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# Using Margaret Archer's Realist Ontology to Analyse the Causal Role of Ideology and Cultural Systems in Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation

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## Abstract

*The concepts of radicalisation and de-radicalisation are primarily defined by the assumption they make that there is a causal relationship between ideas and action. However, the causal role of ideas in informing behaviour has been strongly contested and has thus far eluded and undermined radicalisation and de-radicalisation conceptually and practically. The following article provides a theoretical basis for identifying the causal relationship between ideas and action through Margaret Archer's critical realist ontology. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Northern Ireland, the article identifies processes of ideational causal reproduction and morphogenesis in the Provisional Irish Republican Army's thinking on armed struggle during its transition away from armed violence. It argues that the adoption of the Armalite and Ballot Box strategy in the 1980s introduced a contradiction into the movement's ideology; and that the movement was pressured to address this contradiction through three corrective cycles throughout the peace-process, subsequently softening its position on armed struggle.*

## Introduction

The concepts of radicalisation and de-radicalisation have continued to attract debate on their fundamental assumption of a causal relationship between radical ideology and terrorism (Coolsaet 2016). The debate centres around the assumed causal relationship between the cognitive dimensions of ideology (i.e. holding a radical ideology) and behavioural radicalisation (i.e. engaging in terrorism). Curiously – despite the emphasis on ideology and belief systems in government policies (the United Kingdom's counter-radicalisation strategy, Prevent, is an exemplar in this regard) and despite the way that the term 'radical' implies behaviour informed by ideological views – a significant number of

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studies emphasise that cognitive radicalisation is not a main driver of terrorism (Moskalenko, McCauley 2009). However, understanding the causal relationship between cognitive radicalisation and behavioural radicalisation is important because it distinguishes the concept of radicalisation from the other processes of mobilisation, namely those that are psychological or behavioural. Maintaining the concept of radicalisation without sufficiently identifying a distinct causal process between ideology and behaviour is untenable given the problematic use of the term insofar as associated policies are accused of creating ‘suspect communities’ (Heath-Kelly 2013). The concept of radicalisation and related policies such as de-radicalisation interventions are entirely dependent on a case being made for the causal role of ideology; a case which has failed to be sufficiently made in academia or policy (Kundnani 2012).

The radicalisation causal debate, both for and against, is premised on the distinction and relationship between cognitive and behavioural dimensions of radicalisation. The article follows others who have identified the cognitive-behavioural framework as problematic in understanding the role of ideology in radicalisation and in engagement in terrorism (Neumann 2015). Yet while others criticise the dualistic nature of the framework (Neumann 2015), the problem derives from the conflation of ideas and agency *through* the separation between cognition and behaviour. The article outlines Margaret Archer’s critical realist approach to Cultural Systems to provide ontological space for identifying the causal powers of radical ideology and belief systems in facilitating terrorism and political violence – causal powers that need to be identified for radicalisation and de-radicalisation to make sense conceptually. The purpose is to contribute to the theoretical debate by firstly outlining how the world of ideas has independent causal power over behaviour. In the article, behaviour is understood to also encompass ‘ideational behaviour’, in other words dialogue between and communication of ideas by agency, which the concept of radicalisation tends to miss through its characterisation of behaviour predominantly in its physical aspects. Archer’s approach focuses on the causal relationship between ideas and how agents use, reproduce or conceal ideas, and while it is out of the scope of the paper to directly link this causal role to engagement in terrorism, the article provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the importance of ideas by exploring how ideational change relates to and facilitates disengagement from terrorism and political violence.

Radicalisation and Problems of Conflationary Theorising

The main premise of the article is that existing studies on radicalisation and de-radicalisation are primarily based on ontologies which limit causal exposition of the ideational world by conflating structure/culture (the world of ideas) with agency. If radicalisation and by extension de-radicalisation is to have any conceptual and practical usefulness, it must account for the causal role of ideas on agency. Most studies on radicalisation – while embracing causal complexity – are influenced by a positivist understanding of causality as something identified through the study of patterns of observed events and therefore the absence of observable mechanisms means the causal role of ideology is dismissed or diminished. To defend against this criticism, studies invoke identity markers, cultures, religious systems of belief, sects or ideologies. However, positivist frameworks are limited in identifying their causal mechanisms and therefore lead to essentialising of the ideational space. As a result, studies have problematised the over-emphasis on ideology and Islam in particular (Kundnani 2012), highlighting the wider political dimensions of the process and that behavioural radicalisation can cause cognitive radicalisation instead of the other way around (Crone 2016). However this leaves the ideological dimension still problematically conceptualised and in need of being addressed. Thus the discussion on causality within the context of radicalisation is trapped between a positivist ontology that accepts that ideas inform action in a causal (but unobservable) way, and a post-positivist rejection of this assumption. As a result, the article proposes an alternative approach which can identify the causal power of the ideational space with regard to radicalisation and de-radicalisation. The contribution of a critical realist approach to conceptualising radicalisation is its ontology allows causal explanations of unobservable phenomenon which positivist, constructivist and post-structuralist approaches do not (Patomäki and Wight 2000). Critical realist analytical dualism emphasises a separation of the two over time to analyse the interaction and identify the real causal mechanisms of structure/culture and agency (Archer 1995). A later section will discuss culture and agency specifically, as it is argued this constitutes the domain where radicalisation and de-radicalisation is partly relevant (Archer 1996). However, the first objective is to outline how conflationary theorising within radicalisation is problematic and to make the case for analytical dualism which involves distinguishing between culture – or the world of ideas – and agency to identify causal powers of the two (Archer 1996).

