

EPISTEMOLOGIES OF TERRORISM

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What leads people to turn to terrorism or political violence?¹ This question, posed by Marc Sageman, has preoccupied the intelligence community, policy makers, and terrorism scholars. Three epistemological perspectives on Sageman's question can be distinguished: scepticism, particularism and generalism. In this context scepticism is the view that while the question is legitimate, it is not one to which we now know or perhaps ever will know the answer. One reason is that the identification and evaluation, by means of large scale observational studies, of the causes or risk factors of involvement in terrorism is not feasible. In the absence of such testing, theories that purport to answer Sageman's question are unverified hypotheses rather than expressions of genuine knowledge. Some sceptics have gone further and questioned the idea that terrorism is, even in principle, an object of knowledge. On this view, as Stampnitzky characterises it, 'if terrorists are evil and irrational, then one cannot – and indeed *should not* – know them' (2013: 189).

A different epistemological perspective is that of the particularist.² For particularism one can ask why a given person turned to political violence and may hope for an answer. One person's turn to political violence might be understandable, at least in retrospect, in the light of his biography but what makes his turn to violence intelligible may have little bearing on another person's turn to political violence. For the particularist, the turn to political violence is best explained and understood by reference to specific and idiosyncratic features of a person's life history. There is no general answer to the question why *people* turn to political violence because people who move in this direction are historically specific particulars with their individual trajectories and interactions with different environmental factors. Pathways to terrorism are not unknowable but they are 'individualised and disconnected' (Heath-Kelly 2017: 300).

Generalism accuses scepticism of grossly exaggerating the practical obstacles that stand in the way of testing general theories of terrorism. For example, hypotheses about what causes the turn to political violence can be evaluated by debriefing known terrorists and studying trial testimonies and pre-trial interrogations.³ From an epidemiological perspective such retrospective observational studies have their limitations but are not without value.⁴ As for the supposed particularity of pathways to terrorism, the possibility cannot be ruled out that different individuals' pathways to political violence have identifiable common features, including some that are causally significant.⁵ Judicious abstraction from irrelevant individual differences is a feature of all theorising and there is no *a priori* reason to suppose that there is no general answer Sageman's question. Knowledge in this domain is not easy but far from impossible.

Generalism is the most popular of the three epistemological perspectives. Arguments between proponents of rival answers to Sageman's question are arguments between different general theories of terrorism. Although there are many such theories they cluster around three broad approaches: politico-rational, psycho-ideological and socio-situational. While these labels might be unfamiliar the approaches to which they apply are not. Though by no means mutually exclusive the three approaches emphasise different factors in accounting for the turn to political violence. Each offers an answer in general terms to Sageman's question and each is at odds with the notion that the answer to Sageman's question is unknowable or that there is something wrong with the pursuit of generality. In what follows the strengths and weaknesses of the three varieties of generalism will be assessed. This will be followed by further discussion of scepticism and particularism.

Politico-rational approaches

The key theses of the politico-rational approaches are that terrorism is fundamentally 'a mode of political action' (Kundnani 2012: 21) and in many cases 'a collectively rational strategic

choice' (Crenshaw 1990: 9) that is the result of 'logical processes that can be discovered and explained' (Crenshaw 1990: 7). On this account most terrorists and terrorist organisations have political objectives and see terrorism as an effective means of achieving their objectives. This was true of the I.R.A. in Northern Ireland, the LTTE in Sri Lanka, the Red Brigades in Italy and many other such organisations. The political dimension of terrorism would go without saying if it were not for the fact that recent work on this subject has tended to focus on Islam-related terrorism, which is taken by some to have religious rather than political objectives. In the words of Walter Lacquer, for example, 'Osama bin Laden did not go to war because of Gaza and Nablus' (2004: 52) and Al-Qaeda was founded 'because of a religious commandment – jihad and the establishment of *shari'ah*' (2004: 51).

