3.7

RADICALISATION AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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Introduction

Radicalisation is an influential and yet contested concept. There have been hundreds of accounts of radicalisation processes that have attempted to explain why both individuals and groups adopt extreme beliefs and, in some instances, engage in violence. There is no single pathway to radicalisation and so it would be wrong to say conspiracy beliefs are an inherent component of radicalisation. While conspiracy beliefs are important for some of those engaged in extremism, they are likely to be a marginal factor for others and belief in conspiracy theories is also extensive even among non-extremist groups and individuals. There is little research that has explicitly considered the role of conspiracy theories in radicalisation, but, where this has emerged as a theme, researchers have tended to argue that conspiracy belief can be used to amplify and justify hostility towards opponents (Berger 2018) as well as the need for extraordinary actions against them (Bartlett, Miller 2010). Even where conspiracy theory and radicalisation are not linked directly, there are clear points of connection between the two literatures. (Extremism, however, is not the same as populism and there is a wider literature on conspiracy theories within populist politics; see Chapter 3.6.) This chapter sets out to highlight three broad roles that conspiracy theories can play in radicalisation:

1. Conspiracy theories can provide clear and unambiguous narratives, structuring the world into ingroups and outgroups, reinforcing the sense of specialness that comes from having access to insider knowledge, and overall enhancing the appeal of extremist narratives.

2. Belief in conspiracy theories and radicalisation may be linked, in part, by shared psychological factors.

3. Conspiracy theories can work to enhance in-group bonding and insulate adherents from outside influences.

Within this framework there are important limitations to be held in readers’ minds. First, radicalisation and extremism are both contested terms (Berger 2018) and have been critiqued from a variety of perspectives. While the current interest in radicalisation and extremism stems largely from efforts made during the ‘War on Terror’, extremism and radicalisation have featured throughout history. Second, the focus in this chapter is on radicalisation processes, not extrem-
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Throughout, this chapter concentrates on how conspiracy theories help to explain the processes that lead individuals to become attracted to extremist groups or ideas and potentially engage in violence in service of their cause. This approach will overlook some of the wider questions around conspiracy theories and extremism more generally. Third, this chapter is limited to a broadly social scientific perspective. Other approaches to radicalisation and conspiracy theories have drawn more heavily on other disciplines such as psychology. Although these approaches have informed this chapter tangentially, they are not the main focus of the work.

What follows sets out an overview of radicalisation as a concept, noting some of the main criticisms of the concept as well as how understandings of radicalisation have evolved over time. It then sets out the three main areas in which conspiracy theories can contribute to radicalisation: Narrative, psychological and social. The chapter concludes by emphasising the limited state of the existing literature on conspiracy theories and radicalisation, and the potential for conspiracy theories in explaining other aspects of extremist behaviour outside of radicalisation.

On conspiracy theories and radicalisation

In this chapter, conspiracy theory is understood as ‘the belief that powerful, hidden, evil forces control human destinies’ (Barkun 2003: 2). However, other definitions are available (see Sunstein, Vermeule 2009). As with conspiracy theory research, one of the first challenges for any work dealing with radicalisation is definitional. There is no consensus definition of radicalisation, and no prospect of one emerging. At its most basic, radicalisation is essentially growing support for radical societal change that constitutes a threat to the ‘existing order’ (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010: 798). This conceptualisation demonstrates fealty to language, but generally encompasses more than many researchers mean when they discuss radicalisation. History is full of radical movements seeking to change the status quo, many of which are today lionised as heroes, e.g. in the U.K. the suffragettes and in the U.S. the civil rights movement. To get around this problem, radicalisation is usually interpreted more practically as applying to a violent sub-set of those that have become radicalised, a process referred to as ‘violent radicalization’ (Dalgaard-Nielson 2010), although even this definition tends to overlook some of the violent tendencies emerging from these movements. The distinction between cognitive radicalisation, meaning a belief in the need for radical change, and violent radicalisation, meaning the willingness to use violence to bring about change, is common in the literature on radicalisation and a potential source of confusion (Veldhuis, Staun 2009: 4). While those with a security agenda will likely be content to see radicalisation as linked only to violence, other policy agendas, for example those concerned with broader foreign policy or integration, are likely to also view non-violent radicalisation as an issue. Disagreement over the precise area of concern has, in some cases, left scholars and policy makers at cross-purposes (Sedgwick 2010).

