", and two with republican peace activists (R43 and R47).

With the vast majority of Northern Irish interviewees becoming involved in violence as young men, mostly as teenagers, and several noting that they had been 'radicalized' or influenced by the rhetoric of others (especially loyalists), this chapter suggests that the experiences of former combatants is ignored by the operation of Prevent (which often operates on those fitting this profile). Considering that the 'eras' are only 5 years apart, and that the drivers are not considered to be "fundamentally different", somehow fundamental differences of understanding are at work. The piece suggests that 'risk' is navigated through Prevent in a way inconceivable to those who engaged in violence, especially with regard to the silencing of any external contribution to the reasons violence occurs. The chapter explores three key ways in which this divergence takes place: firstly it looks at how former combatants described their motivations for involvement and compares this to how Prevent understands motivations; secondly it tests former combatant testimony about their commitment with how Prevent conceptualizes intent; and thirdly it looks at the concept of Prevent's preemptive rationality and its 'ability to know', testing this against how those who have 'been there' decipher and understand 'risk'. It highlights how Prevent differs on every level to the experience narrated by former combatants about their involvement in violence.

MOTIVATIONS VS RISK FACTORS

Former Combatants Narrating Motivations

A sense of insecurity was narrated on both sides as central to explaining involvement. Many republicans talked in detail of the unequal foundations of the state of Northern Ireland after its partition from the Republic of Ireland. The country was billed by the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland as a "Protestant Government for a Protestant people" (quoted in Walker, 2012: 70), a frustration of many interviewees. One republican (R28) spoke of partition, saying that the "problem for us [was] that we were caught on the wrong side of the border [and] that the British fairly clearly supported the continuation of unionist hegemony in this part of Ireland." Many narrated in detail the consequences this had for Catholics – it was harder for Catholics to get a job (R30), gerrymandering meant majority-Catholic areas returned unionist majorities to local government (R34), and housing was distributed unfairly (R30). Three separately mentioned that they as Catholics felt like

"second-class" citizens (R28,R37,R48), and all republicans mentioned this sentiment, feeling unable to engage in political, economic, or social life in the same way as Protestants. Loyalists' narratives, meanwhile, centred around their physical security and the security of their identity as a nation being under threat once republican violence had broken out. One (L41) said that, "I believe and still believe that if we hadn't resisted republican tyranny by our armed actions I believe Britain would've [abandoned] Northern Ireland." The threat of being dragged unwillingly into a united Ireland was central to a number of interviews (L26,L40,L49). They spoke of feeling unprotected by the state: one (L26) said, after noting that he was dismayed by the prospect of living in a "theocratically roman Catholic but very heavily mixed with communism and Marxist socialism [united Ireland, that] we seen the British government repeatedly could not handle the situation." This sense of insecurity and being made vulnerable by state inaction was dominant in every interview with loyalists.

Both sides equally spoke of the environment of violence as contributing to *their* involvement in violence. R29 said, "Growing up in those times… you'd see the incursions happening around the country. You heard about the civil rights marches getting attacked… it has an effect." The concept of military occupation was narrated recurrently by republicans (R25,R28,R29,R30,R33,R47). R28 said,

> So for me it was very clear the life I was living was one of military occupation… And for me, I decided to get involved in the resistance, and to do something about it *[Me: Because of the perception of military occupation?]* Yeah. Because I became convinced that there was only one thing the British army would ever understand when it came to Ireland.

Very similarly, on the loyalist side this sentiment was also narrated: L27 said, "You only see the violence and you only say that has to stop." Consistent with most loyalist interviews was L44's remarks: he said that it became incredibly difficult to maintain a normal life because "the early years of the 70s became very violent… You had the impression that the whole country was coming down around you." He then spoke of how the security services had lost control, and was motivated where the state was unable or unwilling to bring justice to republicans who were "killing people with impunity", so that order could be restored. Another (L49) noted that protecting "our people" through involvement with paramilitaries was paramount, because "we didn't feel that the government was doing enough to stop the IRA."