Even if Lacquer is right about Al-Qaeda this would only serve to distinguish it from the majority of terrorist organisations. The claim that Al-Qaeda's objectives are primarily religious has also been disputed. Osama Bin Laden might not have gone to war because of Gaza and Nablus but his objectives did include the expulsion of American forces from the Middle East and this is a recognisably political objective. There is no doubt scope for further discussion about what counts as a 'political' objective or as a mode of *political* action. It might also be argued in defence of Lacquer's view that the presence of American forces in the Middle East, and in particular in Saudi Arabia, was offensive to Bin Laden for reasons that were ultimately religious. Nevertheless, the suggestion that terrorism is, by and large, a political phenomenon seems well-founded.

Politico-rational approaches are also opposed to the notion that terrorists are irrational. They claim that 'terrorism involves the perpetration of rational and calculated acts of violence' (Richards 2011: 151). The form of rationality that is at issue here is instrumental. A person is instrumentally rational 'insofar as she adopts suitable means to her ends' (Kolodny and Brunero 2016). Suitability here is a matter of efficacy not morality. For

politico-rational accounts of terrorism ‘efficacy is the primary standard by which terrorism is compared with other methods of achieving political goals’ (Crenshaw 1990: 8). Even if the means adopted by terrorists turn out to be inefficacious it still doesn’t follow that terrorists are irrational. They presumably *believe* that terrorism is an effective means of achieving their goals and this is not an obviously irrational belief given that there are historical examples of political goals having been achieved by terrorism. There remains the possibility that the goals of terrorist organisations are irrational but this claim is hard to justify in most cases. Goals can be misguided without being irrational.

Critics of the politico-rational approach make two points. The first is that clear-cut cases of terrorism ‘working’ are few and far between. Richard English has written of ‘the profound uncertainty of terrorism achieving its central goals’ and contrasted this with the near certainty that ‘terrible human suffering will ensue from terrorist violence’ (2016: 265). There is also the consideration that the mismatch in some cases between terrorists’ means and their ends is so great that serious questions about their rationality can legitimately be raised. For example there is evidence that Bin Laden’s overarching goal was the disintegration of the United States. The idea that this goal is achievable by the actions of an organisation like Al-Qaeda borders on the delusional. In the words of Thomas Nagel, organisations like Al-Qaeda have little understanding of ‘the balance of forces, the motives of their opponents and the political context in which they are operating’ and ‘it is excessively charitable to describe them as rational agents’ (2016: 19). They employ violent means which they believe will induce their opponents to give up, but ‘that belief is plainly irrational, and in any event false, as shown by the results’ (2016: 19).

If Nagel is right then there is less to the politico-rational approach than meets the eye. A more balanced view is that the politico-rational approach is plausible in some but not all cases. Terrorism is often a mode of political action and, and such, is not necessarily irrational

in an instrumental sense. There remains the question of how to account for the actions and beliefs of those individuals or organisations to which Nagel's description applies. To the extent that terrorists are delusional about the suitability of their means relative to their goals how is this to be accounted for? It is at this point that psycho-ideological approaches come into their own. If terrorists are irrational one might think that their irrationality has a psychological or ideological explanation. It is to this idea that we now turn.

Psycho-ideological approaches

The most well-known psycho-ideological approach claims that terrorists do what they do and believe what they believe not because they are rational agents pursuing reasonable political objectives but because they have been radicalised. The key to understanding the turn to political violence is therefore to understand the radicalisation process, 'the process whereby people become extremists' (Neumann 2013: 874). Radicalisation can be 'cognitive' or 'behavioural'.⁶ The former consists in formation of extremist beliefs whereas the latter is the turn to political violence or the use of extremist methods. Although cognitive radicalisation is no guarantee of behavioural radicalisation it is seen as a necessary condition of behavioural radicalisation and as a cause of political violence. Accordingly, it is argued, counterterrorism programmes should concentrate on countering radicalisation in the cognitive sense.

