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“Radicalisation is underpinned by raging inequality, anger and impotence”

Fatima Bhutto at the Edinburgh International Book Festival

“The underpinnings of radicalisation are not what we’ve been told over the past 20 years”, says Fatima Bhutto. She argues that religious beliefs are not in fact the driving force behind violent terrorism, but instead these are based in feelings of “raging inequality, anger, impotence and humiliation”. The Pakistani writer was speaking today with Indian author Roanna Gonsalves about her new book *The Runaways*, on the opening day of the Edinburgh International Book Festival.

Bhutto argues that when your “country, society, community denies you a space to create your place in the world, your place in the future, then you’re vulnerable to anybody who offers you that space.” There are banal reasons for leaving to join a terrorist organisation such as inclusion, she argues, and she links these to social media and millennials’ increased desire to be “the centre of everything”. “There is a profound loneliness in how we live in the modern world,” she says.

Bhutto’s second novel explores the lives of several young people facing both that modern world, and the possibility of radicalisation. She explains where the appeal can lie: “Part of what is so seductive about these radical groups, is that they approach young and disposed people by saying, you don’t have a place there, we’ll give you a place. And that place will not only be open, and you will not only be free there, but you will be part.”

And this is true also, Bhutto says, of Neo-Nazis: “They feel part of a world that no longer includes them”. She prefers to use the term Neo-Nazi than “white nationalist” or “white supremacist”. Let’s call them what they are, she asks. Not supreme: “Supreme is a good word, because of Diana Ross mainly.”

But although the radicalisation of people going to ISIS and those becoming Neo-Nazis follow very similar patterns, Bhutto points out that the response to these variations of terrorism differ dramatically. She doesn't know the name of the Christchurch Neo-Nazi attacker, but she does of the perpetrator of the Pulse nightclub shooting, who is Muslim. And she draws another comparison with the so-called "ISIS bride" Shamima Begum, whose story has parallels with the characters in her novel. Around the same time as Begum was undergoing public scrutiny while in a refugee camp, Jack Letts, or "Jihadi Jack", a white, British-Canadian ISIS fighter, also expressed a desire to return to the UK. Begum was stripped of her British nationality, Letts was not.

This is partly because, Bhutto claims, white people are allowed to be innocent in a way people of colour are not. She points to a Daily Mail cover picture of the Christchurch attacker as a child. "I've never seen Osama bin Laden's baby photos" she says.

So, what do we do in response to violent terrorism? Bhutto agrees with "starving them of oxygen" - not publishing names, pictures, or words of the perpetrators of attacks, but argues it must be implemented across the board, regardless of the brand of terrorism. Yet she says it's very hard to achieve in the age we live in. She found the El Paso shooter's manifesto "within two seconds" she says, "but the thing that we're leaving out of that, is that there are world leaders propagating his ideas. So, we'll hide his manifesto but what do we do with Trump's tweets?"

When it comes to deradicalisation, Bhutto believes it must be done with compassion, and people need to be given the space which they have been denied. "You're not going to deradicalise them by giving them less space... The solution is to not to push them further but to bring them closer." That doesn't mean they get welcomed back with a parade, she says: "They absolutely have to be accountable; people have to answer for any crimes they commit. [But] I think the harder question is what do you do in a society that is so thoroughly subjected to violence, that have people who are running away to fight in these disparate terror groups but you only have a country that's been at war for 18 years, and you have young men coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq completely traumatised. How do you rehabilitate those men? The answers are connected really, you create space for people, you create more space to hear people."