Understanding Radical Groups and Radical Youth in the West:

A Literature Review

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Abstract

Home-grown terrorism has become an issue several Western states have to deal with. London 7/7 and – more recently - Paris 2015 have highlighted the need to better explore a new enemy from within, i.e. the "home-grown terrorists". How shocking and frustrating it can appear, terrorism is a complex phenomenon, which can be regarded as the outburst of a multi-factor process known as *radicalization.* Radicalization was boldly defined by Neumann as "what happens before the bomb goes off" (Neumann 2008: 4), stressing its pivotal role as a necessary landmark towards any form of extremism. Although all radicals do not become terrorists, all terrorists were previously radicalized. Therefore, it is not possible to understand terrorism without having a good understanding of radicalization. Nowadays, radicalization has become a frequent word in the media considering also the growing presence of radical Islamist movements in the West, attracting a growing number of Muslim youth. The scenario of these groups is very broad ranging from the violent Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to the intellectual Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). In this panorama, one question remains quite unanswered, i.e. *why should young people born and educated in the West turn to radical Islamist movements?* This article aims at exploring this issue by reviewing the literature up-to-date to investigate the catalysts for young Muslims' radicalization in Western states. In order to provide a clear picture of the discourse, I will focus on two broad categories, i.e. the "emotional factors" and the "environmental factors". Furthermore, I will take into consideration the Constructivist approach to better explore the relationship between radical groups and their members as well as the groups' capacity to create meaning and identities.

Keywords: Muslims – Radicalization – Islamist Groups – Ideology – Extremism

1. Defining Radicalization

Radicalization is a complex and multi-factor process whose definition is not clear. In fact, scholarship appears quite divided when framing the meaning of the term. On the most basic level, radicalization can be described as "the process whereby people become extremists" (Neumann 2013: 874; Mandel 2009). Over the years, research has evolved towards more complex definitions and elaborated models, such as Fathali Moghadam's "staircase", Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko's "pyramid" (2008), or Zeyno Baran's (2005) "conveyor belt"[1] to terrorism, all endorsing the basic assumption considering radicalization as medium/long-term progression towards extremism, in different modes and steps.

Also the concept of extremism is quite broad. In fact, radicalization can lead towards *political extremism* (Scruton 2007) as the adoption of political ideas strongly contrasting with the mainstream society's ones, opposing human rights and fundamental freedoms in liberal contexts, and also fostering rage and anger towards authorities responsible of "wicked and damaging" political decisions and actions. At the same time, extremism can concern *religious ideas*, assuming that only one path towards God is righteous while all the others are wrong, to be avoided and sometimes even to be destroyed since they divert people from the truth.

In addition, extremism can be connected to the *methods* by which individuals want to achieve their goals, regardless of other actors' preferences, rights and sometimes even about other people's lives (Scruton 2007; Neumann 2013). This distinction is what led the emergence of two kinds of radicalization, i.e. *cognitive* and *behavioural radicalization* (Mandel 2009). The former emphasizes the adoption of extreme beliefs and ideology that remains at the intellectual level, whereas behavioural radicalization entails the assumption of specific attitudes, along with the performance of extremist actions, which might involve the use of violence. Of course, a relationship exists between the two kinds of radicalization and it is reasonable to assume that the cognitive one precedes the behavioural one, even though not all cognitive radicals will then turn into violent extremists.

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[1] See Baran (2005).

When thinking about Islamist groups, radicalization can also mean something more. In order to grasp the gist of many Islamists' discourses, it is necessary to refer to the etymology of the term, deriving from the Latin word *radix*, which means "root" (Sinclair 2010). Most of the radical Islamist groups stress the need to go back to the roots of religion, to the fundamentals to create an effective political, social and economic order. To do so, they highlight the need to apply Islamic law (*shari'a*) within a divine inspired political setting, i.e. the Caliphate (*Khilfah*). Several Islamist movements support the *Khilfah* and the application of *shari'a* but they all present subjective views on how to re-establish the Caliphate, on the core elements of Islamic law as well as on the relationship between Muslims and *kuffar* (unbelievers). These assumptions give birth to different positions within the broad scenario of radical Islamist groups, which continue to attract second-generation Muslim youth born in the West.