In what sense is radicalisation ideological and in what sense it is psychological? On one view, a key factor in the radicalisation process is ideology. On this account, 'what makes some individuals resort to political violence while others do not is many cases, impossible to understand without looking at the ideological assumptions which they have come to accept and believe in (Neumann 2013: 881). Radicalisation is also conceived of as a personal journey from one condition (not being radicalised) to another (being radicalised). Why do some people who are exposed to extremist ideas make this journey while others do not? Psycho-ideological approaches account for this by reference to 'psychological motives'

(Lacquer 2004: 53) or a psychological predisposition. For example, the radicalisation of some individuals but not others is attributed by the United Kingdom's *Contest* strategy for countering terrorism to the fact that some individuals but not others are 'vulnerable to radicalisation' (2011: 63). As long as this vulnerability is conceived of in psychological terms, as a psychological disposition, the resulting model of radicalisation is not just ideological but *psycho*-ideological.

Among many criticisms of this approach, one is that there is no compelling evidence of a psychological disposition to be radicalised.⁷ If the only evidence that a person is vulnerable to radicalisation is that they have in fact been radicalised then positing a psychological disposition has no explanatory power. Vulnerability to radicalisation, if one insists on speaking in these terms, is environmental rather than psychological. It has more to do with influences to which a person is exposed than with their psychology. A further potentially misleading implication of talk of 'vulnerability' is that radicalisation is something that *happens* to people rather than an expression of their own agency.⁸ On this 'contagion' model extremist ideas are a disease that vulnerable individuals contract by contact with infectious agents in the form of so-called 'radicalisers'. Yet there are many examples of politically violent individuals who have not been radicalised by external agencies. They have self-radicalised and their actions are an authentic albeit unfortunate expression of their own agency.

Another concern about psycho-ideological approaches is that they conceal or ignore the politics of terrorism. According to Kundnani, for example, answers to the question of what drives the radicalisation process 'exclude ascribing any causative role to the actions of western governments or their allies in other parts of the world' (2012: 5). This leads to the idea that 'individual psychological or theological journeys, largely removed from social and political circumstances' (2012: 5) are the root cause of radicalisation. In reply, one might

point out that while government agencies that ascribe political violence to radicalisation might indeed be seeking to divert attention from the role of their own policies and actions in triggering a violent response it doesn't follow that more nuanced accounts of the radicalisation process are committed to ignoring the causal role of government actions. They can acknowledge that some individuals radicalise in response to government action. To say this is not to reject the very idea of radicalisation or to suggest that radicalisation is a myth. The point is rather to explain in political rather than psychological or theological terms how and why radicalisation occurs. On this understanding, however, the dividing line between the radicalisation model and politico-rational approaches is no longer clear-cut.

A different objection to psycho-ideological approaches is that cognitive radicalisation is neither necessary nor sufficient for violent action: 'Most people who hold radical ideas do not engage in terrorism, and many terrorists are not deeply ideological and may not "radicalize" in any traditional sense' (Borum 2011: 8) Assuming that radicalisation in the cognitive sense neither guarantees nor predicts political violence there is no reason to regard it as the cause, or a cause, of political violence. By the same token, it doesn't explain political violence. Accordingly, counterterrorism programmes should focus on countering *terrorism* rather than cognitive radicalisation. Radical beliefs are not a proxy for terrorism. It is true, of course, that *behavioural* radicalisation is necessary and sufficient for political violence but that is because behavioural radicalisation *is* the turn to political violence.

These objections to the psycho-ideological approach raise difficult questions about the nature of causality and causal explanation. The fact that cognitive radicalisation is neither necessary nor sufficient for political violence does not prove that the two aren't causally linked. Nor does this conclusion follow from the fact that only a small proportion of the cognitively radicalised turn violent. For comparison, it is helpful to think about the link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer. The link is causal yet studies suggest that only

172 out of 1000 current male smokers will eventually get lung cancer.⁹ Which individuals will get cancer is almost impossible to predict and it is not the case that everyone who gets lung cancer smoked. Yet smoking causes lung cancer.

