Introduction: biographies of radicalization-hidden messages of social change

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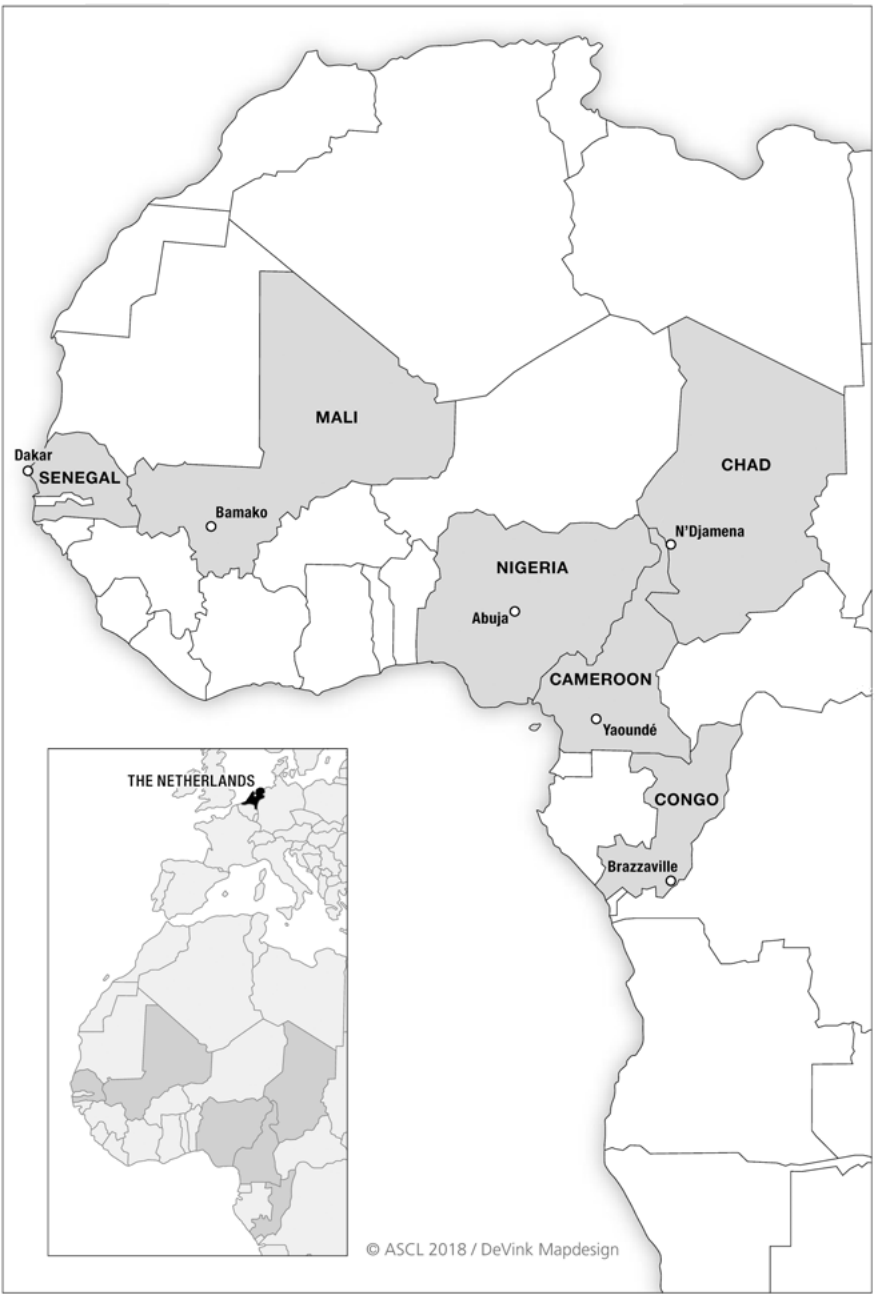
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1 Introduction: Biographies of radicalization—hidden messages of social change

