



The Shoe Bomber

Contextualising Theory and Bridging the Policy Gap

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This paper presents an exploration into homegrown Islamist terrorism, examining the features, processes, and environments which facilitate violent radicalisation. Particular reference will be given to those frameworks and theories which have sought to shed light on the socialisation processes behind mobilisation, as well as exploring the strains and world-views often argued to be preconditions for radicalisation. In order to ground sometimes conceptually abstract discourses, this paper will examine the specific case of Richard Reid aka '*The Shoe Bomber*'. Contextualising analytic theories in this manner not only generates important debates within terrorism studies; establishing, revising, and advancing the discipline, but also has direct practical value by helping to develop effective counter-terrorism strategy. This paper shall focus on three specific areas of analysis: after briefly outlining the timeline of events which took Reid from small-time crook to would-be suicide bomber of Paris to Miami Flight 63, a summary of some relevant theories potentially illuminating or pertinent to his radicalisation will be presented. The essay will conclude with a synopsis of his particular case and a review of the potential implications for theoretically informed counter-terrorism policy in this sphere.

Given this remit, at a preliminary stage it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this paper¹. Attempts have been made to avoid in-depth definitional discussions as abstract tangents debating contentious terms will likely detract from this paper's focus. Thus, when approaching particularly controversial terminology within such wide-ranging, multi-disciplinary literature, it is necessary to assume practical working definitions: This paper takes Hoffman's² definition of '*terrorism*' as "the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence, or the threat of violence, in the pursuit of political change". The term '*homegrown*' is taken from Precht's³ analysis as one who experiences their "formative

¹ Shipman, (1997)

² Hoffman, (2006:40)

³ Precht, (2007:15)

phase, upbringing and cultural influence....in the Western world” and, where used, the phrase ‘*violent extremism*’ refers to the use of violent methods to achieve “political ideologies that are opposed to a society’s core (constitutional) values and principles”⁴. The term ‘*Islamist*’ is taken to be the “strict, literalist practice of Islam with a revolutionary political ideology.... [seeking] to be liberated and/or united under Islamic rule”⁵ and distinct from ‘*Islam*’ as a world religion. Where the expression ‘*violent radicalisation*’ is utilised it describes “a process in which radical ideas are accompanied by the development of a willingness to directly support or engage in violent acts”⁶. As such, theories summarised here should be viewed as more akin to Weberian concepts of ideal typical discourses than indisputable conclusions, or static social truths⁷.

Richard Colvin Reid was born in Bromley, South London, in 1973. His mother was a librarian of white British decent and his father, a railway worker and career criminal, was from Jamaica. At the time of Reid’s birth his father was serving a sentence for vehicle theft and spent the majority of Reid’s childhood in prison. By Reid’s third birthday his parents had separated and he was to have little further contact with father⁸. As a child Reid was described as a reclusive, introverted and socially inept individual who found it particularly difficult to form relationships and make friends. At school he was considered of below-average ability and displayed little academic prowess, failing his 11+ and regularly playing truant. At sixteen he left school and began to follow in his father’s footsteps as a petty thief, a career he proved equally incompetent at, and was jailed for robbery within a year⁹.

Reid was in and out of prison regularly throughout his teens, eventually accumulating over 10 convictions for personal and property crimes¹⁰. Upon release, a chance encounter with his father saw Reid profess how desperately depressed and disillusioned he had become. Unemployed and unpopular, Reid claimed to have suffered severe racism in prison and expressed feeling his life was worthless and empty. His father, who had converted to Islam, spoke warmly of the egalitarian nature of Muslim communities, the better quality of *halal* meat in prison, and the personal peace he had found from his faith¹¹. When Reid was next imprisoned for theft in 1995 he converted and on his release in 1996, aged 22, he began

⁴ Neumann & Rogers, (2007:12-13)

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Dalgard & Neilson, (2010:178)

⁷ Poggi, (2006)

⁸ Elliot, (2002)

⁹ Craig, (2001)

¹⁰ CNN, (2001)

