Radicalisation: the journey of a concept

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Abstract: Since 2004, the term ‘radicalisation’ has become central to terrorism studies and counter-terrorism policy-making. As US and European governments have focused on stemming ‘home-grown’ Islamist political violence, the concept of radicalisation has become the master signifier of the late ‘war on terror’ and provided a new lens through which to view Muslim minorities. The introduction of policies designed to ‘counter-radicalise’ has been accompanied by the emergence of a government-funded industry of advisers, analysts, scholars, entrepreneurs and self-appointed community representatives who claim that their knowledge of a theological or psychological radicalisation process enables them to propose interventions in Muslim communities to prevent extremism. An examination of the concept of radicalisation used by the industry’s scholars shows its limitations and biases. The concept of radicalisation has led to the construction of Muslim populations as ‘suspect communities’, civil rights abuses and a damaging failure to understand the nature of the political conflicts governments are involved in.

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How a government makes sense of political violence directed against it usually tells us at least as much about the nature of that government as it does about the...
nature of its violent opponents. After Ulrike Meinhof, of the West German Red Army Faction, was found hanged in her prison cell in 1976, officials secretly removed her brain in the hope that neuropathologists might discover physical clues as to why she gave up her successful career as a journalist to co-found the far-left armed group. To state officials, it seemed more natural to locate the source of her violence in brain deformities than in the political conflicts of postwar Germany. Likewise, Mau Mau rebels captured in the 1950s by the British Army in colonial Kenya were examined by the psychiatrist J. C. Carothers, who claimed to find ‘hard scientific evidence’ demonstrating that the uprising was ‘not political but psycho-pathological’, a conclusion that conveniently validated the need for continuing colonial government.¹

In the aftermath of 9/11, public discussion of the causes of terrorism was largely curtailed, on the assumption that there could be no explanatory account of terrorism beyond the evil mindset of the perpetrators. Catchphrases – that terrorists were motivated by a hatred of freedom or by a fanaticism inherent to Islam – were prevalent. Terrorism became an ‘evil ideology’ that did not require further analysis.² Those wanting to cover such simple formulae in the veneer of scholarship turned to the founding father of terrorism studies, Walter Laqueur, whose ‘new terrorism’ thesis distinguished between older, political forms of terrorism, inspired by nationalism, communism or fascism, and the new ‘Islamic fundamentalist violence’ that he saw as ‘rooted in fanaticism’.³ The thrust of these accounts was that terrorists and those perceived to be their ideological fellow travellers in Muslim communities were unreformable and no political or economic change could stem their hatred. Only overwhelming force would be successful against this new enemy: thus, the greater evil of terrorism justified the lesser evil of ‘shock and awe’ in Iraq and incarceration at Guantánamo.

By 2004, however, this account of terrorism was showing its limitations. As the US ‘victory’ in Iraq gave way to a bloody war of counter-insurgency, and terrorist attacks took place in Madrid and then London, governments began to ask if ‘hearts and minds’ were as important as ‘shock and awe’. No longer believing that killing and capturing could, by themselves, bring success, they looked for a new discourse that could better guide their counter-terrorist efforts. The taboo on discussing the causes of terrorism now had to be broken. The concept of ‘radicalisation’ emerged as a vehicle for policy-makers to explore the process by which a terrorist was made and to provide an analytical grounding for preventative strategies that went beyond the threat of violence or detention.

Peter Neumann, one of the founders of the new radicalisation discourse, director of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King’s College, London, and a scholar with access to policy-makers in Westminster and Washington, DC, described (in 2008) the value of the concept of radicalisation:

Following the attacks against the United States on 11 September 2001, however, it suddenly became very difficult to talk about the ‘roots of terrorism’,
which some commentators claimed was an effort to excuse and justify the killing of innocent civilians. Even so, it seemed obvious (then) that some discussion about the underlying factors that had given rise to this seemingly new phenomenon was urgent and necessary, and so experts and officials started referring to the idea of ‘radicalisation’ whenever they wanted to talk about ‘what goes on before the bomb goes off’. In the highly charged atmosphere following the September 11 attacks, it was through the notion of radicalisation that a discussion about the political, economic, social and psychological forces that underpin terrorism and political violence became possible again.4

In the context of the evolving ‘war on terror’, this new discussion of radicalisation could present itself as the wiser, more liberal alternative to the simple accounts of terrorism offered immediately after 9/11. It acknowledged that terrorism was a problem that could be investigated, analysed and subjected to policy solutions beyond the use of physical force. In actuality, however, the radicalisation discourse was, from the beginning, circumscribed by the demands of counter-terrorist policy-makers rather than an attempt to objectively study how terrorism comes into being. Rather than provide a location for scholarly understanding of the causes of terrorism – what Kant called the ‘public use of reason’, aimed at the general enlightenment of society – the radicalisation discourse limited itself to the ‘private use of reason’ (serving the needs of a ‘particular civil post or office’), constraining the intellectual process to the needs of government security establishments.5

As such, the concept of radicalisation inherited at birth a number of built-in, limiting assumptions: that those perpetrating terrorist violence are drawn from a larger pool of extremist sympathisers who share an Islamic theology that inspires their actions; that entry into this wider pool of extremists can be predicted by individual or group psychological or theological factors; and that knowledge of these factors could allow government policies that reduce the risk of terrorism. The study of radicalisation, ostensibly a reflection on the causes of terrorism, is thus, in practice, limited to a much narrower question: why do some individual Muslims support an extremist interpretation of Islam that leads to violence? This question, of course, takes terrorist violence to be a product of how Islam is interpreted and, therefore, renders irrelevant any consideration of terrorism not carried out by Muslims. An a priori distinction is drawn between the ‘new terrorism’, seen as originating in Islamist theology, and the ‘old terrorism’ of nationalist or Leftist political violence, for which the question of radicalisation is far less often posed. Answers to the question of what drives this radicalisation process are to exclude ascribing any causative role to the actions of western governments or their allies in other parts of the world; instead, individual psychological or theological journeys, largely removed from social and political circumstances, are claimed to be the ‘root cause’ of the radicalisation process. While some accounts acknowledge politics as a component of radicalisation (using euphemistic
phrases, such as ‘grievances against real or perceived injustices’), this is only done in the face of overwhelming empirical evidence, before quickly moving on to the more comfortable ground of psychology or theology. While terrorist violence is not seen as having political causes, non-violent political activity by Muslim groups that are thought to share in the belief system of terrorists is seen as another manifestation of the same ‘radicalisation’ process, with roots in individual theological and/or psychological journeys; it is thereby depoliticised and seen as complicit with religiously inspired terrorism.

