

Ruminations: book launch speech

My dear colleagues, friends, and associates, thank you so much for joining me today and for this opportunity to be with you on this fine winter afternoon.

We are all here today because the Spanish Steps are the site of yet another book launch.

Ruminations is my latest book, but it has taken me the longest I have ever taken to write a book.

It is a book in two parts. The first starts with my early memories and educational experiences all the way up to the events of 9/11 that coincided with the completion of my doctoral thesis. The second half of the book is all about my travels across the world, including in the cities mentioned above, as well as some observations around key challenges in the world today, including Brexit and Trumpism, nationalism, polarisation, and Islamophobia, combined with debates concerning identity and belonging that have remained particularly pronounced.

So, what is this book about, and why is it out now?

About 15 years ago, I had some time to reflect on the past in the wake of a global financial crisis and the significant implications that would have for forthcoming generations.

I was mindful to explore my own personal history as part of an attempt to come to terms with the changing face of neoliberal globalisation.

I was keen to reflect on the implications this would have for exclusion, racialisation, and Islamophobia, which underpin the experiences of many ethnic and Muslim minorities in the Western European context.

I wrote down everything I could remember, from my first memories onwards, and surprisingly, I could remember quite a bit at ages 3 and 4.

My memory was a little cloudy for a little after that, but I still vividly remember the summer of 1976, which was the hottest on record when it was an average of 26 degrees for 6 months from March to September that year.

[Pause]

Working on this book and reflecting on everything I could think about in terms of ethnicity, migration, identity, belonging, space, and place, and what this meant for me, was something I had been going through all this time, even though I was not thinking about it at the time.

I had to find a way of making it interesting enough, however.

I also needed to make it novel enough for many would-be readers of the book, encouraging them to move beyond the "so what?" and "who cares?" questions.

An autobiography does not need to be written about a single person's life unless they did something amazing or changed the world. It might be mildly entertaining, but that's not enough reason to write one.

Or is it?

So, I wanted to think about Britain's social, economic, and historical changes while also thinking about my own journey to becoming, in my case, a social thinker who can understand society and comment on it to help others learn.

And to that extent, some of this work could be described as 'autoethnographic', which is probably a grand way of saying that it is yet another ordinary life story combined with a great deal of projection.

[Pause]

I completed work on *Ruminations*, wrote about half of it, and came up with the main title, but by the end of 2010, I left it alone. I had not quite figured out what I wanted to say—or why—but I knew it was important to say something.

... and I still worried that it was just my ego hyping itself up, that probably nobody cares, and that I am still only in my 30s, so there is hopefully much more to experience and hopefully more to understand.

I had written about my life from the time I could remember my first thoughts to the present, but I found the present far too difficult to contain in this same book and eventually decided to focus on the personal life story in **part one** of *Ruminations*.

No biography is ever complete because there is always a selection process going on, and so I decided to focus on my experiences of the education system from primary school to secondary school, all the way to my doctoral work, which ended in 2000, a year before 9/11.

It is as if my education was completed on 9/11.

Part two of the book focuses on my observations and travels across the world.

After completing the first draft in 2010, I moved to Istanbul and spent nearly 6 years travelling across the country, taking in its vast topography and trying to understand the complexities of life, politics, and society in Turkey, which, if you didn't already know, is at the centre of the world and has been traversed by every major civilisation.

While still based in Istanbul, I was fortunate enough to travel, live, and, in many cases, study in numerous other places, including being able to spend two months during various breaks from teaching in Islamabad, Jakarta, and Jerusalem. Towards the end of this time, I was invited to NYU as a visiting scholar and lived in Greenwich Village for four months.

While the first part of the book focuses on my journey of ‘self’ discovery, the second part recounts my observations during my travels and academic engagements, which have included places from California to Canberra, from Aarhus to Addis Ababa, and even parts of Turkey that most Turks would not dare visit.

I learned about a mass grave beneath Washington Square Park in lower Manhattan. I reflect on being caught up in a protest against the cartoons in Jakarta and feeling extremely nervous as twitchy twenty-somethings at checkpoints in Ramallah or Bethlehem fiddled about with their extensive military hardware.

