

I.B. TAURIS

RADICALIZATION IN BELGIUM AND THE NETHERLANDS

**CRITICAL
PERSPECTIVES
ON VIOLENCE
AND SECURITY**

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Critical Perspectives on Violence and Security

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(Editors)

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Chapter 1

RADICALIZATION: THE ORIGINS AND LIMITS OF A CONTESTED CONCEPT¹

Rik Coolsaet

'Radicalization' has a twisted history. At every turn, it gained a new meaning without shedding the existing one. In the beginning, 'radicalization' meant Muslims espousing an anti-Western, fundamentalist stance, with Iran as the epicentre of a global Muslim insurgency. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, it started to be loosely used as a synonym of 'anger'. A number of Muslims were said to become increasingly angry as a result of a wide variety of 'root causes'. But almost simultaneously, it became intertwined with 'recruitment' by foreign extremists, who tried to persuade these angry individuals to join foreign war zones. In 2004, another layer was added when 'self-radicalization' became the buzzword, since it appeared that one could also develop into a terrorist through kinship and friendship networks. That year, the EU officially embraced the concept. Myriad models and studies were financed to try to clarify the long, step-by-step process through which an individual radicalized into a terrorist. But, in a new twist, by 2015–2016 it became obvious that radicalization didn't require a long process after all. 'Flash' or 'instant radicalization' was introduced to elucidate how some literally in a moment jumped into jihadi terrorism without any previous phase of, well, radicalization. In the meantime, by 2018, the culprit behind the global Muslim insurgency had crossed the Gulf. Saudi Arabia was now seen as the villain that, through its multi-billion-dollar promotion of a newly coined 'Salafi-Wahhabism', has perverted the minds of millions of Muslims worldwide into a rejectionist, anti-Western stance.

As this chapter will illustrate, throughout the years 'radicalization' has gained even more layers than those succinctly exposed in the introductory paragraph. When the scale of Europeans travelling to Syria was publicly disclosed in early 2013, many were taken by surprise, even in countries like the Netherlands or the United Kingdom, which had taken a substantial lead in the field of radicalization studies. By mid-2014, the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (*Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst*, AIVD) consequently reported that the existing tools focusing upon profiles and indicators had proven to be of only limited use.² This observation should come as no surprise. The very notion of 'radicalization' has always been an oversimplification of an extremely complex

phenomenon, and a source of ambiguity and confusion as a result of competing paradigms and multi-layered definitions.

The concept of radicalization in relation to terrorism has no long-standing scientific pedigree. It was born as a political construct, first raised within European police and intelligence circles, boosted by the 9/11 attacks and finally embraced in May 2004 in an internal EU counterterrorism document. The attacks in Madrid, two months before, and in London in July 2005, pushed the concept to centre stage in EU counterterrorism thinking and policies. Unlike the perpetrators of 9/11, these attackers did not come from abroad but were individuals who grew up in Europe and were often born there. How did they come to resort to terrorism and turn against their own countrymen? Why were they attracted by extremist ideologies? What made them vulnerable to recruiters? Something, it was argued, must turn a person from a 'normal' individual into a terrorist. Untangling this process became the essence of radicalization studies and the holy grail of European (and later worldwide) counterterrorism efforts. Fifteen years after its official adoption and notwithstanding its widespread usage, radicalization remains a sloppy notion, ill-defined, complex and controversial. The same questions are still being asked today: What exactly do we understand by radicalization? What are its drivers? How do we reverse or stop it? Are radical ideas a conveyor belt to radical action? How does religion relate to it exactly?

2001–2004: The origins of a novel concept

The 9/11 attacks made terrorism once more a leading threat to the West. Initially, this was essentially considered an external threat. The West was a target for al-Qaeda and other jihadi groups, as well as a 'place for recruitment and logistical support for jihad in Afghanistan, Iraq and Chechnya', according to Europol, the Europe-wide police office.³ Its international nature made it stand apart from the other forms of terrorism in the EU, dubbed 'domestic', such as separatist, extreme-left or eco-terrorism. The first official EU declaration on terrorism in the wake of the 9/11 attacks clearly testified to the external nature of the threat. Under the aegis of the United Nations, the EU affirmed that it would act in solidarity with the United States and that it would take and support

actions ... targeted and ... directed against States abetting, supporting or harbouring terrorists. ... It is by developing the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and by making the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) operational at the earliest opportunity that the Union will be most effective. The fight against the scourge of terrorism will be all the more effective if it is based on an in-depth political dialogue with those countries and regions of the world in which terrorism comes into being.⁴

But soon, counterterrorism experts in the Belgian police and in State Security (the civil intelligence service VSSE (*Veiligheid van de Staat-Sûreté de l'État*)) started

noticing signs of ‘radicalization’ among youngsters in immigrant communities, particularly with Moroccan roots. ‘Radical’ was loosely used here. It covered the same observations described by Europol some time later as a ‘toughening’ (of Moroccan students in France).⁵ The Belgian assessments were shared with the colleagues of the AIVD, who, in the months following the September 2001 attacks, had noticed a parallel trend of recruitment of young Dutchmen by foreign ‘fundamental Muslims’ who had fought in Afghanistan. In a public report released in December 2002, the AIVD attempted to draw a profile of these youngsters. Many of them were young men of Moroccan origin (aged eighteen to thirty-one), who were born in the Netherlands or grew up there from early childhood:

These young people are often in search of their identity. They blame Dutch society for not having enough respect for their ethnic and religious community and not in the least for their parents and they themselves. Where other foreign youths opt for a more liberal confirmation of their Islamic belief and attach a lot of value to their social development in the Dutch society and others end up in a criminal environment, these youths find something to hold on to in very radical Islamic beliefs. Former Islamistic fighters who guide them in a recruitment process, give them a sense of self-respect, involvement, brotherhood and identity. They feel that they are involved in a fight between good and bad, which guides them into a certain direction and provides answers to existential questions they are dealing with. For some Muslim youths embracing a radical Islamic faith signifies a clear break with their former criminal existence, a way of life they want to leave behind for good.⁶