As Mark Sedgwick argues in one of the few critical reflections on the radicalisation discourse:

The concept of radicalisation emphasizes the individual and, to some extent, the ideology and the group, and significantly de-emphasizes the wider circumstances – the ‘root causes’ that it became so difficult to talk about after 9/11, and that are still often not brought into analyses. So long as the circumstances that produce Islamist radicals’ declared grievances are not taken into account, it is inevitable that the Islamist radical will often appear as a ‘rebel without a cause’.6

In pursuing this path, radicalisation analysts supply what policy-makers demand. Following the murder of Dutch film-maker Theo Van Gogh in Amsterdam in 2004 and the 7/7 attacks on the London transport system in 2005, the issue of ‘home-grown’ terrorism, involving citizens of European countries carrying out violence domestically, came to prominence. Government officials, first in the Netherlands and later elsewhere, began to devise counter-radicalisation policies that they hoped would pre-empt such violence. Their assumption was that knowledge of the ‘indicators’ of individual or group radicalisation would allow for the construction of an early warning system to detect theological violence. Authorities came to believe that they could monitor and profile Muslim citizens for signs of radicalisation and then intervene to prevent the drift towards extremism. Rather than providing governments with a full analysis of the causes of ‘home-grown’ terrorism, thinktanks and terrorism studies departments (which had been established in universities after 9/11 to attract new government funding for national security research) began to model the process by which an individual was thought to become a supporter of the extremist ideologies assumed to lie behind terrorist violence. After all, addressing the wider political context of terrorism was a non-starter with government officials, for whom the basic parameters of foreign policy in the Middle East and South Asia were written in stone, whereas ‘counter-radicalisation’ policy was an emerging area that demanded new forms of knowledge.

For those establishing themselves as purveyors of this knowledge, the period from 2004 onwards was a time of new opportunities, new funding and new audiences, first in Europe and then in the US, especially following the election in 2008.
of a president who wanted a new way of talking about counter-terrorism and who was confronted, eighteen months into his term, with the attempted car bombing of Times Square by an American Muslim. Disraeli once remarked, at the high point of British colonial expansion, that ‘The East is a career’; today, ‘counter-radicalisation’ is a career, as young scholars enter the mini-industry of national security thinktanks, terrorism studies departments, law enforcement counter-terrorism units and intelligence services to work on modelling radicalisation. Of course, scholars of political violence should want societies to make use of their work in order to reduce such violence, but true scholarship also involves a duty to question the underlying assumptions that define the discipline, particularly when those assumptions reflect the priorities of governments that are themselves parties to the conflict under investigation.

Whereas, before 2001, the term ‘radicalisation’ had been used informally in academic literature to refer to a shift towards more radical politics (usually not referring to Muslims), by 2004 the term had acquired its new meaning of a psychological or theological process by which Muslims move towards extremist views. The upsurge of academic interest in radicalisation from 2004 is illustrated in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Articles mentioning radicalisation in thirty peer-reviewed journals from 1990–2011](collegewilliamandmary.sagepub.com)
In what follows, I examine the work of some of the leading scholars of radicalisation and try to show how their analyses owe more to the aims and objectives of the states that are the primary consumers of their literature than to an objective study of the subject. This is not solely a matter of biases introduced by funding, revolving doors between government agencies and thinktanks, or other institutional pressures, but rather a matter of ideological assumptions that determine what counts as legitimate and illegitimate within the terms of this discourse. The result is a systematic failure to address the reality of the political conflicts that radicalisation scholars claim they want to understand. Instead, a concept has been contrived which builds into official thinking biases and prejudices that, in turn, structure government practices introduced to combat radicalisation, resulting in discrimination and unwarranted restrictions on civil liberties. My method is not to challenge the conclusions of radicalisation scholars with alternative sets of empirical data, but rather to explore the conceptual frameworks used to make sense of data, where they exist, and to show that even the limited data that are available ought to lead to different conclusions.

‘A cultural-psychological disposition’

A 2004 article by Walter Laqueur – a bridge between the older terrorism studies and the then-emerging radicalisation literature – provides a useful starting point to explore the concept of radicalisation. Laqueur, a seasoned Washington insider who first came to prominence in the 1950s as the Israeli representative for the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom, begins by asserting that, ‘al Qaeda was founded and September 11 occurred not because of a territorial dispute or the feeling of national oppression but because of a religious commandment – jihad and the establishment of shari’ah’. His argument for rejecting any linkage between terrorism and either poverty or causes such as Palestine is that there are many groups who suffer poverty or oppression, but not all resort to violence. With this, he moves away from a macro focus on economics or politics and descends to the level of the individual: ‘How to explain that out of 100 militants believing with equal intensity in the justice of their cause, only a very few will actually engage in terrorist actions?’ Here, we confront the founding question of the radicalisation discourse, which, Laqueur states, has been hitherto neglected. Answering it will provide a ‘root cause’ that no longer references the wider political context, but instead focuses on what he calls ‘a cultural-psychological disposition’. Framing the ‘root cause’ question in this way and providing a model of this ‘disposition’ also, of course, offer intelligence and law enforcement agencies the possibility of an analytical framework that can be used for surveillance purposes. Scholarship that associates a particular kind of ‘disposition’, be it ‘cultural’, ‘psychological’ or some combination of the two, with terrorist violence enables intelligence gatherers to use that disposition as a proxy for terrorist risk and to structure their surveillance efforts accordingly.
To illustrate the argument, Laqueur turns his attention to Europe, which he describes as ‘probably the most vulnerable battlefield’ and ‘the main base of terrorist support groups’. He claims that: ‘[T]his process has been facilitated by the growth of Muslim communities, the growing tensions with the native population, and the relative freedom with which radicals could organize in certain mosques and cultural organizations.’ The failure of ‘Muslim newcomers’ to integrate into Europe (‘cultural and social integration was certainly not what the newcomers wanted’) reflected a desire to maintain a separate religious and ethnic identity. This, in turn, led to ‘the radicalization of the second generation of immigrants’: acute feelings of ‘resentment and hostility’ towards the authorities and non-Muslim neighbours, nourished by underachievement and ‘sexual repression’. Hence, a ‘free-floating aggression’ underlies the ‘milieu in which Islamist terrorism and terrorist support groups in Western Europe developed’.