¹¹ Elliot, (2002)

attending Brixton Mosque and the Islamic Cultural Centre in South London, well-known for assisting ex-offenders reintegrate into society. Quiet but anxious to learn, Reid initially became a model convert, actively familiarising himself with the workings of the mosque, reading the Koran daily, and enthusiastically learning Arabic – even adopting the name Abdel Rahim¹². The Mosque's Imam, Abdul Haqq Baker, first recalls notable changes in Reid shortly after he met Zacarias Moussaoui, a French Moroccan and outspoken radical who would eventually go on to be convicted of conspiracy over 9/11¹³. Reid began to observe the orthodox, literalist, and, arguably, puritanical *Salafist* Islam, spending the majority of his time with Moussaoui and attending his externally run classes. Baker, who described Reid as eager and willing but also gullible and impressionable, remembers how Reid started to grow his beard and dress in traditional *shalwar kameez* clothing combined with army fatigues¹⁴. The once quiet Reid became increasingly confrontational and argumentative, questioning the moderate teachings of the Imam and regularly quarrelling with him over religious justifications for violence¹⁵.

When Moussaoui and his associates were expelled from Brixton Mosque, for attempting to impose extremist views on younger members, Reid left also. They began to attend Finsbury Park Mosque in North London, notorious for both the extreme ideological message it endorsed and the number of subsequently convicted terrorists that have worshiped there. At this particular time the Imam in charge was Abu Hamza al-Masri, who was eventually jailed for inciting murder and racial hatred, and is currently fighting deportation to the US to face further terrorism charges¹⁶. According to Reda Hussaine, an Algerian journalist and MI5 informant, Reid, Moussaoui and Spanish al-Qaeda member Barakat Yarkas attended prayers together¹⁷. It is believed that through his affiliation with Finsbury Park Mosque, Reid first met Nizar Trabelsi, who would later be convicted of plotting to attack a Belgium NATO base, and Saajid Badat, who would become Reid's accomplice¹⁸. It is further believed that these introductions were facilitated by Djamel Beghal, an Algerian Islamist described as an al-Qaeda middleman and 'talent spotter'. Beghal is understood to have established numerous domestic and international terrorist connections. Whilst Reid's movements during

¹² Gibson, (2002); BBC, (2001)

¹³ Steele, (2001)

¹⁴ Craig, (2001)

¹⁵ BBC, (2001)

¹⁶ O'Neill & McGrory, (2006:133)

¹⁷ Dovkants, (2005)

¹⁸ O'Neill & McGrory, (2006:225)

this time remain obscure, it is believed with Beghal's assistance, Reid sought an audience with Abu-Qatada al-Filistini¹⁹. Regarded as the spiritual leader of al-Qaeda in Europe and a member of their 'Fatwa Committee', Abu-Qatada is currently detained pending deportation to Jordan on terrorism charges²⁰.

Shortly after this meeting, between 1998 and 2000, Reid embarked on an extensive period of travel visiting Egypt, Israel, Turkey, Belgium, the Netherlands, France and Pakistan. He was purportedly testing the security of different airlines and casing potential targets²¹. It is believed that whilst in Pakistan, Reid crossed into Afghanistan where he was identified by terrorist-turned-informant Yacine Akhnouche who claimed Reid, Badat, Moussaoui and Ahmed Ressam, who was later convicted of the attempted Los Angeles Airport 'Millennium Plot', were all graduates of Khalden training camp²². Returning to Europe in 2001, Reid briefly stayed with Trabelsi in Belgium before finally heading to Paris²³. Moussaoui, Beghal and Trabelsi were all subsequently arrested in relation to various terrorist plots and Badat pulled out of his own mission to simultaneously blow up a second transatlantic American flight²⁴.

On the 21st December 2001 Reid attempted to board a flight to Miami but his dishevelled appearance, lack of luggage and \$1800 cash payment for a ticket raised suspicions and security checks eventually caused him to miss his flight. The following day Reid successfully boarded Flight 63 bound for Miami but failed to ignite the explosives hidden in his shoe and was subdued by flight attendants and passengers²⁵. It is believed that being forced to wear the explosive shoes for an extra 24 hours in the rainy Parisian weather caused the fuse to become sodden²⁶. Reid was taken into custody, charged, and tried in Boston. Defiant and unrepentant, in 2003 Reid was sentenced to serve three life sentences consecutively plus an additional 110 years for a string of related offences. Today Reid resides at Florence supermax penitentiary in Colorado²⁷.

