

Rethinking ‘Radicalisation’: Microradicalisations and Reciprocal Radicalisation as an Intertwined Process

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Abstract

This paper proposes a rethinking of ‘radicalisation’ as a process with no definite beginning or inevitable end-point. Reflecting on empirical research which engaged with radical Islamist and far-right activists and supporters, it argues that we should not focus the concept of radicalisation on the moment in which an individual or group moves from legal to illegal activity, or from non-violent to violent, as this is only one part of a longer journey. Thus, the term radicalisation should encompass *any* movements towards greater conflict, both commonplace and rare, small and large, driven by a potentially infinite range of motives, encompassing all political outlooks, and made by individuals, groups, societies and states. Using this conceptualisation instead allows us to examine how small conflicts escalate through ‘reciprocal radicalisation’, and how big radicalisations arise from microradicalisations. This, we argue, provides a more equitable basis for policy and practice that aims to avoid, prevent or combat the most problematic radicalisations, or otherwise resolve political conflict. To achieve this, however, also means not hyping everyday radicalisations into a threat to the existence of the nation state.

Keywords: Radicalisation; Conflict; Concept; Mircoradicalisation

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Introduction

Radical, radicalism, radicalisation. Much has been written to define these words, especially since Islamist bombs came to Europe in 2004, but they remain a source of conceptual confusion (Sedgwick, 2010). When della Porta and La Free reviewed the use of the term radicalisation (2011), they put great emphasis on movement towards violence (Schmid, 2013). Bartlett and Miller, on the other hand, compare ‘non-violent radicalisation’ to ‘violent radicalisation’, with ‘radicalism’ and ‘terrorism’ as their respective end points (Bartlett & Miller, 2012). In current UK policy, radicalisation has come to mean the process by which someone ‘comes to support terrorism and forms of extremism leading to terrorism’, with extremism itself defined as ‘vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values’ (Cabinet Office, 2013). These definitions necessarily draw on definitions of particular outcomes – ‘extremism’, ‘radicalism’, and ‘terrorism’ – and so have roots in localised political traditions. Importantly, such definitions draw attention to particular transitions, from non-violence to violence or from non-extremism to extremism, such that a more holistic view of process is lost, and especially much of the process of ‘reciprocal radicalisation’.

This paper aims to move away from the conceptual confusion by sidestepping, then returning to, the questions that we may ask about which particular ideas and behaviours ought be ‘beyond the pale’ and subject to censure and legislation. Indeed, these questions should be in the realm of political debate, along with what to do about lower level conflict in what is described as the ‘pre-criminal space’ (Warwickshire Police, n.d.). Instead, we use a holistic definition of radicalisation, taking McCauley and Moskalenko’s definition – ‘changes in beliefs, feelings and behavior in the direction of increased support for a political conflict’ (2010) – and accepting its implication that radicalisation is a normal part of human life, is a property of individuals, groups, states and societies, and is not always ‘bad’. This simpler definition, focusing on process and change, can be drawn wider, taking in minor and major movements towards conflict.

The first part of the paper briefly sketches out the problems of boundary making, arguing that the concepts of radicalism, extremism and terrorism are contingent on historical and social norms, and so no timeless definition can be found. The second part of the paper suggests that

sidestepping this issue allows us to think about radicalisation or ‘movement towards conflict’ as including a whole host of social processes, small and large and including ‘politics as normal’, under the concept of *microradicalisation*. The third part of the paper draws on the first two by demonstrating how ‘reciprocal radicalisation’, in which individuals or groups move towards conflict in response to the movement of others, can occur at all levels and not just within those conflicts characterised by ‘extremist groups’. The paper concludes by re-considering the politics of counter-radicalisation. It calls for a deeper political conversation about the good society, the limits of freedom and the ethics of intervention, with a call for fairness, transparency, and proportionality as core principles.

1. Radicalisation and Boundary Making: Good, Evil, Other

That ‘radicalisation’ implies process or change is in no doubt. However, the current dominance of policy and security concerns in the language of radicalisation means that the term is almost always associated with a particular undesirable endpoint. In this framework, radicalisation is something to be policed and is by definition an undesirable process: radicalisation is the process of becoming a terrorist, and so is akin to the evil of terrorism. However, here we problematize the concepts associated with these endpoints – terrorism, extremism, radicalism and violence – as there is no universal agreement to their meanings.

A succinct definition that includes all the varieties of action that have been called ‘terrorism’ has proved elusive. In a wide-ranging discussion, Alex Schmid finds 250 definitions of ‘terrorism’, and finds a significant difference between academic and governmental definitions (2004). Governments emphasise illegality and criminality, demonstrating that their own violence is de facto legal and so cannot be terrorism, while academics emphasise the political (Schmid, 2004), and thus how terrorism, like war, is politics by other means. There is greater agreement with regards to violence or the threat of violence to create terror within a population and its use in coercion of a state to answer demands. These elements can also be found in the European Union definition (Eur-LEX, 2008) in which a terrorist offence requires a combination of ‘objective elements’ (violence or the threat of violence) and ‘subjective elements’ (aims to intimidate a population or change governmental structures or actions).

Similarly, American definitions talk of ‘unlawful violence or threat of violence’ intended to coerce or to intimidate ‘a civilian population’ or government (Hoffman, 2006: 30–31). Thus, the difference between ordinary violent crime and terrorism is that the latter is a form of political communication (Tuman, 2003). Most obviously this can include Islamist terrorism, but also includes remaining examples of the earlier waves, that is terrorism carried out by separatist groups, some single issue direct actions, and extreme right terrorist action such as that of the Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund (NSU) in Germany.