The focus on the radical is also unfortunate for those who study the far right. Within the study of the far right, ‘radical’ is usually taken to mean at odds with mainstream politics, but still willing to work within democratic structures. Extremism, in contrast, is the label applied to groups and actors seeking to work outside of democratic norms (Mudde 2007; Ravndal, Bjørgo 2018). So, while radicalisation is clearly of concern to law and policy makers, radical groups and actors are potentially less of a concern than extremist groups with similar ideologies. This concern is even more pressing as a good deal of work on conspiracy theories draws on phenomena generally associated with the far right. In summary, like the concept of conspiracy theories itself, radicalisation has its problems. Although there is a general pragmatism in the literature that adopts a ‘we know it when we see it’ approach, it is important for researchers to take the
time to clearly specify what they mean when they use the term radicalisation to avoid talking at cross-purposes.

**How radicalisation works**

If scholars have been split in defining radicalisation, it should come as no surprise that accounts of radicalisation also differ in the explanations they offer. The key trend in the analysis of radicalisation has been the varying significance given to explanations based on individual factors, wider structural factors and contextual factors such as ideology and social relationships. The current position roughly centres on radicalisation as a complex set of processes in which different actors can take different pathways to extremism. Equally, however, a critical literature has grown up around radicalisation highlighting the difficulties arising from the concept, including the risks of pathologising and exoticising relatively common and normal experiences.

Although history is littered with both extreme and radical groups and individuals, the study of radicalisation as a phenomena took on a new impetus following the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing ‘War on Terror’. Most accounts of radicalisation have focused specifically on violent Islamist extremism, using datasets composed of those engaging in global ‘Jihad’ (Sageman 2008; Bakker 2008; Borum 2011). Only a few have considered left-wing radicalisation (Tsintsadze-Maass, Maass 2014; Karpantschof 2015), or radicalisation on the extreme-right (Vertigans 2007; Koehler 2014). Explanations have also concentrated in different geographies, including Africa (Botha 2014), the U.S.A. (Vertigans 2007; Tsintsadze-Maass, Maass 2014) and in Europe (Bakker 2008; Karpantschof 2015). Efforts have come from varied academic perspectives, including sociology (Roy 2008; Dalggaard-Nielsen 2010), psychology (King, Taylor 2011) and terrorism studies (Sageman 2008; Horgan 2009).

Many of the conceptual models of radicalisation that have emerged are linear descriptions from the perspective of individuals (Borum 2011: 38–43). For example, the New York Police Department (N.Y.P.D.) model focuses on U.S.-based home-grown Islamist extremist terrorists. It suggests individuals engage in four stages of behaviour: Pre-radicalisation; self-identification, during which they explore and adopt ideological tenants; indoctrination, which is envisaged as an intensification of both belief and commitment; and, finally, ‘Jihadization’, which entails direct violent action (Borum 2011: 41). However, models have also begun to place individuals in a broader context and to consider external factors (Borum 2011). For example, a 2008 report from the U.S. Center for Strategic and International Studies (C.S.I.S.) highlighted three overlapping motivational elements in radicalisation that included narratives and sociological factors alongside psychological factors, whilst at the same time minimising the role of demographic and socio-economic factors (C.S.I.S. 2008). Other models, such as from the Joint Military Information Support Centre (J.M.I.S.C.) were more expansive, including elements such as ‘socially-facilitated entry’ to radical groups, emphasising the role of pre-existing social connections in gaining access to groups (Borum 2011: 45). Other approaches have likewise suggested that radicalisation may be linked to factors other than individual level processes (Veldhuis, Staun 2009). These have included attempts to suggest a greater role in radicalisation for wider society level factors (Roy 2008; Cesari 2008; Bakker 2008), ideology and group processes (Wiktorowicz 2005; Sageman 2008). Radicalisation is not likely an either/or explanation but is instead a product of the complex interplay of differing factors. It is a result of multiple causes, given that ideological justifications develop within a variety of individual and social contexts. Radicalisation is seldom uniform, and different pathways can lead to the same destination (Borum 2011: 57–8).

