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# ABANDONING 'RADICALISATION'

A Conceptual Analysis Into the  
Usefulness and Necessity of the  
Concept of 'Radicalisation'

EBBA SOPHIE VERDÚ





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# ABSTRACT

*It seems nearly impossible to discuss 'terrorism' today without the concept of 'radicalisation' making an appearance in the conversation. Despite its popularity, the concept has also been subject to a number of criticisms. This study asks the question of whether 'radicalisation' is useful and necessary for the study of 'terrorism.' The study engages in a conceptual analysis which demonstrates that the concept of 'radicalisation' is in fact not useful due to it being ill-defined, inherently relative and lacking an agreed upon end-point. It further determines that the concept is not necessary for the study of 'terrorism' by demonstrating how academics have previously been able to cover the same topics and questions as contemporary 'radicalisation' research without using the concept. Based on these findings, this study argues that the concept of 'radicalisation' should be abandoned.*



# CONTENTS

<b>PART I</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>7</b>
	1. BACKGROUND	7
	2. METHODOLOGY	10
	3. LITERATURE REVIEW	15
<b>PART II</b>	<b>CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS</b>	<b>24</b>
	4. DEFINING 'RADICALISATION'	24
	5. ANALYSIS OF EXISTING DEFINITIONS	29
	6. A RELATIVE CONCEPT	36
	7. "END-POINTS:" 'RADICALISATION' INTO WHAT?	39
<b>PART III</b>	<b>THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE</b>	<b>45</b>
	8. TRACING 'RADICALISATION'	46
	9. COMPARISON TO POST-2000	50
	10. DEVELOPING THE CONCEPT	51
	11. IF NOT 'RADICALISATION,' THEN WHAT?	53
<b>PART IV</b>	<b>CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION</b>	<b>57</b>
	NOTES	61
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	72





# PART ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1. BACKGROUND

It seems nearly impossible to discuss 'terrorism'<sup>1</sup> today without the concept of 'radicalisation'<sup>2</sup> making an appearance in the conversation.<sup>3</sup> Given the enduring obsession with the term, it becomes easy to forget that that this concept has not always been a defining feature of the terrorism field. There is general agreement that it did not appear in academia, policy-making circles and the media until about 2004.<sup>4</sup> The reason for its conception is largely understood as a response to the tense political climate following the September 11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers, NY. After 9/11 it became very difficult to talk about and explore the reasons and motivations behind terrorism without being branded sympathisers or supporters of the perpetrators.<sup>5</sup> With the development of 'radicalisation,' discussing the causes and motivations of terrorism became more palatable and acceptable. Furthermore, the 2004 Madrid train bombings and the 2005 London bombings brought

about the realisation for policy-makers that they could not bomb their way to victory. If they wanted to ultimately defeat terrorism, they had to dry up the supply of recruits scrambling to join the cause by targeting their hearts and minds.<sup>6</sup> The so-called 'home-grown' nature of the threat brought with it a new sense of urgency to the War on Terror and the focus on the threat shifted.<sup>7</sup> The lens was turned away from the terrorist acts in the criminal space to risk and prevention in the pre-criminal space. 'Radicalisation' quickly became the "holy grail" by which to determine pre-violent indicators.<sup>8</sup>

Governments poured money into this 'new' field of research, new centres and agencies were established with a specific focus on 'radicalisation' and academics from various disciplines flooded in to take part in the goldmine.<sup>9</sup> Much of the criticism of 'radicalisation' research is focused on this early period immediately after its conception arguing that the research produced lacked academic rigour and an empirical basis.<sup>10</sup> This was due to a combination of the money made available by governments which tempted a number of nascent researchers with a poor understanding of the phenomenon they were studying and the pressure exerted by governments to produce results in a short space of time.<sup>11</sup>

In the tangle of this rapidly changing environment, a sufficient development of the concept of 'radicalisation' itself was neglected and the focus was instead on producing research on which governments could structure and base new prevention policies.<sup>12</sup> This has led to a confusing collation of models, theories and identifiers all claiming to

represent what 'radicalisation' really is and how it happens. The models include Moghaddam's staircase,<sup>13</sup> Silber and Bhatt's conveyer belt<sup>14</sup> and McCauley and Moskalenko's pyramids,<sup>15</sup> each depicting 'radicalisation' in their own distinct ways. Theories that have been developed emphasise different factors relating to 'radicalisation' – Sageman's "bunches of guys"<sup>16</sup> highlights alienation, friendship and kinship bonds and group processes whilst Wiktorowicz<sup>17</sup> argues that "cognitive openings" are key to understanding the move towards terrorism. Some argue it is necessary to look at root causes<sup>18</sup> while others state that we should focus instead on routes<sup>19</sup> into 'terrorism.' Furthermore there is tension between academics who favour research on behavioural 'radicalisation' and those who argue that a focus on cognition is more important. There are now endless factors identified as affecting or causing radicalisation: alienation, social networks, a search for identity and belonging, relative deprivation, actual deprivation, lack of social and economic mobility, discrimination, a sense of adventure, sexual frustration, religion, ideology, rebellion and countercultural attitudes and a lack of role models to name but a few. About the only thing that academics agree on is that 'radicalisation' is a process,<sup>20</sup> but even that has been challenged.<sup>21</sup> It appears almost anything could be deemed 'radicalisation,' and if this is true, what kind of explanatory power does that leave the concept?

'Radicalisation's' popularity is misleading. Despite its frequent application and use as a guiding concept in research, it lacks explanatory power. It is an underdeveloped, ill-defined and confusing

concept and it is insufficient to guide research. The problems with the concept of 'radicalisation' have already been noted by various academics.<sup>22</sup> However, their tendency is simply to conclude that more research is needed and encourage 'radicalisation's' continued use, despite its fallacies. This stands in no logical relation to the criticisms they level at the concept.

This study aims to fill this gap in the research concerning the conceptual debate on 'radicalisation.' It is guided by two research questions: 1) Is the concept of 'radicalisation' useful for studying terrorism?; 2) Is the concept of 'radicalisation' necessary for studying terrorism?

The criticisms of the concept highlighted in this study are not new but need to be reiterated as they seem to have had little effect on the field at large. This study will argue that what follows logically from the conceptual analysis of 'radicalisation' is that the concept should be abandoned altogether.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

There are two hypotheses guiding this study. The first is that 'radicalisation' is an unhelpful concept for terrorism studies. The second and more controversial hypothesis is that the concept of 'radicalisation' is not needed. Together, if proven to be true, these form the basis of the argument that the concept should be abandoned.

In order to demonstrate 'radicalisation's' defectiveness as a concept, this study will use Sartori's principles of what makes a "bad concept:" a lack of definition, "conceptual stretching" and "degreeism." These three features are all present in the concept of 'radicalisation,' leaving it practically useless as a guide for research. Each text used in this study was read through and its efficacy in defining and explaining 'radicalisation' was judged according to Sartori's standards. It was examined whether the concept was clearly defined, discriminate and bounded or whether it suffered from an ambiguous definition, conceptual stretching and degreeism.

When forming a concept, there is a trade-off between having a concept that is discriminate and fine-grained but with narrow applicability versus a concept that is applicable to a wider variety of cases but is broad and general. The wider our lens, the broader the applicability needs to be in order to accommodate the variety of cases under observation.<sup>23</sup> Sartori calls this the concept's ability to "travel."<sup>24</sup> The range from narrow to broad concepts is termed the "ladder of abstraction" with narrow concepts placed at the bottom and broad concepts at the top.<sup>25</sup> Narrow concepts, while superior in their explanatory power, are more context-dependent and therefore limited in their ability to travel to other time-periods, countries or cultures.<sup>26</sup> There are two ways for a concept to climb the ladder of abstraction and become more applicable. The first is by broadening the *extension* of the concept – that is the class of *things* to which the concept applies – by reducing the *intension* of the concept; that is, the *properties* that

determine the things to which the concept applies.<sup>27</sup> To exemplify, the concept of 'bird' could be defined as animals with the properties of having feathers, the ability to lay eggs and fly. However, this definition excludes penguins, ostriches and chickens as they cannot fly. To extend the concept to include these three, one removes 'flying' as a necessary defining feature. This results in a more applicable concept, but it is also a concept with a reduced explanatory power as it becomes more general. The second way of climbing the ladder of abstraction is by broadening the extension without reducing the intension which in turn leads to obscuring the concept's connotation.<sup>28</sup> This is called 'conceptual stretching' and leads to not a general concept, but a "mere generality."<sup>29</sup> Broadening the meaning of a concept is, according to Sartori, the line of least resistance and is not conducive to research as it leads to "vagueness and conceptual obscurity."<sup>30</sup> The way 'radicalisation' has been extended is by obscuring the defining properties opting instead for a strategy of claiming "it could be A, but it could also be B or C." Sartori concludes that "[i]t appears we can cover more ... only by saying less, and by saying less in a far less precise manner."<sup>31</sup> This holds true for the concept of 'radicalisation' as well as it appears to have been stretched beyond utility.

