

# Radicalized Loyalties

BECOMING  
MUSLIM  
IN THE  
WEST

FABIEN TRUONG





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Becoming Muslim in the West

Fabien Truong

Translated by Seth Ackerman and  
supervised by Fabien Truong

polity

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## NOTE TO THE READER

I hope you will make your way through this book comfortably. It is at once a tale, a study, and an essay. In it you will find life stories, known facts, theory. All invite you to move beyond your initial reactions, whether the experiences of the boys recounted here are familiar to you or foreign.

If you are keen on details, references, and sources, the notes will be useful to you. They are essential if you want to go further, and they acknowledge the texts to which I am indebted. If you don't like being interrupted, please ignore them. They will still be there for you at the end of the book.

The quotations are from transcripts of hundreds of hours of interviews and conversations. The words are those of the subjects of the study. To have dispensed with them would have been to pretend. Almost all of these conversations were recorded. As for the rest, it will be understood that in certain situations it would have been neither desirable nor respectful. This book, then, is also to some extent Adama's, Marley's, Tarik's, Radouane's, and Hassan's. Other than Amédy Coulibaly, all of the names have been changed to protect their anonymity. Certain identifying details have been altered. If you think you recognize someone you know, you are certainly mistaken. But it will not be by accident. All of these boys carry with them the weight of a social world that overshadows them. They represent.

Expressions in italics denote concepts and ideas that will be built up as we go. These are the linchpins of my argument. I hope you will be able to make critical use of them.

Finally, forgive me for addressing you, the reader, so informally. Carrying out research, practicing social science, and writing all have certain common purposes: to move about, to keep a record, to seek

#### NOTE TO THE READER

understanding. I like to think that these help us articulate our differences and better see how we are ultimately so much alike. When it comes to such a task, I am more comfortable in the mode of “you” and “I.” Especially in an era afflicted with so much “them” and “us.”

Fabien Truong

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This book is dedicated to Tarik, Radouane, Adama, Marley, and Hassan, as well as all those who appear in cameos or who disappeared from the text in order to be present in the study. You know who you are, I know what I owe you. I hope I have been worthy of your trust and generosity.

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To Oscar and Félix for having been so curiously unperturbed. I hope someday you will better understand the meaning of those days and nights spent far from home.

To the memory of Pierre-Yves, and of Anne who is with him.

# INTRODUCTION: THE CALL OF THE GROUND

The only things that ever trickles down to poor people  
is rain, and that ain't much more than God's piss.

Percival Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*

## Friday the 13th

It was an overcast late afternoon on November 13, 2015, when I first visited Grigny, in the southern suburbs of Paris. Accompanied by my friend and colleague Gérôme, I met up with a neighborhood group that had formed the day after the January 2015 attacks targeting the staff of *Charlie Hebdo* and the Hyper Cacher supermarket near the Porte de Vincennes in Paris. Grigny, like many working-class towns in the Paris suburbs, has long held a sinister reputation among outsiders. But ever since “Charlie,” it has borne an extra weight: Amédée Coulibaly, the Hyper Cacher killer, was one of its children. Its tower blocks were swiftly branded as breeding grounds of hate. In reaction to what they experienced as yet another punishment, the locals collected hundreds of anonymous responses from residents through the streets of the town. Now, ten months after the attacks, an idea took shape: to display the messages in a ceremony of peace and commemoration. The group was overwhelmed by the outpouring of words they’d gathered, and they put out a call for help. Gérôme and I responded, as sociologists. It was a chance to work together and contribute to what we saw as a thoughtful initiative. Our first meeting, on November 13, stretched on into the evening. The encounter was full of promise. For several hours we spoke about the January attacks and daily life in the neighborhood. As night began to fall, we

made plans for next steps. Gérôme went back to Paris. I stayed in the southern suburbs to meet up with two childhood friends, musicians in Alfortville: for nearly 10 years we had made the rounds of all the concert halls with our punk-metal band – a time that now seemed as if from another life. Gradually I shed my sociologist’s skin and prepared to spend a relaxed evening with old companions. As I arrived at my destination, I did not yet know that a few kilometers away, a black VW Polo was about to start up. Inside were three “boys,”\* not yet in their thirties, armed with assault rifles. They were headed for Paris. Destination: the Bataclan.

