

# **RADICALIZATION AND COUNTER-RADICALIZATION**

# SOCIOLOGY OF CRIME, LAW AND DEVIANCE

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SOCIOLOGY OF CRIME, LAW AND DEVIANCE  
VOLUME 25

# **RADICALIZATION AND COUNTER- RADICALIZATION**

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Emerald Publishing Limited  
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2020

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**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83982-989-5 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83982-988-8 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83982-990-1 (Epub)

ISSN: 1521-6136 (Series)



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# INTRODUCTION: DECIPHERING (COUNTER-)RADICALIZATION

Derek M.D. Silva and Mathieu Deflem

Over the past two decades there has been a notable increase in studies related to terrorism and counter-terrorism within the fields of sociology, criminology, law, and criminal justice. Scholars working in this area have laid the foundation for a rich understanding of the complex social relations that contextualize terrorism and, perhaps even more relevant in the context of sociology and criminology, have documented the rise in social control measures seeking to prevent various forms of terrorist activity. While social-scientific studies of terrorism have historically been primarily concerned with understanding the cognitive characteristics, actions, and behaviors of terrorists, sociological work aiming to conceptualize, theorize, and measure behaviors and activities that precede and follow terrorism and political violence have recently gained traction within the field.

Contemporary scholarly discourse surrounding terrorism and counter-terrorism has been influenced by the rapid upsurge in focus on the pre-terrorism space most often labeled under the heading of a “radicalization” process. Typically understood as an individual or group transitioning away from legitimate or lawful political, religious, or otherwise ideological belief toward unlawful violence, radicalization has become an increasingly studied topic in sociological and criminological research on terrorism. Dovetailing this trend has been an augmented focus on not only theorizing radicalization, but also on the development, uptake, and diffusion of social control strategies and practices aiming to intervene in the radicalization process, most of labeled as counter-radicalization, countering violent extremism (CVE) or preventing violent extremism (PVE) strategies. Scholarly questions related to terrorism and counter-terrorism have thus shifted away from seeking to explain terrorism reactively to *preemptive* interventions that aim to understand and intervene in a *process* toward terrorist activity. As such, the epistemological orientation of social-scientific research on terrorism has moved significantly toward the pre-terrorism space, the study of which is largely occupied by scholars interested in radicalization and counter-radicalization.

Not only have radicalization and counter-radicalization recently begun to enter the gaze of mainstream sociology, criminology, and criminal justice as objects of investigation, the concept of radicalization also provides a growing governmental framework for understanding modern forms of terrorism and the life-course trajectories of those engaging in terrorist activities. Furthermore, as agents of social control across Western jurisdictions have increasingly been focusing on counter-radicalization as part of their professional repertoire (Silva & Deflem, 2020), scholars must challenge the dynamics of practices associated with modern counter-radicalization, CVE, and PVE strategies. Indeed, the emergence of radicalization presents an opportunity for social scientists interested in both terrorism and social control, but questions remain about how to develop such a research agenda (Silva, 2019). In this context, the present volume seeks to illuminate some of the contemporary advances in the field and possibilities for sociologists, criminologists, and other scholars interested in issues of criminal and social justice who want to pursue knowledge claims about new forms of social control in the context of contemporary terrorism.

Paralleling the growing interest in (counter-)radicalization has been a sustained critique of the very idea of labeling a complex process toward political violence under the general marker of radicalization (Coolsaet, 2019; Kundnani, 2012; Neumann, 2013; Sedgwick, 2010; Silva, 2018). From this perspective, the focal point of social-scientific research on processes of radicalization should be, first and foremost, on the ways in which knowledge about transitions toward terrorism informs a myriad of public policies, intelligence and law enforcement strategies, and community interventions that impact certain individuals and groups preemptive defined as risky (Silva & Deflem, 2020). Bridging the gap between scholarship on radicalization with studies on counter-radicalization, this body of work highlights the complex interconnectivity between the discourses and knowledges that shape our understanding of the radicalization process with the evolving ways that politicians and governments, law enforcement officials, community leaders, civil society organizations, and other key stakeholders legitimize new policies, strategies, and practices seeking to counter it. It is thus important that this volume contributes to the deciphering of (counter-)radicalization within the field to better understand the complex dynamics involved in the transition toward terrorism and the efforts deployed by various authorities to prevent it.

