RADICALISATION: A POLITICALLY CONTRIVED CONCEPT

Radicalisation is a politically contrived notion with many different meanings. Some are anchored in science, while others stem from anecdotes and prejudices. Consequently, to prevent future counter-radicalisation initiatives from backfiring, the authorities have to be attentive to the great uncertainties related to the concept.

Only a small minority of people with radical views are also involved in violent extremism or terrorism. At the same time, the actual cause of such violence remains unknown. Making a direct connection between radical ideas and violent or criminal acts is, therefore, not just a misunderstanding of the radicalisation phenomenon

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Be specific every time the concept of radicalisation is used. Clarify the context, for example, with regard to social questions, integration or security.

- Keep in mind that the meaning of radicalisation is not based on scientific objectivity, but on a specific political and ever-changing understanding of reality.

- Be honest about the political and normative nature of any conception of radicalisation.

- Be critical of any use of the concept which, under the cover of the prevention of violence, simply marginalises people of a different persuasion.

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– it also limits our range of view and our ability to better prevent violent extremism and terrorism in the future. Instead of limiting democracy and freedom of speech due to worries about extreme political violence, democracy can be used preventively and proactively. Instead of making radical positions taboo and suppressing them in public debates, one can confront and nuance the ideological fringe and make room for alternatives.

Denmark has a long-standing tradition of using freedom of speech as a way for radical voices to let off steam. The broad scope of our ideal of freedom of speech proved to be an excellent tool for deflecting neo-Nazi tendencies in the 1990s. Freedom of speech and the battle of ideas can still be used to counter rebellious youth.

What is radicalisation?
Radicalisation is a politically contrived concept. It is based on an attempt to understand, explain and prevent so-called home-grown terrorism, the idea that some young people who have grown up in peaceful, Western welfare societies end up carrying out politically or religiously motivated violence. The meaning and use of the concept is becoming ever more comprehensive. Over time, it has expanded to include everything from foreign fighters and disaffected youth to radical ideologues.

These constant changes to the meaning of radicalisation, combined with a lack of ability to explain the underlying causes of violence, prompts the use of the term 'radicalisation' in a wide range of policies, which only build upon a hypothetical and abstract notion of threat. A number of scientific disciplines have attempted to anchor radicalisation in scientific practice. However, each discipline has its own framework of understanding, its own models and its own definitions. Thus, the scientific search for answers has so far only led to a cacophony of scientific voices. Currently, therefore, there is no consensus on definitions, models, factors or assumptions about the individual. The question of definition has in itself been the subject of extensive academic debate.

The Danish authorities (the state, municipalities and police) often define radicalisation as:

> '…a process, by which a person to an increasing extent accepts the use of undemocratic or violent means, including terrorism, in an attempt to reach a certain political/ideological objective.'

The latest Danish action plan for the prevention of radicalisation and extremism, dating from 2014, still defines radicalisation in line with this understanding, although the action plan recognises the conceptual ambivalence inherent in the term.

Broadly speaking, the authorities typically consider radicalisation to be a movement or transformation from (democratic) normality to (a form of) extremism, where the movement often starts with radical ideas and ends in violence. What the two concepts, normality and extremism, actually cover is an open question. As a rule, normality is culturally and politically determined and is always subject to negotiation. This makes it difficult to find a solid base for the concept of radicalisation. In addition, the

connection with violent extremism and terrorism means that any abnormal attitude or behaviour runs the risk of being unjustifiably regarded as dangerous.
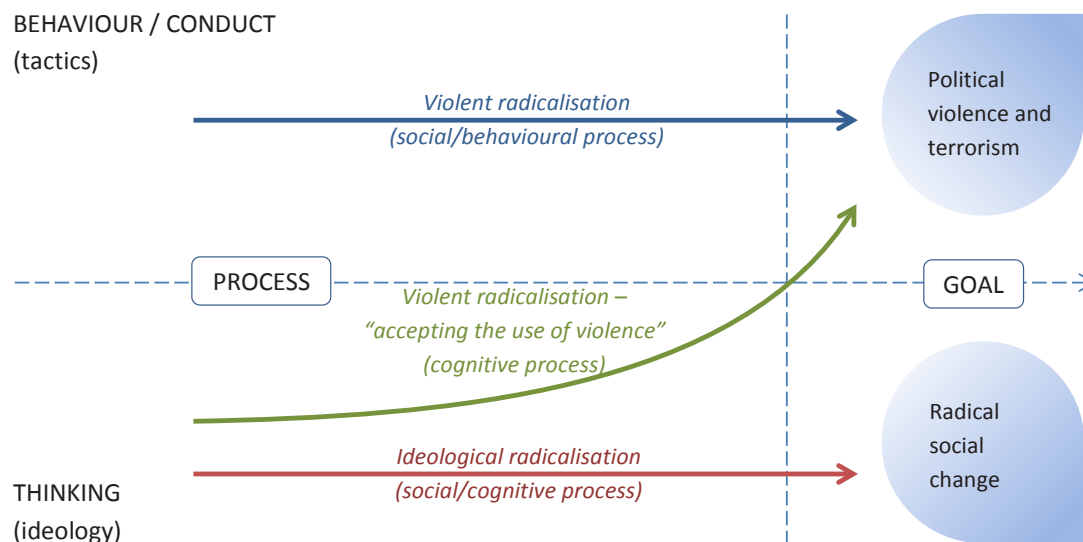
It is exactly this latent and non-specific perception of threat that is one of the most problematic consequences of the concept of radicalisation. So-called 'signs of radicalisation' are so vague and unclear that everything from the length of a beard and the use of certain symbols to radical convictions creates suspicion. But these signs are not necessarily expressions of anything other than certain identities and philosophies of life, which rarely have anything to do with the dangers of radicalisation. In this way, the normality-dependent definition of radicalisation risks becoming an instrument of censorship and self-censorship of people who look different or have an abnormal attitude or behaviour. However, it is not fruitful for a democratic society to alienate the abnormal – on the contrary.

