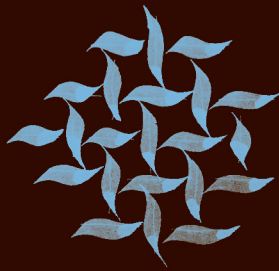


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MIGRATION AND INTERCULTURAL STUDIES

# RADICALISATION

*A Marginal Phenomenon or a Mirror to Society?*



NOEL CLYCO, CHRISTIANE TIMMERMAN, DIRK VANHEULE,  
RUT VAN CAUDENBERG, STIENE RAVN (EDS)

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A Marginal Phenomenon or  
a Mirror to Society?

Edited by  
Noel Clycq, Christiane Timmerman, Dirk Vanheule,  
Rut Van Caudenberg and Stiene Ravn

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# **i. Rethinking radicalisation: Addressing the lack of a contextual perspective in the dominant narratives on radicalisation**

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Stiene Ravn, Rik Coolsaet and Tom Sauer

## **i. Introduction**

When thinking about radicalisation today, other concepts immediately pop into mind: Islam, violence, indoctrination, terrorism, etc. The concept of radicalisation has been media hyped and is widely imbedded in public discourse today. However, the way we comprehend and approach radicalisation is not an objective notion of the concept but rather a subjective understanding that has gradually been attributed to it. Over the past decade and a half, some dominant narratives and understandings on radicalisation have been constructed and spread in policy circles as well as in the public sphere. In this paper, we aim to critically reflect on the body of ideas and explanations on radicalisation that are generally accepted. Reflecting on these dominant narratives is crucial, since policy responses to radicalisation – one of the main security priorities in a great deal of Western countries today – are based on how we understand the concept (Crone, 2016).

The paper starts by discussing the origins of the dominant narratives which can be found in the aftermath of 9/11 and later on following the terrorist attacks in Madrid and London in 2004 and 2005. These dreadful events have been fundamental in shaping the current dominant narratives on radicalisation. The paper continues by digging deeper into some of the key elements in the dominant narratives. An examination of the state of the art teaches us that in current dominant narratives radicalisation is seen as an individual process. The study of

*how* individuals transform from “normal” into “radical” and possibly “terrorist” has become a focal point (Coolsaet, 2015; Sedgwick, 2010). Furthermore, it is generally accepted that within this process, ideology fulfills a key role as it is considered to be the starting point and/or the main driver in radicalisation processes (Borum, 2011; Coolsaet, 2015; Crone, 2016; Kundnani, 2015). Despite a strong increase over the last years in research on radicalisation, many questions remain unanswered (Schmid, 2013). We still don’t know *why* terrorism and/or processes of radicalisation periodically flourish in our societies.

The paper continues by discussing a relatively recent stream of literature that questions some of the key elements in the dominant understandings on the concept. Radicalisation should not merely be seen as an ideology driven process influenced by micro- and meso-level factors of the individual (e.g., the influence of psychological issues, social media, group dynamics, etc.). Processes of radicalisation do not occur in a vacuum, but within a broader societal context that is characterised by for example particular dominant discourse and the presence of other social movements. The relevance of taking this into account is pointed out by Eatwell (2006) who introduced the term “cumulative extremism”, which he defines as “the way in which one form of extremism can feed off and magnify other forms” (Eatwell, 2006: 205). Research has shown that it is crucial to examine the wider cultural, social and political environment that might stimulate and shape the mobilisation of movements and counter movements (e.g., extreme Islamist and extreme Right-Wing or anti-Muslim movements) (Busher & Macklin, 2015).

An examination of the literature shows that an important element in the study of radicalisation and terrorism has been largely left out of the picture in current dominant narratives about these concepts, namely: the context in which processes of radicalisation and terrorism thrive. This is striking, as since the early 1970’s the importance of analyzing the enabling environments in which terrorism occurs was stressed to be significant in the study on the causes of terrorism (Crenshaw, 1981). It is exactly this gap or void in the dominant narratives on radicalisation that will be addressed in this paper. We aim to look beyond the current prevailing understandings and explore the importance of including a contextual perspective in radicalisation. We will do so by discussing Institutional Anomie Theory (IAT), a theory that was originally used to study high crime rates in the United States of America, and applying it on the concept of radicalisation (Mesner & Rosenfeld, 1994). This theory captures the importance of macro-level institutional

contexts in understanding individuals' thinking patterns and (deviant) social behaviour. In addition, the theory allows us to reflect on the consequences of the decontextualisation in the dominant narratives on radicalisation and how this affects the breeding ground for radicalisation processes.

## 2. The dominant narratives on the concept of radicalisation

### 2.1. *Origins of the contested concept of radicalisation*

Defining radicalisation has been a challenge for scholars and policy makers for many years and so far, no consensus exists. Sedgwick (2010) argues that the word “radical” has no meaning in absolute terms but only in relative terms. However, the usage of the term “radical” in relative sense – labelling groups of people as radical in relation to others – also poses challenges and often results in an absolute usage of the term. Defining “radical” in relative terms is only useful when specifying what is considered “moderate” or “mainstream”. This would entail the establishment of a continuum along which a line is drawn. However, the line on the continuum with “radical” on the one side and “moderate” on the other, is not self-evident since different political, cultural and historical contexts produce different understandings of what is considered “radical” and “moderate” or “mainstream” (Sedgwick, 2010; Neumann, 2013).

