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STUDYING VIOLENT RADICALIZATION IN EUROPE I
THE POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION
OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY

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I. Introduction

Why do some apparently well-integrated youth in Europe become attracted to Islamist militancy? Why and when do people cross from violent talk to violent action? What prevents others, exposed to the same political, ideological, and socioeconomic influences, from crossing? When and how might people de-radicalize and draw back from violent action? What policy initiatives would be called for to limit the spread of radical ideas, counter the factors that spur violent radicalization, and strengthen those, which pull in the other direction? In sum: When, why, and how do people living in a democracy become radicalized to the point of being willing to use or directly support the use of terrorist violence against civilians, and what can be done about it?

These questions have been at the center of both academic and public debate over the past years. Yet, there is still a scarcity of empirically based knowledge and no consensus with regard to which theories and approaches to apply to the study of violent radicalization and mobilization.

This working paper explores the potential contribution of Social Movement Theory to throw light on the question of violent radicalization in Europe.

The paper first provides an overview of the main schools and major scholars, who have applied Social Movement Theory to terrorism studies. It identifies three main schools: Strain Theory, Resource Mobilization Theory, and Framing Theory and discusses their respective strengths and weaknesses. Finally, it points to the most promising avenue for further research into violent radicalization in Europe – Framing Theory – and to the specific issues and questions highlighted by this approach.

2. Major Schools and Scholars¹

What causes do radical groups mobilize around and when do these causes resonate with the potential recruits? What are the feed-back mechanisms from the surrounding society (counter-measures of the authorities, media coverage) on the radicalization process within these groups? Social Movement Theory (SMT) offers a way of studying these factors and has been applied in a number of historical studies of leftist and nationalist terrorism. SMT offers a way of conceiving violent radicalization with an explicit focus on the broader dynamics and processes of political mobilization. Whereas for example socio-psychological group process approaches focus on the individual and on group dynamics within small groups, SMT instead looks at larger groups and the relationship between the individual, the group, and the broader society. Whereas the socio-psychological approaches point to psychological needs and rewards as key factors in radicalization, SMT instead conceive of social movements and their violent subgroups as rational actors, driven by a political agenda and a set of political goals. The ambition is to link structural factors, group processes, and individual motivation in an integrated analytical framework, also comprising potential feed-back loops from the surrounding society to a social movement, its behavior, its appeal or lack of appeal [Porta, 1992:31; Wiktorowicz, 2004:3].

A social movement organization is generally conceived as self-conscious group acting in concert to challenge the existing social order by confronting existing authorities. Social networks, according to SMT, are the key vehicle for transmission of grievances, for recruitment, and for mobilization [Porta, 1992:12-14]. Terrorists thus, according to this

¹ We have based our choice of which scholars to include in this review on a combination of criteria looking at the relevance, scientific quality, and originality of their work. We have emphasized theoretical and methodological coherence and clarity, looking in particular for studies and scholars, able to integrate more different levels of analysis and/or bringing a new and original angle to the study of radicalization. Given the scarcity of good primary data-based studies of terrorist motivations, we have favored studies based on primary data, like participant observation or interviews. We have done this with a view to gleaning insights about radicalization, but also practical and methodological insights with regard to the generation of primary data. When selecting studies and scholars we have supplemented our own reading of the field with a screening of all issues of the two major peer-reviewed journals within terrorism studies “Terrorism and Political Violence” and “Studies in Conflict & Terrorism” from 2001 to 2007 to make sure that we had not missed important contributors and/or studies in our own review of the field.

perspective, should be understood and studied as small minorities within larger counter-cultures and radicalization should be seen as a result of social relations rather than structural background factors or innate individual characteristics [Porta, 1992:12-14]. A number of different approaches exist within SMT. For the sake of overview they are categorized below into Strain Theory, Resource Mobilization Theory, and Framing Theory.

