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Juxtaposing violent extremism and critical radicalism in Europe: the role of reflexive awareness in pursuit of religious purity and cultural essence

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ABSTRACT

Employing an approach that focuses on three goals of ideology-making (*i.e.* resolving grievances, seeking status, socialization), this study explores the reflexive boundaries between (1) 68 individual representations of violent ‘Jihadi’ and ‘right-wing’ extremism in Europe, and (2) 130 young adult European citizens who pursue religious purity or cultural essence. Having identified the latter as a pool of ‘critical radicalism’ in the current political context, the study juxtaposes violent and non-violent radicalizations by challenging two interrelated assumptions. The first is the sameness assumption: those who use a similar repertoire are unified by their similarity. The second is the continuum assumption: radicalism will eventually lead to violence, given that ‘radicalization’ discursively implies a shift towards promoting or carrying out violent behaviour. Drawing on comparisons between interview and media narratives, I argue that violent extremism and critical radicalism part ways while developing reflective methods to evaluate grievances, reclaim agency in response to status losses, and align social bonds with the ideology. The conceptual divergence indicates several fault lines between ideological simplicity and completeness and relates to individuals’ self-awareness in (re)making the ideology rather than a given ideology. This concluding remark has implications for the value of reflexive awareness in democracies.

Introduction

Becoming an analyst of one’s own discourse unlocks a new relationship with the self. Munich attacker Ali Sonboly, who identified as Aryan due to his Iranian ancestry and subscribed to Reich ideology, planned his attack to coincide with the anniversary of Anders Breivik’s massacre.¹ Despite sharing a right-wing violent extremist ideology, the two attackers presented their ideology-making processes differently: one championing oneself as an ideological machinery and the other detecting one’s vulnerability when

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¹Florian Hartleb, *Lone Wolves* (Springer Nature, 2020), p. 8.

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exposed to the ideology. Accordingly, Anders presents himself as a cold-blooded ideologue in his 1500-page-long manifesto. He dismisses the argument that he amalgamated his childhood grievances (e.g. family problems) with a grand battle ‘out there.’² Ali differs from Anders since he admitted, right after his attack and just before his suicide that, for seven years at school, he had to bear with the bullying by the classmates he eventually attacked.³ Ali’s statement contains a glimpse of reflexive self-awareness which few violent extremists seem interested in or able to detect.

This paper argues that the pursuit of conscious mental events directed at one’s own ideological formation indicates another trajectory of radicalization—i.e. towards *critical radicalism*, often confused with violent extremism. Focusing on the ideology-making processes, the paper reinforces the concept of violent radicalization as a process of pinning the ideology down to violence. This definitional refinement challenges two assumptions: firstly, that individuals who use the same ideological repertoire are automatically grouped together, and secondly, that a radical approach inevitably results in violence since the term radicalization implies a shift towards violence. As an alternative, the paper introduces critical radicalism as a possible route to non-violent radicalization, denoting a process of pursuing an ideology in its completeness and, in the process, seeking oneself in its internal mismatches and tensions.

The study delves into the ideology-making processes to question the reflective elements which differentiate violent extremism, together in its Jihadi and right-wing representations, from non-violent radicalizations towards religious purity and cultural essence. Drawing upon a variety of philosophical texts on reflexive guises, I describe reflection as a critical thought practice that the self utilizes to learn from one’s own and others’ experiences.⁴ Connectedly, pursuing reflexive self-awareness involves an endeavour on personal, epistemological, and social levels to reach self-constitution. The study seeks the role of such efforts in meeting three fundamental goals behind making an ideology: resolving grievances, seeking status, and socialization.

As an illustration of this framework, Ali’s story suggests his attempt was directed at his peer problems, inability to gain status at school, and a simultaneous need to socialize in a parallel universe. According to a narrative knowledge, he was a young adult male suffering from isolation at school, receiving psychiatric treatment, and holding migrant-origin classmates responsible for his grievances.⁵ Accordingly, his attack became a method for him to regain his agency at school, though it also meant his death. Although he also read about other school shooting cases irrespective of their ideologies, he rationalized his attack by joining forces with the Nazi ideology, the enemy of his enemies.⁶ While radicalizing himself in the sense of making an ideology reduced to violence, he remained indifferent

²Siri Erika Gullestad, ‘Anders Behring Breivik, Master of Life and Death: Psychodynamics and Political Ideology in an Act of Terrorism’, *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, 26:4 (October 2, 2017), pp. 207–216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0803706X.2017.1333138>.

³Leon Siciliano, ‘Munich Shooter Responds’, *The Telegraph*, July 23, 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/07/23/munich-shooter-responds-to-fg-foreigner-taunts-by-saying-i-am-ge/>.

⁴Johan Von Wright, ‘Reflections on Reflection’, *Learning and Instruction*, 2:1 (March 1, 1992), pp. 59–68, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0959-4752\(92\)90005-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0959-4752(92)90005-7).

