

SPECIAL SECTION

Why Ideology Endures in our Study of Terrorists

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Abstract: Should we leave ideology behind in our study of terrorism and terrorists? In this response to Clark McCauley's article, I suggest three reasons why, despite the merits of his observations, ideology remains an important component in our understanding of terrorists. First, definitional ambiguity—while not unique to ideology—can be overcome. Second, the worlds of collective action frames and ideology are inherently intertwined. Third, while we need to be able to 'measure' ideology, a grading scale—such as the one I proposed—has arguably greater utility than one based on framing. Ultimately, we need to adopt an inclusive approach that draws out the complex relationship between ideology and the multiple other components that coalesce in processes of terrorism.

Keywords: ideology, framing, terrorism, evaluation, grading

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Introduction

Exactly six years ago. I published a paper in this journal, together with John Horgan, which we called ‘Terrorism and Ideology: Cracking the Nut’. In hindsight, we were probably a little optimistic in our quest to lay this matter to rest. We were, however, more prescient in our opening line of the article, where we stated that “an enduring bugbear in the study of terrorism is conceptualizing the role ideology plays for individuals involved in such activities.”¹

Clark McCauley’s suggestion in this current volume that we “leave ideology behind” in our attempts to understand radicalisation to terrorism illustrates how enduring this question of ideology has proved to be.² It is, perhaps, our most significant blind spot in understanding pathways to terrorism.

McCauley’s argument builds on decades of his seminal scholarship in our field and merits careful consideration. Summarising his points from a 2024 research note, McCauley pointed out that there was no consensus about how to define ideology in the terrorism literature, which, in turn, made it impossible to measure empirically. It would be better, he argued, to leave the concept behind and apply, in its stead, concepts from Social Movement Theory, particularly pertaining to diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing to stimulate collective action.³

Moreover, McCauley suggested that my recent piece on this topic, *Sacred Violence: The Enduring Role of Ideology in Terrorism and Radicalization*, along with Daniel Koehler’s recent article in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, ‘What’s in a Word?’, offered “broad and non-doctrinaire definitions of ideology” but then ultimately relied on collective action frames in a manner that “is not working.”⁴ Better to shed the former, the argument went, and rely instead on collective action frames, decoupled from the ambiguities of ideology.

On ideology and its immeasurability

Before setting out my rebuttal to McCauley’s points and his suggestion that we leave ideology behind, I should note that the premise of his argument is, in my view, quite sound. It is true that a consensus definition on ideology has remained elusive within our field and beyond. Three related problems arise as a result. Unless definitions are specifically provided, it often seems unclear what references to ideology in our context are meant to capture. Many, for instance, assume the presence of ideological variables implies consistent adherence to (and internalisation of) rigid and doctrinal beliefs with specific end-goals. Theorists have long sought to push back against such ‘true-believer’ fallacies.⁵

But in their attempts to address this problem, they offer conceptualisations of ideology that, for many, McCauley included, are so broad, abstract, and changeable that their analytical utility is very limited.

As a consequence, these conceptualisations often seem to fail to translate into empirical, measurable components that allow us to at least begin to explore the role, function and impact of ideology on individuals to some degree.

Addressing the Critique

Despite these issues, I would argue, ideology remains indispensable for us to appreciate the political ingredients that separate terrorism from other violence. But these challenges impose on us a need to develop a conceptualisation of ideology that rests on a sound empirical footing. This brings us to the specifics of McCauley's critique and some potential problems with his argument.

Three points come to mind.

1. Definitions and conceptualisations

While definitional ambiguity and variance pose problems for incorporating ideology in our thinking about terrorism, it is far from the only concept in our conversations about the topic that remains inconsistently or poorly defined. Radicalisation and deradicalisation, the key processes under McCauley's scrutiny, have not been universally conceptualised either in the disciplines that are most concerned with terrorism.⁶ Even the concept of terrorism itself, as all students of our subject will know, remains contested.⁷

Yet, we move on, acknowledging that universal consensus will likely remain elusive, particularly across disciplines. We explain our terms and ground them in the literature that has developed around them. The conceptualisation of ideology that I adopted in my paper reflects the core elements that experts on ideology have sharpened in their development of the concept.⁸ Moreover, it emphasises the social properties of ideologies and their importance in offering collectives a common lens to view the world and their place in it.⁹ And this relates directly to framing.

