
A Conceptual Exploration of Radicalisation

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Introduction

The concept of radicalism in society has a long history, with many suggesting a close affiliation to the developments of eighteenth-century Enlightenment Europe (Bötticher, 2017: p. 76). It appears to be the case that the active process of “radicalisation”, however, has taken on a new lease of life in the twenty-first century. A rough starting-point for such a development can be identified as the 9/11 attacks in the US, which not only triggered a global shift in security policy and irrevocably reoriented the post-Cold War security landscape; but which also emphasised the human element of identity in the postmodern, internet-age terrorist movements with whom we found ourselves at odds.

Two key factors are inherent in these more recent developments. Firstly, the importance of bureaucratic drivers to the debates, formulations and reformulations of radicalisation theory cannot be overestimated. It appears to be the case that studies supporting governments and state agencies in the early years after 9/11 increasingly identified and scoped a “process” connected with radicalisation, which could be modelled and turned into clearly-defined counter-radicalisation policy and strategy. This work, in turn, catalysed an interest in academic circles in the notions of extremism, radicalism and radicalisation.

Second, a line was drawn in the chronology of counter-terrorism strategies in many states, such that policy after 9/11 took on a greater pre-occupation with the human element than was the case before. This became an accelerating process in the aftermath of the major terrorist

attacks that followed 9/11 in the US, such as those in Bali (2002), Madrid (2004) and London (2005), to name but a few. Here – somewhat unlike the situation in 9/11 – the attackers were not radicals from overseas who had breached the borders and brought in a foreign radicalism; but citizens of the very states themselves under attack in which the perpetrators had been born and brought up.

A number of paradoxes unfolded. In the London attacks, for example, the leader of the bombing cell, Muhammad Siddique Khan, had not only been born and brought-up in the UK, but had been relatively successful in the sense that he had achieved a university degree and landed a solid job. His occupation, furthermore, had been in the healthcare profession. How, asked the state and its citizenry, could an individual move from caring for his fellow citizens to murdering and maiming them in the most dramatic fashion? A depressingly substantial number of other cases have subsequently followed in many nations.

Insofar as answers could be established (and it is worth noting that we are still some way from doing so at the time of writing), the obvious explanation seemed to be that something had happened to these individuals whereby their conceptualisation of their own identity and role in society had undergone some sort of transformative process, taking them away from a “normal” member of society to one with the most violent intent. Furthermore, in the normative sociological language of rational-choice which has largely held sway since the latter part of the twentieth century, such individuals were not mentally disturbed, but had each made some sort of rational calculation about the best way forward for themselves and others in society.

The advent of such developments led to a growing bureaucratic interest not only in the fire-fighting of terrorist attacks on the streets (which involves such actions as police and military action, and gathering intelligence on those involved) but also in the “fire prevention” activities, whereby the circumstances in which individuals find themselves being drawn towards violently extreme actions are examined at a deeper and longer-term level of societal development and intervention. A whole range of policies and strategies have subsequently been instituted, known as “CVE”, or Countering Violent Extremism strategies. Here, the key word – extremism – suggests something ideological and societal, rather than the black-and-white legalistic notion of a violent criminal act.

It should be noted that, while 9/11 set in motion the bureaucratic and academic thinking in these directions, an awareness has grown that the “extreme” ideology in question may not be confined to the violent jihadist ideologies of the likes of Al Qaeda and *Daesh*, but could equally

involve radical-right ideologies, as Anders Breivik starkly underlined in 2011 when he killed 77 and maimed many more in a terrorist attack in Oslo, inspired by what Khosrokhavar describes as a “frenzied utopianism” defined by extreme Islamophobia and ultra-nationalism (Khosrokhavar, 2015: p. 119).

As a result, the concept of radicalisation could be said to have been approached from two major directions, with intersections between them. These can be differentiated as macro-, and micro-level approaches; or the question of extreme *ideology* set against extremist *individuals*. The macro-level approach mirrors much analysis in the realms of Politics and International Relations, whereby the behaviours of individuals are considered within the wider context of societal structures and developments. Here, questions of power-relations in society are significant, and have driven such thinking that socio-economic marginalisation underpins the emergence of violent and revolutionary movements. Such an approach also allows for a notion that discrimination and Islamophobia, which may be as stressful for conceptions of personal identity as for actual daily physical experience, may lead whole sections of society to feel dangerously embittered and to turn to violent thoughts as a way of redemption.

Rather like the calculation concerning gun control, however, the author has noted elsewhere that ideologies are important, but it is the individual who becomes violently extreme (Richards, 2017: p. 220). The micro-level approach is initiated in part by the challenge that bedevils much political and sociological analysis, namely that: if some people respond to societal pressures in violent ways, why do so many others – all of whom are living in exactly the same environment – not do so? There must therefore be some level of context-specificity that needs to be considered in the process of radicalisation.