Furthermore, it is important to note that radical ideas are not necessarily bad. The distinction between “good” and “bad” radicalisation is not evident and historically and culturally bound. In the 1980's, the idea of gay marriage was perceived as radical whereas today, anyone opposing gay marriage could be labeled as “fundamentalist” or “radical” (Neumann, 2013). Moreover, challenging an existing status quo has in some cases proven to lead to more democratic freedom, such as the right of women to vote in the late 19th century. Definitions and understandings of the term radicalisation consist of normative assumptions, value-loaded approaches and a set of suppositions between radicalisation and other terms and concepts (e.g., violence, Islam, terrorism) (Githens-Mazer, 2012).

Notwithstanding the lack of a consensus definition of the term radical, dominant narratives on the concept of radicalisation seem to have been constructed and have evolved throughout the past decade. In the light of some events in recent history, certain dominant understandings have been attributed to the concept of radicalisation.



*9/11*

Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States, the amount of terrorism related literature on radicalisation has staggered tremendously (Ranstorp, 2009; Neumann, 2013). Githens-Mazer (2012) claims that some current discussions on radicalisation are problematic due to the fact that they are founded on the emotional response to the attacks of 9/11 and the securitisation of Islam that followed. The shocking and powerful images of 9/11 raised many questions and concerns amongst the uninformed Western public and urged Western societies to find an “easy” answer to why and how these attacks had happened. This resulted in an “elite-driven popular construction of perceived causation” (p. 5), meaning that governments across the globe instantly started using a particular discourse on the threat of Islamic inspired terrorism to find and describe the cause of the dreadful attacks. The amount of time, money and political discourse and action spent on the risk of violence from Muslim communities in the EU and the USA was enormous and not slightly in proportion with the actual threat, which is statistically negligible. This subjective construction of Islamic risk and threat against Western values spread via discourse by media and politicians was immediately translated into new security policy priorities and measures and has led to what we call “the securitisation of Islam”. These understandings have also trickled into the academic debate as in the aftermath of 9/11 and the declared “war on terror”, academic literature was largely focused on Muslim extremism, suicide-bombings and terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda (Ranstorp, 2009).

In the wake of 9/11, discussions on the causes of terrorism were limited to the belief that the evil mindset of the perpetrators, consisting of fanaticism inherent to Islam and hatred against Western values and modernism, was considered the only explanation for the attacks. The only successful way to combat the “evil ideology” of terrorism and to win the “war on terror” was the use of force against this new enemy to eradicate anti-modernism in the Middle East and to stimulate a cultural transformation in this region (Kundnani, 2012).

*Homegrown terrorism*

However, half a decade later, this notion of terrorism was showing its limitations for mainly two reasons. First, the results and consequences of the invasion in Afghanistan and Iraq led to disappointment and frustration. Second, on 11 March 2004 and again on 7 July 2005 Europe was shaken when public transport systems in Madrid and London became targets for terrorist attacks (Kundnani, 2012).

These bombings marked a turning point for the current understandings and narratives on terrorism and radicalisation since they introduced what was soon to be known as “homegrown terrorism”. Whereas the threat of Muslim terrorism was perceived as an external threat in the wake of 9/11, the perpetrators behind the attacks of Madrid and London were not foreigners but European citizens that were born and raised within the European Union. This new perception wherein Muslim terrorism had grown and had to be dealt with inside the European borders has changed the way policymakers and analysts approached the concept of terrorism (Crone, 2016).

Following the attacks, the concept of radicalisation became the focal point in EU counterterrorism. The term was officially adopted for the first time in an internal EU counterterrorism document in May 2004 (Coolsaet, 2016) and came into widespread public use in Europe (Crone, 2016). Between 2005 and 2007 the usage of the term “radicalisation” in the press reached its highest frequency, which strongly suggests that the popularity of the term derives from the (re-)emergence of homegrown terrorism in Western Europe (Sedgwick, 2010). The main question that quickly gripped politicians and analysts was how young adults, born and brought up in European peaceful and democratic societies, turned to this form of mass violence (Crone, 2016). This question became even more pressing when European countries were confronted with the phenomenon of “foreign fighters” for the first time in 2012. With Belgium as the largest source of foreign fighters per capita, the topic became a media hype in the country and in the rest of Europe. The fear of attacks by returnees has created an atmosphere similar to the aftermath of 9/11 (Coolsaet, 2015).

According to Githens-Mazer (2012) the attacks of 9/11 have started a process of so called “conceptual back-formation”, meaning that the content of a concept has changed due to the attachment of other signifiers and concepts. In the 19th century for example, radicalisation might have meant challenging the status-quo held by religious and/or political elites (e.g., challenging the prohibition for women to vote). Today, however, radicalisation is used to describe the process in which an “ordinary” person enters a pathway and becomes extremist and possibly terrorist. The author claims that: “popular discourse sought a word which might capture what was meant in terms of the process of becoming a terrorist, and has used ‘radicalisation’ in that capacity ever since” (561). Since the birth of this contested concept, the process of radicalisation, by which an individual turns into a terrorist, has become central to the analysis of the causes of terrorism (Coolsaet, 2015; Kundnani, 2015; Schmid, 2013).

The concept of radicalisation has become a political container term used by political players as a label to make a distinction between the “moderates”, to which they belong, and the “radicals” or their political and societal opponents. As a result, other terminology such as “extremism”, “political violence” or “terrorism” has become entangled with discourse on radicalisation. This is problematic, as decades of research have shown that radicals are not *per se* violent or extremist. While they might share characteristics similar to violent extremists (e.g., feelings of discrimination and alienation, anger towards societal institutions, etc.) many differences exist and radical ideas can be expressed or dealt with in various ways (Schmid, 2013).

### *2.2. Key elements in the dominant narratives: radicalisation as an individual and ideology driven process*

The origins of the dominant narratives on radicalisation can be found in the search for answers and explanations in a climate of shock and fear following the attacks of 9/11 and even more after the (re-)entrance of homegrown terrorism in Europe in 2004-2005. The general accepted perception on radicalisation in political and public discourse mainly evolves around two key elements: the individual and the ideology.

