

Rethinking Radicalisation with Clark McCauley

This is a podcast produced by the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence*. My name is **Max Taylor**, and I'm very pleased to introduce to you Professor **Clark McCauley**. Professor McCauley has made a very distinguished contribution to terrorism research. He's a social psychologist by training, and his work recently has focused on issues to do with radicalization, and more generally, how we understand terrorism and the terrorist. He contributed one of the commentary papers in response to Marc Sageman's critique of terrorism research.

Now that might be a point to which we should start this conversation. So to begin, Clark, thank you for speaking with us. Perhaps I might develop further some of the points you made in your response to Sageman. You presented a very balanced response to Dr. Sageman's critique in your reply to his paper, accepting their impediments but suggesting that there be more progress than Sageman suggests. To put it briefly, what do you think that progress is? How might we characterize it, and then what are the impediments?

CM: Well in very broad terms, I think that progress has been slow but steady in the direction of understanding terrorism as a problem of inter-group conflict with a dynamic that plays out over time in which the actions of the state in response to terrorism are just as important a part of the story as what the terrorists do, and some indication of our progress there, I think, is that we're beginning to see some databases of what governments do in response to terrorism. So, as long as we were looking only out there at them, we could not understand the dynamic of what is, in fact, an interaction that unfolds over time. So I think that's progress. We can see also some papers now – some studies, some empirical research – attempting to evaluate state responses to terrorist action, which is another step in the right direction. So in this very broad way, anyway, I think we have seen some progress and continue to see progress. I guess I spent more time in my paper – Sophia and I did in our paper responding to Marc Sageman – we've spent more time on some surprises that have happened to us in our own research because nothing convinces you of progress more than finding out that you've just been surprised by your own data.

MT: What surprised you?

CM: Well in the bad old days – before I understood better – I had a single pyramid model of radicalization. By radicalization, Sophia and I mean changes in beliefs and feelings and behavior in support of one side in an inter-group conflict. So in the beginning we had a one pyramid model in which people with kind of neutral views of the conflict were at the bottom and the terrorists were at the apex. And what's wrong with that? I came to realize to some surprise after purveying this model in several papers – what's wrong with that is the idea that bad behavior comes out of bad ideas, like a dose of salts, that as you get more and more extreme opinions you're bound to get more and more extreme behavior. That's the way I used to think about it, and then I got some surprises.

When Sophia and I were working on our book *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us*¹, we noticed that many of the mechanisms of radicalization that we identified had nothing to do with bad

¹ McCauley, C., Moskalenko, S. *Friction. How it happens to them and us*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. 2011

ideas. Some people join a militant group because they want revenge for some personal affront or injury; no ideology required. Some people join a militant group because they're short of friends; they're in a new place, in a new life, and they're just looking for friends and they fall in with some bad ones. Some people join a militant group for love because somebody they really care about is already a member of that group and invites them to join. And that is a good enough reason for a lot of people, including people who have no previous ideological, political bent whatsoever. Some people – especially young males – have joined a militant group for status and risk-taking. You can hear people talking like, “Well I’ve always been interested in guns, and when I got a chance to join a group with guns, I was ready.” Not too deep in the ideation either.

So as we identified more of these mechanisms of radicalization that didn't involve bad ideas, didn't involve anything like a serious ideology, it began to make trouble for the single pyramid model. And then we started looking at data from polls where we could see that maybe 10% of US and UK adult Muslims agree that suicide bombing in defense of Islam is often or sometimes justified, which seemed to us like a pretty radical opinion. We could see that 10% amounted to something like 100,000 adult Muslims in the US or in the UK, and yet the security services were really only tracking and only worried about hundreds.

So what we're seeing there is 99% of people with extreme opinions never do anything. And many people do something, something violent even – joining a militant group – for reasons that have nothing that has to do with bad ideas, bad ideologies. So it was forced upon us, that the single pyramid model – which I have to say is the way most people talk, even today – is just wrong. It's two separate problems, psychologically speaking. How people come to violent behavior is one problem, and how people come to extreme opinions is a different problem. And if I had a little wit, I would have come to this idea much earlier because, after all, I teach social psychology, and every year I go out of my way to make sure the students understand how different is attitude and behavior. So I could have had a head start on this insight, but I didn't.

