

Radicalization revisited: violence, politics and the skills of the body

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For more than a decade, ‘radicalization’ has been a keyword in public discourse about terrorism. The attacks in Paris in 2015, in Brussels in 2016, and the large number of people currently travelling from Europe to Syria are some of the latest events that have kept radicalization at the top of the agenda. In July 2015, British Prime Minister David Cameron, for instance, made a speech on extremism in which he emphasized that: ‘No one becomes a terrorist from a standing start. It starts with a process of radicalization.’¹ But what is radicalization? What are we talking about when we evoke the topic of radicalization? And how can we understand processes that—eventually—could lead to terrorism? Despite a widespread use of the term, there is no scholarly consensus on how to understand radicalization. This fuzziness, which allows everybody to conceive of radicalization as they like, is not only an intellectual problem of concern for scholars, but also a challenge for practitioners—police, civil servants, intelligence agents, social workers, prison guards, teachers, community workers—who are summoned to manage the phenomenon and communicate their worries about ‘weak signals’ and ‘early signs of radicalization’. What exactly are these people asked to be on the lookout for?

Despite the fact that there is no scholarly consensus on how to define radicalization, a set of preconceived ideas about the phenomenon is nonetheless taken for granted in public discourse. It is, for instance, a widely shared idea that Islamist ideology is a key factor in processes of radicalization and, consequently, that prevention should be targeted at extremist ideas, along with radical imams and mosques. But a primary focus on this specific means of understanding radicalization tends to obscure other aspects. One aim of this article is to question the evidence that surrounds the term ‘radicalization’ and instead turn it into a problem for analysis. The article therefore asks what the currently dominant concepts of radicalization leave out of sight and argues that radicalization is not an individual

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¹ David Cameron, ‘Extremism: PM speech’, Birmingham, 20 July 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/extremism-pm-speech>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 9 Feb. 2016.)

process driven by religious ideology, but can more precisely be understood as a process of politicization.

It is not the ambition of this article to provide a comprehensive overview of the vast literature on radicalization. This service has been performed by other scholars.² However, in order to critically discuss the *concept* of radicalization, the article draws on empirical studies of how radicalization occurs in Europe today. The aim is not merely to apply the concept of ‘radicalization’ to empirical material, but rather to let the empirical material ‘talk back’ to enable a reassessment of the concept. Before grappling with the empirical question of how radicalization occurs in Europe today, it is therefore necessary briefly to delineate some general features of the concept in its most influential articulations. How is radicalization conceptualized, and what are the major fault-lines in recent discussions about radicalization? From this theoretical outline, the article will move on to an empirically based discussion of how we can understand pathways towards terrorism in a European context. The aim of this empirical section is not only to throw light on processes of radicalization, but also to pin down some of the limits and blind spots of current understandings. The article argues that most understandings of radicalization tend to overemphasize the role of ideology, while downplaying the political, social and bodily aspects of the phenomenon.

This argument unfolds in five interrelated steps. The first section briefly presents a prevailing conception of radicalization, where extremist ideology is seen as a precondition for violence. In a second part, I argue that a prior experience with violence can, on the contrary, be a precondition for engaging in terrorist crime. Third, I suggest that pathways towards terrorism that somehow involve religious ideas are not only religious, but first and foremost political. The idea of a pure and apolitical form of religion relies on a secularist concept of religion as private and depoliticized. Fourth, I argue that radicalization is a social process; the idea of the lone wolf being radicalized in isolation is a myth. Finally, I suggest that current concepts of radicalization have ignored a factor that is absolutely crucial when it comes to violence, namely the capacities of the body. Pathways towards violence imply a transformation of the physical abilities of the perpetrator. The aim of setting out these considerations is not to do away with the concept of radicalization altogether, but to add some nuance to dominant understandings and point to other aspects that have hitherto been largely downplayed, if not ignored.

² See e.g. Randy Borum, ‘Radicalization into violent extremism I: a review of social science theories’, *Journal of Strategic Security* 4: 4, 2011, pp. 7–36; Randy Borum, ‘Radicalization into violent extremism II: a review of social science theories’, *Journal of Strategic Security* 4: 4, pp. 37–62; Arun Kundnani, ‘Radicalisation: the journey of a concept’, in Christopher Baker-Beall, Charlotte Heath-Kelly and Lee Jarvis, eds, *Counter-radicalisation: critical perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2015); Peter R. Neumann, ‘The trouble with radicalization’, *International Affairs* 89: 4, July 2013, pp. 873–93; Daniela Pisoiu, ‘Theoretische Ansätze zur Erklärung individueller Radikalisierungsprozesse: eine kritische Beurteilung und Überblick der Kontroversen’, *Journal EXIT-Deutschland. Zeitschrift für Deradikalisierung und demokratische Kultur* 1: 1, 2013, pp. 41–87; Alex P. Schmid, *Radicalisation, de-radicalisation, counter-radicalisation: a conceptual discussion and literature review* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism Research Paper, 2013).

Radicalization as an intellectual process

In order to reconsider the concept of radicalization, it is useful to briefly recall that it came into widespread public use in Europe at a specific moment, namely in the wake of the 2005 London bombings and the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004.³ A few years before, after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States, the threat of Muslim terrorism was perceived of as an *external* threat to be handled through foreign intervention and draconian visa regimes that would prevent dangerous foreigners from entering the United States and other western countries. What was of interest after 11 September was not radicalization as such, but first and foremost the distinction between radical and moderate Islam.⁴ But the London bombings in 2005 were of a different kind. It came as a great surprise when it turned out that the perpetrators behind the attacks were not foreigners, but British citizens and residents, born and/or brought up in the UK. This new threat perception—which was soon to be conceptualized as ‘homegrown terrorism’—implied that terrorism would now have to be managed *inside* the state borders. The question that quickly arose to confront politicians and analysts alike was why young Europeans, born and brought up in peaceful, democratic societies, could turn to this form of violence. And in 2005 the answer appeared to be quite simple: they had been influenced by Islamist ideology, propagated by radical preachers and imams. Scholars would discuss whether the proper denomination of the radical ideology was ‘Islamism’, ‘Salafism’, ‘jihadism’ or ‘takfirism’, but there was broad consensus that some kind of religious ideology was the starting-point for the journey that led eventually to violence.