Personal experiences of violence seemed similarly important in motivating involvement. Several republicans remarked being regularly stopped and searched by the British army (R28,R29,R47), which instilled a sense of injustice. R28 said, "If you were in any way lippy at all, which in general teenagers tend to be, you get battered." Experiencing excessive violence from the British army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary was a common refrain (R22,R28,R29,R34,R47). R37 described his cousin getting shot dead by the British army on Bloody Sunday (a day when British soldiers killed 14 unarmed civilians), twice during the interview stopping to cry. Witnessing indiscriminate republican bomb or gun attacks on their family, friends, or neighbours brought loyalists to engage with groups like the Ulster Volunteer Force or Loyalist Volunteer Force (L40,L44,L45). Importantly, no recognizable 'ideology' was ever narrated as instigating involvement: many republicans spoke of being educated about republicanism only whilst in prison for their crimes, and the closest that loyalists came was speaking about patriotism (L26,L35,L49).

So, across all interviews, the overwhelming narrative that motivated involvement was a sense of state failure, and that civilians weren't being protected in some way, producing incentives to correct this failure. These findings are consistent with those of other terrorism studies research (Silke, 2003; Crenshaw, 1981; Burgess and Ferguson, 2009).

Prevent's Conceptualization of the Motivations for Violence

Charles Farr, when asked "whether the drivers of radicalisation are different than they were before the Good Friday Agreement," replied, "Not fundamentally, no… I think the drivers are comparable in type but not in detail to those for Islamist-related terrorism or even for the extreme right wing" (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2012, Q309). So, having considered the reasons for paramilitary involvement during 'the Troubles', how does Prevent conceive of the motivations behind violence, with Farr's comment in mind? In the face of testimony about structural and external motivations for involvement in violence, we will see that Prevent identifies entirely individualized behaviours as posing terrorism risk.

The 22 Extreme Risk Guidance (ERG) principles, the supposed 'signs of radicalization' that undergird the Prevent policy (displayed in Table 1), paint a *wholly* different picture of the reasons violence occurs than the very political motivations described above. The ERG metrics, described in original documentation as "essentially working hypotheses" (NOMS,

2014, p. 5), have been contested by practitioners (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2016) and over 140 academics (Guardian, 2016; also see: Knudsen, 2018; Scarcella, Page, and Furtado, 2016), yet they form the basis of all referrals to Prevent. The 22 factors are designed to enable preemptive spotting and intervention on those considered most at-risk of becoming involved in violence. These traits are overwhelmingly individual-centric, and, drawn up by psychologists, assume a distinctly psychological framework to explain behaviour (Knudsen, 2018).

Table 1: ERG 22 'risk factors' (NOMS, 2014, p. 3-4)

Engagement Factors	Intent Factors	Capability Factors
Need to redress injustice and express grievance	Over-identification with an extremist group, cause or ideology	Individual knowledge, skills and competencies to commit extremist offences
Need to defend against threat	'Them and Us' thinking	Access to networks, funding and equipment to commit extremist offences
Need for identity, meaning and belonging	Dehumanisation of the enemy	Criminal History
Need for status	Attitudes that justify offending	
Need for excitement, comradeship or adventure	Harmful means to an End	
Need to dominate others	Harmful end objectives	
Susceptibility to indoctrination		
Political/moral motivation		
Opportunistic involvement		
Family and/or friends support extremist offending		
Transitional periods		
Group influence and control		
Presence of mental illness or personality disorder		

Channel cases are identified by their supposed 'ideology' (HM Government, 2019). Yet Northern Irish former combatants never spoke in terms of any overt ideology: any ideological republican sentiment, for example, was entirely absent when explaining initial involvement in violence, and was never narrated on its own; it was always attached to *and resulted from* specific experiences of injustices. Any adoption of a coherent republican ideology primarily occurred much later on when imprisoned, and often actually served as a limiting factor to their re-engagement in violence following release (R23,R28). For loyalists, 'ideology' was represented as intense patriotism but again was only ever narrated alongside their own experiences of violence, and seeing their identity (as attached to mainland Britain) threatened. Loyalists often described their commitment to patriotism, and republicans to republicanism, in equal measure 20 years after the cessation of the conflict. The state, in attempting to locate spaces of possible risk before they materialize into physical danger, deploys an aggregating rationality that endeavours to make individuals known *only through the totality of others' behaviour* rather than looking at individuals themselves (Amoore, 2013, pp. 29-54; Jackson, 2012; Heath-Kelly, 2017a). The 22 ERG factors – the traits determined as indicating risk – are designated security risks because they are assumed to exist in those who will ultimately enact their riskiness through terrorist violence. So whilst for former combatants 'ideology' was not a motivating factor (at least unattached to real experiences of injustice or suffering), because they ultimately appeared ideological it becomes a primary way to identify potential terrorists. Prevent makes prejudiced assumptions about the reasons behind engagement in violence (Knudsen, 2018), disregarding research that consistently points to the broader context as contributing to the incidence of 'terrorism' (Crenshaw, 1981; Ross, 1993; Bjørgo, 2005; Pape, 2005; Burgess and Ferguson, 2009; Basra, Neumann and Brunner, 2016; Crone, 2016).

