

Ecologies of Radicalisation

Arturo Morselli



Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

اسلام کے تھیولوجی آف کاؤنٹر ٹیرورزم

The attempted systemisation of the process of radicalisation has undergone a significant paradigm shift. The study of the pathway to radicalisation – with reference to the phenomenon of home-grown jihadi terrorists – had initially forced scholars to fill what were perceived to be deficiencies in theorising models that could explain what was happening. These early efforts, however, resulted in being insufficiently grounded in empirical evidence, thus misrepresenting a phenomenon far more complex than expected. The perceived difficulty to understand the determinants of the radicalisation process finally led to a scholarly reticence to produce any significant literature that engaged in conceptualising innovative theories that could explain the careers of potential jihadists.

The ability to acquire and mobilise knowledge in this field – which remains relatively new – is highly dependent on the directly proportional ability to successfully conceptualise the phenomenon of home-grown jihadi terrorists. For the study to be encompassing, however, the phase of conceptualisation must be followed by that of productive integration of our findings. While many versions of the main radicalisation models have been offered¹, I argue that an ecological approach allows to both organise and extend our comprehension of the socio-psychological factors that influence and shape a jihadist's path to radicalisation.

Drawing from several versions of the ecological model², I wish to explain how this approach – on which there still seems to be limited literature available – might finally enable us to understand not only the apparent complexity of the procedural aspect of radicalisation – the 'how' an individual radicalises – but also the motivational factors behind terrorism – the 'why' that same individual ultimately decides to engage in acts of violence. Furthermore, the socio-ecological account of the multifaceted pathway that potential jihadists undertake provides a compelling theoretical and operational framework. In turn, this further qualifies the conceptual dimension of radicalisation, that remains – with regards particularly to the academia – a highly disputed issue.

The socio-ecological model for the study of radicalisation is shaped around the "individual - environment - population" system³. At the heart of the ecological thought, this framework rests on a multitude of entwined interactions that, for operational purpose, are grouped into one of two categories: interactions between organisms, and interactions between organisms and their surrounding environment. While the first class focuses with phenomena such as competition, predation, and mutualism, the second set is concerned with the organism's environmental conditions. Ecology – through the study of complex systems – examines entities that are complex insofar as they are composed of different elements that interact in ways that are not immediately obvious – in a way, liquid. An ecological approach to the study of radicalisation rests, first and foremost, on the assumption that an organism – and thus the individual – exists and may be understood through its interaction with other organisms, as much as with the environment in which it finds itself. In practical terms, this translates to the focus we must put on the interaction of an individual – or group – with their environment⁴.

¹Typical examples of similar discussions are to be found in the works of Ehud Sprinzak, Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, and Fathali Moghaddam.

²For example, the RCMP E Division INSET (January 29, 2015), or the RCMP 2015 National Security Interviewing Workshop (April 24, 2015).

³ See *Journal of Evolutionary Biology*, Vol. 6, Issue 4 (July 1992), pp. 611-612.

⁴ In this section, I am referencing particularly to Dawson's 'Sketch of a Social Ecology Model Explaining Homegrown Terrorist Radicalisation'. See <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/ICCT-Dawson-Social-Ecology-Model-of-Radicalisation-Jan2017-2.pdf>

Moreover, this approach supposes that there is no one factor that explains in an exhaustive way why something is happening. On the contrary, the ecological mode of thinking requires us to model the numerous factors that, to varying degrees and in different ways, impact a potential jihadist's progression along the path of radicalisation towards violence.

In line with the assumption that the study of radicalisation does not deal with a delimited – and easily identifiable – set of factors, we must now move on from previous linear or stage models of this progression. Individuals interact with their environment in a dynamic way. This interplay, and one's hardly predictable contingencies, requires us to theorize models that account for the many variables that radicalise actors in a complex – yet identifiable – way. Furthermore, it must be noted that individuals are rarely radicalised in the same way, thus forcing us to rethink those same variables in ever-changing and dynamic patterns. While this point of view is now widely accepted in the discourse of terrorism studies, many debates on the process of radicalisation are still insufficient in their approach – both at the systematic and comprehensive levels.

Most of the available literature⁵, in fact, still focuses on delimited topic-clusters, such as the social, group, or individual causes of terrorism. These, in turn, seem to reflect specific theoretical orientations that clearly limit the scope and nuance of this methodology. However, I would argue that the ecological approach does well in bridging these distinct conceptual standpoints, in the attempt to present itself as an overarching framework that accommodates the complexity of the process of radicalisation through the multiple inputs around which it is shaped. Ultimately, the resulting model would accommodate a plethora of environmental factors and patterns –in line with the previously mentioned interest that ecology has for the interaction between organisms and their environment – such as the social, psychological, physical, and biological ones.

