What causes Radicalisation?

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I am editor of the website, RadicalisationResearch.org, which is funded by the Religion and Society Programme, and which brings high-quality research on the subject of radicalisation to the attention of people working in the media and policy arenas. My own research has also been on religion and violence. As such, I have read hundreds of books and articles on the subject, and my objective tonight is to present to you what seem to me to be the main areas in which some significant contributions have been made about the causes of violent extremism.

I leave it to my fellow speakers to explain why radicalisation is such a contested concept. However, nobody thinks or acts in a vacuum, and whilst 'radicalisation' is an imperfect label it is one that currently guides policy and research on radical and violent actions, and it is to factors affecting these that I wish to pay attention. I will also explain why, even if we do decide to adopt the language of radicalisation, we should not imagine that it has some special connection to religion.

Looking then at what existing research tells us about what causes violent radical actions, four areas emerge as particularly significant. They can be labelled situational, strategic, ideological and individual.

Category	Sub-Categories		Examples
Situational	Pre-conditions	Enabling	Developments within modernity, for example the internet.
		Motivating	Racial and religious discrimination; economic and social exclusion.
	Precipitant		Foreign policy, e.g. the Iraq war.
Strategic	Long term		Defeat of Western modernity/morality.
	Short term		Attention for aims; fear; etc.
Ideological			Non-negotiable beliefs about what is good for society.
Individual			Personal choices, serendipity

Starting with situational factors, these may further be broken down into *enabling* and *motivating* pre-conditions of terrorist violence.

Of the enabling pre-conditions, the most discussed is the nature of the modern world itself. Such things as mass transit, urbanisation and electronic means of communication provide means for radical ideas to be shared, reinforced and rendered plausible to potentially large numbers of people. Obviously, the existence of enabling conditions does not entail that everyone using them will become radicalised - a caveat applicable to all that follows - but their presence can carve particular pathways for contemporary terrorism.

Enabling factors only become potent, however, when combined with motivating ones. Factors like poverty, for example, or the sense of being excluded from the full benefits of modern affluence, are widely recognised to be amongst possible causes of radical behaviour. What seems to count most is a gap between a sense of entitlement and actually possibilities of achievement – which helps explain why the experiences of discrimination and social segregation encountered by middle-class, educated persons are also seen to play a role in radicalisation.

Finally in relation to situational factors, we need to consider the actual precipitants or triggers. These are the flash points which push some people into thinking that violence is the appropriate response. An example of such a trigger might be foreign policy supporting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, or the failure of western powers to resolve the Palestinian situation. This third situational factor has been questioned, however, by Mark Sedgwick – here tonight – who shows that political dissent is an extremely poor indicator of potential violent extremism. These criticisms aside, however, the idea that there are particular triggers to action is perhaps the most discussed (and easiest to comprehend) of the potential causes of radicalisation. But it is much too easy to give apparent triggers too much prominence in leading to actions which follow.

Moving from the situational to the strategic factors causing violence, the literature reminds us that terrorists do not act randomly or merely emotionally in relation to some trigger, but act rationally in the pursuit of strategic aims. A distinction can be drawn between long and short term strategic aims. In the case of al Qaeda, for example, both short and long term aims are violent. In the short term, actions such as the 9/11 bombings sought to motivate sympathisers whilst also striking terror into their 'enemy'. In the longer term they sought to end the perceived universal imposition of Western values on the world.

Next we have ideological factors. These can briefly be defined as non-negotiable beliefs about what is good for society. In my own work – for this is where my own research has focused – I refer to them as beliefs about what is sacred. What is sacred can be violated, and when it is, it is natural to wish to defend it. Some people resort to violent means in order to do so.

My own approach is to code the statements of religious and non-religious groups into a set of markers that outline their non-negotiable beliefs. Secular groups such as the Red Army Faction could be seen to have sacred beliefs, which they defended with violence, as much as religious groups like Aum Shinrikyo or al Qaeda. Closer to home, the sacred was directly invoked in the radical, but non-

violent, debate around the Rushdie affair, both by the religious defenders of Muhammad and the secular defenders of free speech. Groups are bound together by such commitments, and when they feel the need to defend them they, or individuals within them, may resort to violence.

Still, and even assuming that all of the above may have led to an individual being involved in a group with violent strategic aims which feels that what it holds sacred has been violated, it is still not the case that that an individual member of such a group will act violently. For example, while the elder brother of Anthony Garcia (convicted for his part in the 2004 fertiliser bomb-plot) was apparently the more deeply committed of the two to the radical Islamic group they both belonged to, only Anthony acted violently.

Economic background, relative assimilation into 'host' cultures, apparent ideological background and other seemingly important factors all – at the end of the day – fail to account for why some people act violently and others do not. The individual factors constantly emerge as unpredictable elements which foil any attempt to predict who will resort to violence, and which foil the attempts of so-called theories of radicalisation to accurately account for violent behaviour – other than in retrospect.

And so I leave you with three points. First, while radical actions are often about defending sacred beliefs, it is as valid to talk about the secular sacred as it is about what is religiously sacred, and the defence of either can lead to violent actions.

Second, there is a growing consensus amongst scholars that there is in fact no conveyor belt into radicalisation, and no theory that can predict exactly when and where it will occur.

Third, what this also explains is why most of the best research that contributes to this field is not produced by so-called radicalisation experts, but by scholars working across various fields, including sociologists, historians, political scientists, scholars of religion and so on, all of whom can bring an expertise in their field to aid in understanding of the multi-factoral phenomenon which, at the moment, many people choose to refer to as radicalisation.