The radical individual

Mélanie se sent aimée. Elle se sent utile.
Elle cherchait un sens à sa vie: elle l'a trouvé.[1]

This is the concluding remark of the preface to a book based on an intimate and personal story of young people who join the Islamic State. These kinds of books, often based on journalistic encounters, are an increasing genre. Their goal is to arrive at a better understanding of the motivation of these youth. It has become an important question in our modern world, where no region is exempt from terrorist attacks by radicalized groups. The opening quotation refers to a key element that is difficult to capture with scientific research: it hints at the search for identity. Apparently the environments in which the youth have to carve out a living push them into this search/quest. What is this environment, and how does it impact the lives of these youth? Is the search for identity really religious? Or can we find another cause? Is their search also violent only, or can we discover other elements?

Sub-Saharan Africa has seen a significant rise in terrorist acts and radicalized youth since the appearance of Boko Haram in 2009 and the fall of Libya in 2012. In this book we search for the deeper layers of radicalization in Sub-Saharan Africa, which is situated in a larger global tendency. We have adopted the style of books such as those noted above, the biographic form, because this will indeed bring us closer to the motivations, the feelings, and the hopes of these often young people.

In the media, policy discourses, and casual conversations in bars, a link is almost immediately made between radicalization and religion, or between radicalization and violence. However, radicalization is not, *per se*, violent or religious (Schmid 2013; Dzhekova et al. 2016). It can be related to ideologies that

1 Tr. 'Melanie feels loved. She feels useful. She was looking for meaning in her life; she found it.' Anna Erelle, *Dans la peau d'une djihadiste: Enquête au coeur des filières de recrutement de l'Etat islamique*. Paris: Robert Laffont, 2015.

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are pacific or, for instance, to something as innocuous as vegetarianism. The various chapters of this book look at radicalization as a dynamic process, a process in which an individual is both pushed and pulled into new ideas and often a new social group.[2] This may lead to political violence, or it may not. What these processes have in common is that radicalization is related to a wish for social change.[3]

To understand the motivation to radicalize and subsequently to embrace a violent act is multi-directional. What we see in the opening quotation is a moment of despair and a search for identity. Such a search for identity is the most complex one to understand and the outcome of many other factors. In a report on radicalization in Africa from 2016, Institute for Security Studies (ISS) researchers concluded that the ways to radicalization are complex; they are related to so many factors that it is impossible to delineate a straightjacket formula to understand these choices. These ways can be a mixture of poverty, deprivation, feelings of marginalization, loss of faith in and deception by governance structures, critique of a country's leaders, being victims of oppression. There can also be a search for 'being' and 'belonging'. Specific interpretations of religion can offer justification in some of these matters, where few other belief systems can. If such elements lead to radicalization, this is often related to external factors such as the presence of radical groups—and of course to the personality of the persons who are subjected to these factors.

Why do people, often youth, subscribe to radical ideas and the groups that proclaim them, and why are they ready even to resort to violence? Is it only a flight from a situation they feel trapped in? Or do they deliberately join an alternative ideology? Is it for them a flight away or a flight toward? And how do these reasons differ in different socio-political and economic contexts? Does the Sahelian context, the Central African context determine different ways? In a recent exchange with a friend from central Mali (January 2018),[4] one of the main arguments he made was that the young people in his area were searching for social change. They are fed up with what is in fact a feudal system that still rules their society. That is what leads them to join radical groups, because these groups carry a message of change. This message of change may be shared with youth

2 '... an understanding of radicalisation as a complex and dynamic process, which implies the identification of its transformative stages and drivers, and how it may or may not lead to political violence and acts of terrorism' (Dzhekova et al. 2016: 8).

3 In the Oxford Dictionary, we find the following definition of 'radicalization': 'The action or process of causing someone to adopt radical positions on political or social issues' (https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/radicalization).