For Archer, conflation is problematic because it challenges attempts to explain the causal powers of structure and agency (Archer 1995, 1996, 2013). Of course, she recognises that the tendency toward conflation is precisely because they are essentially one and the same

– people make structures. However, the conflation of structure and agency precludes an adequate account of social stability and change because it fails to incorporate temporality (Archer 1995, 79). By making agency dependent upon structure, or vice versa, these approaches automatically preclude any two-way interplay between the two levels by removing autonomy from either structure or agency (Archer 1995, 79). Debates on radicalisation and causality are informed by conflationary theorising and the article contends that the lack of progress within the debate is due to this ontological impasse (Kurki 2006, 2007). Studies on radicalisation and the interplay between ideology and behaviour have been limited because, in various ways, they have conflated ideologies, religions and systems of beliefs ('the parts') with the interests, norms, discourses and attitudes of agency ('the people'). The process of identity-seeking, cognitive-openings, in-group bonding, othering and dehumanisation are shown to facilitate individual engagement in violence (Sageman 2011; Kruglanski et al 2014; Hafez and Mullins 2015); however these are properties of agency and socio-cultural interaction and are irreducible to identities and ideas which they draw upon. Radical ideas are the products of agential reproduction and innovation with the intent to serve agential personal and political interests (see Hegghammer 2010) however their analysis together means causal statements on radical ideas are presented as the progenitors of action or vice versa without clear exposition of the relationship between the two. Thus, the causal properties of each is conflated into essentialist notions of Islam<sup>2</sup> or into 'rationalist man' (Archer 1995). Most conflationary perspectives make the distinction between cognitive and behavioural radicalisation to underline there is no empirical conveyor-belt between the two and therefore that radical ideology has no significant causal power. In their comprehensive study of radicalisation, McCauley and Moskaleiko (2011) argue there is no conveyor-belt from legal activism or radical ideology toward engaging in radical activism, arguing that ideology is not the 'center of gravity' of those engaged in terrorism but is more important as a rationalisation rather than a prime mover. Thus, the inherent causal assumptions within the concept of radicalisation are in tension with how it has been approached ontologically; conflationary theorising has limited causality to the observable, making radicalisation seem both insignificant and discursively harmful, producing little to no empirical evidence of a relationship but being sustained in part by political interest. However, the lack of an observable causal relationship does not mean one does not exist. The central conceptual problem is in fact due to the distinction made between cognitive and behavioural

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<sup>2</sup> As effectively critiqued by Kundnani (2012).

radicalisation, however the problem with this dualism is that it is not actually a dualism in terms of structure and agency which would facilitate causal analysis. The distinction between cognitive and behavioural radicalisation captures agency atemporally which from Archer's perspective would still constitute conflation, thereby obfuscating the *independent* causal properties emergent from structural and cultural systems.

In summary, the cognitive-behavioural radicalisation framework has been limited in understanding the ideational dimensions of radicalisation and existing critical responses to this have been based on conflationary theorising too which also challenge causal exposition (Neumann 2013). It is argued here that analytical dualism can provide causal explanations of the relationship between radical ideology and behaviour. Analytical dualism has been extensively utilised to distinguish how structural causal mechanisms shape policy-making, business organisation and the evolution of terrorism (Lyon and Parkins 2013; Knio 2013; Willmott 2000). Archer's work on the Cultural System can contribute to debates on radicalisation by analytically separating culture and behaviour to understand the ideational causal mechanisms underlying radicalisation and de-radicalisation (Archer 1996). The article separates the 'structural' parts of ideas – the Cultural System – from the 'agential' parts of ideas in order to better analyse the causal relationship between it and agency. Thus rather than merge cognitive and behavioural radicalisation together to better explain the interplay between the two as Neumann (2013, 881) suggests, the way to explain the relationship is to analytically identify and separate the systemic and agential components of ideology which the cognitive-behavioural framework conflates together.