When the first rounds of gunfire broke out, Tarik grasped immediately that lives were being lost in rapid succession. He was a few hundred meters away, about to see a show by Dieudonné, the comedian convicted of “defamation, insult, and incitement to racial hatred” and accused of fanning the flames of social separatism in the French suburbs. Tarik lives in one of these infamous suburban towns: La Courneuve. He happened to have chosen that evening to go see for himself whether the controversial comic was any good. Now, none of that mattered. He knew the sound of explosions too well to be left in any doubt as to their consequences. The crackle of gunfire hurtled him back to a childhood marked by the bloody raids of the Groupe islamique armé in Algeria.<sup>†</sup> And it brought back the turmoil of an adolescence spent rising through the ranks of the drug trade, where claiming a piece of the pie means carrying a piece, too. When word came that these murders had been carried out in the name of the religion he espouses, his anger exploded. By contrast, Radouane was untouched by anger when he read the news on his phone. Unlike Tarik, he didn’t linger on the endlessly looping images. Sitting on the couch in his family’s living room, he felt nothing. Not disgust, not empathy; no rage, not even joy. He stopped watching television and barely read the press, sickened by what he saw as an industry of permanent lies. He felt empty. He knew that yet another line had been breached in the all-round loathing of “us Muslims.” The idea that

\* *Translator’s note:* In familiar French, *garçons* (boys) is sometimes used to refer to males of any age – not unlike the colloquial English expression “good old boys,” or “the boys on the bus.” Throughout the text, I have preserved this usage by translating *garçons* as “boys,” even when the word refers to individuals who are well into their adult years.

<sup>†</sup> The Groupe islamique armé (GIA) appeared in Algeria following the cancellation of legislative elections won by the Front islamique du salut (FIS) in 1991, and sought to install an Islamic state. In the 1990s, it carried out a long series of targeted attacks and civilian massacres – a period of conflict described as a “dark decade,” claiming some tens of thousands of victims.

this really was a war between two camps seemed that much closer to crystallizing.

I had first met Tarik and Radouane eight years earlier, along a different frontline. Then, we were divided by the surface of a gray desk and the frame of a whiteboard. I was starting out as an economics and social science teacher in Seine-Saint-Denis, another unpopular area encircling Paris, on the north side; Tarik and Radouane belonged to the multi-hued ranks of “my” students. That was now in the past: Tarik had left school a long time before, Radouane had gone on to pursue lengthy studies. I now teach in Saint-Denis at the University of Paris 8, having become a scholar studying the personal trajectories of my former students.<sup>1</sup> My sociologist’s skin has thickened since then, and the setting of our initial acquaintance has become a web of lasting connections. But that Friday evening, this shared history was an insignificant detail, lost in the growing maelstrom.

In Alfortville, anguish turned to shock when my friends learned that two close acquaintances of theirs had been in the crowd at the Bataclan – a venue we knew well, and which we feared had attracted friends from our circle that night. Phones lit up, and the statistics were grim: one of their acquaintances would emerge from the carnage alive, the other would not. At this point we were still unaware that Pierre-Yves, one of “our” sound engineers, had been executed at point-blank range along with his wife. It was three days later that we discovered his death. I hadn’t seen him in several years. The echoes of his big, generous laugh now stay with me: a dim memory, tracing the contours of another life, cut down by the absurd.

### **Behind absurdity, the social world**

Such events force us to confront the meaninglessness of existence, to acknowledge those moments when, in Albert Camus’s words, “the stage sets collapse” and we are condemned to “keeping the absurd alive.”<sup>2</sup> And yet there’s something unsatisfying about turning senseless events into solitary observation posts, sustaining the narcissistic fiction of our isolated egos when in reality the ordeal is assuredly collective. That Friday night, the shock was compounded by the chasm between the premeditation of those on one side and the insouciance of those on the other, ignorant of the violence that was about to befall them. It was as if the stench of killing had laid bare the unsteady points of our social compasses.