4 Security in the Sahel; a research project funded by NWO: reference number 383000.004.

in other countries, even as far away as the Netherlands, but at the same time the content of the change they are longing for varies by context—and hence the dynamics of radicalization may differ strongly. The interesting question that keeps returning to mind is how decisions are made to move into these directions. Are these the result of agency and free will? Or are they part of what we can label constrained agency, where the circumstances lead to choice-less choices (Coultner 2008; De Bruijn & Both 2018).

Social change

The perspective of social change and necessity as felt by radicalized youth brings us to the analysis of the circumstances and historical facts that make these youth long for change. This also may change our interpretation of radicalization. Radicalization today is related to negative forces, to violence, terrorism, and war. But radicalization is also a force in society that can produce positive results. The contested author Abou Jahjah Dyab (2016), who was criticized for his radical stance (in a negative sense), makes a plea for the more positive way of interpreting radicalization. He reviews former moments in which radicals took the lead and sees that these were in the end moments of social reform for the better—social reform that was necessary for the creation of a more democratic and sound society, although often the outcome was not exactly what the radicals had wished for. That these moments of radicalization can also usher in negative changes—changes that are unappreciated in Western styles of governance, at least—is clear. And calling for radical change usually includes criticizing the establishment, thereby provoking a counter-reaction from this establishment. Violence can quickly be born out of this reaction if not recognized in time.

(His-)Stories: Biographies and life stories

In this book we try to understand why people radicalize for a cause that can be religious, ideological, economic, or otherwise. The cases united in this book are drawn from different areas in Central and West Africa and the Netherlands, and they are situated in different historical periods. The contexts in which individuals become radical differ. How do individuals develop such ideas? With the biographical method, we aim to situate these ideas in the geographical and historical contexts in which they develop. Apitzsch and Siouti (2007: 5, 6, 7), for instance, offered these observations around the biographical method: Biographies have

> [...] proven to be an excellent way of making theoretical sense of social phenomena. [...] Biographical research is interested in the process-related and constructive nature of life histories, and it distances itself from identity models which regard identity as something static and rigid. [...] It is particularly suited to the analysis of social phenomena as identifiable processes [...]

and therefore biographies are very much a tool to understand how identity changes in relation to contextual changes. And, they continue:

> The focus of biographical analysis is not only the reconstruction of intentionality, which is represented as an individual's life course, but the embedding of the biographical account in social macro structures.

The case studies in this book have all adopted the biography or life story as a central 'tool' both in methodology and in facilitating understanding. In choosing this approach, we have automatically given attention to stories and the people whose stories are told—their pondering, their frustrations, their emotions that feed into their search for a position in society and the world (Buitelaar 2014). The opening quotation from the young woman who went to Syria relates radicalization to such emotions. There is no cause for social change in which emotion, subjectivity, and a search for appreciation do not play a role. It is part of being a radical. This permeates very clearly the stories we present in this book.

Get to know the 'radicals'

After reading the different stories of the main figures in the various case studies, we may then have a better understanding of who these 'radicals' are, and we may also understand how these stories are embedded in the socio-political context in which they are lived. Another aim of the book is to search for the similarities between the regions and forms of radicalization. How does the world around these people apparently force radical choices upon them, or how do these people choose to make these radical choices? The choice to present various cases, differing in time and in geographical space, is based on a wish to learn from the comparison and to understand how confrontation between societal forms and radicals leads to different forms of radicalization. Often in the general discourse that is adopted in the media and policy circles, forms of radicalization are conflated and the nuances are lost. This is where we find ourselves today in the discourse on violent radicalization, where nuance is often lacking, and simplistic notions inform many policies regarding young people. Their violent and terrorist acts and the consequences should never be denied, but probably even

these heinous acts are in some ways a cry for attention, *au fond* a search for social and political change. Perhaps they are indeed part of the third wave of protest movements in West and Central Africa, as Branch and Mampilly (2015) have suggested.

