CONRAD: Constructive analysis on the attitudes, policies and programmes that relate to "radicalisation"

Instead of focusing too narrowly on the processes leading to "radicalisation," the CONRAD team sees great promise in utilising a multi-level (micro, meso, macro) analysis, which focuses on the various ingredients that may contribute to violent "radicalisation." The team also adopts a critical stance about the concept itself. "Radicalisation" is not only an empirical, "real" phenomenon but also a mindset, a media story, a political discourse. As a social construction it has a real impact on the terrain. This is an effect we are particularly interested in. Furthermore, we do not consider "radicalisation" as merely an individual process but also regard it as a collective reality. In this respect it is interesting to notice that the amount and intensity of terrorist attacks in Western Europe is on the decline, whereas the "radicalisation" discourse, arguably, is still on the rise. Our team advocates a deconstruction and reframing of the dominant use of the term "radicalisation," as it also appears in some of the scientific literature, by studying the effects of that discourse on areas affected by it.

Context and question(s) of research

From the state of the art on "radicalisation", the only thing we can say with a relative degree of certainty is that the life-paths of known terrorists and the life-worlds of people at risk of "radicalising" differ to such an extent that no single explanatory model suffices. The CONRAD project aims to to develop alternative discourses and approaches for *thinking* of or *talking* about "radicalisation."

1) What does the study of the existing literature teach us about "radicalisation" as a concept? 2) How is "radicalisation" framed in the public debate and approached in (European) policy? 3) How is the phenomenon understood and experienced by vulnerable groups in Brussels and Verviers? 4) What are the characteristics of the so-called "jihadogenic" spaces of Brussels and Verviers? 5) Which alternative discourses can be developed to talk about "radicalisation" and how can these be useful for civil society and public bodies?

Main findings

Radicalisation" is problematic as a concept and as a scientific tool for multiple reasons. (1) it assumes a linear process from religiosity, to orthodoxy, to non-violent radicalism, to extremist violence. (2) The concept refers almost only to the individual level, whereas it becomes increasingly clear that "radicalisation" resonates with collective processes. (3) It is a term that stigmatises particularly because it has almost entirely been reserved for Islamic "radicalisation". (4) The term discredits genuine political engagement or indignation—people with grievances about experiences of injustice are being told to "deradicalise" rather than that they are taken seriously and recognised. (5) The "radicalisation" concept justifies questionable security strategies which engage in counterterrorism pre-emptively, that is, when nothing illegal has yet taken place. (6) The study of the root causes

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of "radicalisation" in the last 10 to 15 years has mainly yielded dissensus. As a result, we argue that this may relate to the unsustainability of the term itself. Its gaze is simultaneously too narrow and too wide.

Unfortunately, the problematic nature of the concept and the doubts whether there is a homogeneous and unique phenomenon we can call "radicalisation" have not stopped local, national and supranational authorities to develop policy approaches.

In the public debate, as our inductive framing analysis shows, 12 frames are used to talk about "radicalisation".

From focus groups and interviews in Brussels with vulnerable young people we can conclude that the term is understood by the latter as referring both to a positive commitment to religion and a negative, destructive commitment to violence. This is experienced as an injustice since terrorist attacks in the name of Islam have cast a dark shadow over their own quest for meaningfulness, spirituality and authentic values.

From the field research in Verviers, we argue, "radicalisation" should be considered as a peculiar modality of a larger phenomenon, namely the biographical intentional break with the social and political order.

Targeted and vulnerable communities experience government policies with regard to "radicalisation" as a machine. The "radicalisation machine" is characterised by the fact that it is exclusively concerned with wielding its power and consolidating its further existence.

Conclusion and recommendations

We oppose any strategy conflating – even indirectly – youth work with "anti-radicalisation". Working with vulnerable young people should not be done under the guise of a security agenda but simply because young people are inherently worth it.

We recommend improving dialogue, partnership and collaboration within the youth sector.

We recommend increasing the institutional completeness of youth work organisations with due consideration for the existing needs at neighbourhood level.

We recommend an investment in social and psychological support for youth workers.

We recommend offering young people more opportunities for internal exchange with legitimate and knowledgeable facilitators.

We recommend a critical parliamentary discussion about (1) the blurred boundaries of the legal framework of security actors who engage in anti-terrorism pre-emptively, (2) the importance of professional secrecy for frontline practitioners and the risks of shared professional secrecy in the local integrated security cells (LIVC-Rs), (3) the ways in which suspected "radicalised" people are added to black lists nationally and internationally and how this harms their civil rights and their privacy, (4) the myth of collaboration and the multi-agency approach due to the inherent power imbalance between vulnerable groups, frontline organisations on the one hand and state and security actors on the other, and (5) the possible counterproductive effects of counter-radicalisation policy.

Finally, we recommend to stop using the term "radicalisation". Instead we propose to use the term "political violence" or to only talk about "the preparation and execution of terrorist attacks."

Coordination

Contact

De Backer Mattias:
KU Leuven, Criminologie:
e-mail:mattias.debacker@kuleuven.be