This has driven much psychological and anthropological work on radicalisation, which looks not at ideologies per se but at the cognitive and human processes that may cause one individual to become violently extreme when another will not. It is intriguing, for example, that the vast majority of individuals who have carried out violent “jihadist” attacks in Western countries under the *Daesh* banner, for example, could not be described as religious ideologues in their formative years, but quite the opposite (Sexton, 2017). Indeed, most of them have had histories of criminality and problems with the vices of secular, Western society. In most cases, their understanding of Islam could be described as shallow at best. This must surely mean that the influence of extreme, religiously-inspired ideology is rather more complicated than initially presumed.

Such factors have led to a certain degree of introspection in the academic community in more recent years about the radicalisation process models that characterised much of the early, post-9/11 debate, and which were driven to a significant degree by bureaucratic impetuses in the counter-terrorism realm. Indeed, some of the protagonists of the “step” models of radicalisation in this period, such as Horgan and Sageman, are starting to question their own earlier thinking to such an extent that one could ponder whether the established notion of radicalisation is reaching its end (Schmid, 2013). For somewhat different reasons, there are also critics who suggest that the bureaucratic drivers of the radicalisation debate actually had covert, sinister motives in othering certain communities and practising a form of institutional Islamophobia (Kundnani, 2009: p. 24).

In this paper, the argument is presented that radicalisation is *not* becoming a completely moot concept, and that some of the original thinking still has a great deal of utility. More specifically, theories that emphasise the dual and synergistic processes of top-down (macro-level) and bottom-up (micro-level) drivers which may (or may not) cause a particular individual to become involved in a violent and extreme act, remain important and useful in our analysis. Any theories that over-emphasise the importance of ideology over individual identity factors, or vice versa, are likely to have far less utility.

The various theories and debates across the spectrum of discussion concerning radicalisation are reviewed in this paper. These will consider each of the macro- and micro-level positions, before moving on to an analysis of the synergistic, over-arching theories that, it is argued, sensibly take the discussion forward. Some of the implications of the debate for policy-makers will also be briefly considered in conclusion.

The Macro-level Approach

One of the areas of socio-political research that has also enjoyed a resurgence in recent years alongside the question of radicalisation is that examining populist politics; boosted in part by the rise of new, Far Right movements in Western politics, and by the elevation to power of the protagonists of identity-politics such as President Trump in the US.

Much of the analysis in this area takes a structuralist stance, in the sense of structuralism as a Neo-Marxist critique of global politics and economy. This leads to an analysis of postmodern and post-industrial society, in which political constituencies are increasingly thinking not only about the traditional deleterious effects of inequitable distribution in capitalist society, but also, in a somewhat postmodern way, about “governance structures of social organization and cultural life styles” (Kitschelt,

2004: p. 1). In the Kitscheltian argument, populist, identity-based politics may capitalise on the “times of uncertainty” to offer an intersubjective identity politics to those looking for answers (Monroe et al., 2000: p. 438).

In some cases, new political movements are emerging to compete in the traditional political sphere and are gaining traction, notably in southern Europe where the likes of *Syriza* in Greece and *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S) in Italy are starting to gain power. In other cases, “freedom parties” on the far right-wing of politics, such as Geert Wilders’ PVV in the Netherlands or *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in Germany, are also shaking the traditional political establishment. Many of these parties and their sister movements and groups on the fringes of politics would be considered radical at best and extreme at worst by many in the political mainstream.

In this context, several constituencies who may be drawn towards this more disruptive politics are significant. First are what some have described as the “left behinds” of postindustrial society (Speed and Mannian, 2017: p. 249), namely those with low levels of skills and education, who find themselves poorly equipped to find jobs in the new information economy, or indeed competing for manual jobs with incoming migrants or with overseas producers operating at lower costs. This constituency feels the cold winds of globalisation more than most, against which populist politicians may offer a redemptive narrative, such as a promise to “Make America Great Again” that rings in the ears of embittered Rust Belt workers. Similarly, such processes may be reminiscent of political developments in earlier periods of history, and notably the rise of Fascist, national-socialist movements in Europe during the severe economic depression of the 1930s.

A related key constituency is the so-called “precariat” of workers in the new “gig economy” (Standing, 2014), whose sharply reduced job and income security compared to some of their forebears can lead to feelings of anxiety and a desire to change the fundamental economic structure. For such members of society, technological advances such as the increasing penetration of the economy by automation and artificial intelligence (AI) offer a growing anxiety about the future as much as of the present.