## INTRODUCTION: THE CALL OF THE GROUND

As the enormity of the carnage became clear, the whole of society raised its voice. The fabric of interpersonal relations and the drama of what was collectively happening to “us” were all put on display in an uncontrolled unspooling of individual emotions. That is what G  r  me meant when he observed, in a study of the attacks in New York in 2001, Madrid in 2004, and London in 2005, that with “a multiplicity of meanings of ‘we,’ our reactions to attacks demonstrate a heightened sense of ‘I,’ which leads us to sympathize with the fate of the victims on the basis less of a shared belonging than of a shared singularity.”<sup>3</sup> For Tarik, memories flooded back of the paternal shotgun enthroned in the living room of his Algerian home. Radouane noted the strange disjuncture between his feeling of numb disillusion and the emotion stirred in him by the misery of Syrian or Palestinian children, in a confused juxtaposition of guilty parties. For me, nights spent with Pierre-Yves, and our band’s farewell show, where he’d brilliantly handled the sound, came back like flashes of light. Such is the web of impressions spontaneously linking together our jolted individual selves – alongside a rather indistinct “We.”

Each wave of Islamist attacks on European soil heightens the fragility of a “We” that seems parachuted in from above, stripped of its trappings of “givenness” the more it is chanted like a slogan. The periods of official tribute and reflection that follow such attacks no longer yield unanimous assent: they’re also becoming times of suspicion and tension. Such moments are about being together, but also about being counted, being seen, feeling out the apparent fissures – as if, amid such emotion, differences can’t coexist without being reduced to sealed-off blocs. It’s as if “to be Charlie” or “not to be Charlie” were the only question that mattered, inviting us to sport distinctive outward markers: *je suis* or *je ne suis pas*.<sup>4</sup> The connection between “We” and “I” seemed to vanish in the face of “Us” versus “Them.” Scapegoats, demons, moral panics, outsiders – the logic of blame is well known.<sup>5</sup> Today, the threat has a generic name: Muslims.

Such Manichean binaries give meaning to the absurdity of violence by replacing careful explanations, connections between cause and effect, and collective responsibility with “culture talk.”<sup>6</sup> They feed the reassuring prophecy of a “clash of civilizations” while expressing that “attitude of longest standing, which no doubt has a firm psychological foundation, as it tends to reappear in each one of us when we are caught unawares, [which] is to reject out of hand the cultural institutions ... which are furthest removed from those with which



we identify ourselves.”<sup>7</sup> On the Western side, the old colonial image of Islam, layered with “cultural antipathy,” morphs into a “cultural war” against a supposed Muslim International.<sup>8</sup> As the political scientist Arun Kundnani writes, “in the West, people make culture; in Islam, culture makes people.”<sup>9</sup> Islamist discourse deploys a similar, if more direct, rhetoric, proposing to “manage barbarism” and “liquidate the gray zone” between Muslims and infidels.<sup>10</sup> It stresses the depravity of Western society, an amoral world of “unbelievers” driven by passions and impulses, where culture is mere window-dressing to camouflage the basest proclivities. Ostracized “Muslims” and “unbelievers” share the same failing: they are prisoners of nature, their nature. They are “Jews” in Jean-Paul Sartre’s sense: a problem to be solved, men subject to others’ gaze, rather than fully fledged individuals.<sup>11</sup>

In such a setting, the Muslim religion becomes “racial,”<sup>12</sup> as the essayist Moustafa Bayoumi puts it: its visible features are turned into problems and symbols. Beards, kaftans, hijabs, or burkinis eerily resemble the skin and hair of the “Negro” described by W. E. B. Du Bois in his day.<sup>13</sup> France, in this war of imaginaries, possibly represents an even more powerful symbol than the United States. If 9/11 could appear as a strike against the West’s financial power and military dominance, attacking Paris – its cafés, streets, magazines, football stadiums, concert venues – is a declaration of war on entertainment, hedonism, or aestheticism. The fight to eradicate terrorism is no longer just a struggle for freedom of thought or the free market. Now it’s about defending a liberal and open way of life against the dictatorship of a closed and fundamentalist world.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, the images of France under siege may well add a dash of soul to the axis of evil sketched by George W. Bush in 2002.