STRAIN THEORY

Early approaches to the study of social movements, dating back to the 1950s, conceived of political mobilization as a response to grievances. The focus was typically on external strains on society, eroding the efficacy of existing institutions, and leading to political instability and mass mobilization. Mass society, one argument went, leads to a psychological sense of isolation and impotence in the face of broad societal changes. Joining a social movement provides an outlet and alleviates the experienced psychological strain. These notions were underpinned by early research in various North African countries, pointing to how individuals with a high education, and recently immigrated to larger cities experienced the frustration of blocked social mobility and therefore became open to the Islamist militant's message [Wiktorowicz, 2004:7]. A related argument – an argument frequently used by the militants themselves - points to a presumed Western political, economic, and cultural imperialism vis a vis the rest of the world. Foreign economic, political, and military pressure combined with repressive indigenous regimes, the argument goes, create strains in society and lead to the emergence of social protest movements. Religious movements frequently become the vehicle for such protest when opposition political parties are banned as in a number of Middle Eastern countries.

Critics of Strain theory have pointed out that strain does not always engender social movements. It might thus be a necessary, but clearly not a sufficient causal factor. Moreover, critics argue, Strain Theory tends to ignore the purposive political and organized aspects of social movements – social movements, they claim, are not just psychological coping mechanism, but instead should be conceived as rational and purposive collective actors in their own right [Wiktorowicz, 2004:9].

RESOURCES MOBILIZATION THEORY

Resource Mobilization Theory, by focusing on how intermediate variables translate strain and discontent into political action, has sought to address the criticism directed at Strain Theory. Resource Mobilization Theory concentrates on how movements actively engage in garnering support and enlarging their constituency and how social networks and meso-level

organizations such as churches, schools, and charities serve to define and disseminate grievances.

In a study of IRA supporters in the Republic of Ireland, Robert White has shown how mobilization is engineered and/or facilitated by networks, not by grievances in themselves - only about half the interviewees, according to their own statements, had been aware of the grievances faced by Catholics in Northern Ireland prior to joining groups or networks supportive of the IRA's cause. His study, which compared IRA supporters with people involved in constitutional politics in Ireland, also points out that what distinguished the two groups was not their sense of grievance ("Ireland should not be divided!"), or the strength of their identification with Catholics in Northern Ireland. Instead, the two groups were set apart by their belief or lack of belief in the efficacy of IRA politics and their evaluation of the gravity of the negative consequences of IRA violence [White, 1992:82, 97].

These conclusions provide clues as to where to look for potential differences in the belief systems of radicalized and violently radicalized individuals in Europe.

They also point towards the key tenets of a variation of the Resource Mobilization Theory – Constraint Approaches – which have focused on how social movements actively and rationally seek to exploit openings or closures in the political space in which they operate and, based on assumptions about their target audiences seek to calculate the avenues for action with the greatest chance of success [Wiktorowicz, publication year unknown: 5].

Despite Resource Mobilization Theory's qualification and elaboration of the key tenets of Strain Theory, critics point out, it still represents an excessively mechanistic view on mobilization and recruitment. The emergence and endurance of a social movement has to do not only with the availability of resources and political opportunities, critics claim. A key to successful mobilization and movement maintenance is the extent to which movements manage to explain and promote their cause in terms, which resonates with their potential constituency. To understand these processes it is necessary, according to the critics, to place more emphasis on the socio-psychological issue of *interpretation* of grievances. Resource Mobilization Theory (and Strain Theory) it is purported, overlooks the substantial variability in the subjective meanings people attach to their individual situations, and one cannot understand participation without paying attention to the ongoing and relational interpretation of grievances and production of legitimizations and rationales for active engagement in the movement. Even if Resource Mobilization Theory's focus on social networks as vehicles for recruitment explains some of the processes and the structure of a movement's growth, it is

argued, it cannot account for the interpersonal processes which occur once recruiters and constituents engage with potential recruits [Snow, 1986:466].