Political analysis looks closely at such structural shifts in the economy and society and considers how they feed into shifts in voting towards more “extreme” parties away from the traditional mainstream. While a shift towards an unorthodox political party is not necessarily cause for major alarm, recruitment into more extreme and violent groups by ideologues protesting a more revolutionary and anti-democratic narrative most certainly is. Thus, in December 2016, the UK government placed on

the proscribed list a Far Right organisation called National Action: the first such group to be placed on the banned list in British political history. The trigger was the murder a few months before of a sitting member of parliament, Jo Cox, by an extremist proclaiming the nationalist slogan of “Britain First!” and subsequently being found to have sympathies for National Action.

Interestingly, the author of Jo Cox’s murder, Tony Mair, turned out to be a troubled and embittered member of the majority white community, who had lived for many years in exactly the same district as Muhammad Siddique Khan, the leader of the July 2005 terrorist attacks in London (Rayner et al., 2016). Here, we may be seeing a connection between the dangerous embitterment of the “left-behinds”, and certain structural factors affecting minority communities living within Western society. For these minority communities, structural discrimination and socio-economic marginalisation may increase the lure of revolutionary ideologies in slightly different ways.

Here, there is a particularly pertinent reference to Muslim society. A nostalgic “golden age” thesis whereby Islamic society may be perceived to have been progressively subjugated and undermined by Western imperialism over the centuries from the heady days of the *Umayyud* and *Abbasid* caliphates, can – in the hands of skilful ideologues – feed upon a grim economic reality in the Middle East and, to a lesser degree, in Europe, whereby a youth-bulge of relatively well-educated and skilled citizens find themselves faced with extremely poor economic prospects. In Europe, the frustration this engenders is coupled with real or perceived discrimination and marginalisation.

Khosrokhavar (2015: p. 22) characterises the dual and relentless effect of “humiliation and despair” in such minority communities as the most common trigger for radicalisation towards a “theology of wild hope”, in which the perceived injustices are turned upon their perpetrators and the wrongs are scheduled to be righted at some indeterminate time in the future. Such a thesis may partly explain the “Arab Spring” uprisings against entrenched authoritarian regimes in the Middle East from 2011 onwards, but may also offer some explanation for how some troubled Muslims living in Western societies may be drawn towards violent jihadist movements in their quest for self-meaning or redemption.

At the macro-level of analysis, therefore, structural factors in society such as shifts in relative economic and political power relations across different groups, feed into environmental factors that may cause the dangerous radicalisation of certain individuals. The manifestation of that radicalisation may emerge in several different places, such as on the

extreme-right of politics in an expression of violent nationalism and xenophobia; or in the radicalisation of minority groups towards revolutionary, sectarian and anti-democratic movements such as *Daesh*. When looking at the problem through the macro end of the telescope therefore, radicalisation must be conceptualised as the result of structural shifts in society.

The Micro-level Approach

However, it is pertinent at this stage to return to the troubling question of why responses to structural factors that affect broad swathes of society are so variable, not only between regions but right down to the individual level. Why did structural transformations in society cause Thomas Mair and Muhammad Siddique Khan to decide that murder was an appropriate way forward, when the vast majority of their immediate neighbours and associates have decided otherwise? This must mean that generalisations must be taken carefully, and that context-specificity may often be crucially important.

What this also means is that much of the analysis of the concept of radicalisation has connected with micro-level analysis in the realms of anthropology, sociology and psychology, taking as a frame the closely-related questions of how and why individuals can turn to violence.

Jeff Victoroff undertook a useful survey of theorising around extremism and radicalisation in the run-up to, and immediately post-9/11, which identified a significant range of macro-level and micro-level theories (Victoroff, 2005). Echoing Crenshaw's triumvirate of perspectives based on person, group and society (Crenshaw, 1981), theories have been active in the political, sociological and psychological realms. At the macro-level, "relative deprivation and oppression theories" appear to be dominant (Victoroff, 2005: p. 11), but at the psycho-social levels, theories have abounded to include rational choice theory, identity theory, theories focusing on narcissism and paranoia, cognitive, and group process theories. Indeed, particularly after the spur of 9/11 and notwithstanding the difficulties in defining "terrorism", a veritable "potpourri of psychological theories" have emerged about extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism (Victoroff, 2005: p. 31). Virtually all of these are somewhat flawed in their methodological approaches and none can be taken as safe generalisations.

With that said, one of the key intersections between the macro and micro-levels of analysis can be seen in identity theory, and specifically in Sheldon Stryker's development of "structural symbolic interactionism" (SSI). As Stryker suggests, the starting point for identity theory is that "society impacts self impacts social behavior" (Stryker, 2008: p. 20). It

could be argued that all of us live within particular inescapable societal contexts which have a major bearing on our sense of ourselves and our interactions with others around us. But the sense of “interactionism” suggests that the relationship between societal structures and any one individual’s behaviour is a complex and variable one.