In this report ‘radicalization processes’ was incidentally mentioned. It was not altogether clear what exactly was meant, but from the earlier quote it can be assumed that it referred to Muslims ‘embracing a radical Islamic faith’. In relation to Islam, ‘radical’ had indeed become a widespread term since the Iranian revolution of 1979. It was in this sense that the AIVD’s precursor, the BVD, used it in the early 1990s when referring to the ‘increasing radicalization or fundamentalization of Muslim communities.’⁷ But here too, the concept was not further elaborated upon.⁸

In its *2001 Annual Report*, the Dutch service went one step further. It now explicitly linked extreme religious ideas to terrorism:

Never before has it been so manifest that extreme religious convictions within part of the Muslim community also involve risks in the sphere of radicalization and terrorism, in addition to other security-related problems, such as a polarization between population groups or imported conflicts. . . . The BVD’s intensified attention for counterterrorism is partly focused on the identification of breeding grounds for radical ideas that might eventually lead to actual support to or participation in terrorist attacks by Dutch residents.⁹

The ‘breeding grounds for radical ideas’ seem to refer in the first place to the countries of origin of the immigrant communities in the Netherlands, in particular

the Turkish, Kurdish and Afghan communities, but the 'phenomena that frustrate the integration of Muslims into the Dutch society' were also identified, albeit in lesser detail.

The Dutch intelligence service called for both dialogue and repression as measures to prevent radicalization processes from developing into terrorism. How exactly radical ideas transformed into violent acts was not spelled out, however. The previously mentioned December 2002 report was the first attempt to break down the process by which individuals decided 'to travel abroad to participate in or support the jihad'. Radicalization was described as part of a recruitment process led by foreigners and aimed at drawing individuals into participation in overseas terrorist campaigns. In other words, radical ideas possibly turned into terrorism through the patient endeavours of recruiters. This was considered a 'long process':

A recruiter requires patience and social-psychological insight to gradually tighten his grip on the recruit and to be able to manipulate him towards a willingness to devote himself to the jihad. The recruitment process is a long process, that starts with making and intensifying the contact, in which the relation starts to look more and more like a recruiter-recruit relationship. Because recruiters have more impact on recruits than the other way around, it seems probable that the initiative for recruitment originates with a recruiter. . . . People recruited in the Netherlands who then travel abroad to participate in an ideological and military training elsewhere or in the Islamic war, are also a huge threat for the international legal order.¹⁰

In the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War, some European intelligence agencies warned of potential consequences for Europe, contradicting the official American rationale for the war, summarized by George W. Bush as follows: 'We will strike the terrorists abroad so we do not have to face them here at home.'¹¹ Belgium's VSSE was apprehensive that the Iraq War would, on the contrary, boost resentment and unrest among youngsters on the streets of Europe, as indeed police officers in the field soon reported.

As it turned out, the American invasion of Iraq breathed new life into the waning jihadi scene. A new wave of radicals emerged, angered by the invasion. This wave was labelled 'home-grown'. By adding a layer of frustration that existed within Muslim communities worldwide, it also pushed jihadi terrorism into a new dimension that plugged into the ongoing fragmentation of the al-Qaeda network: a bottom-up dynamic of small self-radicalizing groups and individuals no longer directed by al-Qaeda but subscribing to its ideology. Foreign recruiters were no longer needed (even if this still happened), and recruitment became a more spontaneous local process, evolving through kinship and friendship bonds. The jihadi threat was becoming a decentralized, home-grown patchwork of scattered groups linked by a common world view and opportunistic connections. It thus represented an essentially bottom-up dynamic, increasingly replacing the earlier top-down strategy conducted via foreign recruiters.

Competing paradigms on the origins of terrorism were by now cohabitating within EU counterterrorism thinking. The original view of terrorism as an external security challenge was highlighted in the EU's first European Security Strategy (ESS), presented by Javier Solana in December 2003. A second view co-existed alongside the first, but initially only as a side issue, involving exploitation of domestic grievances by foreign extremists. The ESS also mentioned 'alienation of young people living in foreign societies'. That sentence was somewhat puzzling, since the precise meaning of 'foreign societies' was not explicit. Did it concern youngsters living in dire situations outside Europe or did it refer to European youngsters with migrant roots? Probably both. The ESS addressed the realm of external relations, but surprisingly, in a subsequent sentence it also mentioned that 'This phenomenon is also a part of our own society'.¹² That last view was soon to gain the upper hand.

The Madrid train bombings of March 2004 subsequently confirmed these early indications of a home-grown threat, even if the ensuing 'Declaration on Combating Terrorism' still largely described the threat of terrorism in terms of external threat. The perpetrators did not conform to the (implicit) standard terrorist profile of a fundamentalist Muslim coming from abroad, but originated from the important Spanish-Moroccan diaspora, without any proven link to al-Qaeda. With hindsight, this was nevertheless a major boost for what was to become a brand-new dimension in European counterterrorism: the identification of 'root causes'.

The Madrid attacks prompted the EU and its Member States to break new ground in their counterterrorism approach by delving into the mechanisms underpinning the recruitment of individuals into terrorism. The Council meeting of March 2004 called for a thorough assessment of 'the factors which contribute to support for, and recruitment into, terrorism'. The groundwork had been laid by the earlier intelligence and police assessments and the discussions within the EU counterterrorism working groups, but now the EU seriously embarked on the 'root causes' approach to terrorism.

By taking this route, the EU entered uncharted territory. Historically, Member States had always considered terrorism to be a crime that should be tackled through criminal law. 'Root causes', however, not only brought the EU into the realm of prevention, a policy domain that lay by and large within Member States' competence, but also, more importantly, pushed counterterrorism far beyond its traditional security-centred tools of policing, intelligence and law enforcement by linking prevention and security with the ultimate ambition of draining the breeding ground for terrorism. Counterterrorism now became a whole-of-government effort, encompassing complex societal issues such as integration, multiculturalism and social cohesion, and stitching it all together in a broadened security agenda.

Only with the passing of time would the implications of blurring the once-obvious dividing line between prevention and security, and their respective constituencies, become clear. It led to ambiguities and unintended consequences that still bedevil counterterrorism, prevention and community relations alike.