Since its emergence in policy circles, the concept of radicalisation has come to be seen as a process that is almost exclusively related to Islam ideology and Muslim-related phenomena (Borum, 2011; Coolsaet, 2015; Crone, 2016). It is a widely shared idea that Islam ideology plays a key role in radicalisation processes. In the search for answers as to why tragic events such as 9/11 or the bombings in Madrid and London could happen, one thing appeared clear: all the perpetrators behind these terrorist attacks are extremists who share a certain interpretation of Islamic theology that inspires their actions (Crone, 2016; Kundnani, 2012). The securitisation of Islam in the aftermath of 9/11 has caused the debate on the (in)compatibility of Islam and Western liberal democratic values to become increasingly more present and public (Cesari, 2009). Moreover, radicalisation has become intertwined with growing public concerns in Western societies over issues such as the migration crisis, integration and Islam (Coolsaet, 2016).

Radicalisation is seen as an ideology driven process wherein a “normal” individual develops extremist ideologies and beliefs and turns into a “radicalised” individual. This radicalisation process is considered a precursor to terrorism (Borum, 2011; Crone, 2016). Terrorism is thus treated as the end result or the product of a religiously driven process of radicalisation (Hörnqvist & Flyghed,

2012). These assumptions, imbedded in the dominant current understandings on terrorism and radicalisation, imply that ideology and religious beliefs are a starting point and/or a main driving force behind processes of radicalisation (Borum, 2011; Crone, 2016; Hörnqvist & Flyghed, 2012; Kundnani, 2015).

In addition to the key role of ideology in popular discourse on radicalisation, focus is also being put on the individual and how he or she goes through an individual process of becoming radicalised. It is widely accepted that an extremist version of Islam is being used to brainwash and indoctrinate youngsters and push them on a pathway towards radicalisation. The same ideology is being used to justify attacks against the West and its liberal democratic values. Eliminating and tackling the ideology that accounts as the main driver in radicalisation processes with possible violent outcomes, has therefore been put forwards as a central objective in counterterrorism policies. In the aftermath of 9/11 this entailed dismantling the terrorist network of Al-Qaeda and eliminating its leaders. Today, policy and prevention are targeting extremist ideas, movements, mosques or Imams and focus is being put on “deradicalisation” programmes (Crone, 2016).

For security and intelligence services to be able to prevent and intervene in radicalisation processes potentially leading towards violence, they need to identify signs of radicalisation in the behaviour of individuals. Therefore, a lot of attention has been given to the process of radicalisation and the different stages, psychological processes and patterns of behaviour that can be associated with terrorist violence (e.g., group formation, alienation from society, practicing religious beliefs, etc.). The focus on this mix of individual psychological and religious factors allows these services to identify indicators or signs of risk for radicalisation (Kundnani, 2012).

In sum, we can conclude that despite the lack of a scholarly consensus on how to understand radicalisation, a set of preconceived ideas about the phenomenon is taken for granted in public discourse. Focus is being put on the individual, the radical groups they are attracted to and Islam ideology which is presumed to play a key role in the pathway towards radicalisation.

### ***2.3. The lack of a contextual perspective in the dominant narratives on radicalisation***

Within a more recent stream of radicalisation/terrorism literature, a number of scholars question some of the previously discussed dominant narratives on radicalisation (Borum, 2011; Coolsaet, 2015; Crone, 2016; Della Porta, 2012; Kundnani, 2012; Schmid, 2013; Sedgwick, 2010). The prevailing discourse on

radicalisation is characterised by its focus on individuals and their ideological journeys towards radicalisation and terrorism, that are perceived as the root cause of the radicalisation process. However, “the radical” does not exist and cannot be captured in a single profile (Veldhuis & Bakker, 2007; Neumann, 2013). The vast majority of individuals with a socio-demographic profile commonly associated with vulnerability to become radicalised, do not radicalise or engage in violent extremism (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011), while some well-educated, affluent and apparently well-integrated individuals do (Bartlett & Miller, 2012).

The dominant understandings on radicalisation processes in most of the political and public discourse are narrow minded and reductionist as they generally leave out one important aspect, namely, the context in which these processes thrive (Coolsaet, 2016; Crone, 2016; Della Porta & Lafree, 2012; Kundnani, 2012; Sedgwick, 2010). A number of authors argue that the exclusion of the influence of the structural socio-political context in dominant understandings on radicalisation, excludes ascribing any causative role to the actions of governments and the societies in which the phenomenon arises (Della Porta & Lafree, 2012; Kundnani, 2012). The focus on individuals’ pathways and Islamic religion as the key driver in this journey, without taking into account a broader contextual perspective, seems to suggest that the root causes of radicalisation or the problem of extremist violence only lies intrinsically within individuals (micro-level) and/or their close surroundings and the groups and the ideologies they are attracted to (meso-level) rather than being a result of a larger conflict related to societal and political conditions (Della Porta & Lafree, 2012).

*Terrorism as the product of interaction between state and non-state actors*

Terrorism, radicalisation and political violence are not new and have existed for many years in waves that are diverse in many ways. Consequently, generalisations on the aims or methods of action of political violence can rarely be made. However, one important similar mechanism can be distinguished: violence develops from political conflicts between states and their opponents (Della Porta & Haupt, 2012). Nonetheless, the role of states and societies – the socio-political context – are hardly ever discussed or taken into account in current discourse and understandings on radicalisation (Kundnani, 2012). In dominant understandings, the process of radicalisation is considered a precursor to terrorism (Borum, 2011; Crone, 2016), or as Peter Neumann describes it: “what goes on before the bomb goes off” (Neumann, 2008, p. 4). In this perspective, terrorism is seen and treated as the end result or the product of a religiously driven

process of radicalisation (Hörnqvist & Flyghed, 2012) rather than the product of an interaction between state and non-state actors (Kundnani, 2015). The decontextualisation of radicalisation is being criticised by a number of scholars since it is a highly context dependent phenomenon (Coolsaet, 2016; Della Porta & LaFree, 2012; Kundnani, 2012; Sedgwick, 2010).