In this early account, the main components and confusions of the radicalisation discourse are already present: the focus on the religious beliefs and psychology of individuals and the downplaying of political factors; the view that terrorism is rooted in a wider youth culture of anger and aggression; and the listing of factors likely to drive individuals towards support for terrorism, such as anti-western attitudes, religious fundamentalism and self-segregation. Already, the term ‘radicalisation’ tends to merge a number of meanings – disaffection, youth alienation, radical dissent, religious fundamentalism, propensity to violence – which ought to be kept analytically distinct; already, unfounded and biased assumptions about the social and political history of Muslims in Europe are being introduced; and a causal process from a ‘cultural-psychological disposition’ to violence is being asserted without any substantial evidence. Finally, it is worth noting that there is no mention of US and UK government rhetoric on the need to fight a war against ‘radical Islam’, of the war on Iraq, of the uniting of millions of European Muslims and non-Muslims to actively oppose it, and the failure of these mobilisations to prevent the war by democratic means.

Later works in the radicalisation discourse can be seen as attempts to systematise the basic framework laid out by Laqueur in 2004 in a number of directions. For some, the question of religious belief – the ‘cultural’ part of Laqueur’s ‘disposition’ – is most significant. If a set of religious beliefs can be identified that terrorists share with a wider group of radicals, but which ‘moderate’ Muslims reject, then a model can be developed in which such beliefs are seen as ‘indicators’ of radicalisation, a point along a pathway to becoming a terrorist. This can be called the theological approach to radicalisation. For security officials, it offers the possibility of a formula for detecting future terrorist violence because holding a specific set of religious beliefs is regarded as a plausible indicator of terrorist risk. Intelligence agencies can then believe that they have a scientific basis for targeting surveillance and investigative resources at a specific group of people who happen to have these beliefs; say, for example, Salafi Muslims. The problem is that, if there is no real reason to think that these radical religious beliefs are
associated with terrorist violence, then the theological radicalisation model is merely legitimising unwarranted state intrusion into the private religious lives of large numbers of citizens.

The other direction of travel from Laqueur’s 2004 paper is to attend to individual and group psychology. What is the process by which, for some individuals, mental states of alienation or resentment escalate to extremist beliefs, whereas for others they do not? This psychological approach to radicalisation offers the same predictive possibilities for security officials: if particular patterns of behaviour (for example, forming a close-knit group that isolates itself from wider society) can be scientifically associated with terrorist violence, then this can serve as another ‘indicator’ of risk, which intelligence agencies can exploit in their attempts to identify targets for surveillance. With this approach, a more complex account of radicalisation is developed in which a psychological process, such as a group dynamic or struggles with identity, is seen as interacting with a process of acquiring an extremist theology, so that a particular combination of psychological factors and religious beliefs is the best guide to identifying radicalisation.

Implicit in both the theological and psychological approaches is the notion that the ‘new terrorism’ of radical Islamism no longer organises itself in formal hierarchies, but instead operates through social networks. Rather than political propaganda recruiting individuals into a group organised with a clear command structure (as, for example, the Provisional IRA was assumed to function), the suggestion is that individuals are radicalised into supporting an ‘ideology’ as part of an informal social network. This is taken to be a fundamental change; the driver of terrorism becomes a set of ideas shared by an informal social network rather than a coherent organisation. Use of this model to inform counter-terrorist practices has obvious civil liberties consequences. Rather than the central focus on the activities of a criminal organisation, attention turns to the circulation of ‘extremist ideas’, seen as a kind of virus, able to turn people into violent radicals. This then leads law enforcement agencies to try to prevent exposure to this virus, whether it be via books, websites, preachers or radical activists. But is the distinction between an older and newer organisational form, even if accurate, any more than a difference in tactics? Hierarchical organisations, as much as social networks, rely on ideology to bind them together; even if some terrorists appear to have learned that informal networks are harder for states to intercept, that does not imply that the underlying causes of terrorism have changed in any way.

One further point worth noting is that, because security officials are interested in patterns of belief and behaviour that correlate with terrorist risk, irrespective of whether they cause terrorism, questions of causality are usually left unaddressed in the radicalisation discourse, despite its claim to be interested in ‘root causes’. Instead of asking what causes terrorism – the key question demanded by Kant’s ‘public use of reason’ – radicalisation discourse claims predictive power, but lacks explanatory power: scholars generally talk of ‘factors’ or ‘indicators’ that are statistically associated with radicalisation and which intelligence agencies can
put to use in their efforts to detect future threats, while tending to refrain from reflecting on the larger question of causality.

**Radicalisation as a theological process**

A 2009 study by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Laura Grossman, entitled *Homegrown Terrorists in the US and UK: an empirical examination of the radicalization process*, published by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), provides a case study of scholarship that attempts to demonstrate the central role of theology in radicalisation. While the study is typical of many in its approach and conclusions, it stands out for its claim to rigour (‘an empirical examination of behavioral manifestations of the radicalization process in 117 homegrown “jihadist” terrorists’15) and the interest it has attracted among policy-makers in Washington, DC.

The key question that the study sets out to answer is: ‘What clues might there be that an individual is self-identifying with, or being indoctrinated into, jihadist ideology?’16 The data for the study are statements by terrorists themselves, trial transcripts and newspaper reports that provide biographical information on ‘every known Islamic homegrown terrorist in the US and UK who perpetrated an attack, attempted to do so, or illegally supported Islamic terrorism through the end of October 2008’.17 Based on this data, the authors claim to discover clusters of ‘indicators’ that recur sufficiently to suggest a shared trajectory of radicalisation. The ‘indicators’ are not regarded as sufficient conditions to produce a terrorist, but are useful markers of risk.