Radicalisation is also a concept that has attracted considerable criticism. The largest source of disquiet is that it conflates thought, rhetoric and action into a single concept. While each comes
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with its own potential harms, each relates very differently to wider society and the state. Security agencies, for example, tend to be primarily concerned with security issues, i.e. threats to life and property, and even then only in specific forms, e.g. terrorism over protest. In contrast, civil society campaigners may more readily intervene when rhetoric causes problems, while state agencies are constrained by the legal complexities surrounding the boundaries between freedom of speech, hate speech and incitement to violence. Other critics have identified further issues with the concept of radicalisation, for example that it has become needlessly exoticised. It should instead be considered mundane and a normal part of life. By focusing analysis of radicalisation on the moments when an individual may move from legality to criminality, they argue we are missing the potentially extensive collection of factors that may lead up to that moment. By taking a longer view of radicalisation, even the smallest of perceived slights can contribute to moving an individual towards alienation and mistrust (Bailey, Edwards 2017).

The greatest challenge facing the concept of radicalisation, however, has been to explain why so few individuals become radicalised when individual experiences and structural and contextual factors are common to so many. Jensen et al. (2018: 16) argue that approaches to radicalisation have been too linear in attempting to understand the phenomenon, and that it is a product of multiple complex interactions between individual psychology, community grievances, group biases and the promise of material reward. Schuurman and Taylor (2018: 4) seemingly go further, arguing that radicalisation has suffered as a concept as it has attributed too great a role to ideological belief in explaining violent action, while ignoring the fact that the vast majority of those with radical ideological beliefs remain non-violent. They go on to argue that radicalisation suffers from epistemological flaws, missing the fact that terrorists, once involved in groups, are conditioned to describe their actions in ideological ways that may overlook other causal factors unrelated to ideology.

The role of this chapter is not to fully explain violent radicalisation. The task here is to consider the points at which conspiracy theories may play a role in supporting radicalisation processes. There is little available research that directly considers conspiracy theories and radicalisation (one exception is Bartlett and Miller 2010). However, this chapter aims to suggest three broad areas where both phenomena potentially overlap. What follows considers the role of conspiracy theory in radicalisation from three perspectives: Radical narratives, psychological factors and group relationships.

Conspiracy theories and extremist narratives

The clearest point of cross-over between radicalisation and conspiracy theory is in the creation and structuring of narrative accounts of the world. At their most basic, conspiracy theories represent explanations for malevolent events, attributing disasters real or imagined to a small group of secretive malign actors. In that respect, they have much in common with extremist narratives that seek to explain the world and the misfortunes besetting their cause, in unorthodox ways (Sunstein, Vermeule 2009). As a result, conspiracy theories are a common component within the narratives offered by extremist groups and may go some way to explaining their appeal (Bartlett, Miller 2010).

Probably the most familiar set of theories to a Western reader are those associated with the far right, foremost of which have been antisemitic conspiracy theories espoused in works such as The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, Henry Ford’s The International Jew and A.K. Chesterton’s The New Unhappy Lords. While the antisemitic basis of far-right conspiracy theories remains strong, it has been joined by influencers seeking to shift focus to the Islamic world such as Bat Y’er’s Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis and Fjordman’s Defeating Eurabia. In addition, there are thousands
of lesser conspiracy theories circulated in far-right circles, such as the anti-European conspiracy
theory the Kalergi Plan. Writing on the U.K. National Front and breakaway formations in the
1970s, Michael Billig argues that the far right exhibited a tenacious ‘conspiracy tradition’ (Billig
1978: 185). An emerging trend is for conspiracy theories in the far right to be remixed to fit
differing ideological perspectives, drawing in evidence from a range of sources to fit differing
explanations for the state of the world. For example, the counter jihad movement has varied
between espousing the secret ‘Islamization’ of Europe as the result of a Faustian pact between
European and Arab elites to counter American power, to a more straightforward ‘Stealth Jihad’
centred on the U.S.A. (Lee 2017).

