

Press release from the British Sociological Association

Breivik killer was 'psychotic and afraid of losing his masculinity' says researcher

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An alternative view of the Norway killer Anders Behring Breivik – as a psychotic man with a terror of losing his masculinity – was presented at the British Sociological Association in London today [**Thursday 4 April**].

Professor Barry Richards, who has a background in clinical psychology and sociology, says that Breivik killed because he had a “fragile masculinity” and was afraid of “changes to society such that sexuality and gender no longer take clear and predictable forms”.

Richards, who is Professor of Public Communication at Bournemouth University, says Breivik carried out the shootings and bombing which killed 77 people because “the most concrete representation of what he is threatened by is the liberal state, which he sees as responsible for these social changes. Hence his targets and victims on the 22 July 2011 were the Norwegian state and the politically active young people who represent its future.”

Professor Richards analysed the key documents relating to the case, including Breivik’s 1,500-page ‘compendium’ statement, other statements to the court and psychiatric reports. He said that the killer’s core fear was “not Islamification but emasculation”, an attack on his masculine identity arising from changes in society such as the rise of feminism and the challenge to male dominance.

Professor Richards told the conference that “a common view of Breivik is that the murders he committed were simply extensions of the virulent attacks on Islam to be found in the extremes of cyberspace.

“However there is a dimension to his agenda which is unusual – his fascination with the Crusades and with Masonic-style rigmarole, and his fantasies about post-revolutionary scenarios. This material is the ideological expression of an extremely grandiose and omnipotent state of mind, which psychoanalytic psychology would see as a defence against experiencing the weak and terrified self within.

“Notwithstanding the Norwegian court’s decision that Breivik is sane – a very questionable diagnosis, albeit a politically desirable one – his grandiosity can be called psychotic. Along with the extreme intensity of his fear of domination, this is perhaps what made Breivik a mass murderer and not just another bitter keyboard warrior on the ethno-nationalist battlefield.”

Professor Richards said that another mass killing was “a clear possibility” in someone with a “fearful and humiliated” psychology which underpins a worldview based on fear of annihilation, a deep narcissism, and competence in executing mass murder. “While individuals who combine these ingredients may be relatively rare, there is no reason to believe that another will not emerge.”

Professor Richards said: “Containing extremist violence is a mental health problem and a political task. Breivik’s upbringing was very disturbed, and his psychological development had been flagged up by at least one professional as a matter of serious concern when he was five, though this was not followed up. While no mental health system can capture and intervene successfully in all cases of serious early disturbance, we might wonder whether

some kind of intervention at that stage may have enabled Breivik to manage his fears better later in life.

“Overall, however, most people do not come within the purview of mental health services, which leaves the quality of our political discourse as the main defence against the risk that inner disturbances of the kind Breivik presents may become mobilised in violent form. A clear refusal of all coercive fundamentalisms and a consistent defence of the liberal state’s role in protecting and nurturing its citizens would be important elements of that discourse.”

- Professor Richards has written extensively on psychosocial approaches to politics and to popular culture, including his book *Emotional Governance: Politics, Media and Terror* (Palgrave, 2007).

For more information, please contact:

Tony Trueman

British Sociological Association

Tel: 07964 023392

tony.trueman@britsoc.org.uk

Nathaniel Hobby

Press and PR

Bournemouth University

01202 963963

nhobby@bournemouth.ac.uk

Notes

The 2013 British Sociological Association annual conference is being held at the Grand Connaught Rooms, Holborn, London, from 3-5 April. Over 400 social scientists will present their latest research, and 700 people will attend. The British Sociological Association’s mission is to represent the intellectual and sociological interests of its members. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729. Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk