

A CASE IN FAVOUR OF RADICALISATION: A COMMENTARY ON ISSUES SURROUNDING THE CALDICOTT REPORT

By Matthew Owen

The premise of this commentary is that the terms ‘radical’ and ‘radicalisation’ need to be defended. These terms are being unfairly bracketed with ‘violent extremism’. Extremist atrocities, whether implemented by terrorist groups (e.g. destruction of the Twin Towers) or governments (e.g. Hitler’s final solution), are just those: atrocities to be condemned. Radicalism, however, is a desire to bring about substantive change, and in its simplest form this term is divorced from any moral or ethical connotation.

I will contextualize this debate using the example of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the former University College London (UCL) student charged with attempting to blow up a US airliner. A discussion of what is meant by radicalisation will follow, after which some examples of well-known radicals will be presented. Finally, I shall argue that contemporary society is ‘bust’ and that we need radical ideas and radical people in order to ‘fix’ our future society. As such, we need radicalisation within society in general and universities in particular.

Context

In December 2009 former UCL student Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab was arrested in Detroit after attempting to detonate a bomb aboard a US airliner carrying 289 people. This event led to claims (e.g. Rayner 2009) that Mr Abdulmutallab was radicalised and converted to extremism whilst studying at UCL¹. In response to these events an independent inquiry, headed by Dame Fiona Caldicott, was established in order to investigate Mr Abdulmutallab’s experiences whilst at UCL (2005 to 2008). This panel also investigated whether there were, or still are, conditions at UCL that might facilitate students engaging in terrorist activities.

The report discusses what is meant by radicalisation and defines it as:

the process of adopting a ‘radical’ ideology, i.e. a system of ideas that overtly challenges an established social and/or political order (Caldicott report 2010)

Raising the issue that the term may be used in a wide variety of ways, the report also states: ‘when we use the word in this report, we mean ‘radicalisation’ of a specific kind – i.e. as reflected in the behaviour of those whose radicalisation leads them to commit, or attempt to commit, terrorist acts’. This statement is welcomed; however, surely using an umbrella term (‘radicalisation’) to refer to a specific process (radicalisation leading to terrorist acts) leads to confusion.

The inquiry concluded that ‘there is no evidence to suggest either that Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab was radicalised while a student at UCL or that conditions at UCL during that time or subsequently are conducive to the radicalisation of students’ (Caldicott report 2010). Responding to the report’s findings the UCL council states that it ‘has welcomed the central conclusion of the report that there was no evidence to suggest either that Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab was radicalised while a student at UCL, or that conditions at UCL during that time or subsequently were conducive to the radicalisation of students’ (University College London 2010a).

Violent acts are to be condemned, and UCL is correct to dissuade its students from becoming violent extremists. However, this author is deeply concerned with the bracketing of ‘radicalism’

¹ Responding to these events, UCL Provost, Malcom Grant issued a strong defence of freedom of speech and UCL’s traditional ethos, as well as announcing an independent inquiry (see Grant 2009).

with 'violent extremism'. Violent extremists may be radical, but a radical is not necessarily violent. As well as a duty of care to students, a university has a duty of care to language and the current clumsy usage of 'radical' and 'radicalisation' leads to a misunderstanding of these words and an unnecessary fear of them. UCL has a proud radical tradition, as its website reminds us:

UCL was founded in 1826 as a radically different university, opening up English higher education for the first time to people of all beliefs and social backgrounds. That radical tradition remains alive today. (University College London 2010b)

What is radicalisation?

'Radicalisation' has various meanings. This essay is concerned with the socio-political and scientific spheres and uses the definition presented by the Caldicott report shown previously.

This definition correctly implies extremist views. Why would one desire fundamental social and political reform? Due to a fundamental disagreement with the middle ground or the status quo. As such, the views of the radical are likely to be on the outer ranges of the spectrum: the extreme. However, extreme views are not by definition violent or non-violent, positive or negative: they are simply different from those currently accepted as the norm by the majority. To quote a statement attributed to a UCL alumnus, once viewed by many as a seditious radical, Mohandas Gandhi: 'Even if you are in a minority of one, the truth is still the truth'.