Less often discussed has been the role of conspiracy theories in the narratives offered by
various forms of Islamist extremism. Islamist ideologue Sayyid Qutb, for example, includes a
warning in his seminal Milestones that some Westerners were part of a ‘well-thought-out scheme,
the object of which is first to shake the foundations of Islamic belief and then gradually demolish
the structure of Muslim society’ (Qutb 2002: 116; see also Sageman 2008: 78). This belief was
well-represented in narratives of groups such as Al-Qaeda, who would frequently reference
varying religious coalitions as working against Muslims (Bartlett, Miller 2010). There is also an
enduring overlap between the apocalyptic narratives adopted by I.S.I.S. and a more generalised
acceptance of antisemitic conspiracy theories that see the U.S.A. in particular as in the pocket of
Israel (Stern, Berger 2015: 222). While we are often conditioned to think of far-right and Islam-
ist groups as being opposed to one another, conspiracy narratives can overlap in unexpected
ways. For example, the acceptance of the Protocols forgery amongst groups hostile to Israel, such
as Hamas, seemingly points to some alignment with the far right (Bartlett, Miller 2010: 21).
That conspiracy theories feature so heavily in the narratives of extremist groups is not surprising
and they can potentially help to explain why extremist narratives resonate with potential sup-
porters and therefore at least some elements of radicalisation.

Conspiracy theories are usually Manichean, referencing the polarisation of a world divided
between dark and light or good and evil (Barkun 2003: 2). Although conspiracy theories can be
massively convoluted and complex, they are often clear in identifying those seeking to cause
harm (Raab et al. 2013). Writing on the ‘war on Islam’ concept present among some Islamist
extremists, Sageman notes:

This global conspiracy provides the dramatic background for the self-appointed role of
the global Islamist terrorists. They view themselves as warriors willing to sacrifice
themselves for the sake of building a better world, and this gives meaning to their lives.
They are part of an elite avant-garde devoted to absolute principles regardless of per-
sonal cost. Their enemies, who pursue their self-interest and give into temptation, are
symbolic of the decadence of the present world.

(Sageman 2008: 81)

The explanatory power of conspiracy theories may be heightened when groups feel themselves
to be threatened. When individuals and groups are stressed, for example through personal crisis
(Schuurman, Taylor 2018), then conspiracy belief is likely to offer clear explanations for events
and provide a clear opponent to fight. As a result, conspiracy theories are of value in extremist
narratives as they clearly and unambiguously set out enemies to be opposed at every turn (Barkun
2003).

As well as their explanatory power, conspiracy theories further serve to enhance the appeal
of extremist groups by casting adherents in a sometimes heroic – or at the very least knowledge-
able – light, thereby enhancing individual agency. Uncertainty and lack of clarity are key factors
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that drive belief in conspiracy theories overall (Douglas et al. 2016: 59). Conspiracy theories are linked to wider crises of individuality through the idea of ‘agency panic’, where individuals feel their own autonomy is under threat, conspiracy theories are a way for them to affirm their own values (Raab et al. 2013: 2). Agency emerges over and over in accounts of conspiracy theories. Robertson’s (2016) analysis of millenarian conspiracy notes that conspiracy theories stress the importance of individual agency. Similarly, discussions of conspiracy theory in the post-Soviet space also explore a lack of control as a possible explanation for the appeal of conspiracy theories (Ortmann, Heathershaw 2012: 556).

The appeal of conspiracy theories can be connected to wider societal trends linked to an ‘age of uncertainty’ brought about by advanced capitalism and globalisation, especially for those at the margins of societies (Parish 2001). In such a complex environment, older forms of explanation of cause and effect are clearly broken down and conspiracy theories then offer a ‘compensatory fantasy’ to their adherents (Knight 2001: 21). In a conspiracy-driven universe, nothing is accidental or coincidental and all events are capable of being read as meaningful and somehow tied to the wider conspiratorial narrative (Barkun 2003: 3; Douglas et al.: 2016). While conspiracy theories are frequently terrifying, they are also comforting in that they posit a universe in which patterns can be freely imposed on chaos (Barkun 2003: 4).