### 3. Radicalisation literature

After discussing the dominant narratives on radicalisation in political and public discourse, the paper continues by mapping the academic debate and reviewing understandings on radicalisation in academic literature.

Literature on the causes of radicalisation has mainly been focusing on processes of radicalisation and the study of *how* a person transforms from “normal” to “radical” into “extremist” and eventually “terrorist”. Most scholars are concentrating their study on the process by which extremist religious ideology takes hold among youngsters and the factors that influence this process (Kundnani, 2015). The process of radicalisation is often portrayed in models in order to better understand it and to analyze where interventions to counter the radicalisation process are possible. These models, e.g., the pyramid model (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008) and the staircase to terrorism model (Moghaddam, 2005), aim to capture how the process of radicalisation develops and what stages individuals go through when evolving from “normal” to “radical”. Such radicalisation models have been used as a base by policy-makers, intelligence services and law enforcement for the creation of counterterrorism policies and deradicalisation strategies (Kundnani, 2015).

In radicalisation literature, academics have been developing various theories, models and concepts that focus on different aspects and factors which cause individuals to radicalise and that explain the process by which an extremist ideology takes hold of them. These theories are often portrayed according to three societal levels: micro-level (individual life experiences and perceptions), meso-level (the role of group dynamics and the social surroundings of individuals), and macro-level (the social, political and cultural environment) (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Della Porta, 2012).

#### *Micro*

Within the research that tries to explain processes of radicalisation, a great deal of studies identifies key elements on the *micro-level*. Some scholars turn

to psychological causes and focus on individuals with particular mental health disorders and suffering from psychological issues (the psychopathological, Victoroff, 2005). Others investigate individuals with a lack of self-esteem that are in search for the construction of a personal identity (identity theory, TTSSL, 2008), or a sense of purpose and self-worth (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). Another theory suggests that some individuals are more prone to joining radical groups because of the action and excitement. This so-called novelty-seeking theory claims that a quest for risk and adventure is an important factor on the micro-level (Victoroff, 2005).

### *Meso*

A second group of theories can be situated on the *meso-level* and focuses on the social surroundings, group dynamics and inter-group relations. The relative deprivation theory states that individuals' perceptions of being deprived of economic means and possibilities can cause them to radicalise and eventually engage in violent actions (Bouhana & Wikström, 2010). The judgment of individuals that they and their group are worse off, if compared with their group of reference in their social environment, helps to explain to some degree the reason why radicalisation can also be found in groups that are seen as "better off" (Pettigrew et al., 2008). This meso-level mechanism is considered particularly important during early stages in the radicalisation process when individuals develop certain perceptions regarding their social surroundings (Doosje et al., 2016). The relative deprivation theory balances on the line of meso- and macro-level since it involves group dynamics as well as the broader socio-economic environment of individuals.

Another important factor on the meso-level, usually in a later stage of the radicalisation process, is group membership. People are social human beings which makes them vulnerable to social influence. Extremist groups can provide individuals with a strong sense of in-group belonging. The formation of an "evil" out-group, that is held responsible for grievances of the in-group, creates a strong inter-group dynamic (Doosje et al., 2016). Focus is also being put on the relevance of social networks that transmit radical ideas or the external influence of role-models and media in accepting certain social behaviour (Sageman, 2004; Wiktorowicz, 2004). The role of media, information and communication technology are important on this level. It has been shown that especially victim videos and jihad videos have the power to stir people with extreme right and jihadist sympathies to action (Holt et al., 2015).



### *Macro*

As mentioned above, the line between mechanisms on the meso-level and the macro-level can be thin at times. The *macro-level* can generally be understood as the level on which processes of radicalisation are influenced by larger structural societal factors (economic, cultural and socio-political context). To a lesser extent, there has been attention for macro-level mechanisms in radicalisation literature, notably in process models. For example, in the previously mentioned staircase to terrorism model (Moghaddam, 2005) that is regularly used in terrorism studies. Moghaddam (2005) uses the metaphor of a narrowing staircase in order to understand radicalisation processes resulting in violent terrorist acts. The staircase has a ground floor and five higher floors resembling different psychological processes, each becoming more extreme and ending in the engagement with violence and terrorism. Although this process model also emphasises the individual pathway to terrorism and the psychological processes during this journey, it also takes into account the broader societal context. The ground floor of the staircase is considered the place where the psychological interpretation of material conditions takes place. Here, perceptions of grievances and just treatment are important. On this floor, individuals may experience different levels of perceived injustice caused by e.g., relative deprivation. By including the conditions and environment of the individual in his staircase model, Moghaddam takes the relevance of the context in processes of radicalisation in consideration.

Another macro-level element that is being studied in radicalisation literature is the role of international politics and how they may directly affect the radicalisation of individuals and groups who have no direct relation to the conflict (Kjøk et al., 2003). There is an interplay between radicalisation in some Muslim countries and Muslims in Europe, as, for instance, concerning the offence taken from western military interventions in the Middle East (Korteweg et al., 2010).