"Degreeism" is unacceptable in relation to concepts as it does "...not advance us by a hair's breadth toward quantification" according to Sartori.<sup>32</sup> "Degreeism," simply put, is the persistent use of the phrase "it is a matter of degree" and the argument that everything is located on a never-ending continuum. To be clear, some things are in fact a matter of



degree, and the continuum image can be a useful illustration in research on 'radicalisation.' However, degreeism and the continuum image tend to be over-used. At some point, there must be a cut-off point in order for a concept to be conducive to research. Degreeism is closely linked to the ladder of abstraction and conceptual stretching. As a concept is stretched, its properties (which have not been reduced as the concept is extended) all become a 'matter of degree' obfuscating the concept's connotation and leaving it fuzzy. Claiming that everything is a matter of degree leaves us with indefinite conclusions and research that tells us little – if anything – about the subjects under observation.

While researching the concept of 'radicalisation' for this study, several questions emerged. Two in particular stood out: what did academics use before 'radicalisation' emerged as a concept? and; do we need 'radicalisation?' Despite the decades of existing research, these questions have largely been ignored by contemporary research on 'terrorism' and 'radicalisation.' These two questions formed the basis of the second hypothesis in this study. To answer them, the study focused on texts produced pre-2000 covering the questions of who becomes a terrorist, why they do and how without using the concept of 'radicalisation.' The reason the texts are pre-2000 and not pre-2005 is because some academics, albeit few in number, had started using the concept after the Madrid train bombings in 2004.<sup>33</sup> The 5-year period is therefore intended as a buffer-period. It should also be mentioned that since its conception, and even today, there are academics who prefer not to use the concept of 'radicalisation' despite the fact that their research

covers what would be considered 'radicalisation' by other academics in the field. This demonstrates the possibility of talking about 'radicalisation,' even today, without having to use a concept replete with conceptual faults. This research forms the basis of the argument that 'radicalisation' should be abandoned.

The limitations of this study must be acknowledged. Firstly, it is not the intention of this study to pass judgement on the validity of 'radicalisation' research and its findings – that is, it will not analyse the accurateness of theories or models and their relation to the empirical world. Rather, it is a conceptual analysis dealing with the concept of 'radicalisation' itself and its usefulness for research on 'terrorism.' Secondly, Sartori's work on concepts may appear overly taxonomical to some and therefore not able to contend with the highly complex reality of 'radicalisation.' Despite this, the study believes that Sartori's guidelines are appropriate as they highlight the same concerns as academics engaged in 'radicalisation' research themselves highlight.

This study is divided into three parts. The rest of this chapter is devoted to a brief literature review covering the main existing criticisms of the concept of 'radicalisation' and will demonstrate why they are insufficient and a part of the existing problem. Chapter Two deals with the conceptual problems surrounding 'radicalisation.' It will examine the disparity between definitions and their ambiguity, the inherent relative nature of the concept and its lack of an agreed end-point – the three most contentious and most commonly acknowledged problems with the concept of 'radicalisation.' It will also discuss the problems

associated with each of these points. In Chapter Three the study will engage in the intellectual history of both the concept and the term 'radicalisation,' tracing first the use of the term from the late 1980s to 2000 and its development into a concept post-2000. This is to demonstrate the difference in 'radicalisation's' usage pre-2000 compared to post-2000. It will then examine research produced prior to 2000 focused on the why's, who's and how's of 'terrorism' – questions typically associated with 'radicalisation' research – and demonstrate how these texts are able to cover the same questions without using the concept of 'radicalisation.' Finally, based on the findings that 'radicalisation' is neither useful nor necessary for the study of 'terrorism,' it will conclude that the concept should be abandoned.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Academia and research are driven by the pursuit of knowledge – a search to understand and explain the world around them. Language mediates this knowledge and is therefore the most important tool in an academic's toolbox. Not only does language facilitate the expression of thought, but it also affects the way one thinks. Language names real-world referents which in turn affects how we think about these referents.<sup>34</sup> Sartori argues that "[b]ad language generates bad thinking; and bad thinking is bad for whatever the knowledge-seeker does next."<sup>35</sup> The language used is therefore significant for the production of meaningful research.

Concepts are located at the intersection between language and thought. They are basic units of thought, or “fact containers,” that express a certain composition of ideas.<sup>36</sup> Concepts constitute the basis on which to build frameworks and methodologies which essentially guide research and its logical structure.<sup>37</sup> To be able to conceptualise, one needs to think about thinking— that is, to identify and understand why one thinks the way one thinks. As Sartori argues, “[o]ne may be a wonderful researcher and manipulator of data, and yet remain an unconscious thinker.”<sup>38</sup> As concepts advise methodology and methodology, in turn, guides the research, good concepts are therefore indispensable if one wants research to be useful in any meaningful way. But what makes a good concept?

Sartori has dedicated much time to identify exactly this. The concept needs to be *defined*.<sup>39</sup> Without clearly defined concepts, how can we know what is being researched? These definitions need to be clear and unambiguous.<sup>40</sup> A vague definition leads to a fuzzy concept, and a fuzzy concept results in imprecise research. Finally a concept needs to be discriminate.<sup>41</sup> It needs clearly defined boundaries indicating what the concept *is* and what it *is not*. Without boundaries, the concept could be said to apply to everything, and if everything is true by definition then nothing is. Fuzzy boundaries leave us with a concept that is devoid of any explanatory power.

The concept of ‘radicalisation’ has all the hallmarks of a *bad* concept. It lacks an exact definition, it is ambiguous and its boundaries are fuzzy. Sartori argued in 1970 that “[p]olitical scientists eminently lack (with

exceptions) a training in logic – indeed in elementary logic.”<sup>42</sup> Not only does this statement still seem to be true but it also holds for academics from other fields – psychology, anthropology, social movement – engaged in the field of ‘radicalisation.’

Several academics have already tried to tackle the thorny issues surrounding the concept of ‘radicalisation.’ Their critiques deal with what have now become familiar problems like the lack of an existing definition, the relative nature of the term and the relationship between cognitive and behavioural ‘radicalisation.’ These existing critiques are important as they bring forth very valid and critical difficulties not only with the term ‘radicalisation,’ but also with the very core of the concept. However, they all fail to solve any of the problems they grapple with and so the concept of ‘radicalisation’ remains as elusive and contentious as ever. Though providing good analyses, their conclusions mainly stress the need for more research and encourage the continued use of the concept despite its persistent problems. The authors thereby leave the issues for someone else to solve after handing out their critique. This is the wrong approach – the discipline ends up circling the issues without effectively offering viable solutions that can advance the field of research. As will become clear in the next chapters, the concept is a jargon-laden catch-all phrase that is not necessary in order to talk about and study who, why and how someone becomes involved in ‘terrorism’ and ‘political violence.’ It is a dispensable term which has run its course. It is necessary for academic work to move beyond the concept and the confusion it brings with it. Before analysing ‘radicalisation’ and its

fallacies, we must first examine the existing criticisms and analyses of the concept in order to understand why they are lacking.

Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen and Mark Sedgwick both offer the same message, which is that the inherent relativeness of 'radicalisation' must be recognised when using the concept. Dalgaard-Nielsen raises the important point that "...'radical' and 'radicalization' mean different things to different people."<sup>43</sup> Though not original, this needs to be acknowledged and kept in mind whenever one uses research on 'radicalisation.' However, Dalgaard-Nielsen is unable to clear up the confusion surrounding the concept. Her critique is of an empirical nature arguing that we need to build on existing studies and broaden our empirical knowledge on the topic in order to understand what 'radicalisation' really involves, but we cannot do this until we have an agreed upon concept to guide this research.