Closely related to SSI is “identity control theory” (ICT), which, in the words of Stryker, is:

concerned with the internal dynamic of selves viewed as cybernetic systems seeking to restore equilibriums when identities are threatened by external events (Stryker, 2008: p. 21).

The notion here is that individuals are constituted by a complex system of identity drivers and values, arranged in a delicate and finely-balanced “hierarchy of salience” to the individual. The individual’s behaviour will be determined by a constant rebalancing and adjustment in response to external events and stimuli, depending on how far a particular element of identity may be challenged and how salient that particular identity factor is to the overall identity of the individual. Perceived challenges to the more important elements of identity in the hierarchy of an individual may be followed by particularly robust responses as a way of attempted rebalancing. Such a theory applies not only to how and why individuals may turn to violence, but much more widely to interactions in the workplace, management psychology and so on.

On the question of violence, one of the most infamous experiments is that conducted by Stanley Milgram in the early 1960s. The Milgram Experiment, as it came to be known, explored the relationship between power and hierarchy by establishing in fairly chilling terms that ordinary individuals will be prepared to inflict suffering on others if told to do so by those in positions of power over them (De Vos, 2009: p. 223). The experiment helped to shed some light on the gruesome bureaucratisation of daily violence during the Third Reich in Nazi Germany, in which the human desire for conformity trumped adherence to fundamental values of humanity.

In terms of security, ICT can help to conceptualise how and why individuals choose to undertake a violent act, with some analysts building on the essentials of rational choice theory by using linear “decision-tree” approaches (see for example Dornschneider (2016)). There has also been much connection in these approaches with cognitive psychology, notably in terrorism studies. Maikovich, for example, presents an interesting “cognitive dissonance” model for understanding terrorists. Here, the radicalisation process (although Maikovich does not describe it as such) aims

to gradually reduce an individual's cognitive dissonance between feeling embittered about an issue and considering extreme violence against other human beings as an appropriate response (Maikovich, 2005). In this way, radical ideologues will use "dissonance-reducing mechanisms" to enable individuals to make the journey into violence, by offering social support (making people feel part of a wider collective); suppressing unhelpfully contradictory information; and developing a "just world bias" in the worldview of the individual. Such information strategies will be broadened and deepened by opportunities offered through new media. At a level of broad conceptualisation, this is little different from how a state may recruit an individual into an army and train them to feel comfortable with using violence.

In social group theory, some of the analysis of how and why individuals become drawn into radical movements suggests a more problematic lack of generalities. In a very interesting empirical study of how women became drawn into radical-right organisations in the US, for example, Kathleen Blee observed that a move into violent extremism can often be down to circumstantial and social developments in an individual's life (such as meeting a new person or group of people socially) which can offer the promise of a new narrative that helps to "make sense" of an otherwise seemingly disconnected and happenstance life (Blee, 2002: p. 45). This suggests the nexus of two important processes: vulnerability and stress in a person's life (a need to make sense) and socialisation (meeting new people who invite one into a particular group). This might mean that individuals could be just as likely to be drawn into a church group, or hobby circle, as into an extremist organisation, given a different set of circumstances.

Blee's analysis also supports an apparent geographical clustering of recruitment into extremist organisations, which may suggest that social connections may be as important as any other structural or personal factors. In a study of the social media traffic of 99 individuals who had left Germany to fight for violent jihadist organisations in Syria, Reynolds and Hafez (2017) found that the "integration deficit" hypothesis appeared to be a weak factor in this particular dataset. Meanwhile, the study accorded with some of the findings of a similar study in Belgium and the Netherlands by Bakker and de Bont (2016), noting that face-to-face peer-group socialisation was potentially as important as any other factor, including social media (Reynolds and Hafez, 2017: p. 24). Indeed, three cities in the North Rhine-Westphalia region (Bonn, Solingen and Dinslaken) appeared to have contributed more than half of all identified German "jihadist foreign fighters" in the recent conflict in the Middle East. This may explain why certain very specific districts, such as the Molenbeek region

of Brussels; or parts of the Hague in the case of the “Hofstad Group” of terrorists in the Netherlands, appear to have been so significant in the stories of recent terrorist attacks in Europe.

Radicalisation Models

There are undoubtedly problems with conducting empirical work in the fields of terrorism and extremism, since the subjects of interest are either difficult or dangerous to reach; incarcerated in prison which poses a particular set of ethical issues on interviewing; or are deceased. There are also methodological problems in asking someone, where they are available, why they became a radical or a terrorist, as Horgan observes, since there may be a natural tendency for the response to focus lazily on an ideological narrative about “the cause” rather than revealing anything personal (Horgan, 2008: p. 87).

