

# **Governing Terrorism Through Preemption: A Comparative Analysis of Radicalization in Three Western Liberal Democracies**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, issues related to terrorism and counterterrorism are increasingly being understood through the construct of ‘radicalization.’ At its most basic level, radicalization is most often conceptualized as a transition from “normal,” conventional political, religious or otherwise ideological beliefs towards extremist views and ultimately violence. The process is now adopted by governmental officials and politicians, police authorities, journalists, and even scientists to justify various forms of governmental intervention, such as policing, social and public policy, education, and surveillance. Notably missing from the scholarly literature is a distinctly sociological understanding of the implications of the proliferation of radicalization discourse in contemporary society. Considering the relative absence of sociological research on radicalization as a construct, this project develops a theoretical perspective based on insights from the sociology of social control to explore the emergence and genesis of radicalization discourse and its social implications.

In particular, this study engages with theories of governmentality, literature within critical policing studies and the othering paradigm traced back to the work of Edward Said, to explore the global diffusion of radicalization discourses across three Western liberal democracies – the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada – from 1969 to the present. More specifically, utilizing critical discourse and case study analysis, I explore how social institutions of law, politics, media, and science conceptualize radicalization and investigate the material practices of risk, security, and policing for which such discourses give rise. Following the analysis of thousands of publicly available governmental and non-governmental documents, this study finds that not only has radicalization become a dominant framework for understanding terrorism, but that modern discursive labeling mechanisms associated with preemption disproportionately affect certain cultural and ethnic minorities. The data illustrate this trend across social institutions in all three countries. The findings also highlight how notions of risk and security are increasingly embedded in the daily lives of citizens through discourses of radicalization in order to more efficiently govern the threat of terrorism. The study therefore broadens sociological and criminological debates on processes of social exclusion, social control, and cultural change in the context of terrorism and highlights some of the ways in which social distance is constructed and represented in the public sphere.