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On the radicalisation of Muslim youngsters in the Netherlands

Current research and some perspectives¹

The stagnating integration of immigrant groups, the insufficient acceptance of Muslims and the lacking respect for them are assumed to constitute a breeding ground for radicalisation as well as a threat for democracy. Certain groups of Muslim youngsters are susceptible for radical ideas. They cherish anti-democratic convictions as they show a tendency to violence. In Rotterdam e.g., nearly half of the population is of non-Dutch origin. Under Muslim youth, the self-exclusion risks are limited but real as well. Looking for their identity, many of them started a religious quest. The manifold wells they draw upon vary from orthodox-radical to moderate-democratic ones.

Last year, the Dutch Minister of Home Affairs offered 28 million Euros to fight against radicalisation of youngsters. This important political initiative will be implemented in local communities and living environments, by dialogues, educational support, strengthening the learning environment at the workplace, and by maintaining compulsory education strictly.

The issue of **radicalisation trends** within Islamic communities, and their adolescent generations in particular offers interesting motives for researchers, e.g. for youth researchers, as we see that the allegedly Muslim radicalisation trends are assumed to be typical, however not exclusive for Muslim adolescents. What might be the unattended blind-spots? This attention is shared more broadly, by newspapers and other public media, and by politicians, the populist MPs in particular and partly by minorities' representatives as well. Is there a real threat of radicalism in the country whether it is a realistic fear or not and whether the alleged traits of radicalisation and risks of violence can be offended and fought definitively, or not? Another challenging research broadening aspect

is related to our impression that the threat of radicalism does not come primarily, or exclusively, from the radical ideas themselves, but from the **expectation** as well that these ideas may lead to violence or to other actions that disturb the public order. Certainly since the attacks of 9/11 this threat is also a motive for policy-making against radicalism in the Netherlands.

There are, of course, many sociological, developmental-psychological, educational, intercultural, political (etc.) opportunities to broaden 'radicalisation' as a research theme. Probably, we need a more complex, or a more or less disruptive research-methodology. But we will look first at some current research.

Current research perspectives: Amsterdam and Rotterdam

Current research in **Amsterdam** which focuses on the radicalisation of young Muslims assumes that there are four central pretexts:

- ▶ A highly orthodox interpretation of faith. This religious dimension is expressed in extreme interpretations on how to live a 'good' life, amongst other things.
- ▶ The pointed sense of being threatened by the established order in this interpretation or

Note

¹ This article is a summary of the research paper "On the radicalisation of Muslim youngsters in the Netherlands" presented at NYRIS 10 (10th Nordic Youth Research Information Symposium) from 13 to 15 June 2008 in Lillehammer, Norway. The entire research paper can be requested from the author: g.t.witte@hro.nl

perception of faith: the **political** dimension. As these religious and political notions are combined strongly, the susceptibility to radicalisation is said to increase.

- ▶ Young people who combine these religious and political dimensions often add a dichotomous worldview: **'us' versus 'them'**.
- ▶ The step from ideas to actions is then stimulated by the thought that one does not have to remain at dreaming of an ideal society, i.e. a situation in which a person's own extreme/orthodox views are considered to be **achievable**.

The Amsterdam researchers conclude that the religious and political dimensions are **independent**. They indicate that orthodoxy does not necessarily lead to political dissatisfaction, and thus to the possibility of radicalisation, and vice versa. A person with orthodox beliefs is not necessarily radical, nor does she/he automatically stand a chance of becoming so.

Another impression is that in popular discourse and in the public media, radicalisation is associated with **Islam in particular**.

In the actual situation it is worrying that attempts to discuss the matter of radicalisation risks with health and welfare organisations largely failed. Furthermore, it is remarkable related to the plural nature of the problems, that **being a Muslim** was experienced as the decisive factor in a number of cases.

Over the last years, radicalisation has increasingly been linked to **polarisation**. This term refers to "the intensifying of opposition between various groups in society, which results in (an increase in) tensions between these groups and risks to public security". Given the worldwide attention currently being given to Muslim terrorism, many Dutch Muslims also experience an **intensification related to their status of being a Muslim**. This may find its expression in an increase of verbal harassment, discrimination, vandalism, intimidation, racism or in a growing number of violent incidents. This phenomenon is a cause of continuous concern, as polarisation in the most

extreme case may lead to radicalisation, and because radicalisation in turn may serve as a breeding ground for polarisation.

A fairly uniform picture emerges from conversations with social workers in Rotterdam. All boroughs of the city indicate that there are various groups of **young people** who turn their backs to each other. They verbally accuse each other, they do not mix mutually and they do not make any attempt at all to improve their relations. This picture does not become less complex in confrontation with well-known theories on rebellious behaviour of youngsters, but it needs to be taken seriously. **Not only young people** do adopt a negative attitude to one another, however. In some neighbourhoods in the city, there is a far broader distance between various population groups. Particularly in the running-up to local elections, when personal views are expressed more outspokenly and strongly, tensions can run high. Being asked about this experience, social workers say they barely take notice when 'the fat is in the fire'.