In the smoking case, relevant considerations in relation to the causal claim include the following: although lung cancer is not an inevitable consequence of smoking it is nevertheless the case that smoking substantially increases the risk of getting lung cancer: only 13 out of 1000 non-smoking males will get lung cancer. Since smoking is a risk factor for cancer an effective way to reduce cases of lung cancer is to reduce levels of smoking. If lung cancer is the problem but it is possible to smoke without getting lung cancer it doesn't follow that health programmes should target lung cancer rather than smoking. Targeting a risk factor for lung cancer is a way of targeting lung cancer. In general, 'if C causes E then if C were to be manipulated in the right way, there would be an associated change in E' (Woodward 2009: 234). If levels of smoking were to be manipulated in the right way then there would be an associated change in levels of lung cancer. This can be so even if cigarette smoking doesn't necessitate lung cancer. Furthermore, there is a reasonably well understood physiological mechanism relating smoking with lung cancer. The existence of this mechanism can justify the hypothesis that a heavy smoker who develops lung cancer did so as a result of their smoking, even though, for all we know, they might have got lung cancer anyway.

On this account of causation the relevant questions for the psycho-ideological approach are: is cognitive radicalisation a risk factor for political violence, one that raises the probability of a person turning to political violence? Would there be a change in levels of political violence if the extent of cognitive radicalisation were to be manipulated in the right way? And is there a well understood mechanism that links cognitive radicalisation to political violence. Critics of talk of radicalisation suspect that the answer to these questions is 'no'. It's not clear that they are right, at least in relation to the first two questions. Nevertheless,

given that only a small proportion of cognitively radicalised individuals will become terrorists the question can be still asked of those who do become violent ‘why these particular individuals and not others?’. As Lacquer asks, ‘how to explain that out of 100 militants believing with equal intensity in the justice of their cause, only a very few will actually engage in terrorist actions?’ (2004: 53). This is not a question to which radicalisation-focused theories of terrorism have, or should claim to have, an answer. Cognitive radicalisation is insufficient to explain why *particular individuals* commit terrorist acts and there is no getting away from ‘the inherent unpredictability of who becomes violent and who doesn’t’ (Githens-Mazer & Lambert 2010: 893). This is still compatible with viewing cognitive radicalisation as a risk factor for political violence and as causally implicated in political violence.¹⁰ In the same way, saying that smoking is a risk factor for lung cancer, and a cause of lung cancer, is compatible with accepting the inherent unpredictability of who among all the smokers is going to get lung cancer. We don’t know why this particular individual developed lung cancer and his chain-smoking brother did not.

Whatever the relationship between cognitive and behavioural radicalisation there is also the challenge of explaining cognitive radicalisation. Even if exposure to extremist ideas is a relevant factor there is still the question why, among all the people who are exposed to such ideas, some individuals accept them while others do not. The challenge with respect to a person who becomes cognitively radicalised is to understand ‘why these ideas have a traction with this individual’ (Githens-Mazer & Lambert 2010: 894). Could it be that extremist ideas resonate with particular personality types or with people with particular psychological characteristics? The jury is still out on these issues but aside from psychological factors account also needs to be taken of personal experiences and social-situational factors in radicalisation. It is to the latter that we must now turn.

Socio-situational approaches

In psychology situationism is the view that ‘people’s situations, rather than their characters, are explanatorily powerful factors in explaining why different people behave differently’ (Kamtekar 2004: 458).¹¹ The ‘fundamental attribution error’ consists in overestimating the role of personality traits and underestimating the role of situations in explaining how people behave. If the fundamental attribution error is an error then theories that try to explain why some people become terrorists while others do not in terms of differences in personality are guilty of it. This is the basis on which Sageman rejects psychological or personality-based accounts of terrorism.¹² Such accounts neglect social and situational factors in radicalisation. As for ideological accounts, the problem with these is that very few people who are exposed to extremist ideologies accept them. Psycho-ideological approaches fail to account for the low base rate of radicalisation as a result of exposure to extremist messages.