With the EU embarking upon a root cause trajectory, the United States instead privileged a global manhunt as its main strategy for combating international

terrorism. The EU's burgeoning focus on upstream prevention through the identification of the underlying factors that could lead to (recruitment to) terrorism was generally rejected by the United States, since it considered that speaking of 'root causes' implied condoning certain terrorist acts. The idea of 'roots' was 'a taboo in the Bush administration, with "evil" the only acceptable explanation for the attacks of September 11'.¹³

Immediately after the Madrid bombings, a closed meeting organized in Brussels by the Belgian Egmont Institute – The Royal Institute for International Relations – at the request of the (rotating) Irish EU presidency brought together for the first time the two relevant EU working groups on terrorism (Council Working Group on Terrorism – International Aspects or COTER and the Terrorism Working Group or TWG) with the police and intelligence services of the Member States to discuss terrorist recruitment. Participants tried to determine whether top-down recruitment by international networks such as al-Qaeda or instead bottom-up self-recruitment were the main avenue by which individuals were drawn into terrorism.

The Irish EU presidency acted upon the discussions at this conference. In May 2004, a common (confidential) assessment of the 'Underlying factors in the recruitment to terrorism' by the two EU working groups (COTER and TWG) attempted to identify the root causes of radicalization. It was the very first time an official (albeit confidential) EU document mentioned 'radicalization' in relation to terrorism. In the assessment radicalization was essentially understood as 'anger among Muslims or Islamists'.

The potential causes of this anger were considered wide-ranging (but not put in any specific order of priority, nor really operationalized): regional conflicts and failed or failing states (and the perception of Western double standards), globalization and socio-economic factors, alienation, propagation of an extremist worldview, and of systems of education (madrasas). In summing up the possible root causes of the anger, the paper clarified the puzzling reference to alienation of youngsters in foreign countries in the ESS. This did indeed refer to youngsters both inside and outside Europe:

Within Europe, young Muslims may often feel themselves to be subject to discrimination and participate relatively little in mainstream politics and public life. In this context of sometimes real grievances, a lack of any real opportunities to effect change or vent frustration and a consequent sense of anger and helplessness, the unambiguous messages of extremist propaganda can become very attractive, particularly to the youth population.¹⁴

The report was largely inspired by recent intelligence assessments (originating from the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands and a limited number of Member States). It warned that the 'processes by which individuals are drawn into terrorism [were] very complex. . . . Accordingly, generalizations must be viewed with great caution.'

The 'radicalization process' was accordingly represented as the ultimate stage of recruitment to terrorism for a minority of radical Muslims:

Recruitment to terrorist organizations is preceded, in many cases, by a process of radicalization, where an individual may become attracted to extremist ideologies. There are a number of factors that may contribute to this, although the specific process of radicalization can vary from individual to individual.¹⁵

This recruitment was understood as a wide-ranging and strategically planned endeavour by 'Islamist terrorist organizations' who were 'looking for and identifying potential recruits and then monitoring and manipulating these people to achieve an internalized radical political-Islamic conviction, with the final purpose of having them participate in the jihad in one way or another'.¹⁶

But in its concluding paragraphs, the May 2004 assessment also mentioned the new bottom-up trend, reported earlier by police and intelligence services, of 'self-motivated young radicals . . . who have had no physical contact with recruiters and who have been mobilized by extremist ideological messages encountered over the internet'.

At the end of 2004, the Dutch AIVD was the first Western intelligence service to state publicly that radicalization could indeed be a process of 'autonomous' recruitment (through self-initiated radicalization), without the mediation of a 'real' recruiter.¹⁷ The murders of the libertarian Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn by an environmental and animal rights activist in 2002 and, still more so, of the movie director Theo van Gogh in 2004 by a young member of a loose grouping of radicals of Moroccan descent who had been born or raised in the Netherlands (with the exception of one or two converts to Islam), turned the spotlight on home-grown terrorism.

Moreover, this report for the first time attempted to define 'radicalism' (distinguishing it from extremism) and 'radicalization'. Radicalism was defined as:

The (active) pursuit of and/or support to far-reaching changes in society which may constitute a danger to (the continued existence of) the democratic legal order (aim), which may involve the use of undemocratic methods (means) that may harm the functioning of the democratic legal order (effect). In line with this, radicalization can be interpreted as a person's (growing) willingness to pursue and/or support such changes himself (in an undemocratic way or otherwise), or his encouraging others to do so.¹⁸

In contrast to the earlier internal EU assessment, the AIVD privileged an essentially ideological understanding of the process of radicalization, disconnected from the potential political, social and economic causes of radicalization originally understood as 'anger'. It did acknowledge that the causes of the emergence of 'radical-political Islamic movements are diverse', including the national context. But it left the domestic context essentially out of the equation, and instead focused on the 'purely religious ideological component of radical-political Islam, which plays an increasingly important role in many countries (including the Netherlands) both on a national level and on an international level'.¹⁹ What was originally, in the May 2004 EU assessment, only one of the possible root causes of radicalization

now became a major prism through which to examine the process. Even if inside the EU some Member States – including the Irish Presidency at that time – warned against the pitfalls of involving Islam as a religion in the debate (in a classified EU-wide message on 4 February 2004), the ideological and religious prism nevertheless became a major factor in the emerging consensus on radicalization as the core approach to understanding contemporary terrorism.

The AIVD went to great lengths to distinguish between different forms of ‘radical Islam’, only to conclude that all of its forms – religious, apolitical or violent – constituted a threat, albeit of different natures, and were thus a matter for follow-up and investigation by intelligence services.

This turn to a religious and ideological prism produced a new set of competing paradigms, with important policy consequences. Even fifteen years on, this still bedevils and obscures the issue of radicalization, making it a source of persistent ambiguity. If radicalization is decontextualized and primarily considered an ideology-driven process, whereby ideas function as a conveyor belt to action, then a counter-narrative (instilling individuals with so-called moderate ideas) is an appropriate way of blocking its spread. But if the context or the conducive environment is the key structural driver behind the emergence of radicalization, then proposing a counter-narrative will be irrelevant or of only limited use. Moreover, the latter approach makes a suitable counter-strategy much harder to conceive, since it implies taking a hard look at structural drivers within one’s own domestic environment and dealing with an extraordinarily broad range of issues.

Alongside the evolving thinking within the intelligence community and the European Commission, the Madrid bombings clearly acted as a milestone, not only for enhancing European coordination in counterterrorism, but also for pursuing the enquiry into root causes.