2. Frames and ideology

It was, in many ways, the literature on ideologies that spawned the collective action frames that McCauley advocates. As Koehler traced in his paper, they derive from John Wilson's attempts, over fifty years ago, to tease out their "structural elements": "a diagnosis of present problems; a solution to those problems and vision of a better world; and a rationale for the movement."¹⁰ As the framing concept gained traction, some criticised its use as an oversimplification, cliché even, that failed to capture the ideational complexity of social movements and reduced their cultural richness to a "recruitment strategy."¹¹ But frame theory, according to Pamela Oliver and Hank Johnston, had a more profound problem: "its failure to address the relation between frames and the much older, more political concept of ideology, and the concomitant tendency of many researchers to use "frame" uncritically as a synonym for ideology."¹² The debate about this relationship, as it turns out, is not new.

David Snow and Robert Benford, who coined the collective action frames, responded to this criticism. They began by refuting the suggestion that they ever recommended "that the term ideology should be jettisoned or replaced by the term frame." The two worlds were inextricably connected. But they did seek to "bring some dynamism to the rather static conceptualization of ideology." Collective action frames were, they emphasised, dialogical, processual, and linked to ideologies in four significant ways. Firstly, ideologies provided the "*cultural resource* that can be tapped and exploited for the purpose of constructing collective action frames." Secondly, framing helped us understand "*remedial ideological work*", where ideologies were modified or updated to reflect new experiences. Thirdly, and relatedly, framing thus muted the "*vulnerability of ideology to reification*," helping us understand not only the dynamics of change but also the emergence of new ideologies. Fourthly, and this relates directly to McCauley's point, framing, in contrast to ideology, was a "*more readily empirically observable activity*," because it involved group-based social interaction.¹³

3. Measuring ideology

McCauley presented some examples of how different components of collective action frames could be measured, in his case through polling. But even here, the links between ideology and the frame, the interpretation and that which shaped it, seem palpable just beneath the surface. For instance, he cited polling about support for the Great Replacement theory as a measurement of a diagnostic dimension for “Right-Wing terrorism”.¹⁴ While he could show that 28 percent of respondents accepted the theory as true, he did not explain *why* they felt it was true. Who were the interlocutors, what was the sense of collective self, of grievance or common angst that shaped these opinions? How were they formed? Without reference to their shared beliefs, as I argued in my paper which McCauley referenced, we lack a crucial piece of our puzzle.

More fundamentally, relying solely on framing as a tool of measurement presents some obvious problems when it comes to the way in which ideology is conveyed through “modes of transmission,” to borrow a phrase Wilson used in his original conceptual work.¹⁵ Ideology does not simply exist, floating in the ether. It is conveyed through texts, books, speeches, essays, videos, and sermons. These interpretive acts illustrate vividly the relationship between ideology and frames. And they are paramount for us to measure ideology. We can see how people, terrorists included, select them and interact with them over time. And we can assess their content. But here, collective action frames, separated into individual tools of measurement, are meaningless because most of these modes of transmission convey them all, as the literature behind them would suggest. Anwar al-Awlaki, for example, whom I identified as the key ideologue of British convicted Islamist extremists, would not fill his dense lectures with diagnosis, decoupled from prognosis, separated from a motivational call to arms, but rather combine all three, tapping into the Salaf-Jihadi ideology that propelled him and his followers.

Depending on what we want to measure, therefore, other yardsticks may be more appropriate. The method that I developed was grounded in a common understanding of ideology, but then broken down into, effectively, degrees of severity: material that combined diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames but offered different interpretations on the definition and treatment of outgroups, including the use of violence. Such criteria: moderate, fringe, extreme1, extreme2, extreme3 can be empirically employed, their reliability tested, and utilisation emulated across different samples. Indeed, my framework was applied in the study that McCauley and Koehler both cite, *The Language of Jihad*.¹⁶ It is intended to help us add empirical solidity to the abstract world of ideology, which was central to McCauley’s call, and a point which I believe is well made.

Combining Perspectives

In ‘Terrorism and Ideology: Cracking the Nut’ we concluded that “ideology is fundamentally part of the environment, affecting all who participate [in terrorism] and their perceptions of what they encounter, in different ways and to differing degrees.”¹⁷ I think that statement stands. But what we also called for, as others have done, was for our thinking to move beyond a perception of ideology as an isolated monolith, an awkward block of beliefs contiguous to some pathways to terrorism, and to explore instead the dynamic interaction between ideology and all the varied constituent parts of these processes. Max Taylor’s response to McCauley’s piece in this issue lays important groundwork in this regard.¹⁸

While it seems unlikely that we will ever lay this question of ideology and terrorism to rest, we could devote much more attention to how ideas and beliefs work in unison with the multitude of factors that lead to terrorism. Here, fascinating questions remain. And there is much work to be done.

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Endnotes

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About

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