### *Interplay between micro-, meso- and macro-level*

While a great deal of radicalisation literature and theories focus on either one (or two) of the societal levels, some models do combine factors on the three societal levels in their study. The recently introduced “trigger factor model” of Feddes et al. (2015) investigates radicalisation by focusing on trigger factors on the three societal levels that may influence processes of radicalisation during different phases of the process. On the micro-level possible trigger factors – concrete incidents or problems which may trigger radical action – might exist



of problems or incidents at school or at home. On the meso-level, friendships or confrontation with propaganda can form possible trigger factors in radicalisation processes. On the macro-level, perceived attacks on individuals and the groups they identify themselves with or certain government policies might also form important trigger factors that can lead youngsters towards radicalisation. Other process models such as the above mentioned staircase model of Moghaddam (2005) also includes elements on the three societal levels. It is important to note that factors on the micro-, meso- and/or macro-level in radicalisation processes interact with, and influence, each other. The above mentioned relative deprivation theory was already considered an important element in the study on why people turn to (collective) violence by Gurr in 1970. In his search as to “why men rebel”, Gurr found that individual-level attitudes towards one’s social surroundings and material conditions creates dissatisfaction which may lead to violence. Hereby, the author takes into account the interplay and interactions between the three different societal levels (Gurr, 2015).

#### *More nuanced academic debate*

In sum, whereas debates in the dominant narratives in political and public discourse on processes of radicalisation and causes of terrorism are narrow minded and reductionist, academic literature seems to provide a more nuanced view on the concept. As previously discussed, the dominant narratives in political and public discourse are almost exclusively linked to the individual and Islam ideology. While there is no clarity or consensus on the causes of radicalisation and terrorism in scientific literature, the academic debate seems to be more broad and less restricted and simplified compared to the prevailing popular public perceptions on the concept. Academic literature pays a great deal of attention on micro- and meso-level factors as well, however, the relevance of macro-level elements and the interplay between the different levels is also taken into account in some of the literature and models on radicalisation/terrorism.

#### *3.1. Impact of the dominant narratives in public discourse on academic literature*

Despite the fact that part of academic radicalisation literature does take into account some contextual aspects and that process models are increasingly taken the macro-level into consideration, several scholars claim that, similar to the dominant narratives in political and public discourse, there is a lack of a contextual perspective in a large part of academic literature and research on radicalisation as

well (Crone, 2016; Della Porta, 2012; Kundnani, 2012; Schmid, 2013; Sedgwick, 2010). Much of the academic literature has been studying individuals and their radicalisation process in isolation from broader structural social and political contexts (Crone, 2016; Della Porta, 2012; Kundnani, 2012; Sedgwick, 2010). Even though some process models do have attention for macro-level contextual mechanisms and do consider the interplay between elements on the three different societal levels (e.g., the trigger factor model), many scholars feel that the relevance of structural and contextual mechanisms has not been sufficiently taken into consideration in the academic debate. Notwithstanding the fact that factors on the micro- and meso-level of the individual and the role of ideology are significant in radicalisation processes and that some models and theories have led to better understandings of the socialisation process leading to extremism and possibly terrorism (Coolsaet, 2016), neglecting or de-emphasizing the macro-level structural contexts in which these processes take place, leads to incomplete, fragmented and narrow understandings of the phenomenon (Sedgwick, 2010).

The popular perceptions and dominant narratives on radicalisation in political and public discourse, have had some implications for academics studying the field. Radicalisation has become an ambiguous term which makes it difficult to operationalise as a research topic. Due to the popular perception that has been attributed to the term, with emphasis on the individual, terrorist violence and Islam, it is more challenging for academics to objectively and scientifically study the phenomenon of radicalisation. This increases the risk of them contributing to the social construction of risk and radicalisation (Githens-Mazer, 2012). Because of the lack of conceptual clarity on radicalisation, in addition to obstacles such as data availability, there exists little empirical grounded research on radicalisation. These issues have been standing in the way of reaching cumulative and comparable research results on which valuable policy recommendations can be drawn (Schmid, 2013).

The decontextualisation of radicalisation that is found in a significant part of the literature, is remarkable since the importance of the context and the environment in which terrorism thrives has been claimed to be fundamental in terrorism studies since the early 1970's. It was advocated that a comprehensive explanation on the causes of terrorism must take into account the conducive environments that facilitate its occurrence (Crenshaw, 1981). Over the last decade, academia in terrorism studies have increasingly been challenging the radicalisation models on which many counterterrorism policies have been built. Many scholars find them too reductionist and over emphasizing the key role of

ideology. After 9/11, the previous long standing focus on the context, root causes and preconditions of terrorism has disappeared (Sedgwick, 2010). Since then, a lot of focus has been put on *how* individuals undergo an ideology driven process of radicalisation leading to violent (terrorist) acts rather than on *why* terrorism occurs in the first place and the conducive contexts that facilitate its occurrence (Coolsaet, 2015; Sedgwick, 2010).

#### **4. The relevance of including a contextual perspective on the concept of radicalisation: insights from Institutional Anomie Theory**

In addressing the lack of a contextual perspective in the dominant narratives on radicalisation in political and public discourse, as well as the disregard for the role of context in a significant part of the academic literature and studies on radicalisation, Institutional Anomie Theory (Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994) can provide interesting insights. Institutional Anomie Theory (IAT) originates from the discipline of Criminology and was originally used in research on the role of societal institutions to explain crime rates in the United States of America. The concept of “institutional anomie” captures the importance of macro-level structural and institutional contexts regarding individuals’ thinking patterns and (deviant) social behaviour and can therefore be of great value to understand radicalisation processes. An important part of individuals’ (cultural and socio-political) environment and context are the institutions of their society. The institutions that constitute a social system, and to which we refer in this paper, are educational institutions such as schools, security institutions such as the police, juridical institutions such as courts, political institutions such as governments, etc. These institutions are crucial in the organisation of a society as they impose social norms, educate members of society, ensure security, defend democratic rights, etc. In a social system, institutions are founded on, and make part of, a value system that is shared and common to the members of that society (Messner et al., 2008).