The baseline interpretation of conspiracy narratives as an attempt to bring order to an uncertain political and social picture resonates with understandings of radicalisation that link extreme ideas with wider societal factors, suggesting that conspiracy and radicalisation are born out of the same environment characterised by anxiety and uncertainty. Uncertainty brought about by changing economic practices and, in particular, the decline of manufacturing has been instrumental in driving radicalisation on the U.S. extreme right, despite the fact that many supporters have not been personally affected by economic changes (Vertigans 2007: 647). Similar factors were noted by Veldhuis and Staun (2009: 31) in their discussion of European Muslim integration in the context of Islamist radicalisation. They noted the lower socio-economic profiles of many European Muslims and further expanded this, arguing that Muslims were poorly integrated in the political domain, and noted that foreign policy in particular was often a source of grievance. In a study of limited open source data about 242 European jihadists, Bakker (2008) suggested that there was little evidence of jihadists being drawn from the upper classes, describing the majority of cases where information was available as being from middle or lower classes. In his conclusions on the data, Bakker noted the limited data available, but suggested that the broad trend was for violent Islamist extremist recruits in Europe to be drawn from lower social orders with a greater likelihood of having a criminal conviction (Bakker 2008: 43). However, these findings are often based on limited data about radicalised individuals (Bakker 2008) and cannot explain instances where highly educated and high-status individuals are seemingly radicalised. Economic uncertainty, then, may be one factor common to radicalisation, but the evidence suggests that those most at risk do not have a uniform socio-economic profile.

A more compelling explanation for radicalisation than immediate economic threats may be the extent to which economic and social change contributes to wider uncertainty around identity and status. Theories of the ‘French sociology’ school draw heavily on concepts such as identity and the search for meaning, including the experiences of the French Muslim population (Daalgard–Nielsen 2010). These are not born from simple socio-economic or political causes, but instead derive, as the conspiracy theories above, from a wider backdrop of modernity in Western democracies, in particular increasing levels of uncertainty around values, morals and identity:

The key contention of this group of sociologists is that violent radicalization arises out of the particular challenges faced by an increasingly Westernized generation of young
Muslims in Europe, who attempt to carve out an identity for themselves. The overall conditions of modernity and life in Western democracies – individualization and value relativism – prompt a search for identity, meaning, and community for a number of individuals.

(Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010: 800)

In a similar vein, radicalisation has been characterised as the result of a rupture between an individual and a society rather than as of any one socio-economic process (Roy 2008: 109). Those seeking to engage in the global jihad were uprooted, often lacking solid social integration and often seeking solutions to identity issues. In some cases this was caused by criminal involvement (Roy 2008: 112), and recruits often experience disconnection from family, environment, the state and moderate beliefs (Roy 2008: 109). Likewise, other researchers characterise radical recruits as being disembedded from society and social networks (Cesari 2008: 103).

Accounts of radicalisation and conspiracy theory both draw on wider societal developments as part of their explanations. For those concerned with conspiracy theories, the uncertainty of globalisation leads to an increase in the search for comfortingly simple explanations. Likewise, sociological accounts of radicalisation suggest the same uncertainty leads to the profound dis- connect and rupture that opens up the possibility of engaging with groups and ideas that promise a radical alternative. To this overlap, we can also add the centrality of conspiracy narratives in many radical movements. This occurs most obviously in tropes about Jewish domination on the right wing, but is also a component of violent Islamism and other forms of extremism. That conspiracy theory and radicalisation both originate with global uncertainty and a quest for identity is the clearest point of overlap between the two literatures, and it is easy to see how the conspiratorial narratives adopted by extremist groups enhance their appeal to potential recruits.

**Psychological factors**

As well as the crossover between radical narratives and conspiracy theories prompted in part by growing uncertainties, there is a strand of research on the psychological factors underpinning both radicalisation and conspiracy theories. This chapter is rooted in social science rather than psychology, however researchers of both conspiracy theories and radicalisation have speculated about the psychological factors that may contribute to the phenomena.

Accounts of radicalisation have often been sceptical about the role of psychological factors. Psychological profiling has been written off by some as a likely dead end that will never capture the evolving nature of terrorism (Horgan 2009). Horgan (2009) suggests that becoming involved in terrorist activity is a process and that psychological risk factors can only ever contribute to entry into a longer and more complex process such as those described above. Despite this, Horgan goes on to identify several risk factors for involvement in terrorism, which include temporary emotional states, dissatisfaction with current activities and ‘permanent relevant individual factors’ such as stress-seeking, that may prompt individuals to seek involvement in terrorism (2009: 11–12). A contrasting approach draws out the role of psychological factors in the critique of radicalisation, noting the prevalence of personal crises as being of interest in explaining different outcomes from similar patterns of extremist engagement. They go on to further emphasise the role of individual personality and behavioural factors in explaining violent action by suggesting abandoning the concept of radicalisation altogether in favour of fanaticism, as defined by a series of individual behavioural characteristics (Schuurman, Taylor 2018: 8–13).