Within the European Commission, officials were, however, reluctant to use the concept of ‘root causes’. They feared that it could be hijacked by radicals in the Basque region or Northern Ireland to justify their terrorist tactics. But they were also convinced of the need to address the underlying factors and thus to go beyond the mere law enforcement that constituted the traditional core of European counterterrorism. Without tackling upstream the context that had engendered the current wave of ‘Islamic terrorism’, they feared that the European polity would be undermined by a growing polarization between Muslims and non-Muslims and between natives and migrant communities. They thus seized the opportunity offered by this emerging concept of ‘radicalization’, judging it to be more neutral than ‘root causes’.

They were nonetheless aware of the inherent dangers in advancing this concept. Not only did they realize that it was an oversimplification of an extremely complex phenomenon at the intersection of individual pathways and a societal context, but they also comprehended that radicalization was not to be criminalized, lest freedom of speech and the very essence of liberal democracy were endangered. The concept must also not be hijacked by anti-migrant and anti-Islam pundits and movements, thus endangering the social fabric of the EU.

In October 2004, the European Commission released its first public paper on ‘radicalization’, accompanied by the qualification ‘violent’.²⁰ Speaking of ‘disrupting

the conditions facilitating the recruitment of terrorists', it evidently echoed the May 2004 report and the intelligence assessments. The Commission announced its intention to draw upon 'the expertise of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, experts and researchers', with the aim of identifying 'where European policies and instruments can play a preventive role against violent radicalization'. The Commission also made plain that it intended to boost intra-European cooperation in this field and thus to enhance its role in a policy domain that was still largely dominated by intergovernmental decision making.

The two EU counterterrorism working groups drew up a second joint report in November 2004. It now zoomed in on the personal trajectories of individuals and evidently privileged ideological factors over the contextual factors that had been prominent in their first report as the sources of eventual anger. The Netherlands now held the rotating EU presidency. This partly helps to explain the shift from context to ideology, since it reflected the stance taken by the Dutch intelligence service. But one might also consider this to be the result of a common-sense process of narrowing down a complex phenomenon into an operational approach. A strategy that intended to dry up all the possible root causes of anger among youngsters was doomed to be a whole-of-government approach, extremely wide-ranging, complex, time-consuming and spanning virtually all imaginable policy domains, far beyond the classical realm of counterterrorism. Concentrating upon individual pathways seemed, on the contrary, to have the benefit of simplicity. Focusing on the process an individual undergoes from his or her original 'normal' status to becoming a terrorist seemed a lot easier than addressing the environment that made him or her vulnerable to the siren song of extremism.

Accordingly, this November report identified a number of particular 'hot spots' where radicalization processes were likely to occur (certain mosques, schools, ghettos, the internet). But the report now also insisted that it tended to take place via loosely connected networks and individuals rather than through specific organizations dedicated to the task. This unmistakably indicated that the original idea of an external recruiter actively taking the lead in the process of radicalization had given way to bottom-up dynamics. The report mentioned that while 'exogenous factors' (i.e. the role of al-Qaeda as a leading factor in radicalization) had somewhat diminished, 'endogenous factors have an increasing influence on radicalization'.

The report now clearly leaned towards the ideological paradigm, like the Dutch AIVD reports. While contextual factors were not entirely neglected – underlying factors such as social deprivation or lack of integration were indeed mentioned – the emphasis was nevertheless clearly on the ideological process of the individual:

A univocal definition of radicalization cannot be given. At the same time, it is clear that individuals can move from mainstream Muslim beliefs and practices towards Islamist extremism. This may be motivated by a potential confrontation with Western society, though other factors also can play a role here such as justification of criminal activities, peer pressure, the appeal for 'justified' violent behaviour.²¹

2005: The institutionalization of competing paradigms

In December 2004, the European heads of state and government decided to elaborate a strategy and action plan to address radicalization and recruitment to terrorism. It had now become agreed standard language within the EU that in the long run the Union's response to terrorism had to address the 'root causes of terrorism', as this Council decision stated. It called on the Council to establish a long-term strategy and action plan on both radicalization and recruitment by June 2005.²²

Alongside the ongoing work that had started within the Commission after the March train bombings, the EU Council secretariat also initiated a comprehensive effort of consultation and information gathering on radicalization under the guidance of Gilles de Kerchove, then director for Justice and Home Affairs.

The July 2005 bombings in London acted as a further booster for counterterrorism work and thinking at EU level. While holding the EU presidency in the second half of 2005, the United Kingdom proposed streamlining into a single overall framework the wide variety of ad hoc measures that had been undertaken since 9/11. This would mirror the structure of its own recently adopted counterterrorism strategy (which itself had been influenced by the ongoing work within the European Commission on a counterterrorism strategy).

Radicalization as prism for understanding and countering terrorism was now rapidly gaining traction within EU counterterrorism thinking. The Commission announced in September 2005 that it was establishing 'a network of experts for the sharing of research and policy ideas which will submit a preliminary contribution on the state of knowledge on violent radicalization in the beginning of 2016'.²³ This document defined violent radicalization as 'the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism . . .'. The document once again stressed that this was 'a very complex question with no simple answers and which requires a cautious, modest and well-thought approach'. It was also adamant in warning against the use of the words 'Islamic terrorism'. Stating that no religion tolerates, let alone justifies, terrorism, the document emphasized:

The fact that some individuals unscrupulously attempt to justify their crimes in the name of a religion . . . cannot be allowed in any way and to any extent whatsoever to cast a shadow upon such a religion. . . . Stating this fact clearly is, in the Commission's view, the first requirement for the Union in the fight against violent radicalization.²⁴

The emerging consensus on the concept of 'violent radicalization' should not, however, be overstated. Quite the contrary. Most EU Member States were of the opinion that the emphasis should rather be on preparedness and protecting the public from the immediate threat of terrorist attacks. Moreover, in the absence of a univocally agreed definition of radicalization, elusiveness was the dominant characteristic of the discussions that followed. Some Member States increasingly identified ideology as the major driving force of radicalization. But a small number

of Member States, together with the Commission and the Council Secretariat, were adamant about addressing contextual factors in view of long-term sustainable results in counterterrorism efforts.²⁵

The European Commission itself was firmly in favour of maintaining a broad approach to upstream prevention at the heart of European counterterrorism efforts. One of the motivations behind Commission officials' desire to gather together the aforementioned Expert Group was the hope of building a critical mass to sustain this approach. It wanted to pool existing academic knowledge on different types of radicalization in order to identify the core characteristics of the process as a necessary basis for devising adequate counterstrategies.

The EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy adopted by the heads of state and government in their December 2005 Council meeting, while still defining terrorism as an external phenomenon ('much of the terrorist threat to Europe originates outside the EU'), now also endorsed the home-grown radicalization challenge that needed to be addressed.²⁶ It took some discussion among the Member States, but by identifying 'Prevent' ('preventing people turning to terrorism by tackling the factors or root causes which can lead to radicalization and recruitment, in Europe and internationally') as the first of the four strategic objectives, the EU clearly stressed the preventive work that needed to be undertaken to combat terrorism in the long term.

The other strategic objectives were the following: 'Protect' (sheltering citizens and infrastructure from attacks), 'Pursue' (pursue and investigate terrorists and their networks across EU borders), and finally 'Respond' (enhancing consequence management mechanisms and capabilities used in case of an attack in one of the Member States).

As part and parcel of this new overall strategy, the European Council simultaneously adopted the *Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism*, thus confirming that radicalization had become one of the central threads in Europe's 'root cause' approach to counterterrorism. This document called for a better understanding of the 'motives behind such a decision [i.e. to become involved in terrorism]' and for a way to 'identify and counter the ways, propaganda and conditions through which people are drawn into terrorism and consider it a legitimate course of action.'²⁷ The strategy recognized that radicalization was rooted in the domestic context of the Member States: Within the Union, too, structural factors existed that might create disaffection and susceptibility to the overtures of extremists, such as social and economic inequalities among relevant minority groups.

This was plainly spelled out in the accompanying (classified) Action Plan, which almost exclusively dealt with factors in the domestic realm. In an attempt to operationalize the complex mosaic of root causes that had been identified since 2004, the Action Plan defined three venues for specific action: 'facilitational factors' (disrupting the activities of terrorist networks), 'motivational factors' ('ensuring that voices of moderation prevail over those of extremism') and 'structural factors' ('promoting yet more vigorously security, justice, democracy and opportunity for all'). In the last dimension, EU Member States were exhorted to 'combat those who exacerbate division by inciting racism, xenophobia and specifically Islamophobia'

and to target resources to reduce existing inequalities. Member States should consequently 'develop and promote full and active engagements of all citizens in their communities'.

By the end of 2005, radicalization had become the holy grail of European counterterrorism. But under this apparent unanimity, major ambiguities existed as a result of competing paradigms. Firstly, while the political discourse still very much emphasized the external realm, the home-grown dynamics advanced by the practitioners had by now become the essence of the threat. Secondly, even if 'root causes' were increasingly embraced as an idiom, the focus was split between insistence on the context and the seemingly more practical approach of looking into individual pathways, with ideology as the privileged culprit. But even to those officials who were involved in these discussions on a daily basis, the distinction between both paradigms was not wholly clear, nor the dissimilar policies that would flow from them.

*A comet in the EU counterterrorism sky: The EC Expert Group
on violent radicalization*

Commission officials who had been energetically advancing the need for upstream prevention nevertheless realized that not much was known about what happened in the black box labelled 'radicalization' and what exactly made the environment conducive to radicalization. They also acknowledged that the relationship between ideas and action, between radicalization and terrorism, was poorly understood. Past studies on why, how and when individuals became involved in terrorism had indeed never produced definite answers.

In a landmark 1981 contribution on 'The Causes of Terrorism',²⁸ Martha Crenshaw already acknowledged that answering the question of why specific individuals engage in political violence was a complicated problem. Context, Crenshaw urged, is of the essence in understanding terrorism. Its causes lie in a facilitative or conducive environment that permits its emergence *and* in direct motivating factors that propel people to violence. Together with colleagues such as Ted Gurr, Crenshaw thereby insisted early on upon the need to look into the interplay between this societal context, psychological considerations and group dynamics to understand terrorism. Even in 1981, Crenshaw had insisted that terrorism had never been an automatic reaction to given conditions, but also that terrorists only represented a small minority of people who experienced the same conditions. But answering the question of why specific individuals engaged in political violence was a complicated problem, 'and the question of why they engage in terrorism is still more difficult'.²⁹

Fraught with methodological difficulties and confronted with a seemingly endless stream of factors to be taken into consideration, the why-terrorism-occurs research failed to gain traction. Instead, the focus shifted to more practical policy-oriented studies and crisis management analyses.

Beyond academia, individual trajectories were not an essential part of the counterterrorism toolbox of law enforcement or intelligence services either. The

context being considered a sufficient explanation of why individuals chose terrorism, looking into individual pathways never played much of a role in assessing and countering the threat: 'No one talked of the IRA being radicalized, or Shining Path, or Black September or the Red Brigades. Though all of these older groups certainly were by our modern understanding.'³⁰

Commission officials were evidently aware of the intricate, interlinked and complex nature of the issues involved, and the absence of satisfying answers. How and why do individuals embrace radical ideas? How do ideas (ideology, religion) translate into action? Are psychological or socio-familial profiles a way forward in identifying potential terrorists? What is the interaction between context and individual pathways? What is the role of systemic factors? And how can all this be operationalized in policy? The endeavour was thought to be rewarding, though if one could succeed in understanding how these sequences worked, it was assumed, it might be possible to devise adequate strategies to extract individuals (or groups, for that matter) from radicalization and thus turn them away from terrorism.

As previously mentioned, Commission officials started to screen leading authors in several fields that might be helpful in deepening the concept of violent radicalization. Experts with different academic backgrounds ranging from Islamic studies to deviant behaviours (studying subcultures like skinheads, radical rightists and leftists, those who enacted political violence, gang members) to international politics were invited to join the group. Fernando Reinares from the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos in Madrid was appointed as its chair.³¹ This policy advisory group was tasked with preparing a synthesis report on the existing knowledge in the field of violent radicalization. Originally planned for June 2006, it was only by 15 May 2008 that the final report was submitted to the Commission, as a result of a series of personal and practical difficulties that had hampered the group from the start (by mid-2007, one of its members even thought the group was dead).

In its report, the group re-stated that the concepts of 'radicalization' and 'violent radicalization' had originated in EU policy circles after the 2004 Madrid bombing, and that they had not been widely used in social science as a concept. They cautioned against the ambiguity of these concepts, since no uniform usage existed in social sciences and humanities. Moreover, 'radicalization' in connection with terrorism was qualified as inherently confusing as a result of its relationship to 'radicalism' as an expression of legitimate political thought.

