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What is This?

The rhetoric and reality: radicalization and political discourse

Jonathan Githens-Mazer

Abstract

This article will illustrate how the term 'radicalization' has both contributed to and been the subject of the social construction of risk surrounding violence and radicalization. To this extent, contemporary discussions of radicalization are related to ideas of 'vulnerability' and susceptibility to 'extremism' – topics which facilitate problematic assertions of inherent relationships between challenging ideas and the propensity for violence. The article will close by providing some corrective suggestions to push forward less subjectively framed research, while still engaging in the complex examination of the relationships between identities, ideas, and violence.

Introduction

For many outside the academy, radicalism, radicalization, and 'being radical' are common-sense ideas. These terms describe basic, though often profound, challenges to existing political, social, economic, and cultural mores, norms, practices, and institutions – and radicalization, more specifically, is used to describe the relationship between such challenges and the potential of an individual's engagement in violence as part of this challenge to the status quo (often described as terrorism). In this way, radicalism is pitted against the status quo, and transcribed into an ideology that pits 'extremism' against 'moderation'. The predominant understanding of radicalization has created a corollary political agenda: how best to counter what are interpreted, or indeed socially constructed, as problematic challenges to existing orders of states and societies. This corollary agenda is often called 'counter-radical' or 'counter-extremist'. While this dialectic of challenge and mitigation or deflection of challenge dominates the 'conventional wisdom' on radicalism and on radicalization,

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in my work I consider this simple dichotomy problematic (Githens-Mazer, 2010a, 2010b; Githens-Mazer and Lambert, 2010a). One common response is to ask, 'How does radicalization in the 21st century relate to those progressive, but challenging politics of the 1960s in civil rights campaigns, university sit-ins, and those movements that they helped to foment that led to deep social transformations and reforms on issues of race, class, sexuality, and gender?' Such a question begs a series of subsequent normative and subjective questions. Are challenges to the status quo good or bad? Are they destructive or constructive?

As radicalism and radicalization have been framed as issues of good or bad and as extremist or moderate, a truism seems to have emerged: 'We like good radicalism and radicalization, but do not like bad radicalism and radicalization – we like challenges to some things, but believe challenges to others to be an existential risk to the continued functioning and existence of society.' What constitutes 'valued' radicalism and radicalization versus risky radicalism and radicalization is, however, subjective, decided not so much by a wider society, but by those with their hands on the tiller of the status quo – the elites who control what is deemed 'normal' practice and to whom many of the challenges are directly addressed. On the one hand, politicians and the media seek to engage in strong and definitive talk about the risk to stability and security posed by 'radicalization' (via 'terrorism'), and yet in an era of austerity, and where many of the basic assumptions and beliefs in free-market capitalism seem incorrect, the media, policy-makers, and wider society appear to value some challenges to status quo practices and beliefs that will help to correct social, economic, and in some cases, cultural problems. This ambiguity, in short, has caused real conceptual dissonance between the subjective use of these terms, their meaning as concepts, and the potential for academic research into understanding radicalism and radicalization.

The discussion that follows here represents an attempt to set out some basic antecedents for the evolution of 'radical' and related terms, explain how radicalism and radicalization constitute a 'conceptual back-formation' for policy-makers and the media when trying to make sense of the attacks of 9/11 (New York World Trade Centre), 3/11 (Madrid commuter train system), and 7/7 (London underground), and how this back-formation is inherently bound to the social construction of risk. In short, the article will argue that the problem with some current discussions of radicalism and radicalization is that they are based on an emotional response to the shock of 9/11 and the subsequent securitization of Islam, what Horgan (2005: 23) refers to as the 'drama' of terrorism – a human understanding of the scale of death, destruction, or property damage. 'Radicalization' was quickly appropriated by the media and politicians as a descriptive term to explain how and why Muslims participated in violence against the West, ostensibly in the name of their religion. It was regularly used interchangeably with terms such as 'fundamentalist', 'Islamist', 'jihadist', and 'neo-Salafist' or 'Wahabbist'. In other cases, 'radical' Islamist was a euphemism for 'violent' Islamist (Langohr, 2004).

