



Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung
Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology



CALL FOR PAPERS

Workshop

Is Terrorist Learning Different?

21-22 November 2019

Venue: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany

Convenor: Carolin Görzig, Imad Alsoos, Florian Köhler, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Research Group: How 'Terrorists' Learn

What is particular or specific about learning in terrorist as compared to other groups? This workshop aims to critically examine learning processes in organizations that are generally labelled “terrorist” in public debates. With increased interest inspired by the “Global War on Terror” and similar developments, scholars have strongly focused on the tactical evolution of violent groups, such as the increasing lethality of attacks, and mainly applied behavioural approaches that reflect an instrumental understanding of learning. We argue, however, that violent groups learn not just behaviourally, but also cognitively, even if these two types of learning are often difficult to distinguish in practice. Looking at cognitive learning makes it possible to see changes that go beyond tactics and involve strategic transformations and changes of political goals. An understanding of these groups’ learning must therefore go beyond seeing their actions as automatic reactions to performance feedback from the environment and instead take into account how modifications in their internal cognitive maps may influence their actions.

The specificities of the environment terrorist groups find themselves in also contribute to making their learning different. This environment is characterized, for example, by a need for clandestine operations, which influences the dynamics of organizations’ cognitive and behavioural learning processes. Examining radical groups using the framework of Social Movement Theory has helped to explain how the interaction between a group and its political environment influences a group’s words and actions. However, Social Movement Theory-based approaches have not offered insights into groups’ internal cognitive learning processes and how these affect their behaviour. Therefore, we propose to draw on approaches that also reflect dynamics within groups and highlight the dialectic between the internal and external dimensions, such as Organizational Learning Theory.

We especially invite papers based on empirical case studies that address the specificities of the external environment and groups' internal cognitive and behavioural learning. "Terrorist" learning as a subject of study brings with it certain methodological and ethical challenges. Processes of cognitive learning are difficult to observe in general, and learning often has to be deduced from observed action. In the case of violent organizations, security issues make access to information not only risky for the researcher, but also highly sensitive for the subjects of research. However, we maintain that the subject can be approached pragmatically despite the complexities related to empirical research in this field. As empirical research on terrorist learning itself implies learning, we also invite contributors to share their experiences with and reflections on the challenges related to this particular research context, as well as possible ways of responding to them.

We welcome theoretical and empirical contributions from a variety of disciplines, as well as multi-disciplinary approaches. Contributions should address at least one of the following foci:

- Comparison of religious, ethno-nationalist, leftist, and right-wing groups
- Comparisons to non-violent groups
- Radicalization and de-radicalization
- Internal and external dimensions of terrorist learning
- Specificities of the environment
- Learning theory

Please submit your abstract of no more than one page to goerzig@eth.mpg.de by **February 28, 2019**. After an initial selection process, participants will be asked to submit their full paper by the end of August 2019. Selected contributions will be published in an edited volume. For invited speakers travel and accommodation expenses will be covered by the Max Planck Institute. Please do not hesitate to contact the convenors with any queries.

Contact:

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