

Quintan Wiktorowicz**Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West**

Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, 264 pp.

\$US 26.95 paper (0-7425-3641-6), \$US 75.00 hardcover (0-7425-3640-8)

Some social scientists have provided interesting explanations of the evolution of Islamism in recent years. Gilles Kepel (2002), for instance, has shown the importance of key social processes, such as the loss of legitimacy of Marxism and Arabic nationalism, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the dispersion of “holy warriors” from some parts of the world (Afghanistan for instance) to others (Bosnia, Algeria...), the increase of oil’s price after 1973, and the precarious relations between devout middle class people and some young, educated, poor and urban people in Muslim countries. Bernard Lewis (2004) has provided historical and structural explanations by linking Islamism to the collapse of the Ottoman empire, the disappearance of caliphate as a symbol of Muslim unity, the legacies of the Crusades and western imperialism, fundamentalist interpretations about the life of the Prophet and the *Jihad*, the American presence in Saudi Arabia, the war in Iraq, negative emotions such as frustration and humiliation, the effects of Soviet policies, the alliance between Israel and the United States, a cultural shock related to the “discovery” of the American way of life, the corruption of Muslim rulers and, more generally, a search for new “prescriptions” after the “failure of modernization” in Muslim societies.

Quintan Wiktorowicz is one of those social scientists (Bayat 2005, 2000, 1997; Milton-Edwards 1996; Mishal and Sela 2000; Palmer Harik 2004; Viegès 1997) who borrow from “social movement theory” to study Islamism. In 2004, Wiktorowicz edited a book called *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* where the study of Islamism is founded on concepts developed by specialists of social movements (see della Porta and Diani 1999, McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996 and McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). This theoretical framework is supposed to procure some protection against common errors in research on Islamism, such as:

- It shows that deprivation and frustration cannot fully explain the rise of Islamism since misery does not lead necessarily to mobilization. Mobilization of resources, decision-making and framing should also be taken into account.
- Even if they are not simply “dysfunctionals”, the actions of Islamist activists should not be reduced to the narrow logic of rational choice theory. Thanks to the use of concepts like framing, identities, diagnosis and prognosis, ideological motives are seen as crucial dimensions of the Islamist movement, even if rational calculations are also key factors in terms of mobilization of resources.
- Framing is not everything in “social movement theory.” Therefore, this theoretical framework also helps to avoid the post-structuralist trap where social movements are reduced to symbols, language and ideology (Bayat 2005).
- Finally, researchers do not present Islam as the only determinant factor. Therefore, “social movement theory” avoids the pitfalls of stereotyping and essentializing which characterized some comments on Islamism (Meijer 2005: 287).

Radical Islam Rising is founded on the same theoretical framework. But, as its subtitle says, the

topic of the research is “Muslim extremism in the West.” Wiktorowicz tries to explain why, in Western societies like Great Britain, some “individuals would engage in radical Islamic activism” (2005: 5) even if the risks and the costs are high in this movement. More precisely, the questions are: What explains their initial interests? “How are they persuaded that a radical group (...) is a credible source of Islamic interpretation?” (p. 6). How are they convinced to engage in risky activism?

The research is based on one radical organization (*al-Muhajiroun*) situated in London and ruled by Omar Bakri Mohammed (who was banned from the UK in August 2005). Besides the use of violence against Western militaries operating in Muslim countries, “a core tenet of the movement is the use of military coups to establish Islamic states wherever there are Muslims, including Britain” (p. 7). Wiktorowicz did thirty structured and unstructured interviews with Omar Bakri Mohammed, other leaders and some activists. These interviews were completed by “interactions” with “about one hundred other activists and movement ‘supporters’” plus participation in “an assortment of activities”, such as “propagation tables, demonstrations, open religious lessons, and community outreach programs” (p. 32). Different “movement documents” were consulted. A control group of “individuals who defected from movement activities” was formed “to help explain patterns of *nonjoining* and *nonparticipation*” (p. 32). Finally, “a small survey to Muslims in London” was distributed “to provide some comparative data.” Very few answered and the research assistant “even received threatening e-mails” (p. 33). These reactions can explain the looseness of the methodological procedures. A high level of methodological flexibility is certainly necessary when one deals with this type of sensitive topic.