This volume seeks to offer a useful contribution to the budding field of radicalization studies that intersects within the fields of sociology, law, criminology, and criminal justice today. This effort is certainly not meant as a condemnation or critique of contemporary or historical social-scientific research on terrorism in general, but as an attempt to at once demonstrate the value of empirical research that gives primacy to the radicalization process and attempts to control it and, perhaps equally important, illuminate the rich, sophisticated, and rigorous scholarship that is being conducted in this area.

The interdisciplinary nature of scholarship on radicalization that lies at the nexus of crime, deviance, and social control is reflective of the development of contemporary scholarship on terrorism in general. The scope of this volume of *Sociology of Crime, Law, and Deviance* to focus on radicalization



and counter-radicalization, as such, complements two volumes on the study of (counter-)terrorism published in this series over the past 15 years (Deflem, 2004, 2015), bringing with it unique contributions toward the study of radicalization as a legitimate unit of analysis. What the assembled authors hope to show is that empirical studies of the so-called radicalization process and the myriad of social control strategies developed to intervene in it are valid, robust, and useful areas of scholarly concern. To this end, our volume should nicely complement other relevant works in this area, such as the edited collections (Baker-Beall, Heath-Kelly, & Jarvis, 2014; Jackson, 2016), books (Alimi, Demetriou, & Bosi, 2015; Horgan, 2009; Khosrokhavar, 2017; McDonald, 2018), and the numerous empirical articles (Kundnani, 2012; Neumann, 2013; Schmid, 2013; Sedgwick, 2010) the field of radicalization studies now relies on.

The chapters in this book are divided into four parts, each representing cutting-edge scholarship being done in different areas of radicalization research. Part I brings together four chapters that in very different ways discuss theoretical and conceptual advances and trends in the social-scientific study of (counter-) radicalization. John Horgan, Katharina Meredith, and Katerina Papatheodorou first address perhaps the most obvious question currently facing the field: does deradicalization even work? Based on a descriptive account of findings within the field, they find that although scientific research on deradicalization is relatively new, there remains significant promise in emerging findings that support a case for the effectiveness of deradicalization programs. Next, Keiran Hardy evaluates the merit of using John Stuart Mill's harm principle to understand debates surrounding the definitions of radicalization and deradicalization. He argues that Mill's harm principle is best applied when researchers and policymakers focus on the social aspects of radicalization over the psychological ones. Alex Wilner and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz draw on Transformative Learning theory to suggest a new and novel approach to the study of violent radicalization they call Transformative Radicalization. They argue that there remains some efficacy in understanding the cognitive and emotional process of change that prepares and motivates an individual to pursue violent behavior, and that the Transformative Radicalization framework might provide a more nuanced understanding of the cognitive aspects of radicalization. Paul Gill, Zoe Marchment, Sanaz Zolghadriha, Nadine Salman, Bettina Rottweiler, Caitlin Clemmow, and Isabelle Van Der Vegt synthesize recent advances in violent extremist risk analysis. They find that the next generation of violent extremist risk assessment will necessitate a focus upon process, barriers that challenge effective implementation, and a return to the human element of decision-making.