What, then, are the social and situational factors that account for the turn to political violence? Two key factors, at least in the case of global Islamic terrorism, are friendship and kinship. In this context, becoming a terrorist is usually ‘collective process based on friendship and kinship’ (Sageman 2008: 84) involving a “bunch of guys” who collectively decide to join a terrorist organisation. Social bonds come before any ideological commitment but reference to friendship and kinship groups will not account for loners who self-radicalise and commit terrorist acts.¹³ However, what accounts for their acts is not fundamentally different from what accounts for terrorist acts carried out by a bunch of guys. In both cases, the key is self-categorisation.¹⁴ Even “lone wolf” terrorists imagine themselves to be part of a larger social category such as ‘defender of Islam’. Hence, the first step in the turn to political violence consists in what Sageman sees as the ‘activation of a politicized social identity, which generates an imagined political protest community’ (Sageman 2017a: 117). The second step involves the activation of a *martial* social identity. This happens when ‘a few exasperated activists step up and volunteer to defend their imagined community’ (2017a: 143). They self-

categorize as soldiers and this ‘means that violence is imminent because people with this social identity are likely to act out who they believe they are’ (2017a: 145).

This social identity perspective offers a more nuanced account of the radicalisation process than psycho-ideological accounts but some important questions remain unanswered. Among those with a politicised social identity only a few will self-categorise as soldiers but why these particular individuals and not others? To ask Lacquer’s question again, how are we to explain the fact that out of 100 people with a politicised social identity only a few will self-categorise as soldiers and actually engage in terrorist actions? For that matter, how are we to explain the fact that a given bunch of guys exposed to extremist messages takes them on board while another bunch of guys from a similar background does not? One might wonder, though, whether it is reasonable to expect an answer to these questions. One view, that of the sceptic, is that when one gets down to specifics, it is necessarily a mystery why a particular individual turned to political violence while others exposed to the same influences did not. A different view is that of the particularist, who adopts a biographical approach and sees a particular individual’s turn to political violence as ultimately intelligible not in terms of the operation of socio-situational mechanisms of radicalisation but in the light of the specifics of their life history. For no one person is exactly like another and this is not a reality from which even socio-situational approaches can escape. The remaining question, therefore, is whether there is anything to be said for scepticism or particularism.

Particularism and scepticism

Particularism is a theory that is grounded in the metaphysics of particulars, in the notion that complex particulars ‘interact continuously with a variety of uncontrollable environmental factors’ and that we can never know ‘what historically specific interactions may impact on such historically specific particulars’ (Gorovitz and MacIntyre 1975: 16). Terrorists are complex particulars and, apart from the difficulty of knowing which interactions with other

people have impacted on them, there is also the difficulty of knowing *how* such interactions have impacted on them. This is one factor that accounts for the fact Lacquer's question is so hard to answer. The problem is that people who are exposed to very similar socio-situational influences can react to them very differently. Yet it wouldn't be correct to conclude, with the sceptic, that there is no possibility of illumination. In some cases, it is possible to understand in retrospect how a particular individual became politically violent, even though there is no saying whether another individual placed in exactly the same circumstances would have done the same thing. There is no general formula for the turn to political violence.

Another dimension of particularism derives from the work of the philosopher Karl Jaspers, who distinguishes between explanation and understanding.¹⁵ Explanation is concerned with the formulation of general rules and theories based on repeated observation. Understanding is not concerned with general rules or theories and is achieved by empathy. It is only concerned with the individual and requires a proper engagement with the individual's subjectivity. Engaging with a terrorist's subjectivity means imagining their situation as if it were one's own. It means making sense of their cognitive or behavioural radicalisation by reference to their history, relationships, and situation rather than by appealing to general mechanisms of radicalisation. Their pathway to political violence might turn out to be totally unique and idiosyncratic but may nevertheless be intelligible. There is, for example, the well-documented case of Anwar Al-Awlaki.¹⁶ Perhaps few others came to be radicalised in the way that he did, and the factors responsible for his turn to violence include some that were wholly contingent and accidental. It is nevertheless possible to make sense in biographical terms of his turn to political violence.