### Cultural Systems and Radicalisation

Analytical dualism is applied by Archer to the world of ideas by distinguishing between the Cultural System and Socio-Cultural Interaction. The former refers to the relations between the components of culture – such as bodies of ideas, theories, ideologies – and the latter to the relationships between cultural agents – such as teacher to student (Archer, 1996, xviii). These are separated to avoid conflation and better understand the causal relationship of one over the other and how the 'people and the parts' transforms over time. Temporality is fundamental to the approach: agents are born into a world that is not of their making. In other words, they are born into a stratified world which constrains and enables their behaviour by providing costs/benefits, but it does not determine it. Due to where agents are placed upon birth, they have vested interests in either maintaining or changing

structures/culture. To understand social change Archer analyses the interaction between structure/culture and agency over time in three stages in the morphogenetic cycle. In each of these stages, she studies the relationship between structure and agency, culture and agency, and intersection points between these two analytically separated worlds. The morphogenesis of culture is explored in four propositions made by Archer: 1) there are logical relationships between components of the Cultural System; 2) there are causal influences exerted by the Cultural System on the Socio-Cultural level; 3) there are causal relationships between groups and individuals at the Socio-Cultural level; and 4) there is elaboration of the Cultural System due to the Socio-Cultural level modifying current logical relationships and introducing new ones (Archer 1996, 143). The separation of the two is premised on the notion that the Cultural System originates from Socio-Cultural interaction but that “over time a stream of intelligibilia escape their progenitors and acquire autonomy as denizens of World Three, after which time we can examine how they act back on subsequent generations of people” (Archer 1996, 144). The vast majority of studies on radicalisation have been conducted at the stage of Socio-Cultural interaction yet Archer’s theory would identify the causal properties of ideology emerging at the Cultural System stage.

Presenting an argument that ideas are ontologically real is obviously controversial. Yet causal exposition of ideology (for or against) is essential given the social impact of the radicalisation discourse. Even within critical realism the application of analytical dualism to the world of ideas has been critiqued with alternative conceptions emphasising the salience of norm-circles for example (Elder-Vass 2010). Nevertheless, this distinction is made to understand the causal properties of holding ideas in and of themselves as much as possible (as this is the core claim of radicalisation). This distinction is not to claim it is more causally important than or even equal to the influence of holding norms and interests in shaping behaviour: indeed, the more appropriate explanations of why agents engage in terrorism and political violence can be accounted for in socio-cultural interaction, yet as mentioned, it is difficult to identify the role of ideas causally in this interaction. Given the potentially controversial nature of claiming that ideas have independent causal powers, the article focuses on making the case that the cultural system shapes ideational reproduction and morphogenesis but this is not intended to diminish the salience of radicalisation research at the socio-cultural level.

The article argues that the logical relations between components of the cultural system exercise causal influence over people. The causal influence of the Cultural System is through

agents holding theories or beliefs *which stand in particular logical relationships* to other theories or beliefs (Archer 1996, 144). Archer argues:

‘[T]he maintenance of ideas which stand in manifest logical *contradiction or complementarity* to others, places their holders in different ideational positions. The logical properties of their theories or beliefs create entirely different situational logics for them. These effects mould the context of cultural action and in turn condition *different* [emphasis added] patterns of ideational development’.

Archer (1996, 145)

Constraining contradictions are a property of the Cultural System and if two ideas (A and B) are logically inconsistent it exerts a constraint upon actors who wish to maintain one of these ideas. By invoking idea A they also evoke idea B and with it the logical contradiction between them because idea A cannot stand alone without idea B (Archer 1996, 148). Idea B cannot be simply repudiated by those who hold idea A due to their intertwined nature. Therefore ‘those adhering to A are in a situation where the survival of A depends upon their repairing the inconsistency with B. Since the relationship between A and B is a genuine logical contradiction then its direct resolution is logically impossible. Corrective manoeuvres are mandatory, but they require substantial theoretical work’ (Archer 1996, 149). However it is important to emphasise that the causal influence of the cultural system is not deterministic. The second type of systemic relations is defined by ‘concomitant compatibility’, which refers to cultural systems where invoking idea A ineluctably invokes idea B, ‘but since the B upon which this A depends is consistent with it, then B buttresses adherence to A. Consequently A occupies a congenial environment of ideas, the exploration of which...yields a treasure trove of reinforcement, clarification, confirmation and vindication – because of the logical consistency of the items involved’ (Archer 1996). The compatibility between ideas also acts as a constraint upon agency because it ‘guides thought and action along a smooth path, but over time this wears a deeper and deeper groove in which thoughts and deeds become enrutted’ (Archer 1996, 154).