Similar issues arise when considering definitions of extremism. ‘Almost every scholar in the field points to the lack of a generally accepted definition... in twenty-six definitions of right-wing extremism... no less than fifty-eight different features are mentioned’ (Mudde, 2000: 10–11), with a similar debate around the judgement of Islamist extremism (see Haddad, 2003). Some definitions of extremism are akin to that of terrorism, requiring going ‘well beyond the legal boundaries of democratic politics [with] violent direct actions or even terrorist tactics’ (Norris, 2005). Others follow the argument that not accepting the ‘values, procedures and institutions of the democratic order’ (Carter, 2005: 19) makes an *ideology* extremist. This more expansive definition is reflected in what Neumann describes as the ‘European approach’ to radicalisation, in which the *expression of extremist ideas* is considered problematic and dangerous, in comparison to the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ approach in which free-speech is paramount and only extremist *action* (as opposed to words) is countered (Neumann, 2013). Given that the UK definition of extremism is now ‘vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs’ (Cabinet Office, 2013), it seems that the European approach is in the ascendant.

Therefore, extremism in this framework means a movement beyond ‘politics as normal’, and so also can never refer to the state which defines ‘politics as normal’. Such definitions ‘tend to be status quo friendly and have little sympathy for those who are disenchanted with the status quo and want to change it by other than non-violent means’ (Schmid, 2013: 12), and are ‘biased towards Western state priorities’ (Jackson, 2009: 9). Indeed, the history of the more ambiguous terms radicalism and radical, and some of the most obvious examples these words are used for, demonstrates why defining non-normal politics as wrong is problematic.

As pointed out by Schmid, the term ‘radical’ has been used to describe those agitating for democracy against despotism (Schmid, 2013). The Oxford English Dictionary’s earliest use of ‘radical’ dates from the 1830s, when it was applied to American political groups that favoured democracy and opposed slavery. More generally, radicalism - literally going to the root, a ‘rip it up and start again’ approach of fundamental change - has been ascribed to suffragettes (although not suffragists), Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Margaret Thatcher, and retrospectively to Jesus, Copernicus, Mohammed and Thomas Paine. Whether in goal or methods, radicalism implies that there is enough of a contradiction between two viewpoints that politics as usual will not suffice. The history of the re-categorising of Mandela, for example - from terrorist to radical and thence to secular saint - demonstrates that such definitions are contingent on the cultural and historical context. Definitions of ‘extremism’, ‘terrorism’ and ‘radicalism’ that rely on difference from an assumed norm are dependent on the nature of the norm and some sort of ‘relative, evaluative and subjective’ (Mandel, 2009: 105) comparison. Radicalisation is commonly defined in terms of a movement across a line dividing legitimate political activity from violent or unacceptable forms of conflict, but this only displaces the question of where we locate the limits of acceptable conflict - and whether this is possible without reference to a specific cultural and historical setting³.

Furthermore, it is important to note early on that these limits and the associated judgements of the contours of acceptability are not only contingent, but are subject to disagreement in any one time and place, *and* subject to the biased interpretations of that time and place. We will not here consider the longer history of Islamophobia or the ‘racialisation of Muslims’ (Meer & Modood, 2011), or, for that matter, the ‘whitening of the working class’ (Hirsch, 2017). Instead, it is sufficient to note that the degree to which a particular radicalisation phenomenon is judged to be problematic is to some extent dependent on both those doing the act and who is making the judgement, as well as the phenomenon itself. Thus, there are two dynamics that should give us pause for thought when examining how such phenomena are represented. First, some of these phenomena are given the status of being ‘cultural’, implying a determinism that

³ Like extremism, radicalism and terrorism, the term conflict has multiple meanings. ‘Political conflict’ can mean conflict that ‘lie[s] beyond established regulatory procedures’ (Conias Research Institute, n.d.), such that its opposite is ‘politics as normal’, or conflict could mean the absence of peace or the absence of consensus. The latter approach then begs questions of how deep a consensus needs to be to be full consensus. More pertinently, politics itself is best viewed as a one potential solution to conflict, hence politics being war by other means and vice versa (see Foucault’s *Society Must Be Defended*, 2003).

goes beyond personal or political opinion⁴. Second, and related, there are degrees of double standards, such that almost identical radicalisations are judged differently depending on who is doing it: most obviously, Muslim protest is seen as a threat where others would not. ‘Culture’ becomes a block-like entity to be feared, because the ‘threatening’ are many. This dynamic does not figure in, say, the radicalisation of animal rights activism, as it is not conceptualised as being an inevitable outgrowth of oppositional vegetarian culture. It hardly needs repeating that the ‘war on terror’ – along with the idea of a ‘clash of civilisations’ (Huntington, 1996) – is also both a cause and consequence of such thinking, with Western states’ military actions providing further context. As we discuss later, the asymmetric judgements of both radicalisations and state responses are a driver for further radicalisation, with societal failure to recognise and challenge its own racisms (Norton, 2013) remaining key.

Lastly, normative definitional problems have also afflicted another term, *ideology*, used in this piece. Most obviously, there is a commonsense, negative usage that depicts ideology as ‘a system of wrong, false, distorted or otherwise misguided beliefs’ that ‘express or conceal one’s social or political position, perspective or interests’ (van Dijk, 1998: 2). In this usage, one’s own beliefs are rational and unideological, whereas others are irrational and ideological. Furthermore, the idea of *system* can lead to conceptualisation of ideology as ‘a fairly broad, coherent, and relatively durable set of beliefs that affects one’s orientation not only to politics but to everyday life more generally (Benford & Snow, 2000: 613), and this coherence and durability holds for both individuals and political groupings, hence the referral to people and parties as, for example, far-right, liberal or conservative.