From 'radicalism' to 'radicalization'

While the history of 'radical' and 'radicalism' has a clear pedigree in the history of political thought, the term 'radicalization' is a recent innovation. 'Radicalization' is a word which is often used today to mean a range of concepts and ideas, leading to a large degree of confusion. So what does the contemporary political science literature mean by 'radicalization'? It has been used to indicate forms of populism related to revolutionary opportunity (Ellner, 2005); a revolutionary act in response to declining power (and used interchangeably with 'fundamentalism') (Ferrero, 2005); an 'ultra' form or intensification of existing political orientations and behaviours, often typified by a shift from peaceful activity to (ever more) violent 'extremism' (Brighton, 2007; Jenne, 2004; Jenne

et al., 2007; Van den Broek, 2004); the process by which political moderates become militant or increasingly support extremists and their positions, as well as a related sense of a reaction to a catalyst, occasionally described as recruitment (De Figueiredo and Weingast, 2001; DeNardo, 1985; Duffield, 2002; Fraihi, 2008; Mesquita and Dickson, 2007; Rosendorff and Sandler, 2004; Ryan, 2007; Saad-Ghorayeb, 2003); and, lastly, an individual sense of becoming hyper-aware of critical issues, resulting in a 'radical irrationality' and a subsequent willingness to act violently on this awareness (Gustafson, 2007; Simon, 1985).

Take, for example, the Homeland Security Institute's 2006 report entitled 'Radicalization: An Overview and Annotated Bibliography of Open-Source Literature', which was prepared for the Science and Technology Directorate of the US Department of Homeland Security. A comprehensive report, coming in at more than 220 pages, it is a compendium of open-source articles, books, and reports (by journalists, academics, governments, and think-tanks) covering a large range of cases (domestic, international, and everything in between) in order to define radicalization. As a basic literature review, it makes little distinction between reports that address who and where terrorist incidents occur, reports on 'breeding grounds' for radicalization, and attempts to make basic definitional claims for the term. Within the space of several pages, one can see a collection of disparate methodological approaches with little concentric conceptual consideration that range from claims to have uniquely identified the key signifiers of radicalized 'sleeper cells' to the addressing of the problem of 'prison radicalization' (Githens-Mazer and Lambert, 2010b).

As of early 2011, there were 107 books, journal articles, government papers and documents, working papers, think-tank reports, and publicly available postgraduate theses that are of direct relevance to the study of radicalization. Out of these, some 67 (63 percent) refer to 'Islam', 'Islamism', 'Muslim', 'jihad', 'Al Qaeda' or 'Salafi-Wahhabism' in the title and 78 (73 percent) refer exclusively to radicalization with reference to Muslims or Islam, or both.

The main way in which to attempt to group these sources seems to be through the definition of radicalization they present. Out of the 107 sources, 56 (the majority, although it is close) do not offer any definition of radicalization. Of the 51 remaining sources which do attempt to define radicalization, these can be grouped (loosely) into three categories. First, there are those which define radicalization as a *process*. These include those which claim that radicalization should be conceptualized as a 'conveyor belt' (a series of steps towards becoming a terrorist), those which see radicalization as more of a 'funnel', and those which see radicalization as a process of changing beliefs and ideas that results in the acceptance or willingness to use violence or direct action. The second category tends to view radicalization in terms of *causation*. This category includes those which in their definition of radicalization refer specifically to possible reasons why one might become radicalized, those which define radicalization as a push for societal change or a reaction to poor governance, and those which define radicalization with reference to Islam, with Islam perhaps providing the reason for radicalization. The split between process and causation is relatively equal. The third and final category consists of those which provide a negative definition of radicalization, for example claiming that radicalization is not terrorism or violence, or those which merely provide examples of different types of radicalization, such as violent or non-violent radicalization.[1]