Archer’s work on Cultural Systems, therefore, can contribute to our understanding the causal role of ideology which underpins radicalisation by separating the world of ideas from socio-cultural interaction, with the world of ideas consisting of logically related ideas which stand in contradiction or complementarity to one another. Thus, the independent causal power of ideology does not emerge from the type of ideology but the relationship between ideas



which agency draws upon. Ideology exerts causal power over agency by providing situational guidance to either seek to modify contradictions within a system of thought or to explore similar ideas. Most notably, the outcome of these causal mechanisms is also ideational: holding an ideology does not directly cause agents to engage in terrorism, however it provides incentives to explore ideas which may support violence when these are complementary or they may encourage innovation of ideology toward a more *or* less violent trajectory in response to a contradiction within the cultural system.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Archer's approach provides a more complex understanding of the causal role of ideology, whereby the adoption of radical ideology can also facilitate a move *away* from violence. Thus ideology has causal influence over agency but it emerges from the relationship between ideas (therefore it is *not* attributable to ideological markers such as Salafism, Islam etc), it is limited to ideational reproduction or innovation (it merely informs how agency engages with ideas related to violence), and is non-deterministic and complex (agency does not 'have to' respond to tensions in the system and the exact same cultural system can equally work to oppose violence). The next section illustrates how contradictions within the Cultural System can pressure agency to engage in corrective (ideational) behaviour, in this case, a move away from the use of violence, using the Provisional Irish Republican Army's (IRA) transition from armed struggle to peaceful methods between the 1980s and 2010s to illustrate the independent causal role that ideology exerted on the movement.

### Ideology and the (Lack of) De-Radicalisation in the Provisional IRA's Transition from Armed Violence

The causal role of radical ideology has been most contested regarding the process of de-radicalisation and how this relates to shifts away from engaging in violent action. De-radicalisation refers to an abandonment or softening of ideology which theoretically should also lead to a change in behaviour, specifically a better quality of behavioural change whereby the risk of recidivism is presumably reduced (Altier et al 2014; Rabasa 2010). Such underpinning assumptions can be critiqued as ahistorical, since they do not appear to account for the fact that many non-violent actions can be underpinned by ideologies classed as radical either at the time they were carried out or subsequently. In this, those proponents of radicalisation as a precursor to violence, whether in academic or policy circles, see the role of

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<sup>3</sup> Hegghammer (2010) is illustrative of how contradictions within Islam on 'just war' and state legitimacy have been exploited by agency to re-frame the legitimacy of violence..

ideas as unidirectional, with the propensity towards violent action an almost inevitable risk (or vulnerability) flowing from radical ideology. While governments across the world have embraced de-radicalisation programmes, de-radicalisation conceptually and practically has been heavily critiqued, specifically on the causal assumption it holds on the relationship between (abandoning) radical ideology and (abandoning) violent action (Reinares 2011; Horgan et al 2017; Koehler 2016). In this criticism, scholars often make reference to the Provisional IRA's transition from armed violence from 1998 to illustrate that transitions from violence can be successful without abandoning or changing an ideology (Silke 2011). In the literature, the Provisional IRA serves a case exemplar in discrediting the concepts of radicalisation and de-radicalisation yet (Ferguson 2016; Ferguson et al 2018), rather than deriving from ideology possessing no significant causal influence, this criticism reflects the aforementioned conflationary approach of separating cognitive and behavioural radicalisation which limits causal exposition. Subsequently, the Provisional IRA's transition from armed violence represents a suitable case to illustrate how Archer's framework can identify the causal role of ideology in facilitating a shift away from armed violence. The application to the Provisional IRA draws upon fieldwork conducted in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 2013. Fifteen interviews were conducted by the lead author with Unionist and Republican community workers and former prisoners, including five former members of the Provisional IRA working in conflict transformation, which provided crucial insight into the main contours of debate within this network at the time research was conducted (as confirmed by findings in studies with a larger n) (Carmel and Lynch 2017). The interview data was transcribed and a thematic analysis conducted.<sup>4</sup> Interview data was triangulated, where necessary, with data in the public domain such as newspaper reports, republican political ephemera, and extant secondary literature. The analysis identified three distinct temporal cycles of cultural morphogenesis concerning the Provisional IRA's approach to the use of violence: 1994-1998; 1998-2005; and 2006-2013.

