
Radicalization, Violent Extremism and Conflicting Diversity

An Interview with Michel Wieviorka

Mitja Sardoč

Prof. Michel Wieviorka is currently president, Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, and professor at Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, France. He served as president of the International Sociological Association (ISA 2006-2010), and is a member of the scientific Council of the European Research Council (ERC). He is the author of *The Arena of Racism* (Sage), *The Making of Terrorism* (University of Chicago Press), *The Lure of Anti-Semitism* (Brill), *Violence: A New Approach* (Sage), *Evil* (Polity Press).

*What are the most important differences between violent extremism fueled by radicalisation and other forms of terrorism that existed in different European countries back in the 1960s and 1970s, e.g. Spain, Italy, Germany, the UK (those you have examined in your book *The Making of Terrorism* [Sociétés et terrorisme])?*

We have to distinguish, between what I will call classical terrorism, and global terrorism. Classical terrorism began, at least seen from Europe, in the sixties, and was at its highest level in the seventies and early eighties. It could be domestic, then with three main possibilities: extreme-left, extreme-right, and independentist (for instance, Basque, or Irish). Sometimes, a same country, or a same movement could combine two aspects. Italy faced in the seventies both extreme-left and extreme right terrorisms, the Basque and the Irish movements had sometimes extreme-left components. And classical terrorism could also be international, which was mainly the case with those groups that acted in name of the

Palestinian cause, but also, less important, with the Asala, the Armenian movement. Classical terrorism was highly political, not religious.

Global terrorism began to appear, from my point of view, in the early or mid eighties, with some attacks in Lebanon, and, later, in France – but not only. In the nineties, it began to be much more active, and there was a summit in 2001, in the United States, with Bin Laden and 9/11. Global terrorism is religious, and either meta-political or infrapolitical. The actors want to die, as “martyrs”. In some cases, the actors are at the crossroads of two logics, a domestic one – they are for instance migrants in a country where they feel badly treated – and a geopolitical one – they are part of a world fight, like in the Huntington theory of “Clash of Civilizations”. In some cases, they have no territorial basis, and act as a network, which has been the case with Al Qaeda, but they may also try to have their own State, the Califate for Daech. Global terrorism can become individual, i.e. actors act as “lone wolves”, without strong ties with any network. It is in fact not so frequent with Daech; I would say that the more a country experiences only these kind of terrorist actors, the more it means that there are no strong centers abroad, no real capacity to organize important attacks from abroad, like in Paris in January and November 2015.

My book (in English: *The Making of Terrorism* [University of Chicago Press]) results from some eight or nine years of research, including fieldwork, at a time when classical terrorism was at stake, and it mainly deals with it. But I also made my research at a time when the new, Global Terrorism was appearing – which was very difficult to understand and, much more, to conceptualize.

Should we only use one term for this process or do we need to employ the term radicalisation(s) instead?

Radicalisation is not a concept, nor a theoretical category, but one of these words that is used in ordinary life, or by experts, technocrats, journalists, etc. when they want to speak of those people that are ready to commit terrorist acts. Or who commits them. When social scientists use it, they very quickly understand that it is not easy to pass from an ordinary vocabulary to a scientific one. In history, so many actors have been involved in commitments that today we could call “radical”! The French or Soviet Revolutionaries were radicalized! Those that were acting in order to decolonize their people were radicalized! Leftism, and extreme-right ideologies are radical! It is much more useful to introduce other concepts such as subjectivation and desubjectivation, and to analyze processes where they are at stake.

Despite the fact that in the EU's Internal Security Strategy and Action, radicalisation is defined as 'a complex phenomenon in which individuals adopt a radical ideology that can lead to committing terrorist acts', the relationship between radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism is anything but unambiguous or unproblematic. Is there any distinction between these terms that is in need of further clarification?

If social scientists expect to have their conceptual categories provided by the US or EU bureaucrats or politicians, then we can consider that social science does not exist! How do some individuals enter in a specific way of thinking, this is a first question. And here, it is clear that there is not only one worse way, but several, and that in order to understand this phenomenon, we need in-depth interviews or any other solid materials. In my own research for instance, I have been frequently surprised by the narrative which were provided to me by former terrorists accepting to tell me their life-story: the moment when they passed to some ideological "radicalisation" was not at all what you could have expected. It may have been purely accidental, or connected with very ordinary events, or interactions. Then, there is a second question due to the fact that many people can share radical ideas or ideology, but very few act as terrorists. Why and how do some people only pass from ideas to action? As far as Islamic terrorism is at stake, I consider that religion is absolutely decisive, even if the terrorist actor doesn't know a lot about Islam, or if he discovered Islam only a few months before he committed an attack. Without religion, there wouldn't be this impetus that makes possible the decision to die: dying, here, due to religion, means passing to another world, where you will have a wonderful life. So, let us forget this confusing word, "radicalisation", and let us analyse terrorism with other categories!