This study primarily focuses on specific behavioral changes that homegrown terrorists went through as they radicalized. It examines six manifestations of the radicalization process: the adoption of a legalistic interpretation of Islam, coming to trust only a select and ideologically rigid group of religious authorities, viewing the West and Islam as irreconcilably opposed, manifesting a low tolerance for perceived religious deviance, attempting to impose religious beliefs on others, and the expression of radical political views.18

The study concludes that the first five factors – all associated with religious ideology – are sufficiently present in enough cases to demonstrate that ‘the individuals’ theological understanding was a relatively strong factor in their radicalization’.19

There are a number of rather obvious problems with the study: first, it does not include a control group of persons who are not terrorists; second, it has no basis on which to associate terrorism with the religious manifestations it is considering; third, there seems to be no basis on which these six manifestations of the radicalisation process were chosen as opposed to other possibilities; and, finally, since the presence of any of these manifestations is tested by consulting sources that are more likely to record the presence of a particular manifestation than its
absence, the results are likely to be skewed towards presence (for each manifestation considered, in only a low number of cases is its absence explicitly noted in the sources while, in around half of the cases, there is not enough information to determine its presence or absence). Another difficulty is that, in some of the cases considered, there are serious questions as to the validity of the criminal convictions by which the individuals concerned are classed as terrorists. There are plausible arguments that some convictions were secured by entrapping individuals who were not terrorists, but merely suspected of having ‘radical’ religious opinions. This possibility is not considered, but would imply that the study’s selection of cases is biased by the inclusion of persons who have particular religious opinions, but are not violent. In addition, one might ask how much insight into ideology can be gleaned from breaking down a person’s beliefs into six discrete religious and political ‘manifestations’.

Even if these problems are set aside, there remains the difficulty that selecting to study the category of ‘jihadist’ terrorism assumes that this form of terrorism has specific causes that differ from other forms of violence. In fact, this assumption runs up against even the limited data gathered by Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman. It turns out that belief in a ‘political’ narrative (which the study summarises as: ‘Western powers have conspired against Islam to subjugate it, both physically and morally. At the same time, Muslims worldwide have lost their faith, and lack the strength that they possessed during Muhammad’s time. The only proper response to the present situation is military action’) scores highest among the manifestations examined; indeed, there are no cases in which this political dimension was found to be absent. But the study seeks to evade the implications of its own data. Having noted that the political component of radicalisation appears more consistently than the theological, the authors immediately caution that to conclude that politics is more significant than religion would be ‘crude’ because ‘when individuals are committed to a physical fight against the West, it is natural that they will try to justify this on multiple levels’, which rather defeats the purpose of looking to a person’s own account of his beliefs, as the study sets out to do. The authors go on to ask

whether individuals’ religious awakening preceded or followed their political awakening. For the homegrown terrorists who exhibited signs of political radicalization, the religious awakening preceded the political awakening 40.7% of the time. In contrast, we found that political radicalization preceded any kind of religious radicalization 11.6% of the time. (In the other 47.7% of cases, it is unclear whether political or religious ideology came first.) Thus, in our view, a nuanced look at the role of religious ideology in homegrown terrorists’ radicalization should find that religion likely plays an important role.

But whether ‘religious awakening’ or ‘political radicalisation’ comes first is only relevant if we assume that either ‘religious awakening’ is a gateway to
political radicalisation’ or vice versa. Only then does it make sense to ask the order in which these manifestations occurred. No empirical evidence is offered for this assumption. Even within the study’s own problematic conceptual framework, a more natural interpretation of the data would be that ‘religious awakening’ is not a precursor to ‘political radicalisation’, or vice versa, and that ‘political radicalisation’ is the key factor in becoming a terrorist.

Why this eagerness to downplay political factors, even when the data suggest otherwise? Part of the answer might lie in the politics of the study’s publishers and funders. The FDD is one of several neoconservative pressure groups set up in the wake of 9/11 that helped build support for the US war on Iraq. Its study was funded by three private foundations, one of which is the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, which donated more than $1.2 million to the neoconservative Project for the New American Century and has provided millions of dollars to Islamophobic groups in the US, such as the Center for Security Policy and the David Horowitz Freedom Center. For such groups, it is convenient to root terrorism in Islamic extremism rather than in the political interaction of western foreign policy and Muslim terrorist groups.

But perhaps the main reason is a bias in favour of knowledge claims that can be put to use by national security ‘practitioners’ without institutional discomfort. Breaking down religious extremism into five different ‘manifestations’ that can be ‘scientifically’ associated with terrorism is knowledge that law enforcement and intelligence agencies can easily utilise. On the other hand, painting a more reflexive picture, in which state agencies and terrorists are caught in a dynamic political conflict, is much harder to ‘sell’. In an introductory section to the FDD study, Brian Jenkins Mead, a prominent analyst of terrorism at the Rand Corporation, makes clear its potential use by law enforcement and intelligence agencies: ‘The indicators identified by Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman … have value … in deciding whether to initiate a closer look or to not waste limited resources where it is not warranted.’ And the FDD study’s lead author has, according to his website, provided ‘instruction to members of the US military preparing for deployments to the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan, and the Persian Gulf. He also designs training courses and specific modules for use by US government agencies, including the State Department’s Office of Anti-Terrorism Assistance.

Radicalisation as a theological-psychological process

Counter-radicalisation policy-making in the US and Europe is pluralist and allows for a process of compromise between multiple approaches within the limits of the basic assumptions outlined above. Radicalisation scholarship reflects this range of approaches. While accounts of radicalisation that focus on religious ideology have had a certain influence, at least as significant have been more complex models of radicalisation that see an interactive process between theological
and social-psychological journeys. Rather than religious beliefs by themselves driving individuals to violence, the picture is one in which ideology becomes more extreme in response to a ‘cognitive opening’, an ‘identity crisis’ or a group bonding process. This implies a more sophisticated counter-radicalisation practice that addresses the interdependence of theology with emotions, identity and group dynamics.