In order to have a deeper insight of what are the elements that drive young Muslims towards radical expressions of Islam, I have regrouped them into two broad categories, i.e. the emotional factors of radicalization and the environmental ones.

1.1. The Emotional Factors of Radicalization

This set includes all the elements related to the emotional sphere of the individuals that push youth from different cultural, social and economic backgrounds towards radical forms of Islam. Ryder et al. (2000) firstly introduced the concept of *acculturation stress* which later became the focus of other studies, such as Olds' (2009) and Wolfberg (2012). Acculturation is a "phenomenon that results when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits 1936: 149). Barry has broadened this definition, pointing out that acculturation is also "a social interaction and communication response styles that individuals adapt when interacting with individuals and groups from other cultures" (Barry 2001: 193). This interaction usually generates stress on the people involved and may lead to negative consequences.

This picture fits perfectly in the life of Muslim communities giving us an insight of the tensions they experience living in a western country (Kundani 2014). A major source of stress is represented by the host country expectation towards Muslims to act as "good citizens". This label involves Muslims' acceptance of the mainstream society values, within an environment characterized by Islamophobia and suspicion. As argued by Abbas (2007), political leaders and authorities frequently promote a double image of "good" and "bad" Muslims to curb this social hostility and encourage a peaceful cohabitation. Good Muslims are those who fully abide by the western country laws and conform to the common values. Moreover, this category does not strongly oppose western foreign policy. Conversely, Muslims who do not observe these requirements might be considered as "bad".

Furthermore, scholarship has pointed out the fact that several young Muslims live in two worlds. For instance, their environment at home is completely different from what they experience at work, at the gym, at a restaurant and in any other place normally frequented by those living in a western country. As a result, the family's culture and traditions are constantly challenged, causing friction within the individual himself who, in some cases, might determine to reject them both. This attitude is included in what Culhane (2004) has identified as the four dimensions of acculturation. Namely, *integration,* when individuals maintain their cultures and are able to accept and adapt to the host's culture and *assimilation,* when individuals fully adapt to the host's culture. *Separation* occurs when individuals become alienated from the host culture and separate themselves from the main society preferring to socialize with persons from their own culture. Lastly, an individual experiences *marginalization* when he feels alienated from both cultures, i.e. his own and the host culture. This fourth dimension can be considered as the starting point for many youngsters who are searching for their personal identity, religion and values. This process could end with the membership to a radical movement, which provides all three of these elements.

By the same token, in their study on Muslim youth in Australia, Noble and Tabar (2002) remarked that second generation Muslim young people are "caught between two cultures", i.e. their parents' culture and the western one. This problematic feeling led Fareed (2005) and Costanza (2012) to retrieve the

concept of *bipolar life* as a possible driver towards radicalization. It is conceived as living within a *kuffars'* country and at the same time coping with a Muslim heritage. This is a reality for a great number of children belonging to religious families, who seem to live their life in two different dimensions, separated only by the house door. Remarkable differences concern the language register, the dress code, the food, and hobbies. For instance, there are significant dissimilarities between Muslims and Westerns on what music to listen to, what movies to watch and what books to read and which venues to attend. All these fields are influenced by the background the person belongs to and this is rather problematic since several behaviours condemned by Islam are accepted by the West and vice versa. For instance, secular laws tolerate gambling, alcohol, adultery, homosexuality, and blasphemy, which is all *haram* (forbidden, shameful) through the lens of Islam (Wiktorowicz 2005). On the other hand, common accepted behaviours, such as polygamy, are outlawed in the West. These examples highlight how hard it is to combine the two worlds, whilst distinguishing their rules and attempting to live in the midst of them.

Interestingly, although a number of youngsters choose western identity as their primary preference, this does not prevent them from experiencing exclusion, racism and isolation. The internal tension together with the individual's need to find his place in the society - so as to give a meaning to his existence – leads him/her to what Pipe (1983), Tibi (2002) and Berna (2008) have defined as an *identity crisis*. This sense of emptiness and the will to detect the core characteristics of "their selves" pushes young Muslims to look for what can be defined as a "pan-identity", adequate and filling every aspect of their life. This is why radical Islamic identity seems very appealing for young people since "it provides a personal sense of safety, security and self-worth" (Costanza 2012: 19).

Within this scenario, Vertovec and Rogers (1998); Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000); Cesari (2002); Saint-Blancat (2004); Peek (2005); Hamid (2011) and Warner et al. (2012) have highlighted the fact that second generation Muslims are more inclined to seek a *different religious identity* than that of their parents. This usually happens when young Muslims consider their parents' model of religiosity to be disappointing (e.g. their model of religiosity is either too strict or too weak or simply not adequate to address the young people's needs and aspirations). In

fact, scholarship has stressed how more and more young Muslims are looking for real Islam (Cesari 2002; Voas and Fleischmann 2012; Warner et al. 2012). They see western societies as characterized by moral decline and boundless wickedness where core values (such as marriage, family and honour) are mostly regarded as bigot clichés.

This perception leads young Muslims (at least those who are not interested in conforming to these attitudes) to look for another way. Their underlying desire is the one of doing the right thing, to give a meaning to their existence and to find the right path towards God. However, as stressed by Skillicorn et al. (2012) and Lynch (2013), another dilemma concerns what religious school of thought to follow, what to do to please God (or whose instructions to trust and follow) and how to make the difference in a world of decay. As a result, these youngsters emphasize the need to go back to Texts, to the roots of religion. Within this framework radical movements find an enormous recruitment pool.

1.2. The Environmental Factors of Radicalization

The second broad category focuses on the inputs towards radicalization from the environment the individuals live in. Among them, public policies can play a pivotal role having a strong impact on the person's perceptions, sense of belonging and affection towards the host country. In particular, two sets of policies seem to be very relevant, i.e. *Foreign Policy* and *Integration Policy*. With regard to the former, experts (Fareed 2005; Wiktorowics 2005; Abbas 2007; Hamid 2011; James 2011; Pupcenoks 2012) agree on the fact that the discontent on Foreign Policy can cause rage, anger, and frustration towards the host country and might work as a catalyst towards radicalization. In his recent work on Muslims in the West, Arun Kundani (2014: 35) concluded, "what governments call extremism is to a large degree a product of their own wars". His claim on the disruptive impact of military interventions on public opinion seems very appropriate with regard to Muslims. For instance, one can imagine how hard it is for an Afghani or a young Iraqi Muslim to accept the brutal interventions in their countries of heritage and to support the War on Terror. All the same, one cannot imagine a young Muslim from Palestinian origins

being indifferent to the Intifada, the bombings on schools and on innocent children.

A flourishing literature in the 1980s – mostly made up by Esposito (1980); Ayoob (1981); Dessouki (1982); Sivan (1984); Lewis (1985); Levine (1986); Piscatori (1986); Vitikiotis (1987) and Keddie (1988) - maintained that radicalization is the outcome of new forms of western colonialism in the world. These assumptions are known as the *neo-colonialism argument*, supporting the claim that the United States - in alliance with former colonial powers - has created new mechanisms to exploit and control weaker states and their people. Taji-Farouki (1996), points at the Trusteeship System in Middle East as a clear example of a means to keep control over politics, people and resources in an international legitimized way. Other evidences regard tricky economic aid agreements, foreign investments, development projects and support for puppet regimes. Nonetheless, the exportation of western/American models not only concerns politics and economics, but also society as a whole. In fact, western entertainments, food, music and fashion have spread all over the world. These facts provoked a reaction among minorities aimed at protecting their identity and heritage. As a result, through the lens of this argument, the strong will to restore an Islamic identity, state and society appears as an attempt to resist being crushed by the mainstream western model.

With regard to the *Integration Policy*, a number of issues rotate around it affecting second-generation young Muslims. After 9/11, Muslims have become the "dangerous other" in the West, fostering new attitudes such as Islamophobia (Satter 2010) and Securitization (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998: 25) as well as shaping a sort of suspect community (Nickels et al. 2011). Ahmed (2009) has pointed out how a substantial part of young Muslims in UK have a strong sense of belonging to their occidental homeland, but they do not feel fully accepted and usually perceive their loyalty as on trial. This anxiety is also spread in religious places. In fact, as Kundani (2014) emphasizes, mosque attenders and imams mostly feel so stressed and under scrutiny that they immediately eject whoever shows more radical ideas and trends, instead of dealing with his/her needs and perceptions. Furthermore, the spread of hostility towards Muslims - regarded as a threat – has caused fear and alienation from both sides (i.e. western societies towards them and Muslims towards their environment).

Recent research in the UK has shown that Muslim youth are considered as a "disenfranchised youth" (Lynch 2013: 245), far away from the social standards in terms of education, employment and lifestyle and this status is common to several countries. These conditions constitute the basis for the so-called *socio-economic argument*, assuming that bad economic circumstances in terms of uneven income distribution, natural resources availability and growth rate push people towards radicalization (Almond et al. 2003). Within this framework, integration policy is often regarded as a panacea to foster the birth of a sense of belonging in the hearts of many young Muslims and avoid home-grown radicalization. Although this is not a universal remedy, it is definitely important. On this purpose, I support Migliore's (2011) and Harris and Roose's (2014) argument stressing the need to consider immigrants or second-generation citizens' integration as a key priority of many political agendas.

Several programs have been implemented, involving both public and third sector actors. Beyond the national differences, the common aim is to make the recipients part of the society in which they live in terms of language, professional skills, values and law abidance. Useful examples are the Australian National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security (NAP 2006) and the Diverse Australia Program (2010). These programs stress the need to increase the chances for young Muslims to take part in community activities as well as to be engaged socially and politically. Some of the initiatives concern educational activities in local schools aimed at improving the common understanding of Muslim Australians, to increase the opportunities of vocational training for better employment and to enhance the dialogue within the community and with the authorities. The strict link between these policies and second generations Muslims' radicalization is officially recognized. In fact, one of the primary goals of the NAP (2006: 3) is to create "a society more resilient against extremism and terrorism". The core idea is in line with the main argument highlighted by recent scholarship (Van Krieken 2012; Jakubowicz and Ho 2013; Harris and Roose 2014; Patton 2014; Peucker et al. 2014). It assumes that an immigrant community - with its second-generation children, born in the host country – has better chances to develop a sense of belonging to the host state, which is in fact the homeland, if a number of conditions are satisfied. Among the most remarkable ones, the members should fully enjoy political and civil rights, have access to equal opportunities in several fields (especially within

the area of employment) and perceive their cultural heritage as an enrichment rather than a burden. This sense of belonging, identity and love is thought to discourage any form of violence and rage towards the country where these people were born. Notwithstanding all the programs implemented all over the Western world, Muslim youth still experience terrible forms of racism, discrimination and exclusion (Allen 2010; Lambert and Githins-Mazer 2010; Hamid 2011).

In addition to all the mentioned causes, people surrounding the individual - such as friends, family and the religious community - can represent another remarkable driving force towards radical ideas. Experts believe that *social bonds* are a powerful catalyst. Among the advocates of this argument, Marc Sageman (2004, 2011) stands out for the significance of his research based on empirical data and interviews with Afghan Mujahedins in Islamabad. Sageman's theory of radicalization is known as the "Bunch of Guys Theory". He refuses the single-factor explanations regarding radicalization as the product of economic disadvantage or religious beliefs only. Instead, he identifies four steps towards radicalization. The first step concerns a perceived moral outrage that affects the individual's sensibility; the second step is the perception of an ongoing war against Islam, which stands as a broad moral war. In the third step, personal experiences of discrimination, racism and exclusion come to mind and they are framed within the hostility against Muslims. They consider themselves as victims of an unjust system that needs to be changed through the perfect law, which is Allah's one. Finally, the fourth step is mobilizing networks. Individuals are ready to act within their group, where they feel accepted, important and part of a noble plan. Therefore social ties are essential to become a radical.