There is much concern about this phenomenon of sub-tolerant isolationism with some groups of Muslims in the Netherlands. In these circles, intolerant views exist of people who have different ideas or beliefs. Negative media attention and ignorance and prejudice about Islam experienced from non-Muslims, particularly by young Muslims bring about a 'sense of weariness'. In one-to-one-interviews with about ten young Muslims in the age category of 20 to 30, almost all of them being highly educated, it became clear that they constantly feel as if they need to defend themselves to others. Further, they say, this is a one-sided world in which Muslims draw the short straw. In one way or another, they experience that criticism of Muslims on the lifestyle of non-Muslims is not allowed, while the other way around is the order of the day.

Young people say they do not always feel called to take this task onto themselves, while others who come across this problem try to do something about it. They visit debates or forums, or discuss the issue amongst themselves with friends and

fellow-students. A number of them are positive about the future, but they are simultaneously critical about the possibilities available to themselves. Others indicate that they also experience the problem, but that they do not take it personally. Yet others say that they see the problem, they do take it personally, but that they do not do anything about it, as they are simply too busy with other things. Most of the interviewed people said that their circle of friends consists largely of people from the same ethnic background. Mixing with their own group is not a conscious choice above making contact with other young people. 'It often just happens that way.' There is a natural understanding of each other's way of life in their own group, and the uncomplicatedness is experienced as pleasant. Young people realise that this does not improve the situation with regard to ignorance and a stereotypical image of Islam with people of a different cultural and/or religious background. But, they say, it is quite practical.

Looking for broader research practices

Let's sharpen the discussion about future research. The most inconvenient aspect of the ongoing research, whether it is done by secret services or by scientists, is its relatively narrow-mindedness, e.g. on the **self-fulfilling prophecy** aspect. There are, of course, so many sociological, developmental-psychological, educational, intercultural, political (etc.) opportunities to broaden 'radicalisation' and 'polarisation' as research themes.

Both radicalism and the uneasiness about it deserve more and a broader and different attention than they get at the moment. This concern refers to **real social problems**. The integration of ethnic groups in the Netherlands is stagnating, especially in urban areas. Nowadays, these immigrants seem to be less accepted than in the 1980s and before, and second and third-generation newcomers from Islamic countries do notice that very well. Sometimes they tend to withdraw themselves instead of focussing on their integration and participation in their 'guest country'. Radicalising

Muslim youngsters sometimes share their own countercultures, which might give a special accent to normal, growing-up unrest of adolescents.

The real determinants of these relatively new urban-sociological phenomena need more scientific attention. We give some impressions. Nearly half of the population in the four greatest cities in the Netherlands – Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, the western urban agglomeration – have a foreign, non-Dutch background, and these groups will grow faster in the next decades than the Dutch-born people. **Exclusion risks**, even the unintended ones, within this 'allochthonous' Rotterdam youth, e.g., are very real, as the population of the city is not only greying ('silvering') but also 'greening'. The new generation will be a multi-coloured one. Some Muslim youngsters do criticise Dutch society as they feel vulnerable and even excluded, and on the reverse, and of course: they tend to exclude themselves as well.

The risk is growing, both in established groups and within groups of radicalising and (self-) excluded youngsters, of a tradition-and-modernity-collision, as Ronald Inglehart wrote. From the early 1970s, he noticed, a slow transition took place in Western societies from traditional values to more liberal and modern ones. Modernising orientations – from a 'command' society to a 'negotiating' one, in the words of the Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan – are really 'unsimultaneous' under native groups and newcomers from traditional Asian and North-African countries. Contrasts between tradition and modernity can be observed on the fields of religion, culture and life-orientation, education, politics, etc. Finally, from the 1990s on, modernisation in our countries developed into neo-liberalistic and fight-for-yourself mentalities. To some extent, this development caused backlashes between the native Dutch and some immigrant groups, due to the divergent or even criminal interpretations of these allegedly necessary competences for surviving.

These developments make living-together in urban areas in one of the most densely populated countries of the world complicated.

The country failed, and fails, sharply to offer its inhabitants the same integration opportunities in education & schooling, work & employment, and housing – which causes that second – and even third-generation-newcomers tend to identify themselves less with their present country than with their ‘former’ country, even when they were neither born there nor visited that country ever.

So far the **structural-functional risks** and the related unsimultaneity. There are two other risks, at least. Jürgen Habermas depicted the so-called **socially or morally disintegrative tendencies**, as can be observed in the lagging behind in public and political participation (‘civil society’), and the failures in expressing **socio-cultural and religious feelings and convictions**. It is a real misery that the last ones, the divergent or even inappropriate expressive capacities of immigrants even were cherished ‘multiculturally’ by the native Dutch people in the seventies and the eighties of the last century – instead of establishing and strengthening national and local policies in the field of functional and social integration.