This does not, however, mean there is a dearth of empirical study in the area of radicalisation, as some have suggested (Githens-Mazer, 2012: p. 558). In fact, many have undertaken surveys of a range of people of interest about notions of radicalisation and extremism, delivering an interesting body of primary material. The problem is not so much about the many valiant efforts to gather such data, but about the ability to derive generalisations from them.

One of the more interesting recent studies was that of McGilloway, Ghosh and Bhui, who undertook an extensive survey of academic outputs on the radicalization of Muslims in the West up to 2012 (McGilloway et al., 2015). This project identified 17 relevant major studies based on original primary research. The conclusions of this survey were broadly that there was:

no single cause or route responsible for engaging in violent extremism. Radicalization was seen as a process of change, but that some may be more predisposed to being vulnerable if catalytic events/precipitating factors are present (McGilloway et al., 2015: p. 49).

There was general consensus across the studies reviewed that there is a significant connection between personal “vulnerabilities” and the risk of exposure to “violent radicalization”; namely the synthesis of macro- and micro-level processes and influences, to which we will return. All of the studies involving empirical survey work with young Muslims seemed to suggest that the difficulties in “finding a sense of identity and belonging” were highly significant sources of vulnerability for many, with a number of studies identifying this factor among young British Muslims in particular (McGilloway et al., 2015: p. 49).

Despite these identified difficulties in establishing generalities about the radicalisation “process”, however, the bureaucratic drivers described above in the post-9/11 period have been key factors in the development of a range of radicalisation process models. These can be collectively conceptualised as “step” or “pathway” models (following Moghaddam’s influential “staircase” model (Moghaddam, 2005)), in that they generally describe a phased transitional process whereby an individual moves from being a law-abiding and peaceful member of society to a dangerous radical with violent intent. (In Moghaddam’s analysis, the process is likened to ascending an ever-narrowing staircase in which distracting influences and opportunities are increasingly expunged.)

King and Taylor looked at five of the more quoted and discussed models of radicalization that emerged in this period (King and Taylor, 2011). These are: Randy Borum’s four-stage progressive model of psychological development towards extremism (Borum, 2003); Wiktorowicz’s four-stage model of joining extremist organizations, with the now-proscribed British group *Al-Muhajiroun* (the Emigrants) as the case study (Wiktorowicz, 2004); Moghaddam’s aforementioned six-stage staircase model of radicalization into terrorism (Moghaddam, 2005); Silber and Bhatt’s four-stage radicalization model, developed in conjunction with the New York Police Department (Silber and Bhatt, 2007); and Marc Sageman’s “four-prong” heuristic, published in 2008. In all cases apart from Sageman, these are linear models, whereby the individual under analysis moves progressively along a pathway towards problematic extremism. In Sageman’s model, the four prongs are not linear, in that they can be present and affect an individual in simultaneous ways and in different combinations (King and Taylor, 2011).

One of the defining characteristics of these models was the cleanly identified linear sequence of processes through which target individuals may progress (with the exception of Sageman’s study in which several identifiers could appear simultaneously). There was clear utility in these linear models for counter-terrorism bureaucracies, in that these models could be used institutionally to train analysts and security practitioners to “watch for the signs” and tick off the identifiers of radicalisation as they were observed. Much of Randy Borum’s work has been conducted in conjunction with the FBI, and Silber and Bhatt’s model was produced in conjunction with the NYPD. Others in this field, such as Elaine Pressman, have also developed multiple indicator models (Pressman 2006). Pressman’s ten-indicator model, for example, identifies a set of personal indicators, weighted according to their importance, which combine to describe an eventual pathway towards dangerous radicalisation. There are clear connections

here to work in identity theory, and notably the “hierarchy of salience” conceptualisation at the heart of ICT, whereby an individual’s struggle with factors important to their self-identity can lead to a problematic anxiety and schism.

Other important studies in this period also described alleged indicators of radicalisation without necessarily building these into a “pathway” as such. Notable examples were Taylor and Horgan’s 2006 conceptual framework (Taylor and Horgan, 2006); and Kruglanski and Fishman’s 2009 study of psychological factors in terrorism (Kruglanski and Fishman, 2009), to name but two.

The key conclusions emerging from an over-arching analysis of these studies and models are twofold. Firstly, there is an “assumption that radicalization is a transformation based on social-psychological processes” (King and Taylor, 2011: p. 609). This reflects a primarily micro-level focus on the identity formulation and development of the individual. Secondly, there was also something of a consensus about the central importance of “relative deprivation” as a driver (King and Taylor, 2011: p. 609), which brings us back to the broader structural considerations. Here we can recall Stryker’s observation that self, society and social behaviour are inextricably interwoven (Stryker, 2008: p. 20).