From this viewpoint, radicalization came to be considered as a process of embracing extremist ideas. As radicalization was also conceived of as an *individual* process, public discourse was soon to propagate the narrative of the normal, average citizen meeting up with a ‘radicalizer’ who would brainwash the innocent youngster before pushing him or her into extremist action. This conceptualization was somehow moulded into the specific British context of the ‘Londonistan’ radical environment, including several radical preachers who were openly airing their radical opinions in public. Subsequently, religious ideas and ideology came to be considered as both the starting-point for and the driving force behind processes of radicalization.⁵ When a young person was, step by step, becoming imbued with religious ideas, they would also become more and more radicalized until reaching the ‘tipping point’, where they would take the step ‘from talk to action’, from religious *ideas* to violent *action*.

³ Mark Sedgwick, ‘The concept of radicalization as a source of confusion’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22: 4, 2010, pp. 479–94.

⁴ Angel Rabasa, Cheryl Benard, Lowell H. Schwartz and Peter Sickle, *Building moderate Muslim networks* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007).

⁵ Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam rising: Muslim extremism in the West* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005). Although the focus of Wiktorowicz was broader than mere ideology, his concepts of ‘cognitive opening’, ‘religious seeking’ and ‘sacred authorities’ were highly influential and inspired many policy concepts of ‘radicalization’ after 2005.

More than ten years after the London bombings, the idea that ideology is at the heart of the radicalization process still prevails. The vocabulary has evolved, if only slightly, since 2005, from ‘Islamism’ to ‘extremism’, and the site of contagion has shifted from ‘radical preacher’ to ‘online radicalization’. But the main idea is more or less the same. In his speech of July 2015 on extremism, for instance, Cameron claimed that: ‘The root cause of the threat we face is the extremist *ideology* itself ... the extremist *worldview* is the gateway, and violence is the ultimate destination.’⁶ In the same speech, he stated that the fight against extremism could be considered a ‘battle of ideas’.⁷

Despite this broad agreement about the role played by extremist ideology, the concept of radicalization has from the outset been attended by ambiguity. Recent articles on radicalization have pointed to a fault-line between ‘ideological radicalization’ and ‘behavioral radicalization’,⁸ or between ‘extremism of thought’ and ‘extremism of method’.⁹ ‘Ideological radicalization’ describes the process through which a person comes under the influence of extremist *ideas*, while ‘behavioral radicalization’ is the process through which a person—having adopted a radical ‘world-view’—accepts violence or is ready to take the step from talk to action to realize his or her extremist ideas. To some, radicalization is a purely cognitive process leading to the endorsement of radical ideas; to others, it implies a behavioural transformation leading to a condition in which a person has either accepted the use of violence or is willing to perpetrate it. But although concepts of radicalization differ in terms of their ultimate destination—endorsing radical ideas or accepting/perpetrating violence—they share the fundamental idea that radicalization implies an intellectual transformation and that an extremist ideology is somehow the precondition of the violent acts. Most concepts of radicalization—whether ideological or behavioural—thus emphasize the *intellectual* dimension of radicalization and claim a specific *relationship* between ideas and violence.¹⁰ To echo David Cameron, ideology is the ‘gateway’ or the ‘starting-point’ leading up to the ‘final destination’: violence.

It is precisely this intellectualist approach to radicalization that this article sets out to challenge. In order to do so, I will narrow the focus and consider only violent/behavioural forms of radicalization or pathways leading to political forms of violence. The phenomenon that I strive to understand is terrorism; not whether people endorse opinions that a majority consider extremist. In a liberal society, where freedom of speech and opinion—within specific limits defined by the law—is a fundamental right, ideological radicalization is not in itself a problem, but on the contrary a right. The problem we are facing is not—I would argue—the radical views, but the violent acts. Ideological radicalization is a problem only to the extent that it leads to violence, and this causation is exactly the presumption

⁶ Cameron, ‘Extremism: PM speech’, p. 3, emphasis added.

⁷ Cameron, ‘Extremism: PM speech’, p. 10.

⁸ Neumann, ‘The trouble with radicalization’.

⁹ Anthony Richards, ‘From terrorism to “radicalization” to “extremism”: counterterrorism imperative or loss of focus?’, *International Affairs* 91: 2, March 2015, pp. 371–80.

¹⁰ Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam rising*.

that we tend to take for granted—and that this article sets out to examine. Hence, I do not ask whether extremist ideology feeds into *ideological* radicalization, which, obviously, it does. The focus here is on terrorist *acts*, and I therefore ask whether and to what extent extremist ideology feeds into *behavioural* radicalization. In this respect, I am not interested in people who merely *accept* violence or express that they are ready to perpetrate it. I am interested in understanding cases where someone has committed or actively prepared an act that in the current setting is designated as ‘terrorism’.

From ideology to violence or from violence to ideology?

From this conceptual introduction, I move to the heart of the matter: how to understand pathways towards terrorism in Europe today. When dealing with radicalization in Europe, we are confronted with a huge problem: the lack of independent, in-depth, ethnographic knowledge about extremist environments.¹¹ As scholars, we rely on scarce and often biased information. Most articles on radicalization are therefore either review articles or articles underpinned by the same types of open source material: earlier research, newspaper articles, court transcripts, interviews with practitioners and public authorities.¹² Hence, much of the literature tends to build on and redundantly repeat already existing knowledge. There are obvious reasons for this predicament. Radical environments are difficult, if not impossible, to access, and interviews with former extremists tend to be ex-post rationalizations. Nonetheless, from 2008 to 2011, I had the rare opportunity to be in regular contact with an extremist milieu in Copenhagen, including people who had been charged and/or convicted in five terrorist trials.¹³ This experience was tied to both a specific time and a certain milieu, and, in many ways, extremist milieus are different today. In 2008, people from this milieu were travelling to Pakistan, Yemen or Somalia; today, they would probably go to Syria. Nevertheless, this experience gave me a glimpse into a violent extremist milieu, and led me to question some of the dominant narratives about radicalization—in particular, the role attributed to religion or ideology.