How I ended up face-to-face with a water cannon ready to spray CS gas at you at the top of Istiklal Avenue in the heart of Istanbul during the 2013 Gezi Park unrests has more to do with my naiveté than academic interest; as they say, curiosity killed the cat (almost).

Istanbul was a lot of joy and discovery, living and working in a city like no other on this earth, but rarely do good things last forever.

After having to leave Turkey and give up my chair in sociology after earning it in 2012 at the sixth-strongest private university in the country, with around 15,000 students and hundreds of faculty, it had been taken into administration by the government in early 2016, and it was rumoured that foreign faculty were not going to get their contracts renewed.

And it seemed that the final axe for the university was just a single step away.

I finally left Istanbul nine days before the failed coup events of 2016.

Less than a month later, the university was seized by the state. Students were in chaos; all the staff were sacked. The worst part for all employees was having their pensions taken away while others were hounded out of the country. Later, some of my own students were arrested and put on trial—all for alleged associations with an organisation with no name.

There remain huge problems with academic freedom in Turkey.

But, as they say, out of the frying pan and into the fire.

I returned to London at the same time that the self-styled Islamic State terrorised major European cities, until 2018, when I decided to leave the UK once more, especially because Brexit was actually happening and I didn't want to be a part of it, and so I came to The Hague and have been here ever since.

Now, I have been here for years, but for two of them, we were all under lockdown and isolated. During this time, I decided to stop the endless nonsensical drama on Netflix and do something that contributes to my well-being. And I finished all the writing I was working on, including *Ruminations*. This seemed right, since the lockdown period marked a break in human history that had never happened before. Now is the time to think about the past, look into the emptiness of the present, and imagine a better future.

[Pause]

So, having described some of the background on the motivation and the context during which this book was put together, the question remains: why is it of interest, and why should anyone read it?

These are, of course, incredibly good questions, and, of course, the answers remain unknown, but it is important to try and emphasise why I decided to release this book to unsuspecting readers, which includes you all.

Ruminations is an attempt at being an accessible, readable, and engaging narrative that allows the reader to walk through the journey of ‘self’ discovery and then the rationalisation of the ‘other’.

I have argued elsewhere that both the *self* and the *other* are subjective and selective.

That is, how we see ourselves is as much about remembering and choosing to forget the characteristics and attributes of this particular *self* in the same way that we might relate with or to an *other*.

Neither the *self* nor the *other* is anything more than an identity projected or perceived so as to fit into whatever is being identified with *or* not identified with.

All of these concerns are important for any individual at any time in history. So, why does my particular story appeal any more than anyone else’s?

[Pause]

Inevitably, in the book, I talk a great deal about radicalisation but also how we understand the topic—and often get it wrong.

There have been various attempts to try and come to a better appreciation of the problems of extremism and radicalisation ever since the events of 9/11.

... but many of the responses by different states and supranational institutions have put the cart before the horse and ended up fuelling polarisation and intolerance so as to exacerbate the problem rather than alleviate it.

You might think this is a passing remark, but bear with me as I try to break it down.

The vast majority of cases of extremism and radicalisation occur in conflict zones, that is, in various parts of the world where civil, ethnic, or national conflicts exist.

Terrorism in Europe and North America is a very small part of this, but people in these places spend a lot of time and money trying to figure out what's going on and come up with solutions that, as expected, don't work.

What is driving radicalisation is more about individual-level actions that emerge in the context of specific contexts that come into play at any point in time. Therefore, both structure and individual agency matter, but it is not always easy to determine what the trigger is.

For example, the vast majority of those implicated in extremism emerge from marginalised settings, but the vast majority of those who emerge from marginalised settings have nothing to do with extremism.

Here, in the broadest of frameworks, radicalisation is caused by Islamophobia, and Islamophobia causes further radicalisation.

I have said this before, and it may surprise some people, but it is absolutely true that for the vast majority of Muslim minorities in Europe who are involved in extremism and terrorism, too much focus is put on some kind of religious problem that eventually comes out when pushed hard enough.