“Relative” is an important word here in a social constructivist sense. One might imagine that many young men joining militant groups in economically very deprived areas of the world, whether it be the Taliban, Lord’s Resistance Army or any number of other groups, may be motivated in part by simple factors of daily income and protection, and not necessarily because of a strong ideological affiliation. In a major study looking at Somalia, Colombia and Afghanistan, the NGO MercyCorps attempted to understand why young men were joining insurgent and terrorist groups in such areas. The report somewhat debunked – or at least finessed – what they called the “economics of terrorism narrative”, noting that:

In some cases, economic inducements may compel someone to join an armed group, but upon further analysis, this appears to be rare. While unemployment is often emblematic of systemic sources of frustration and marginalization, *employment status alone does not appear to determine whether a young person is likely to join an insurgency*. Violence makes people poor, but poverty doesn’t appear to make them violent (Mercy Corps, 2015: p. 17; emphasis in original).

The report concluded that “young people take up the gun not because they are poor, but because they are angry” (Mercy Corps 2015: 3). In part, this is a comment on the corrupt and venal nature of the states in

which such young people live, which echoes the “humiliation and despair” narrative noted above in the context of the Middle East (Khosrokhavar, 2015: p. 22). It is also a specific comment on the importance of making sure aid and development programmes do not make problems worse in such environments.

But what of radicals living in Western contexts, who, by comparison, are much better-off than their counterparts in war-torn and deprived parts of the world? This is where the “relative” nature of deprivation may be important. Muslim radicals in European contexts, claims Khosrokhavar (2015: p. 39–40) tend to be of a “lower social strata”, and hailing from “tough neighbourhoods”. This may explain the preponderance of cases of criminality amongst the recent cohort of Western terrorists, since this characterises the environments in which many of the subjects have lived. It may also increase the importance of fundamental socio-economic struggle to the radicalisation story. Again, the notion of a generation of *indignados* driving political radicalism in different ways gains further weight.

Similarly, a factor concerning modern, information-age society is probably of critical importance in this respect, and this concerns the ease with which the disaffected of Western society can access and consume narratives from other parts of the world and identify with the plight of others. The aforementioned Muhammad Siddique Khan, who led the July 2005 terrorist cell that struck London, noted in his posthumously-aired suicide video that he identified with a wider *ummah* of believers and saw them as “my people”, for whom revenge and justice were a collective duty (Horgan, 2008: p. 85). Similarly, the perpetrators of a brutal terrorist attack in a French church in July 2016 explained to one of their hostages that “peace” was what they wanted, and that “as long as there are bombs on Syria, we will continue our attacks. And they will happen every day. When you stop, we will stop” (Sky News, 2016).

From a psycho-social theory perspective, such factors may accord with the results of Tajfel’s “minimal group paradigm” experiments of the late 1960s, which confirmed in-group and out-group dynamics, even when the groups were artificially designed in a laboratory setting and there were no real-world consequences for affiliation with any particular group (Tajfel, 1970). Wider group identification may allow for a disaffected Muslim in the West to feel a sense of shared anger and humiliation at the suffering of co-religionists in Palestine, Kashmir or Syria. In this sense, deprivation or injustice may not need to be experienced directly to form a component of radicalisation, providing the narrative is developed and promulgated skilfully. It might also explain how groups can be mobilised

in a collective way to establish a “dehumanized other”, or a “life unworthy of life” as was the case with Nazi Germany (Glass, 1999). Similarly extreme cases of the bestial denigration and rejection of outgroup others were seen in Rwanda, or Gaddafi’s Libya, in which outgroups and political opponents were described as “cockroaches”, from whom the country had to be “cleansed” (Higiro, 2007: p. 85; BBC, 2011). There are almost certainly parallels between such genocidal mass movements, and the narratives of radicalisation.

Synthesised Perspectives

The over-arching message of this analysis and modelling could be said to be a growing acceptance that the early aspirations for “profiling” or modelling the sorts of people who will be dangerously radicalised, and the processes by which this will happen, are probably a fruitless pursuit. As Horgan noted, the “moment of epiphany” concept of an embittered individual suddenly crossing an identified line and deciding they will become violent, is naïve at best (Horgan, 2008: p. 92). Instead, we seem to be faced with a framework of situations and environments which could lead to violent radicalisation, but whether and how these take effect on any one individual is very much a case-by-case analysis.

In a detailed study of the circumstances in which a group of individuals came to be recruited by Palestinian militant organisations as suicide bombers during the Second Intifada, Assef Moghaddam developed a useful synthesised top-down and bottom-up schema, which has a great deal of utility in considering the wider question of radicalisation (Moghaddam, 2003). In his “two-phase model”, Moghaddam suggested that the factors that lead to an individual being successfully recruited as a violent militant are when a set of *personal* motivations intersect to a sufficient degree with the *organisational* motivations of a particular group (Moghaddam, 2003: p. 68).

