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Shifts and continuity in contemporary violent extremism: Moving toward a dynamic and developmental understanding?

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The “salad bar of ideologies” has emerged as a useful metaphor for the apparent fragmentation of contemporary violent extremism. Building on the discussion by Horgan and Shayler and the response by Baele, we argue that ideological hybridization and anti-modern grievances are not themselves novel. Rather, attention should be paid to what appears distinctive: the growing involvement of minors and young adults, the spread of dystopian worldviews, and the emergence of nihilistic violence that borrows symbols from established extremist traditions while lacking a coherent political project. Drawing on clinical experience and emerging Canadian evidence, we suggest that adolescence is characterized by movement across ideological positions and that contemporary cases are better understood along a developmental continuum linking coherent ideological commitments, hybrid forms of grievance, and de-ideologized nihilistic violence. We propose that these transformations reflect both a generational search for meaning under conditions of uncertainty and the convergence of populist mobilization with algorithmic exploitation of identity, recognition, and belonging. While process-oriented approaches offer a productive alternative to multiplying categories, we argue that they must incorporate a developmental and temporal perspective to inform prevention and intervention. Understanding trajectories, rather than static classifications, may provide a useful framework for responding to contemporary violent extremism.

Keywords: adolescence, development trajectories, ideological hybridization, nihilistic violence, violent extremism

1. INTRODUCTION

In addressing the “salad bar of ideologies” concept in depth, the paper by Horgan and Shayler (2026), together with Baele’s (2026) response, raises two timely and important questions about the current ideological landscape of violent extremism. First, what is new, if anything, in what is happening now? Second, what is useful

in the multiple attempts to capture this changing reality? Do we need new concepts or categories or should we rather try to focus on underlying processes? Building on the careful conceptual and empirical review of Horgan and Shayler and on the counterpoints by Baele (2026), Cassam (2026) and Perliger (2026), this commentary proposes prolonging this

much-needed conversation about the present transformations in the field of violent extremism. The views expressed here are informed by our respective perspectives as a child psychiatrist and an anthropologist, both clinician-researchers working in Montreal with young people who are attracted to or involved in extremist and nihilistic violence. Mindful of our respective positions, we believe that bringing together divergent geographical and disciplinary perspectives—and allowing for a degree of disagreement—may help us not only develop a more nuanced understanding of these ongoing shifts, but also identify possible avenues for addressing the challenges they pose.

In this commentary, we begin by agreeing with our colleagues that ideological hybridization and anti-modern grievances are not themselves new, while proposing that greater attention should be paid to what may be genuinely distinctive in the present landscape: the younger age of offenders, and the changes in youth culture, with the spread of more generalized dystopian outlooks. We also address the related emergence of a growing form of nihilistic violence, which, although it shares certain anti-modern grievances and borrows mixed symbols and references from collectivist forms of violent extremism, is neither ideological nor political in nature.

2. WHAT MAY BE NEW IN THE PRESENT IDEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE?

Horgan, Shayler and Baele rightly underline key elements of continuity in what is presented as the “Salad bar” change. Historically, hybridization of ideologies has always existed. In fact, present political and economical systems have incorporated many elements which were once considered radical and even extremist, and are now considered mainstream (union and minority rights for example). This ideological hybridization is, of course, not unique to violent extremism. More broadly, cultural change often proceeds through processes of bricolage, whereby individuals and groups selectively recombine symbols, narratives, and practices drawn from diverse traditions to construct new

cultural forms. Likewise, polarization itself is far from a novel phenomenon. Bateson's concept of schismogenesis reminds us that cultural differences frequently emerge through reciprocal processes of differentiation, in which groups define themselves by becoming deliberately unlike one another. These dynamics operate across multiple scales, from civilizations and political movements to communities, families, and even sibling relationships (Bateson, 1958). Furthermore, meaning making processes associated with ideologies have always co-existed with recurrent feelings of meaninglessness and absurdity which, in times of adversity, when cultural and social narratives fail to provide a sense of hope, can in themselves become a symbol of shared humanity (Das, 2011).

Questions of measurement may also shape assessments of novelty in the field. Within the same national context, for example, differences in the prevalence of hybrid ideological configurations reported among clients seen in Toronto and in Montreal (Rousseau et al., 2024) are significant. Do they reflect provincial or sociological differences, variations in referral patterns and assessment methods, or the theoretical—and potentially ideological—position of referral, intake, and evaluation processes in defining what counts as ‘extremist’?