¹⁹ *ibid*; BBC(2007); Dovkants, (2005)

²⁰ Rabasa *et al.*(2006:27)

²¹ Elliot, (2002)

²² *Ibid*

²³ O'Neill &.McGrory, (2006:228-233)

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Elliot, (2002)

²⁷ Parkinson, (2003); CNN (2003)

Individual psycho-pathological explanations for violent extremism are widely contested and one should be careful of assuming innate mental imbalances and ‘fundamental attribution error’²⁸. Therefore psycho-social contributions and group dynamics may provide greater insights into understanding radicalisation, allowing us to see beyond public stereotypes and the ‘insane terrorist’ myth²⁹. Indeed terrorists are striking by their normality and are often more mentally stable than comparable violent criminals and on par with society at large – even suicide bombers display few suicidal tendencies and are often strategically logical³⁰. One way to consider Reid is within the classicist paradigm; as a hedonistic, free thinking actor, cognitively *choosing* to self-radicalise and pursue terrorist activity after a “rational calculation which balance[s] the benefits against the cost”³¹. Certainly, Reid’s actions appear logical and calculated: Whether through engagement with radicals, seeking out extreme locales, or the choice to attend a terrorist training camp, Reid seems to have made apparently reasoned decisions motivated by utilitarian principles³². However, any explanation reduced to purely psycho-pathology or self-gratification is over simplistic and fails to account for environmental influences. Whilst Reid’s hedonist motivations are crucial, of equal significance are the relationships, loyalties, and social processes associated with interactionist philosophy combined with external factors associated with sociological positivism³³.

Although Reid should be considered a ‘footsoldier’ rather than a ‘leader’, his socio-economic origins distinguish him from the majority of terrorists in that he was not highly educated, nor was he from a privileged background³⁴. Reid hailed from a deprived council-estate and realised low educational attainment, his social ineptitude and resultant marginalisation was reinforced further by his imprisonment. He suffered racism as a result of being mixed race, yet had almost no contact with his absentee father or his Jamaican heritage. His isolation, discrimination and cultural ambiguity, or “double sense of non-belonging”³⁵, may have led Reid to seek out an identity, meaning, and community – something alluded to during his chance encounter with his father³⁶. If one takes the

²⁸ Sabini, (1995:3-15)

²⁹ Heghammer, (2006:50); Silke, (2008:118-119)

³⁰ *Ibid.*; Pape, (2005:179)

³¹ Jones, (2006:104)

³² Adams, (1976)

³³ Downes, (2003)

³⁴ Khosrokhavar, (2005:25)

³⁵ *ibid.*.(pg185); Roy, (2004:193)

³⁶ Kepel, (2004); Sloodman & Tillie, (2006)

quantifiable social exclusion and inequality indicators used by the Rowntree Foundation³⁷ as an index for social deprivation, Reid was a heavily disadvantaged individual who resided on society's periphery for most, if not all, of his life. Interestingly, many of the social exclusion markers he displayed are also notable within the British Muslim population more generally. Perhaps then it is unsurprising that Reid gravitated towards a religion he was able to relate to in his search for dignity, respect and identity³⁸. His evolution into violent Islamism potentially provided a fixed value system which allowed him to externalise his own discrimination and failures as the consequence of a hostile Western world³⁹. Through Miller's frustration-aggression paradigm, Reid's aggression can be viewed as consequence of his frustration with society, whilst concurrently his real, and perceived, social deficit and alienation created solidarity with the *Ummah* (Muslim nation) through a sense of mutual grievance⁴⁰.

