

## Anders Breivik: Absolute Zero

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<http://www.morgenbladet.no/article/20110729/OIDEER/707299959/-1/DEBATT>

The shocking shootings by Anders Behring Breivik in Norway leave us numb, overwhelmed by the grief and pain of the parents, siblings, friends, and community who have been bereaved. The community extends beyond the shores of Norway, since across the world we recoil with anger towards the gunman, with disbelief that someone is capable of hurting others in this way, with shock at the tragic loss of life, and with sympathy at the pain of the victims and their families.

These shootings leave us feeling that such acts of cruelty are inexplicable, a sign of pure 'evil'. But this sense of its inexplicability is because the concept of evil is a non-explanation. Ultimately there is of course a scientific explanation of human behaviour. At a minimum, Anders Breivik had zero degrees of empathy: how else could he calmly and cold-bloodedly shoot dozens of teenagers, without a thought for them, their pain, and the pain of their family and friends?

Neuroscience tells us that empathy comes by degrees, and that how much empathy a person has is related to the functioning of a specific circuit in the brain, the empathy circuit. If Anders Breivik was put into an MRI scanner, we would see his empathy circuit functioning at below average levels, under-developed compared to most people.

But knowing Anders Breivik has zero degrees of empathy begs the question of how he ended up in this state. Again, neuroscience now tells us there are many routes to this endpoint. One of these routes is experience, and I am struck that Anders' parents divorced when he was a year old, his father divorced again when Anders was 12, and that Anders had had no contact with his father since 1995. Certainly one route to low empathy is an absence of important parental affection in childhood, and growing up with a sense of hate. But neuroscience tells us that nature also plays a role, as there are genes which correlate with how much empathy a person has. And of course, nature and nurture interact.

Leaving aside ultimate causes of Anders Breivik's low empathy, I am struck by his manifesto entitled *2083 - A European Declaration of Independence* he published on the internet: 1518 pages written over the period of 9 years. This is a man whose *ideology* has convinced him that his beliefs are right and that the rightness of his beliefs are more important than the lives of his victims. It is a case of ideology overriding empathy. This is someone who believes he has an important message for the world. Sacrificing these teenagers was in his mind simply a necessary step to get the world to wake up:

"I had to save Norway and Western Europe from a Muslim takeover. The purpose of the assassinations was to give a symbol to the people".

Anders reminds me as having many parallels with the young Hitler. At 8.30pm on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 1923, Hitler (then age 34) burst into the largest beer hall in Munich, fired a shot into the ceiling and jumped on a chair yelling: "The national revolution has broken out!" Anders also thought he was starting a revolution. When arrested, Hitler wanted to use the trial to make political speeches, just as Anders hopes to do. Sent to prison for 5 years, Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*, a long ideological justification for his racist cruel actions that also has many parallels with Anders' manifesto 2083. Hitler's diatribe against the "Jewification" of Europe also parallels Anders' diatribe against "Islamification" of Europe. Again, both men convinced by the rightness of their beliefs and both willing to sacrifice people to achieve their ends. Although Hitler was accompanied by his SS hench men whilst Anders operated alone, Anders claims he is part of a network of right wing groups. Like Hitler, Anders describes himself as a "European hero" and a "saviour of Christianity". His movement, the Knights Templar, are purported to be a group of "ordained Knights", a re-founding of the Crusading Order. It is as if Anders is acting out in real life the online game *War of Warcraft* that he also played.

Zero degrees of empathy can occur within a range of psychiatric conditions, particularly antisocial or narcissistic personality disorders. It raises the challenging question that if someone commits a crime as a result of low empathy, is the criminal himself suffering from a form of neurological disability?

If we simply stand, shocked by Anders Breivik's actions, we block enquiry into the factors that can produce the end-state of zero degrees of empathy. If we are to learn the lessons to prevent such tragedies in the future, we need to look at the discoveries of psychology and neuroscience. And we need to ask what kinds of social support and intervention could the young Anders have received that might have set him along a different, less destructive path. But a scientific analysis is not the immediate priority; instead, it is to express our deepest, heartfelt sympathy to the survivors and the victims' families.

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