Turning to what may constitute a more significant shift; we agree with Baele (2026) that globalization, digitalization, and the online mobilization of ideology help explain changing ideological presentations. We argue, however, that the rapidly changing generational profile deserves greater attention. Practitioners, researchers, and policymakers have yet to fully reckon with the growing involvement of minors and young adults in violent extremism, alongside the concurrent rise of nihilistic discourses, networks, and violence (Europol, 2025). In Canada, security agencies report growing involvement of minors and young adults in terrorism-related activity, alongside the rise of nihilistic violent extremism and its links to the sexual exploitation of and by minors (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2026; Public Safety Canada, 2026).

To begin to circumscribe the phenomena it may be useful to first pay attention to the interaction between youth culture, attitudes fueling nihilistic and ideological beliefs and developmental characteristics. In Quebec (Canada), a recent longitudinal study of 574 high school students' support for violent and non-violent radicalization, revealed that adolescents moved significantly across the ideological profiles and their adherence to the glorification of violence over a one-year period (Miconi et al., 2026a). Another latent class analysis on support for multiple ideologies (i.e., nationalist, xenophobic, pro-environmental, masculinist, and pro-LGBTQ2S+ ideologies) and glorification of violence, on the same dataset showed complex combinations of conservative ideologies (xenophobia and masculinism) and glorification of violence in this general population adolescent sample (Miconi et al., 2026b). Taken together these findings suggest that exploration of activism and violence as idioms of protest is both very common and dynamic during adolescence. The reported fluidity of ideological profiles should prompt caution in detection efforts. Although well intentioned, approaches that rely heavily on ideological markers risk generating false positives, encouraging profiling, and pathologizing normal adolescent exploration, intergenerational discontent, and legitimate grievances about the state of the world. These generational shifts, including the retreat from offline life into online worlds, reflect broader systemic problems that extend well beyond youth: the erosion of shared structuring narratives, growing uncertainty surrounding the climate, the economy, demographic change, and geopolitics, as well as widening economic inequalities. Yet the inadequacy of societal responses—often experienced through increased control and securitization, declining trust in institutions, and the limited credibility of counter-narratives—appears to be especially pronounced among young people.

To capture how these changes may be reshaping the ideological landscape, we propose two hypotheses. First, the concurrent rise of ideological lability and nihilism may reflect a generational search for meaning under conditions of heightened uncertainty. Young people may move back and forth between repeated

attempts to make sense of the world by borrowing from diverse ideological repertoires and an embrace of meaninglessness or apocalyptic scenarios as a way of recovering agency. Second, these dynamics may reflect the convergence of two forms of exploitation. On the one hand, rising populist and ethnonationalist movements mobilize identity uncertainty, unmet needs for belonging, and the desire to be heard, seen, and recognized (Lamont, 2023). On the other, algorithmic systems, exploit the same vulnerabilities by rewarding emotionally charged content, intensifying grievance and identity conflict, and repeatedly directing users toward increasingly extreme or nihilistic material. None of these processes is entirely new, but their acceleration, interaction, and global circulation may be intensifying ideological hybridization in unprecedented ways.

In this perspective, we propose that contemporary cases are best understood not as belonging to discrete ideological or nihilistic categories, but as occupying different positions along a dynamic continuum, across which individuals may move back and forth over the course of their trajectories, as we have observed in our clinical work. At one end lie relatively coherent ideological projects, grounded in shared political, religious, or philosophical worldviews and directed toward a collective future—for example ethnonationalism, neo-Nazism, or religious extremism. Further along the continuum, collective narratives increasingly intertwine with personal grievances, identity struggles, and quests for recognition. Here, ideological commitments co-exist with highly individualized motivations, often expressed through admiration for symbolic figures ranging from political martyrs to school shooters. At the opposite end lies violence that has largely shed any coherent political project, where violence itself becomes the primary source of identity, belonging, status, or stimulation, as illustrated by nihilistic online ecosystems such as 764. Importantly, these positions do not constitute separate cultural worlds. They draw upon a largely shared symbolic repertoire—memes, aesthetic codes, historical references, manifestos, and online narratives—that participants deploy with varying degrees of conviction, irony, and performativity. The same symbols

may function as sincerely held beliefs for some, as identity signals for others, and as deliberately transgressive or humorous references for yet others.

The manifesto of the lone actor responsible for the recent Montreal shooting targeting Pornhub illustrates this fluidity. Although widely described in the media as reflecting "Incel ideology," the 104-page text articulated a far more complex worldview. Beginning with a grievance about the alienation and loneliness of young men under contemporary capitalism, it developed into a broader philosophical critique characterized by profound hopelessness regarding the possibility of meaningful agency. Rather than advancing a coherent ideological programme, it assembled disparate references to Stalinism, Islamic theocracy, and the Russian neo-fascist thinker Alexander Dugin, while simultaneously rejecting organized religion and many of the very traditions from which it borrowed (Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence, 2026). Such manifestos are perhaps better understood not as evidence of ideological inconsistency, but as examples of contemporary bricolage, in which heterogeneous symbolic resources are selectively assembled in the service of a deeply personal grievance and fuelled by the alienation of modernity and exploited by political movements, online subcultures, and algorithmic systems.

Cassam's (2026) account of "extremism without ideology" reinforces the need to distinguish analytical categories without reifying them. Expanding terrorism, extremism, or ideology to encompass every form of spectacular violence risks obscuring meaningful differences in motives, organization, and political purpose. Our proposal of a dynamic continuum in which individuals may move between coherent collective projects, hybridized personal grievances, and violence pursued increasingly as an end in itself partially converges with Cassam's distinction between ideological extremism, value extremism, and violence fixation. Cassam evokes the Rudakubana case, which for us as clinicians tragically illustrates the limitations of fixed categories and the absence of a developmental

perspective. Despite repeated failed referrals to the Prevent programme, this vulnerable adolescent—with autism and a history of intergenerational trauma—did not receive sustained, wrap-around intervention as his behavioural and ideological changes unfolded between ages 13 and 17, ultimately culminating in lethal violence.

Perliger's (2026) warning about the erosion of conceptual clarity is an important call for rigour and interdisciplinary scholarship in the social sciences. However, the claim that this incoherence is merely artifactual is quite surprising from a clinical perspective. Recognizing that the degree of chaos actually mobilized can be deeply unsettling, we will have to understand how it may affect all of us, scholars and practitioners, and sometimes generates divisions which are not strictly theoretical nor empirical.

3. WHAT COULD BE USEFUL TO APPROACH THOSE CHANGES?

To a certain extent, the "salad bar" concept functions as a useful heuristic: although broad and relatively non-specific, it acknowledges an important transformation at a time when empirical evidence remains limited. Converging with practitioners (Rousseau et al., 2024), Horgan and Shayler (2026) propose rather to question the usefulness of multiplicity of categories and theories and focus on understanding processes of hybridization. They propose to classify ideologies as mixing or migrating, divergent vs convergent, at a particular point in time. This model could be useful to represent the apparent paradoxes in ideological profiles and to capture their evolution in light of a personal trajectory and of the collective hybridization of signifiers (at the family, community and generational levels). Distinguishing personal and familial dynamics from external influences is difficult, as these forces are constantly interacting (Rousseau et al., 2026).

If identifying processes is undoubtedly the way forward, translating this approach into effective intervention or prevention requires the introduction of a temporal perspective. An analysis of trajectory leading to Violent Extremism and Nihilistic Violent Extremism in young people

could support our attempt to better understand the processes underlying the present transformations (Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Moffitt, 1993). Among the factors identified in classical criminological studies as shaping trajectories, maturation consistently points to the central importance of developmental processes. Indeed, if the developmental gap between an 18-year-old and a 30-year-old is considerable, it is even greater over two- to three-year intervals during adolescence. While moving the focal lens toward dynamics, it is urgent to pay much more attention to the centrality of developmental factors and to their fluidity to avoid applying an adult frame of understanding (recycling of our categories- doing more of the same) to the new generation of adolescent offenders (Rousseau et al., 2025). Online actors have understood how to interest and retain adolescents' attention and push them toward action (as was previously the case for child soldiers recruited by governments or paramilitary groups). Intersectoral coordination is therefore urgently needed to address difficult questions: What, if any, deterrent value is gained by trying minors as adults? And how useful is it to apply the category of terrorism to forms of violence that are primarily nihilistic rather than political? Moving beyond the horror elicited by these forms of violence, we also need to question the increasing politization of our field categories (terrorism, extremism), and delineate the moral, ethical but also pragmatic challenges that we are confronting.

Taking stock of these changes, we believe the field should move beyond the search for the right categories and instead ask what these different movements reveal about broader developmental and global trends, and about threats as they unfold at local and individual levels. While collecting the much-needed empirical evidence in real time in different intervention and general population settings from an interdisciplinary perspective, we may use our divergences as indicators of systemic complexity.

4. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no completing interests.

5. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

C.R. and S.V. jointly conceptualized the commentary. Both authors contributed to the literature review, interpretation of the issues discussed, and drafting of the manuscript. Both authors critically revised the manuscript and approved the final version for submission.

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