The 'causal' interpretation of the process of radicalisation as a 'path' or 'staircase' to terrorism advanced by some scholars has been very influential in this area of scholarly research. Is the process of radicalisation deterministic [that any individual who is radicalised is already a potential terrorist (the equivalence premise)]?

We had some years ago an interesting debate in France on this issue. Gilles Kepel, a good specialist, explained that religion is the key element in order to analyse passing to terrorism, in opposition to another good specialist, Olivier Roy, who gave more importance to social radicalisation, i.e. the social trajectory that leads to terrorism, for instance, in France: young migrants, living in poor neighbourhoods, victims of discrimination, and

racism, becoming small criminals, going into jail, meeting some Islamist preacher there ... So, Kepel spoke of radicalisation of Islam when Roy spoke of islamisation of radicality ... But a third excellent specialist, Farhad Khosrokhavar, published recently a great book in which he demonstrates that there is not only one single model, but many different paths, some of them including long training in religion, and others a short one, or almost none. And we should avoid two risks. One can be called “sociologism”: explaining terrorism only by social determinations, which is risky since many people share the same experience, but only a few may become terrorists; the second risk can be called “psychologism”: explaining terrorism by the personality, without taking into account the social background of actors. Many people are “radicalised” and will never commit any terrorist attack, and many people have an authoritarian and destructive personality but will not act like this too.

Some scholars argue that radicalisation is exclusively a reaction to the status quo [causal interpretation]? Do you find this interpretation ‘reductionist’ or otherwise problematic?

This is a very old way of thinking, explaining the action without analysing the actor, nor any kind of interaction, but observing the system and its modifications that make people react. Terrorism, like any other action, has its meaning, even if we should consider much more its loss of meaning. Actors do not become actors only because they react, for instance to some change in the status quo. They become actors in order to fulfil some goals, and because they want, as subjects, to transform the situation, and not only react.

Existing research on violent extremism focuses prevalently on its etiology looking for a causal explanation of the process of radicalisation leaving several conceptual issues either neglected or even ignored. What are the most important shortcomings of existing discussions on radicalisation(s) and violent extremism?

Let me say again that any causal explanation is generally too simplistic. And let me add a methodological remark: we need, when discussing this kind of affirmation, some proof, some test, some demonstration. In my case, the demonstrations were the result of fieldwork with former (or not so former) terrorist actors: when it has been possible for me to present to these people my analysis of their action as terrorists, the test was in what they did with my analysis. When they accepted it, and when they said something like: this analysis helps me to understand better what happened with such event, or what I did in such context, when they did

something with my analysis, I could consider that there was some element of demonstration. So, to these people that propose a causal explanation: what is the proof, the demonstration, the test?

Can the process of radicalisation be considered as 'the last of the remaining options' (when the 'loss of meaning' is taken into account)?

I wouldn't give a general answer, I would take this as a hypothesis, and I would test it with concrete actors. Did they have the feeling of having no other option? How do they react when I introduce this idea? My first reaction to this question is that I would be surprised to see terrorist actors accepting this kind of proposal, and say: yes, it is or it was the last option. I imagine much more them saying: it was the best option, far from any other one.

The brutality of terrorist attacks and their ever-increasing frequency also open the space for 'moral panic', Islamophobia, right-wing populism and political extremism that contribute considerably to the polarization of societies. How to deal with these so-called 'collateral' problems associated with radicalisation and violent extremism?

When terrorist attacks are striking a society, there is a lot of fear and irrationality that develops. Democracy then is in danger, the executive power will consider it necessary not to let the judicial and the legislative powers work as usual, and will diminish their capacity of action. Rumours, looking for scapegoats, prejudice will develop. Some very small issues will become big affairs; people will sometimes say they want a very strong, non-democratic authoritarian regime. I don't have any recipe in order to face such challenges, I can only say that social scientists have here an important responsibility, we must explain, provide serious analysis, contribute in the public debate on the basis of our researches.