Sedgwick's article,<sup>44</sup> like Dalgaard-Nielsen's, focuses on the relative nature of the concept of 'radicalisation' and its somewhat promiscuous use. His study demonstrates how the concept is used in three specific contexts and tailored to serve different agendas, focusing specifically on public and political discourse, security and integration, and foreign policy. The three agendas create different definitions.<sup>45</sup> This is the main reason for the confusion surrounding 'radicalisation' as the different contexts essentially denote three differing concepts.<sup>46</sup> His arguments highlight an important point, namely that the reason why disparate groups, governments, organisations and individuals are reluctant to come up with an agreed definition may be that keeping the concept



ambiguous and vague allows for it to be exploited for a multitude of purposes. It is not an objective concept or “fact-container” as a concept should be, but rather a subjective and highly flexible term to be moulded to fit individual agendas. It has become a justification for policies, both domestic and foreign, and the fear-mongering surrounding terrorism and the ambiguity surrounding what ‘radicalisation’ actually *is* has resulted in the general acceptance of these – sometimes invasive – policies.<sup>47</sup> All this is made possible by a threat built on an elusive and underdeveloped concept. To solve this dilemma and to dispel the confusion, Sedgwick, like Dalgaard-Nielsen argues that we must simply recognise that ‘radicalisation’ is a relative concept.<sup>48</sup> However, this ‘solution’ seems sorely lacking. Even if we do recognise the relative nature of the concept, we are still left with countless different definitions and, as Sedgwick himself points out, differing concepts. Depending on which version is chosen, academics may end up studying different phenomena and ‘radicalisation’ will still be an ambiguous concept vulnerable to exploitation for political gain. Despite Sedgwick’s ‘solution’ we are nevertheless left trying to wind our way through the thorny tangles now characteristic of the field of ‘radicalisation.’

Mandel’s study on the concept of ‘radicalisation’ provides the most persuasive analysis. He argues that the concept does not in itself “... provide an explanation of how that process unfolds or why it begins.”<sup>49</sup> He contends, and rightly so, that the concept as it stands today does not help us understand ‘terrorism’ or ‘political violence’ due to the

subjective and value-laden way it has so far been put to use. This is caused by flawed definitions where the definientia are nothing more than synonyms for the subject being defined thereby failing to actually define the concept.<sup>50</sup> Mandel therefore develops his own definition which he believes better defines 'radicalisation' and correctly delineates the relationship between 'radicalisation' and 'extremism.'<sup>51</sup> However, it is not just the way that 'radicalisation' has been used that has caused the concept to be flawed. There are no ways to correct the problems as the concept itself is inherently subjective and value-laden. Mandel's own definition ends up being vulnerable to the very difficulties he is trying to overcome, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter.<sup>52</sup>

Schmid's exploration of the concept is by far the most comprehensive available. Even though it is now a couple of years old, the important questions he raises and pitfalls he identifies still stand, despite his efforts to the contrary.<sup>53</sup> As noted in the intro, there are a host of factors identified as contributing to 'radicalisation' and Schmid argues that the "existing conceptualisations... [are] part of the problem."<sup>54</sup> He composes his own definition of 'radicalisation,' one which he believes will go some way to rectifying the "fuzzy conceptualisation" and one-sided application that has been used up until now.<sup>55</sup> However, through his definition, which is meant to reduce the level of abstraction usually prominent in definitions, he makes the mistake of leaving it open to interpretation by having it rely on *relative* conceptions of what is 'moderate' and 'extreme' in societies across the

world and across time. Thus, he commits the very mistake he is trying to rectify.

For the concept to be a useful tool, Schmid argues, researchers need to acknowledge that 'radicalisation' is something that can happen to anyone no matter what side they are on in a conflict and that 'radical ideology' and 'terrorism' are not dependent on each other.<sup>56</sup> To better understand 'radicalisation' he encourages more holistic research into the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of the phenomenon.<sup>57</sup> The issue with this is that research cannot be conducted in any fruitful way without first having a solid concept on which to base it.

Schmid's conclusions add up to an insubstantial concept in which the exact nature of what 'radicalisation' *is* remains unclear. If research is to be based on this, its conclusions end up asserting that it could be A and/or it could be B, and it could lead to X on the one hand but it could also lead to Y and/or Z on the other. The concept remains unclear yet a clear concept is absolutely necessary as a basis to conduct cumulative research and construct pragmatic policies. Schmid views the concept of 'radicalisation' as indispensable and believes that research cannot do away with it,<sup>58</sup> but this conclusion does not logically follow the rest of his piece. If the concept is so devoid of clarity and subject to conflicting conceptualisations and understandings as his study argues, then we should in fact stop using it.

Peter Neumann, who has dedicated most of his career to the study of 'radicalisation,' agrees with Schmid. His paper, *The Trouble with Radicalization*, starts off as a defence of the concept of 'radicalisation'

despite its fallacies.<sup>59</sup> He calls on scholars and policy-makers to embrace the concept and dedicate themselves to understanding it properly.<sup>60</sup> He rightly acknowledges that 'radicalisation' is an ambiguous term and concept and argues that this ambiguity stems from the lack of a definition and the contention surrounding the relationship between 'extremist' ideas and 'extremist' behaviour.<sup>61</sup> Though stating this, he does little to actually dispel the ambiguity in the rest of the article stating that "[r]adicalization...is inherently context-dependent, and its meaning will always be contested."<sup>62</sup> However, a contested concept is unhelpful for research. His insistence on the need for 'radicalisation's' continued use is problematic for the same reason as Schmid's. Without a clear concept to guide research and policy we might end up studying differing phenomena and the research produced, on which policy is so often based, will neither be cumulative nor effective. He concludes by writing that there are no simple answers or silver bullets to the 'radicalisation' puzzle,<sup>63</sup> but that does not mean we have to make it more difficult for ourselves by using an unhelpfully confusing concept.

These studies highlight two things. Firstly, that there is a general agreement among scholars that the concept of 'radicalisation' is problematic and that it needs to be clarified in order to be helpful for 'terrorism' research. Secondly, they demonstrate that the field is sorely lacking viable solutions to these problems. The general conclusions of these studies have either been to recommend further research or to develop their own definitions, neither of which really gets to the root of the issues. What is needed is some reflection on the actual *need* for the

concept. If it does not add to our understanding and confuses research, why continue to encourage its use?

# PART TWO

## CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

### 4. DEFINING 'RADICALISATION'

Defining terms and concepts is the first, and arguably most important, task for research. Without clearly defined concepts, there are no explicit guidelines to direct the research. And without obvious guidelines, the research is vulnerable to lose sight of its objective and to be misunderstood. Furthermore, aggregating research becomes difficult when there is no unifying concept on which to build. Like with 'terrorism,' there is no agreed upon definition of 'radicalisation.' Defining 'radicalisation' has therefore become a highly subjective activity and has led to a debate of what 'radicalisation' *actually* means. At its broadest, most ambiguous conception, 'radicalisation' seems to refer to "...what goes on before the bomb goes off."<sup>64</sup> This is a highly unsatisfactory guide for research and leaves the concept open to a number of problems. Practically, a lack of precise definition is problematic for counterterrorism, for how can we counter something



when we cannot agree on what we are countering? A lack of definition is also harmful on an academic level as it leads to ambiguity which, as Giovanni Sartori argues, could destroy "...a discipline as a cumulative fabric of knowledge...".<sup>65</sup> 'Radicalisation' research seems to be suffering from what Sartori characterises as "collective ambiguity" in which each academic ascribes his or her own meaning to the term.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, it seems scholars engaged in this field succumb to individual ambiguity – that is, "...a single author's confusion, his own obscurity and/or inconsistency of meaning."<sup>67</sup> The combination of both individual and collective ambiguity leaves the concept practically useless.

David Martin Jones and M.L.R. Smith argue that the issue is not with 'radicalisation's' ambiguity, but rather that it is the wrong term to use to describe the phenomenon of becoming a 'terrorist' or 'violent extremist.'<sup>68</sup> Tracing the word's history, they find that 'radicalism' has positive connotations with an etymology firmly rooted in "rational, constitutional, social and economic reform" and progressive democratic thought.<sup>69</sup> This is, to a degree, true. The terms 'radicalism' and 'radical' have been used to refer to advocates for liberal and democratic values and rights, including the suffragettes, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela and the Founding Fathers of the United States. In Jones' and Smith's view, 'radicalism' and 'radicalisation' lead to mislabelling the process that induces 'extremism.' Because its definition has been linked to positive change in the past, they argue that its contemporary usage distorts the phenomenon and should therefore be abandoned. Though

their conclusion is accurate and the concept should be abandoned, the analysis on which it is based is flawed for two reasons.

Firstly, it must be remembered that 'radicalisation' is a relative term – what appears 'extremist' or 'fanatical' today was considered mainstream in earlier time periods and vice versa. Nelson Mandela, the suffragettes, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Founding Fathers could legitimately be characterised as 'extremists' in their time as what they were advocating was positioned far outside the accepted 'mainstream.' Furthermore, the suffragettes, the African National Congress and the revolutionary movement in the United States, of which the Founding Fathers were a part, all used violent methods at some point in their campaigns. Regardless of the legitimacy of their goals, the contemporary usage of 'radicalism' could accurately be applied to them.