This raises a more general question about the very idea of 'the radicalisation process'. The use of the definite article implies that there is a single process and encourages the notion that 'studying radicalization is about discovering the nature of that process' (Neumann 2013:

874).¹⁷ The particularist's hypothesis is that there are multiple idiosyncratic pathways to radicalisation rather than a single process. There is simply no such thing as '*the* radicalisation process'. By way of analogy, consider the process by which someone makes the transition from not supporting a particular soccer team to supporting that team. If the team in question is Arsenal then one might say that someone who makes this transition has been 'Arsenalised' but one would not suppose that there is such thing as '*the* Arsenalisation process'. There are any number of idiosyncratic and highly personal pathways to Arsenalisation, and a particular person's Arsenalisation might be intelligible in the light of their biography. Yet there is no general theory of 'Arsenalisation'. Why should one expect there to be?

One response to this question might be to point out that while a particular person's radicalisation or Arsenalisation might be due to idiosyncratic factors there are nevertheless identifiable risk factors for both. In that case, there is something that can be said in general terms about both processes and scope for some broad generalisations. However, even if living close to the Arsenal stadium in London is a risk factor for Arsenalisation many people who live in that part of London do not support Arsenal, and Arsenal has supporters who live nowhere near the stadium. Risk factors for behavioural radicalisation are no more precise and of equally limited predictive value.¹⁸ Generalism about radicalisation is bound up with the idea that radicalisation is a process that can be studied and modelled in the way that other more familiar physical and social processes can be studied and modelled. The question whether this assumption is defensible is worthy of further study. What does seem clear is that Lacquer's question is one that no general theory of the turn to political violence is in a position to answer. Once the nature and limitations of such theories are understood that should come as no surprise.

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Notes

¹ See Sageman 2017b: ix. In Sageman's terminology, political violence is the 'deliberate collective attempt to use force against people or objects for political reasons' (2017b: 14). Turning to political violence is 'what is commonly thought of as becoming a terrorist' (2017b: 10).

² See Cassam, forthcoming, for an account and defence of this approach.

³ Sageman 2017b: xix.

⁴ For a helpful discussion of some of the methodological issues, albeit in a different context, see Howick 2011, chapter 5.

⁵ For example, Neumann identifies three drivers 'that seem to be common to the majority of radicalization trajectories' (2011: 15).

⁶ See Sageman 2017a: 90.

⁷ There are overviews of the evidence in Victoroff 2005 and Horgan 2014.

⁸ See Richards 2011: 150-2.

⁹ Villeneuve & Mao 1994.

¹⁰ As noted by Neumann. See Neumann 2011: 17.

¹¹ Ross and Nisbett is the *locus classicus* of situationism.

¹² Sageman 2008: 17-18.

¹³ On the priority of social bonds see Sageman 2008: 70.

¹⁴ Sageman 2017a: 114.

¹⁵ Jaspers 1997: 301-5, originally published in 1913. Hoerl 2013 is a clear account of Jaspers' 'epistemic particularism'.

¹⁶ Shane 2015. For an account of the relevance of Al-Awlaki for particularism see Cassam, forthcoming.

¹⁷ Elsewhere Neumann emphasises that ‘there isn’t a simple formula or template that would explain how people radicalize’ (2011: 15).

¹⁸ This is not to say, however, that failures of prediction in relation to terrorism necessarily ‘reveal a lack of intellectual rigour’ (Neumann 2016: xvii). Such failures are regarded by particularism as unavoidable.