Connected world

A word on connectivity. It is undeniable that we have to consider the influence, both for the better and for the worse, of social media in our world today (Ekine 2010). The specificity of this third wave, as it is called by Branch and Mampilly (2015), is this connectedness among each other and to the world and world developments.[5] The young intelligent boy or girl in a small village in the middle of the Sahara is now able to access instant news and interpret his or her world in new ways. In an article elsewhere on Mali, we tried to provide insight into this new information landscape and concluded that although there is much connectivity across social, ethnic, and regional borders/frontiers, there still exist strict circles of information in which specific interpretations of a situation and discourses circulate, and these circles inform action (De Bruijn et al. 2015).

Such 'compartmentalized' connectivity is, for instance, the connected world of international and regional policy actors. Present-day policy as it is applied in the Sahel is an example of such dynamics: the G5 (five Sahelian states who join forces to combat terrorism) is a fostered connection between five states, where external funding (and influence) of international organizations such as the EU, UN, and numerous NGOs is present. In these circles, exchanges about a situation create shared discourses and steer decisions made for policing the area. Today the focus is on military intervention, because 'we' agree that we are facing terrorists and violent radicals who want to destroy our world and 'our values'. Images from Syria, The Hague, and various governments in Africa are conflated, and the fear of radicalized and violent youth is globally shared. With the chapters in this book, which add important nuances to the debate and offer various related interpretations of what radicalization is, we hope to contribute to diversifying the debate, opening views into the lived contexts behind the labels, and changing the one-dimensional image of so-called radical youth.

5 See also Dzhekova, Rositsa et al. (2016).

A region turned radical

I wish to recall how my own research project, which started in 2012, became part of such a dynamic.[6] During the period of the project (2012–2018), the team of researchers have been observing changes in the ways people with whom we conducted research adapted their language and, in some cases, indeed joined radical groups. The research was situated in West and Central Africa and experienced the increasingly wider conflicts and violence that have developed in the region. Our research coincided with the start of the Mali conflict in 2012, with the refugee crisis issuing from the conflict in Central African Republic after 2013, and with the Boko Haram intensification since 2009. Other crises also developed, such as in Nigeria around Biafra (2015), in anglophone Cameroon (2016), in Burkina Faso (2015), and in Congo-Brazzaville (2016). These developments came after and partly overlapped with terrorist attacks in Europe and with the war in Syria. The implantation of the discourse of radicalization from 2005 onwards[7] became part of our observations and influenced the final analysis of our work. It also raised many questions. The people with whom we were working, and also the researchers themselves, shared an interest in changing their environments and creating new ways to live their lives (see the contribution of Both and Souleymane, and the film *Hope-less*[8]). On the one hand, the violence of the radical groups touched them in negative ways; on the other hand, these manifestations of radicalization influenced their own thinking. The cases of Biafra and the refugees in Cameroon show parallel developments of radicalization that are not always violent (or at least not yet). These are differences that are overlooked in the larger discourse—a discourse that developed also on the international level and that has led to a fear for these regions and their populations and enormous difficulties for NGOs and the like to get permission to work. And, indeed, in the meantime the situation seems to have got out of hand in some instances. But would that have been necessary if we could have interpreted the message in early 2013 for Mali and in 2009 for Nigeria's Boko Haram as, in some ways, cries for social change?

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6 See www.connecting-in-times-of-duress.nl (NWO funded: W 01.70.600.001).

7 Alex Schmid (2013) recalls: the concept of 'radicalisation ... was brought into the academic discussion after the bomb attacks in Madrid 2004 and London 2005 by policy makers who coined the term "violent radicalisation"'; it became part of the discourse on the Sahel a few years later with the advent of Boko Haram and al-Qaeda-like groups in the Sahel.