Among the most prominent exponents of this perspective is Marc Sageman, whose *Understanding Terror Networks* (2004) and *Leaderless Jihad: terror networks in the twenty-first century* (2008) together constitute perhaps the most ambitious attempt to develop a comprehensive theory of radicalisation. His model has come to be known as the ‘bunch of guys’ theory because of its emphasis on friendship and kinship as central to the radicalisation process. Sageman, a psychiatrist, was formerly a CIA operations officer specialising in Afghanistan and was based in Islamabad from 1987–1989, where he ran ‘unilateral programs with the Afghan Mujahedin’. (At the time, the US government funded the Afghan ‘jihad’ against the Soviets; today it funds studies of what causes ‘jihad’.) Sageman was also an adviser to the New York Police Department (NYPD) for a number of years and, in 2008, was named its ‘scholar-in-residence’.

In line with the basic assumptions of the radicalisation literature, Sageman rejects accounts that consider economic or political conditions as significant, on the grounds that these factors affect millions of people, whereas only a small number become terrorists. And, for similar reasons, he breaks with those who see religious ideology as the sole cause: ‘These perspectives imply an overly passive view of terrorists, who are the recipients of social forces or slaves to appealing ideas.’ Instead, he argues convincingly that we need to ask how terrorists interpret the structural conditions with which they are confronted and how they attempt to forge a common struggle in response.

In addressing these questions, Sageman makes strong claims to academic rigour, claiming to bring the methods of social science (statistics, sampling theory, survey techniques, measurement, data analysis) to the study of radicalisation. Yet, the object of his study lacks any definition. The closest we get to a description of the category of activities he is analysing is the statement that he is interested in ‘the men responsible for the September 11, 2001, attacks and all those who, like them, threaten the United States and the West on behalf of a larger community, the vanguard trying to establish a certain version of an Islamist utopia’. This, he says, gives him a database of around 500 persons ‘linked’ to the 9/11 attackers. Based on this sample, he claims that the most striking feature of the ‘jihadist’ profile is that ‘joining the global Islamist terrorism social movement was based to a great degree on friendship and kinship … About two-thirds of the people in the sample were friends with other people who joined together or already had some connection to terrorism.’ He concludes that there are two major pathways into terrorism: the ‘bunch of guys’ who collectively decide to join a terrorist organisation; and joining a childhood
friend who is already a terrorist. Social bonds, therefore, ‘come before any ideological commitment’. 33

Sageman delves into the process by which a ‘bunch of guys’ radicalises, trying to establish what it is about the dynamics of the group that brings them to the point of supporting terrorism. He identifies four prongs to this process: first, a sense of moral outrage about a perceived injustice in the world; second, ‘an enabling interpretation’, such as that there is a war on Islam, which places this outrage in the wider context of a moral conflict; 34 third, personal experiences, such as of discrimination, which become ‘another manifestation of the war on Islam’; 35 and, fourth, mobilising networks. ‘Only other people who share their outrage, beliefs, and experiences, but who are further along the path to violence or who are willing to explore it with them, can help them cross the line from venting their anger to becoming terrorists.’ 36 Thus, a ‘natural and intense loyalty to the group, inspired by a violent Salafi script, transformed alienated young Muslims into fanatic terrorists’. 37 For Sageman, it is the embedding of theological radicalism within a group dynamic that is the root cause of radicalisation.

In response, he argues, policy-makers should understand that the ‘war against the al Qaeda social movement is basically a battle for the hearts and minds of the Muslim community’. 38 He recommends that community policing can pre-empt the radicalisation process by reducing alienation, that the ‘American dream’ of equal opportunity and individualism is better at integrating Muslims than the European welfare state model, which fosters dependency and indolence, 39 and that the Iraq war was counter-productive because it fostered moral outrage. 40 Above all, governments should quietly partner pro-western Muslim leaders, advising them on the techniques of ‘political and cultural influence’ in order to ‘battle for the soul of the community’ and win over young Muslims with new role models and leaders that reject the narrative of a ‘war on Islam’. 41

Sageman’s stress on social networks has an obvious implication for law enforcement and intelligence agencies: if tomorrow’s terrorists are likely to be today’s associates of terrorists, then that gives agencies a simple formula for identifying targets of investigation – suspicion by association has anyway long been a staple of counter-terrorist policing. But claiming social bonds to be the root cause of terrorism is inadequate. Even if we accept the implication that terrorism spreads like a virus from a person already infected to his associates, all we have done is explain the process of infection; we have said nothing of why the ‘virus’ exists in the first place. Moreover, Sageman’s work shares with the rest of the radicalisation discourse a failure to distinguish between radical beliefs and violent methods. 42 Despite Sageman’s stated aim to explore how terrorists interpret their situation and how they decide to respond, we get no discussion of the conditions under which violence is chosen over other means. Even if his model offered a plausible explanation of how radical ideas circulate, it has nothing to say on what causes supporters of such ideas to favour violence over other means of advancing their cause. By default, therefore, the question of violence
can only be answered theologically. The picture is one in which the ‘Salafi script’
is already a predisposition to violence that only needs a friendship dynamic to
activate it. Sageman argues, with regard to al-Qaida and the ‘many other terror-
ist groups that collaborate in their operations’ that ‘Salafi ideology determines
its mission, sets its goals, and guides its tactics’.43 In other words, as a ‘bunch of
guys’ intensify their belief in a radical theological worldview, violence is likely
to follow. For that violence to pose a terrorist threat, the only other condition is
that the social network is able to successfully seek out the ‘global Salafi jihad’ in
order to access skills and resources.44 Thus, for Sageman, jihadi terrorism is the
product of: a socialisation process of friendship and kinship; progressive inten-
sification of beliefs leading to acceptance of the Salafi ideology; and a link to
know-how and support.45 At the heart of Sageman’s model, then, remains an
unexamined assumption that violence has its origins in theology.