At the individual level, a set of ideas, frustrations, and direct or indirect experience of oppression or violence may lead to an individual feeling so embittered that they might be willing to die to achieve some sort of justice or redemption. But only when these feelings neatly align with the organisational objectives of a particular group do the two come together at the “recruitment” stage. Thereafter, the group will have to further radicalise and train the individual to carry out an attack before the second and final phase of the process is completed. (Indeed, some individuals will never proceed from recruitment to actual attack.)

Here, we see the complex interplay between bottom-up personal circumstances, and the top-down objectives of a militant organisation or

movement. The situation is almost infinitely variable, and it will be very difficult to predict when any one individual will pass successfully through the recruitment and deployment phases. This also helps to explain why most individuals who experience exactly the same things and consume the same narratives will *not* become violent militants.

In a wider-ranging sense, Horgan used the language of “push and pull” factors which describe a similar situation (Horgan, 2008: p. 87). Militant organisations and movements will be constantly trying to pull recruits into their ranks, but they will only be successful where a set of individual factors push a particular person sufficiently far into the arms of that organisation or movement. More significantly, from a policy point of view, Horgan notes:

Despite the increased discussions of root causes of terrorism, we can do little in a practical sense to change the “push” factors (i.e., the broad sociopolitical conditions) that give rise to the increased likelihood of the emergence of terrorism. In contrast, counterterrorism programs may be more effective in concentrating on the “pull” factors (or “lures”), since they tend to be narrower, more easily identifiable, and specific to particular groups and contexts (Horgan, 2008: p. 90).

Thus, macro-level factors are not ignored, but policy may be better aimed at a bottom-up perspective than an exclusively top-down one.

In some ways, we can see these ideas reflected in more contemporary Western counter-terrorism policy. In the post-2010 refreshed version of the UK government’s “Prevent” Strategy document, for example, the word “radicalisation” and its derivatives are mentioned 185 times. The strategy notes that:

All the terrorist groups who pose a threat to us seek to radicalise and recruit people to their cause. But the percentage of people who are prepared to support violent extremism in this country is very small. It is significantly greater amongst young people. We now have more information about the factors which encourage people to support terrorism and then to engage in terrorist-related activity. It is important to understand these factors if we are to prevent radicalisation and minimise the risks it poses to our national security. We judge that radicalisation is driven by an ideology which sanctions the use of violence; by propagandists for that ideology here and overseas; and by personal vulnerabilities and specific local factors which, for a range of reasons, make that ideology seem both attractive and compelling. There is evidence to indicate that support for terrorism is associated with rejection of a cohesive, integrat-

ed, multi-faith society and of parliamentary democracy. Work to deal with radicalisation will depend on developing a sense of belonging to this country and support for our core values. Terrorist groups can take up and exploit ideas which have been developed and sometimes popularised by extremist organisations which operate legally in this country. This has significant implications for the scope of our Prevent strategy. Evidence also suggests that some (but by no means all) of those who have been radicalised in the UK had previously participated in extremist organisations (HM Government, 2011: p. 13).

The statement here is extremely interesting and indicative of more recent thinking about the process, although it is also – as you might expect from an official pronouncement – somewhat political in nature.

From a definition point of view, the above statement reflects an understanding of the interwoven relationship between micro-level factors (“personal vulnerabilities and specific local factors”); and macro-level factors, in terms of the top-down effect of propagandists, recruiters and “extremist organisations”. Thus, some people will fall prey to such actors (those who are vulnerable to their narrative) while the majority of others will not.

The political elements are the sense that the core problem is a rejection of the political system the government is charged with upholding. Any government is primarily interested in winning votes and consolidating power, and a successful and proportionate discharging of security policy will help to do so. Within this process sits the sanctity of a secular and democratic order, placing those interested in a more extreme millennial, *caliphatic* vision on the wrong side of history and decency.

From a policy point of view, the thinking about radicalisation reflected above has helped to shape the detail of the Prevent policy: itself an arch example of a European CVE policy. Specifically, the thinking drives intensive work in institutions and environments where “vulnerable people” are expected to be located, and notably prisons, or the education and health sectors.

The potential problem with such official approaches, as McCauley and Moskalenko (2017: p. 211) note, is that they tend to concentrate overly on the importance of political ideology and thus find themselves sucked into a “war on ideas”. This can be dangerous and problematic, since ideas as to how a perfect system should be, are many and varied, and none more so than in a supposedly free-thinking democracy.