However, socio-economic explanations of radicalisation create a number of issues, primarily as the vast majority of Muslims, and indeed disadvantaged minorities in general, do not adopt extremist viewpoints and even fewer pursue acts of terrorism. Therefore rather than asking '*why do some people radicalise?*' perhaps one should ask '*why doesn't everyone radicalise?*'. This is the fundamental principle of sociological control theories, and specifically Hirschi's⁴¹ social bond theory, which start from this starkly different premise and asks what prevents or 'insulates' individuals from adopting deviant and/or extreme behaviours. Reckless⁴² explains how internal controls are self imposed, learnt through the process of socialisation from parents, relatives and peers. Whereas external constraints arise from 'institutions of informal social control', such as schools and religious establishments, and provide secondary insulation should internal constraints fail. In this sense, Reid displayed very weak societal bonds and held almost no 'stakes in conformity' which may have buffered him against radicalisation. Indeed, as we shall see, the absence of internal social controls and perversion of external societal institutions can be seen to have actually bolstered and aided his radicalisation.

Taken in isolation then structural strains cannot adequately explain Reid's case and no direct linear relationship between underlying socio-economic conditions and terrorism

³⁷ JRF, (1997;1999;2010)

³⁸ Ziauddin Sardar, *cited in* Elliot, (2002); Rousseau, (2005)

³⁹ Dalgard & Neilson, (2010:810)

⁴⁰ Miller, (1941); Smelser, (1962)

⁴¹ Hirschi, (1969:16-24)

⁴² Reckless, (1961:19-27)

exists⁴³. However, relative deprivation theory, or the ‘anomie’ created between societal goals and an individual’s inability to achieve these may be of relevance here⁴⁴. A dynamic perspective is articulated in framing theory, a branch of social movement theory, in which Wiktorowicz⁴⁵ contends that the *indirect* consequences of root causes combined with social relationships are of most significance. Reid’s grievances allowed for a ‘cognitive opening’ where radical narratives resonated with his experiences, and he became more receptive to the diagnosis presented by extremist world-views. Noticing his enthusiasm for seeking prognostic religious answers, individuals like Moussaoui and later Beghal were able to appeal to a pre-existing ‘sentiment pool’ which, in turn, eventually led to ‘frame alignment’ or congruence between Reid’s own beliefs and the ideology and rhetoric of al-Qaeda. Reid’s full socialisation and internalisation of extremist dogma occurred after his transition to Finsbury Park Mosque, where these views were strengthened and reinforced by the guidance of Abu Hamza and later Abu-Qatada.

By this stage, Reid’s disenchantment with wider society was matched only by his isolation from it, associating almost entirely with a very small, introverted group of extremists. Here, the influential importance and the inter-group dynamics of his immediate peer group become increasingly clear, and contributions by social network theorists become invaluable in assessing Reid’s journey⁴⁶. Sageman⁴⁷ highlights the centrality of personal bonds and interaction within small ‘cliques’ during the radicalisation process, suggesting al-Qaeda no longer need to actively recruit in a top-down fashion, but rather that previously socialised Islamists seek out terrorist networks once they have already decided upon violent extremism as a course of action. Similar observations by Kirby⁴⁸ certainly seem to correlate with Reid, who appears to only have proactively sought direct communicative links with al-Qaeda after he had already become an activist. Reid’s progression to this point can be understood as having progressed from a sense of anger at the perceived discrimination of the *Ummah* and the framing of his own grievances and disappointments as reflective of an overarching theme of Western intolerance and aggression towards Islam. The isolated and insular nature of his polarised peer group saw moderation shunned and jihadist rhetoric

⁴³ Krueger & Malečková, (2002;2003)

⁴⁴ Merton, (1938)

⁴⁵ Wiktorowicz, (2005)

⁴⁶ Porta, (1996:23–28)

⁴⁷ Sageman, (2004;2007)

⁴⁸ Kirby, (2007)

promoted, perpetuated, and allowed to escalate to the point this ‘bunch of guys’ decided to pursue terrorist acts⁴⁹.

Commonality can be found here with Sutherland’s⁵⁰ criminological concept of ‘differential association’, where deviant attitudes and values can be learnt, adopted, and reproduced by social environments favourable to the commission of such outlooks. The pressure to conform, the censorship of dissent, the collective rationalisation and the neutralisation of amoral views, and the arrival at a skewed consensus also feature in Janis’s⁵¹ concept of ‘groupthink’, where the unquestionable acceptance and conformity to the majority view bypasses alternative ideas, critical evaluation, or possible consequences. Within this group dynamic, Reid can be seen as having undergone a ‘risky shift’, gradually adopting more extreme positions and advocating progressively violent action, observable by his increasingly recurrent arguments with Abdul Haq Baker⁵².