The Provisional IRA's objective since its emergence in 1969 has been to end the partition of Ireland through armed struggle (Bosi 2012). Crucially, the movement recognised an inevitable political dimension within this strategy yet traditionally this referred to inter-party negotiations working to a British withdrawal by building pressure through the use of violence.<sup>5</sup> In one of the Provisional IRA's first, and rather unsophisticated, attempts at such a

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Braun and Clarke (2006) and Cooper (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Interview, Former Provisional IRA Member 4, Belfast, 3rd September 2013.

strategy, key activists from the movement met representatives of the British government in 1972, but merely presented a summary of its demands, chief among which was a declaration of a British intent to withdraw from Northern Ireland within three years. Its wider policy on political participation, prior to the 1980s, was based on abstention from all parliamentary systems in Ireland and the UK. The policy of abstentionism was fundamental to the Provisional IRA's use of violence by locating its legitimate use in the political institutions and 1918 election which preceded the partition of Ireland (Smith 2002). The ideological roots underpinning the legitimacy of the republican movement to the use of force went back much further (depending on who one asked), but the rebellion of 1916 and the Irish "war of independence" between 1919 and 1921 were both crucial in this respect.<sup>6</sup>

The advancement of the Armalite and Ballot Box strategy in 1986 removed the policy of abstention from political institutions in the Republic of Ireland, and scholars view this change in ideology as disrupting the basis for the Provisional IRA's justification of violence (Hannigan 1985). For some, the removal of abstentionism was a deliberate strategy by the elite within the Provisional IRA to push the movement away from armed struggle towards a political route (Moloney 2003). This process had begun earlier with the increasing politicisation within the republican movement attributable to the convulsive 1980/81 hunger strikes (Frampton 2008). Indeed, such a process was also in evidence during the 1975 "truce" which saw a dialogue between Provisional IRA leaders and representatives of the British government, and the establishment of Sinn Féin "incident centres" in the heart of their communities. These centres became a nexus for political activity at local level (McDaid 2013). While the shift away from armed struggle was certainly a project pursued by actors within the movement, the application of Archer's approach emphasises how the adoption of the Armalite and Ballot Box in response to factors such as security force attrition<sup>7</sup> had introduced independent causal forces which shaped how the Provisional IRA engaged ideationally, especially with regard to the ideological position of the armed struggle.

The position of the armed struggle within its wider corpus of thought gradually saw changes in the 1980s that sought to reframe it as a means to an end as opposed to a principle. This shift is more clearly reflected in the adoption of the Armalite and Ballot Box strategy which introduced a contradiction within the movement, whereby the initial equal positioning

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<sup>6</sup> For discussion see English (2013).

<sup>7</sup> See for instance Alonso (2007). Such external factors have already been shown to be overestimated in explaining the IRA's transition to peaceful methods. See Tonge et al (2011).

of the strategies not only brought tensions between which approach to prioritise, specifically where they were not compatible, but it also later introduced the idea of the armed struggle as something to be traded and ceased to achieve other intermediary goals (Hannigan 1985; Benedetta and Knobel 2015).<sup>8</sup> This contradiction was all the more stark, given the supremacy of the Provisional IRA army council over the political wing in the republican hierarchy (O'Brien 1995, 11). Subsequently, strategies of concealing contradictions were less likely to be effective in the long-term and therefore there was a push toward synthesis (and morphogenesis), yet due to the interests of the leadership this synthesis was toward changing armed violence to be more compatible with the political dimension rather than the other way around. Three cycles of cultural morphogenesis can be identified that were instigated through the internalisation of the Armalite and Ballot Box strategy. Several scholars have noted the contradictory nature of the Armalite and the Ballot Box strategy, specifically how it placed constraints on the Provisional IRA's use of violence as the movement sought to implement the strategy (Hannigan 1985; Shirlow and McGovern 1998; Tonge 2006). The contradictory elements within this ideological innovation which were introduced and mostly accepted by the Provisional IRA forced members to confront it, specifically where the tensions become more apparent when violence affected electoral success and electoral participation diverted and limited military operations (Neumann 2005). Over the course of the Provisional IRA's disengagement until today, attempts to reconcile this contradiction through synthesise has prompted ideational change, specifically on how the movement constructs the armed struggle.

### The Morphogenesis of Violence in the Provisional IRA

In the first cycle, armed struggle was reframed from the primary means of achieving the movement's objectives to placing it on equal footing with a political approach, and then as something to trade to achieve intermediary goals (i.e. the 1994 ceasefire which was announced to facilitate negotiations). Internal dialogue within the Provisional IRA prior to its disengagement emerged which sought to emphasise the re-framing of armed struggle – thus it was not the sole way to achieving the movement's objectives, however it could be used and ceased for tactical gain to facilitate achieving the objectives through other (political) means.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview, Former Provisional IRA Member 4, Belfast, 3rd September 2013.