The basic unit of the ecological model is the individual social actor. The focus of the researcher is thus the agent's involvement with the multiple contexts that influence and shape his radicalisation process. This allows scholars to gain a sense of the actor's sense of the situation⁶, that in turn allows to trace his career path to becoming a terrorist. Our goal, in fact, is ultimately that of gaining as much familiarity with the contingent realities of these individuals as possible, attempting to understand their choices through the social structural-psychological elements that shape their actions. Hence, I wish to argue that the ecological approach facilitates the exercise of sociologically-based imagination required from the research. Some of the early essays by Martha Crenshaw and Donatella Della Porta, that represent some of the most nuanced works on the motivations for terrorism, are clear examples of the insight that this type of approach allows.

I would argue that delineating the social ecology model –in its commonsensical version –is extremely compelling insofar as it allows us grasp in practical terms the meta-levels that might be motivating an individual's engagement with extremism and political violence. As I have previously mentioned, the focus of this specific model is that of the actor's perception of the combination of factors that determine and shape his involvement with terrorism. In other words, the ecologic approach to

⁵ See *Theoretical Criminology*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2010), pp. 131-153.

⁶ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford Press, 1959).

understanding radicalisation is firstly the effort to humanise the terrorist. In turn, this can better help us comprehend the ‘how’ and ‘why’ remarkably ordinary individuals end up committing such atrocious actions.

For example, when, on the 15th of April 2013, the Chechen Kyrgyzstani-American brothers Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and Tamerlan Tsarnaev⁷ placed two homemade pressure cooker bombs near the finish line of the Boston Marathon race, killing three people and injuring several hundred others, scholars were forced to rethink their approach in the study of the home-grown jihadi terrorism phenomenon. And while the ecologic social model is not shaped exclusively around the specific contingencies of the Tsarnaev brothers, it is precisely the pathway to terrorism such as theirs that this type of approach endeavours to comprehend.

Accordingly, the social ecologic model is limited to a social systems approach⁸ that covers relevant factors at the macro (societal), meso (group), and micro (individual) levels. In other words, the fundamental assumption of such an approach is that there is no one level – or factor therein – that influences and shapes the actor’s radicalisation in an exclusively determinant manner. All factors, at all levels, share equal inherent potentiality to be the ultimately decisive element in an individual’s terrorism pathway. And while there remain hard-to-predict contingencies⁹ that underlyingly differentiate the various individuals, it is nonetheless possible to conceptualise a model whose effectiveness can be measured based on its ability to reduce those hard-to-predict contingencies to close-to-insignificant factors.

The first ecological niche that shapes the social ecologic model for the study of home-grown terrorism is the phenomenon of late modernity. There is no denying that the new social conditions in which we all live has, to some degree, contributed to producing home-grown terrorism. The full spectrum of social structural theories and their social psychological consequences – a product of what sociologists call the risk society, or liquid modernity – that were triggered by the phenomenon of globalisation, have left some individuals exposed to the process of radicalisation. Furthermore, in the case of jihadists in non-Muslims majority countries, the data shows that the recruitment selection pool is composed predominantly by the 1.5 to 2.0 generation of immigrants.

The social ecologic model thus finds a clear linkage between home-grown terrorism and the movement of peoples around the world. This, together with the ability of immigrants to stay in touch with people and issues in their homelands – spreading and thus fuelling terrorism with relative ease through the internet – has tightened up the effect of the process of radicalisation on immigrants. The model then also identifies the immigrant experience to be the second ecological niche that ought to be studied and comprehended in order to prevent the possible radicalisation of some of these individuals.

⁷See Estes, Adam Clark; Abad-Santos, Alexander; Sullivan, Matt (April 15, 2013). "Explosions at Boston Marathon Kill 3 — Now, a 'Potential Terrorist Investigation'". *The Atlantic Wire*. Retrieved April 17, 2013. Available online at <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/04/boston-marathon-explosions-live/316233/>

⁸T. Parsons, “Social Systems”, in T. Parsons, *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory* (New York: Free Press, 1977), pp. 177-203.

⁹The radicalisation process is unique to each individual. However, it tends to involve a combination of shared cognitive and behavioural traits, structural grievances, politicised by a unifying ideology or a rallying cause that encourages a process of de-pluralisation. Hard-to-predict contingencies are thus those same factors that differentiate all individuals, such as one’s personal experiences and their timing.

Accordingly, one may think of the hardships faced by some of the younger children of immigrants. The difficulty in managing expectations of two different – and at times opposing – worlds, the parental cultural traditions and the pervasive popular culture of their non-immigrant peers all become particularly complex issues for those from cultural and ethnic minorities.

Late modernity and the circumstantial mass migration therein, represent the wider phenomenological symptoms around which the social ecologic model is shaped. The necessity to account for these two conditions becomes ever-more evident if one considers that their combination leads some to an existential search for greater ontological security – both in the face of de-traditionalised and de-centralised social environments and in the face of precarious socio-economic futures¹⁰. While this need not imply that the path to radicalisation is the only viable result to this ontological search, it is nonetheless a pathway that offers – with alarming effectiveness – a realistic and fulfilling solution to existential insecurity and experiential hardships.