8 http://www.voice4thought.org/hope-less/; Hope-less, biographies of radicalization in the Sahel; a film made by Sjoerd Sijsma and Mirjam de Bruijn, 2018; Produced by Voice4Thought (English subtitling)

It is important to note here that this book concentrates on those youth and persons who become radicals. Why do they turn to these ideas? We do not analyse the context of the international criminal networks, illegal trade, and the non-governed areas that are the macro-logics behind these developments. But in many cases, for the radical or radicalizing people we meet in this book, these international factors are outside their orbit. Theirs is a local experience, and often theirs are actions informed by frustration and a search for a different life.

The methodology of the book

The different authors of the chapters in this book are not united in one research group. They are all researchers who during their research experience have come across the phenomenon of radicalization and an increasing tendency toward violence. Some of the chapters are based on research that was conducted in the framework of research on radicalization. Djimet Seli (Chapter 8) and Remadji Honaithy and Sali Bakari (5) were invited to collaborate in the UNDP study on radicalization in the region;[9] Bart Schuurman (3) and David Ehrhardt (9) also framed their work from the beginning as research on radical youth. Modibo Cissé (11) stepped into researching the Sahelian problematic after the radicalization discourse was well established. For Boukary Sangaré (12), Amadou Adamou (13), Meike de Goede (15), Selly Ba (14), Inge Ligtvoet and Loes Oudenhuijsen (10), Dorrit van Dalen (4), Souleymane Adoum and Jonna Both (7), and Walter Nkwi (6), the radicalization discourse was born while they were doing research. I (Mirjam de Bruijn) invited the researchers to reflect on their research in relation to the discourse of radicalization, particularly if they were able to find biographies of radicalization. I also asked them to search for dynamics and processes and to search for an alternative model to understand the relationship between radicalization and forces for social change, radicalization that is not automatically violent or linked to terrorist acts. The methodologies to access these stories vary from personal contact with radicalized individuals, to gathering stories from families of the radicalized, to ethnographical encounters with the radicalized. Here, of course, was the danger that the discourse would take over from the analysis, and it is for the reader to judge if we have been able to step outside this limiting discourse.

9 UNDP 2016

The researchers come from different disciplines, but all have adopted a strongly empirical approach: from that of the historian (among archives and oral history), to the anthropologist (ethnographic work), to the political science / security studies people (interviews and statistics). Some stories are more in the nature of essays, while others have opted for a more analytical form of writing. We also added other than academic authors to the book, in the form of alternative modes for presenting the 'results' of understanding what radicalization means. These modes, a song, interviews, narrative, provide space for emotion: the explanation of a slam text on radicalization and terrorism by an artist (Croquemort, 2); a reflection by a researcher on his own process of radicalization while living with radicalization during his field work (Souleymane & Both, 7); and a narrative report (V4T, 16) about a social event organized in Dakar where a 'positive' interpretation of radicalization was the leading guide. The latter report refers to alternative approaches or solutions to the issues of radicalization. There are also two chapters devoted to 'after' radicalization, or 'solutions': a historical chapter on Congo-Brazzaville (15), and a story from Senegal (14) where religious radicalization seems to be less of a tendency in the relatively liberal form of Islam and the democratic tendencies of the country.

Following this introductory chapter, the book begins with the reflection of a Chadian artist, Didier Lalaye, a.k.a. Croquemort: first of all, one of his song texts, written in 2001, but so relevant for the interpretation of the present situation. He is probably himself a radical but in a different way from those youth who turn into terrorists to fight for 'Allah'. In a reflective interview about the slam text, we meet with the feelings of anger and injustice that are at the core of many radicalization itineraries. The interview refers to the historical roots of the phenomenon of radicalization and to the present-day emotions that are part of becoming a radical, emotions based on interpretations of history (in memory) and on confrontations with daily realities. In the interview, we also find reference to historical examples of radicalization and a reference to possible alternatives to approach the situation now. Another important point we can learn from the song text is that it is mostly young people who instigate radical tendencies. This is true for all chapters in the book. We should also not forget that in most countries that feature in this book, youth below the age of 25 years comprise at least 60 per cent of the population.