The Expert Group thus suggested an alternative to the concept of 'radicalization':

While radicalism can pose a threat, it is extremism, and particularly terrorism, that ought to be our main concern since it involves the active subversion of democratic values and the rule of law. In this sense violent radicalization is to be understood as socialization to extremism which manifests itself in terrorism.³²

Drawing on their pooled expertise, the experts explicitly rejected any exclusive link with a specific religion, for example, Islam. They noted on the contrary that ‘remarkable similarities [exist] between radicalization to current Islamist or jihadist terrorism and radicalization associated with left-wing, right-wing or ethnonationalist terrorism in Western Europe since the 1960s’. It is probably useful to quote this assessment in full:

Past and present waves of violent radicalization which lead to terrorism among mainly young people share certain structural features:

- (i) Firstly, radicalization thrives in an enabling environment that is characterized by a more widely shared sense of injustice, exclusion and humiliation (real or perceived) among the constituencies the terrorists claim to represent. . . . Nothing creates so fertile a breeding ground for political radicalization than the feeling of belonging to the camp of those left behind in the progress of mankind but at the same time upholding potent and aspirational symbols of empowerment.
- (ii) Secondly, radicalization always takes place at the intersection of that enabling social environment and individual trajectories towards greater militancy.
- (iii) Thirdly, terrorist violence . . . stands only at the far end of a wide repertoire of possible radical expressions and only a small number of radicals become terrorist extremists. Indeed, even radicalization into violence short of terrorism is not a prevalent phenomenon among the vast majority of citizens of the European Union and only a tiny minority of newcomers succumb to it.³³

To make clear their point that ‘radicalization’ was an exceptionally complex, gradual and phased process, they noted that:

One of the most significant understandings gained from academic research over recent years is that individuals involved in terrorist activities exhibit a diversity of social backgrounds, undergo rather different processes of violent radicalization and are influenced by various combinations of motivations. This is relevant not only with respect to the more recent expressions of Islamist terrorism but also as regards right-wing, left-wing and ethnonationalist manifestations of such violence previously experienced in a number of European countries.³⁴

And insisted that:

There is not any single root cause for radicalization leading to terrorism but a number of factors may contribute to it. Precipitant (‘trigger’) factors vary according to individual experience and personal pathways to radicalization. For instance, historical antecedents of political violence, excessive repression by state authorities in the recent past and profound social changes (in Europe or in the

country of origin) may, under certain conditions, contribute to a polarized social climate in which confrontation rather than conflict resolution becomes the preferred option. Yet personal experiences, kinship and bonds of friendship, as well as group dynamics are critical in triggering the actual process of radicalization escalating to engagement in acts of terrorism against civilians.

What then was the role of ideology (and religion, for that matter) in the processes leading to terrorism? The group clearly distanced itself from the burgeoning trend in the United Kingdom and other Member States of considering ideology as a primary driver. Ideology acted as a vehicle to reduce potential moral inhibitors and as a justification of the resort to extreme actions such as terrorism, but not really as a driver, according to the authors.

Finally, since it was asked to provide policy advice, the Expert Group expressed scepticism about the efficiency of one-size-fits-all deradicalization programmes. As a result of the wide variations observed in processes of radicalization into violence, it judged it 'futile to try to develop strategies for preventing these processes as no such measures will be able to fit them all'.

But in their concluding remarks, the group recommended examining past and current individual, tailor-made exit strategies in, for example, Scandinavia and Germany, in which they emphasized as particularly relevant the conceptual distinction between deradicalization as a cognitive process and disengagement as a behavioural process that implies discontinuing involvement in terrorism (the former being extremely challenging). Since they realized that the Member States would undoubtedly embark on devising deradicalization programmes, they insisted these should be evaluated in order to provide evidence on what worked and what did not.

For reasons that were never made wholly clear to the group, but were rooted in turf wars within the Commission, after it completed its first study in May 2008, the EC Expert Group on Violent Radicalization was de facto discontinued by the French Commissioner, Jacques Barrot. Even if Commission officials and public Commission documents sometimes still referred to the report, it went largely unnoticed for many years before receiving renewed attention long after its official submission.

Pull and limits of a concept

It would require a huge leap of faith to imagine that if the report had been made public it would have made any difference. Radicalization proved irresistible as a concept. Because of its apparent simplicity, but also its inherent ambiguity, it got embroiled in the concerns over immigration and integration that had developed since the 1980s, and with the unease over Islam and Muslims boosted by the 9/11 attacks. The concept was all the more tantalizing because of the pre-existing popular idiom of 'radical Islam' and the ubiquity of the 'clash of civilizations' paradigm since 9/11. Both reinforced one another by lumping together disparate

violent and non-violent groups into a unified global insurgency. Radicalization made it possible to speak about these issues in a way that seemingly differed from the anti-Islam rhetoric of right-wing pundits and movements.

In 2004, the head of Scotland Yard's counterterrorism command, Peter Clarke, was probably among the first officials to warn the media against labelling today's main terrorist threat as 'Islamic', since this was 'both offensive and misleading'.³⁵ But this is exactly what happened. Radicalization came to be seen as a unique and contemporary process linked almost exclusively to Muslim-related phenomena – exactly what the Council Secretariat, the Commission and its Expert Group had hoped to avoid.