The first question I want to raise is whether extremist ideology is the ‘root cause’ of or the ‘gateway’ to violent radicalization. Is radical ideology the cause or precondition of violence? In order to discuss this question, I draw on my fieldwork experience, which I combine with open source material, eight years of regular interaction with security practitioners and a new database of terrorist attacks in Europe since 2001.¹⁴ It is not the intention here to conduct an anthropo-

¹¹ Andrew Silke, ‘The devil you know: continuing problems with research on terrorism’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13: 4, 2001, pp. 1–14.

¹² An exception is John Horgan, ‘Interviewing the terrorists: reflections on fieldwork and the implications for psychological research’, *Behavioral Science of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 4: 3, 2012, pp. 1–17.

¹³ The fieldwork, carried out with Dr Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen, started during a terrorist trial. Later we met the young men in various locations: a café, a mosque, a research institute, and other trials. Instead of formal interviews, we had informal conversations with these men, while also observing their interactions.

¹⁴ The WITT (Western Islamist Terrorist Threat) database contains data on materialized terrorist attacks in western Europe and the US from 2002 to 2015: <http://www.diis.dk/files/media/documents/projects/crimeplots141215.xlsx>.

logical analysis based on thorough investigation of ethnographic data. Rather, the fieldwork experience constitutes a backdrop for my analysis in the precise sense that it has been constitutive of the way I understand processes and dynamics in extremist environments and therefore also of how I critically assess open source material. Sometimes I make explicit reference to my fieldwork; sometimes the ethnographic knowledge feeds into the analysis less directly.

Like certain other scholars,¹⁵ I argue that ideology is not necessarily a precondition for violence; but I take the argument a step further to suggest that violence can, conversely, be a precondition for engaging with extremist ideology. If we consider the perpetrators who were involved in the recent attacks in Europe—Merah, Nemmouche, the Kouachi brothers, Coulibaly, the Copenhagen shooter, the people behind the November 2015 Paris attacks, and so on—we do not see a gradual *ideological* radicalization, which led, step by step, to violence, but rather the opposite: that a prior experience with violence was seemingly a precondition for engaging with extremist ideology and eventually perpetrating a terrorist attack. Radicalization is a very complex issue, where various elements come together; there is no one-size-fits-all. Radicalization and violent extremism are diverse phenomena that operate differently for different people. From my fieldwork experience, I realized that extremist milieus are heterogeneous, including people of various kinds: some are interested in Islamism as a visible sign of opposition; others are attracted by action and violence. Nevertheless, the young men who were involved in the recent attacks in Europe were neither intellectuals who, through a long theological process, embraced an extremist ideology before eventually turning to violence, nor young people meeting up with a radicalizer who lured them into extremist ideology. Most of these perpetrators are, or were, young people—often with a troubled social background—who had experience with violence from criminal environments and who eventually converted their violent skills to serve an extremist cause.

The point I want to stress is that many of these young men were acquainted with violence and violent milieus *before* embracing an extremist ideology: they had, for instance, been involved in drug dealing, gang violence and weapon use. Similarly, through their involvement in criminal environments many have experienced legitimate state violence: some have been in contact with police or intelligence services; some have been put in prison. If we narrow the focus to include only those individuals who, from January 2012 to July 2015, perpetrated a terrorist attack in Europe, nearly 80 per cent have a known criminal background and approximately 60 per cent have been in prison.¹⁶ These facts are consonant with the words of the French President François Hollande in his speech to the French parliament in the aftermath of the November 2015 Paris attacks. He did not allude to extremist ideology, but emphasized that the men who had perpetrated

¹⁵ Cf. John Horgan and Max Taylor, 'Disengagement, de-radicalization and the arc of terrorism: future directions for research', in Rik Coolsaet, ed., *Jihadi terrorism and the radicalisation challenge* (London: Ashgate, 2011); Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, 'Mechanisms of political radicalization: pathways toward terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20: 3, 2008, pp. 415–33.

¹⁶ The WITT database: <http://www.diis.dk/files/media/documents/projects/crimeplots141215.xlsx>.

the attacks were ‘individuals who went from ordinary crime to radicalization to a terrorist crime’.¹⁷

This cursory sketch is not an attempt at profiling the budding terrorist. The aim is to challenge some of the assumptions that underpin widespread approaches to radicalization; in particular, the idea that religion or extremist ideology is the starting-point for and the main driver of radicalization. In contrast to this widespread idea, the process we see today is not necessarily an acquaintance-ship with a radical ideology that eventually leads to violence, but most often the opposite: young men who are already part of violent milieus—and who therefore are familiar with violence—eventually converting their violent skills to serve a *politico-religious* cause, which from their point of view is noble and prestigious. These young people, who have often experienced difficulties in the regular school system, are on the lookout for other ways of gaining recognition, prestige and success.¹⁸ They may obtain this prestige by using the skills that they have, by doing what they are good at: namely, perpetrating violence or handling weapons. By engaging in terrorist-related activities, they apply their existing skills and knowledge, their courage and their willingness to engage in violent high-risk activities, to a more prestigious political cause.

Hence, we have to reconsider the idea of a ‘tipping point’, where an ideological process tips over into violence. Pathways towards terrorism or political violence do not necessarily entail a step ‘from talk to action’—from ideology to violence—but could also entail a transition from one kind of violence into another. To put the point differently: instead of an ideological radicalization process, one pathway towards terrorism could be a ‘politicization of violence’.¹⁹ This ‘politicization’ would transform the violence from ordinary crime into a *political* form of violence, that is, terrorism. In contrast to most radicalization theories, which have highlighted the idea of violent radicalization as a huge step from ideas to violence, this perspective points to a less dramatic step from one form of violence to another. Similarly, the initial question of why young men who were brought up in peaceful democratic societies could turn to violence should also be reconsidered. Although European societies are relatively peaceful, they are not entirely exempt from violence. Hence, the interesting question is not why some people turn to violence, but why they turn to *this kind of* violence.