Sageman’s work has been a major influence on how law enforcement agencies
understand radicalisation. He also provides an analytical basis for those who
favour a managerial approach to Muslim ‘grievances’, using soft power methods
to contain radical dissent and promote ‘shared values’, without asking too many
questions about where that radicalism comes from. Conceiving the ‘war on ter-
or’ to be not only a series of military actions, but also a global ideological cam-
paign, Muslims are to be won over to a pro-western ‘narrative’ using the same
‘cultural’ approach that had been favoured in the early cold war. An ideological
battle against radical Islamism thus becomes the new anti-communism, with
‘moderate Muslims’ the new non-communist Left, whom the CIA had sought to
recruit against Moscow in the 1950s.46

A similar approach is favoured by Quintan Wiktorowicz, another of the lead-
ing advocates of a combined theological and social-psychological model of radi-
calisation. Wiktorowicz spent a number of months in London in 2002 conducting
ethnographic fieldwork with al-Muhajiroun, the radical Islamist group founded
by Omar Bakri Muhammad. This research was published in 2005 as Radical Islam
Rising: Muslim extremism in the West.47 He was subsequently based at the US
Embassy in London, at a time, after the 7/7 terrorist attacks, when the US govern-
ment became keenly interested in the potential radicalisation of Britain’s Muslim
population.48 He built up a network of links with Muslim leaders in Britain and
observed the impact of the UK government’s Preventing Violent Extremism pol-
icy, which aimed at mobilising ‘moderate Muslims’ to oppose ‘the ideology that
supports violent extremism’.49 In early 2011, with the White House’s interest in
developing similar policies, Wiktorowicz was appointed to the National Security
Council and credited with developing the Obama administration’s counter-
radicalisation policy.50

In his Radical Islam Rising, Wiktorowicz seeks to determine why ‘thousands of
young Britons are attracted to the panoply of radical Islamic movements with
bases or branches in the United Kingdom, including Hizb ut-Tahrir, Supporters
of the Shariah, al-Muhajiroun, and al-Qaeda’.51 Al-Muhajiroun is taken as a case
Kundnani: Radicalisation: the journey of a concept

Like Sageman, he emphasises the way that groups place ‘grievances’ within an interpretative ‘frame’, and the importance of socialisation into the group’s construction of reality to create a ‘network of shared meaning’. But his account of radicalisation adds still more levels of complexity while maintaining the same underlying assumptions. He introduces the concept of ‘cognitive opening’, which refers to a psychological crisis in which previously accepted beliefs are shaken and an individual becomes receptive to other views and perspectives. This might be caused by emotional distress (such as a death in the family), experiences of discrimination, political repression, confusion over identity or as a result of ‘consciousness raising’ or persuasion by activists. Those who experience a cognitive opening may then attempt to find religious answers to the discontent that has prompted it by initiating a process of ‘religious seeking’. Finally, exposure to networks of radicals socialises individuals into participation in the movement, as would-be activists are ‘cultured’ into accepting the religious authority of the movement’s leaders and adopting their ideology.

Wiktorowicz begins his study with an account of two erstwhile members of al-Muhajiroun, Asif Mohammed Hanif and Omar Khan Sherif, who, in 2003, carried out a suicide attack on behalf of Hamas at the Mike’s Place bar in Tel Aviv. The rest of the text effectively becomes an attempt to explain how it was possible for these two British citizens to be willing to carry out such an act of violence. Yet the people studied by Wiktorowicz, through his interviews and participant observation, are radical activists, not terrorists, a distinction that gets lost in the attempt to construct a model of ‘radicalisation’. Most of al-Muhajiroun’s activities consist of ideological propagation, but the group supports violence in certain contexts, and individual activists and former activists have been involved in violent actions. But Wiktorowicz offers little reflection on what factors legitimise or delegitimise the use of violence by the movement. As with Sageman’s work, the question of what causes radical religious beliefs becomes a proxy for the question of what causes violence. As Wiktorowicz himself acknowledges at the end of his study, the social-psychological process by which individuals become active in radical Islamist groups is ‘not all that different’ from moderate, non-violent Muslim groups or from non-Islamic social movements, even if the content of the ideology differs. It therefore becomes impossible to use his account of that process to plausibly explain why violence occurs.

Like other radicalisation scholars, Wiktorowicz argues that, by themselves, political and economic circumstances are insufficient to account for radical activism. For support, he quotes Trotsky from The History of the Russian Revolution: ‘The mere existence of privations is not enough to cause an insurrection; if it were, the masses would be always in revolt.’ It follows, he states, that the real question is, ‘why some aggrieved individuals choose to join Islamic groups while others do not’, a question that is answered by considering psychological and theological journeys. This is a different inference from that made by Trotsky, who follows the above quote with these sentences, which Wiktorowicz’s
text does not include: ‘It is necessary that the bankruptcy of the social régime, being conclusively revealed, should make these privations intolerable, and that new conditions and new ideas should open the prospect of a revolutionary way out. Then in the cause of the great aims conceived by them, those same masses will prove capable of enduring doubled and tripled privations.’

Wiktorowicz’s rejection of a mechanical model of ‘grievances’ directly causing revolutionary action is convincing. But whereas this leads him to turn to the individual religious and cognitive trajectory, he ignores the other possibilities suggested by Trotsky’s text, which emphasise the perceived legitimacy of the present state of affairs and the plausibility of alternatives; in other words, politics. From this perspective, the question would be, ‘what kinds of political circumstances, combined with what kinds of political narratives (even if expressed in religious terms), are necessary for particular kinds of violence to be seen as legitimate within a given movement?’

**Radicalisation models as policing tools**

The view, shared by Sageman and Wiktorowicz, that radicalisation is essentially a theological-psychological process (in which radical religious beliefs, activated by group dynamics or cognitive openings, transform individuals into terrorists) has been influential among law enforcement agencies. In 2007, the Intelligence Division of the NYPD published a study entitled *Radicalization in the West: the homegrown threat*, which outlined a simplified version of this kind of radicalisation model. It was the first time that the NYPD had chosen to publish a document that claimed any kind of scholarly credentials. It did so, it stated, in order ‘to contribute to the debate among intelligence and law enforcement agencies on how best to counter this emerging threat’. Backed by outside ‘experts’, such as Brian Jenkins Mead of Rand, and strongly influenced by the work of Sageman and Wiktorowicz, the report identifies ‘jihadist’ ideology as the key driver of radicalisation, suggesting four phases by which an individual goes from being ‘unremarkable’ to becoming a person who is ‘quite likely to be involved in the planning or implementation of a terrorist act’: **pre-radicalisation** (the situation before exposure to ‘jihadi-Salafi Islam’); **self-identification** (beginning to explore ‘Salafi Islam’ as a result of a cognitive opening that leads to the breakdown of an existing identity and association with like-minded others); **indoctrination** (progressive intensification of beliefs, leading to complete adoption of the ideology, as a result of group socialisation); and, **jihadisation** (acceptance of an individual duty to participate in jihad). These four stages are described as a ‘funnel’ through which ordinary persons become terrorists, as their religious beliefs become progressively more radical.