We cannot fully explore here the response to this conceptualisation in social movement studies through debates that explore the vocabulary of ‘schemata of interpretation’, ‘collective action frames’ and ‘framing processes’ (Benford & Snow, 2000), and their relationship with each other and to ideology. Here, we find more value in Snow’s later formulation, to the effect that ideology should be considered as:

⁴ Such an analysis would use a Muslim homophobe to show that Islam is homophobic whereas another homophobe would not show that society is homophobic, and a working-class racist or Islamophobe would show that working-class culture is intolerant while a middle-class racist would be merely that.

‘a variable phenomenon that ranges on a continuum from a tightly and rigidly connected set of values and beliefs at one end to a loosely coupled set of values and beliefs at the other end, and that can function, in either case, as both a constraint on and a resource for the kind of sense-making, interpretive work associated with framing.’

(Snow, 2004: 400)

Further, we follow Freeden’s conceptualisation of ideology as clusters or networks of political concepts or conceptualisations, such that differing terms, or differing meanings for terms are used in different ideologies (Freeden, 1996, p. 54). ‘Freeden maintains a notion of ideology as a dynamic and flexible system that implies neither a high degree of coherence... nor ideological unanimity among adherents, nor even correspondence with behaviour’ (Koehler 2015: 28). Thus it makes sense to talk of the ‘dominant ideology’ or ‘ideological families’ (Koehler 2015: 28) as these are shorthand for particular aggregates of ideas and values recognised as such - although we should recognise that these aggregates change over time and can mix or cross over, with even components of extremist ideologies sometimes being incorporated in the mainstream. At the same time, ideologies are always ‘socially situated’ and ‘partisan value-arbitrated’ (Freeden 1994: 155): the term brings with it a sense of positionality and social interest. To be a political actor is thus to be the bearer of an ideology which corresponds in some sense to one’s antagonistic social position. This perspective does not exclude variation between individuals - in fact it requires it: each individual’s guiding cluster of ideas is as unique as the social experiences through which it developed. As will be demonstrated later, political socialisation starts with basic understandings of concepts such as justice, fairness, racism, and authority, and subsequently individuals’ ideologies are shaped by their experiences, actions, and learning, including learning from the reactions of others.

2. Radicalisation is to Radical, as Aging is to Aged

Having (we hope) detoxified ‘radical’ and ‘extremist’ (seen as pejorative labels for positions outside of political normality) and rehabilitated ‘ideology’ (seen as a universal feature of political life), we are left with the problem of deciding where the line defining ‘radicalisation’ should be drawn. We suggest that McCauley and Moskalenko’s definition of radicalisation as

‘changes in beliefs, feelings and behavior in the direction of increased support for a political conflict’ (2010) enables us to sidestep this problem. Instead, and given the emphasis on movement ‘in the direction of’, we argue that radicalisation is everywhere, can be found alongside deradicalisation, and is a property of individuals, groups, societies and states (McCauley & Moskalkenko, 2011). This is a deliberately broad definition of radicalisation; it implies no particular end point and no value judgements. Radicalisation can lead people to non-violent or legal activities or violent or illegal activities, and may be judged in the long-term as a force for bad or for good, as in the cases of movements for fundamental human rights and women’s suffrage (Neumann, 2013). Radicalisation, and the resultant conflict, is therefore the engine of history.

This ‘depoliticised’ definition of radicalisation has a number of advantages. First, it need not stigmatise particular individuals, groups, or movements as particularly radicalised or at risk of radicalisation, or make prejudicial assessments of one set of ideas or actions to be more or less problematic than any other: indeed, it also calls attention to the radicalisation of the state itself. Second, it enables a non-judgemental examination of those movements towards conflict that are *not in any way* serious enough to be considered criminal or even deviant, but which can be sociologically connected to more serious radicalisations. Third, and related, this definition can be open to the fact that in any pluralist society, there may be some that judge an action to be an example of radicalisation that needs a response, while others feel that the action ought to be permissible as part of political freedom. This final point will be key to understanding ‘reciprocal radicalisation’.

Our contemporary ‘official narrative’ of radicalisation is skewed towards the spectrum of Muslims/ Islamists/ radical Islamism, and the role of ideology and religion (Kundnani, 2014). Despite the use of the term radical to denote, amongst others, the supporters of parliamentary reform, then leftists and later the far-right, in the 21st Century the term is now overly associated with ‘radical Islamism’. This, of course, is due to the greater current threat, in the West, of Islamist terrorism than nationalist, far-right, far-left, anarchist or other terrorisms. However, this obscures a history in which those other terrorisms had their place as the greater threat, and so implicitly or sometimes explicitly suggests that Islamism is somehow different

to those previous strands of political violence⁵. In the UK, the radicalisation discourse has been extended to also cover the far-right, albeit with a different approach to the question of ideology.

A rethinking of radicalisation would begin without any a priori assumptions of the driving forces of movement to greater conflict, in these or any other strand of politics. The long-standing debate over the relative weights of ideology and indoctrination versus local and international grievance seen in discussions of Islamist radicalisation could easily be transposed to discussion of any other form of radicalisation; indeed, this debate has been present in social movement studies work for a number of decades (van Stekelenberg & Klandermans, 2013). The ‘official narrative’ focus on Islamist ideology – whether due to a desire to avoid the arguments on the role of foreign policy or Islamophobia, a view of religion as a special ideology, or merely a naïve sense of Islamism as ‘other’ – has become a rationale for seeing particular worldviews as problematic, even when not combined with actions. This, we argue, may be compatible with a holistic concept of radicalisation, but it requires accepting that, just as an Islamist ideology *could* lead to greater conflict including going beyond legal norms (but also might not), so might any other ideology that is not in complete accordance with the status quo. If Islamist radicalisation can be detected as a problematic force in the absence of particular actions inspired by it, then green, anarchist, socialist, nationalist and other radicalisations have the same status, especially as we cannot predict future conflict trends.