*I was doing a lot of travelling...[and] he was very opposed to the cessation of the armed struggle. We'd be [in the car] from Cork to Belfast, and we would have talked about nothing else, and there would have been screaming matches. It was not always comradely and 'let me hear your opinion', it was screaming: 'are you stupid! Think it through, think it through, it's not about the armed struggle, it's about the objective and how best to get there.' And once you have that in your head, it opens the possibilities: this is the best way forward, and nobody is going to die.<sup>9</sup>*

In the second cycle (1998-2005), the success of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and the commitment to the Provisional IRA decommissioning its weaponry accentuated the tensions between a commitment to armed struggle and participation in political institutions. Firstly, the framing of armed struggle as a tactic to be traded for intermediary goals logically extended in its applicability to other areas of the armed struggle. Thus in the first cycle violence ceased to facilitate negotiations to pursue the political dimension of the strategy and this same logic is applied to justifying decommissioning the Provisional IRA's weaponry and fully embracing the political dimension.

*I suppose it was the same as with armed struggle. You would use your weapons in armed struggle for political gain, and I suppose the further you moved away from the ceasefire and that stuff, your engaged in negotiations and the institutions are up and down and stuff. But I think over time people began to internalise that argument. Armed struggle. It's a tactic. Weaponry, it's a part of the armed struggle, it's a tactic, and you make more advances using your weapons this way, and I think that's what it was about.<sup>10</sup>*

While the reframing of armed struggle as a means to achieving political ends was pursued to address the tensions between mutually pursuing armed struggle and the political approach, armed struggle throughout the second cycle still held an important role and therefore both were contingent on the other, especially insofar as the credibility of the movement largely derived from its prior adherence and application of the armed struggle

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<sup>9</sup> Interview, Former Provisional IRA Member 5, Belfast, 3rd September 2013

<sup>10</sup> Interview, Former Provisional IRA Member 3, Belfast, 3rd September 2013

(Ashe 2009). Consequently, conditionality was introduced into the Provisional IRA's legitimisation of armed struggle, which allowed the Provisional IRA to maintain support for its use of violence in the past while justifying (and opposing) violence in the present. Conditionality was introduced by amplifying the social conditions in Northern Ireland during the 1960s Civil Rights campaign as the main driver and legitimiser of violence. Although these social conditions were broadly addressed two decades prior to the Provisional IRA's disengagement and were not the sole driver of Provisional IRA violence,<sup>11</sup> the use of violence was in part retrospectively linked to addressing these conditions of inequality and discrimination between Nationalist and Unionist communities in Northern Ireland, and also to what was regarded as the oppressive actions of the security forces during the periods of most intense violence, in order to address ideological tensions.

*The thing young people throw back at you is 'you done it, you fought the Brits and you did this and you did that'. And I say, 'yep, in them circumstances, where I was growing up, the influences, the politics of the day and all of that stuff, that all influenced me to respond in a certain way'. The next big question is, 'would you go back to it?' 'If I lived in the circumstances then, I would go back to it because it is justified, because nobody has the right to treat me or my family like a second-class citizen'..[p] nobody has right to deny me a job or treat me like dirt like the Orange Order or the Unionists did, and nobody again will, because what we've done is stop that, we have cut that off. Didn't achieve a united Ireland. Still not going to stop trying to achieve that, but it stopped that happening again....we have created a level playing field to talk.<sup>12</sup>*

The use of temporal conditionality to address the tensions emanating from the Armalite and Ballot Box strategy (and its consequences) also encouraged further synthesis in the third cycle (2006-2013). In this period the Provisional IRA were officially disbanded however many of its (former) members were engaged in conflict transformation activities with young people. Differences in generational experience,

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<sup>11</sup> This argument can be seen in, for example, Lee (1989, 431) and McCleery (2015, 71). That is not to say, however, that there were no residual human rights issues over-and above the original civil rights demands, particularly concerning security legislation. See for example O'Leary (2019, 100).