Radicals from history

It is not difficult to find examples of radical individuals or groups from history. Galileo Galilei (1564 – 1642), an Italian astronomer, was instrumental in the Copernican astronomical revolution which displaced the geocentric view of the universe with a heliocentric model (Kuhn 1996). This was an idea contrary to the scriptures and Aristotelian philosophy, and Galileo faced the Inquisition, was tried and was convicted of suspected heresy in 1633; he lived the remainder of his life under house-arrest (see Feyerabend 1993 for a detailed examination of these events).

Heresy, as defined by the Chambers dictionary (1994), is a 'belief contrary to the authorised teaching of the religious community to which one ostensibly belongs; an opinion opposed to the usual or conventional belief'. As such, being convicted of heresy may be considered analogous to being convicted of radicalism. The Heliocentric universe has been shown to be false, however, it was a significant improvement to our understanding of the universe. The ideological struggle between the Catholic Church defending the status quo and Galileo advocating a new idea is a classic case of radical ideas unsettling the established socio-political order².

Mohandas Gandhi (1869 – 1948), also known as *Mahatma* (great soul), was imprisoned on numerous occasions, a result of his long campaign against the British Raj. With his advocacy of *Satyagraha* (passive resistance), he mobilised thousands of Indians against the Raj and was found guilty of sedition (see Gandhi, trans. Desai 2007). From the perspective of the British administration Gandhi was undoubtedly a radical and regarded as dangerous³. According to an article published in *The Times* in March 1930:

It is hardly necessary to point out that the adoption by any large number of Indians of the policy of passive resistance to the law, and interference with the rights and duties of citizens, will

²The case shows a further point of interest when it comes to assessing radical ideas. As Feyerabend (1993) observes, in convicting Galileo, based on the scientific situation at the time the Inquisition were correct. They assessed his work and, using modern terms, declared the Copernican doctrine to be unscientific.

³ However, it is interesting reading newspaper articles of the time that he is rarely, if ever, referred to as an extremist.

compel the Government to take such steps as may be necessary for the maintenance of order and for the defence of the general interest against irresponsible agitation. (*The Times* 1930, 17)

This demonstrates the subjective nature of the issue: from the British perspective Gandhi was seditious; from the Indian perspective, in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, 'a beloved leader'. It is undeniable, however, that he was a radical campaigning for fundamental change to the established political order.

Contemporary society and the need for radicals

The United Nations (2009) estimates the current global population at 6.9 billion, 923 million suffer from hunger (DFID 2010), 33.4 million people live with HIV (WHO 2009) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change forecasts temperature increases of up to 6 °C in this century compared to the last (IPCC 2007).

Below is a summary of the state of the world from UCL's grand challenges website:

The world is in crisis. Billions of us suffer from illness and disease, despite applicable preventions and cures. Life in our cities is under threat from dysfunctionality and climate change. The prospect of global peace and cooperation remains under assault from tensions between our nations, faiths and cultures. Our quality of life – actual and perceived – diminishes despite technological advances. These are global problems, and we must resolve them if future generations are to be provided with the opportunity to flourish. (University College London, 2009).

I would argue that a society such as that outlined above is one where the established socio-political order is not working. Such a society needs substantive change.

History shows us that meaningful, substantive change, be it a scientific paradigm shift or a social revolution, often comes from radicals. In support of this statement I present the names Galileo Galilei, Mohandas Ghandi, Charles Darwin, William Wilberforce and Martin Luther King Jr. These individuals, branded radicals – extremists by some – changed the world. Surely in order to maintain UCL's radical tradition and to meet its 'Grand Challenges' the university needs radicals. As such, it needs radicalisation.

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