Furthermore, how can radicalisation be understood within the framework of discussions about diversity? Perhaps as 'conflicting diversity'?

What you still want me to call "radicalisation" is one aspect of thinking and eventually acting when the processes of subjectivation, desubjectivation and resubjectivation appear in social life. If such processes exist, it is because social life is made of divisions, and they appear and develop when a non-radical action is not possible, when it is not possible for some individuals to transform through debates and non-violent conflicts

their subjectivity into action. Non-violent conflictuality including democratic negotiations and dialogues is the best answer to violence and “radicalisation”.

Are the phenomena of radicalisation, right-wing populism and political extremism poised to ultimately dominate our future? Is there a way of ‘exiting violence’ (to borrow the term from the ‘Violence and Exiting Violence Platform’ that you chair)?

You could add international criminality, school shooting, extreme nationalisms, etc.! One should not be too optimistic! Sometimes, one form of violence disappears, but another appears. For instance in Mexico, there is almost no more political violence, but there is a lot of criminal violence! There are no total solutions, but real possibilities to always try and implement preventing, reducing and eventually exiting violence. This means for instance being able to help traumatised people to recover, justice and peace to be articulated and not opposed, law, democracy and the state to replace chaos and civil war, etc. We are living in very dangerous times, and it is difficult not to be pessimistic.

Several scholars argue that one of the main limitations of existing approaches to the problem of radicalisation lies in its reliance on the ‘security’ paradigm, which leaves unanswered several key issues associated with the tackling of radicalisation and violent extremism. What would be the most pressing challenges to the ‘security paradigm’?

Radicalisation is a process, and in order to understand this process, we must first of all take into account the great diversities, on the one hand of those that are “radicalised” and on the other hand, of not only the national, but also international and local situations in which radicalisation has been possible. The “security” paradigm intervenes mainly at the national level, and deals with limited dimensions, most of them in the very short term. It doesn’t take into consideration the long-term issues, for instance education, and it has nothing to do with the economic, political, cultural and social sources of radicalisation, such as racism, social inequalities. It may become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and exert devastating perverse effects, for instance by stigmatizing some people that have at the beginning nothing to do with terrorism and violence. Security is necessary, but should appear as just one aspect of public policies. And security measures shouldn’t be voted in order to face terrorism, and be used for other goals.

What are the most important motivational factors that ‘trigger’ the process of radicalisation and what groups or individuals do you think are most at risk?

Radicalisation is such a diverse phenomenon; one cannot say that there are some “most important factors” that would “trigger” it. More generally, social science shouldn’t try to propose one or several “factors” of “causes to explain human behaviours, since these behaviours are not determined by them, they develop within the framework of relations between human beings, and usually these relations are not explained just by some “factors”. We shouldn’t think in terms of social or political determinism.

In some cases, radicalized individuals or groups select one kind of targets – journalists, Jews, catholic priests for instance. In other cases, the action is blind and there is no specific target, they just kill those that are there when they act, in the street for instance, like in Nice on July 14th, 2016. Today, there is such an importance of geopolitical and religious dimensions as far as radical violence is at stake that those individuals and groups that are concerned with these dimensions are most at risks – visibly Jews first.

What role should education play in the tackling of radicalisation and violent extremism and what educational programs and strategies do you find most appropriate? Which educational environments are most appropriate for programs and other activities associated with deradicalisation, counter-radicalisation, anti-polarisation (e.g. schools, peer groups, civil society organizations)? Why?

Education will not solve all issues, but no education will contribute to a more radical and violent society. The more important, from my point of view, is to consider that educational systems should create such conditions for more capacity, for each individual to become a Subject, i.e. a person able to master his or her own life while considering that all human beings should also be able to be more and more able subjects. This means: more capacity to analyze problems and situations, and one’s own participation or role in some problems and situations. When some individuals are radicalized, or in a process of radicalisation, there is always also a tendency towards sectarianism, incapacity to discuss out of one’s own group, feeling that “society” cannot understand, and then, I consider that facing this means creating new opportunities for these individuals to be re-integrated in debates and even tense discussions. Let me give you an example. In the early 70s in France, there was a revolutionary leftist “maoïste” group

who was radicalized, and not far from passing to terrorism. Their chance was that some very important intellectuals, including Jean-Paul Sartre or Michel Foucault were interested and concerned with talking to them, the leaders of this group had a relationship with external people that talked with them, and it has been one element that made them decide to finish with these tendencies of clandestine and violent action.