Secondly, 'radical' and 'radicalism' of which 'radicalisation' is derived, are terms that have evolved since their earliest conceptions. David Mandel has mapped the etymology of the term 'radical.' He found that as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was used to refer to comprehensive or sweeping political change.<sup>70</sup> By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it had evolved again and referred to someone supporting an 'extreme' faction of a political party or to a deviation from the 'mainstream' more generally.<sup>71</sup> This is consistent with today's overall usage of the word, as most of the authors reviewed for this dissertation used 'radicalisation' to refer to a process in some shape or form which encourages the move towards the 'extreme.' These findings are also supported by Schmid.<sup>72</sup> Our current understanding and usage of the

term 'radical,' then, has in fact been around for more than a century and therefore has a somewhat established, although still ambiguous, understanding.

Though this dissertation agrees with Jones and Smith in that the language of 'radicalisation' should be abandoned, their argument on which this conclusion is reached is misguided. Jones and Smith argue that we should use the 'original' meaning of the term which in their view is 'radical' as progressive. If we are to take their argument seriously, however, then we should use the *actual* original meaning of the term 'radical' which referred to the "root" or "fundamentals" of something.<sup>73</sup> They fail to acknowledge that its association with progressive liberalism and democracy is in fact an evolution of an earlier conception. Their argument, it seems, does not hold up to serious scrutiny. The real issue with the words 'radical,' 'radicalism,' and their derivation 'radicalisation,' is that they are equivocal: they have several supposed meanings. Using these terms to define a concept becomes problematic because it is not immediately clear what exactly academics are referring to. This is one, but by no means the only, factor that contributes to 'radicalisation's' ambiguity.

Academics and policy makers usually approach the concept in one of two ways. Either, they do not define 'radicalisation' when used in their work, but simply assume that its meaning is implicit. This is demonstrated most clearly in the edited volume *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge. European and American Experiences* by Rik Coolsaet.<sup>74</sup> This is a book, as the title suggests, that is dedicated to the

'radicalisation' phenomenon. Yet out of the 20 chapters, only two actually try to define it.<sup>75</sup> Another example is Mark Sageman's *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*.<sup>76</sup> Throughout the book, Sageman refers back to 'radicalisation' as a concept guiding his research but he does not once define what he means by it. This is problematic firstly because the concept's meaning is *not* implicit but rather highly subjective and controversial. Secondly, as Sartori points out, "[w]hen an author avoids defining his key terms, the odds are his argument will rest on the *word*, not the *concept*" which means "he is unnecessarily exposed, among other things, to the risk of changing his meanings as his argument proceeds."<sup>77</sup> And the problem with an argument resting on a word like 'radicalisation' is that, as previously mentioned, it is not a univocal term but rather has many different meanings and meanings that have changed over time.

If a definition of 'radicalisation' is provided, be it by academics, governments or institutions, more often than not they develop their own, new, definition and add it to the endless mix of already existing ones. We are now left with countless versions of how to define this concept which begs the question: which one is the right one? Though the definitions may possess some similarities or core characteristics, there are enough deviations so as to make it impossible to come up with a unifying one that could replace the existing array of definitions. Neumann states that 'radicalisation' is "...inherently context-dependent, and its meaning will always be contested."<sup>78</sup> But this is problematic and should not be treated in the blasé way Neumann does.

The choice of definition guides the research and, more seriously, policy choices. Differing definitions will lead to researchers studying (to a degree) differing phenomena. There are countless works to choose from to illustrate this point, but only a few will now be examined. The works have been chosen specifically because the authors raise a number of important issues regarding 'radicalisation' but, as will be demonstrated, they are also a part of the problem.

## 5. ANALYSIS OF EXISTING DEFINITIONS

In her literature review on 'radicalisation' Dalgaard-Nielsen differentiates between the concept of *radicalism* and *radicalisation*.<sup>79</sup> She defines them as such:

*Here, radical is understood as a person harboring a deep-felt desire for fundamental socio-political changes and radicalization is understood as a growing readiness to pursue and support far-reaching changes in society that conflict with, or pose a direct threat to, the existing order.*<sup>80</sup>

This definition contains several problematic aspects. Her definition says nothing about violence, a prominent feature in many other definitions of 'radicalisation.' This demonstrates the disparity between existing academic definitions. Furthermore, her definition is ambiguous. This allows for her definition to travel across space and time, but at the same time leads it to become very abstract and does not allow for comparative analyses if those analyses are based on countries with

considerable differences in their “existing order.” Her definition appears to cover legal methods of democratic change – in fact, it appears to *only* refer to legal methods. It could, for example, be argued that the Labour party in England currently wants to pursue far-reaching changes in British society and that these changes in fact pose a threat to the existing order which is based on more conservative politics. As there is no mention of violence in her definition, “threat” does not have to be something causing bodily or societal harm and so could simply refer to a major socio-political change. Even if Labour does not pose a “threat,” it could certainly be argued that they support changes that “conflict with” the existing order. Does that mean the Labour party and all of their supporters are ‘radicals’ who have become ‘radicalised?’ Most would argue they are not ‘radicalised’ in the contemporary sense of the word. Dalgaard-Nielsen uses her definition in relation to terrorism and political violence and so it becomes problematic to define it in such an ambiguous way without any mention of the possibility of violence.

Like Dalgaard-Nielsen, the Change Institute emphasises *cognition* rather than *violent behaviour*. They define (violent) ‘radicalisation’ as:

*The phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism.<sup>81</sup>*

Here, the emphasis is on “opinions, view and ideas” indicating its focus on cognitive ‘radicalisation.’ Their choice of wording is curious as a key word in this definition is “could.” Their focus is on *violent* ‘radicalisation,’ yet their definition implies that violence may *not* be the



actual end-point. Considering the extensive collection of causes and processes identified as possibly contributing to ‘radicalisation’ and terrorism, one could almost argue that anything *could* lead to acts of terrorism. But if anything could be ‘radicalisation,’ then nothing would. The definition loses all of its meaning and surrenders its informative power.

Schmid chooses to make the distinction between ‘radicals’ and ‘extremists’ arguing that what separates them is the ability and “willingness to engage in critical thinking.”<sup>82</sup> In a view more closely related to Jones and Smith, ‘radicals’ are defined as able and willing to engage in critical thinking and dialogue, whilst ‘extremists’ are not.<sup>83</sup> Definitions by governments and academics alike highlight that their focus is on ‘radicalisation’ into ‘*extremism*.’ What follows logically from this train of thought is that ‘radicalisation’ is perhaps the wrong term to use as we are concerned with ‘extremists,’ not ‘radicals.’ Could a solution perhaps be to use a different term – a new term – related to ‘extremism’ rather than ‘radicalisation’ to dispel some of the confusion? Unfortunately, constructing a new term like ‘extremization’ is not a viable solution as this would, like ‘radicalisation,’ be subject to disagreements and contradictions surrounding the definition. ‘Extremism’ is itself a highly relative term and so would be subject to the same pitfalls. Schmid presents his own definition of ‘radicalisation:’

*An individual or collective (group) process whereby, usually in a situation of political polarisation, normal practices of dialogue,*

*compromise and tolerance between political actors and groups with diverging interests are abandoned by one or both sides in a conflict dyad in favour of a growing commitment to engage in confrontational tactics of conflict-waging. These can include either (i) the use of (non-violent) pressure and coercion, (ii) various forms of political violence other than terrorism or (iii) acts of violent extremism in the form of terrorism and war crimes. The process is, on the side of rebel factions, generally accompanied by an ideological socialization away from mainstream or status quo-oriented positions towards more radical or extremist positions involving a dichotomous world view and the acceptance of an alternative focal point of political mobilization outside the dominant political order as the existing system is no longer recognized as appropriate or legitimate.<sup>84</sup>*

Like Dalgaard-Nielsen and the Change Institute, legitimate forms of political action are covered in Schmid's definition as he states that 'radicalisation' includes "...the use of (non-violent) pressure and coercion..." which could be considered a part of normal political processes. Unlike Dalgaard-Nielsen, however, he also includes various forms of political violence, terrorism and war crimes. There is a clear divergence between the two definitions.

Schmid uses words to define 'radicalisation' that are themselves vague and open to interpretation. These include, "normal practices," "extremist," "mainstream" and "status-quo." These terms will refer to something different depending on when and where you are in the

world. Schmid's definition leads to more questions than answers. What are "normal practices?" Which "mainstream" or "status-quo" are we referring to and does it make a difference? Is the phenomenon of "radicalisation" the same across time and space? If the definition leaves us guessing and in search for more answers, it is clearly not sufficient to guide research. What makes these terms even more unhelpful is that societies are capable of changing quite rapidly as evidenced by recent populist politics and the growth in support for more 'extreme' right-wing politics in recent years. What is considered mainstream is capable of changing quickly which results in an unstable term used to define our guiding concept.