Radicalisation, as movement towards greater conflict, is also to be found in populations and the state itself. Here we point to changes in racist or Islamophobic attitudes, nationalism, anti-state sentiment or religious chauvinism, many of which have been subject to surveys aiming to gauge the degree to which particular segments of society are problematic or a threat (see for example Mirza, Senthilkumaran, & Ja’far, 2007; Painter, 2013). While such change is usually slow, the history of intercommunal rioting, pogroms and genocide suggests that populations can undergo radicalisation to the point of extremism and violence. State responses are also forms of radicalisation. Where the population supports escalation of conflict with

⁵ See, for example, those analyses that see the current threat as the New Terrorism (Spencer, 2006).

internal or external enemies, state radicalisation can involve the changing of laws or even the declaration of war. Political conflicts may also be radicalised by efforts to control them: where the political status quo is threatened by the irruption of a new political actor (perhaps a protest movement supported by popular mobilisation), redefining the new entrant as illegitimate ('violent', 'terrorist') escalates the level of immediate conflict while making the longer-term political threat more manageable (cf. Edwards, 2009). A society's response to a political threat may thus restore the political status quo while making society more, not less, vulnerable to violence (Edwards, 2016). The broader definition of radicalisation also makes it possible to capture these contradictory dynamics.

The second advantage of using a more holistic definition of radicalisation is that this removes the requirement to hive off a stage of radicalisation that produces a move to illegality or violence from other stages of radicalisation as though they were completely separate processes. Difficulties in differentiating between these two processes have bedevilled the British government's Prevent programme from the outset; the first iteration of Prevent oscillated between defining 'radicalisation' as 'becom[ing] radicalised, to the extent of turning to violence' and acknowledging that only 'a tiny minority of radicalised individuals' do in fact become terrorists (Edwards, 2014: 55). The broader definition of radicalisation sidesteps this problem productively. While it is of course true that we can make a distinction between violent and non-violent radicalisation (see Bartlett & Miller, 2012), one does not rule out the other whether in sequence or in parallel. We argue that this is particularly important because the route from 'model citizen' to 'terrorist' is not one of switching sides as one crosses a socially constructed line, but can include a longer path in which attitudes and actions change but remain on the legal side of the line, followed by more travel on the illegal side of the line.

It is also important to note that any movement in the direction of heightened conflict does not imply an inevitable trajectory to terrorism; rather, it can be followed by movement away from conflict. This formulation of radicalisation has parallels in the concept of escalation in international relations, in that some escalations spiral out of control and others reach a point at which the parties involved want to row back. In this formulation, the term radicalisation is akin to aging (albeit with potential for reversal): *radicalisation* is to *radical* as *aging* is to

aged. Just as we can accept that the aging process is something that all life undergoes all the time, but we reserve the term *aged* for those that have undergone lots of it, so we can reserve the terms *radical* or *extremist* for those at a particular point in the process. Young people are aging and may or may not become aged (they may not get there). Ordinary people radicalise and deradicalise, and may or may not become radical or extremist. Undergoing the process, defined like this, is not dependent on the crossing of a socially constructed line.

That said, and in order to avoid some of the political associations of the term *radicalisation*, we suggest that small parts of a *radicalisation journey* are better conceptualised as *microradicalisations*. This concept, then, includes the anger felt by large numbers of people when faced with perceived injustice or threat. By including smaller and less serious processes, we can note that many people radicalise but that most never move far enough to come to the attention of the authorities, and that they more often deradicalise than move on to ever greater conflict. Thus, both the motivating factors, and the start and endpoints of radicalisation journeys are diverse, and are not in any way linear or straightforward.

Further, *microradicalisation* also encompasses the small movements that contribute to parts of society or state becoming more conflictual or less harmonious with other parts of the social whole. Just as the dichotomy between ‘model citizen’ and ‘terrorist’ cannot account for all positions and journeys between them, neither does a dichotomy between a perfectly peaceful society and civil war or holocaust. Smaller movements, which may include laws, the individual and combined actions of ‘street level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky, 1980), and changes in the aggregate attitudes of the population all contribute to a society’s radicalisation, hence all of us bear some responsibility.

Finally, we argue that this holistic focus on process and the smaller components of conflict is key to understanding the symbiotic relationships between different strands of radicalisation. It is not only the case that one group of extremists react to the actions of another group of extremists, but that different sections of society (including extremists) can react to what they *perceive* as a threat to their interests or as injustice. As described above, we cannot assume that any judgements of the seriousness of any radicalisation or form of conflict is universal. Therefore, such reactions are made to particular perceptions and interpretations of other

actions: for example, some may see the protest repertoire of a particular group as threatening, while others see it as allowable free speech. While the crossing of a legal line is necessary for some state interventions, this is not a determining factor in other reactions, and the media, mass public, local publics or oppositional movements may make different judgements as to the acceptability or threat of any particular position. Thus, this understanding of microradicalisations suggests we focus less on ‘cumulative extremism’ (Eatwell, 2006) and more on a much broader ‘reciprocal radicalisation’ (Holbrook, 2013).