In line with Sageman's assumptions, Quintan Wiktorowicz (2005) in his work on Al-Muhajiroun *Radical Islam rising: Muslim extremism in the West* argues that a person usually gets in touch with radical interpretations of Islam hearing about them through a family member or friend. For instance, the participation of women is strongly encouraged by a number of radical movements, such as Hizb ut Tahrir and Al-Muhajiroun. Within the latter, husbands must try to get their wives involved (Wiktorowicz 2005). Moreover, when an individual is in the phase of religious seeking, he will usually turn to people he knows and trusts,

looking for specific answers. For this reason a *da'i*[2] would start to perform their job focusing first on their family, peers, friends and relatives (Wikham 2002). Recruiters start operating and their first step is to build trust (for people who are not part of their family or friends) behaving as good neighbours, being helpful and wise. This is what Hirsch (1990) describes as the "principle of socialization prior to participation", arguing that the creation of personal relationships and affective bonds is a fundamental initial stage to pull individuals into the network.

The *religious community of origin* usually plays an essential role as well. Swick (2005) claims that it is common that the older immigrants (who run mosques) rarely include youth in leadership roles. Young Muslims frequently feel excluded and misunderstood by first generation Muslims. Also the language barrier stands as a giant obstacle for their inclusion. Young people's Arabic – or whatever language of origin – is not always fluent and this situation works as a restriction towards a deeper knowledge of Islam and their religious understanding. Radical movements have fully understood this problem and have adopted new effective techniques to fill in these gaps. For instance, they spread religious information, pamphlets and organize quranic studies using the western country language, which is in fact the mother tongue of the great majority of Muslim youth. Additionally, these movements provide a noble cause to pursue, an aim to achieve and a living dynamism opposed to the static attitude typical of the parents' religious entourage.

All the factors highlighted so far work as driving forces for Muslim youth towards radical movements. As argued so far, Islamist movements create a micro-cosmos, a set of values and priorities that attract the individuals and later constitute the core elements of their new "radical identity". In order to better understand this process, I will use the literature on Constructivism. In spite of its limitations, I consider it a valid theoretical framework to analyse the identity-building process of radical groups and their influence on the members.

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[2]Defined as "One who invites people to the faith, to the prayer, or to Islamic life" http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e478?_hi=0&_pos=8 Accessed 26.11.2015

2. Through the lenses of Constructivism

Constructivism stands as the most suitable approach to analyse the relationship between the radical groups and its members. Constructivism can be defined as a "meta-theoretical label" (Knol, 2011: 2), which is applied to a great variety of disciplines, ranging from philosophy and pedagogy to sociology and international relations. Although its characteristics vary according to the particular field it is applied, there is a common ground among "constructivists of all kinds". Ontologically, scholars within this approach conceive the world as socially constructed. Within this scenario, individuals evaluate facts and resources according to the system of common understandings they are rooted in (Wendt, 1995). Epistemologically, constructivists are interested in comprehending how the world became what it is (Adler, 2012). Therefore, their primary aim is not to explain objective reality (which is in fact contingent to the observer) but to investigate the processes of its building and transforming. Lastly, common methods used by constructivists include positivist, post-positivist, quantitative and qualitative as well as combined ones. Across the disciplines, case studies (Klotz, 1995), process tracing (Sikkink, 1993) and other interpretive methods (such as narrative analysis, ethnography and genealogy) are frequently used (Adler, 2012).

Berger and Luckman firstly applied Constructivism to sociology in the 1960s, introducing the approach into social sciences. Their work, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966) represented a turning point for human agency and the structure above it. In the *Treatise,* they argue that individuals – both as singles and within a group – play a vital role in the construction of facts, which are made-up, explored and established by means of social interaction. As a result, constructivists see social construction as a continuous process replicated by people whose action is driven by their understandings and knowledge.

Constructivism has broadened the interpretive spectrum of reality, overcoming the traditional rigidity applied to the observation of social world. In particular,

it has challenged the realist conception of reality as something detached from individuals being "out-there", considering the world as dependent on agency and socially constructed. Constructivism provides the best framework to analyse Islamist radical groups in comparison with other main approaches like realism (very much concerned with factual needs and power) and rationalism (which is about the optimal relationship between costs and benefits for the agent). Radicals' success is very much related to their capacity to create meaning, values, norms and principles among its members and cannot be explained through a set of exogenous factors, unrelated to the personal sphere of the agent. In fact, Constructivism takes into account the agents' background, knowledge and interpretative schemes as core elements shaping their vision of the world and preferences. As a result, Constructivism can help to explain the individuals' choices, orientations and attractiveness to particular groups.