For those individuals that radicalise, however, the interplay of these factors exacerbates pre-existing identity struggles typical of certain age periods, such as adolescence and young adulthood. Moreover, the lives of these individuals may also be chiselled by minor experiences of abuse and discrimination due to their immigrant status. The seemingly major challenge in these type-scenarios is the difficulty that friends and family – and by extension researchers – experience in noticing such prolonged inner turmoil¹¹. Studies have revealed that the sudden and apparently inexplicable turn to unconventional points of view stems from similar disquietude. While the third ecological niche of the model is thus the phenomenon of youthful rebellion, the available literature lacks a greater integration of focused research on adolescent psychology and the concept of adventurism.

The stronger orientation to action and risk that distinguishes simply confused and rebellious youth from individuals who will go on to radicalise is part of a threefold factorial system of psychological indicators of such process. The first that seems to play significant role is the marked quest for significance¹². While this may originate in the desire to compensate for perceived humiliations – personally or on the part of the *ummah* – it is ultimately the product of the burning desire to make a mark in the world. The other psychological factor at play in creating a cognitive opening in the radicalised individual is a deep moral concern. Surprisingly, young terrorists are more worried about knowing and doing the right thing than their peers, and I would argue that while the push-factor of this dynamic seems to be an apathetic and corrupt society, the pull-factor is evidently a higher or transcendent authority¹³.

The last two ecological niches of the model are the concepts of ideology and group dynamics. The intensity and combination – in the right social environment – of the psychological factors I have just mentioned will almost inevitably lead the potential jihadist to find that terrorist narratives comprehensively satisfy, amongst other things, his existential angst. At both the conceptual and

10 S. Cottee and K. Hayward, "Terrorist (E)Motives: The Existential Attractions of Terrorism", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34, No. 12 (2011), pp. 963-986.

11 S. V. Levine, *Radical Departures: Desperate Detours to Growing Up* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).

12 A. W. Kruglanski et al., "The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization" (2014), pp. 69-93.

13 J. S. Ginges et al., "Psychology out of the laboratory: The challenge of violent extremism", *American Psychologist* 66, No. 6 (2011), pp. 507-519.



practical levels, the terrorist ideology effectively connects the dots and offers a simplistic thus satisfactory course of action that might function as an explanation to the individual's inner turmoil. In other words, I would argue that the determinant to the appeal of terrorist propaganda is its ability to offer meaning to individuals who hardly find any in social ambiances they deem corrupt and deviant from their own ferrous moral outlook.

What appears to be the ultimate determinant in the jihadist turn from potentiality to actuality – his engagement in acts of terrorism – is his interaction with those like him. Often, the solidarity and support of individuals who are further down in the path of radicalisation drastically speeds up one's already radical leanings. Ultimately, it is evident that the shared nature of experience is the driving factor behind a jihadist's ability to gain enthusiasm at the idea of being a radical and eventually the courage to act. I would argue that this proves that the contexts into which we are put shape our behaviour and decision-making more than we might at times be willing to admit. The ecological approach thus focuses on the plethora of factors in the various environments – social, economic, religious, political etc. – in which the individual exists.

However, the interactions between these varying factors, across all ecological niches, ought to be studied at all analytical levels. Furthermore, their cross-sectional study at the individual, communal, and societal level may reveal discernible patterns that might aptly explain this social phenomenon. While radicalisation – in its different manifestations and instances – is not always idiosyncratic, it is nonetheless possible to discern ways to make the analytical patterns stand out through the significant variation¹⁴.

Fundamentally, the social ecology model for the study of radicalisation privileges no one set of variables or niches. It is rather the variable-combination at the various analytical levels that will determine the career of an extremist. The inherent dynamism of the model may appear counter-productive and inconclusive. However, I believe there is reason for optimism.

As with other social phenomena characterised by particularly undesirable social consequences – such as paedophilia or drug addiction – the social sciences have produced complex and multi-variable models¹⁵ that have brought enough analytical and conceptual order to events that fall far outside of conventional norms. Similarly, the ecological approach endeavours to accommodate the complicated and seemingly ever-variable process of radicalisation, while maintaining the need to offer a more intuitive explanation of the phenomenon. In turn, this would ease the task of fashioning practical orientations and counter-terrorism policies. Overall, to understand the process of radicalisation in its ecological meaning allows to maximise and synchronize the processes of knowledge mobilisation and acquisition.

ITCT does not necessarily endorse any or all views expressed by the author in the article.

14 R. Prus, "Generic Social Processes: Maximising Conceptual Development in Ethnographic Research", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 16, No. 3 (1987), pp. 250-291.

15 J. Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes" (2008), pp. 80-94.