3. ‘Reciprocal Radicalisations’, Trivial and Deadly Serious

In this final section, then, we examine *microradicalisations* and the longer *radicalisation journeys* by reflecting upon empirical fieldwork conducted with radical Islamist and far right activists and supporters in the north and midlands of England⁶. In particular, we will demonstrate how microradicalisations are often reactions to the perception of others’ actions or lack of action⁷. These reactions are not only found in the ratcheting effect of one extremist group responding to another extremist group’s actions as in Eatwell’s ‘cumulative extremism’ (2006), but in the responses of all citizens, populations, and the state to other individuals’ and groups’ actions. As Busher and Macklin argue, we need to examine how the ‘core’ cumulative extremism processes between well-defined groups ‘intersect with wider social and political processes’ including ‘community polarisation’ (2014: 489). It is our argument here that the term ‘reciprocal radicalisation’ (Holbrook, 2013) should, given an understanding of radicalisation as more than the moment of becoming a radical, also refer to the everyday interaction in which *microradicalisations* are generated. Furthermore, we argue that the processes driving the most trivial *microradicalisations* have parallels in the processes driving those that are far more serious.

Since 2006, one of the authors (Bailey) has conducted a number of research projects that have

⁶ The author conducted this fieldwork as an ESRC-funded doctoral student, and then as a postdoctoral researcher on a European Commission funded project.

⁷ There are, of course, radicalisation processes or parts of such processes that are driven by internal dynamics, including indoctrination, group ‘echo chambers’ and loyalty to friends (see Sageman, 2008; Sunstein, 2009), and radicalisation seems to occur more easily when particular risk factors are present, including social isolation, a lack of education and mental health problems (see Corner & Gill, 2014; Houtman, 2003). However, many other radicalising factors can be interpreted as the actions of opposing others

examined far-right and radical Islamist activism. This has included face-to-face survey work with a focus on far-right voters, and those who may potentially vote far-right, conducted in 2006. Post-doctoral research done in 2012-13 included fieldwork with the anti-Islamist/ Islamophobic English Defence League (EDL) and a number of smaller far-right groups. These studies largely focused on present attitudes and activities, for example looking at the drivers of far-right support by asking which political issues are important to different segments of the electorate, or by asking EDL and other far-right activists and participants about what they saw as ‘the problem’ to be addressed. The doctoral work, however, which is the source of the empirical work used here, went beyond this to examine radicalisation journeys.

This doctoral research used a mix of ethnography and biographical narrative interview methods, with fieldwork done between 2008 and 2010. It included one year focused on East Estate, a peripheral ‘white estate’ in an English city where the estate’s elected councillors were all from the far-right British National Party (BNP), and one year focused on Hilltop, an inner city ‘Asian area’ in the same city where the local radical Islamist al-Muhajiroun (al-M) group was based. In each area, Bailey spent a year attending public meetings and other events where these activists mixed with a wider public: for the BNP this included bingo sessions, leafleting homes and neighbourhood forums, and with al-M this included their da’wah street stalls and other meetings. This eventually led to biographical interviews with a small number of mainstream and extremist activists, including five of the six al-M activists in the city, and four BNP activists, all of which had stood for office with all but one becoming councillors. These were conducted using a biographical-narrative method taking its cue from the work of Hollway and Jefferson (2001) and Wengraf (2001). The typical interview comprised two one-hour sessions, a week or two apart.

The biographical method was chosen over semi-structured interview techniques for two reasons. Firstly, the exploration of connections between community sociality, community action and political action required an attention to the histories of individuals and the place and community in which they live: these are the ‘problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society’ (Mills, 2000: 6). Through a whole-life narrative approach, the interviewer hoped to avoid both the compartmentalising of politics and political attitudes from individual experience, and to avoid the discussion of politics and political attitudes being

only in the context of the present (Jones, 2003: 60). Secondly, it was important for the interviewer to avoid introducing the terms ‘politics’ and ‘extremism’, as anti-political sentiment and/or the highly politicised discourse of extremism and terrorism could lead participants to draw on well-rehearsed analytical frameworks: stories ‘[anchor] people’s accounts to events that have actually happened [and so] have to engage with reality’ (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000: 35). The question used to start the conversation was:

‘Can you tell me the story of your life, starting wherever you like? All of the things that have happened that you think are important, and I’ll just take notes.’

From here, the interviews followed the guidance of Hollway and Jefferson (2000), avoiding ‘why’ questions, and asking for more detail using the ‘respondent’s own words and phrases... in order to respect and retain the interviewee’s meaning frames... [and] not imposing a structure on the narrative’ (36). In this way, the ‘radicalisation journey’ was demonstrated through the stories of ‘what happened and when’, and so the actions of the interviewee and reactions to their life experiences.

Hence, the aetiology of this extremist activism must include individual radicalisation journeys. While it is trite to say that none were born extremists, it is also the case that almost all were brought up in households without extremism. Where participants talked about their parents’ or other family members’ politics or other activism, it was the mainstream parties and, for the Muslim participants, the main neighbourhood mosque, that were central. Furthermore, the ‘separate lives’ narrative that was one of the early explanations for radicalisation and community polarisation (Cantle, 2001) was conspicuous by its absence: BNP members and EDL activists had ethnic others for friends and relations, and the al-M group had grown out of school friendship networks at an ethnically-mixed secondary school, and the resultant ‘mixed’ street gangs. Instead of the dichotomy of stereotypical ‘liberal multiculturalism’ and insular and divided ‘communities’, even these activists combine the convivial with intolerance (c.f. Back & Sinha, 2016).