The attraction of violence and conflict areas abroad

In the previous section, I argued that religious ideology is not necessarily a precondition of violence, and that, conversely, a prior acquaintance with violence could be a precondition for engaging with an extremist ideology. There are, however,

¹⁷ François Hollande, ‘Discours du président de la République devant le parlement réuni en congrès’, 16 Nov. 2015, <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-devant-le-parlement-reuni-en-congres-3/>.

¹⁸ Laurent Bonelli, ‘Les chemins de la radicalisation’, *Le monde diplomatique*, Feb. 2015, pp. 1, 14–15.

¹⁹ Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen, Manni Crone and Jakob Peter Witt, *The politicisation of violence: an alternative to radicalization*, DIIS policy brief (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2015).

other ways in which violence—or the *attraction* towards violence—can precede the engagement with an extremist ideology. Today, a relatively large number of people go to Syria to fight with groups such as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Nusrah Front and others, whereas ten years ago they would head for Pakistan, Yemen, Iraq or Somalia. Whichever groups and countries they choose, the same question arises: why do young Europeans join foreign insurgencies or terrorist groups in remote areas? At first sight, we find the ideology narrative in an updated version of ‘online radicalization’: young people become radicalized on the internet; they are being recruited by religious preachers who brainwash them through the dissemination of Islamist ideology.²⁰ But if we scratch the surface, we will see something else: that the attractions of weapons, violence, war zones, excitement—combined with a perceived just cause, or just the prospect of leaving behind a dull and seemingly hopeless life—may pave the way for an extremist engagement, sometimes including a loose or superficial affiliation with an extremist ideology. Young people who currently travel to conflict zones abroad are not necessarily illuminated by a radical religious ideology inciting them to engage in a foreign conflict. They may, at least initially, simply be attracted by the perspective of entering a battle zone, of getting access to weapons, of fighting in a cause they believe to be just, of living out dreams of heroism and purpose.

An example from my fieldwork illustrates this suggestion. During his trial, one young Dane, who was later to be convicted of preparing a terrorist attack, said that he had initially been attracted by war, weapons and conflict zones.²¹ He was not, strictly speaking, part of a criminal milieu, but he was attracted by weapons and on the lookout for ways of getting access to a conflict zone. Hence, he was ‘shopping around’ in various extremist milieus in Copenhagen in the hope that they would provide him with the relevant contacts. In 2006, he wanted to go to Lebanon to fight in a war against Israel. First, he was hanging around with Hizb ut-Tahrir; then he befriended a group of young men who had been charged in a terrorist trial, and who were supportive of Al-Qaeda. As these milieus could not provide him with relevant contacts to give him access to the battle zone, he finally went to Pakistan, where he passed through the Red Mosque and eventually succeeded in getting access to an Al-Qaeda training camp in Waziristan. His religious engagement was hardly fervent—in Copenhagen he spent more time in the gym than in the mosque—and the milieus he frequented in the city were extremely heterogeneous in religious and ideological terms: one day he was hanging out with Hizb ut-Tahrir, the next with groups supportive of Al-Qaeda. He had also taken a course with a local imam who had expressed his admiration of Al-Qaeda, but dropped out of the classes because he found them ‘too boring’. This pattern of shifting loyalties to groups of very different ideological stances could suggest that his engagement with the various extremist milieus was motivated not by ideological conviction so much as by the desire to gain entry to a battle zone or training camp.

²⁰ Gabriel Weiman, ‘Lone wolves in cyberspace’, *Journal of Terrorism Research* 3: 2, 2012, pp. 75–90.

²¹ Operation Dagger (the Glasvej case): two men were arrested in 2007 in Copenhagen and subsequently convicted of preparing a terrorist attack.

Religion and politics: the illusion of pure religion

The tendency to view radicalization through the prism of religion or religious ideas has often implied a *depoliticization* of radicalization. Radicalization has been conceived of as a religious process, not a political one. But this contention is utterly abstract. Pathways towards terrorism are first and foremost political processes or, in the case of Islamist extremism, a politico-religious process. In violent extremist milieus—milieus including people who use violence to further their political ideas—religion is always already political. Islamist extremist ideology is a political theology that offers a political utopia in the form of another kind of society. Hence, extremist forms of religion are never apolitical; they always articulate a political ideology that proposes a simple diagnosis and a simple solution: what is wrong, and what to do about it. In Europe today, a specific version of Islamist extremism, present in the extremist milieus in Copenhagen, runs along the following lines: democracy is bad; western societies are materialist, sinful and licentious, allowing pornography, paedophilia and homosexuality to prosper; European states discriminate against Muslims in Europe and kill innocent Muslims abroad; and so on. The prescribed redress to this situation is simple: action in the form of violence, whether jihad, martyrdom or terrorism. Islamist extremism proposes a political utopia: a political fantasy about another society, where shari'a is applied to the letter and justice will rule. This fantasy also conveys the compelling idea of a sudden political and social revolution, whereby the humiliated and excluded of today are to become the omnipotent rulers of tomorrow. It proposes a form of empowerment, whereby social and political impotence can be exchanged for a position of action and power. In this perspective, Islamist extremist milieus could be viewed as *political* subcultures.

But this begs the question of what kind of politics Islamist extremist politics are. What concept of the political is implied in this kind of politics? Extremist politics are extremist precisely because they unfold outside the normal political framework of democratic institutions. The young people in extremist milieus reject the 'post-political' games of democratic politics that present political decisions as 'necessary' and obliterate radical political alternatives to the existing political order.²² Moreover, these young people are often (self-)excluded from institutionalized politics: on the one hand, they consider participation in democratic politics as *haram* (forbidden) and walk the streets trying to persuade others not to participate in elections. But at the same time, their opinions are not represented in European parliaments. There is no shari'a party in any parliament in Europe.