Part II focuses on the role of the state and civil society in (counter-)radicalization. Therese O'Toole first explores the ever-evolving counter-radicalization strategy in the UK, called Prevent, and its increasing alignment with a much larger counter extremism agenda. O'Toole finds that this trend is evidence of a broader "civic turn" toward a narrow and increasingly restrictive conception of both integration and citizenship. Concentrating on the role of state violence in the adoption of terrorism, Stephen Chicoine's comparative-historical study of anarchist, anti-colonial, New Left groups, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the

Levant demonstrates the symbolic importance of state violence which is thought to provide a moral justification for numerous forms of terrorist activity. Next, Fahad Ahmad illuminates how Muslim communities and their representatives in civil society experience and negotiate the pressures from counter-radicalization policies and practices. The author finds that while counter-radicalization policies are legitimized by general references to risk governance and community-based intervention, security discourses and practices continue to cast Muslim communities as suspect communities by constructing radicalization as a problem predominantly within Muslim communities. To end this part, Carys Evans presents the often-overlooked perspective of counter-radicalization practitioners within the field. She argues that practitioners are perhaps most equipped understand the contextual factors leading individuals toward violent extremism and can thus provide much more holistic tools to help prevent radicalization and, importantly, exploitation that might fuel extremism.

In Part III, the focus shifts to how the online space operates as an increasingly important arena for (counter-)radicalization research. Kurt Braddock studies the use of attitudinal inoculation to challenge online disinformation propagated by extremists. He shows that despite the demonstrated efficacy of disinformation inoculation in general, its utility as a means of preventing the adoption of extremist beliefs and attitudes has yet to be sufficiently used in terrorism research. Next, James Hawdon and Matthew Costello argue that Ronald Aker's Social Structure Social Learning theory can help explain who is involved in the production of online materials considered hateful or extremist in nature. Concentrating on activity in women-only online forums, Ayse Lokmanoglu and Yannick Veilleux-Lepage use structural topic modeling to uncover the most salient topics between White Nationalist and Islamic State women-only forums. They find that the safety of online spaces enables women to be more active and serves as an echo-chamber of support for like-minded individuals.

In Part IV, finally, four chapters explore the complex role that current and former extremists play in contemporary (counter-)radicalization strategies. Ryan Scrivens, Steven Windisch, and Pete Simi begin by exploring the ways in which former extremists have and have not be used in radicalization and counter-radicalization research. They find that although former extremists have indeed informed public understanding of an array of issues related to radicalization and counter-radicalization, empirical research in this space has largely ignored their voices. As such, they urge researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers to engage with former extremists to get a much richer and nuanced understanding of the complex trajectory toward political violence. Examining the UK's Prevent strategy from the perspective of a former combatant, Tom Pettinger investigates how those engaged in political violence in the UK understand the country's preemptive rationality. He shows that despite the assumptions made by Prevent about risk and radicalization, the strategy completely misses an opportunity to learn from former combatants who have a very different understanding of the radicalization process. Studying the transition from terrorist to informant, Stefano Bonino shows that it is possible to prove theories on radicalization and deradicalization by drawing on the unique experiences of terrorist who have left their

movement to work with law enforcement to prevent terrorism. Finally, co-authors William Schultz, Sandra M. Bucerius, and Kevin D. Haggerty focus on the question of whether prisons might serve as an incubator, or breeding ground, for radicalization. Relying on interview data with 587 incarcerated men and women as well as 131 correctional officers in four prisons in Western Canada, they show that, unlike other jurisdictions, radicalization was not common in these institutions due, at least in part, to a number of social and structural barriers to radicalization.

Taken as a whole, the authors of this volume represent a broad range of scholarly disciplines interested in the dynamics of radicalization and counter-radicalization from various theoretical, conceptual, and methodological perspectives. The common thread among all chapters is the deliberate focus on situating radicalization and counter-radicalization within a social context and each apply their own theoretical and methodological approach to uncovering important and useful answers to the problem of political violence and terrorism. Collectively and through their respective individual chapters, the contributions in this book should make for a meaningful addition to the (counter-)radicalization studies literature that will be of interest to scholars and students interested in terrorism, counter-terrorism, and related concerns.

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# PART I

## THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ADVANCES