With regard to the constructivist debates, this paper focuses on the agent-structure debate, the epistemological debates and the theoretical ones. The *structure-agent debate* mostly rotates around a central question, i.e. what exists in the world, and should its explanation concern agents, structures or both? Over the years, constructivists have evolved from radical positions to milder ones. Scholars started questioning the validity of the statement that everything is socially constructed, labelling this trend as "social reductionism", oversimplifying reality (Pickering 1989; Latour 2004). A pure constructivist position is perfectly in line with Giddens' *Theory of Structuration* (1984). He contributes to the debate strengthening the idea of a mutual constitution of agents and structures. In particular, he focuses on the "duality of structure", defining it both as a means and as a result of reproduction of social practices. Moreover, he argues that structures exist both inside the agents (in terms of memories, rules, frames) and outside them as an expression of social activities.

Giddens was followed by Alexander Wendt, who is himself one of the major contributors to the debate, especially in the field of International Relations. Laying on Giddens' arguments, Wendt claims that both structures and agents interact together, shape and constitute the real world. In fact, social structures depend on agents' practices and knowledge, but agents' interests and

preferences are influenced by structures at the same time. Advocates of this deep bond between agents and structures found great opposition with the scholarship. Walter Carlsnaes (1992) stands as an example of Wendt's main critics. He considers Wendt's vision as "a bold attempt to amalgamate the divide between action and order" (Carlsnaes, 1992: 257). He strongly opposes the conflation between structure and agent, calling into the debate Archer (1988) and his explanation supporting structural autonomy from the agents. For instance, when considering the act of cycling, bicycles exist and can be observed detached from the agents, and disregarding one's riding skills. The same can be argued for facts and people in the real world. In spite of the materialistic trend, Carlsnaes' contribution is remarkable since he introduced the "time dimension" in the debate. Recalling Giddens (1979) and Archer (1985), he stresses the importance of time in framing actions within social systems, which are continually structuring and evolving. Moreover, the possibility to identify a "cycle of action structure interaction" (Carlsnaes, 1992: 260) would help the observer to understand the reality better and explore its dynamics.

Some years later, Jackson and Nexon (1999) and Martin Weber (2005) pointed out the scholarship's disproportionate attention to the agents rather than to the structures. This excess prevented the researchers from grasping the essence of reality and its processes. In 2008, Lebow made an important contribution to the debate drawing his assumptions from constructivist psychology. He maintains that while the core elements leading agents' conduct (like hunger and temperament) are stable in their primary role, culture shapes the pyramid of people's principles and their articulation.

To date, this debate is far from being resolved. In spite of the common idea of mutual constitution, some scholars show a particular bias. For instance, Giddens appears focused on structure, whereas Wendt is focused on agents. Still, within a system, structures and agents constitute each other, change simultaneously and evolve over time. As a result, in order to understand the core elements of the evolution, it is essential to focus on both the agents and the structures involved.

To sum up, two main positions dominate the debate, namely the advocates of a conflated vision of agents and structures and the supporters of

agents/structures autonomy. Nevertheless, the debate might converge towards other focuses, such as practices and learning processes (Adler 2012).

Radical positions among scholars have continued to emerge in recent years. A group of Scientific Realists (*Patomäki 2002;* Wight 2006) continue stressing the fact that the world exists "out-there" autonomously from individuals' influence and theorizing about it. At the same time, they accept that understanding can be collectively fabricated since it depends on personal perceptions. In contrast to this view, Friedrichs and Kratochwil (2009), in a quite reductionist perspective, claim that groups of intellectuals are the key actors. In fact, by setting socially built praxis they are the main spring of knowledge, drastically narrowing the spectrum of analysis to a group of actors.