The NYPD study argues that each of these four stages of radicalisation has its distinct set of indicators that allow predictions to be made about future terrorist risk. For example, stage two of the radicalisation process has ‘typical signatures’
that include: ‘Becoming alienated from one’s former life’ and ‘affiliating with like-minded individuals’; ‘Joining or forming a group of like-minded individuals in a quest to strengthen one’s dedication to Salafi Islam’; ‘Giving up cigarettes, drinking, gambling and urban hip-hop gangster clothes’; ‘Wearing traditional Islamic clothing, growing a beard’; and, ‘Becoming involved in social activism and community issues’. The study acknowledges that these behaviours are ‘subtle and non-criminal’, but, nevertheless, the need ‘to identify those entering this process at the earliest possible stage’ means that intelligence gathering based on these indicators is ‘the critical tool in helping to thwart an attack’.

Following Sageman and Wiktorowicz’s emphasis on the group dynamic in radicalisation, the NYPD considers it crucial to identify ‘radicalization incubators’, the venues where socialisation into radical ideology is occurring. These the study describes as ‘places where like-minded individuals will congregate as they move through the radicalization process’. They can be mosques, but are more likely to be ‘cafes, cab driver hangouts, flophouses, prisons, student associations, non-governmental organizations, hookah (water pipe) bars, butcher shops and book stores’ or ‘extremist websites and chat-rooms’.

Thus, in the hands of the NYPD, Sageman and Wiktorowicz’s radicalisation scholarship becomes a prospectus for mass surveillance of Muslim populations. An investigation by the Associated Press, published in a series of articles beginning in August 2011, revealed that such surveillance has been systematically practised by the NYPD in recent years. With assistance from the CIA, every aspect of Muslim life in and around New York has been thought worthy of observation and infiltration. More than 250 mosques in New York and New Jersey and hundreds more ‘hot spots’, such as restaurants, cafés, bookshops, community organisations and student associations, have been listed as potential security risks for reasons that included endorsing conservative religious views or having devout customers. A secret team known as the Demographics Unit has dispatched undercover officers and recruited informants to eavesdrop at these ‘locations of interest’. An NYPD ‘Moroccan initiative’ has watched Moroccan restaurants, gyms, barbershops, meat markets and taxi companies – and compiled a list of every known Moroccan taxi driver.

According to Senate Committee testimony, the FBI uses a similar model of radicalisation to that outlined in the NYPD’s report. However, the FBI tends to give more weight to community partnerships in countering the radicalisation process. Muslim community leaders, often local businessmen, are briefed by FBI agents on the process of radicalisation, presenting the same four-stage model as the NYPD’s, and told of warning signs to look out for among young people in the community. Through a combination of community self-policing and tip-offs, the FBI believes that this approach can prevent extremism. This mirrors the strategy outlined by the Obama administration’s August 2011 position paper, Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States, which heralded community partnerships as the government’s chief means of counter-
ing radicalisation among American Muslims. Wiktorowicz was largely responsible for drafting the strategy.

Speaking about this new strategy in an interview with National Public Radio, Denis McDonough, deputy national security advisor to the White House, listed who was being asked by the government to monitor communities for signs of radicalisation: ‘Well, I think it’s not just local law enforcement, although local law enforcement is addressing this issue and is ready. It’s also local community leaders. It’s teachers. It’s principals. It’s coaches.’ The strategy thus envisages a web of surveillance and engagement by a range of professions that might interact with young Muslims and whose members would be trained in spotting the signs of radicalisation, following the models developed in the scholarly literature. It is hard to see how this does not amount to a substantial intrusion into the mental and spiritual lives of young Muslims. But, by outsourcing this kind of surveillance to educators and community leaders, and relying on community self-policing initiatives as much as law enforcement interventions, the government hopes to avoid charges of violating the First Amendment to the constitution on freedom of speech and religion.

The inspiration for these approaches is Britain’s Preventing Violent Extremism programme, which was launched by the Blair government in 2007 and has sought to build partnerships between Muslim community organisations, police forces and local authorities to mount an ideological challenge to radicalism and to identify individuals thought to be on a radicalising path. The latter of these objectives is met through the Channel project, which involves youth workers, health workers and teachers being trained to spot supposed indicators of radicalisation in order to identify ‘vulnerable’ young people, who are given mentoring, religious instruction or counselling to stem their journey towards extremism. Between 2007–2010, 1,120 individuals were identified by Channel project practitioners as being on a pathway to radicalisation. Of these, 290 were under 16 years old and fifty-five were under 12. Over 90 per cent were Muslim (the rest were identified for potential involvement in far-right extremism). Official Channel guidance on the signs that radicalisation is taking place appears to be influenced by Sageman and Wiktorowicz and their focus on socialisation and cognitive opening. Listed as potential factors of radicalisation are, for example: abandoning current associates in favour of a new social network; experiencing a crisis of identity or family separation; and, expressing ‘real or imagined grievances’.

Wiktorowicz’s analysis had earlier been strongly influential in similar programmes run by the Amsterdam municipal authority following the Van Gogh murder in 2004. The approach there, which was subsequently replicated in other Dutch and Scandinavian cities, was likewise to embed surveillance in a range of formal and informal agencies in the hope of creating an early warning system to detect radicalisation, all based on indicators derived from the scholarship. Both the Dutch programme and the UK’s Channel project depend on the ability of the state to collect highly detailed information about the lives of Muslims,
including children. While, ostensibly, this information is not routinely shared with law enforcement and intelligence service investigators, it is, of course, available to them should they wish to access it. In any case, such programmes raise substantial issues of religious discrimination and disproportionate invasion of private life.