So there's a surprise which we now represent in the two pyramids model. One pyramid is a pyramid of radicalization of opinion and one pyramid is a pyramid of radicalization of action. But that's not even the only surprise. Another surprise came to us from polling data. It began with polling data from Muslims in Canada. We were looking through the data and we happened to notice that there was essentially no correlation between favorable opinion of the US and favorable opinion of Hamas, or between favorable opinion of Israel and favorable opinion of Al Qaeda. That lack of a correlation means that there are some Muslims who feel favorably toward the US but also feel favorably toward Hamas. And some Muslims who feel unfavorable toward the US and they also feel unfavorable toward Hamas. You get all four cells, and that's why the correlation isn't there and what that surprise amounts to be is that when you go looking at Muslims you don't find the clash of civilizations that so many people like to talk about. There are plenty of Muslims who can dislike both them and us, and there are plenty of Muslims who can like both them and us. And that surprised me, and I think maybe a few more people after our paper came out. But I was able to show that it wasn't just happening in Canada, I had some data also from North Africa, and it showed the same kind of pattern of no correlation between opinions of the US and opinion of these groups that challenge the US. So there's another surprise.

MT: These are, I think, very important comments because they have quite broad implications, don't they? Right at the beginning of this conversation you made reference to I think a sort of notion of 'process', that's there's a system involved, and that it's not just the terrorists, but it's the terrorists in

context that we need to think about. Can I quote something to you that you wrote for an SSRC [Social Science Research Council] publication called *After September 11*²?

“The response to terrorism can be more dangerous than the terrorist. Relaxing into the warmth of anger, and war against terrorism will not honor those who died in the attacks of 9/11. We have to think.”

There’s a strong echo there – that was your comment – in the report published I think this week or last week from the Human Rights Institute at Columbia University called “Illusions of Justice”³ where they say, amongst other things, in some cases the Federal Bureau of Investigation may have created terrorists out of law-abiding individuals by conducting sting operations that facilitated or invented the targets’ willingness to act. That touches on the same sorts of issues, doesn’t it? This junction between attitude, opinion, ideology, and actually doing something ...

CM: Well I haven’t seen the report that you were just mentioning. I better hasten to find it and take a look. But in general, yes I am worried about these so-called sting operations which seem to me to have elements of what gets called in the legal business “entrapment.” And if we weren’t so worried and upset about terrorists amongst us, we’d be reluctant to do some of the things we’re doing. But what is the cost of that? What is the cost of surveilling mosques and Islamic bookstores and websites? What is the cost of sending in informants, some of them recruited basically by threat of some kind of legal proceedings against them if they didn’t? So what is the cost of doing that? I have recently gotten some data from a panel of US Muslims, and I think I can read out some of the cost there. They feel like there is a war on Islam. Now of course that’s something that Al Qaeda has always encouraged. But by our own actions and overreactions I think we have helped encourage that. And I don’t know quite how it works out with UK Muslims; I’ve read a little bit about some of the programs that the British government has tried to reduce or prevent the radicalization of UK Muslims, but I’m not really an expert about that.

But here in my own backyard in the US, in my own data, I can see US Muslims feeling somewhat put upon. This does not help make them cooperative, doesn’t help make them good citizens. It’s more like a whole group of people who feel like they’re being unfairly profiled. We know what kinds of reactions African-Americans have had to that, and it’s only human to expect the same kind of reactions from US Muslims. So yes I think we’ve got to think – but notice what this kind of thought requires. It requires recognizing that what we do is just as important as what the terrorists do.

They’re not out there on a desert island somewhere and all we have to do is figure out enough about them and we can find them and fix them and forget them. It’s not like that. They’re living in the same world we are. They are living in an interaction with us and our country and its policies and its procedures and its criminal justice system. So once you start thinking about the relation between Muslims and the US, or between Muslims and the US government, Muslim and US security services – once you start

² C. McCauley The Psychology of Terrorism (<http://essays.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/mccauley.htm>)

³ Human Rights Watch. Illusions of Justice. Human Rights Abuses in US Terrorism Prosecutions. July 21, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-62313-1555

thinking about this as an interaction over time developing its own dynamics of action and reaction then you realize that we have to be just as attentive to what we do as we are to what they do.

MT: Clark, I think that's a really important point on which to end this podcast. Thank you very much for making the effort to come and talk to us, and we all look forward to seeing these ideas develop further.

CM: My pleasure. Thank you Max.