Another source of arguments within this framework is the *cognitive interest debate* (Adler 2012), which has split constructivists into two categories. Firstly, there are those who think that the principal aim of social knowledge is to explicate social reality (so called Modernists), while the second category includes those who trust that the primary target of social knowledge is to release by overbearing configurations (so called Critical Theorists). In the latter, Constructivism develops an ethical trend on how to ameliorate the world. So far, although constructivism lacks a precise ethical stand, it seems able to confer new elements to normative formulation (Price 2008). As shown above, the positions are wide-ranging and far from reaching a compromise within this debate. In spite of the recent trend to develop milder views, there are still "extremists" referring to both poles (i.e. the reductionist and the realist one). Once more, these utmost claims are not quite useful since they narrow down the focus on a few elements, missing a wide range of key explanatory factors.

The exploration of the major constructivist debates shows the main weaknesses of the approach. In fact, the extreme reductionist position stands as a focal point that denies the existence of reality "out-there" considering instead the world as fully socially constructed. This radical view prevents its advocates to have a clear understanding of certain phenomena, neglecting the influence of

given external factors. Moreover, constructivist scholars seem to be interested in the behaviour of states, giving little consideration to individuals. Constructivism needs to be more socially focused on collective learning and on the process of building social practices in order to better understand the essence of both persons and nations, either considering them as structures or agents. Furthermore, as highlighted in the theoretical debates section, the constructivist closure towards other approaches can hinder a confrontation and the related mutual learning process that usually foster improvements.

At the same time, constructivism presents several strengths that have contributed to comprehend reality, exploring its different angles. For instance, the focus on inter-subjective knowledge has stressed the fact that concepts are not permanent but change according to historical events and individuals' interpretations (Knol 2011). In this scenario, change concerns the rise of different constitutive rules, progress and alteration of social structures as well as new social practices whose origin is connected to agents. As a result, constructivists engage in the agent-structure debate within a new perspective. They stress the interdependence between agents and structures and the fact that they evolve and are transformed together. Lastly, constructivists point out the role of practices as a constitutive part of the world. In fact, cultural based concepts rooted in individuals exit the personal sphere and find their empirical implementation in actions and interaction, where practices are performed.

A study on the radicalization of Muslim youths in western states, focusing on the groups' attraction ability, contributes to the agent-actor debate stressing complex nature of the relationship between the members and the group. In fact, it can be explored both as an actor (with regard to the national environment it acts within) and as a structure (focusing on its members and the role it plays in framing their minds and behaviours). Moreover, this paper highlights the micro-cosmos created by radical movements, as socially constructed. For instance, through study-groups, where individuals are trained on ideology, main claims, primary goals and core values – as well as through leaflets, conferences, lectures and mass media - radicals promote their image of the world, their understanding of facts and events. The movement also shapes

the members' identity fostering the separation between "us" and "them" outside. As a result, members' loyalty is fostered through a process of constructed incentives, which also influence affiliates' behaviour in acting with other individuals in multiple contexts.

3. Limits of current literature and the focus on Islam as an ideology

There are several "black holes" in the literature concerning the causes of radicalization and Islamic groups as social ideological actors. With regard to radicalization, all the causes identified by the scholars so far can be questioned if considered on their own. For instance, it seems quite inappropriate to regard radicalization as the product of western foreign policy and of the Palestinian issue. In fact, this is a problem that has lasted over 60-years whereas Islamic extremism is a rather new phenomenon. The same can be argued for the new-colonialism argument. If radicalization was a mere reaction against Americanisation or Westernization, it should have started many years before. Even if some radical movements existed before 9/11, they had a limited impact and were geographically confined. There is nothing comparable to what we find today in terms of activities, resources and mobilization. Advocates of the socioeconomic argument also need to consider its limitations. In fact, poverty, unemployment and the uneven distribution of resources do not necessarily push people towards radical groups. Eritrea is an example of a very poor state where Islamic fundamentalism is not spread. Furthermore, what this work has defined as internal factors – such as an acculturation crisis, identity crisis and experiences of racism and exclusion – do not implicitly lead to an extreme expression of Islam. At the same time it is not clear whether political radicalization comes before the religious one or vice versa. Scholars do not agree on what ideas act as a trigger for the others. Further research should therefore focus on particular groups as case-study in order to understand whether political or religious ideas drove the members to their affiliation. Besides, I do not exclude what I define as a "third way". Namely, the parallel development of radical religious and political ideas derived from the contact with shocking information. In fact, vivid discoveries can affect the individual's previous beliefs, leading him towards the radicalization process. Moreover, few studies on radical movements are centred in the West compared to those

focused on Middle East. Nonetheless, it seems clear that radicalization is not an exogenous phenomenon in western states anymore; instead it is a very endogenous one. As a consequence, radicals need to be studied in the western environment (Bleich 2009; Costanza 2012; Lynch 2013).