Instead of taking into account people's experiences, spotting an individualized and supposed "*need*" for status or expression of grievance becomes operationalized. What were objective grievances about the state of a country, or unjust voting systems, or threats to their very survival, become folded back onto the individual through the suggestion of these grievances being individual "needs". Problematizing individuals and fixing them without considering structural solutions means that any lessons from former combatants' testimonies of injustices and insecurity become immaterial. Any environmental explanations for involvement in violence becomes excluded from reasonable political discourse, even

becoming taboo: “Attempts to explain would be taken as justification, and attempts to understand would be elided with sympathy” (Stampnitzky, 2013, p. 191; also see Jackson, 2012). Yet, had the ERG factors been built upon the testimony of former combatants to prevent what they ultimately engaged in, the signifiers of ‘risk’ would look entirely different. The ‘risk factors’ would be considered the other way around: structural inequalities and the (in)action of government, and how this produces suffering, would be central. But the turn towards effecting predictive power excludes the possibility for exploring broader human experiences (Aradau and van Munster, 2012; Jackson, 2012). Prevent’s operation merely aims to “stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism” (HM Government, 2011, p. 6) rather than considering contributing social or political injustices, or their solutions (Altermark and Nilsson, 2018; Stephens et al., 2019). Despite the emphasis of Prevent in policy documents on understanding the *drivers* of radicalization (HM Government, 2011), the preemptive methodology does not attempt to understand *motivations* behind violence in order to fix any underlying social or political problems (Valverde and Mopas, 2004; Amoore and de Goede, 2008). This “methodological individualism” – a position which Prevent assumes (Knudsen, 2018: 44) – removes the potential for politics from state-citizen relations (Richmond, 2003). As Aradau and van Munster (2012, p. 100,105) write, “By tackling the forms of social relation rather than the structures of society… Social relations are only constituted in the anticipation of, response to and recovery from the next terrorist attack.”

AGENCY (COMMITMENT VS VULNERABILITY)

With the endeavour to minimize supposed terrorism risk, Prevent operates in the preemptive space, before the potential for crime has occurred (so before engagement with any criminal behaviour). So how does the commitment with which Northern Irish former combatants spoke compare with Prevent’s conception of risk in relation to the drive and intent to engage in violence?

Former Combatant Commitment

Northern Irish militants often spoke in no uncertain terms about their commitment to their respective causes (L26,L35,L49,R23,R37), and all baulked at the idea that somebody could have spoken or directed them away from involvement prior to their engagement, without some material change in circumstances. Indeed, in several cases where family members guessed that they were involved, these relations had tried to dissuade them from continued involvement. L27 mentioned that he'd had a conversation with somebody who was close to founding of the militant group Ulster Volunteer Force, but who later tried to dissuade L27 from becoming involved in violence. I asked whether this conversation made a difference to his thought processes or behaviour, and he replied, "No I just laughed. I seen it as the waffle – while I respected him, I just saw it as the foolish waffle of an old man." Many emphasized that they would have made essentially the same choices given the same set of circumstances, diverging only on different tactics they might have employed. They narrated overwhelmingly that their experiences had such an affective impact on them that they could do nothing but engage in reactionary action. Corroborating these claims (that their commitment was absolute) is the fact that despite having made comments like these across the board, many interviewees are now engaged in peace activism and community conflict resolution projects, let alone that they were very conscious at the time of the consequences of engagement (which were prison, or death, they kept reminding me). They spoke consistently as seeing violence as a last resort, often a necessary evil, even a moral duty (L27,L44,R23,R28). R34 remarked, "I was very reluctant you know to go the military way. And held back a long time. But eventually there was no way out for me. It was one or the other. Either you take a stand or you go away."