This is not to say, however, that these young people are apolitical. From my fieldwork experience, I became aware that they are, on the contrary, very interested in foreign politics and follow the situation in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Somalia and Afghanistan very closely. For young people who are sceptical of mainstream norms, who feel alienated from the post-political games of spin, but who are nevertheless deeply concerned with foreign policy, wars, and atrocities

²² Slavoj Žižek, *The ticklish subject: the absent centre of political ontology* (London: Verso, 1999).

committed against Muslims by authoritarian regimes and western powers in the Middle East, jihadism offers a form of violent politics in which marginalized young people are not doomed to passivity and exclusion, but can take action and *do* something about conditions they perceive to be unjust.

One of the attractions of extremist ideology, then, is that it offers a *political* position and a way to act against perceived injustice. It offers a political position that empowers the powerless who are otherwise excluded from political influence. More precisely, extremist Islamist politics offers the possibility of combining heroism with politics: performing great deeds to make one's name famous and immortal. After the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks and the attacks in Copenhagen, the Kouachi brothers, Ahmed Coulibaly and Omar el-Hussein were acclaimed and lauded on jihadi websites all over the world and in the glossy magazine published by ISIS, *Dabiq*. By applying their violent skills to a political cause, they were able to transform themselves from petty criminals, pariahs and outcasts into post-mortem heroes.

One of the attractions of ISIS today—for women as well as for men—is precisely that it proposes not merely nihilistic violence targeting innocent civilians, but the materialization of a *political* aim: a state-building project and the possibility of participating in the construction of a brand new society. This political dimension is not, however, conveyed only through extremist ideology, but also through violent *acts*. A closer scrutiny of recent attacks supports the idea that radicalization has a *political* dimension as well as a religious one. If we look at the targets of the recent attacks, they were not necessarily *religious* enemies, but Jews, soldiers, policemen or proponents of freedom of speech. The key question is: were they selected as targets because it was a *religious* duty to kill them, or because they represented a *political* enemy? For Islamic extremists, the Jews are not only the *kuffar*—the disbelievers—but also representatives of the state of Israel, which for years has killed and oppressed Muslims in Palestine. Similarly, soldiers represent the European states that wage war in Muslim lands (Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria); the police represent the oppressive European states that discriminate against Muslims and imprison them (many perpetrators have negative personal experiences with police); and proponents of free speech are not merely offenders of the Prophet, but also incarnations of the core values of western societies.

Islamist extremism, then, is not only religious but can in many ways be compared to other political ideologies based on the prospect of a political utopia. The idea of a pure, depoliticized form of religion relies on a liberal, secularist ideology of religion as a strictly private and depoliticized activity that takes place only in the personal realm. Similarly, the idea of extremist politics implies that we leave behind the liberal idea that politics and violence are incompatible, and that politics stops where violence begins. Since Thomas Hobbes, the political community has been constructed in terms of putting an end to natural violence.²³ The peace that prevails in the political realm was created when the right to commit violence was

²³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; first publ. 1651).

handed over to the state, which now has the monopoly on legitimate forms of violence.²⁴ The implication of this liberal conception of society is that all violence other than legitimate state violence must be considered non-political in the precise sense that it is situated *outside* the political sphere of the state. The concept of extremist politics, conversely, suggests that we repoliticize forms of violence that challenge the legitimate monopoly of state violence and that we recognize that liberal societies are not exclusively havens of peace, but are permeated by various forms of political non-state violence.²⁵

An individual or a social phenomenon? Extremist milieus and the social context

Concepts of radicalization that frame the phenomenon as an ideological process are not only depoliticized; they are also desocialized. Initial concepts of radicalization perceived it as an individual process through which a single person was transformed from a normal citizen into a budding terrorist. Concepts of radicalization thus focused on individual pathways, taking the person through a number of phases from a ‘cognitive opening’, the meeting with an extremist ideology and the internalization of extremist ideas until eventually they reach the end destination: the perpetration of a terrorist attack.²⁶ But this individualist bias has specific consequences. By focusing on the individual and his or her ideological ‘journey’, concepts of radicalization have to a large extent obscured the social dimension of radicalization. Under closer scrutiny, concepts of radicalization *do* articulate a social dimension, but this boils down to the contact between the individual and an extremist ideology conveyed through a ‘radicalizer’, an ‘extremist influencer’ or social media.

The social aspect of radicalization is thus conceived of as a top-down process, involving just two terms, through which a transmission of ideas takes place from one person to another. This specific understanding of the social, however, turns a blind eye to the role played by other forms of sociality, for instance the role of extremist milieus and subcultures or, more generally, the role of the ambient society. A closer examination of the phenomenon suggests that the social dimension of radicalization is pivotal. Ten years after the London bombings, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that pathways leading to extremist violence or terrorism are not individual, but emphatically social, and, in nearly all known cases, made possible by an extremist environment.²⁷ The lone wolf who is radicalized in isolation in front of his computer is a myth that—with very few exceptions—has no empirical support. This individualist bias in radicalization theories is reflected in the most common way of understanding a terrorist attack, by looking into the

²⁴ Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1972).

²⁵ See Charlotte Heath-Kelly, *Politics of violence: militancy, international politics, killing in the name* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

²⁶ Wiktorovicz, *Radical Islam rising*.

²⁷ Interestingly, until 2014 French law criminalized terrorism only as a group phenomenon (*association aux malfaites en vue d'une entreprise terroriste*).

individual life stories of perpetrators: 'X was born in the suburbs and had a difficult childhood; he then went to the mosque, met up with a radicalizer and became very religious; then he travelled to Syria,' and so on. But these individual life stories omit both the role of extremist milieus and the role of the broader social context, that is, the influence of the western societies in which the processes of radicalization are taking place. Instead, we are offered a narrative about a normal individual living in a peaceful democratic society, who is corrupted in the process of studying an extremist ideology.

