
Radicalization, Violent Extremism and Conflicting Diversity

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The problem of radicalization and violent extremism is one of the most important challenges facing modern plural societies. The brutality of terrorist attacks and their frequency together with some of the ‘collateral’ problems associated with radicalisation and violent extremism, e.g. Islamophobia (Esposito & Iner, 2019), ‘moral panic’ (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2018), right-wing populism [and terrorism] together with other forms of political extremism have brought to the forefront problems previously either compartmentalized in specialized courses on intelligence and security studies or at the very fringes of scholarly interest. Despite the consensus that radicalization and violent extremism represent a major threat to political, economic and social security of contemporary democratic societies, with terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 figuring as some sort of ‘Year One’¹ on the calendar of the ‘war on terror’, the discussion about what precisely is radicalization, as the authors of the book *Counter-Radicalization: Critical Perspectives* have emphasized, ‘has been marked by a significant degree of conceptual confusion’ (2014: 5). Interestingly enough, the process of radicalization and the adjacent issue of violent extremism has opened up a number of different issues, which the theories, policies and practices of counter-radicalization, deradicalization and anti-polarization do not offer a unanimous answer to. Other important questions arise here as well, e.g. what criteria apply in order to distinguish between non-violent and violent radicalization (Bartlett & Miller, 2012)? What is the relationship between the cognitive

1 The analogy of ‘Year One’ is based on the French Republican Calendar created in 1792 during the French Revolution after the abolition of the monarchy in France.

and the behavioral dimension of radicalization? Is radicalization problematic only when it turns to violent extremism or is radicalization wrong in itself? Is the process of radicalization problematic irrespective of the method being used or is its negative valence associated exclusively with the use of indoctrination?

These and other questions are a clear sign that existing research and its focus on the etiology of radicalization [looking primarily for a causal explanation of the process of radicalization or the turn to violent extremism] leaves several definitional and conceptual issues either neglected or outrightly ignored. Radicalization, as Jonathan Githens-Mazer and Robert Lambert, have emphasized ‘is a research topic plagued by assumption and intuition, unhappily dominated by “conventional wisdom” rather than systematic scientific and empirically based research’ (2010: 889). At the same time, radicalization and violent extremism are only one part of the puzzle associated with the polarization of contemporary societies as hate speech and fake news [as well as other dystopian narratives (e.g. sensationalism)] combined with prejudices and stereotypes are an important factor contributing to social fragmentation and the phenomenon of conflicting diversity. Most importantly perhaps, these [and other] problems also challenge some of the foundational principles of contemporary democratic societies. For example, how to strike a balance between the respect of privacy and the requirements of security? What are the limits of the freedom of expression etc.?

In his well-known essay on punishment and accountability [‘Prolegomenon to the Principles of Punishment’], H.L.A. Hart, one of the most important scholars working in jurisprudence, made an insightful comment on punishment, one of the most controversial and pressing public issues back in the 1950s [at least in the UK]. As he eloquently emphasized, ‘[g]eneral interest in the topic of punishment has never been greater than it is at present and I doubt if the public discussion of it has ever been more confused’ (Hart, 2008: 1). This observation applies well also to the many issues addressed in this journal special issue of *Šolsko polje* entitled ‘Radicalization, Violent Extremism and Conflicting Diversity’. Its overall aim is to move beyond the ‘conventional wisdom’ over radicalization (Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010: 889) best represented by many well-known slogans [e.g. ‘one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’], metaphors [e.g. ‘hearts & minds’]² as well as various thought-terminating clichés [e.g. ‘what goes on before the bomb goes off’]. It brings together