The use of empirical research and primary data (interviews, surveys, polls, and so on) is not, apparently, considered requisite practice to publish on radicalization: only 64 of the 107 sources (just less than 60 percent) had conducted their own research. Yet the overwhelming majority of those that had used their own empirical data provided no definition of the concept of radicalization (37 of the 64 or just less than 58 percent). Much of the current research on radicalization fails to conduct any empirical research and fails explicitly to define radicalization. Out of the works which have both conducted empirical research and attempted to define radicalization (27 or 25

percent), 13 see radicalization in terms of causation rather than process. This is by no means a majority, but it could perhaps indicate that those doing research in the field (especially interviews) become more empathetic with, and focus on, the reasons as to why people become radicalized, rather than defining it solely as a function of structure or ideology, or both. The field seems definitively split between process and causation when defining radicalization. Interestingly, 92 of the 107 sources consulted used either lesser primary or outright secondary sources, which included think-tank reports, government reports, working papers, policy documents, court transcripts, newspaper reports, websites, television programmes, speeches, censuses, and so on. Such practice begs those questions raised by scholars such as Schmid and Jongman (Schmid, 2004; Schmid and Jongman, 1988) as to the extent to which this research reproduces 'group think' through constant self-reference.

Radicalization, reality, and constructing risk

As a term, 'radicalization' has pervaded almost all aspects of the discourse on terrorism and risk since 9/11. The question, in many ways, is why this is so. What is it about 'radicalization' as a term or concept that makes it so appealing for political media discourse when asking how and why an individual comes to perpetrate a terrorist attack? What is this term, as a basis for popular discourse, saying about the kind of vocabulary we think we need in order to describe such a phenomenon?

All risk is a social construction based on a combination of statistical probability and, more importantly, concerns which a society either explicitly or implicitly deems worthy of attention and the expenditure of time and resources (Beck, 1992; Douglas, 1992; Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983). Radicalization, in current parlance, represents this exact phenomenon. Societies often intuit risk as a perception of how scary and threatening an outcome is, rather than its probability of occurring. The actual threat of violence from Muslim communities in Europe and the USA is statistically infinitesimal, yet the attention in terms of time, money, and political rhetoric is massive. Take, for example, the number of arrests for 'Islamically inspired' terrorism in the EU in 2010: 179 were arrested for such terrorist offences of one variety or another, constituting some 30 per cent of all those arrested and convicted for terrorism offences in the EU (EUROPOL, 2011). This looks, on its own, to be an alarming statistic – almost one-third of all terrorist convictions in 2010 were for Islamically inspired plots. However, such a figure must be placed in a wider context. As there are in excess of 53 million Muslims living in Europe, only 0.000033 per cent of the population of European Muslims were arrested and convicted of these offences. Even on a national scale, if we consider that there were 12 convictions for Islamically inspired terrorism in the UK in 2010, a policy concerned with Islamic radicalization (that is, counter-radicalization) is based on something like 0.000041 per cent of the entire British Muslim population (EUROPOL, 2011). As Scott Attran (2010) says: 'Rarely in the history of human conflict have so few people with so few actual means and capabilities frightened so many.'

In part, this reflects the power of the images of 9/11 – images that came as a total shock to a complacent and unaware western public (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2007). In the aftermath of these attacks, western societies sought an answer to how and why such attacks had happened – and there was an elite and popular attempt to discern causation in the deaths of more than 3000 in the USA on this dreadful day, asking the question 'Why did this happen to us?' Douglas (1992; Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983) talks extensively about the socially constructed nature of causation, especially in relation to violating taboos. How do we understand why something bad happens to us? We think about such issues in light of morality, religion, and action and reaction, despite the world being massively complex and causation most often indiscernible. In the aftermath of the horrific attacks

of 9/11, governments across the world resolutely talked of the threat of Islamically inspired terror-
ism, and the correlative rise in its priority as a resonant political issue was about addressing degrees
of public panic and popular perceptions of this threat. Simultaneously, states, through their security
apparatuses and the co-optation of academic research, sought to ascertain the actual extent to which
these attacks represented a viable challenge to the existing political, cultural, economic, and social
status quo. This was the elite-driven popular construction of perceived causation. The actual risk
of a terrorist attack affecting any one individual's life was beyond infinitesimal, yet an individual's
perception of this risk is not based on tangible evidence.