Within the last few years, we have seen a series of terrorist attacks where the perpetrator acts alone (Merah, Nemmouche, Omar el-Hussein); but this does not imply that the perpetrator is a 'lone wolf' in the sense that he has turned to political violence all on his own. On the contrary, within the last few years, almost all the people who are known to have turned to political violence have been members of or involved in one or several extremist subcultures. A young Algerian student, Sid Ahmed Glahm, who in 2015 was arrested in the French city of Villejuif (apparently) just before he tried to blow up a church, initially appeared to have come out of the blue and be acting in isolation; but it soon turned out that this 'lone wolf', who was not on the radar of the intelligence services, was very well connected: the attack was remote-controlled from Syria and his contacts reached into hard-core Islamist milieus in France, Syria and Morocco.²⁸

On the basis of my fieldwork experience, I suggest that a milieu or subculture is not necessarily a formally structured organization with a named leader and an international branch network. Nor is it a social movement or a 'cell' of a few fanatics who are increasingly cut off from the rest of society. As Marc Sageman has suggested, an extremist counterculture could most appropriately be described as 'a bunch of guys': a loose network of friends and family, with individuals passing in and out.²⁹ There are numerous examples of family members—most often brothers—playing a role along the pathway towards violence: the Abdeslam brothers in the 2015 Paris attack, the Kouachi brothers in the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, the Tsarnaev brothers in the Boston marathon attack, the Khürsid brothers in the Danish Glasvej case, the Merah family and so on.³⁰

To understand radicalization better, then, we have to supplement the individual focus with a focus on extremist milieus, gangs and groups as preconditions for the turn to political violence. The intelligence services that have to deal with the terrorist threat in practice are well aware of this. Although they keep files on specific individuals, they are not primarily interested in the itinerary of any specific individual or, for that matter, in the nature of their ideological stance. All attempts at profiling the future terrorist or pinning down the process leading to terrorism have failed. Therefore, intelligence agents who in practice work to disrupt terrorist plots take interest in the social aspects: milieus, communication and contacts between people in extremist environments. This explains why the

²⁸ Soren Seelow, 'Sur la piste des commanditaires de l'attentat manqué de Villejuif', *Le Monde*, 3 Aug. 2015.

²⁹ Mark Sageman, *Understanding terror-networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

³⁰ Olivier Roy, 'Vouloir déradicaliser les jihadistes est "absurde"', Radio Télévision Suisse, 27 Nov. 2015, <http://www.rts.ch/info/monde/7290164-vouloir-deradicaliser-les-djihadistes-est-absurde-selon-olivier-roy.html>.

so-called ‘metadata’ have become pivotal in current intelligence work. Metadata provide information not about the content of communication—whether it involves extremist ideas or not—but about the contacts, the milieu or network: *who* somebody is communicating with and the scope of that communication.

There are, of course, obvious reasons why scholars and analysts have downplayed the social dimension of radicalization. Getting access to radical milieus is, as already mentioned, extremely difficult, if not impossible. This empirical challenge should not, however, itself make us turn a blind eye to the social dimension—to the ‘bunch of guys’.

Ideological radicalization or activist mentoring?

The social dimension of radicalization also has a diachronic aspect. During my fieldwork, I became aware that extremist milieus are path-dependent: that they depend on the existence of earlier extremist environments. People who enter extremist milieus are often very young and tend to be on the lookout for people who have more experience with extremism. It has been repeated over and over again that radical preachers or imams are radicalizers who intoxicate vulnerable youth with radical Islamist ideology, thus pushing them towards terrorism. Although the vocabulary has slightly evolved—the favoured term is no longer ‘radical imam’ but ‘extremist influencer’³¹—the alleged role of these ‘influencers’ hardly differs from the one ascribed to the ‘radicalizers’ of yesterday: ‘What links them all is their aim to groom young people and brainwash their *minds*.’³² But is this an adequate picture? Is this actually what happens in extremist environments today?

There is little doubt that extremist milieus are hierarchical, and that some people are endowed with more authority and prestige than others. But a closer scrutiny will reveal that the prestige of the ‘radical preacher’ or the ‘extremist influencer’ who has success in attracting young people is not necessarily linked to his religious credentials and his capacity to brainwash their minds, but is more often associated with his activism or militancy. As noted above, it is frequently the case that young aspiring jihadis seek the company of older people with more experience. The perpetrators of the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* and a Jewish supermarket, the Kouachi brothers and Coulibaly, for instance, met Djamel Beghal in prison and continued to visit him when he was released and put under control orders in a remote part of France. The relevant question, then, is whether they were on the lookout for theological guidance, or whether they were seeking the company of an iconic jihadi who had been to an Al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan and had subsequently been convicted of preparing a terrorist attack.

In the extremist milieu in Copenhagen, there were various forms of authority or prestige to which younger people were attracted: one person had been to Guantánamo; one had contacts with high-ranking Al-Qaeda affiliates; another had contacts in ‘Sharia4UK’ in London; and yet another had militant experience

³¹ Cameron, ‘Extremism: PM speech’, p. 8.

³² Cameron, ‘Extremism: PM speech’, p. 8 (emphasis added).

from an insurgency abroad. This picture should prompt us to reconsider the idea of the ‘radicalizer’ or ‘extremist influencer’ as a preacher whose main role is to disseminate extremist ideas.