2 The metaphor of the ‘hearts and minds’ figures prominently in both radicalization and violent extremism literature including other adjacent areas of scholarly research, e.g. counter-insurgency operations (Egnell, 2010), ‘war on terror’ (Mockaitis, 2003) etc. as well as in

a set of articles discussing some of the most important empirical, methodological (Knudsen, 2018) and conceptual (Kundnani, 2012, Neumann, 2013) questions associated with this area of scholarly research. Without sounding as a truism, the unifying assumption of the articles published in this journal special issue is the complex nature of radicalization, violent extremism and conflicting diversity [as well as their interwoven relationship]. While radicalization has become one of the ‘great buzzwords of our time’ (Neumann & Kleinmann, 2013: 360) and ‘perhaps the most pervasive framework for understanding micro-level transitions towards violence’ (Silva, 2018: 34), pleas for its very abandonment as a useful analytical category due to some of its ‘conceptual fault-lines’ (Neumann, 2013) have started to emerge as well.

In order to tackle a sort of conceptual carelessness stemming from much of the literature on radicalization and violent extremism, Julian Richards takes a closer look at the concept of radicalization itself and discusses the main trends, problems and challenges associated with it. Interestingly enough, some of the recent publications have moved toward the examination of the concept of radicalization itself (Knudsen, 2018; Silva, 2018). Kundnani (2012). Next, Dianne Gereluk and Carol-Ann Titus look at the role of schools in addressing youth radicalization as well as in making sense of the alleged paradox between the overall disengagement of youth in contemporary democratic societies on the one hand and the radicalization of youth [the single most vulnerable group being exposed to radicalization and violent extremism] on the other. As they write, ‘[w]hile schools must not be burdened solely to address those youth who may become radicalized, schools have a significant role to help support those youth who feel that radicalization is the only way forward for them’. Furthermore, their emphasis on the role of slogans [and other buzzwords] on the way we make sense of such complex phenomena is an illuminating example for future research. The interview with Michel Wieviorka discusses some of the most pressing issues associated with radicalization and violent extremism. The initial section of the interview is devoted to the discussion of the main differences between violent extremism fueled by radicalisation and other forms of terrorism that existed in different European countries back in the 1960s and 1970s. In the central part of the interview, Prof. Wieviorka reflects on some of the conceptual problems associated with the ‘standard’ interpretation of radicalization and violent extremism. The concluding part of the interview takes a closer look

political rhetoric as both the former US president Barack Obama and the Canadian PM Justin Trudeau made considerable use of it.

at the role education should play in the tackling of radicalization and violent extremism. Based on the analysis of the key distinctions associated with radicalization and violent extremism, Kosta Bovan, Marko Kovačić and Milica Vučković present the findings of their research on ‘how the terms “radical” and “mainstream” are understood by Croatian youth’ as well as how young people in Croatia conceptualise radicalism as a relative, neutral, and context-dependent term. The article by Iztok Prezelj, Klemen Kocjančič and Urša Marinšek discusses the process of Islamist radicalisation at the conceptual level as well as ‘the fight for the hearts and minds of the population’ strategy that has gained considerable leverage in discussions over radicalization. Ultimately, as the authors emphasize, their article also ‘proposes some ideas of how to fight Islamist radicalisation in public schools’. In his article ‘Factors of Radicalization’, Srečo Dragoš addresses the various uses of the term radicalization through the concept of a “cage” made of four dimensions. As he emphasizes, ‘[r]adicalisation is defined by the coincidence of unfavourable combinations of these dimensions, which is why it is difficult to understand it, if it is reduced only to one level and qualified more as a reason than as an effect’. The second part of his paper ‘gives some examples on the influence of the social context on the phenomenon of radicalism, with a special emphasis on the Slovenian example’. The final article to this special issue ‘Radical Hate Speech and Islamophobia: The Fascination with Hitler and Fascism on the Slovenian Webosphere’ by Boris Vezjak examines cases of radical hate speech posted on Slovenian social networks during the development of the refugee crisis in Europe and Slovenia beginning in 2015.

Alongside the focus on problems and challenges associated with the ‘standard’ interpretation [the ‘security paradigm’], this journal special issue aims to address also other contextual, definitional and conceptual issues as the relationship between radicalisation, violent extremism and conflicting diversity is anything but unambiguous or unproblematic.

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