David Mandel, who has criticised the concept of 'radicalisation' for being too vague, argues that "[r]adicalization is to extremism as velocity is to position"<sup>85</sup> and defines 'radicalisation' as such:

*Radicalization refers to an increase and/or reinforcing of extremism in the thinking, sentiments, and/or behaviour of individuals and/or groups of individuals.<sup>86</sup>*

Though Mandel is trying to provide a definition that overcomes the subjective nature of the concept, his definition tells us very little. It does not state what the end-point of 'radicalisation' is: do individuals develop into extremists, radicals, political activists or terrorists? Nor does it say on what continuum we are meant to be measuring the increase in 'extremism.' At what point is one an 'extremist,' and what exactly does this entail? When does one cross the threshold from

'mainstream' to 'extremist?' He does make clear that the definition of the concept is not meant to explain the "process of radicalisation" in and of itself,<sup>87</sup> but his definition is unable to move past the vagueness which he is trying to overcome.

In their paper on drivers of violent extremism, Allan et.al from RUSI allege that they try to differentiate the concepts of 'radicalisation' and 'recruitment,' stating that there is an important distinction between the two and that they have yet to find research that grapples with this particular issue.<sup>88</sup> Despite focusing on *conceptualisations*, they fail to provide an apparent definition of 'radicalisation.' They write that:

*...the term [radicalisation] presupposes that individuals may develop extreme views and then seek to put them into practice, implying that they search for terrorist groups rather than vice versa. It quickly eclipsed the traditional notion of recruitment...<sup>89</sup>*

Considering their entire paper focuses on conceptual differences between 'recruitment' and 'radicalisation,' this is an unfortunate oversight. It does not tell us what the concept is apart from a vague reference to the development of "extreme views." They do not state what the end-point of 'radicalisation' is and they use ambiguous phrases and words such as "extremism" and "...seek to put them into practice...". It is not clear whether Allan et.al. are referring to violent or non-violent actions here as "practice" could potentially refer to either leaving it ambiguous. The word "seek" is also questionable. If individuals think about and want to put their views into action but

never actually *do* anything about it, it is unclear whether this would be considered 'radicalisation' or not according to their definition. This is a poor 'definition' of the concept and does not assist their research. Unfortunately, Allan et.al. are not alone in failing to adequately define their terms.

Guilian Denoeux and Lynn Carter have written an 89-page paper on the drivers of 'violent extremism.'<sup>90</sup> Despite using the words 'radical,' 'radicalism,' and 'radicalisation' 125 times throughout their paper, they never once define these key terms. They provide an annex<sup>91</sup> at the end with key definitions, but even here these terms are not considered. They have fallen into the trap assuming that the meanings are implicit and the reader is therefore left guessing what exactly Denoeux and Carter are referring to when they use these terms. Like, Denoeux and Carter, Jerold Post, Martha Crenshaw and Jessica Stern, in Club de Madrid report,<sup>92</sup> also fail to define these terms despite using them repeatedly.

These examples demonstrate the collective ambiguity surrounding the concept of 'radicalisation.' Though similarities exist, none of these authors use the same definition of 'radicalisation.' The authors are all guilty of contributing to the collective ambiguity of the field in which most academics ascribe their own meanings to the concepts of 'radical,' 'radicalism' and 'radicalisation.' Despite providing criticism of existing 'radicalisation' research and of the concept itself, these academics are undeniably part of the problem. Academics' insistence on creating new definitions coupled with the ones who ignore the definitions altogether

results in a confusing conceptual disarray unfit to guide meaningful research and unable to produce useful knowledge about 'terrorism.'

## 6. A RELATIVE CONCEPT

The inherent relative nature of the concept of 'radicalisation' has already been mentioned but as it is a highly problematic element, it deserves closer attention. Several scholars have looked at the relative nature of 'radicalisation:' Dalgaard-Nielsen writes that 'radicalisation' means different things to different people;<sup>93</sup> Schmid demonstrates the concept's relative nature by demonstrating how it is historically context-bound;<sup>94</sup> Neumann, like Schmid, argues that the concept is context-dependent and that the term has no meaning on its own,<sup>95</sup> and; Sedgwick demonstrates how this relativity can be manipulated to serve specific agendas.<sup>96</sup>

It has already been demonstrated that 'radical,' 'radicalism,' and 'radicalisation' changes according to what is considered mainstream in a particular time-period.<sup>97</sup> 'Radicalisation' is not bound simply by historical context but also by geographical location. The status-quo varies according to *where* we find ourselves in world, even within the same historical time-frame. Consider 'radicalisation' into Islamist inspired extremism (violent or non-violent). This would refer to something different in Saudi Arabia than in the UK. In Saudi Arabia, the ideology driving AQ and ISIS is significantly closer to the mainstream than it is in the UK, and so adhering to is not a far leap from 'normal'

practices.<sup>98</sup> Whilst it is still considered a threat, as it is in the UK, this 'extremism' is not as far removed from the status-quo in Saudi Arabia. Likewise, 'radicalising' into 'right-wing extremism' has different meanings in Norway, Egypt and Israel as each country presents a unique set of socio-political dynamics. Neumann points out that free speech is considered 'radical' in North Korea, but is considered an essential part of Western democratic societies.<sup>99</sup> Child marriage is considered 'extreme' in Western Democratic societies whilst in countries like the Sudan or Tanzania, they are a normal part of social practice – in fact 117 countries allow child marriage to happen.<sup>100</sup>

These examples demonstrate the inherent subjectivity in defining and understanding the concept of 'radicalisation' as the continuum on which it is measured varies, and significantly so, depending on where we are. As the concept will identify differing phenomena, it becomes problematic to build on good research conducted in one part of the world if one is conducting one's own in another. This makes cumulative research difficult. One could simply acknowledge, as Sedgwick argues, that 'radicalisation' is a relative concept<sup>101</sup> and treat all research with prudence before using any of its data. Nevertheless, the concept is, more often than not, treated and used as constant and unchanging. Very seldom do academics, institutions or policy-makers state in relation to what they judge to be 'radical' or 'extreme.' The field itself is dedicated to understanding why, and how people become terrorists by discovering patterns. Using a concept that is relative and has differing meanings depending on the academic in question, means building on

each other's work becomes nearly impossible. Either researchers have to ignore the fact that they are studying differing phenomena and use the research anyway, which leads to inaccurate conclusions. Or, one is left with countless differing studies based on differing versions of the 'radicalisation' concept which cannot be connected as the concept is context-dependent and non-transferrable. Either way, cumulative research suffers.

The reason 'radicalisation' remains a relative concept, and why authors such as Neumann and Dalgaard-Nielsen accept it and use it as such, is that they need they need the concept to be able to *travel*. In order for 'radicalisation' to be applicable to a wide variety of societies and cultures across time, they have broadened its extension. Academics engaged in the field of 'radicalisation' have engaged in conceptual stretching. 'Radicalisation' is now applied to individuals, groups and countries no matter when or where in the world they are located. At the same time academics have obscured the defining properties – the intension – of the referents. Anything could be said to contribute to 'radicalisation' which can also happen to *anyone*. If defining features amount to 'anyone' or 'anything,' 'radicalisation' becomes a ubiquitous yet chaotic collation of conceptual confusion which can only amount to insubstantial conclusions.

The relativity of the concept is paradoxical because despite the effort of leaving the concept ambiguous to allow it travel, the relative nature of the concept means that it remains context-dependent and that research is non-transferrable. Academics insist that its relative nature



allows it to travel well so long as it is acknowledged that different continuums exist on which to measure 'radicalisation.' However, if there are *different continuums* then we are talking about differences in *kind*, not differences in degree. By virtue of it being relative, academics believe they can apply 'radicalisation' more broadly while in fact it makes comparative research nearly impossible.

## 7. "END-POINTS:" 'RADICALISATION' INTO WHAT?

The third source of confusion regarding the concept of 'radicalisation' is the lack of an agreed end-point. Horgan aptly points out that 'radicalisation' and 'terrorism' are used so interchangeably and as synonyms for one another that an unspoken understanding has developed in which 'radicalisation' implicitly means 'violent radicalisation.'<sup>102</sup> 'Terrorism' and 'radicalisation' are treated as two sides of the same coin by the media, the general public and by many academics and policy-makers as well. However a sizeable number of individuals and institutions understand 'radicalisation' as developing 'extremist' thought. The biggest point of contention is therefore between cognitive and behavioural 'radicalisation' and the relationship between them. 'Cognitive radicalisation' usually refers to the development of 'extreme' thoughts, beliefs and values whilst 'behavioural radicalisation' usually refers to the development of 'extreme' behaviour including 'political violence' and 'terrorism.' Neumann highlights that the difference is especially stark between what he terms the 'Anglo-

Saxon' and 'European' conceptualisations of 'radicalisation.'<sup>103</sup> In this divide the conceptualisations are strongly influenced by countries' social, political and legal history. In the United States and the United Kingdom, free speech is sacred and not to be infringed upon. Their emphasis is therefore on 'radicalisation' as the development extreme *action*.<sup>104</sup> In the European conceptualisation the emphasis is on cognitive 'radicalisation.' Though violence is understood as a *possible* outcome of 'radicalisation,' non-violent 'extremism' is deemed the main threat to the fabric of society and occupies the central role in their definitions of 'radicalisation.' The phenomenon to which 'radicalisation' is meant to refer will vary according to where academics and policy-makers choose to place their emphasis.