On the basis of my fieldwork experience, then, I suggest that the prestige of the so-called ‘radicalizers’ or ‘extremist influencers’ and their capacity to attract young potential jihadis lies not only in their *thoughts and beliefs*, but first and foremost in their *acts*; not necessarily in their theological or ideological skills, but more often in a prior experience with violence. Sometimes—as in the case of the Briton Anjem Choudary—this prestige arises from their capacity to speak up against the authorities and thus attract public attention. Hence, we have to revise the top-down picture of a radical preacher who is radicalizing and recruiting the young through religious indoctrination. Rather than theological or ideological preachers, what the young aspiring jihadis are looking for is *role models* who have practical experience with jihad, who have been convicted for terrorist-related crimes, who have prestigious international contacts, or who are successful in airing their extremist views in public. In short: the role of ‘the radical preacher’ or the ‘extremist influencer’ is less one of *intellectual* guidance than one of *activist* mentoring, carried out by a person who has experience of committing violence or who can facilitate contacts with conflict areas and battle zones abroad. An extremist milieu therefore depends on earlier extremist environments from which people with experience, capacity, contacts, etc. emerge.

A cognitive or an embodied process? Radicalization as a transformation of embodied capacities

Concepts of radicalization have not only underestimated the political and social aspects of the phenomenon, but have also abstracted from a factor that from a fieldwork perspective appears to be critical for the readiness to use violence, namely the skills of the body.³³ In the milieu in Copenhagen with which I was in contact, the body was constantly identified as a site of physical and moral improvement. The young men spent a lot of time going to the gym or doing martial arts. But prevalent concepts of radicalization present the individual involved as a purely intellectual agent who, through some mysterious process, which is hardly ever accounted for, translates specific ideas or a specific world-view directly into action. Such concepts are underpinned by an analytical distinction between intellectual knowledge and violent practice, the latter being dependent on the former. But although radicalization undoubtedly implies some kind of intellectual transformation (the nature of which remains to be clarified), processes of radicalization also imply a transformation of physical capacities and acquisition of the skills of violence. The point is not that processes eventually leading to a terrorist attack are completely devoid of cognition and concern only physical capacities, but that the perpetration of a terrorist attack presupposes an *embodied* know-how, an enacted

³³ Manni Crone, ‘Religion and violence: governing Muslim militancy through aesthetic assemblages’, *Millennium* 41: 3, 2014, pp. 291–307.

or practical kind of knowledge about how to act. It presupposes a specific 'body technique' or 'habitus' that enables the perpetration of violence.³⁴

Such knowledge about how to use one's body for acts of violence is not acquired through an intellectual process, such as studying the Qur'an or being brainwashed by an 'extremist influencer'. Rather, the perpetration of a terrorist attack presupposes the kind of knowledge that is acquired directly through practice. It is a learning-by-doing. A pianist, for instance, does not learn how to play the piano by reading a book on 'how to play the piano', but through sustained practice and imitation of other pianists. Similarly, the skilled extremist does not find out how to perpetrate violence, handle a Kalashnikov, get access to weapons, make explosives or avoid the security agencies by downloading fatwas or reading articles about how to 'make a bomb in the kitchen of your mom'.³⁵ He acquires the skills to perpetrate a terrorist attack by exercising his body, by doing weight training, by mixing in violent subcultures and criminal environments, by going to a training camp or joining a conflict zone abroad, where it is possible to get real-life experience of shooting and fighting.

A violent habitus is acquired through practice and imitation. Young aspiring extremists do not become radicalized by taking part in highbrow discussions about the concept of jihad. Rather, they pick up specific ways of behaving, fighting, shooting and dressing. By imitating role models, they acquire the skills and the looks of prestigious jihadis. The *modus operandi* of the aspiring jihadi is thus transmitted directly through enactment; no engagement in intellectual discourse is necessarily involved (though a certain limited conceptualization of a world-view must, arguably, be entailed). This transformation of embodied skills is acquired through 'prestigious imitation'.³⁶ A person who is in the process of acquiring a specific technique will mime successful acts, that is, those of individuals whom he admires or endows with authority. The notion that bodily and practical imitation plays into the forming of pathways towards political violence further suggests that a successful terrorist attack could inspire and encourage imitation. It has, for instance, been suggested that the attack in Copenhagen in February 2015 was to some degree inspired by the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks. In that sense, a terrorist attack is less the translation into practice of religious or intellectual ideas about how to act properly, and more often the imitation of successful acts.

One of the reasons why, since 2012, we have seen a high proportion of terrorist perpetrators with a criminal background³⁷ could very well be that, as delinquents, they possess the practical knowledge of how to perpetrate violence. They already have the skills it takes to shoot and kill, and thus are able to perpetrate political forms of violence. Such violent skills can also be acquired or further developed in conflict zones or training camps abroad. The point made here is not that we should move from an intellectualist understanding of radicalization to an exclusive focus

³⁴ Marcel Mauss, 'Les techniques du corps', *Journal de Psychologie* 32: 3-4, 1934, pp. 5-23; Pierre Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980).

³⁵ 'Make a bomb in the kitchen of your mom', *Inspire Magazine*, Summer 2010.

³⁶ Mauss, 'Les techniques du corps', p. 8.

³⁷ WITT database, <http://www.diis.dk/files/media/documents/projects/crimeplots141215.xlsx>

on physical abilities, but that we should supplement the intellectualist approach with an added awareness of the bodily dimension and recognize that radicalization also implies—or presupposes—a certain transformation and improvement of the physical abilities.

How does extremist ideology matter?

In the previous sections, I have tried to nuance the role played by ideology in pathways towards terrorism and point to other aspects that are often underestimated in policy discourse. This is not to imply that extremist ideology plays *no* role in extremist milieus, or that religion plays *no* role in Islamist environments. They probably do. The argument that I want to pitch is merely that ideology is not the cause of, or the driving force behind, processes leading to terrorism. In this final section of the article, I therefore briefly turn to the delicate question of *how* extremist ideology could figure in political violence. Over a decade after the London bombings, it is not enough merely to assert that ideology is or is not a root cause. As researchers, we should take one step further and ask *what ideology* is at work in these milieus, and *what role* it plays. Instead of taking for granted that ideology is a factor in or a driving force behind processes of radicalization, we have to ask *how* it matters for people in extremist milieus, and what ideology is *to them*. Abstract discussions about, for instance, ‘Salafism’ and concepts such as ‘jihad’ or ‘martyrdom’ are irrelevant. What is of interest here is only how people in extremist milieus conceive of, use and practise their ideology or religion, and how this ideology is entwined with violence. In other words, purely theological knowledge is irrelevant; what is needed to take us further in our understanding of pathways towards terrorism is anthropological and sociological knowledge about the actual role of religion in radical Islamist environments today.

