BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by Alex P. Schmid

Terrorism research tends to concentrate heavily on certain groups (like al-Qaeda), certain techniques (like suicide bombings) or certain themes (like radicalization). With so many researchers covering the same narrow grounds and using similar data, many new monographs tend to have less and less added value. There are exceptions and Peter Waldmann’s new book is one of them. *Die Zeit*, Germany’s quality paper, has noted what insiders knew for some time, namely, that his analyses belong to the very best writings on the subject of terrorism. However, he publishes mainly in German and Spanish and therefore he is less well known in the English-speaking world. His latest book on terrorism, his fifth, tries to answer the question why Muslim migrants who came to the West to improve their standards of living turn against their host societies and why some of them even attack their hosts with terrorist tactics. He attempts to interpret religious radicalism on the basis of the dilemmas arising from migrants’ experiences in diaspora situations. His focus is, on the one hand, on the countries of origin of those migrants who turned violent and, on the other hand, on the specific migration policies of the host countries, especially the United Kingdom, France, Spain and Germany. That is a novel angle in the literature; so far the type of national integration policies vis-à-vis immigrants and the “style” with which immigrants have been dealt with by the governments of host countries have hardly been objects of investigation in the search for root causes. As a sociologist (Waldmann is emeritus professor at the University of Augsburg), he looks at the phenomenon of diasporas from the micro-, meso- and marco-levels. Interpreting the migrants’ situation as a *challenge* (in the sense of Arnold Toynbee) he discusses three basic *responses* of migrants vis-à-vis host societies: full assimilation, conditional integration or rejection of the ‘decadent’ West, coupled with an exaggerated idealisation of the home country’s traditions.

Radicalisation is, then, one possible response to the psychic dilemma produced by life in the diaspora situation, an answer to the problem of a split identity and lack of recognition by the host society. Only about 10 percent of the migrants show radical tendencies; far fewer become violent extremists. The latter, however, tend to gravitate towards the formation of “ideological groups” similar to the late 19th century Anarchists. Waldmann shows that four characteristics of such groups (identified first by Vladimir Nahirny in the 1950s for Russian Anarchists), also apply to contemporary *salafist* extremists in the diaspora: (i) total devotion to common ideas or a common faith, (ii) a dichotomous world view that sees “them” and “us in black-and-white terms, (iii) a de-individualisation of group members due to the commitment to the cause, and (iv) a...
renunciation and systematic suppression of all spontaneous feelings of affection in favour of ideologically predetermined stereotypes (p.64). Waldmann then links the situation of violent radical Muslims in Western diaspora situations to the historical role of migration in the Muslim world, beginning with the Prophet’s migration from Mecca to Medina and his victorious return to his root society. With this historical analogy in mind, Western countries hosting Muslims are seen by jihadists chiefly as a convenient launch pad for the reconquest of the lost homeland (p.76). For Bin Laden this is primarily Saudi Arabia, for Ayman Al Zawahiri this is Egypt while Afghanistan or ‘Londonistan’ were staging grounds for engineering a revolution at home. Assimilation or integration are not the goal of Muslim immigrants in the diaspora who turned radical. Waldmann then differentiates and qualifies this general picture by discussing the experiences of different generations and classes of migrants and their children, synthesizing a broad array of recent sociological research on various levels of analysis.

While Waldmann’s volume is not based on new case study work of his own, he offers perceptive comparisons between state responses, a broad, sociologically and historically informed, perspective of diasporas, and a critical but nuanced questioning of existing dominant interpretations of radicalism. Together, these provide depth and richness to this remarkable volume. (Reviewed by Alex P. Schmid)