This threefold political failure became clear in the early 1990s. Within 25 years the relatively independent phenomenon of authoritarian family relations and the coming up of more or less family-related generation-conflicts came into being within these poor structural (educational, housing and employment), social (participation) and expressive (religious, cultural) contexts. Radicalisation ideas, trends and threats to be screened and fought need to be connected with the research of these three processes.

A very enriching question for radicalisation and polarisation research among youth-at-risk might be: **how are expectations being fed, who are the ‘feeders’, how do expectations and anxieties become realities?** The hard core of radical Islam that is considered to pose a threat is considered to be a relatively small group. Why then the growing unrest? And why the resentment under native Dutchmen – an excellent indicator might be the lowest confidence ever in the Government and politics

in general. **Why?** Very little of research has been undertaken about (more or less) collective **resentment** matters.

To continue these contra-indications, various developments deserve attention. **A growing resistance to radicalisation has been noticed within the Muslim community.** Individual persons, but also mosques and Muslim organisations, are increasingly feeling and assuming responsibility for combating radicalisation. Against this positive development, some Muslim youth-imams need attention because of their risky conservative orientation and not being educated adequately, neither religiously nor socially, non-speaking Dutch even. Any comparative research between these two groups might be interesting to clear-up both the common traits and, above all, the striking differences between these religious ‘stakeholders’.

Radicalisation risks of Muslim youngsters cannot be discussed or researched without prudence, as there are so many determinants and phenomena to be taken into account. More or less creatively following Max Weber’s proposal, it is possible to understand and to explain social phenomena and processes with the help of so-called ‘Idealtypes’, which can be utilised as frames or profiles of interpretation and explanation of complex empirical data and experiences.

It is challenging to **(re)construct some Idealtypes of risky Muslim youth.** Pay attention to the variety within these youngsters! They can be under- or even over-educated, radicalised or not, varying from 16 to 30 years, including the pubertal 12-18-group, feeling excluded or fighting radically for self-exclusion and for moralising firmly their age-group. In order to get in touch with these youngsters, the construction of Idealtypes needs to be linked to a very early stage, i.e. before risky transitions like school drop-out, before they may start fighting for pure Muslim schools and school boards, for a severe, salafist orientation of second language courses and religion lessons in private schools, or even in public mono-cultural (‘black’) schools.

With the help of a mix of Idealtypes, linked to broader sociological theories about negative or

even destructive determinants, some clearness can be created about the **2% of the immigrant youth-at-risk**, being susceptible for radicalism in practice. They cannot be identified as real radicals, they are youth-at-risk, i.e. youngsters who are threatened by dangerous trajectories, or 'fractured transitions'.

It might be challenging to look sharply and intensively after so-called multidisciplinary but complementary indications from both sociology and psychology, looking especially and for preference at those aspects which cannot be combined easily at first sight. Patterns of radicalisation are highly ambiguous and ambivalent. They might be much more complicated than politicians, newspapers and researchers suppose.

A complementary orientation, as elaborated by the Hungarian-French cultural-anthropologist Georges Devereux, does not exclude that individual and growing-up motives to radical ideas and practices contrast to social and religious ones. A complementary view **requires** a suspicious looking for those contrasts: between cultural and religious motives, between the broadly recognised aspects of integration and participation (expressive, socio-political and functional ones), between social exclusion and even self-exclusion by choice.

Conclusion

Signals of radicalisation are not perceived adequately at the moment. In case of suspects, neither politicians nor professionals act adequately. Despite this failure, youth and educational professionals and social workers are requested – by the Ministry of Home Affairs – to notify signals and trends of radicalisation they observe. To make matters worse there isn't any consent at all among social scientists about definitions, or even about the causes, the backgrounds and the traits and chains and patterns of radicalisation.

Both politicians and professionals, e.g. teachers, youth-workers, street-corner workers and policemen, know too little about youth-at-risk, their strategic and symbolic motives, their social and growing-up contexts and so on. About the private situations of risk youngsters, and their life on the streets (boys) and at home (girls). About being selected ethnically, at the age of 12, for secondary vocational education (the lowest strata), and being expelled at 16, 17 from that school, full of school-hate; without any diploma, in cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam, challenged to compete with other chanceless people (why not become a religious radical!?). These professionals do not know enough about 'adopting' group identities, more or less, by these youngsters, or whether these 'favourite' social characters are ritualistic and/or realistic ones. How extensive are the virtually aggressive subgroups, really?