Institutional Anomie Theory focuses on culture and social structure manifested in social institutions and offers a macro-level perspective on the social determinants of crime. IAT approaches institutions from the subjective view of individuals and how they perceive or experience the functioning of institutions. Therefore, the institutional macro-level dynamics that play a role

in the breeding ground for criminal behaviour are also closely intertwined with micro-level individual processes. IAT can be seen as a theory that studies macro-level structural contexts, notably the role of social institutions, and the ways they explain micro-level individual behaviour (Messner et al., 2008).

The idea of institutional anomie builds further upon Merton's Anomie Theory (1938), which claims that anomie is caused by discrepancies between culturally defined goals on the one hand, and the legitimate opportunities individuals have at hand to achieve those goals on the other. IAT claims that societal institutions – the core of the structural socio-political and cultural context of individuals – are crucial to guide individual behaviour. When societal institutions' ability to control behaviour diminishes, this may lead to a higher degree of anomie and, possibly, to a higher crime rate. When individuals encounter strains built into the organisation of society that derive from culturally defined goals and unequal access to legitimate means to achieve those goals successfully a cultural imbalance called "anomie" is created. The higher the degree of anomie in a society or culture, the weaker the internal control. This increases the likelihood that individuals will pursue their goals and strive success in other ways "by any means necessary", including criminal means (Mesner et al., 2008).

#### *4.1. The interplay between micro-, meso- and macro-level mechanisms and the role of ideology in radicalisation processes from the perspective of IAT*

Applying IAT on the study of radicalisation provides interesting insights on the interplay between micro-, meso- and macro-level mechanisms in radicalisation processes and allows us to understand these complex interactions in the background of the institutional context in which they take place. IAT emphasises the importance of societal institutions in this process and allows us to discuss and reflect on the role of ideology in these processes from a different perspective.

#### *Institutional anomie in current globalised society*

Since the nineteenth century, democratic institutions such as the juridical, educational, political and civil society systems have been essential to generate feelings of commonality, interdependence and belonging among socio-economically, ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse individuals. In the current postmodern age, old certainties have been lost about identity, family values, and the boundaries of one's community (Baumann 2000). In this context, as people might feel more lost and have a harder time identifying themselves, new "we's" centered around religion and nationality are gaining momentum.

At the same time, processes of globalisation and Europeanisation have failed many of their supposed beneficiaries, leaving behind feelings of disappointment and betrayal as well as deepening social inequalities (Stiglitz, 2002). In such an environment, feelings of alienation, exclusion and disconnectedness can grow. As a consequence, individuals and groups are in a constant search for meaning, support and information as they are seeking to construct a positive self-image and valuable social position for themselves and the social group(s) with which they affiliate.

These issues are more pronounced particularly in urban centres where fundamental socio-demographic transformations are taking place due to increasing ethnic, cultural and religious diversification, a process that goes hand in hand with rising socio-economic inequalities following the global economic crisis. This process gains more momentum given the emergence of a specific youth bulge in many European urban areas, similar to the youth bulge found in many Maghreb and African countries (Urdal, 2006). Half of humanity worldwide live in cities. Organisations such as the United Nations have been warning us for many years for the increasing wealth gap – particularly in urban cities – that is creating a social and political time bomb. High levels of inequality can lead to severe negative social and political consequences that have a destabilizing effect on societies (United Nations, 2008).

In urban areas, a high proportion of young people, particularly those with an immigrant background, are concentrated. This group of young people often experiences strong inequalities and limited opportunities (Heath et al., 2008), which results in rising social pressures (Lia, 2005) and inter-generational tensions (Ganor, 2011). This can in turn be fueled by feelings of stigmatisation and experiences of discrimination. This is certainly also the case in Belgium. The social and structural inequalities between specific ethnic minority groups and the dominant native Flemish group have remained rather stable over decades (Danhier et al., 2014). Many immigrant youngsters perceive their social context as offering them fewer opportunities compared to their native peers (Clycq et al., 2014). International comparative research shows that polarisation and negative stigmatisation are widespread in Flanders (Special Eurobarometer 393, 2012). Within this precarious social context, the emerging youth bulge will probably increase this social pressure even more in the coming decades. Nevertheless, while marginalisation and inequalities are key to the analysis of radicalisation processes, it is important to keep in mind that not only marginalised individuals turn towards radical ideologies. Indoctrination of a small but significant minority

of persons dissatisfied with the sociopolitical context in which they live can generate a sub-culture of violence (Alonso et al., 2008).

Institutions at international, EU, national, regional and local levels are constructed to support and guide individuals in their quest for recognition and appreciation of their status and position in society and are crucial to provide social cohesion in societies. However, when (large groups of) individuals are dissatisfied with the sociopolitical context in which they live and experience societal institutions as failing to address their needs, goals and perceived inequalities or injustices, a feeling of “institutional anomie” can arise: individuals’ attachment to mainstream society’s core institutions can fade and make them vulnerable to turn to other networks or counter-spheres in their search for meaning, belonging and fulfillment.

*The role of ideology: exploiting the institutional gap*

The theory of Institutional Anomie allows us to attribute a different role for ideologies in radicalisation processes. As a result of institutional anomie, anti-social ideologies and/or networks might arise alongside weak pro-social institutions. Although focus is being put on jihadi radicalisation in political and public discourse, terrorism and radicalisation have been fueled by an array of different ideologies in the past (Alonso et al., 2008). Institutional Anomie Theory allows us to identify some similarities in attempting to explain how any ideology can benefit from the occurrence of institutional anomie in societies.