<sup>12</sup> Interview, Former Provisional IRA Member 4, Belfast, 3rd September 2013

where young people are attracted to armed Republicanism but have no experience of the Troubles, especially the social conditions that sparked the Troubles, accentuates remaining ideological contradictions. Specifically, the conditionality of violence inadvertently presented past violence as glamorous due in part to its necessity for former Provisional IRA members to maintain credibility. While not a member of the Provisional IRA, one Republican former combatant involved in conflict transformation and working with youth highlighted the tension between how Republicans discussed violence in the present and violence in the past:

*Some young people do believe they've missed out on the conflict, for whatever reason. Part of that is we have recognised that the way we talk about the past in some social setting, you are talking about things and you make it sound adventurous, you make it sound fun and stuff like that. So young people are getting this image in their head that it is some sort of adventure. ... I don't think [former combatants] realise, and we didn't realise it when you were talking about the past that you were talking about it in a way that made it sound adventurous, which especially to young men would have been attractive.<sup>13</sup>*

Former combatant engagement with youth through conflict transformation initiatives highlighted continuing tensions between an armed approach and political approach despite corrective attempts in the second cycle. Corrective measures introduced a temporal dimension to violence which was reproduced by a number of Provisional IRA members, as illustrated by the following quote on the use of violence today: “We are not saying we feel all sorry and guilty...I'm quite proud of the role I played in the conflict, but what I am saying is, armed conflict has to be, it *has* to be a last resort”.<sup>14</sup> In response to the ideational tensions re-asserting themselves, a third cycle of synthesis can be identified which builds upon the temporal conditional dimension introduced in the second cycle, but which attempts to de-glamourise past violence without apologising or de-legitimising past violence. As one republican put it:

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<sup>13</sup> Interview, former INLA member, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Interview, Former Provisional IRA Member 4, Belfast, 3rd September 2013.

*When we recognised that that was part of the images that we were putting in people's heads, along with the Ulster Defence Association over in the west Shankill area, in Highfield, we got involved in a project that brought young people from their community and our community. And we brought them into the prison...and stuff like that, and we sat with them beforehand. We had meetings, workshops, and all we would have talked about was the impact that prison had on you, the bad times in prison, the impact it had on your family - what it did to your family, and stuff like that. Try to counterbalance the narrative that we had been giving.<sup>15</sup>*

One former Provisional IRA member provided in detail the ways in which they seek to de-glamourise violence and time in prison.<sup>16</sup> The de-glamourisation of past violence and prison features extensively in a programme targeted at school children which features former combatants highlighting life in prisons, and while these interventions involve former combatants from a range of organisations, this re-framing of violence features particularly within the Provisional IRA narrative (Emerson 2012). The shift in narrative is broadly accepted as having occurred however the significant point for the article is these changes were causally shaped in response to tensions between the temporal conditional framing, which emerged as a corrective measure to contradictions between the Armalite and Ballot Box strategy.

The Provisional IRA's transition from armed violence was discussed to illustrate Archer's theory on the causal role of ideas in relation to radicalisation and de-radicalisation. The morphogenesis of the Provisional IRA's ideology (specifically, its ideas related to armed struggle) surrounding its transition from armed violence was shaped by contradictions and tensions within the Cultural System, resulting in at least three notable attempts at synthesis. The formulation and acceptance of the Armalite and Ballot Box strategy into the Provisional IRA's ideological corpus introduced a contradiction which prompted several notable attempts to address it over three decades. Crucially, the manner in which it is addressed – through repositioning armed struggle

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<sup>15</sup> Interview, Former Irish National Liberation Army member, Belfast, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2013.

<sup>16</sup> See Clubb (2016).



as a tactic to trade off for intermediary goals and reframing its legitimacy in terms of temporal conditionality – had a knock-on effect which incentivised further synthesis towards de-glamourising violence (at least for former combatants engaging youth in conflict transformation).

The Provisional IRA's disengagement is often shown to reflect the weaknesses with concepts of radicalisation and de-radicalisation however the paper would contend this is because these concepts have tended to conflate the adoption and abandonment of ideology (thus conflating the process with identity, for one). Instead, the application of Archer to the Provisional IRA highlights how the causal role of ideology relates to the (contradictory) relationship between ideas which may encourage ideational change, gradually diminishing the salience of armed struggle within the movement. While the paper is not claiming these ideational changes are the main reasons why the Provisional IRA successfully disengaged, the case does indicate a causal role for ideas within the process of disengagement which existing uses of concepts of radicalisation and de-radicalisation do not capture.

## Conclusion

Academic and policymakers speak past one another on radicalisation and the relationship between radical ideology and terrorism. The lack of a consistent empirical causal relationship between the two has led to much scepticism on focusing on radical ideology and attempts to give ideology greater attention have had limited success in identifying its independent causal role without conflating this with agency. The main objective of this article has been to argue that critical realist ontology and analytical dualism enables the identification of the causal mechanisms which give radicalisation meaning insofar as the holding of radical ideas can shape (ideas associated with) behaviour but in a limited and non-deterministic manner. The approach advocated here moves away from the cognitive-behavioural radicalisation framework as both of these dimensions are properties of agency which obfuscates the independent causal properties of structure and culture on these processes. Instead, the article distinguishes between the cultural system (the relationship between ideas) and agency (cognitive and behavioural radicalisation) and argues that the causal powers of radical ideology emerge from how the cultural system exerts an influence upon agency. To that end the approach developed here is complementary to existing approaches, given how cognitive

and behavioural elements are situated within socio-cultural interaction and are shaped by the Cultural System.