When asked questions like '*Would there be hypothetical conditions where you would reengage in violence?'* most interviewees answered in the vein of L35, who responded, "If the same thing happened again I'd read it in the same way. Absolutely." These comments were made even in the context of several former combatants (including L41) considering themselves as having been 'radicalized' by others such as Ian Paisley. My conversation with one interviewee went as follows:

> *[Do you think that people like Ian Paisley and others who were quite vocal-]*
> Radicalized people? *[Yeah]* Well I can see your point and yes it's hard to argue

> against it, particularly when you look at the discourse in the rhetoric and language of him and others at the time… [They were] particularly influential in recruiting young people like me into paramilitarism… Every single one of the 14 former life sentence prisoners that I interviewed for my own research all named Ian Paisley as being influential to them politically growing up. And to them joining the paramilitary group. Every single one. (L46)

Whilst several former combatants understood themselves as having been 'radicalized' (on Paisley's radicalizing influence, see: Bruce, 2007, p. 231-2), their commitment and their conviction that given the same set of circumstances they would act in similar ways, was central. Moreover, they narrated these convictions with hindsight and reflection from years in prison, having had children and grandchildren (which many mentioned enabled greater perspective), and often now engaging in peace activism.

Many spoke of the environment of violence (described above) being fundamental to lowering the barriers to their own involvement (especially L26,R47). With most republicans (and L27) describing 'the Troubles' as a war, and loyalists describing the conflict as threatening their very way of life, commitment to protecting themselves, people they knew, or their area through violence was narrated as a natural, normal reaction (L21,L26,L27,R32,R33,R47,R48). Speaking of how their engagement corresponded with the violence around them, R23 mentioned that he was living amongst tanks and chinooks, R47 spoke of his school being overtaken by the British military, and both L27 and L44 noted separately that the situation was so intense that they considered it "the breakdown of society". Former combatants' stories – in the detail and the overarching narrative – conveyed their devotion to their respective causes. Righting a wrong (L35,R25,R34,R38) or correcting injustices (L26,L41,L44,R23,R28) was central to how they described their involvement, and, having spent over 50 hours in conversation with these individuals over the course of six weeks, it was impossible to imagine them not committing to some form of engagement in the conflict. Whilst some mentioned doubts about specific moments in their engagement in violence, most (almost all republicans and many loyalists) spoke of not harbouring regrets about responding to the violence around them through their own violence – including those now working as peace activists. R37, the former combatant who cried during the interview, when asked whether there were times when he doubted his commitment, replied, "Never ever. Never ever… If there was ever any doubts creeping in I woulda went to the city cemetery."

Prevent's Understanding of Intent

Yet looking more intricately at the 'Intent Factors' from the list in Table 1, and considering them against this former combatant testimony, we can see that Prevent's 'risk factors' suggest that a far lower level of commitment is taken for somebody to be considered related to terrorism risk. The categories "'Them and Us' thinking" and "Attitudes that justify offending" indicate that Prevent operates – contrary to the refutations of its proponents – on the thought-life of its constituents (Heath-Kelly, 2017b). Fundamentally a counter-terrorism strategy, Prevent therefore situates radical and divisive thoughts as related to terrorism risk. But the banality with which Prevent operates clashes with the political culture in Northern Ireland – which is so divided that L27 remarked about Prevent that "it wouldn't work [here] because everyone would need to be de-radicalized, including the teachers who often try and radicalize the kids! There's not enough people to do the de-radicalization jobs!"

As well as operating under the presumption that potential terrorists are visible through their thought patterns or even ideology – a theory with limited validity (Horgan and Bjørgo, 2009; Clubb, 2016a,2016b; Ferguson, 2016) – Prevent also distances itself from former combatant testimony through its reliance on the assumed vulnerability of those presumed to be on the trajectory towards violence. Not only does Prevent reconfigure a lack of commitment as possibly dangerous (by securitizing merely divergent attitudes), but suggests also that those who pose danger are actually in need of protection and support (HM Government, 2011). Reinforcing this position is psychologically-informed 'radicalization' literature, which places a significant emphasis on the notion that potential terrorists are deprived of full mental capacity (Gill and Corner, 2017). Whilst an association might exist between mental health issues and the type of violence Prevent attempts to mitigate (individual-level, apparently-ideological), these studies take the focus away from broader environments of violence that were central to every single former combatant's story – people who contributed to the killing of over 3000 people. So where psychological literature and the ERG risk factors suppose a lack of agency as contributing to radicalization, even where former combatants considered themselves 'radicalized' (by people like Ian Paisley), their commitment to engagement was the dominant narrative, as was their conviction that they would have acted the say way given the same circumstances, albeit in

hindsight deploying violence more strategically. L35 remarked, “If republicanism was to rise again, I’d like to think that future generations would rise to meet them the way we did. It’s a game of chess: if they rise, we meet them.” Had I queried former combatants on whether mental health issues contributed to their involvement, they would have been eminently offended, and the interviews possibly terminated.