So why does radicalization matter here? Risk and security are intimately bound concepts, as
the concept of 'security' is a subjective construction that reflects the power of the labeller and
inherently elevates one perspective of what constitutes 'security' over others (Floyd, 2006). In
this instance, the contemporary security discourse of radicalization represents the translation of a
perception of social risk from Islamically inspired terrorism into the concrete focus of a policy
agenda. In the panic after 9/11, and later the 3/11, 7/7, and other terrible attacks and atrocities,
societies constructed Islam and its practitioners as constituting some sort of unique existential
threat to society (Croft, 2012). In post-9/11 western society, Islam is regularly exceptionalized,
held up to constitute a distinct and 'other' religious category worthy of extra scrutiny either
because of an alleged relationship to terrorism and violence or because of a wider 'clash of civi-
lizations' thesis which decries its incompatibility with 'liberal democratic values' or democracy,
or both (Cesari, 2009; Croft, 2012; Huntington, 1993, 1996; Lewis, 1990, 1993; Phillips, 2006).
This has created a political discourse about the relationship between minute groups of Muslims
who believe that violence against non-Muslim states and individuals in a non-Muslim state is a
necessary and rational act to 'defend faith', and the impact of the practice of Islam in the West
more widely. This discourse has meant that the social construction of risk associated with
Islamically inspired violence has become intimately bound up with debates over 'community
cohesion', that is, what constitutes 'reasonable' behaviour among British Muslim communities.
This discourse exceptionalizes 'Muslim culture' (objectifying and essentializing a vast array of
identities, theological outlooks, and experiences), which is constructed by political elites and the
media as constituting a threat to 'traditional British values', sometimes as a specific function of
'Muslim immigration' (McLaren and Johnson, 2007: 727; Poole, 2002: 22; Werbner, 2000;
Zahera and Ehab, 2006: 1063). Taken as whole, the popular media and political discourses now
routinely juxtapose issues more usually associated with integration and immigration with terror-
ism and radicalization, such as the wearing of the Hijab, arranged marriage, and the fundamental
compatibility of Islamic religious ideology and practice with liberal democracy. This is the
essence of the 'securitization' of Islam, literally labelling Islam as a potential existential threat to
the security of western, and in this case British, society, and subsequently suspending legal,
social, and political norms to justify this exceptional treatment, by the apparatus of the state, of
Islamic faith, belief, and practice and Islamically inspired political engagement (Bicchia and
Martinb, 2006; Cesari, 2009; Croft, 2012; Githens-Mazer, 2009; Laustsen and Waever, 2003;
Pasha, 2006).

Whereas in the 18th and 19th centuries radicalization might have meant fundamental chal-
lenges to those shibboleths held by religious and political elites, now it has come to mean how one
of us becomes one of them – how an 'ordinary' person enters on the path to becoming a terrorist
who wants to kill me and you. This is the act of conceptual back-formation. In etymology, back-
formation refers to a change in a word after it has an existing parsing or meaning, so, for example,
we now use the verb 'to diagnose', which is a neologism derived from 'diagnosis', and the word
'diplomat', which is a neologism reflecting the original word 'diplomatic'. So, here we have an

instance of conceptual back-formation. Popular discourse sought a word which might capture what was meant in terms of the process of becoming a terrorist, and has used 'radicalization' in that capacity ever since. This process of back-formation means that radicalization is where the rubber of an individual's socially constructed perception of reality meets the road of concrete policy and security practices.

Given that so much of the literature on radicalization does not define the concept, does not engage in the collection of empirical data, and yet focuses solely on varieties of Muslims and Islam, it follows that we might wonder to what extent this literature has buttressed, if not actively engaged in, the social construction of risk attributed to Islam and Muslims in the European context? Is 'radicalization' only a made-up 'securitizing' label, part of an elaborate plot to 'other' Muslims and maintain a non-Muslim hegemonic status quo? There is a real threat of terrorist attack from a minuscule number of largely tactically incapable individuals who believe that they have a moral obligation to carry out violence against western targets in the West in the name of Islam. Certainly, one reasonable question, given the character of much of this literature, is: How proportionate has our response been to the nature of this threat and how does our construction of the risk of a terrorist attack equate with the statistical likelihood of its occurrence? The size of the gap between the statistical reality and the fear of its occurrence is a good indicator of how socially constructed the risk actually is. The idea of Islamically inspired 'terrorist radicalization', particularly when framed as part of a discourse about Muslims and Islam, is more deeply popularly resonant than the probabilistically higher dangers involved in driving too fast, drinking too much, not looking both ways when crossing the street, or falling asleep with a cigarette in our hand. Yet even in light of such statistical realities, policy-makers and the media continue to assert that radicalization via Islam is a danger to the entirety of Muslim communities – a specific failure of multiculturalism epitomized by a failure to embrace 'shared values and beliefs' that provide 'resilience' against messages that support and encourage Islamically inspired violence against Britain and British interests (Travis, 2009).