Our scepticism is fed by recent judicial inquiries which ended in a deadlock: the Open Court proved its full inability to offer closely-reasoned arguments for its indictment of an alleged group of radicalised Islamic youngsters in The Hague. It might be much more interesting, according to a Popperian methodology and even the judicial practice, to look at discharging data instead of charging data, to interpret facts complementary instead of feeding populist anxieties and resentments.

An increasing number of (Muslim) youngsters need more support and guidance in questions how they can combine their faith with living in a secular Western environment. Judging with a calm response to incidents, it may be deduced that the situation with regard to radicalisation and polarisation is stable. Interviews with young people and social workers show that the situation can also be considered to be fragile. More inconvenient research is necessary: searching for facts, and disenchanting ideologies and social panic, and searching for intriguing and inconvenient methods.

Radicalisation de la jeunesse musulmane aux Pays-Bas Recherche en cours et perspectives

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Les *tendances à la radicalisation* observables au sein des communautés islamiques, et parmi leurs jeunes générations en particulier, constituent un sujet intéressant pour les chercheurs, notamment les chercheurs sur la jeunesse. D'autant que ces prétendues tendances à la radicalisation ne concernent pas que les adolescents musulmans... Des champs de recherche auraient-ils été négligés ? Cette question intéresse beaucoup de monde, la presse et d'autres médias publics, les politiques et les parlementaires populistes en particulier, mais également les représentants des minorités. Existe-t-il une réelle menace de radicalisation dans le pays, est-ce une crainte réaliste et peut-on combattre et éradiquer ces prétendues tendances à la radicalisation et les risques de violence ? Une autre question mérite réflexion, à savoir notre sentiment que la menace du radicalisme ne provient pas exclusivement des idées radicales en elles-mêmes, mais

également de l'*anticipation* de la possibilité que ces idées ne débouchent sur des violences et d'autres actions susceptibles de perturber l'ordre public. De fait, depuis les attaques du 9 septembre, cette menace est également une motivation à élaborer des politiques pour lutter contre le radicalisme aux Pays-Bas.

Les développements actuels ont rendu très compliquée la cohabitation dans les zones urbaines d'un des pays les plus peuplés du monde. Le pays n'est pas parvenu, et ne parvient toujours pas, à offrir à ses habitants les mêmes opportunités d'intégration en matière d'éducation et de scolarisation, de travail et d'emploi, de logement. De ce fait, les membres de la deuxième génération, voire de la troisième, des communautés d'immigrés tendent à s'identifier moins avec leur pays « actuel » qu'avec leur « ancien » pays, même s'ils n'y sont pas nés ou ne l'ont même jamais visité.

Zur Radikalisierung muslimischer Jugendlicher in den Niederlanden Aktuelle Forschung und einige Perspektiven

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Das Thema Radikalisierungstrends in islamischen Gemeinschaften und insbesondere in deren junger Generation bietet Forschern wie beispielsweise Jugendforschern interessante Motive, weil wir feststellen, dass die angeblichen Radikalisierungstrends unter Muslimen als typisch für heranwachsende Muslime betrachtet werden, wenn sie auch nicht ausschließlich bei diesen anzutreffen sind. Wo könnten die unerwarteten Fundstellen sein? Diese Aufmerksamkeit wird auf breiterer Basis von Zeitungen und anderen öffentlichen Medien sowie von Politikern und insbesondere populistischen Abgeordneten und teilweise auch von Minderheitenvertretern geteilt. Gibt es eine echte Bedrohung durch Radikalismus im Land, ob es sich nun um eine realistische Angst handelt oder nicht und ob die angeblichen Merkmale der Radikalisierung und Gewaltbereitschaft strafbewehrt und definitiv bekämpft werden können oder nicht? Ein weiterer ambitionierter Forschungsaspekt steht im Zusammenhang mit unserem Eindruck, dass die Radikalisierungsbedrohung nicht in erster

Linie oder ausschließlich aus den radikalen Ideen selbst hervorgeht, sondern auch aus der Erwartung, dass diese Ideen zu Gewalt oder sonstigen, die öffentliche Ordnung störenden Aktionen führen können. Seit den Anschlägen vom 11. September ist diese Bedrohung mit Sicherheit auch ein Motiv für politische Entscheidungen gegen Radikalismus in den Niederlanden.

Die gegenwärtigen Entwicklungen machen das Zusammenleben im städtischen Raum in einem der am dichtesten besiedelten Länder der Welt kompliziert. Das Land hat versagt und versagt eindeutig weiter, wenn es darum geht, seinen Einwohnern in Bildung und Ausbildung, Arbeit und Beschäftigung, Wohnungsbau die gleichen Integrationsmöglichkeiten zu bieten - wodurch die Zuwanderer der zweiten und sogar dritten Generation sich tendenziell weniger mit ihrem jetzigen Land identifizieren als mit ihrem 'früheren' Land, selbst wenn sie dort weder geboren sind noch dieses Land jemals besucht haben.