But what does such an imaginary tell us about Tarik, seated with his friends at the café terrace next door to that of “La Belle Equipe,” a few minutes before 19 people lost their lives in that multicultural bistro? What does it tell us about Radouane’s impassiveness in the face of these murders, at the end of a long day spent in his Paris office as an accounts manager, a day that began at five in the morning in his neighborhood mosque? Almost nothing – except perhaps that the world runs on categorizations that reduce reality to acceptable representations. Amid so much confusion, only one certainty remains: humans are, most often, social animals without knowing it.

## The magic of “radicalization”

One word has come to the fore to give meaning to these dilemmas: “radicalization.” Though now used by journalists, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens, the term was first popularized by decision-makers and policy experts after September 11, 2001. According to Peter Neumann, director of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence in London, the rapid spread of the term is explained by its vagueness: “the idea of radicalisation” makes it possible to talk about everything that happens “before the bomb goes off” without having to grapple with the “‘root causes’ of terrorism” – a notion always suspected of fostering an irresponsible culture of excuses.<sup>15</sup> For profiling purposes, “radicalization” narrows the focus to the various milestones along the path taken by the “terrorist next door.” It allows us to name the indescribable, to shield ourselves from terror by placing a label on its origins.<sup>16</sup> But as Guy Debord observed about the use of the word “terrorism”: “what is important in this commodity is the packing, or the labeling: the price codes.”<sup>17</sup>

“Radicalization” aims to describe a specific phenomenon: the emergence of what psychiatrist and former CIA officer Marc Sageman calls the new generation of “homegrown terrorists,” groups of friends who turn against the countries where, for the most part, they were born.<sup>18</sup> As long as the enemy still came from outside, there was no cause to speak of “radicalization.” The word “terrorism” was quite sufficient: the attacks were committed by foreigners, radically “other.” When the enemy comes from inside, the question of betrayal arises: the tipping point where “us” becomes “them.” The stakes here are considerable: to protect ourselves from these locally grown enemies, we must first know who they are. In France, the 1990s witnessed the rise of what the sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar terms “Islamism without Islam”: marginalized individuals whose life-courses begin in social and emotional poverty, leading to delinquency and prison, and then to an ostentatious religiosity aimed at regaining a lost dignity.<sup>19</sup> Twenty years later, “radicalization” now helps to fill in this picture of failed “integration.” How could such hardline fundamentalism meet with a wish for murder and death – here, in France?

“Radicalization” is both a practical and an analytical category. As a practical category it’s deployed in a variety of arenas that aim to improve public safety, as a way of giving meaning to ordinary life experiences: teachers ask themselves whether this or that