The respected terrorism scholar Alex Schmid, former Officer-in-Charge of the Terrorism Prevention Branch of the UN and member of the Expert Group, explains in one of the most comprehensive reviews of the state of knowledge on (de-) radicalization to date:

We have to admit that in the final analysis, 'radicalization' is not just a socio-psychological scientific concept but also a political construct, introduced into the public and academic debate mainly by national security establishments faced with political Islam in general and Salafist Jihadism in particular. The concept was 'pushed' to highlight a relatively narrow, micro-level set of problems related to the causes of terrorism that Western governments faced in their efforts to counter predominantly 'home-grown' terrorism from second and third generation members of Muslim diasporas.³⁶

University of Exeter scholar Jonathan Githens-Mazer makes a similar point:

When applied to Islam and Muslims, the term radical is often being used interchangeably and opaquely with terms such as fundamentalist, Islamist, Jihadist and neo-Salafist or Wahabbist with little regard for what these terms actually mean, and instead indicate signals about political Islam that these members of the media and politicians wish to transmit.³⁷

To be fair, the myriad radicalization studies produced since 2004 have nevertheless yielded useful and intriguing results. Radicalization studies have furthered our understanding of what happens to individuals once they get involved in a process that can ultimately result in terrorism. Radicalization is indeed first and foremost a socialization process in which group dynamics (kinship and friendship) are more important than ideology. These studies have provided us with a more detailed understanding of the stages in the process, which is similar to other forms of deviant behaviour, like gangs or delinquency.³⁸ The process of socialization into extremism and, eventually, into terrorism, happens gradually and requires a more or less prolonged group process. Feelings of frustration and inequity first have to be interiorized and then lead to a mental separation from society (which is considered responsible for those feelings). Individuals then reach out to others who share the same feelings and create an 'in-group'. Within such a group, personal

feelings get politicized ('what are we going to do about it?'). Groupthink gradually solidifies into an unquestioned belief system and attitude, with alternative pathways gradually being pushed aside. In this process, ideology helps to dehumanize the outside-group and transforms innocents (who bear no responsibility for the original feelings of frustration and inequity) into guilty accomplices.

As years went by, the concept of radicalization secured its key position in counterterrorism in policies, law enforcement and academia. But this apparent consensus has obscured the limits of the concept as well as its enduring ambiguities and significant controversies. Radicalization is relentlessly thrown around in various contexts, with diverging meanings and competing policy recommendations.

In at least three respects, the concept has run into its own limitations:

- (i) Firstly, contrary to the expectations of its advocates fifteen years ago, we're no closer to identifying what exactly triggers an individual to perpetrate a terrorist attack. Identifying him as 'radicalized' is not very helpful, since many others sharing the same ideas never go beyond this point. Unpacking the black box has thus not resulted in anything close to a prospective instrument for assessing individual behaviour.
- (ii) Secondly, and contrary to what some early radicalization studies had initially imagined, personal trajectories or pathways are murky processes that are neither fixed nor predetermined but highly 'individualised and nonlinear, with a number of common "push" and "pull" factors but no single determining feature'.³⁹ For that reason, Mohammed Hafez and Chreighton Mullins came up with an alternative metaphor of radicalization as a 'puzzle' composed of four factors that come together to produce violent radicalization: personal and collective grievances, networks and interpersonal ties, political and religious ideologies, and enabling environments and support structures.⁴⁰
- (iii) Finally, jihadi plots from 2015 onwards by organized hubs and so-called lone actors alike have challenged earlier assumptions that the socialization process needed time to mature into action, that it required a more or less prolonged group process, whereby ideology solidified the cohesiveness of the in-group. All kinds of people have been involved in these plots, but a number of them literally jumped from drug trafficking and petty criminality or living a normal life into a jihadi plot, without any protracted process and with only a limited acquaintance with religious thought compared to the early jihadi generations:

Information on foreigners joining the ranks of IS suggests that recruitment can take place very quickly, without necessarily requiring a long radicalization process. Age plays a role: younger people are found to be more impressionable and radicalize quicker than older candidates.⁴¹

In fact, before these individuals decided to act or to join ISIS, there was not much of a 'radicalization process' going on, at least not as earlier understood. To describe this novel phenomenon, a new concept was even coined: 'flash' or 'instant'

radicalization. Few observers realized that it was strikingly different from what radicalization was once thought to be.

Beyond these limits to the concept, radicalization also still grapples with the same ambiguities as when it was conceived. A first enduring ambiguity concerns the identification of the key drivers behind radicalization. Is it ideology or context? In fact, this controversy is as old as the study of terrorism. Should one focus on the ideology that drives an individual to embrace terrorism or should the focus be on the conducive environment that lures individuals into a journey that ultimately ends in terrorist violence?

The former approach typically reduces the multi-faceted interaction between context, individual trajectories and group processes to a question of ideology. While radical-right pundits and politicians have tried to make Islam itself the core issue, others referred to a 'distorted interpretation of Islam' as the culprit. According to this paradigm, jihadi terrorism is essentially the result of an ideology-driven process. The key vector in addressing radicalization is subsequently a war on ideas through the promotion of a 'moderate Islam' (whatever that may mean) to combat the negative influence of 'radical Islam'. As a corollary, society is considered to play no significant role in radicalization. Concluding a comprehensive discussion on radicalization in the wake of a failed terrorist plot in Verviers (Belgium) in January 2015, the president of the Flemish nationalist group in the Flemish parliament thus asserted that 'society can never be blamed for radicalization'.⁴²

The latter approach however considers radicalization to be primarily a context-driven process. Radicalization is to a context what fever is to illness – a symptom. Sometimes, medicine for fever will alleviate suffering, but as long as the triggering illness is not cured, fever will continue to haunt the patient. The ensuing policy recommendation is then to concentrate on the conducive environment that permits the emergence of radicalization and provides for motivating factors that can propel people to violence. This position was taken by the Belgian federal prosecutor in charge of terrorism, Frédéric Van Leeuw, who readily admitted that 'our Western society is part of the problem' when explaining the departure of so many foreign fighters.⁴³ A similar assessment was made by Belgium's highest police official (and the new Europol director), Catherine De Bolle:

What really shocked me, before the attacks and with all that has happened since, is that society has failed to include people. There are many who live with us for years, even decades. We didn't succeed in devising a common denominator. They do not really feel as if they are being included, as if they are part of our society, of Belgium.⁴⁴

These competing paradigms can be easily perceived in the wide-ranging report by the Belgian Parliamentary Commission established after the terrorist attacks in Brussels in March 2016. In its assessment of the relationship between radicalism and the terrorist attacks, the competing paradigms are simply juxtaposed. The report starts by zooming in on the religious dimension and concludes that religion, and its fundamentalist currents in particular, has been of paramount influence in

the rise of radicalism. This fundamentalist radicalism moreover is seen as the precursor to violent radicalism.⁴⁵ However, the last part of the report reflects on discussions with first-line practitioners and prevention officials, concluding that radicalization has many causes, depending on the paradigm, that it is more important to deal with the (societal) roots of radicalization, rather than with its manifestations, and that discriminations have an important, if not determinant, role in the emergence of radicalism/violent radicalism.⁴⁶

The persistence of these competing paradigms helps to explain why deradicalization programmes often constitute a potpourri of objectives from inclusiveness and prevention of all kinds to repression and counter-narratives. As a result, assessing what works and what doesn't remains as difficult as it has always been.