All of this is very wrong and very stereotypical of a whole ethnoreligious community and all of its members.

Indeed, much of this is due to issues of orientalism and Islamophobia that were prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s, which accelerated following the events of 9/11 and everything that has happened since.

But we are no better or more capable of dealing with these problems, and the reason is that we have been looking for them in the wrong places.

For much of the current field of extremism and radicalisation studies, there is a need for greater critical engagement with this area of research and policy thinking.

Ask any individual whose background is implicated in terrorism, as I have done, and they will not say that their religion is the reason for their actions. Religion does justify the action and is seen as such from a political point of view, but that is not the goal of religion itself.

Most people will find this unsurprising, but it is striking how difficult it is for so many to comprehend that being radicalised is the result of an attempt to hold onto something that has

been taken away, and that what has been taken away is identity and a sense of belonging that people find elsewhere. And that's it in a nutshell.

Going back to this book, in the 2000s, numerous biographies of former extremists were published. I read all of them, but I found them deeply problematic, largely because they were fake in every way.

In some cases, I found that parts were made by central government employees who had already written at least one draft manuscript.

The aim is to convey the message that radicalisation is a Muslim problem and only Muslims can solve it, which is complete nonsense in a world where Muslim identities are always perceived as a risk for something potentially violent or extremist when in fact the research tells us that more Islam, not less, is partly the solution.

And, of course, addressing the grievance problem that many trapped in the poorest parts of towns and cities across Europe face is an important component in this, but we refuse to deal with these issues with direct resource investment and instead project some kind of cultural deficiency model, tinged with heavy doses of moral superiority, because it assuages our own sense of guilt while projecting all of our failures onto others.

What I want to do with *Ruminations* is provide a perspective on life as a European-born Muslim, one that reflects on the general experience of most people in that you have to climb out of the ghetto in some way or another, and you have to keep yourself and your soul intact in doing this, otherwise you are potentially facing many more challenges down the line.

Lots of people do not get out of the ghetto; some end up in criminality, others in something much worse.

It's possible not to emerge from the ghetto as some kind of perennial *other*, but rather to navigate the passage through and out of it in order to be able to use the lessons learned to teach others and provide others with insight and knowledge that they would otherwise not get, especially when it comes to thinking about extremism and radicalisation, because far too many people have no idea what is going on inside communities from which many of these people emerge.

It is not only the academics who are to blame for this; lots of policy-thinking on extremism and radicalisation is far too wedded to the past and not the future.

[Pause]

Ruminations effectively goes from *my* story to *your* story, and back again to make it *our* story.

The focus on life in the 1970s and 1980s is meant to be a critique of the dark side of Thatcherism, which destroyed society at the time.

The focus is also on the 1990s, when the west had no problems of its own, but after the global war on terror began in 2001, the west reduced the Muslim east to extremism and has effectively kept it there.

At the same time, the Muslim east has its own problems with identity, place, and space. Underdevelopment, corruption, cronyism, and cynicism are the main things that the Muslim east sees when it looks at the west.

Ruminations is not just one long outburst that focuses on suffering, pain, and resistance; rather, it is supposed to be entertaining and engaging, so some of it might make you laugh and some of it should make you cry.

It is a focus on resilience, empathy, humanity, and humility.

It is a treatise on how the eastern philosophical traditions of oneness can transcend individual-level anxieties and fears.

It is about the strength of the human mind to cut through the noise and nonsense because of the need to focus on the greater good.

It is a lesson in determination and conviction.

It is a voyage of discovering and becoming.

It is also about how to navigate the rough and tumble while knowing you are one step away from oblivion.

... and how to rise above bigotry and intolerance, knowing that we are all guilty of it and that only a few are truly wicked enough to cause regular suffering to the rest of us.

Most importantly, it is a study of self-awareness, through which it is possible to determine worldly consciousness.

Ruminations is my story, in part, but it is also a story that is deeply recognisable.

And on that note, I want to thank you again for your time, energy, and patience, and I hope you enjoy the book.

Thank you!