These elements in the song text and the interview are also a guide to the book's three parts: 'History and reflection'; 'Present-day processes of radicalization'; and 'Pathways out of radicalization'. The first part, 'History and reflection', creates room for theoretical reflection on the concept of radicalization and on historical examples. Both lead us to relativize the urgency that is usually given to the topic in present-day analyses and experiences in the world. Bart Schuurman's

chapter (3) is an interesting opening chapter positioning us directly in a comparative geographical perspective, as it relates a case of radicalization in The Hague, the Netherlands. The European angle pushes us to understand radicalization not as something 'African' only, but rather as a dynamic that can occur in one of the richest and most secular countries of the world: the Netherlands. In addition to this opening attention to geography, the chapter is also positioned ahead of the other chapters as it is foremost a reflection and attempt to understand how the concept of radicalization is born and what it has contributed to understanding the world better. For Bart, in the end, the concept is best avoided, because it fails to clarify anything. There are too many differences and too many itineraries gathered under the same label. So what then does it explain?

Nevertheless, as the following chapters show, radicalization means much in the present-day experiences of people who radicalize or who take part in acts of radicalization. It has become a real phenomenon that we need to understand, as David Ehrhardt notes in Chapter 9; and we need to understand it because it occurs in reality and can have significant consequences. The chapters that follow, which examine historical cases that have 'ended', illustrate the use of the concept in a certain mode. It has helped these historians to analyse in a different way the social phenomena captured in biographies. The concept also makes these historical studies relevant for the understanding and the relativization of the current discussion about radicalization. The first historical case goes back to the 17th century, presenting the itinerary of Muhamad al-Wali in 17th century Chad (4). This is followed by the more recent history of Sheikh Ahmet Ismael Bichara (5), who radicalized violently in 21st century Chad, and the itinerary of the protest leader Ruben Um Nyobe in Cameroon (6) around the time of independence. Radicalization seems to be a phenomenon of all times. And what these more historical chapters show is that it can indeed be a force for social change. The move into violence in these stories is not always present and seems to be an effect of the presence of violent reactions from outside first. These are all stories from history about the youth of those days. Already from these stories we see a number of themes that are also present in today's discussions of radicalization and that feature in this introduction: the importance of the context in which the ideas are formed—from an Islamizing society (4), to a striving for independence (6), and a protest against the experience of difficult and marginal living conditions (5). It is also clear that all three of these cases are in fact hidden messages of social change.

The second part of the book, 'Present-day processes of radicalization', unites chapters that relate to more current and often mediatized moments/processes of radicalization. This part contains two chapters on the situation in Chad, two on Nigeria, two on Mali, and one on Cameroon. These are on-going cases that we are

living with—for those who follow the news—and they are examples for discussions about the Sahelian 'arc of insecurity' in policy circles. The chapters here search for itineraries of radicalization, references to historical moments, and individual decisions in context. How are these itineraries related to specific contexts of mobility and communication? And how are they related to the specific socio-political and economic circumstances in which the radical itineraries develop? Factors that guide these itineraries are related to the experience and reliving of historical periods. Souleymane's reflections (7) highlight that memories of past periods of conflict and violence inform such itineraries of radicalization. This dynamic can be recognized in almost all subsequent chapters: in the case of the Biafra war in the late 1960s that still echoes in today's protests in Nigeria (10); in the case of Mali, where the Muslim preachers relate to the 19th century past in their discourse (11); and in the case of the refugees from CAR in Cameroon who refer to the history of violence in CAR (13). In all these cases, oppositions and assumed differences feed into the sentiment to take a radical view on society and to take decisions toward joining radical ideas and groups. These oppositions are based on new conditions in which people find themselves, as is very clear in the case of refugees in Cameroon (13) and the people who join Boko Haram (9); but they are also based on the refusal to accept or continue to accept economic and political differences, as is the case of youth in Chad (8), nomads in Mali (11 and 12), and youth in northern Nigeria (9).