Although there has been a trend away from viewing radicalisation as pathological, there is a similar argument within the literature on conspiracy theories that innate psychological
characteristics make some individuals more likely to support conspiracy theories than others. An overview of psychological research into conspiracy theories suggests factors such as anomie, distrust in authority, political cynicism, powerlessness, Machiavellianism and schizotypy may be linked to conspiracy belief (Douglas *et al.* 2016: 58). The phenomenon of hypersensitive agency detection – a well-documented human tendency to overestimate the extent to which events are intentional – also helps to explain the appeal of conspiracy theories (Douglas *et al.* 2016: 59). However, the evidence provided describes personality characteristics associated with conspiracy belief, not causal mechanisms (Douglas *et al.* 2016: 59). In other words, the causal relationship between conspiracy belief and psychological factors is uncertain.

A further stand-out finding from psychological research on conspiracy theories has been that conspiracy beliefs are often mutually supportive. When individuals subscribe to one conspiracy theory, they are more likely to endorse others. This has led to claims that there is a specific conspiracy mindset in which conspiracy thinking becomes self-reinforcing (Goertzel 1994). Existing partisan pre-dispositions have also been found to play a role in individual acceptance of conspiracy theory (Uscinski *et al.* 2016: 57). One study of U.S. citizens concluded that exposure to conspiracy theory was only likely to increase belief for those already primed to accept the logic of conspiracy theories and for whom the conspiracy theory aligned with existing partisan belief (Uscinski *et al.* 2016: 67).

The argument that there is a psychological overlap between radicalisation and conspiracy belief is less developed than the case about shared narratives. However, both radicalisation research and conspiracy theory research have pointed, in some cases, to psychological factors that influence individual susceptibility to both phenomena. From a social science perspective, caution needs to be exercised here, as taking an overly reductive psychological approach risks drawing attention away from both wider societal level as well as group level approaches to both radicalisation and conspiracy theories. The major danger is that both radicalisation and conspiracy belief are reduced to pathologies unrelated to wider social trends. Despite this, if there is such a thing as a conspiratorial mindset, it could well overlap with the kinds of psychological risk factors identified by researchers working on radicalisation.

**Radicalisation and conspiracy theory as social context**

As well as providing appealing narratives and the potential psychological overlap between conspiracy and radicalisation, conspiracy theories also work to reinforce the relationships within groups. While many people find extremist narratives laced with conspiracy theories such as those adopted by the extreme right or Islamist extremists appealing and may share a psychological disposition towards conspiracy theories and extremism, most do not participate in extremist groups. Social relationships are therefore an additional factor in explaining the appeal of extremist spaces and individual motivations to participate in them (King, Taylor 2011):

*It is certain that radicalisation does not play out in individual isolation. It is a social phenomenon: individuals learn from one another, on and off the Internet, and various radical movements compete vigorously with one another; arguments are exchanged, opponents are maligned, and every movement is convinced that it is in the right.*

(*Slootman, Tillie 2006: 5*)

Evidence of the importance of social bonds has mainly come from analysis of Jihadist terrorism. The breakdown of the central organisation within Al-Qaeda foreshadowed a transition to a strategy described as ‘leaderless Jihad’ (Sageman 2008). In this context, social relationships
became more important for explaining participation. The majority of recruits had prior connections to one another and terror networks were largely home-grown conglomerations of friendship and kinship groups radicalised together (Sageman 2008: 141). Likewise, evidence from a study of 242 European-based Jihadi terrorists found that in 35 per cent of the sample there was evidence of social connections at the time of joining a group or network. This included 43 cases where friends joined together, and 50 cases of related individuals (Bakker 2008: 42). The importance of social relationships in radicalisation has also played out in the extensive debate around lone actor terrorism. An increasing consensus within terrorism studies has been that lone actors are generally not nearly as one as they seem and instead are connected to wider ideological communities (Berntzen, Sandberg 2014; Schuurman et al. 2017; Hofmann 2018). The generally accepted explanation has been that radicalisation also requires some form of social support structure. It is an ‘inescapably social’ process, reliant on both social connections and group-curated narratives (Conway 2012: 13).