Analysis that focuses on ‘risk factors’ can reduce both this complexity and ambiguity and the

processual nature of journeys to connections or correlations between particular moments in time – the before and the after. It is, of course, the case that background and intermediate causes – whether personal, economic, political and ideological or other (see Wiktorowicz, 2005 and also the use of such factors in risk assessments) – are present in the biographies of extremists⁸. Much of the post 9/11 research into why some people are radicalised to violence has considered drivers and attractors. The former include psychological pathologies, grievances based in perceived individual or group deprivation and related grievances based in geopolitics (see Christmann, 2012 for a systematic review). The latter include social bonds, friendships and camaraderie (Sageman, 2008) and the attraction of violence or revenge. In the language of political scientists, these are supply and demand factors (Rydgren, 2007).

Such an approach implies examining a static moment prior to radicalisation. Individuals or groups either have the risk factors or do not, and these models do not examine how it is that such risk factors develop over time. By way of contrast, there are models that do focus on change over time, especially those that posit stages of radicalisation (for example Moghaddam, 2005). However, these focus on the outcomes – that is, how one repertoire of radicalised behaviour can engender another – or those processes internal to the group or individual. Here we are arguing that what is often missing is the intertwined development of ideology and behaviour, and including the action and reaction of all parties. In this, the work of McCauley and Moskalenko (2011) in particular is instructive as it demonstrates how state and societal responses to terrorism can bolster the terrorist groups' causes (see Crenshaw, 2008). Here, then, the examination of a longer-term process for individuals and groups leads to an analysis of the *development* of oppositional identities and attitudes, and resultant actions and reactions, at the smallest scale.

Even if such factors and processes are found more often in the background of those radicalised to an extremist end point, though, they can also be present in the background of others too. Indeed, it was striking that many of *East Estate's* mainstream activist base reflected upon their own equivalent microradicalisations as part of their justification for current activity. Many of these individuals had experience of violent conflict as young people,

⁸ It was, for example, clear that one al-Muhajiroun activist had gone through Wiktorowicz's 'cognitive opening' that came with the anger about the death of his father.

with teachers, employers and other young people, and that fighting for societal change through Christian and Labour party activities had become a better channel for them. As Gordon, a Labour activist described a colleague: ‘he saw the error of his ways and now wants to make up for that... that’s where I come from [too]’. These activists had ‘sought to turn their past lives into something positive’ (Maruna, 2001: 11).

At the time of interview, the young men of the al-M group had not turned their lives around to reverse their head-on collision with wider society⁹. Some of their biographies included many turns of a vicious cycle of challenging authority that began long before their involvement with radical Islamism, but was informed by an incipient politics of identity. Abu Q reflected on an incident while at secondary school:

‘I was fasting that day. That is the only day I fast. Like I wasn’t practicing but I, I really wanted to fast this day. I woke up in the morning to fast and I said I’m never, not going to break my fast. No. I said to my teacher no I said to her I’m fasting I don’t want to... We were making cakes or something. She said you have to make it. I said I don’t want to you know what I mean bro? I don’t want to. Because I’m fasting. She said go to your own country and fast. Go there and do the fasting. I got angry. I got angry. I was an angry kid them days. I started throwing stuff. I got very, very angry. Then the head teacher came and like the senior head came in and they all... I said she said go to my own country. And why didn’t they say nothing to her because she was an authority.’

Thus, Abu Q’s early clashes with authority were coloured not by an extremist ideology, but with the anti-authority ideology found in working-class boys everywhere (see Willis, 1977).

For Asif, this kind of challenge occurred a little later in life. After rebelling against

⁹ We have chosen to focus on the al-Muhajiroun group here, but similar data and arguments can be presented for the far-right groups. However, for those on the far-right the opposing forces would include far-left/anti-fascist activists, as well as the state and the radical Islamists.

expectations and doing manual labour for a short while, he did A-levels and began a law degree at his local university. In this context he challenged the failure to include Islamic perspectives in the course, resulting in a lower degree result than predicted. Asif's sense of social justice also led him to challenge elsewhere¹⁰. While working for the local race equality body he challenged a council officer after a community cohesion event where there was no halal food provided:

'...is the food here halal? And it was, I want you to understand where we went to. This was an event organised by the Race Equality Council, for community cohesion, community awareness, and you know, and a better understanding of BME community, and we went to there, I said to your guy 'is your food halal?' he said yeah, it's halal. I said where did you get your meat from then, to find out which shop it was, he said 'no, we sterilised everything', I said 'I beg your pardon'. 'I've sterilised everything'. I said 'halal and sterilisation are two different things'... My dad's worked his bone, to his bones, I've seen him with my own eyes my dad coming home and his bones showing after working in the factory. He worked his fingers to the bone. His back to this day is not fully, er, operative, as a result of carrying those heavy goods, but he never complained... And they still don't know that he eats halal food.'

As with Abu Q above, Asif said he was not particularly religious at this point, but he still felt wronged. Asif's path was further influenced by a later incident in which he witnessed what he interpreted as Islamophobic policing, with his challenge of the police officers escalating to the extent that he received a short prison sentence, and so also lost his livelihood as a youth worker. Others in the group had prior antagonistic relationships with the police for other reasons. Yasir, the group's only convert to Islam, had grown up in a drug-dealing family, and

¹⁰ A similar process was found in some of the far-right activists. One older BNP activist came to this position after an attempt to challenge the local Labour establishment resulted in humiliation, such that he switched from being a 'Labour man'.

had made many Asian-Muslim friends through his street based behaviour: a number of the group had previous involvement with drugs and violence.

The al-M group itself was subject to a great deal of attention from the police. The group's activities largely consisted of da'wah (proselytising) stalls, where a few hours a week the group would hand out leaflets and attempt to engage with passers-by. As the Home Secretary noted, while this kind of activity may be an irritant and promotes intolerance, they 'may not have broken the law' (Jacqui Smith quoted in Percival, 2009). Indeed, the group had a relatively good relationship with the local police officers who checked their leaflets. However, this relationship was somewhat strained by raids on some of the members' homes by counter-terrorism police, which after a year of investigation led to no charges being brought against them.