Because of the (inaccurate) perception of a new era of especially catastrophic terrorism (Stohl, 2012), the government seeks to monitor every possible risk through the “clear privileging of large-n-based quantitative research” (Jackson, 2012, p. 18). In this catch-all, risk-averse approach to risk-management, the links between risk factors and actual, lived experience become immaterial. The state can't hope for totalizing knowledge, so monitoring risk patterns rather than people is the operative logic (Heath-Kelly, 2017b), and so what were understood as political and environmental causes become pathologized and repackaged into potential risk factors posed by the individual. So as with motivations (seen earlier), *intentions and commitment* of individuals towards violence similarly become excluded from Prevent’s operation. Despite the consistent testimony of former combatants being that their violence was a last resort, and sometimes even a moral or civic duty in the face of extreme circumstances, Prevent often intervenes upon children (HM Government, 2019) and upon their attitudes or radical viewpoints. Though children naturally experiment with totally irrational or even dangerous-sounding ideas, this childishness becomes securitized and associated with terrorism risk through Prevent’s operation (Coppock and McGovern, 2014). So whilst even people who considered themselves as having been radicalized spoke in strong terms about their commitment and noting that they would re-engage given the same circumstances, Prevent attempts to stop this same violence by associating a lack of demonstrable commitment with terrorism risk. This excludes any discussion around people's *intention* to engage in violence from the equation, instead focussing on bringing *divergence from the norm* back into line (Heath-Kelly, 2017a,b). In turn, the focus on risk factors rather than on human suffering from an environment, (re-)produces and (re-)creates the subjugation of human experience (Jackson, 2012).

KNOWING DANGER AND RISK

So, turning to the preemptive logic of Prevent itself, this section compares the 'knowledge of risk' that former combatants narrated with the assumptions about the interruption of violence that Prevent makes through its operation. How do Northern Irish former combatants describe their choices and character in relation to those who *didn't* get involved? And set against this testimony – testimony which suggests an inherent unknowability of where danger resides – how does Prevent's preemptive rationality somehow know, with only banal identifiers, where risk may reside?

Former Combatants on Involvement vs Non-Involvement

All former combatants spent most of the interviews detailing the very personal circumstances under which they became involved and how these circumstances occurred in a context of a violent environment. Several mentioned having particular conversations which opened specific opportunities to join a paramilitary group (L35,L45,R48), or experiencing bullying which bred a tendency towards violence (L26), or seeing specific attacks near their home or against themselves that brought them to wanting to act (L40,L41,R23,R28,R34). L35 remarked that "I think [engagement is] a matter for your own personal conscience [and] life's chances." All described a very personal process, but one which was situated and affected by their surroundings.

Because former combatants spoke of their involvement occurring as a result of random personal, chance encounters, or of knowing a victim of a bomb attack, or of being present in (London)Derry on Bloody Sunday or Belfast on Bloody Friday, they shrugged when attempting to summarize what could have incited involvement in others. For every interviewee, it was an accumulation of the environment alongside chance circumstances or encounters, being in the right (or wrong) place at the right (or wrong) time. Indeed, L40 stressed,

> You can't just say "that's why!" There's nothing why, it just was a natural growth I think… Some people woulda realized "that's not for me." Now why, whatever, maybe they just didn't feel they could carry those acts out.

So this loyalist, whose whole life has been shaped by the conflict because of his involvement, and who had and still has many friends both within and outside the former combatant community, was unable to suggest anything more nuanced than "that's not for me" to explain (non-)involvement. This lack of ability to generalize was eminently the case in most interviews: R28 similarly offered: "You join for your own reasons, I can say why I joined, I can't say why other people didn't join." A representative excerpt is taken from an interview with R38:

> There is no one singular experience and one causal factor doesn't produce the same effect in everybody… [Those who didn't become involved] may have fallen in love, family disapproval, may have been working, they may just have had second thoughts, we don't know, all we know is the decision-making process is shaped to some extent by environment, by certain preconditions and in my case those preconditions were the British state, and maybe I had a more rebellious attitude.