Why do people become radicalised?
The causes of violent extremist behaviour are probably an enigma for all theories of radicalisation. Descriptions of the causes depend entirely on the scientific and philosophical perspective employed when looking at radicalisation. Many radicalisation researchers therefore emphasise that there are just as many reasons and combinations of reasons (domestic violence, discrimination, involvement in criminal environments etc.) as there are radicalised individuals. Every life story is unique. But even this point of view focuses too much on the individual and overlooks significant social, discursive and political interrelationships.

It has often been emphasised that explanations can be distinguished according to whether they involve the individual, group or societal levels. However, part of what makes radicalisation so complex is exactly the unpredictable interaction between factors at these

THREE INTERPRETATIONS OF RADICALISATION

BEHAVIOUR / CONDUCT
(tactics)

*Violent radicalisation
(social/behavioural process)*

Political violence and terrorism

PROCESS

*Violent radicalisation –
"accepting the use of violence"
(cognitive process)*

GOAL

THINKING
(ideology)

*Ideological radicalisation
(social/cognitive process)*

Radical social change

To simplify the wide range of approaches to understanding radicalisation as a process, three main conceptions can be deduced.

The first conception (the bottom arrow) indicates ideological radicalisation as a process that exclusively leads to thinking about or wanting radical change. Ideological radicalisation describes a cognitive and social process in which politics, culture, society etc. are reinterpreted in an increasingly radical direction. The result of this process is a revolutionary radicalism based on utopian ideas and a fundamental critique of the current world order.

The second conception (the top arrow) indicates violent radicalisation as a socialisation process, which teaches individuals, groups or entire societies to act violently in different situations. This process develops an ever increasing readiness to commit violence. The violence may be expressed through more or less random outbursts or take a specific form inspired by ideological narratives.

The third conception (the arrow in the middle) indicates radicalisation leading to (the acceptance of) violence as primarily being a process in which the radicalisation is cognitive and ideological, but the goal is the will to act violently (to one extent or another). This conception is the one typically used by the Danish authorities.

levels. In addition, the aspect of affective and emotional support for radicalisation remains a neglected topic. What gives rise to the searching, normality-sceptical individual in the first place? Is it a lack of existential meaning, the longing for recognition, or the need for a clear identity?

One of the most heavily debated questions in the literature on radicalisation is the question of the role of religion or ideology. Of course, approaches that emphasise radicalisation as an individual and cognitive process that starts with radical ideas and ends in violent extremism attach great significance to ideology. In contrast, approaches that place the emphasis on social (criminological) conditions often play down the significance of ideology. In situations where the latter approach deals with causality, the sequence is often reversed so that already existing violent inclinations, feelings and frustrations are expressed through an ideological or religious framework.

These opposing explanatory models and the difficulties involved in deciphering the significance of the radical individuals' links with the surrounding society result in vague descriptions of radicalisation.

How do people become radicalised?
The earliest attempts to develop radicalisation models often described radicalisation as a linear process divided into phases or stages in which a 'normal' individual turns to violent extremism or terrorism. But these simple models build upon a number of problematic assumptions and are often criticised by both researchers and practitioners.

Others regard radicalisation as a dynamic and unpredictable phenomenon that is reactive in nature and may take place over a number of years or arise more suddenly. Radicalisation may escalate and de-escalate, and the elements that appear to be important for an explanation of individuals' or environments' development over time appear to be completely different from the elements that stand out if one concentrates on the hours, days or weeks leading up to a specific violent event. For example, the elements that contribute to explaining Omar el-Hussein's behaviour during the weeks and days that led up to the shootings at Krudttønden and the synagogue in Copenhagen on the 14th and 15th of February 2015 are presumably elements that are different from those that explain his hatred of Israel or his readiness to commit violence, which evolved over a number of years.

Thus, there is a difference between these long-lasting processes and the moment's chaotic mix of relationships, networks, possibilities and events. What sometimes retrospectively appears to be the unavoidable effect of socialisation is still subject to the unpredictability of the moment. Nothing is carved in stone.

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