So what exactly is the end-point of 'radicalisation?' Is it violent action, 'extremist' thought that *could* lead to violent action or 'extremist' thought on its own, regardless of violent action? Though Neumann's divide is helpful, the research is here divided loosely into three different categories: (1) those who believe that 'radicalisation' acts as a conveyor belt and that violence is the ultimate and inevitable outcome; (2) the ones who argue that 'radicalisation' leads to 'extremist' thought which has the *potential* to lead to violent action, and; (3) the ones who view 'radicalisation' of thought and 'racialisation' of action as separate phenomena. These conceptualisations will now be examined more closely.

The first conceptualisation views violence as the certain outcome of 'radicalisation.' This view is perhaps best expressed through the

“conveyor belt” theory developed by Silber and Bhatt of the NYPD.<sup>105</sup> It contends that mere exposure to ‘extremist’ thought will eventually and inevitably result in ‘terrorism.’ ‘Radicalisation’ is conceptualised as a phased, linear process where the outcome (violence) is known and can be predicted as soon as an individual comes into contact with ‘extremism.’. This view manifests itself practically through the controversial and heavily criticised sting operations in the United States, in which the logic of expected consequences drives the fabrication of individuals’ ‘radicalisation.’<sup>106</sup> The “terrorism-as-the-end-point” view is, like Neumann highlights, most prominent in the United States.

The second conceptualisation understands ‘radicalisation’ as the development of ‘extremist’ thought that *could* (read: may or may not) lead to ‘terrorism’ or ‘political violence.’ Advocates of this conceptualisation see non-violent ‘extremism’ and ideology as fertile breeding grounds for violence, but violence in itself is not an inevitable outcome of ‘radicalisation.’<sup>107</sup> Though ‘radicalisation’ of thought, beliefs and values are presented as an essential and unavoidable part of the concept, violence is an outcome that may or may not happen. This is the most ambiguous conception of ‘radicalisation’ out of the three presented in this study. We end up with a concept in which the conclusion is insubstantial and it is unclear what exactly it is referring to. This type of conceptualisation is not helpful for understanding ‘terrorism.’

The third conceptualisation understands 'cognitive radicalisation' and 'behavioural radicalisation' as two separate phenomena. The advocates of this view argue that the previous two conceptions are misguided, based on faulty analysis and information.<sup>108</sup> The first conceptualisation is inaccurate because most 'extremists' never engage in violence and therefore violence is not an inevitable outcome of 'radicalisation.'<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, it is now increasingly being acknowledged that 'terrorism' does not have to be preceded by 'extremist' thought thereby disproving the second conceptualisation.<sup>110</sup> Sageman demonstrates this through his study on Islamist inspired 'terrorism' where he found that individuals joined 'terrorist' groups because of friendship, kinship and love.<sup>111</sup> Della Porta discovered the same in her study from 1995, where the overwhelming majority of her subjects were not convinced by ideology but joined because of the love for a friend, a family member, revenge or love of another person.<sup>112</sup>

To rectify the misconception of 'radicalisation,' McCauley and Moskalenko have developed a two-pyramid model to demonstrate the separate nature of cognitive and behavioural 'radicalisation:' the Opinion Pyramid representing cognitive 'radicalisation' and the Action Pyramid, representing behavioural 'radicalisation.'<sup>113</sup> Though the two can and sometimes do overlap, they should be treated as distinct phenomena.

The issue is not only with a lack of an agreed end-point, but with the end-points themselves and the persistent uncertainty with which the concept of 'radicalisation' is treated. The first version of the concept of

'radicalisation' – 'radicalisation' as a conveyor belt – is the only version of 'radicalisation' that actually has a definite outcome, despite being the most criticised and controversial of the three. Whether it is the correct conceptualisation or not, it is the only one where one can point to something specific and say "*that* is 'radicalisation.'" "

The two other versions are both subject to degreeism. In order to be able to accommodate more cases, or simply because the concept is so ill-defined, academics have resigned themselves to opt for degreeism. 'Radicalisation' is presented as a continuum on which individuals, groups and/or entire societies are located and their level of 'radicalisation' becomes a matter of degree. This, however, does not bring research any closer to understanding terrorism as we are again left with more questions than answers. When, along the continuum, is an individual, group or society considered to have begun 'radicalisation?' At what point is one considered a 'radical' or an 'extremist?' At what point is one considered a 'terrorist?' Does 'radicalisation' have an end at all or does it just continue indefinitely? If it is on a continuum, does that continuum branch off into different ones depending on what one is radicalised *in to*? Depending on which academic we ask, we are likely to get very different answers. And if the answer is simply "it is a matter of degree" then where does that leave us? It certainly does not bring us any closer to answering the questions about 'terrorism' that we seek by doing this kind of research.

The combination of the lack of an end-point and the insufficient conclusion of "it is a matter of degree" results in an insubstantial,

unbounded concept and an unacceptably vague guide for research. If we continue to use the concept of 'radicalisation' research will be stultified as there is no stable base upon which to build cumulative research and develop our knowledge.

## PART THREE

# THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Within the field of terrorism studies, as is typical with academia in general, there seems to be a case of academic amnesia. David Betz writes that reading the literature on insurgency and counterinsurgency is like the film *Groundhog Day*, arguing that the "...literature tends to be repetitive and the phenomenon which it addresses is usually treated as static."<sup>114</sup> Reading through the literature on 'terrorism,' one gets the same impression – a sense of déjà vu. Della Porta wrote in 1992 that there was a "...need for deeper insight into individual motivations in the underground...," that this had previously been given little thought by academics as it was deemed a sign of sympathy or support for 'terrorists' and that these attitudes changed in the 1980s.<sup>115</sup> The likeness is uncanny between these statements and the ones from the mid to late 2000s detailing the emergence and need for the concept of 'radicalisation.' It has been argued that the emergence of 'radicalisation' as a concept allowed academics to research and explore the mechanisms

of becoming a 'terrorist' without having their agenda questioned or being branded as sympathisers. But academics have been doing this exact research for decades, long before 'radicalisation' was conceived of as a concept. Whilst some, like Neumann,<sup>116</sup> acknowledge this, a large part of academia seems to have forgotten about the expansive literature produced pre-2000. It seems the research is simply going around in circles. Furthermore, reading through the literature produced pre-2000 one realises that the *term* 'radicalisation' has been around longer than it is usually given credit for.

The second part of this study will aim to do two things: first, it will briefly trace the term 'radicalisation' and its evolution into a concept, and; secondly, it will examine the research covering the questions of why, how and who becomes a terrorist to determine whether or not the concept of 'radicalisation' is really needed.

## 8. TRACING 'RADICALISATION'

While 'radicalisation' appears repeatedly throughout the literature from the 90s, it is used sparingly, almost tentatively. Though 'radicalisation' was used, it was understood and applied differently in these earlier texts compared to how it is applied and understood today. In the 90s academics used the *term* 'radicalisation' as a descriptor. It appears to have been used simply as a synonym to 'extremism' without encompassing any wider ideas as a concept would. 'Radicalisation' did not mean anything specific nor did it act as a guide for research or from



a defining feature of the research in any significant way. It was not yet a conceptualisation containing ideas about a particular phenomenon as we have come to associate it.

Della Porta wrote in 1992 of the Weathermen that they were:

*... an organization that emerged from the radicalization of protest in the 1960s.*<sup>117</sup>

Here, 'radicalisation' is something that happens to *protest*: it is used descriptively to signify that protest became more 'extreme.' She further uses the term 'radicalisation' in reference to ideology, attitudes and behaviour, political conflicts and action strategies: "[t]he radicalization of a working-class ideology in a middle-class environment...;"<sup>118</sup> "[a]s attitudes and behaviour became radicalized...;"<sup>119</sup> "[p]olitical conflicts are often further radicalized by the effects of antiterrorist policies;"<sup>120</sup> "...the environmental conditions that allowed for the radicalization of action strategies."<sup>121</sup>

In all of these cases 'radicalisation' is used as a descriptor to indicate something becoming more 'extreme' and *not* as a concept detailing the exact processes of that move. This becomes clear when she later uses the idea of "political socialisation" which she describes as the process detailing a person's development and move into the underground: "... from the individual's first experiences of protest activism, to the radicalization of this experience, to his or her participation in the underground."<sup>122</sup> Della Porta uses "political socialisation" to describe what would perhaps be understood as 'radicalisation' today, indicating

that she does not understand 'radicalisation' as a concept but rather uses it as a characteristic to illustrate that the Weathermen became more 'extreme.' Today, 'radicalisation' involves not only increased 'extremity' but includes a number of assumptions about the process of becoming more 'extreme' as well as images of who becomes more 'extreme' – it contains *ideas*.