So when considering the answer to 'why did you become engaged but your friends or family not?', almost universally former combatants felt unable to speculate as to what differentiated them.

On the rare occasion when they *did* speculate, the only quality that a few former combatants (including L26,R23,R37) pointed to, to explain why their friends or family might *not* have become involved in armed struggle, was "courage", or a lack thereof. Given that they often spoke of involvement as an "obligation" to correct injustices (R25, and many others), the only variable between them and others was the bravery to step over the threshold: "People who saw themselves as wannabe soldiers to fight against the IRA found in many different cases found they just hadn't got the courage or the lack of character or whatever you want to call it" (L26). R37 emphasized that he could only speak for himself as to why people became involved (or didn't), but, when I pressed him, he replied, "I don't want to use this word but I suppose I'll have to – [they] hadn't got the courage to take on board the consequences."

They all saw the political environment, and often the very structures of the state, as so fractured that violence was inevitable, and spoke in every case its management only possible through political reform and negotiation. The only way for parents to ensure children *didn't* end up involving themselves in violence was to move away from hotspots (like Belfast and [London]Derry) and to other countries, according to various interviewees

(including L49,R30). But the violence was so endemic that, for L27, many people were "completely surrounded [by it]. A lot of radicalization was there, it wasn't called radicalization or extremism then, people just see it was defending communities." Every interviewee, during discussions about how to minimize violence, brought the issue back the environment of insecurity and injustice. R23 lamented, "If only they'd have brought [sweeping reform] in the 60s or something… Cos if you don't give reform, people will take it by revolution. Ask Marie Antoinette!" So although they found it impossible to suggest general traits that might be suggestive of 'risk' (except for 'courage' in a few cases), when discussing the minimization of violence they constantly moved the discussion back to the broader political circumstances and environment within which they lived.

Prevent Operating through Speculation and Intuition

So, given that former combatants with all their years of involvement, their time in prison, and their decades of life post-release could not identify more useful traits of involvement versus non-involvement in their friends and family than "that's not for me", how does Prevent *know* possibly-risky from non-risky subjects? The assumption that risk can be 'known', and the practice of 'knowing' it (or highlighting it for correction), is central to the performance of risk-management (Amoore and de Goede, 2008; Martin, 2018). We will see that subjective interpretation and risk-infused imagination are central to Prevent's 'knowing', at odds with former combatant testimony which refrains from guesswork, and which does not recognize individuals as the origin of risk.

Given that Prevent's observing gaze is so broad and banal, and when working practices are context-dependent and reliant upon the imagination of possible futures, the subjective intuition of its practitioners is required to spot where risk may reside (Elshimi, 2017; Pettinger, 2019; van de Weert and Eijkman, 2019). Situated in the pre- or non-criminal space, the preemptive rationality is mobilized through imagination (Amoore, 2013) and the speculative guesswork of practitioners, because the supposed risk has by definition not yet materialized. The space for intuition to sort and categorize possible spaces of risk is therefore central, and is opened up further by the encouragement of over-reporting which produces an entrenched and pervasive risk-consciousness (Heath-Kelly, 2017a). Moreover, this intuition, the imaginations, are infused with worst case logics, and projecting negative, risk-infused potentiality onto otherwise regular citizens (Pettinger, 2019).

This modality of looking everywhere – but only at individuals – for signs of future risk sits extremely awkwardly with the testimony of former combatants. When questions were posed to them about hypotheticals or attempts to prevent or preempt their violence, the conversation was consistently moved back to explaining their own personal involvement, the environments within which they acted, and considering the past rather than possibilities. When I asked how preventive measures could have been outworked, every response again referred to the environment. I asked R43, a peace activist who works with dissident groups, how the British government could have discouraged people from joining militant groups. He became visibly annoyed, replying, "It's a nonsense of a question to be truthful, because one it implies that you know nothing about the subject, and because the reality is that the state engaged in sectarian conflict… How would people *not* react in a negative way?" Attempting to interpret others' behaviour before engagement with criminality materialized was a concept that the former chief prosecuting counsel for Northern Ireland (42), who had prosecuted hundreds of terrorism cases during the conflict, was startled by. Probing to understand how it worked, he remarked, "Pre-crime. This is astonishing! I don't want to batter you but this is fascinating." And then, eventually, "Yeah it would never work here." Former combatants consistently commented that they couldn't speculate about others' decisions to become involved or not – despite their social worlds often being entirely shaped by the conflict. The whole premise of preemption is generally foreign to their society, because the conflict – and the context still, today – is widely understood as political manoeuvring between groups, as a social process (Alimi et al. 2015). So interviewees re-interpreted my questions about preemption: they listened to questions about how to identify the risky ones, or how to preempt conflict, but in every single case folded their answers back around the environment and external circumstances. This is epitomized through the fact that "courage", as a characteristic of *overcoming fear of the consequences of the external environment*, was described in a few cases as the only way to differentiate between the involved and the non-involved. So with regard to the act of individual-preemption itself, Prevent makes no sense to those upon whom it would have wanted to act.