The group also came to the attention of oppositional 'others'. Some members of the public, not knowing much about the group, were prepared to talk to them, with memorable conversation about religion and society ending with a young woman saying that she was glad to have met them as 'a good example of religious people engaging with others, dispelling the fear'. It was those who did not engage who were the most aggressive, with young white men often shouting abuse from cars as they drove past the stalls, and a group of men that the activists associated with the BNP gathering next to the stall to do the same. While the al-M activists were unaware of the BNP's activity and vice versa, they did both hold images of the other group as far bigger and far more influential, such that any oppositional activity could be attributed to an organised group. Once the EDL began to counter-demonstrate against al-M activity nationwide, this then became a reality and 'selective patterns of interaction are also more likely to bring activists into repeated and emotionally charged contact with people articulating views diametrically opposed to their own' (Busher, 2015), creating the conditions for further anger and conflict.

In January 2010, and shortly after Bailey's fieldwork was completed, the group was proscribed for 'glorifying terrorism', the only group to be banned under new laws introduced in 2006 (Home Office, 2010). This ban came after a public outcry over the group's plan to do a march through Wootton Bassett, the town through which British soldiers killed overseas are

brought through, carrying coffins to symbolise dead Afghan civilians. Later, after a surveillance operation, some of the al-Muhajiroun group were subsequently arrested, charged with, and convicted of terrorism offences. At least part of the ‘plot’ was in response, and so vicarious revenge for, the attempted arson attack on a local mosque at which they themselves would not be welcome.

This radicalisation journey, from angry schoolchild to convicted terrorist, was not done in isolation or only with fellow travellers but was, we argue, also driven by a process of reciprocal radicalisations *at every stage of the way*. Further, these reciprocal radicalisations take similar forms at each point, such that they reinforce each other, and are made up of the individual and group microradicalisations and those of the state and society or parts thereof. Furthermore, none of these movements towards deeper conflict need be rooted in a fully-formed radical-Islamist or far-right ideology. Prior to being involved in a ‘contrast society’ (Koehler, 2015) in which individuals are committed to opposing the mainstream, these individuals already engaged in everyday forms of resistance while motivated by far less systematised ideological frameworks. Each movement towards conflict is justified by the prevailing ideology of the participants at that time, which include the unsophisticated identity politics and racist intolerances of young men, the radical Islamist and far-right frameworks of particular groups, and the combination of societal and state racisms and the desire for security over freedom. Thus, we do not argue that one of ideology or grievance is the primary cause, but that grievances help ideology develop and vice versa, in the context of groups and their cohesion (see Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2007).

Indeed, because any particular societal unit’s understanding of radicalisations are interpreted through an ideological lens, reciprocal radicalisation can be driven by perceived injustices arising from differential assessments of threat. This is particularly important when assessing the state’s role in the process, as collectively the state has by far the greatest set of powers. First, even the forms of conflict that are allowed by the state as part of our democratic norms can be judged by others as being radicalisations that should not be permitted. Hence, non-extremist Muslim participants in Bailey’s study were angry that for all the talk of ‘extremism’ in Muslim communities, the BNP were allowed to organise and even have important roles in the local state.

Second, very similar activities have been treated very differently by the state. Most obviously, the repertoire of al-M was very similar to that of the EDL, and for a while they were long-term partners in demonstration and counter-demonstration. However, only al-Muhajiroun was banned, suggesting that the state was favouring one side over another and so reversing the EDL's claims of 'two tier justice'. Similar problems are found in the distinction made between hate crime and terrorism. While ideal types of the two can be defined as different, particularly with regard to the degree of organisation and the role of ideology and messaging, (see Deloughery, King, Asal, & Rethemeyer, 2012; Perry & Alvi, 2012), many and perhaps most incidents are both¹¹. However defined, critics point to the differential response from society and the state, both in terms of the level of condemnation and activity to prevent. Furthermore, the focus on ideology for terrorism (see above) has prompted state responses to ideas, whereas societal racisms, homophobias, and so on, are not recognised as an ideology that can engender hate crime. This, then, can be interpreted as the state taking sides and itself being part of the radicalisation threat (Kundnani, 2012).

Finally, when widely held explanatory frameworks for radicalisation fall back on ethno-religious community as explanations, others can interpret *any* visible attribute as a threat. The discourse of the 'roots of radicalisation' has come to implicate identity politics in general (see Choudhury, 2007), and Cantle's 'separate lives' finds sources of radicalisation in residential segregation (2001). In such formulations a huge range of attributes are posited as connected to radicalisation and extremism, including particular cities and neighbourhoods, the veil and the St George flag (Bailey, 2015). One member of the al-Muhajiroun group described Premiership football as a threat, as it always 'encourages nationalism'. While the connections between such attributes and radicalisation are statistical, an overly cautious interpretation leads some to believe that there is a threat present, where others see none.

We therefore argue that by rethinking radicalisation to not refer to a binary between the non-radicalised and the radicalised, but as a longer process, we can show how the connections are made between the 'spirals of violence' between extremist movements and the 'more generalised deterioration of community relations' (Busher & Macklin, 2014: 489). There are

¹¹ See, for example, the debates in the United States with regard to the designation of the Pulse attack in Orlando (June 2016) and the San Bernadino attack (December 2015).

multiple actors in any conflict, and while the state might attempt to demarcate ‘problem radicalisation’, these do not always coincide with the lines that others may draw.