Implications for research

So the situation for academics engaged in this field is that we are now stuck with a popular perception of radicalization that sits at odds with its conceptual operationalization as a basis for meaningful and scientific enquiry. 'Radicalization' has become an ambiguous term – a moving target which is declared 'common sense' by policy-makers and the media, yet is a total nightmare to operationalize as a proposed topic for research. We want 'radical reform' of banking and the global economy, but we do not want 'Islamic radicalism'. What is a social scientist to make of such a term? How can it be operationalized at all as the basis for research? Should we jettison it in light of its normative affiliations or re-inject a degree of conceptual and methodological rigour into its use? And, do such questions matter in the parallel worlds of media speak and political debate?

The study of radicalization should be a matter of objective ontological observation. Whether we determine this to be the study of the process by which 'collectively informed, individually held moral obligations to participate in direct practice' take place or whether it is the study of direct challenges to hegemonic status quo practices is a matter of semantics rather than any kind of philosophy-of-science issue (Githens-Mazer, 2010a; Githens-Mazer and Lambert, 2010a). Those studies, scholars, and institutes that seek to study radicalization solely on the dependent variable of violence without explicitly stating that this is their aim and objective, and sometimes even while doing so, contribute more to the social construction of risk and radicalization than they do to any objective scientific consideration of how and why violence occurs in light of cases and processes.

This, therefore, seems a key moment to recalibrate the study of radicalization. This requires an explicit acknowledgement that radicalization, whichever of the above definitions we use, has no link to Islam and violence. We must consider the collectively defined though individually enacted phenomenon of challenging an existing status quo as an act which has no scientific basis for moral claims as to what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' or risky or constructive forms of radicalization. Until we have a wide basis for comparison about understanding how and why individuals challenge the status quo because they feel obligated to do so on the basis of specific identities, no matter how we personally feel about such challenges, this field will be a moribund quagmire of political machination.

There are two key steps to promoting better second-generation research on radicalization in the future. The first is *proper conceptualization*. This requires all future research on radicalization to strive to set aside normative assumptions and value-laden approaches towards understanding this concept. It also requires scholars to re-examine a whole set of assumptions about the relationships between radicalization and violence, radicalization and 'ideology' or belief, and radicalization and identity. Simply assigning the study of radicalization to the category of personality process and, especially, making it the sole purview of psychology may reify a state of being which is ephemeral in observation and complex in terms of establishing causation. One way to begin this recalibration may be to perform the conceptual exercise of asking what radicalization is not, as much as what it is. Goertz (2006; Goertz and Mahoney, 2005) makes the crucial point that in their enthusiasm for reifying complex sociological or political concepts, theorists and empiricists often focus too much on what a concept *is*, rather than identifying such a concept on a continuum, in order to assess when a concept is present versus when it is not.

Dichotomizing a concept is problematic, so why do it here? Towards this end, Table 1 suggests some kinds of observable values that we may attach to the conditions of where radicalization is present (Radicalized +) and where it is absent (-Apathetic). While such conditions may not parallel all other approaches to this topic, at least it provides a starting point for enquiry and observation. Both Goertz and Ragin make the point that concepts such as democracy become overly fluid and relative when used in theories such as 'Democratic Peace Theory' or other situations requiring the conceptualization of democracy (Goertz, 2004; Goertz and Mahoney, 2005; Mahoney and Goertz, 2006; Ragin, 2000, 2006, 2008; Ragin and Pennings, 2005). In such situations, democracy often becomes a relative concept rather than an observable phenomenon, such that many different forms of political representation may become defined as democracy, rather than exact conditions being specified (such as directly elected representatives) or, indeed, it being recognized that some types of

Table 1.