The primacy of politics

Radicalisation models, whether based solely on theology or including a social-psychological component, have encouraged national security establishments to believe that they can pre-empt future terrorist attacks through intensive surveillance of the spiritual and mental lives of Muslims. Radical religious ideology has been conceived as a kind of virus infecting those with whom it comes into contact, either by itself or in combination with psychological processes. But the radicalisation literature fails to offer a convincing demonstration of any causal relationship between theology and violence. Moreover, the concept of radicalisation tends to confuse propensity to violence with radical ideas, leading the question of what causes violence to be insufficiently isolated from the question of how belief systems and ideologies come to be adopted.

In a paper that is less widely read than his better-known books on Islamism, Olivier Roy argues that it makes more sense to separate theology from violence: ‘the process of violent radicalisation has little to do with religious practice, while radical theology, as salafisme, does not necessarily lead to violence’.74 The ‘leap into terrorism’ is not religiously inspired, but better seen as sharing ‘many factors with other forms of dissent, either political (the ultra-left), or behavioural: the fascination for sudden suicidal violence as illustrated by the paradigm of random shootings in schools (the “Columbine syndrome”).’75 While a Salafi semantic register might be part of the way that groups articulate their narrative, this alone is not evidence that religious ideology is causing violence, but merely that, within this milieu, legitimacy is secured using theological references.

Despite its analytical problems, the radicalisation concept continues to be popular among policy-makers in Europe and the US. And the alternative possibilities of conceiving of terrorism, particularly those that view it as a mode of political action, are neglected. While policing agencies search for scholarship that can give them a magical formula to predict who will be a future terrorist, an honest survey of individual cases suggests that the micro-level question of what causes one person rather than another in the same political context to engage in violence is beyond analysis and best seen as unpredictable.76 For policing agencies, the best approach is therefore to investigate the active promotion of violence, rather than wider belief systems that are wrongly assumed to be precursors to violence.

On the other hand, the meso-level question, as to what conditions are likely to increase or decrease the legitimacy of the use of particular types of violence for a particular political actor (either a social movement or a state), is amenable to
productive analysis. So, too, is the macro-level question of how particular social movements and states are constituted to be in conflict with each other, and how the interaction between these different political actors produces a context in which violence becomes acceptable. This relational aspect requires us to investigate the ways in which western states themselves ‘radicalised’ following 9/11 as much as non-state actors, both becoming more willing to use violence in a wider range of contexts. An objective study would examine how state and non-state actors mutually constitute themselves as combatants in a global conflict between ‘the West’ and ‘radical Islam’ and address under what conditions each chooses to adopt tactics of violence, paying close attention to the relationship between the legitimising frameworks of the various actors. Only by analysing the interaction between the different parties in the conflict and how each interprets the other’s actions is it possible to explain why the number of incidents of home-grown terrorist violence increased dramatically in Europe following the launch of the Iraq war.

Of course, such a perspective on terrorism would also imply a very different approach to ‘counter-radicalisation’, one that sought solutions in the political empowerment of young people, the creation of political space for Muslim communities to engage in radical, democratic alternatives to violent vanguardism, and a rethinking of the foreign policies of US and allied governments.

References
5 Immanuel Kant, ‘An answer to the question: “What is enlightenment?”’ (1784).
7 This graph was generated using full-text searches on journal publisher websites and on the EBSCO website. A journal was included in the survey if it had published at least one article on radicalisation in the last twenty years, based on a wide-ranging literature review of the subject. No adjustment has been made for the moderate growth in the total number of articles published each year in these journals over the period of time under consideration. Biases were also potentially introduced due to variations in how different search engines handled keywords. Both


10 Ibid., p. 53.

11 Ibid., p. 53.

12 Ibid., p. 55.

13 Ibid., p. 56.


17 Ibid., p. 27.

18 Ibid., p. 29.


22 Ibid., p. 53.

23 Ibid., p. 54.


31 Ibid., p. 15.

32 Ibid., p. 66.
Support for violent methods should itself also be further distinguished from being willing to plan and commit violent acts. The former is usually constitutionally protected.


Ibid., p. 120.

Ibid., p. 135.


Diplomatic cables subsequently published by Wikileaks reveal that the US Embassy in London had made available grants of $50,000 to support anti-extremist projects among UK Muslims, including the possibility of fostering an ‘anti-extremist genre’ of Bollywood films; see cables for 25 October 2007, ‘EUR senior advisor Pandith and S/P advisor Cohen’s visit to the UK’; and for 18 April 2008, ‘Proposals for ambassador’s CT fund’.


Arun Kundnani, ‘The FBI’s “good Muslims”’, Nation (19 September 2011).

White House, op. cit.


Kundnani, Spooked, op. cit.


Colin Mellis, Amsterdam and Radicalization: the municipal approach (City of Amsterdam, 2007).


Ibid., pp. 3, 15. Similarly, Jeroen Gunning and Richard Jackson question the assumption that ‘religious terrorism’ is the product of religious ideology and unpack the distinction between ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ forms of terrorism. Also, Mark Sedgwick argues that al-Qaïda’s violence is best understood in terms of classic theories of the political strategy of ‘propaganda of the deed’, as developed by nineteenth-century anarchists; Gunning and Jackson, ‘What’s so “religious” about “religious terrorism”?’, Critical Studies on Terrorism (Vol. 4, no. 3, December 2011); Mark Sedgwick, ‘Al-Qaeda and the nature of religious terrorism’, Terrorism and Political Violence (Vol. 16, no. 4, Winter 2004).

Githens-Mazer and Lambert, op. cit., p. 893.

Donatella della Porta, Social Movement Studies and Political Violence (Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation, Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, Denmark, September 2009), p. 9.

In Britain, for example, the number of potentially violent Islamist militants is said to have trebled in the years between 2003–2006; Peter Neumann, Recruitment and Mobilisation for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, King’s College London, December 2007), p. 32. Robert Pape has used quantitative data to argue that suicide bombing is a tactic used to oppose foreign occupations carried out by democracies. However, his account is overly mechanical in the way it conceives the use of violence by non-state actors; see Robert A. Pape and James K. Feldman, Cutting the Fuse: the explosion of global suicide terrorism and how to stop it (Chicago, IL, Chicago University Press, 2010).