The results of the research are presented in four chapters. The first chapter explains the high costs and risk which come from activism in an Islamist organization like *al-Muhajiroun*. Activists “frequently sacrifice work, friends, family, and leisure time” (p. 47). It is highly time consuming since the activists have to participate in various public outreach events, attract new recruits, etc. Members give one-third of their salary to the organization. They can pay fines or go to jail. Daily social activities such as listening to music and radio, smoking, cruising, watching TV, playing games, solving crosswords, chatting on the phone, etc. are discouraged.

Chapter two explains why some individuals are initially attracted by this kind of radical organization. Some “cognitive openings that spark religious seeking” (p. 127) explain this initial attraction. Often related to certain pre-conditions such as an identity crisis, racism of the mainstream society and some pre-existing social ties, these cognitive openings reinforce the will of the individuals “to listen to the movement and its alternative views” (p. 85). Potential recruits are usually contacted by activists in pre-existing social environments (family, peer groups, workplaces) or in public demonstrations. During the initial contacts, the recruiters try “to shake certitude in previously held beliefs and generate a sense of crisis and urgency” (p. 85).

Chapter three underlines that the credibility and the “sacred” authority of the leader plays a key role in convincing individuals to become activists. The perception of Omar Bakri’s “ability to accurately interpret Islam” is particularly important (p. 137). His personal and social qualities such as his good character, his reputation, and his personality also influence the choice of the potential recruits. These evaluations of the leader do not appear in a social vacuum. *al-Muhajiroun* is involved in a competition with other radical and moderate Muslim organizations who try to convince the same people.

The last chapter deals with the classical free rider dilemma. This problem is resolved by the organization by linking the pursuit of values and self-interests. In brief, this is done through a “culturing process” which transforms some previous curiosity and interest into real commitment. Islam is transformed into an ideology, and the individuals are convinced that “the only way to achieve salvation and enter Paradise on Judgment Day is to follow the movement’s prescribed strategy, which includes high-risk activism” (p. 167). The religious value of *tawhid* – belief in the oneness of God – is central here. Any individual deviance from God’s will, or any obedience to other forms of laws or rules (from the State, the family), means suffering eternal consequences after this life. In this logic, the activists are ready to take huge risks as long as they believe that *al-Muhajiroun* is the best place to be in order to understand what God expects from them.

There are good reasons to borrow some methodological and theoretical tools from “social movement theory” to study Islamism in the West and in Muslim countries. *Radical Islam Rising* definitely provides interesting explanations on a very important topic. It is also important to note that this kind of research on sensitive issues shows the courage of researchers like Wiktorowicz and her assistant. But this book also illustrates that the borrowing of some concepts from one pre-existing theoretical framework can reduce a social phenomenon. It becomes even more risky if this *a priori* theory was not developed to study individual choices. The main problem here is that “social movement theory” mainly sees the individuals from the social movement organization’s (SMO’s) perspective. In this logic, social processes such as “framing” and “socialization” are reduced to what SMOs do. It is true that notions such as “social ties” and “identity crisis” help to see the individuals before their involvement in the SMO. But this is not enough, especially if one tries to understand why some people become “holy warriors” in a *Jihad*. The recruits are probably not as passive as they seem to be in *Radical Islam Rising*. They are not only culturally doped by the SMO. After all, if the people studied by Wiktorowicz are more attracted than others by a Muslim ideology, a Muslim identity, etc., it probably has something to do with the fact that most of these people are Muslims. They could react to an “identity crisis” and racism by adopting another action frame (feminism, Marxism, nationalism, political liberalism, etc.). If their “cognitive opening” is connected to a “religious seeking” (and an Islamist one), it is certainly not only because they have some radical Muslim friends or relatives. And it cannot be explained only by the efficient methods of mobilization of a SMO and the qualities of its leader. It is also because, in one way or another, Islamism is compatible with their own habitus (more than feminism, Marxism, nationalism, etc.) and their psychological background. In this sense, in future similar research, it would be relevant to integrate other sociological dimensions and concepts which do not come from “social movement theory” — such as the habitus. A larger conception of socialization could also be useful to see how the family, school, media, etc. influence the choices of Islamist recruits. The integration of the works of Kepel (2002), Lewis (2004) and others could also be worthy. Some Muslims living in the West are certainly affected by factors explained by these authors. I am thinking about factors such as stories on the Crusades, Israeli policies, and the US invasion of Iraq. Finally, when social scientists try to explain individual behaviors, they should adopt some concepts which can also deal with psychological factors.

In sum, it is necessary to go outside of the box built by the “social movement theory.” However, there is no doubt that *Radical Islam Rising* can stimulate many students in courses on social movements, violence, deviance or other social problems.

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March 2006

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