Conclusions

So far, this article has argued for the extension of the concept of radicalisation to include all movements, small and large, trivial and serious, in the direction of political conflict as *microradicalisations*. Doing so avoids the problems of the current radicalisation discourse. First, it does not limit radicalisation to the small conceptual space in which an individual, idea or action moves from being legal to illegal, from non-extremist to extremist, or from non-violent to violent: each of these boundaries is contestable as a socio-legal construct, hence radicalisation based on such distinctions will have conceptual confusion (Sedgwick, 2010). Second, this concept forces us to examine the radicalisation journey holistically, including the minor brushes with authority that may lead to ‘ideological alienation from the state’ (Waddington, 2007: 49) or society, and which occur in a far broader population. Given that in previous times other ideological frameworks have led to violence and terrorism, we should understand that ‘there but for the grace of God go I’¹². It also reiterates the work of Martha Crenshaw, showing that movement occurs after crossing the line too, and that throughout the journey radicalisation is in response to other groups’, the state’s and society’s movements to and from conflict. Third, it points to ‘reciprocal radicalisation’ as being based in societal understandings of radicalisation, extremism, threat and so on, and not just in state-centred understandings. Indeed, the whole argument is predicated on the fact that human social processes do not always respect the boundaries placed before them.

The implication of this conceptualisation of radicalisation is that it implies no predetermined value judgement, unless we take the position that all conflict is bad or all conflict is good. Radicalisation is instead central to political life. Individuals and groups disagree on something, they engage in conflict in a parliament, in the public sphere, on the streets and elsewhere, and they eventually disengage or triumph. Some examples of radicalisation, those of Nelson Mandela and the suffragettes, for example, have been judged to have been for the

¹² Or a secular equivalent.

good of society, while other have been judged as for the bad. Mostly, though, radicalisation processes peter out and become deradicalisations as conflicts end in compromise, win or defeat, or just moving on: as Sageman argues, ‘do not overreact... [many will] move on with their lives’ (quoted in Hasan, 2013)

This, then, is where we may no longer sidestep the question of politics. So far we have examined the sociology of radicalisation, but we cannot avoid thinking through how the concept is deployed in counter-terrorism and other policies. As Awan et al. show, the use of the radicalisation narrative to mark out ideology and action that falls short of crime has created ‘hypersecurity’ (Awan, Hoskins, & O’Loughlin, 2012) that by and large restricts the lives of Muslims. While the extension of the concept could neuter it, it could also justify further securitisation. As outlined earlier, our alternative here would be to see these small parts of a radicalisation journey (which might not reach a radical destination) as *microradicalisations*.

This ought to be combined with a deepening of democratic debate on where the limits of legal behaviour should be placed, what punishments there ought to be for crossing the lines, what kind of interventions ought to be acceptable in other instances, and how assessments based on risk should be handled. Many, ourselves included, critique the UK’s Prevent policies, and Channel programme in particular, on the grounds that in targeting Muslim dissent and some Islamic cultural forms judged as risk factors it is inherently Islamophobic. The Islamophobia could be removed, of course, by designating all dissent as illegal or problematic, and picking out more cultural attributes as risk factors to make Muslim false-positives no more likely than other false-positives. This, of course, would be an unacceptable restriction of civil liberties.

Instead, a more reasonable response would require assuming that *microradicalisations* are a normal and welcome part of a healthy democracy, as people do not always agree. The legal limits of speech and other action ought to be set out in terms that are as neutral as possible, and not, as a senior police officer once told one of us, written specifically to catch some groups (i.e. al-Muhajiroun) and not others. We should note that society does not practice total laissez-faire up to the point of legal interventions, but is a more complex system of informal and formal restraint and self-restraint (Elias, Dunning, Goudsblom, & Mennell, 2000). Again,

the good society would aim for neutrality and not respond differently to (roughly) equivalent actions merely because of their wider associations. Finally, where risk factors are used as justification for intervention, any prohibitive or facilitative intervention should not go beyond what the risk factor itself justifies, and is only equitable if done in all instances of this risk factor. Indeed, many of the facilitative actions that would address some of the drivers mentioned above – for example economic threat, disenfranchisement and a desire for belonging – are justified on their own merits in promoting justice and equality and ought to be universal. Overall, such an approach should begin with the principles of fairness, transparency and proportionality, and should avoid politically hyped claims that a huge range of activity is a potential threat to the nation state. A more thorough treatment of such an approach can be found in Tore Bjørge's *Strategies for Preventing Terrorism* (2013).

This, of course, is not easy. All engagement with others should be done in a spirit of openness and assuming the best, but climates of mistrust make this hard. For example, the 'cooker bomb' case, when a 4-year-old's mispronunciation of cucumber led to nursery workers approaching the parents with suspicion of terrorism (BBC News, 2016), should actually have been responded to by asking the child what he meant in a non-directive way, as one would in any misunderstanding of a pre-schooler. This would have led to a learning moment for the child, just as he would if he mispronounced any word. However, teachers will have imbibed cultural norms and understandings like the rest of us, and also feel scared that they will be in more trouble if they get it wrong. However, getting it wrong by over-reacting, due to a radicalisation of the state, can inflame the situation. As the story of Abu Q above demonstrates, radicalisation journeys begin small, and while most are reversed, some keep going. In another world, Abu Q's teacher would have responded kindly, and perhaps the outcomes a decade later would differ. Moghaddam argues that radicalisation ought to be thought of as a staircase, in which the higher a person goes, the more their choices are constrained (Moghaddam, 2005). We argue that the radicalisations of state and society can increase these constraints. When the state demands deradicalisation, an appropriate response may be 'Physician, heal thyself'.

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