Radicalization Conceptual poles	
− Apathetic	Radicalized +
Commitment to rhetoric.	Commitment to direct action.
Mediated relationship with political orientation, mobilization, and action.	Mobilization and participation are individually obligatory and defined.
Mediated relationship with rhetoric and texts.	Relationships with agendas are personal and non-elite defined.
Elite-defined political participation and behaviour.	Direct action is prized, as defined by texts.
Power relationships maintained through the practice of ritual.	Rejection of ritual in favour of direct action.

institutional organization of representatives may be inherently more democratic than others.[2] In the case of radicalization, it is as important to define what is not radical as what is, so that we can make empirical observations of both conditions. Methodologically, this allows us to derive observations of the causal conditions which explain why the one situation exists rather than the other. If, on the positive pole, radicalization is being defined as the replacement of rhetoric with practice derived from 'the text', what constitutes the negative pole? What is the counterfactual to radicalization? Logically, it must be those cases in which rhetoric and ritual are more important than direct political action – a state in which ritualized practice mediates, directs, and legitimizes political behaviour, and motivates action. Even fully accepting the contemporary popular perception of radicalization, it can be coherently argued that the absence of radicalization is not moderation or even apathy, but the staunch defence of the status quo, even potentially a violent defence of the status quo.

In my own research, I have settled on a fairly clear definition of radicalization: 'a collectively defined though individually held moral obligation to participate in direct action, often textually defined'. It may be that other scholars disagree with this particular approach and have better, more innovative, or, indeed, more articulate definitions than this one. One aspect lacking in my definition is the acknowledgement of its contemporary use as a challenge to the hegemonic status quo. There are also clearly varying degrees of process, belief, and commitment in terms of radicalization, and the condition of being radicalized is dynamic, such that it can be present one minute and absent the next with no guarantee of its return.

This raises the second aspect which needs to be recalibrated for radicalization research: *methodology and case selection*. There are many different examples of radical movements and of radicalization. Differentiation is not only a function of factors such as the political, cultural and religious context, history, and geography, but also of differences within specific conditions. For example, the early incarnation of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a prominent organization in the American civil rights movement, exemplifies a group that had moved beyond a rhetorical commitment to racial equality in the USA and that played a key role in several campaigns of non-violent direct action. In this way, their spearheading of the Freedom Rides, the March on Washington (in 1963), and freedom summer all constitute radicalized political behaviour. The SNCC's form of radicalization can be assessed relative to the position adopted by white Northern Democrats, who may have implicitly supported desegregation and aspects of racial equality without participating in direct action, yet could be mobilized by the party machine and local politicians to support (or at least not oppose) the candidacy of politicians such as John F. Kennedy and to support the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965 under Lyndon Baines Johnson. On the other hand, the SNCC itself can be observed as being on a continuum and compared to parallel institutions of the period, such as the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and even groups such as the Weathermen (Weather Underground Organization) and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defence. These organizations, although all representing a degree of radicalization in the USA during the 1960s, cannot in any way be lumped together as all being committed to exactly the same political agenda or, indeed, as using the same techniques to achieve their specific agendas. On the other hand, their commitment to direct action is explicit, and their belief that this action forms part of an individually defined commitment to proper and moral political conduct is more than apparent. In fact, all of these organizations can easily be placed on a 'radical' continuum if we define radical (and radicalization) as the basis for the challenge to status quo practices. These groups define this sense of legitimacy in a variety of ways (and the role of elites varies significantly between them), but they were all comprised of individuals who felt a collectively defined, but individually held moral obligation to take direct

action, and the legitimacy of this obligation often came from interpretations of key, 'sacred' texts, ranging from the New Testament to Marx's *Capital*.