The role of leading figures, be they real or in the imagination of people, is also an important factor. They have the ability to unite and galvanize people under a specific discourse. The role of social media and mediating through, for instance, recorded sermons and YouTube films are important weapons in the recruitment of youth. In the end, after all, we are facing many groups in the Sahel who are in fact commenting on the state, on a situation they experience as difficult and unjust; hence, theirs is a demand for a better life and for justice. The new connectivity is also a tool for the population to be better informed, to organize, and to link to others with similar ideas. Let us not forget that in past cases, communication played a crucial role, as is certainly illustrated by the writing of the scholar in 17th century Central Africa, Muhammad al-Wali (4), and of Um Nyobe in French Cameroun (6).

The biographies presented in parts one and two show different forms of radicalization, different ways of violence, and how they developed in different contexts. The common denominator is the search for social change and the problems that most young people, both in the past and in the present, have in finding responses from those who govern them. In some cases, they feel that violent acts are inevitable. All these stories read as stories about intelligent people who reach out for change. And in the song text there is an understanding about their

choice. Perhaps the slam artist himself would not be surprised if he takes a similar turn in his life.

In the general public and media discourse, a link is made between radicalization and violence, and religion. In the chapters in this book, also, we can read about the role of religion in the choices of these youth. However, the itineraries and stories show that there are many layers to their biographies. It is these layers that consist in feelings of neglect by governing bodies, absence of a clear future, and crushing poverty, contrasted with the presence of these religious groups offering money, respect, a feeling of shared purpose, and a certain future—or offering an ideology of nationalism and resistance against the state, as in the case of Biafra in Nigeria. How the link between violence and radicalization turns out certainly has much to do with the context in which it develops.

The book ends with part three, 'Pathways out of radicalization', which consists of three chapters in which there is a search for ways to come to a different interpretation of radical discourse and its effects. The chapter of Meike de Goede (15) on the Matsouaniste movement and its aftermath in Congo-Brazzaville helps us to think through radical histories in a positive way, aiming at a discourse of social change but without violence. In fact, a re-interpretation of a radical movement becomes a positive message. Here again memory is important—but it is memory re-worked, a subjective interpretation of the past in the present. In the chapter of Selly Ba (14) the role of female preachers is central, as possible negotiators and reconcilers. This is one of the core debates around the return of radicalized youth: how can we reconcile them, and how can they be reintegrated into society? Finally, the book ends with a reflection on the 'Rencontres V4T@Dakar', a series of events that Voice4Thought organized on 15 – 18 November 2017 around the theme of society's responsibility for (de)radicalization. The *rencontres* were an attempt to *listen* to potentially radicalizing youth, instead of talking about them in conference rooms, academic fora, etc. This closing chapter can be seen as a plea for a different approach, one that counters the military approach. The latter approach is thought by some to be inevitable, but it really will not lead to a solution—as so many commentators have noted.

A logical consequence of this book and the Rencontres V4T@Dakar is a plea for more *rencontres* across the Sahel region. If we are to take seriously the sometimes hidden messages of radicals about social and political change, we need first of all to listen to what these ideas are, to reflect on and respond to them, and to develop policies together with input from the youth. The chapters of this book and the outcome of the V4T@Dakar festival lead us to conclude that the agency of youth, constrained or free, does indeed matter. It is to our own benefit as much as to theirs to understand their reasoning and their search for a future, to assist them to be able to find alternatives to radical and violent acts, and to assist our-

selves to move beyond neglect or repression of these 'voices from below'. Young people need support from those of us in power and with decision-making capability. They need, like the young woman in the opening quotation, to feel useful and to find meaning in their lives—not by feeling driven to violent alternatives, but by being given space to contribute to and change society from within.

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