The task of forming an identity to become contributing members of society has become more difficult in current highly globalised societies (Jensen, 2011). When individuals in addition feel neglected and disconnected from society, they will seek to find answers and recognition of their frustrations and demands elsewhere. When individuals feel excluded and alienated from society’s core institutions, an institutional “gap” or “void” is formed. This gap can be exploited by movements or networks propagating radical ideas and/or violence (Boukhars, 2009). These ideologies and networks develop and disseminate alternative narratives and counter public spheres that thrive in such a context and offer the idea of a potential utopian society for particular groups of individuals. As these counter public spheres can operate online and cross-states, they can also attract individuals that may be or feel geographically as well as socially isolated. Crone (2016) claims that the attractiveness of extremist ideologies lays in the fact that they offer a position to recognise and give power to those who are otherwise excluded from influence. Extremist ideologies, whether it is jihadism or right-

winged extremism, offer the possibility to take action in building a new utopian state and to participate in a new society.

Jihadism, based on an exclusive, violent interpretation of the Islamic, promotes violence as a way to achieve the creation of a new caliphate to form a common bond. It meets the demand of some groups of individuals as it provides them with a clear identity, purpose and self-worth. The radical ideas of this movement serve as a powerful motivational factor that justifies criminal actions. These actions are put forward as necessary and inevitable responses to the negative contextual perceptions and feelings of believers and their community (Alonso et al., 2008). For young people that experience feelings of anomie, strong inequalities, limited opportunities and frustrations, the Islamic State seems to offer a plausible alternative by presenting youngsters a desirable and attainable utopian society (Neumann, 2015). Jihadism has become the religion of resistance, offering a religion-based Utopia within reach – not altogether that different from what Marxism once offered to the oppressed (Holmes, 2005).

Similar processes can be found among right-wing and far-right groups, such as The English Defence League, Het Vlaams Belang, Lega Nord, the PVV, Jobbik, Front National (FN), Alternative für Deutschland (AFD) or UK Independence Party (UKIP) and movements such as PEGIDA that, like their Islamist counterparts – seem to offer the hope of a strong mono-ethnic and mono-cultural utopia. While it is important to recognise potential feedback loops between jihadism and extreme-right radicalisation, we have to bear in mind that extreme-right radicalisation has many roots and cannot be considered a mere reaction to the rise of jihadism.

The institutional gap cannot only be exploited by radical extreme-right or jihadist movements or ideologies, but also by criminal gangs, drug networks or arms trafficking networks. Terrorism is increasingly getting intertwined with organised crime. Many of the perpetrators behind the recent attacks in Europe had a prior experience with violence (Crone, 2016). Institutional Anomie Theory teaches us that when individuals experience anomie, they will lean towards illegitimate – potentially criminal – means in search for recognition and to achieve goals and success in society. From this perspective, it is not the ideology that causes extremist violence, but the failing role of societal institutions creating an institutional gap that can be exploited by radical or criminal networks propagating violence. Crone (2016) states it as follows: “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 radicaliser 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” (592).

From the perspective of Institutional Anomie Theory, taking into account the importance of the institutional context, the role of ideologies in processes of radicalisation thus acquires a new interpretation and gets a different content than the one that is attributed to the concept in current dominant narratives.

#### *4.2. The impact of the dominant narratives on radicalisation on experiences of institutional anomie in society*

The dominant narratives and popular perceptions on radicalisation, discussed in the beginning of this paper, are being used, spread or operationalised by a great deal of societal institutions. As discussed before, throughout Europe, public discourse on homegrown terrorism is mainly focused on the dangers of Islamic religion and has become more culturalist. Muslims and the religion of Islam are increasingly seen as a threat to Western liberal democracy due to the securitisation of Islam that was initiated after 9/11. As a response to rising concerns, counter-radicalisation strategies are focusing on individual processes and are mainly coloured by religious ideology rather than pragmatism (Boukhars, 2009). Some of these strategies have received substantial criticism, as they constrain young Muslims and lead to opposite effects of what is intended (Irwin, 2015). These strategies often neglect broader social problems, such as racism, negate Muslims’ social and political agency, students’ sense of freedom, activism and expression of identity and have resulted in more marginalisation and polarisation (Brown & Saeed, 2015; Coppock & McGovern, 2014; Kundnani, 2015). Doyle (2013) argues that anti-Islam political discourse has been gaining momentum around Europe. The need to protect liberal values and the European identity is emphasised and seen as a main priority by many. The author claims that centre right parties are instrumentalizing hostility towards Islam to respond to the political crisis in the European Union. Therefore, she argues: “at heart, Islamophobia constitutes a manifestation of the European states’ crisis of democratic legitimacy (265).”

From the perspective of Institutional Anomie Theory, the dominant narratives and understandings of radicalisation – used and spread by societal institutions – may reinforce experiences of institutional anomie since many scholars claim that they nourish alienation from society, polarisation, feelings of discrimination,



injustice and stigmatisation (Boukhars, 2009; Brown & Saeed, 2015; Coppock & McGovern, 2014; Doyle, 2013; Kundnani, 2015). According to Institutional Anomie Theory, it is exactly those perceptions and feelings that construct the breeding ground for deviant social behaviour or violence. When institutions do not function as a cohesive factor in society but rather reproduce stigmatisation and existing inequalities, they will lose their legitimacy among certain individuals and subgroups in society. The failure of institutions to address these problems and thus to provide protection against institutional anomie can result in growing alienation and distrust towards societal institutions. Individuals (and groups) feel excluded and no longer believe that they can become successful according to the dominant narratives of success in mainstream society and seek recognition and success elsewhere. Ideologies can exploit this institutional gap by providing utopian solutions for the concerns of these individuals and giving them a sense of self-worth and identity.