CONCLUSION

So the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement was signed in 1998 to conclude 'the Troubles', and Prevent came into existence just five years later, with the question of why people engage in violence not finding a significantly different answer compared to the time of 'the Troubles'. But on every level, from the motivations and intent described, to how danger itself is conceptualized, Prevent is disconnected from the testimony of former combatants – from the very people upon whom it would have wished to intervene. Prevent is designed to be "flexible enough to address the challenge posed by terrorism of any kind" (HM Government, 2011, p. 25), and indeed works on Northern Irish cases (albeit not in Northern Ireland itself). But its functionality takes into account few of the political or structural lessons from the conflict in Northern Ireland, suggesting that actually, a tectonic shift *is* understood to have happened – except without an explicit admission or discussion as to why.

Concerning the motivations of Northern Irish former combatants, their involvement in violence was overwhelmingly related to external environments, substantiated by the fact that less than 4% of those released under the Good Friday Agreement have reoffended (Horgan 2013). Whilst the former Director of the OSCT accepted that the drivers of violence are not different, Prevent presumes the citizen as the locus of the problem, folding every external and environmental motivator back onto the individual. With regard to how commitment is narrated by former combatants and understood by Prevent, again, there is little crossover. Where Northern Irish interviewees described involving themselves begrudgingly in violence or seeing it as a moral obligation, having no other options to bring about change, Prevent problematizes agency, suggesting those who might appear risky suffer from mental health deficiencies or at least are not operating truly rationally. Again folding the problem back onto the individual, this psycho-pathologization of terrorism is consistent with historic terrorism scholarship, and is a trend that has largely gone unchallenged (Stampnitzky 2013: 66-7) because of the taboos of assuming the rationality of violence against the 'democratic' state. Finally, Prevent attempts to produce security by trying to guess where risk might arise – looking only at individuals. The mobilization of pessimistic speculation and imaginations of the future, rather than examining such intricately different historic experiences that former combatants couldn't suggest why others became involved or not, makes no sense to those who engaged in violence. Indeed,

still being immersed in similar political divisions as during the conflict brought L27 to remark that everybody there would have to be de-radicalized, including the teachers, were Prevent to be deployed in Northern Ireland.

Because the academic discipline of 'radicalization studies' – and Prevent itself – were developed to provide governments with security solutions (Stampnitzky 2013), state-approved forms of knowledge are privileged (Jackson 2012). This position is compounded through the existence of what Burnett and Whyte (2005) call "embedded expertise" within the 'counter-radicalization' industry, where academics and government practitioners work side-by-side, re-instantiating the field as unidirectional, as security-minded, and as accepting mainstream forms of knowledge (see also: Stohl 2012; Miller and Mills 2009). This leads to the acceptance of the assumption that threat originates from individuals and is not caused by government policy, which shuts down the debate on how political environments or the state's policies themselves contribute to violence. Looking only at individuals' 'needs' to solve a grievance, to dominate others, to know belonging, as Prevent does, situates the problem of violence with the individual, rather than observing the fount of the grievance itself. It ensures that the practice of monitoring and intervening upon supposed risks is detached from the testimony of those who spent years doing the very thing Prevent attempts to stop. But the endeavour to preempt, to look everywhere for possible risk but only at individuals, means that it is a foreign entity to former combatants. R43, a peace activist who has disengaged and demobilized many republican dissidents, remarked that Prevent "doesn't mean anything to me at all in terms of a strategy that will influence people who are outside mainstream society because they believe that what's happening to them is wrong."

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