For these reasons, the main question still remains unanswered*: Why are radical groups attractive for Muslim youths in the West?* In line with Wiktorowicz (2005) and Sageman (2011), I refuse single-factor explanations, stressing the complex nature of radicalization as a phenomenon having several causes. Among the ones identified, there is a particular moment when the individual wants his life to change. This change needs to be a holistic alteration that includes all the aspects of a person's life and it is mostly favoured by the embracement of a new ideology. A great number of experts argue that ideology rather than religion is the driving force towards radical movements for many young western Muslims (Wiktorowicz 2005; Mozaffari 2007; Berna 2008; Sinclair 2010). In particular, *Islamism* as an ideology is the catalyst. This term is not Quran-specific, in fact we find "Muslimûn and Mu'minûn" (Believers) but never Islamiyyûn, the Arabic for "Islamists". They were defined by Al-Turabi (2003: 49) as "political Muslims for whom Islam is the solution, Islam is religion and government and Islam is the Constitution and the law". This definition highlights the emphasis on political action, fostered by a number of grievances that highlight the need to act, to present an effective solution. Mozaffari (2007: 21) argues, "Islamism is a religious ideology with a holistic interpretation of Islam whose final aim is the conquest of the world by all means". The ambition to change the *status quo*, to destroy what they perceive as corrupted and unjust systems of government as well as to restructure political, economic and social practices tells us that radical Islam stands as a real policy preference, where "religious fundamentalists are ideologues and political activists are primarily concerned with political power" (Tibi 2002: 20). Furthermore, a key term emerging from Mozaffari's definition is *religious ideology.* As previously highlighted by Tarrow (1998) and Wiktorowicz (2005), Mozaffari underlines the fact that radical Islam presents many commonalities with totalitarian ideologies such as communism, fascism and Nazism, working as effective tools for mass mobilization, collective action and leadership legitimization. Zeen Sternhell (1982: 329) defined ideology as a "set of ideas by which men explain and justify the ends and means of organised social action, with the aim of preserving or reconstructing a given reality" but

Islamism is much more than that, since it is characterized by a sacralisation of the essence of ideology. In fact, the tasks undertaken by Islamists are also religious duties for them. While a Nazi would feel responsible to his Führer alone, an Islamist is responsible to his leader but primarily to his God (Mozaffari 2007).

In summary, the main idea of the above-mentioned scholars is that Islamism as an ideology is holistic towards the individual's identity and life, inside and within the group. Indeed, it provides a precise system of values, ideas and patterns of behaviour together with stable long-lasting loyalties, assured by its religious nature for which betraying the group means to betray God.

Conclusion

As emerged from this literature review, radicalization is a complex phenomenon that cannot be explored through one single path; it needs instead a multi-factor framework. Given that there are still several gaps in current literature, I acknowledge that many steps forward have been taken to better understand Muslim youth's radicalization in western world.

For instance, the "emotional and environmental factors" play the role of a valid starting point to understand the factors that might push a young Western Muslim towards radical Islamist movements, going far beyond the common and simplistic *neo-colonial* and *economic argument*. In fact, the focus on the emotional sphere of the individual seems to be a turning point, providing a plausible explanation for the radicalization of individuals who were not so "disenfranchised".

At the same time, Constructivism works as a useful framework to explain the groups' actions towards their members and towards the political arena they have to play within. In fact, radical movements act both as agents and structures, interacting with competitors and opponents. In parallel, they create meanings,

values and loyalties among their members who start perceiving reality and events in the "group's way". Behaving as a structure, groups are able to change their affiliates' minds, priorities and goals according to their ideology.

Still, in spite of the above-mentioned achievements of research on radicalization, a lot is required in order to understand this multifaceted phenomenon and steps forwards must include studies on women, along with further research on the neuro-psychological field.

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