If one considers Reid’s fatherless childhood, and his struggle to form lasting relationships, the importance of this tight-knit group and the solidarity he felt with his likeminded comrades should not be underestimated. This was comprehensibly articulated by Reid’s aunt who explained that "he was so lonely, his life was so empty....[and] he found solace with his Muslim brothers. With him, it became much more than a religion, they became his family....he believed he owed them loyalty"⁵³. Indeed suicide bombing itself can be viewed as a “murderous form of what Durkheim calls *altruistic* suicide"⁵⁴. The sense of belonging, community, mission and the social bonds Reid formed, depict radicalisation as a far more horizontal and *acephalous* process than a transcendent recruitment drive by al-Qaeda⁵⁵.

However, whilst self-starters may be more reflective of contemporary homegrown terrorism, it is undeniable that at this time certain ‘safe havens’ for extremism did exist and had become hubs for the fund raising, recruitment, and logistical planning of al-Qaeda related terrorist plots⁵⁶. The most notable example is the very Finsbury Park Mosque that Reid attended, at the time considered the heart of extreme Islamist culture in Britain⁵⁷. Nonetheless, sensationalist media reporting has created an image in the public

⁴⁹ Sageman, (2004;2007)

⁵⁰ Sutherland, (1947)

⁵¹ Janis, (1972)

⁵² Silke, (2008:111)

⁵³ Madeline Reid, *cited in* Craig, (2001)

⁵⁴ Pape, (2005:179)

⁵⁵ Neumann & Rogers, (2007:63)

⁵⁶ AIVD, (2004:12-14)

⁵⁷ Gibson, (2010:para1)

consciousness of al-Qaeda operatives lurking in the shadows of mosques and brainwashing innocent victims. As we have seen, the radicalisation process is far more complex, associated with social malaise combined with a particular counter-culture milieu and facilitative networks operating within 'enabling environments'⁵⁸.

Finsbury Park Mosque acted as magnet to an already radicalised Reid who switched his place of worship to follow his peers and establish 'links to the jihad', in this sense it was a gateway to terrorism⁵⁹. Recognition must also be given here to the role Brixton Mosque played in this process. Although it promoted a peaceful philosophy, due to its active contribution to the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders, it advocated a 'no questions asked' policy which provided the setting, albeit unwittingly, for the initial genesis of an extremist milieu. Parallels can be found here with criminological routine-activity theories which view deviant behaviour as relating to everyday patterns and opportunism⁶⁰. However, whilst radical mosques may have lost influence in the recruitment of Islamist militants, as Snow⁶¹ point's out, radical ideologues often affiliated with religious institutions can still play vital roles as propagandists and religious authorities in the radicalisation process – often acting as both important frame articulators and 'central nodal points' for seeking activists. Reid's self-recruitment was enabled by the guidance of Abu Hamza and Abu-Qatada who acted as gate-keepers to the networks' resources, demonstrating that the disposition, charisma, and credibility of Imams can still be significant⁶².

If one were to describe Reid within the personality typologies put forward by Nesser⁶³ he would best be expressed as a vulnerable, disadvantaged, easily manipulated 'misfit', whose troubled past and societal disenchantment culminated in a search for a prescriptive identity as a means to frame his real and perceived grievances. These motivations made him more receptive to the radical narratives of an extreme counterculture and were conducive to his slow immersion and socialisation into an introverted, self-affirming, clique. This group was in turn influenced and eventually mobilised into a 'guided cell' by credible and convincing frame articulators, operating within enabling environments and a facilitative network⁶⁴. Despite remaining an under researched field, the synthesis of 'push' and 'pull' factor

⁵⁸ Richardson, (2006b:21-36)

⁵⁹ AIVD, (2004:13)

⁶⁰ Clarke & Felson, (1993)

⁶¹ Benford & Snow, (2000:611-639)

⁶² Sageman, (2004:ch3)

⁶³ Nesser, (2004:10)

⁶⁴ Neumann & Rogers, (2007:24-26)

analysis is essential in the formation of effective counter initiatives aimed at both preventing initial involvement and promoting disengagement. The real-world application and scrutiny of theories through empirical case studies allow us realise this relationship and may help us 'bridge the gap' between academia and policy⁶⁵.