The second enduring ambiguity directly flows from the first. It remains impossible to measure radicalization. Even if simply viewed as personal trajectories towards violence, 'radicalization' has essentially remained a catch-all. Many different expressions of an individual's ideas and behaviour are mixed together as 'signs of radicalization', and these range from the increased presence of girls and women wearing the hijab, to men dressed in Salafi trousers, orthodox and hate preachers, radical ideas and the terrorist acts themselves. Putting these disparate signs together into a box labelled 'indicators of radicalization' empties the concept of all explanatory meaning, turning it into a container concept.

No satisfying metrics have therefore ever been developed to quantify radicalization. One should thus not take at face value sweeping statements, by authorities or by observers, that radicalization is increasing. Such statements mostly lack robust fundamentals and merely reflect mainstream thinking. An example of this is provided by the policy declaration of the incoming Belgian government in October 2014. It stated that 'The preservation of the democratic system and the safety of our citizens are for the government an absolute priority. Today, it is under pressure from a growing threat of radicalization and terrorism.' On what indicators – beyond the number of foreign fighters from Belgium (and even this criterion was not made explicit) – the assessment of 'growing threat of radicalization' was based, was never made clear.

A third and last area of controversy that has accompanied the concept of radicalization from its adoption in 2004, concerns its relationship to Islam. Early on, many have warned against its exclusive focus on Muslims and Islam. This nevertheless occurred and has continued to do so ever since. It thus unwittingly helped to consolidate the popular Western image of Muslim minorities as suspect communities. It reinforced the existing image of Islam as an imported and threatening value system and Muslim minorities in the West as a potentially disloyal 'fifth column'.⁴⁷

The sloppy use of the concept and its inherent ambiguities contributed to move the once quintessentially radical-right stance against Islam into mainstream politics and discourse. The 2000s witnessed a fierce anti-Islamic *Kulturkampf*, propelling a polarizing debate on the compatibility of Islam with Western values, portraying a global ideological insurgency against Western Enlightenment akin to the clash of

civilizations in the 1990s. In the second half of the 2010s, the argument moved beyond this caricature and instead started to focus specifically on the impact of Saudi Wahhabi proselytism on Muslim minorities in the West. Saudi Arabia was accused of being the primary funder of Islamist extremism in the West.⁴⁸ Its multi-billion-dollar efforts to promote a newly coined 'Salafi-Wahhabism' was now said to be preparing the ground for radicalization and thus providing a stepping stone to jihadism. In a number of European countries, a growing discussion surfaced about the foreign funding of Islamic institutions, in particular in Germany, Austria, Belgium, Italy and France. In Belgium, the aforementioned Belgian Parliamentary Commission specifically targeted the Saudi-financed Grand Mosque in the centre of Brussels as the vanguard of radicalization in Belgium.

This anti-Salafism stance gained a broad political and media audience in Europe, ranging from Islamic reformers to radical secularists and mainstream politicians. But it remains nevertheless impossible 'to prove beyond doubt a direct causal link between militancy and Saudi-inspired ultra-conservative forms of Sunni Muslim Islam'.⁴⁹ Moreover, the argument that Salafi-Wahhabism increasingly contributes to shaping an environment conducive to social isolation and therefore ultimately to jihadi mobilization turns the true sequence of events upside down. In itself, an ideology is sterile. It only takes root if it corresponds to a demand and a need. Salafism is gaining ground precisely because social isolation is real. Salafism offers sense and meaning to those who experience social exclusion. Combating Salafism while ignoring the effects of social exclusion of minority groups is thus likely to fail.

The anti-Salafism campaign brings the state into a position of deciding what kind of Islam is acceptable to European societies. This is at odds with the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion. And, perhaps most importantly, instead of helping endeavours to anchor Islam naturally in local environments, this campaign risks backfiring. It runs the risk of hardening positions and furthering polarization by inadvertently reinforcing the distorted jihadi narrative that there is no place for Muslims in the West. Discussion about Islam in Europe has to be a common endeavour of Muslims and society as a whole, but with Muslims determining how to practice their faith. Authorities have to tread lightly when promoting this debate within the framework of combating radicalization.

Conclusion

The concept of radicalization has been less helpful or adequate at explaining and countering terrorism than its early advocates envisaged fifteen years ago. Yet, since it has become a household concept, we can't escape its use. In order to minimize its drawbacks, it is useful to remember its intricacies and its multiple layers. Alex Schmid summed it up neatly: 'Radicalization, like terrorism, too often means different things to different people, sometimes based also on different political interests'.⁵⁰

A comparison with another terrorist campaign (where the concept of radicalization has not been en vogue) might help recalibrate our understanding

and reaction to jihadi terrorism. Andrew Parker, the head of the British MI5, made the following comment on Northern Irish terrorism:

We . . . detect and disrupt the vast majority of their attempts. But occasionally we are all stung with the tragedy of wanton murder, as we saw most recently with the shooting of David Black last November. Rejecting the political process in Northern Ireland, these ragged remnants of a bygone age are in a cul-de-sac of pointless violence and crime with little community support. We will continue to work with the police to put these thugs and killers in front of the Courts.⁵¹

A 2016 social survey of the Brussels district of Molenbeek indicated that jihadi ‘radicals’ enjoy as little community-level support as the Irish ‘radicals’ to whom Andrew Parker referred.⁵² This time too, most plots are detected in time, but sometimes security services are unsuccessful in stopping human tragedies. Comparing both terrorist campaigns from the same standpoint helps to avoid overblowing the jihadi threat and thus deprives jihadi terrorists of their capacity to further tear apart the social fabric of societies by enhancing anxiety over migration and Islam.

Another reminder of bygone times might serve as a welcome lesson too. Now largely forgotten, a similar widespread mania about a ‘pan-Islamist’ threat to European civilization emerged in the 1930s. When assessing this frenzy, the renowned Dutch historian and gifted writer Jan Romein (1893–1962) perceptively concluded, in no uncertain terms: such representations survive not because they’re true, but because they’re useful.⁵³

Notes

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