

Book Review

Engineers of Jihad : The Curious connection between Violent Extremism and Education by Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, Princeton University Press, 2016, ISBN: 9780691145174

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The world has experienced a vicious history of violent extremism in different forms with diverse interpretative ratiocination. The book under review builds on Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog's previous paper "why are there so many Engineers among Islamic Radicals" that was published in the European Journal of Sociology in November 2009. From the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and his wife by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo in 1914, this unleashed World War I.

The spartacists whose revolutionary zeal contributed to the rise of the right in Germany in 1919 and the Baader-Meinhof Gang which, fifty years later, shook the stability of the young West German democracy. Or the anarchists who rocked the European monarchies at the turn of the twentieth century, and Sendero Luminoso in Peru, and FARC in Colombia who held their countries hostage for decades. Bearing in mind all of these, the Islamist extremists, who have been the salient threat for the last two decades and who are the focus of this book, are but the latest in the long line. Who are the terrorists? What can their educational background tell us about why they might engage in such violence? And to what extent are Islamist militants comparable to left-wing or right-wing terrorists? In *Engineers of Jihad*, the authors seek to address these questions, among others, and in doing so help us understand the roots of certain types of political violence.

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There are four classic questions that surround extremism that the co-relation at the core of our book will help us frame in a new and clearer light. The four questions are as follows:

1. What are the socio-economic conditions that explain why people join extremist groups?
2. Do some people, more than others, have a mindset susceptible to the lure of extremism?
3. To what extent is the question of who ends up becoming an extremist a matter of “supply”—different types of people choosing particular types of extremism—or a matter of “demand”—groups searching for and selecting suitable recruits?
4. Does ideology matter in determining which types of people join certain groups?

Chapter 1, “*The Education of Islamist Extremists*” takes a sample of 497 violent Islamist radicals from Muslim countries, and 344 born or raised in western countries between the 1930s and the years 2000. It is therefore a study of the educational path of almost 850 violent Islamist radicals during the last eight decades examines and explains why well-off, educated men join the ranks of jihad. This over representation of engineers, the authors argue, is not the result of selective recruitment based on technical skills in bomb-making or communications.

Moving on to Chapter 2, “*Relative Deprivation in the Islamic World*” and 3 “*Relative Deprivation Probed*” explain the engineering puzzle on the basis of socio-economic factors. The central argument here is that the overrepresentation of graduates in general and of engineers in particular is that these are frustrated would-be elites. A whole generation of engineers across the Islamic world had their hopes raised and then brutally dashed when it became clear that their prestigious degrees were not a ticket to ride the train of social mobility, as they had first expected. Students with university degrees of ‘lower’ status - arts, humanities, education - were less represented among militant movements, as is confirmed by the dataset analysed in the first chapter.

Chapter 4, “*The Ideology of Islamist Extremism Compared*” and chapter 5 “*The Education of Other Extremists*” further the already discussed section on socio-economic conditions with an individual-level set of psychological explanations. While as chapter 4 discusses the role of ideology and the traits of extremism the main conclusion of this chapter is that there is considerable overlap between radical Islamism and right-wing extremism (traditionalism, anti-Semitism, acceptance of social inequality, etc.) and a nearly complete lack of overlap with left-wing extremism. In short, the core ideological traits of Islamist ideology are sometimes shared by other extremists. This suggests that engineers may be more attracted to some groups than others, irrespective of the recruiters’ constant demand for skilled individuals. Chapter 5 builds on the findings concerning the core traits of extremism and examines the relationship between educational degrees and political ideology. According to the authors, not all engineers are equally enticed by radical politics. Engineers are more likely to join right-wing groups than left-wing ones, even if both types could benefit from their technical expertise. The authors discard the ‘skill hypothesis’ and argue that ‘certain degrees are a proxy for personality traits’ (p. 127). In other words, different types of people are attracted to different types of extremism: engineers appear mostly in right-wing extremist movements, and social scientists and humanities graduates appear mostly in left-wing ones.

Chapter 6, “*Mind-sets for Extremists*”, the last chapter of this book peeps into the worldview of extremists. The main contribution of this chapter is that it successfully connects ‘disciplines’, ‘personality traits’ and ‘political preferences’. According to the authors, engineers are present in groups in which social scientists, humanities graduates, and women are absent. Engineers possess traits (e.g. avoiding ambiguity, proneness to order, in-group bias and oversimplification) in a measure that the other two groups do not (and indeed usually lack) more than do any other group of graduates

The authors’ expertise, which combines empirical research on violent/criminal groups and a wide knowledge of the region, materialized previously in a joint article published in 2009. Gambetta and Hertog’s book is therefore the result of almost a

decade of research. It avoids discussing the Arab Spring, and seems to ignore the ongoing development of Daesh, enabling hence to stand back and look at the general picture. Engineers of Jihad does not make a case for individual profiling or the monitoring of engineers. Rather, the book emphasizes the role of labour markets and failed development in generating the radicalism of would-be elites in the Muslim world. Thus, promoting job opportunities (as well as education and more inclusive institutions) might go a long way in preventing radicalization given that the dispossessed are natural candidates for extremism. Nonetheless, if the argument proffered by Gambetta and Hertog about status deprivation is correct and the obstacles to the social mobility of engineers in the Middle East and African region are both the corruption and autocracy which restrict economic growth, why are the energies of so many jihadists directed to the far enemy instead of the near one? And also, how can the authors make sense of the fact that self-starters in the West continue to radicalize in spite of enjoying far superior economic conditions compared with their peers in the Middle East and Africa? The authors provide a convincing account of militant engineers in the Middle East but their supply-driven argument is not equally applicable to other parts of the world.

This book lacks some practical aspects, as neither of the authors seem to have spent time speaking to “radicals” they have been studying nor any substantial ground work been done to ascertain the facts. It also misses today’s rise in violent extremism (embodied by Daesh for example), and tends to formulate generalizations about engineers that may castigate them in their respective societies. With hindsight, this outstanding book persuasively examines the relationship between education and radicalization and provides the best account to date of why some engineers join violent extremist groups and allows the student of modern radical movements to understand the underlying methodologies prevalent in the Eurocentric academic terrain.