Extremist ideology—for instance, in the form of a fatwa or a speech in a propaganda video—contains truth claims about whether specific actions are allowed, prescribed or forbidden in specific circumstances. Such intellectual discourse can of course inspire or underpin actions by people who strive to embrace violent militancy. But the carrying through of a terrorist attack is never the simple realization of specific ideas. There is no one-to-one relation between an ideological norm and a violent practice in the sense that the activist simply *follows* the norm to the letter. But religio-political ideas conveyed in extremist milieus can incite specific forms of action, point out specific targets and contribute to the justification of violent behaviour.

We have to revise the idea that the extremist ideology has an effect, in the sense that it produces extremist individuals and acts, in any simple way. During my fieldwork, I noted that although some of the young men tried to appear as devout Muslims emulating the Prophet, they did not necessarily follow a set of fixed rules defined by the Qur’an. Rather, they were ‘cherry-picking’, loosely adopting a kind of Islam that confirmed the way of life that they were already living or at least dreaming of. If a person was, for instance, attracted by the idea

of joining a conflict zone abroad and wanted to go to Pakistan or elsewhere, he would be on the lookout for ideologies stipulating that jihad is a duty and that a good Muslim should leave behind the comfortable, materialist life in the West and travel to a conflict zone. People who embrace violent militancy are not just blindly following a religious authority or 'extremist influencers'; they conveniently choose the authorities or mentors of their taste. Through academic literature, we have become acquainted with the idea that Salafi Muslims are literalist in the precise sense that they are against interpretation and simply follow Islamic norms to the letter. This may be true in theory. But on the basis of my fieldwork experience I would claim that in practice Salafists are not just following an Islamic norm to the letter, but pragmatically applying the norms and examples within a given context.

I will present just one example of such a flexible practice of the orthodox norm. One day, my colleague and I had a meeting with a man from the extremist milieu. As he was not supposed to be alone with two women, he always showed up at our meetings with an entourage. But one day he came alone. He explained that his friends were not able to come and that therefore he had consulted an imam to clarify whether he was allowed to meet us or not. At first, the imam was reluctant and told him that it was strictly forbidden (*haram*) to be alone with two women; but, thinking it over, the imam had concluded that if he only talked about Islam and nothing else, it was allowed. In practice, however, once the man had made this initial announcement, the discussion flowed freely, touching upon all kinds of subjects.

Similarly, in environments supportive of violence, violent actions are often chosen in a rather ad hoc manner, the militants making their decisions along the way, depending on the situation at hand and the broader context (intelligence environment, capacities, access to weapons, sheer chance, etc.). Hence, the ideological and tactical advice on how to act is flexible and sensitive to the context. If, for instance, complex plots involving several people are easily discovered by intelligence services, the 'ideology' will adapt to this new security environment by urging the commission of simple attacks involving only one person and easily accessible weapons. This is the tactical evolution that we have seen, from the grandiose attacks on the Twin Towers and Pentagon in 2001 and the London bombings of 2005 to smaller attacks involving only one person and often perpetrated with simple weapons (an axe, a rifle, a knife)—at least, it was the trend until the Paris attacks in November 2015, which were more complex and involved several people.

Radicalization: the implications for policy

The way we understand radicalization or pathways towards terrorism has specific consequences for the ways in which we deal with the phenomenon. In this article, I have questioned ideas that are often taken for granted in discussions on the topic of 'radicalization'. I have suggested that, in contrast to a widespread notion, religion

and extremist ideology are not necessarily gateways to violence. Taking stock of the current situation, it appears that embodied skills of violence and a prior acquaintance with violent milieus—in Europe or abroad—is more often a precondition for perpetrating terrorism than are extremist opinions. I am not suggesting that extremist ideology plays no role at all on the path towards terrorism; merely that it is not necessarily the primary cause of and driving force behind this kind of violence. However, the endorsement of rudimentary extremist ideas can contribute to the transformation of one form of violence into another; it can change regular crime into the political form of crime that currently goes under the name of ‘terrorism’.

Prevailing concepts of radicalization rely on specific presuppositions about the individual and about the society in which radicalization occurs. Concepts of radicalization with an intellectualist bias conceive of the individual as a mainly cognitive, intellectual and disembodied being who translates intellectual ideas directly into violent practice. This individual is situated in a peaceful democratic society, but becomes violent through the internalization of violent ideas that originate in a conflict-stricken Middle East. In this article, I have suggested other ways of conceiving of the individual and of the society in which radicalization is taking place. I have suggested that cognition, body techniques and the mimicking of terrorist acts that have succeeded are co-constitutive and entwined within a specific violent ‘habitus’.³⁸ Moreover, European societies are, in fact, not entirely peaceful, but subject to various forms of violence—for instance, violent crime, domestic violence, violent sports and state violence.

The way we understand radicalization has concrete policy implications. If we understand radicalization as a mainly intellectual process, the countering of violent extremism will be ‘a battle of ideas’, calling for ‘counter-narratives’ and ‘strategic communication’. If, on the contrary, we consider pathways towards terrorism as political and social processes that imply specific capacities and skills, developed through activist mentoring and sustained experience with violence, then efforts to counter violent extremism should not primarily target ideas, but adopt a comprehensive approach including criminology, social measures, and suggestions as to how people in extremist milieus can find non-violent ways of expressing their political ideas—or pursuing their drive towards action and acts of heroism. Many practitioners who work with radicalization in practice probably know this and already adopt such a comprehensive approach. The challenge, then, is to nuance our intellectual understanding of the phenomenon, the better to inform public and political discourse about radicalization and how to prevent terrorism and violent extremism.

³⁸ Mauss, ‘Les techniques du corps’; Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique*.