The concepts of radicalisation and de-radicalisation are fundamentally based on the assumption of a causal relationship between ideas and behaviour; yet it is precisely on these grounds that it has been most strongly critiqued. The application of Archer provides a theoretical basis for the existence of a relationship yet how this causal role manifests is starkly different from how it has been understood regarding radicalisation and de-radicalisation. Specifically, the article has contended that radical ideology – where there are contradictions and complementarities within the system adhered to – may exercise causal influence over how agency reproduce or transform ideas over time. Whether this translates into engagement in terrorism or disengagement from terrorism is a matter of socio-cultural interaction. However, ideational behavioural change is likely to affect the type of behaviour typically understood in relation to radicalisation and de-radicalisation. Nevertheless, the consequence of the article’s argument for interventions which seek to challenge radicalisation is to highlight that efforts at challenging ideology to facilitate behavioural change are likely to be frustrated, unpredictable and only observable over longer periods of time.

Archer’s approach was applied to the Provisional IRA’s transition away from armed violence to demonstrate that, even in the case used to illustrate the conceptual problems with radicalisation and de-radicalisation, ideology exerted an independent causal role on the movement’s behaviour. Of course, the article does not claim that this accounts solely or predominantly for the Provisional IRA’s transition – arguably it is a manifestation of the move towards a political direction the leadership were pushing the movement. There was also a wider reframing of what Republicanism meant which also justified the move away from violence. A good example of this was Martin McGuinness’s 2010 speech commemorating the hunger strikers who “set the moral compass” for Republicans to aspire to. The objectives of the republican movement were repackaged as “being about a better Ireland, a reunited Ireland, a new inclusive society - and a new national Republic based on equality, freedom and justice” which required the use of strategy and tactics “suitable and workable to the 21st century” to achieve “the Irish Republic that our comrades sacrificed their liberty and lives for in the H-Blocks 29 years ago” (McGuinness 2010). However naïve or historically accurate this was, there is no doubt this reframing played a prominent part in providing a rationale

for the transition from violence to politics.<sup>17</sup> However it was the introduction of a contradiction through the Armalite and Ballot Box strategy which facilitated this wider shift ideologically by challenging the movement to address the position of armed struggle through ideational innovation. While these ideational changes cannot be characterised as de-radicalisation in the conventional sense, they challenge the assumption that ideological abandonment is always the preference for a reduced risk of recidivism insofar as the systemic pressures gradually facilitated Provisional IRA members to adopt a softer position on armed struggle while still maintaining a degree of consistency. Although the empirical points presented in this article are not necessarily new, the article's original contribution is to emphasise how the Provisional IRA's ideology, however ill-defined or superficially engaged with, exerted a causal influence over the movement's treatment of armed struggle over the course of its transition.

The aim of the article has been to provide a theoretical basis for the concepts of radicalisation and de-radicalisation insofar as their utility is dependent upon an existence of a causal relationship between ideas and behaviour. While the critical realist approach illustrated in the article differs significantly from how this causal relationship is traditionally understood within these concepts, it provides the basis for identifying the causal role of ideology which is more consistent with their acceptance of causal complexity. For example, studies have highlighted how ideology may or may not have a causal role in causing terrorism alongside a multitude of factors yet this form of descriptive causality does not sufficiently account for the causal mechanisms that could justify ascribing such a significant role to ideology, particularly given its problematic baggage. While a critical realist approach is much clearer in identifying the causal mechanisms of ideology independently from agency, it also sets out a limited role for ideology and a potentially limiting role for ideological intervention. From this perspective, the direct relationship between ideology and behaviour is called into question but rather than dismissing the causal role of ideology altogether as other critical studies do, the article locates causality in ideational reproduction and morphogenesis. Not only does this provide ontological space for radicalisation and de-radicalisation, it gives an account of what (limited) independent role ideology may have

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<sup>17</sup> The tactical nature of this positioning was highlighted, following the later publication of comments by former Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams about the use of the equality strategy to "break" unionism. See *Impartial Reporter*, 24 November 2014.

in relation to terrorism and political violence, which can in turn help to justify more limited and realistic counter-terrorism interventions in the ideational space.

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