As well as helping to explain participation in groups, social connections provide important interpretive frameworks for extremists. Within extremist groups, external events are not only interpreted by individuals but through the collective lens of a group:

Social bonding within small peer groups can facilitate the adaptation of more extreme worldviews. They emphasize how the group provides individuals with a sense of belonging and community, with the feeling of being accepted and important, and even with a sense of superiority and mission. They also emphasize how social pressures apply to the members of the groups and how this increases group conformity over time.

(Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010: 803)

The importance of social connections is not limited only to Jihadist groups but is also a feature of far-right groups. Research from the U.S.A. argues that ideas associated with white supremacy are embedded within U.S. society at a more mainstream level. However, by engaging with extremist groups, individuals are able to develop more extreme interpretations of events (Vertigans 2007: 647).

Social aspects are a significant point of overlap between conspiracy belief and radicalisation. Conspiracy theory belief contributes to a sense of group exceptionalism and outsider status, as well as improving resilience to external challenges. Conspiracy theories exist in the domain of ‘stigmatised knowledge’, sitting alongside other forms of knowledge such as esoteric teaching and ‘political radicalism’ (Barkun 2003: 12). As a result of their heterodoxy, those who subscribe to conspiracy theories have a shared outsider status. One analysis concludes by describing a ‘theodicy of the dispossessed’ in which adherents are located outside of time and with access to knowledge unavailable to those still bound by conventional modes of thought (Robertson 2016: 206). Those party to the conspiracy but not bound by it are ‘an elect minority defined by exclusive knowledge’ (Robertson 2016: 207).

Social relationships also contribute to the growth of conspiracy theories. In the context of extremist groups, information is often limited and often wrong, what one team of researchers termed ‘crippled epistemologies’ (Sunstein, Vermeule 2009). This kind of social context is primed for the growth of conspiracy theories as factually weak explanations gain traction within a social group and become the go-to explanation for events. For other activists, it is easier and simpler to go along with the established explanation rather than challenge it. As less-committed members of the group drop away, selection effects mean that explanations become ever more detached from reality and the median position shifts towards the extremes (Sunstein, Vermeule 2009).
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Conspiracy theories also work for improving group resilience, providing group members with an easy explanation for why a group is ostracised by the mainstream, or why events do not play out as scripted by group narratives. As ‘monological’ belief systems, i.e. reliant on a single immutable idea, conspiracy theories provide believers with a shield against new information that may threaten existing world views (Goertzel 1994). A good example is millenarian movements that lack a mass following and tend to use conspiracy theory to explain away their lack of popularity as well as the failure of the End Times to materialise: ‘Surely the masses would believe if only they knew what the concealed malefactors were up to’ (Barkun 2003: 3).

Conspiracy theories are valuable in maintaining solidarity against efforts to undermine group narratives. The acceptance of counter messaging as a component of policy in countering violent extremism has put a focus on the difficulties inherent in reaching those engaging with extremist spaces (Aistrope 2016; Braddock, Morrison 2018). Extensive interest in counternarrative and counter-messaging approaches to extremism from government and civil society are easier to combat when they can be interpreted as yet more evidence of both the righteousness of the cause and the malevolence of the forces acting against a group. Where conspiracy theories are a component of a narrative, they can dismiss any counternarrative as part of the wider plot and therefore unreliable evidence (Barkun 2003: 7). This feature is often described as limited falsifiability, suggesting that the theory put forward cannot be disproved. Although this has been a major criticism of conspiracy theories, some have argued that this feature is also present in more conventional explanations for political events (Räikkä 2009). There is also evidence from wider studies of decisions to accept and contest evidence that suggest that the limited falsifiability of conspiracy theories may not be that different from other situations (Leman, Cinnirella 2013).

There is a need to consider the direction of causality at work in this context. While the approach to conspiracy theories is generally utilitarian, arguing that they serve distinctive purposes in extremist spaces, the reality is likely to be more complex. For example, conspiracy theorising could easily be a by-product of engaging in extremist spaces as well as a cause. The isolation and hostility experienced by participants in extremist spaces could easily heighten the appeal of conspiracy belief. There is some evidence to suggest that, where groups are under pressure from unusual, unforeseen or traumatic events, dramatic new explanations for events become more attractive. For example, conspiratorial themes took on a heightened significance in the mainstream press in Serbia during the 1999 N.A.T.O.-led bombing campaign (Byford and Billig 2001), and similar explanations were offered for the interest in conspiracy theories developing after 9/11 in the U.S.A. (Barkun 2003: 2).