pupil has been “radicalized”; appeals for vigilance proliferate; the public is called upon to report “signs of radicalization”; politicians finance “de-radicalization programs.” As an analytical category, radicalization is mobilized by social scientists to denote everything that happens “before the bomb goes off,” but with different and sometimes contradictory meanings, none of which commands unanimous scientific assent.<sup>20</sup> Despite this semantic cacophony, all these usages share something implicit: radicalization is about wayward individuals, the culmination of a succession of steps in a biographical trajectory. A slippery-slope motif emerges in all the posthumous commentaries on “homegrown terrorists” – those anti-stars whose anonymous pasts are suddenly dissected to identify the moments of personal failings and failures that led to the irreparable. The psychologist Fathali Moghaddam’s so-called “staircase” model, often used in deradicalization programs, gives a typical picture: involvement in terrorism depends on an individual’s capacity to cope with feelings of injustice and frustration, and this capacity is challenged over a succession of steps.<sup>21</sup> That means better individual profiling is needed, a task that became all the more urgent as the portraits of would-be martyrs grew more complex over the 2000s. After Daesh supplanted Al Qaeda and Syria went up in flames, the territorial conflict moved closer to the gates of Europe. Now school graduates, members of economically prosperous families, “converts,” “whites,” girls, even children, are climbing an increasingly accessible staircase, further blurring the relationship between the “us,” the “them,” and the “I.” If sociological variables no longer seem decisive, and if free will and voluntary servitude aren’t politically acceptable explanations, then a narrative comes to the fore in which fragile individuals gradually tumble into a violent ideology. This, in turn, calls for a struggle against the persuasive force of that ideology’s accredited conduits (“the Koran,” “imams,” “Salafists,” “the Internet,” “Daesh,” “prison,” etc.). The label is bolstered with each new case, but it’s as if the word is always trying to catch up with the reality. The increasingly innovative updated versions of it – “pre-radicalization,” “high-speed radicalization,” “solitary radicalization,” “self-radicalization,” “online radicalization” – merely underscore its inability to make sense of the world. It has become a rallying cry for preventive and remedial action: as the sociologist Stuart Hall would say, it is a veritable “conductor” of the crisis.<sup>22</sup> It seems wiser to abandon the term and, instead, to observe what it seeks to explain: the seductive power of the ideology of “martyrdom,” the call for political violence, and Islam’s attraction for a whole swath of young people.

Ideological explanations are, at best, tautological: it's obvious that any young person ready to die for the glory of the Prophet adheres profoundly to a firm system of belief. But political allegiance and moral justification are at least as much consequences as causes. Scott Atran, one of the finest ethnographers of Middle East jihadism, made this clear when questioned by the US Senate about the threat posed by radical imams. He suggested that such clerics stand at the end of a long-distance race. Rather than genuine recruiting agents, they act more as "attractors," thriving on convictions already deeply held.<sup>23</sup> Radicalization by ideology functions as a myth. It offers a narrative about the origins and spread of evil, but ultimately says little about the phenomenon it supposedly describes. Its primary function is to "empty reality," thus revealing our intimate relationship to it.<sup>24</sup> Its focus on ideology signals a magical conception of religious belief, common to both jihadist propaganda and Western fears of radicalization. Faith in radical Islam is seen as leading to either paradise or barbarism, as if ideas float – and strike – in the air. But no religious belief or conception of the world can have sufficient weight to guide what people do unless it resonates in some way with their needs, practices, power relations, institutions. In short, it must deal with pre-existing social expectations and constitute an effective and acceptable response to concrete problems. As Max Weber says, ideas are mere "switchmen" on the "tracks of action," not impetuses to it. This was one of sociology's very first findings.<sup>25</sup> There is no religious essence contained within pure texts, impressing itself into blank minds – however adrift those minds may be. Islam is no exception to this universal dependence on historical context and sociological setting.<sup>26</sup> If there is something like a staircase of terror, its woodwork is made from composite raw materials, a mix of social, economic, and political forces without which no one will ever ascend to their death in the serene certainty of their own election.

This *magic of radicalization* is a result of "culture talk" that pictures Islam as a body of frozen beliefs guided by an irrational logic (faith versus reflexivity), by withdrawal (a lack of integration versus civic participation), and by subordination (submission versus contestation). Such a uniform picture has no empirical basis. Every specialist in Islam contests it – starting with Gilles Kepel and Olivier Roy, though they frontally oppose each other in the debate on the origins of Islamist terrorism.<sup>27</sup> Kepel sees contemporary jihadism as the expression of a "radicalization of Islam," while Roy instead stresses an "Islamization of radicalism." Kepel points to changes in the tone and targets of Islamist propaganda, and in interpretations