In an operational, strategic, sense there is little that can be done to instantaneously relieve the structural conditions that produce alienation. Nonetheless, Left Realist calls for wider social justice, the acknowledgement of discrimination, and greater societal equality remain important and should be encouraged⁶⁶. Additionally, there must be proactive policies to ensure no form of violent extremism is not allowed flourish in communities or environments that may place vulnerable people at risk. This being said, it is also imperative to avoid Draconian knee-jerk reactions that criminalise and alienate entire minority demographics. One positive step towards education and community focused initiatives, which attempts to avoid stigmatising whilst challenging extremism is 'Project Safe Space' of The British Youth Parliament. This scheme encourages vigorous debate between young people, academics, religious figures, politicians and practitioners on controversial topics like 'racial hatred' and 'suicide attacks', but within appropriately controlled forums⁶⁷. Nevertheless, the plurality of homegrown terrorism must be better appreciated, and such programmes should not be seen as universal blueprints but as elements of wider, phase-specific, locally grounded, counter-terrorism strategies. Therefore de-radicalisation policies must recognise the mediums that will credibly communicate counter narratives, and in this sense those communities and institutions disproportionately affected by violent extremism will be the long-term solution⁶⁸. However it is vital that communities be empowered to "grow into this role organically" or risk further societal divisions, and even being viewed as agents of the state themselves⁶⁹. However, in the wake of the London Riots and following the latest series of spending cuts, one cannot help but question how genuinely effective policies discouraging deviant behaviour and encouraging social development are likely to be.

In summary, given the restrictive parameters of this analysis it is important to recognise that violent extremism is not the inevitable end product of an inescapable sequence termed 'radicalisation'. Holding radical or fundamentalist views no more automatically equates to

⁶⁵ George, (1993)

⁶⁶ Horgan, (2008:92-93)

⁶⁷ Thomas, (2010)

⁶⁸ Nawaz, (2011)

⁶⁹ Briggs, (2010:981)

terrorist acts than risk factors identify every terrorist. One should be as careful of sweeping pejorative labels as of false positives, which criminalise minority groups, and have potentially negative consequences for social cohesion⁷⁰. Policy makers must be mindful that ill conceived counter-terrorist strategy may reinforce the image of an anti-Islamic West painted by extremists, and could unintentionally catalyse further radicalisation⁷¹. Furthermore, a general critique of terrorism studies can also be made of this paper in that, despite careful screening to ensure credibility and reliability of sources, primary data is limited and/or some intelligence regarding Reid is not in the public domain, resulting in a reliance on secondary or open source information⁷². Given the very specific of Reid, this paper makes no claims towards the conclusive nor does it purport to be representative of *all* homegrown terrorism. Rather it should be viewed as an exercise into the utility of theoretical tools within one particular context.

One can see then that the nexus and interplay between psychological, sociological, and ideological factors is central to a sophisticated understanding of Reid's radicalisation and mobilisation⁷³. An appreciation of the socio-economic strains and alienation he experienced also allow for an understanding of the drivers behind his search for identity and inclusion, suggesting their potential worth as indicators for radicalisation⁷⁴. The analytic tools considered here, whilst by no means an exhaustive list, represent the real-world application of academic frameworks. This offers valuable empirical insights into the relationships, loyalties, and environments which nurture and reinforce radicalisation, and may contribute to a contextualised understanding of these themes in policy attempts to effectively predict, recognise and, ultimately, combat homegrown radicalisation.

⁷⁰ Scraton, (2007:63)

⁷¹ Sageman & Hoffman, (2008); Change Institute, (2008); Bakker, (2006: 36-53)

⁷² Schmid & Jongman, (1988); Silke, (2001)

⁷³ Neumann & Rogers, (2007)

⁷⁴ Richardson, (2006:2)

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