Della Porta and Diani wrote in 1999 that: “[t]he direction taken by a social movement, therefore, may be that of moderation, but equally that of radicalisation...”<sup>123</sup> and; “[r]adicalisation develops in a spiral of negative and unforeseen feedback.”<sup>124</sup> 'Radicalisation' here is used simply as a synonym to 'extreme' as it is placed at the opposite end to 'moderation.' Like in the previous example, Della Porta and Diani are using 'radicalisation' to describe a situation or to characterise a particular social movement.

The use of 'radicalisation' as a descriptor rather than a concept is further demonstrated through three passages from Moyano and Della Porta respectively:

*...Three ... events contributed to the radicalisation of public opinion.*<sup>125</sup>

*...in the competition with the Old Left that the New Left radicalized its ideology.*<sup>126</sup>

*...radicalization is a result of vicious circles – that is, spirals of negative feedback that produce different effects from those planned. The parties involved in the conflict – protesters and police – repeatedly act*

*on and respond to each other, escalating the conflict in a self-sustaining round of exchanges..*<sup>127</sup>

Like the first example from Della Porta from 1992, 'radicalisation' is here attached to referents other than people: public opinion and ideology in the first two passages with the last passage detailing *why* it happens – why something becomes more 'extreme' – indicating that 'radicalisation' in itself is not why people become 'extreme' as it is implied today.

Rather than being used to refer to individuals or groups, one can see here that 'radicalisation' and 'radicalise' was applied to more elusive subjects such as ideology, conflicts, strategies, behaviours and movements. Though concepts are used in relation to behaviour and ideology today, it is in a much different way. In the pre-2000 texts behaviour or ideology became more 'radicalised' growing, as it is understood by this study, more 'extreme.' Today, 'radicalisation' is something that is applied to individuals and groups exclusively. Their behaviour or beliefs might become more 'extreme' but that is the result of the individuals *themselves* 'radicalising.' *Individuals* and *groups* are 'radicalised' involving wider ideas about how this comes about. When used in relation to behaviour and ideology as in pre-2000, 'radicalisation' is simply a descriptor and not a concept.

## 9. COMPARISON TO POST-2000

If one goes back and examines some of the contemporary definitions of 'radicalisation,' one can see a clear difference in its usage compared to pre-2000. Dalgaard-Nielsen's definition of 'radical' includes pre-held assumptions about what a 'radical' looks like and how he/she feels: "... a person harboring a deep-felt desire for fundamental socio-political changes...".<sup>128</sup> 'Radicalisation' is not intended to simply indicate an 'extreme' position relative to society but assumes that certain characteristics are inherent in the 'radical.' Furthermore, her definition of 'radicalisation' also encompasses ideas of how becoming a 'radical' transpires. Dalgaard-Nielsen's definition is intended to be something more than simply a descriptor. The words she uses in her definition conjure up an image of the 'radical' as a threatening figure and illicit in the reader certain emotions about him/her. The Change Institute's definition also refers to a phenomenon in which certain pre-held assumptions are included. They refer to the *embracing* of ideas rather than simply describing something as 'extreme.' By this, the definition incorporates wider ideas and 'radicalisation' and is taken beyond the point of being a mere describing property.

Compared to the other definitions, Schmid's is by far the most comprehensive. His focus is on 'radicalisation' as a process and he details quite comprehensively the ways in which this process develops, amongst other things, through "societal polarisation."<sup>130</sup> The definition incorporates wider ideas about the nature of 'radicalisation' that goes

beyond mere description and it is based on numerous assumptions about this process such as the abandonment of “normal practices,” commitment to “confrontational tactics,” “ideological socialization” and the development of a dichotomous worldview and rejection of the existing political system. He also includes a number of assumptions about the methods and character traits developed by the ‘radicals.’

The only academic reviewed here who’s definition seems more consistent with the pre-2000 use of the term is David Mandel.<sup>131</sup> His definition reads more like a descriptor than a concept encompassing ideas about a specific process. This is curious as his piece appears to aim at developing a concept and not a mere descriptive adjective.

Whilst ‘radicalisation’ was used pre-2000 to simply indicate an ‘extreme’ position relative to the ‘mainstream’ in a society, today it encompasses ideas and images about people and a specific process about how they come to be that way.

## 10. DEVELOPING THE CONCEPT

We see the first signs of the evolution of ‘radicalisation’ into a concept in Ted Gurr’s piece. He writes :

*There are two main routes by which (some members of) such groups come to accept extreme means: radicalization and reaction... Radicalization refers to a process in which the group has been mobilized in pursuit of a social or political objective but has failed to make enough progress towards the objective to satisfy all activists. Some become*

*discouraged, while other intensify their means of political action, and look for tactics that will have greater impact.*<sup>132</sup>

Here, the concept is still in its infantile state, not yet fully formed into the concept of today and yet, it is still more than simply a descriptive term. However, Gurr's understanding of 'radicalisation' was not picked up by other academics pre-2000 and he is the only one, as far as this study can tell, who uses it in this way. Despite Gurr's brief and tentative attempt at conceptualising 'radicalisation' we do not start to see 'radicalisation' emerge as a concept until about 2004. It emerges first in Sageman's book *Understanding Terror Networks*. He writes:

*The Core Arabs were so well-off that their families sent them to study abroad, where their radicalization began. In their host countries, they were alienated, underemployed, and perhaps discriminated against, and therefore in a situation of relative deprivation.*<sup>133</sup>

Though not as exhaustive as more recent conceptualisations, this passage indicates the beginning of the conception of 'radicalisation' as we have come to know it. Sageman incorporates into 'radicalisation' the ideas of alienation and lack of social and economic mobility moving it away from its previous descriptive use. This is further demonstrated in this next passage:

*The global Salafi jihad evolved through a process of radicalization consisting of gradual self-selection, manipulation of resources from above, and recognition of the singly common target of the jihad.*<sup>134</sup>

Sageman is the first author to embrace 'radicalisation' as a concept. Not only does the passage demonstrate his understanding of 'radicalisation' as a process but it also incorporates suppositions of how this process unfolds and links it to a specific ideology – political Islam. After Sageman's book came out, whether by its influence or coincidence, other authors started to incorporate the concept of 'radicalisation' into their research. In the Club de Madrid report that came out in 2005, several authors included it in their work.<sup>135</sup> Following this, authors who had previously not used the concept started to class their research on the basis of the concept of 'radicalisation.'<sup>136</sup>

## 11. IF NOT RADICALISATION, THEN WHAT?

What becomes immediately apparent when reading through the 'terrorism' literature is that academics are able to research and discuss why, how and who becomes a 'terrorist' without ever having to use the concept of 'radicalisation.' Instead it is phrased by some as a transition or a move: "...the evolution of political involvement...;"<sup>137</sup> "...move towards ever-deepening political commitment...;"<sup>138</sup> "[t]ransition to clandestine life...;"<sup>139</sup> "...entered a phase of intense political engagement on the border of legality."<sup>140</sup> At other times it is phrased in terms of socialisation: "[p]resocialize activists to militancy;"<sup>141</sup> "political socialisation;"<sup>142</sup> "...group recruitment and socialisation processes..."<sup>143</sup> Yet others describe it as a change in direction like Zwerman talking about individuals crossing the line between 'radical' and 'criminal,'<sup>144</sup>

Braungart and Braungart using the phrase "...turned to violence..."<sup>145</sup> and Bandura describing it as "[t]he conversion of socialized people into dedicated combatants..."<sup>146</sup>

The themes discussed by authors pre-2000 are eerily similar to what one finds in contemporary research on 'radicalisation.' This includes the importance of social networks and the role of friends and family for recruitment, the search for identity and belonging, perceived grievances, alienation, rebellion against the family and ideology. This research and these ideas have been recycled by contemporary academics and rebranded as 'new' under the guise of 'radicalisation.' Bishop and Mallie,<sup>147</sup> Braungart and Braungart,<sup>148</sup> Crenshaw,<sup>149</sup> Della Porta,<sup>150</sup> Della Porta & Diani,<sup>151</sup> Moyano,<sup>152</sup> Waldmann<sup>153</sup> and White<sup>154</sup> all highlight the importance of existing social networks and friendship and family bonds for the joining and participation in 'political violence' and 'terrorism.' The feeling of lacking an established identity and identity-formation in youths is highlighted by various authors as an important factor influencing the decision to join terrorist groups with several drawing our attention to the feeling of alienation and the search for belonging.<sup>155</sup> Family issues have been pointed out to have affected the decision to join 'terrorist' groups with some arguing it acted as a counterculture to their parents' generation due to a sense of alienation, some highlighting the abusive or absent parents as a catalyst and some stipulating the feeling of not being able to live up to expectations.<sup>156</sup> Ideology itself is presented as a potential catalyst by White<sup>157</sup> and Sprinzak<sup>158</sup> while Bishop and Mallie<sup>159</sup> highlight the role of ideology in



combination with a lack of social and economic mobility as influencing factors.