From this point of view, the lack of a contextual perspective in the dominant narratives on radicalisation does not only lead to incomplete, fragmented and narrow understandings of the phenomenon. In addition, the counter terrorism strategies and deradicalisation programmes that are based on the dominant understandings of the concept might prove to be contra productive since they can lead to (more) institutional anomie in society, widen the institutional gap and consequently strengthen the breeding ground for processes of radicalisation.

## **5. Conclusion: towards a more comprehensive narrative on radicalisation by including the relevance of the context**

The way we understand and approach radicalisation today is not an objective notion of the term. Since 9/11, dominant understandings on the concept of radicalisation have been constructed. In an attempt to understand why Western countries have become targets for terrorist attacks in the past decade and a half, a set of ideas, assumptions and emotional presumptions have been attributed to the concept of radicalisation. Policy makers and analysts have mainly been trying to capture how individuals turn from “normal” into “radical”. In dominant public discourse, it is generally accepted that Islam ideology plays a key role in radicalisation and that individuals go through a process of embracing extremist ideas leading to acts of violence. Based on these understandings, counterterrorism policies and preventative strategies focus on eliminating the “evil” influence of

extremist Islam. Focus has been put on *how* these processes develop rather than on *why* terrorism and processes of radicalisation thrive in our societies. Attention for the contexts that enable the occurrence of terrorism and/or radicalisation has largely been absent in dominant discourse and narratives on the concept.

Although the context is taken into account in part of radicalisation literature and theoretical process models on terrorism, the dominant narratives in political and public discourse have to some extent trickled down into the academic debate. In recent literature, many scholars argue that a great deal of studies on radicalisation have largely been focusing on the individual (micro-level), group dynamics and influences of radical intermediaries (meso-level) and the key role of ideology, while significantly de-emphasizing the wider circumstances and contexts (macro-level) in which processes of radicalisation occur.

Through literature study, we have thus identified a gap or void in current dominant understandings on the concept of radicalisation in public discourse and to a lesser extent in academic literature, namely the lack of a contextual perspective on radicalisation. The decontextualisation of radicalisation is discussed and reviewed through Institutional Anomie Theory (IAT), a theory that originates from the discipline of Criminology and was originally used to study the role of societal institutions to explain high crime rates in the United States of America. From the perspective of this theory, the decontextualisation of radicalisation is problematic. In dominant narratives, the relevance of the conducive contexts in which radicalisation processes and terrorism thrive is neglected. However, macro-level contexts are fundamental in understanding individuals' thinking patterns and (deviant) social behaviour. Notably, the role of societal institutions – the core of individuals' environment and context – can play a crucial role in radicalisation processes. An important part of individuals' (cultural and socio-political) environment and context are the social institutions of their society that preserve and impose social norms, offer education, ensure security, defend democratic rights, etc. (e.g., schools, security services, courts, political institutions, etc.). These institutions are fundamental to create and maintain social cohesion in societies.

Especially in today's highly globalised society where people are facing a migration crisis, the aftermath of an economic crisis, inequalities and growing polarisation, it is crucial for institutions to give a sense of identity to the members of its society and to make them feel included. When (groups) of individuals are dissatisfied and/or frustrated with the sociopolitical context in which they live and feel that societal institutions are not addressing their needs and/or perceived

inequalities or injustices, feelings of institutional anomie can arise. Individuals' attachment to mainstream society's core institutions can fade and make them feel disconnected from society and vulnerable to influences from other (radical) networks and counter-spheres.

This institutional gap can be exploited by ideologies. When individuals feel they cannot become successful according to universal culturally goals and institutions do not provide them with equal access to legitimate means to achieve those goals, they will seek their success and a sense of identity and self-worth elsewhere. This is where radical ideologies can thrive. By offering a utopian and attractive counter narrative – be it the construction of an Islamic caliphate or a mono-ethnic non-Muslim culture in Europe – ideologies fulfill a gap or void and exploit individuals' frustrations and experiences of institutional anomie. Radical networks address precisely those needs and demands that are neglected by society's institutions.

The socio-political context and the role institutions carry out in this context are thus crucial to comprehensively understand why some individuals turn away from their society and find salvation and recognition in radical ideas and/or networks. Reviewing the institutional context and the role of societal institutions in processes of radicalisation provides us with other insights on the complex interplay between micro-, meso- and macro-level mechanisms in radicalisation processes. From this perspective, we believe it is crucial to not only focus on the individual and religious process that individuals go through but also to examine how states and societies, in particular societal institutions, play a role in this process.

In addition, the dominant narratives on radicalisation in political and public discourse are even more problematic as they do not only lead to narrow and fragmented understandings, but might even reinforce institutional anomie in society and thus strengthen the breeding ground for radicalisation. Since the dominant narratives focus on the ideology of Islam and how this religion poses a threat to Western values, the alienation and disconnectedness that minorities might experience in our societies can be strengthened. As a result, these narratives, as well as the counter terrorism strategies and deradicalisation programmes based on the dominant narratives, might make individuals even more vulnerable and receptive to radical ideas.

We conclude by arguing that the subjective and emotional loaded set of ideas and assumptions that are imbedded in the dominant narratives and understandings on the concept of radicalisation in political and public discourse are problematic

as they: a) lead to incomplete narrow understandings, b) lead to stigmatisation of Muslims and polarisation in society, c) can reinforce institutional anomie in society and therefore d) contribute to and strengthen the breeding ground for radicalisation processes. The question that policy makers and analysts should ask themselves might therefore not be how to eliminate the threat of extremist Islam in Europe, but how to narrow the gap between societal institutions and individuals in order to prevent youngsters from becoming receptive to radical ideas or networks propagating violence and to strengthen their resilience against processes of radicalisation.

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