FRAMING THEORY

Framing Theory focuses exactly on the social production and dissemination of meaning and on how individuals come to conceptualize themselves as a collectivity. The key tenet of Framing Theory is that events rarely speak for themselves. Varying levels of information, the presence of individual bias, attempts at deception, and/or the existence of more competing “authoritative” interpretations of a situation or event entail that multiple competing versions of the social “reality” are likely to exist. The concept of “frame” relies on the work of sociologist Erving Goffman and refers to an individual’s worldview or “schemata of interpretation,” consisting of values (notions about right and wrong) and beliefs (assumptions about the world, attributes of things, and mechanisms of causation). This schema helps an individual make sense of and organize his or her experience, and guide his or her action [Snow, 1986:464]. “Framing” refers to the active construction and dissemination of meaning and the success of a social movement with regard to mobilizing resources and gaining adherents, according to Framing Theory, depends to a large extent on the ability of the movement elite to create and disseminate frames, which attract adherents [Crenshaw, 1992:31; Porta, 1992:31]. Movements diagnose problems and attribute responsibility, offer solutions, strategies, and tactics (prognostic framing), and provide motivational frames to convince potential participants to become active. Key to mobilization, according to this perspective, is whether the movement’s version of the “reality” resonates or can be brought to resonate with the movement’s potential constituency. Some scholars have referred to this process as “frame alignment” – the emergence of congruence between an individual’s and an organization’s interests, values, and beliefs. In some instances a movement or other mobilizing agents need simply reach out to a “sentiment pool” already sharing the grievance and attributional tendency of the movement, but lacking a means for organizing and expressing these grievances. In other instances mobilization requires that the movement entrepreneurs are able to manipulate the values and or beliefs of potential constituents to a smaller or larger extent [Snow, 1986:464]. Overall, factors such as the degree of compatibility between the movement’s message and the broader cultural context, the risk and costs associated with involvement in the movement, the extent to which the message is internally coherent and convincing, the existence or absence of competing “frames” and movements, as well as the reputation and status of those who articulate the message are of importance [Porta, 1992:15-16].

How do “normal“ activists evolve into terrorists? Framing Theory would emphasize how social and intersubjective processes create the motivation. In other words, Framing Theory would seek to explain violent radicalization and terrorism through the distinct constructed reality, shared by members of violent groups – a constructed reality or world view, which frames problems as not just misfortunes, but injustices, attributes responsibility for these “injustices,” and constructs an argument for the efficacy and/or moral justification of using violence against civilians to right the perceived wrong.

In contrast to various psychological approaches², Framing Theory focuses on the individual’s relational position rather than innate characteristics. Moreover, in contrast to Strain Theory, discussed above, Framing Theory takes a dynamic view on radicalization: The intersubjective and communicative process of framing a situation/issue/problem rather than the situation/issue/problem in itself is the key to understanding radicalization [Porta, 1992:17; Crenshaw, 1992:31].

Framing Theory has been applied by Quintan Wiktorowicz in a case study of the UK branch of the transnational Islamist movement Al-Muhajiroun – a movement, which supports the use of violence against Western interests in Muslim countries. Based on participant observation and interviews with leaders and randomly approached regular members, Wiktorowicz suggests that activists emerge through the following steps: 1. A personal crisis, experienced discrimination or repression, or chance encounters with charismatic movement recruiters create a “cognitive opening” by which an individual becomes open to new ideas. 2. A search for new ideas, channeled by religiosity. 3. A “frame alignment” between the individual’s interpretive schemata and the movement’s message – an alignment in which the movement’s message increasingly “rings true” to the seeker. Wiktorowicz points out how existing members do not immediately present potential joiners with the more proscriptive and violent parts of the movement’s message, but instead focus on common and widely shared concerns, for example, with the plight of Muslims in conflict zones around the world. 4. Finally, when the joiner has come to accept the key tenets of the movement’s message, more intensive socialization takes place in closed study groups and through face-to-face interaction. At this point emotive appeals are underpinned by ideological teachings, prompting the joiner to reach the conclusion, that the movement does not only represent the truth, but that he or she has a personal obligation and responsibility to join and become active. Group bonding and peer

² See Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Studying Violent radicalization in Europe. The Potential Contribution of Socio-psychological and Psychological Approaches”, DIIS Working Paper, 2008.

pressure reinforces the emerging commitment of the joiner [Wiktorowicz, publication year unknown: 23].

Though Wiktorowicz’s small and non-random sample does not permit a generalization of the conclusions of his study, the study represents one of the few interview based attempts at exploring processes of radicalization in Europe.