To demonstrate the similarity between the pre-2000 and post-2000 research the study will briefly examine and compare Della Porta and Diani's work on social movements with that of Sageman's research on 'terrorism' and 'radicalisation.' The similarities between Sageman<sup>160</sup> on the one hand and Della Porta and Diani<sup>161</sup> on the other are many. Both studies argue that movements are grassroots-driven. They utilise frame theory arguing that to mobilise support, social movements need to link individual experiences with that of the collective.<sup>162</sup> Social problems to an extent only exist when they are interpreted as such. Movements therefore frame them as unjust and identify the ones responsible.<sup>163</sup> This is comparable to Sageman's view on the manipulation of perceived grievances.<sup>164</sup> The studies also converge in their view of individuals introduction into social movements and 'terrorist' organisations. Della Porta and Diani highlight the importance of social networks and argue that "[p]ersonal links play an important part in facilitating individual participation."<sup>165</sup> Sageman is of the same view, arguing that people become involved in terrorist groups and the Islamist social movement activist scene through friendship and kinship bonds.<sup>166</sup> Despite studying very different movements (Della Porta and Diani focusing on Italy and Germany and Sageman focusing on "jihadist" social movement in the West) their studies seem eerily similar. They both highlight the construction of identity to link and divide,<sup>167</sup> that values constructed by the movement to link individuals to the collective also

define goals and strategies as morally acceptable<sup>168</sup> and that identity, belonging and constructed values sustain the motivation in the long run.<sup>169</sup>

Della Porta even uses “cliques of friends” in her earlier work<sup>170</sup> which is highly comparable to Sageman’s “bunches of guys.”<sup>171</sup>

The pre-2000 texts demonstrate not only similarity but the ease with which academics were able to structure, conduct and convey research covering the *same* questions and themes as contemporary ‘radicalisation’ research but without using the concept of ‘radicalisation.’

# PART FOUR

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This study was guided by two research questions: 1) Is the concept of 'radicalisation' *useful* for the study of 'terrorism?'; 2) Is the concept of 'radicalisation' *necessary* for the study of 'terrorism?'

This study has effectively demonstrated that it is neither. It has shown the significant disparities between academic definitions and their inherent ambiguity. The lack of an agreed upon definition coupled with some academics' assumption that 'radicalisation's' meaning is implied has resulted in a field shrouded in collective ambiguity. This is unhelpful for the study of terrorism as the use of different definitions effectively leads academics to research differing phenomena. The definitions designed to overcome this ambiguity unfortunately fall victim to the very issues they try to overcome. The result is lingering uncertainty regarding what 'radicalisation' actually *is*.

The study further demonstrated how the concept of 'radicalisation' has been stretched in order to broaden its applicability. As 'anyone' and 'anything' could potentially be subject to 'radicalisation' the concept results in unhelpfully indeterminate conclusions. Rather than making the concept more applicable, the concept's relative nature ensures that it is context-dependent. While 'radicalisation' is broadly applied, it remains bound by historical and geographical constraints. Comparative research becomes challenging as the highly complex and diverging environments and subjects under review coupled with the vast number of potentially influencing factors results in uncertain and intrinsically debatable results.

The lack of an agreed end-point has led researchers to employ degreeism when approaching 'radicalisation.' However, this approach does not bring us any closer to quantifying 'radicalisation' nor does it really answer the questions regarding who becomes a 'terrorist,' why and how, to which this field is dedicated. Declaring that everything relating to 'radicalisation' is a matter of degree leads to opaque conclusions and provides more questions than it answers.

The conceptual fallacies of 'radicalisation' makes cumulative and comparative research challenging to the point of being nearly impossible to undertake. Too broad and ambiguous a definition leads to the gathering of imprecise information and the misidentification of the variables which impact the process of 'radicalisation.' Research based on this concept will necessarily provide conclusions that are insubstantial, uncertain and debatable. A team of Australian researchers

argued that beyond the agreement that 'radicalisation' is a process, "...there is considerable variation as to make existing research incomparable. It is like comparing eggs to oranges and concluding that oranges, therefore, come from chickens."<sup>172</sup> Such a conception creates a poor foundation on which to conduct research. The concept of 'radicalisation' leads to confusion rather than answers and is therefore not useful for the progression of the study of 'terrorism' and the further development of knowledge in this field.

This study further examined whether the concept of 'radicalisation' was necessary for the study of 'terrorism' as some researchers have come to argue.<sup>173</sup> After demonstrating the use of 'radicalisation' as a purely descriptive tool pre-2000 it determined that academics were able to cover the same questions and topics as contemporary 'radicalisation' research without using the concept. This indicates that 'radicalisation' as a concept is not necessary for the successful study of 'terrorism.'

Despite 'radicalisation's' many faults, its emergence has not been purely negative. The focus on 'radicalisation' has encouraged a broader and deeper interest in understanding what causes 'terrorism.' This heightened attention is positive for as McCauley and Moskaleiko argue, "[i]f we cannot understand why normal people turn to violence, we cannot hope to stop that violence, to reduce it, or to immunize against it."<sup>174</sup> A number of truly great studies have been produced in the aftermath of 'radicalisation's' conception which has certainly brought about a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. However, this study

believes that 'radicalisation's' flawed conception will lead the field to suffer in the long run.

Though this study encourages the abandonment of the concept, it realises that this is not a realistic goal. The amount of time, money and effort put into the development of this field means that too much is at stake for academics, governments and institutions to simply abandon the concept of 'radicalisation' now. Nevertheless, given the trouble with 'radicalisation' research should not continue to rely on the concept as it stands. This study therefore encourages academics to critically evaluate their need for the concept and, if deemed necessary, to rework 'radicalisation' into a concept conducive to the further development of the field.

# NOTES

## 1. INTRODUCTION

2. Apostrophe's are used in this study to indicate words that do not have an agreed upon definition but are contentious in nature and debatable in meaning.
3. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that the concept of 'radicalisation' is not useful for understanding terrorism. This argument rests partly on the fact that there is no agreed upon definition of 'radicalisation' and providing a comprehensive definition would therefore impede this analysis. For the purpose of this study 'radicalisation' is a concept used by academics engaged in terrorism research and is generally understood as a process by which an individual, group or society becomes more 'extreme' in relation to what the academic in question considers to be 'mainstream.'
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6. Kundnani, "Radicalisation: The Journey of a Concept," 14; Peter Neumann, "Introduction," in *Perspectives on Radicalisation and Political Violence: Papers From the First International Conference on Radicalisation and Political Violence* edited by Peter R. Neumann, Jacob Stoil and Dina Esfandiary (London: ICSR, 2008): 4.
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8. J. Githens-Mazer and R. Lambert, "Why Conventional Wisdom on Radicalisation Fails: The Persistence of a Failed Discourse," *International Affairs* 86, no.4 (2010): 889
9. Coolsaet, "Epilogue," 260.
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43. Sartori, "Concept Misinformation," 13.
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49. Sedgwick, "The Concept of Radicalization," 479.
50. Mandel, "Radicalization: What Does it Mean?" 107.
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## 2. CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

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78. Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," 877.
79. Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe."
80. Ibid., 798.
81. The Change Institute, *Studies Into Violent Radicalisation; Lot 2. The Beliefs, Ideologies and Narratives* (London: The Change Institute, 2008): 7.
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83. Schmid, *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation*, 8-9.
84. Ibid., 18.
85. Mandel, "Radicalization: What Does it Mean?" 110.
86. Ibid., 111.
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93. Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe," 798.
94. Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation," 5-7.
95. Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," 876.
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97. See pages 22-23 of this study.
98. It is not the intention here to conflate Saudi cultural practices with extremism but rather to recognise that the shift from a 'Western' viewpoint to an Islamist 'extremist' one is different to shifting from an "Islamic' viewpoint to Islamist 'extremism.' It is the difference between shifting worldviews entirely versus shifting to an extreme end of one worldview.

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110. Horgan, "Discussion Point;" McCauley and Moskalkenko, *Friction*.
111. Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*.
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### 3. THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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117. Della Porta, "Introduction," 6.
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119. Ibid., 14.
120. Ibid., 15.
121. Ibid., 23.
122. Ibid., 10.
123. Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999): 149.
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127. Ibid., 111.
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#### 4. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

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