This, in a sense, strikes at the heart of some of the conceptual problems around a notion of radicalisation. There are those who suggest that

the inherent relativity of terms such as “radical” is dangerous, in the Orwellian sense of a state outlawing any thoughts or ideas it considers non-mainstream; and unhelpful, as there have been good and bad radicals in history and radicalism itself is not necessarily a bad thing per se (Githens-Mazer, 2012; Sedgwick 2010). Latterly, like the word “terrorist”, it could be argued that radicalisation has “become part of the rhetorical structure of the waging of the ‘War on Terror’” as an inherently dangerous and negative concept (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2009: p. 82).

A suitable response to such thinking does not necessarily mean ditching the term “radicalisation” altogether, since it would probably only result in another term being inserted in its place with similar problems of definition (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2017: p. 211). Clearly something is happening repeatedly whereby individuals move from being law-abiding members of society to violent and dangerous individuals, and we should not bury our heads in the sand in response.

McCauley and Moskalenko’s prescription has been to develop a “two pyramid” model, whereby “radical thought” is separated from “radical action”, with the former being not necessarily problematic (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2017: p. 211). To be fair to governments, this has been recognised variously across the Western world as a suitable approach, not least since becoming embroiled in ideological and counter-extremism battles and debates is an extraordinarily resource-hungry and controversial business. Indeed, the “VE” element of Countering *Violent* Extremism reflects such thinking in essence.

Peter Neumann outlines some of the issues in his appropriately-named paper, “The trouble with radicalization” (Neumann, 2013). He outlines two important positions taken on the concept of radicalization, which he characterises as the Anglo-Saxon, and European approaches. The former tends to be fairly reductionist, focusing almost entirely on the rule of law and not generally on the wider hinterland of radical views or beliefs. (With this said, the official statement by the British government above shows there has been some degree of ambiguity about whether and how ideology should be part of the picture.) By contrast, the European model is defined by a clear connectivity between terrorist operations and the ideological activities of those who might be on the track of violent extremism, or who might be facilitating others on that pathway. In this way, holding views defined as radical can be a cause of state attention. It is thus no surprise that countries such as France and Denmark have generated controversy over their approach towards such issues as Islamic dress in public spaces, when “banning the burqa” would be much more complex in an Anglo-Saxon country. Conversely, recent thinking by the British

government has suggested some degree of convergence with policy against radicalisers and recruiters as well as actual terrorists.

Conclusions

Martha Crenshaw showed remarkable foresight by writing some years before 9/11 that an analysis of who becomes a terrorist and why, should sensibly focus on the three interlocking dimensions of person, group and society (Crenshaw, 1981). This was all the more noteworthy when much of the post-war analysis of radical movements in Europe, such as the Red Brigades or *Baader-Meinhof* gang, had been imbued with a “pathology aura” in seeking to suggest that terrorist behaviour must surely reflect mental instability (Silke, 1998: p. 67).

After 9/11, Sageman further undermined the pathology thesis in his study of 172 militants associated with Al Qaeda, which, he found, showed unusually high indicators of income, education and mental health when compared to the population at large (Sageman, 2004). While this study was admittedly based on a relatively small number of individuals associated with one particular movement, it did suggest a more general finding that radicalisation is not necessarily as simple as it first seems.

Sageman was writing in a period when studies of terrorism and radicalisation were flowering at a remarkable rate following the shock of the 9/11 attacks. The results generated a great deal of heat but not necessarily light, in the sense that a considerable range of top-down and bottom-up theories delivered a panoply of possible explanations, united only in the fact that none of them worked against statistically significant samples of subjects; and none offered strong replication across environments and circumstances.

As with most areas of social science, the most important conclusion is that much further research will be needed before the science can be substantially moved forward. In the meantime, notions of radicalisation seem to be settling on the understanding that a combination of top-down and bottom-up drivers will cause any one individual to move into violent extremism, but when and whether this happens will be almost entirely case-specific. It does seem to be the case that frustration and despair (both immediate in a personal sense and concerning wider developments in society) can act as some of the most important drivers, as can personal struggles over identity, but when these will cause one person to become violently extreme and his or her neighbour not to do so, are matters of continual debate and examination.

In some ways therefore, the challenge *is* akin to that of mental health in society, in that the drivers that push any one person into difficulties are

extremely numerous and varied, and the best that can be done is to bolster community networks, support and information. In other ways, of course, radicalisation is significantly different in that there are anti-state groups and organisations working to “pull” recruits into their fold and offer an outlet for violent intentions. States inevitably have to work against these organisations in gathering intelligence and understanding, and disrupting networks. Back at the individual level, both state and society have a strong interest in continuing to try to understand how and why individuals become violently extreme, and who most sensibly conforms to the notion of a “vulnerable individual”. Unfortunately, the most effective sample-set to help with so doing tends to be the biographies of individuals who have already carried out violent actions.

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