Social scientists have two main strategies for exploiting or overcoming these kinds of differentiation. The first is via the comparative method and the second is by trying to observe inductively how and why such movements are different from 'normal' practices and if there is any relationship between being an 'outlier' and the occurrence of specific outcomes, for instance, violence. Too much research selects on a narrow dependent variable, such as Islamically inspired political violence in a western context, and then claims to establish the causality of certain processes or factors which can actually be observed in a variety of cases beyond the sample (Githens-Mazer, 2010a, 2010b; Githens-Mazer and Lambert, 2010a). There can be no inferring of causality in such cases – they barely constitute useful scientific observation because there can be no comparisons in which violence does or does not occur and, furthermore, there is no consideration of the idea of radicalization as a concept beyond the specific of Islamically inspired violence in a western context. Either future studies have explicitly to compare violence with violence in terms of radicalization in a variety of contexts and cases (which there is some movement towards) or, perhaps even more positively, we must begin an entire recalibration of the research which asks the research question in the right way. What is the right way of asking a research, question on radicalization? We still do not understand why, despite the myriad of potential reasons for people to launch violent challenges to the hegemonic status quo, 99.9 per cent of people would not even countenance such an act. Nor do we understand under what specific kinds of social, cultural, economic, and political pressures they might be willing to do so. Until we actually focus on those questions, how do we even know if we are observing radicalization at all?

Conclusions

Of course, the transformation of the meaning of words such as 'radical' or 'radicalization', the process of ideological back-formation, or even the invention of new words, are not at all new. 'Fundamentalist', 'terrorist', and 'extremist' are all words that reflect similar processes: they mean (potentially) something very specific in the academic literature, but come to mean something substantially different in popular discourse. Most recently, the discourse has slightly shifted in some quarters away from 'violent radicalization' to 'violent extremism', and after years of outcries about exceptionalizing Islam, there have been some token efforts to expand the debate to 'right-wing' or 'far-right' radicalization and extremism. This occasional replacement of 'extremism' for 'radicalization' is a shift in terms, not concept. The best evidence for the token nature of any inclusion of non-Muslim radicalization comes from the UK government's recent Prevent Review, which supposes the function of the Prevent Strategy to be the countering of Al Qaeda and Islamist-inspired ideologies, rather than the promotion of multiculturalism per se as a means of countering the anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric of organizations such as the English Defence League and the British National Party. Politically, the attempt to shift this study to include 'right-wing' or anti-Muslim radicalization (and hence, violence) represents the ultimate normative rather than scientific shift – an attempt to transfer the complex political problems of securitization away from how and why radicalization studies exceptionalize Islam rather than making the study of radicalization any better.

In fact, there may be one point of continuity in the continued use of 'radical' and related words: the role of the individual. While this article has argued that the conceptual back-formation of radicalization has come to mean understanding the process by which someone believes that a

challenge to the status quo (often violently) is a rational and important plan of action, even previous versions of radicalism had focused on an individual's engagement with a moral obligation to participate in direct action to achieve what that individual perceived as making the world a better place. This is the key link between past and present. It remains, in addition, the puzzle for future studies of radicalization. On the one hand, why does challenging the status quo appeal to some individuals, but not others? On the other hand, does the state or society have an obligation to prevent or to embrace such challenges?

The fact remains that in the case of radicalization, research has the power to wreak havoc and distrust across whole swathes of western societies – emphasizing risk, threat, and security with regard to Islam and Muslims, to the detriment of social interaction and well-being. Scholars engaged in research on radicalization bear an extra set of burdens that require substantial reflexivity: To what extent does the research reflect objective conceptualization and scientific data collection (even where interpretive methods are deployed) and how do we understand the role of such research in the buttressing or constructing of social perceptions of risk and threat? Other questions follow on from this. To what extent should academics attempt to tailor their research to policy needs? Alternatively, should the political and media discourse take better heed of the academic research?

One thing is for certain: research into radicalization has become incredibly important at the start of the 21st century, and we have an obligation to do it correctly, no matter the nature of the social and political pressures. As a paradigm for impact-driven research over the next decade, we must strive to be as scientific as possible while staying firmly anchored to the real world.

Notes

1. For a similar breakdown of the radicalization literature, it is worth consulting Kühle and Lindekilde (2010: 24).
2. For further discussion on the application of concepts and of 'drift', see Collier and Mahoney (1993), Gerring (1997, 1999, 2001), Goertz (2006), Goertz and Mahoney (2005), Gray (1977), and Sartori (1970).

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