Both the literatures on radicalisation and conspiracy theory acknowledge a key role for social context. Radicalisation, for all the models and accounts focusing on push and pull factors towards participation in extremist groups, is at heart a social process, relying on established connections to access groups and, once inside extremist spaces, it involves interpreting the world in a way that preserves the group’s vision. Likewise, the conspiracy theory literature highlights the social aspects of conspiracy theories, both in ostracising believers from wider society, granting them a shared outsider status, and in allowing groups to fend off external criticism and sustain their ideological commitment. Once inside an extremist space, conspiracy theories are powerful tools that create shared bonds and a sense of exceptionalism for extremist participants, especially against a hostile and often threatening mainstream.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the intersection of conspiracy theory and radicalisation. As noted in the introduction, the focus here has been on conspiracy theories and the processes of
engagement with extremist groups, i.e. radicalisation. Not discussed here, but of interest, is the extent to which conspiracy theories can appear to structure the behaviour of extremist groups. This is most clearly demonstrated in target selection. We know from the manifestos of far-right terrorists such as Anders Breivik and Brenton Tarrant that conspiracy narratives can be used to justify the targets of terrorism. Conspiracy theories often make claims that connections exist between seemingly disparate events and people. Although hidden from view, the hand of the conspiracy is everywhere. Barkun (2003: 4) describes conspiracy theorists as engaging in a constant process of ‘linkage and correlation’ between events. James (2001: 71), writing about Christian militias in the U.S.A., argues that the conspiratorial narrative of the Zionist Occupational Government (Z.O.G.) was a key component in bringing together the objects of delegitimation for the movement. As racial enemies were reconfigured and viewed as having taken over the very state itself, groups once committed to the state and nationalism reframed their activism to focus both on racial minorities and the state (see also Sprinzak 1995; Kaplan 1995). Bartlett and Miller (2010: 24) contend that conspiracy theories act as ‘radicalisation multipliers’ within groups. Starting with the observation that extremist groups and actors share a common conception of ingroups and outgroups (see also Berger 2018), they argue that conspiracy narratives can lead groups towards violence by exaggerating the threat presented by outgroups, shutting down dissenting voices and legitimising the use of violence in order to awaken others. So, while it is plain that conspiracy theories play a key role in structuring and possibly motivating extremist behaviours, in particular violence, and it is equally clear that extremist narratives tend to be highly conspiratorial, the exact role of conspiracy theory in radicalisation remains an open question.

There is a frustrating lack of evidence for the role of conspiracy theories in underpinning radicalisation and it has been challenging to get the two literatures to address one another directly. However, if we squint, the connections between radicalisation and conspiracy theories are potentially manifold. This chapter has identified three possible points of overlap: First, that the presence of conspiracy theories in extremist narratives enhances the appeal of extremist narratives, thereby encouraging radicalisation. Conspiracy theories are powerful tools for making sense of an increasingly complex world and the appeal of clear and absolute narratives for those struggling to find identity and certainty cannot be overlooked. Second, and more tenuous, research has linked both conspiracy belief and radicalisation to psychological factors. In the context of radicalisation, this link has been questioned, not least because of the deep unease around separating radicalisation from its wider social context. The extent to which any conspiracy mindset and risk factors for radicalisation overlap remains an open question. Third, once inside an extremist space, be it a cell, party or wider network, conspiracy theories can work to improve solidarity and insulate believers from external challenges to their ideas. This is a case of conspiracy theories protecting believers and preventing de-radicalisation rather than supporting radicalisation.

Plainly, there is more work to be done in getting the radicalisation and conspiracy literatures to engage with one another. Further efforts to unpack the appeal of conspiracy theories for those seeking to involve themselves in extremist spaces would be welcome, as would analyses of conspiracy theories specifically in the contexts of political and religious extremisms. There also remains a question around the modes of distribution of conspiracy theories in extremist settings. While the growth of the Internet has generally been linked to growing belief in conspiracy theories and support for extremism, further research is needed to understand how these trends are interacting with one another.
Radicalisation and conspiracy theories

Note

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References


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