Table 1 below provides an overview over and comparison of the different strands within Social Movement Theory

	Unit of analysis	Background factors/Explanatory mechanism	Key scholars	Caveat
Strain Theory	Social movements	Mobilization in response to grievances.	Della Porta. Gurr. McAdam et. al. Tarrow. Tilly.	Grievance might be necessary, but not sufficient explanation.
Resource Mobilization Theory	Social movements. Meso-level organizations: Schools, mosques, charities. Micro-level mobilization: Everyday social circles.	Mobilization in response to grievances through social networks. Groups as purposive and political actors. Movement entrepreneurs	Della Porta. Gurr. McAdam et. al. Tarrow. Tilly. White.	Based on European leftist movements. Dynamics likely different for high-risk participation in Islamist militant groups.
Framing Theory	Individual, group, society interaction. Stages.	Social construction of reality. Framing of issues/problems. Resonance. Frame alignment.	Crenshaw. Della Porta. Snow et.al. Wiktorowicz.	Limited empirical evidence. Non-random samples. What if no active recruitment takes place? Movement cannot be conceived as an “actor.”

3. Framing Theory – A Promising Avenue for Further Research?

How do we explain the phenomenon of Islamist militancy and violent radicalization in Europe?

Framing Theory highlights the process of radicalization rather than specific socioeconomic background factors or innate personal characteristics. It is thus able to account for the wide variety in the actual socioeconomic profiles (including well-educated and apparently well-integrated individuals) and life paths of individuals involved with Islamist militancy in Europe. The observable trend towards bottom-up emergence of small peer groups and still faster radicalization might be explained within Framing Theory by the existence of easily tapped and mobilized “sentiment pools” already sharing the grievances and attributional tendencies of Islamist militants.

Framing Theory provides a coherent theoretical framework for integrating both the structural, the meso-, and the individual level of analysis, as well as the potential feedback loops between them (for example, the impact of counter-terrorism measures and media coverage on Islamist militancy and violent radicalization in Europe). Such feedback loops are still an underexplored area in a European context.

All in all, Framing Theory appears like a promising approach to the study of violent radicalization in Europe.

A study guided by Framing Theory would focus on the following issues and questions:

- Social networks as vehicles for the dissemination of grievances, ideas, and ideologies.
- Movement entrepreneurs/recruiters and movement elites as active producers and promoters of a specific version of the social “reality.”
- The relationship between a broader social movement and a violent subgroup. Are social movements an alternative way of peacefully venting frustrations or rather a stepping stone towards violent radicalization?

- The impact of reinforcing, but also potentially countervailing social forces in the immediate social environment of the potential joiner (friends, family, educators, social workers) on frame alignment between the individual and the radical group or organization.
- Feed-back loops from the broader surrounding society – the impact of the reactions of authorities and media – on frame alignment.

On a number of questions, however, Framing Theory does not purport or is unlikely to provide satisfactory answers. “Why does a movement manage to obtain frame alignment with some individuals, but not with others?” “Why do some individuals defect at an early point while others remain committed to the radicalizing or violent group?”

Arguably, Social Movement Theory and Framing Theory have too little focus on the individual level of analysis to permit it to answer such questions. This would indicate the need to supplement studies informed by Social Movement Theory with psychologically or socio-psychologically informed studies.³

³ For a discussion of individual level approaches to terrorism studies see Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Studying Violent radicalization in Europe. The Potential Contribution of Socio-psychological and Psychological Approaches”, DIIS Working Paper, 2008.

4. Conclusion

When, why, and how do people living in a democracy become radicalized to the point of being willing to use or directly support the use of terrorist violence against civilians, and when, why, and how might they de-radicalize and draw back from such action? The empirical basis for understanding the background factors and trigger events pushing or pulling people towards Islamist militancy is very limited. Moreover, there is no consensus within the research community as to which theories and approaches offer the most promising avenues for further exploration.

This working paper has discussed various possible approaches within the subfield of Social Movement Theory and indicated some promising areas for further research. Together with the working paper “Studying Violent radicalization in Europe. The Potential Contribution of Socio-psychological and Psychological Approaches” it provides an overview over and discusses some of the different potential theoretical approaches to studying and understanding the phenomenon of violent radicalization in Europe.

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Research subjects are formulated in consultation with the Danish Council for Strategic Research as well as with representatives from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Justice. The actual research and the conclusions of the research are entirely independent, and do not necessarily correspond to the views of the ministries involved or any other government agency, nor do they constitute any official DIIS position.

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