⁵Emma Graham-Harrison and Janek Schmidt, ‘Strange and Withdrawn: What Drove Ali Sonboly to Launch Munich Attack?’, *The Observer*, July 24, 2016, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/23/ali-sonboly-munich-massacre-mcdonalds>.

⁶James Dunn, ‘Munich Maniac Had ‘Why Kids Kill’ Book in Rucksack during Murder Spree’, Mail Online, July 23, 2016, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3704643/Munich-maniac-book-called-Kids-Kill-rucksack-went-murder-spree-obsessed-German-teenager-shot-dead-15-classmates-SEVEN-years-ago.html>.

to the broader right-wing milieu, which has a much larger arsenal of grievances and policy options. Instead, he spent enormous time with online shooting games and socialized in dark web communities.⁷

Such readings over grievances, status, and socialization problems make sense to understand Jihadi violent extremists as well. For example, Kruglanski and Webber identified the central element of any terrorism-justifying ideology, be that ‘militant Jihadist’ or ‘Neo Nazi,’ as the goal of restoring or developing personal significance for its members.⁸ In a sample of violent and non-violent extremists together, Doering *et al.* found no significant difference between right-wing and Jihadi extremists regarding abuse history, mental illness records, and engagement with violence.⁹ Bouhana *et al.* found no significant differences between violent right-wing extremists and other lone actors in terms of the indicators related to motivations, capabilities, and incubation periods.¹⁰ Given the relative triviality of the tangible differences, ‘none of which appear to be that counterintuitive,’ they questioned whether the violent radicalization assessments should be tailored to ideology.¹¹ Focusing on the ideological similarities, Gambetta and Hertog argued that both the right-wing and the Jihadi extremists develop similar rigid identity boundaries.¹² Finally, Koch *et al.* identified a trend of ‘white Jihad’ through which right-wing extremists incorporate Jihadi motifs into their ecosystem.¹³

This study takes a step further by focusing on individuals who engage with the same ideological repertoires in contrasting ways even when they share family and friendship problems, status and significance losses, and similar socialization needs. It explores the reflexive boundaries, particularly between European youths who come to embrace (1) right-wing or Jihadi violent extremists and (2) imaginations of a pure culture or religion while identifying, appraising, and offering alternative strategies against the status quo. In line with the identified similarities among violent extremists of different ideologies, my baseline classification hints at the assumption that violent Jihadi and right-wing extremists look more like each other than the broader ‘Salafi’ and ‘Radical Right’ communities they are ideologically associated with. The study combines two datasets: the first consists of a collection of media narratives on 68 violent extremist profiles based on the Europol Terrorism Situation and Trend Reports (TE-SAT). The second dataset includes 130 interviews from the PRIME Youth project, which utilizes a single optical lens to analyse Islamist and nativist radicalization processes and outcomes among young to middle-aged (18–30) in four European countries.¹⁴

⁷Roberta Liggett *et al.*, ‘The Dark Web as a Platform for Crime: An Exploration of Illicit Drug, Firearm, CSAM, and Cyber-crime Markets’, Thomas J. Holt and Adam M. Bossler (ed) (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), pp. 91–116, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78440-3_17, p. 98.

⁸W. A. Kruglanski, and David Webber. ‘The Psychology of Radicalization.’ ZIS 9/2014, p. 382, p. 388.

⁹Sara Doering, Garth Davies, and Raymond Corrado, ‘Reconceptualizing Ideology and Extremism: Toward an Empirically-Based Typology’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, (July 17, 2020), pp. 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1793452>.

¹⁰Noémie Bouhana, Emily Corner, Paul Gill, and Bart Schuurman. ‘Background and Preparatory Behaviours of Right-Wing Extremist Lone Actors: A Comparative Study.’ *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 12:6 (2018), pp. 150–63.

¹¹Bouhana *et al.*, ‘Background and Preparatory Behaviours of Right-Wing Extremist Lone Actors’, p. 160.

¹²Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad* (Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 163–164.

¹³Ariel Koch, Karine Nahon, and Assaf Moghadam, ‘White Jihad: How White Supremacists Adopt Jihadi Narratives, Aesthetics, and Tactics’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (July 5, 2023), pp. 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2023.2223694>.

¹⁴Ayhan Kaya, Metin Koca, and Aysenur Benevento, ‘Introduction Nativist and Islamist Radicalism: Anger and Anxiety’, in *Nativist and Islamist Radicalism* (Routledge, 2023).

The research task is essential to contribute to the study of violent extremism and problematize the securitization of radical thinking and the accompanying creation of gigantic suspect communities. To begin, I will contextualize the research within the existing literature, operationalizing the main concepts and explaining the underlying rationale of the study. Then, I will highlight and problematize two assumptions leading to a transnational confusion about the relationship between Salafism(s) and violent Jihadi extremism, and violent right-wing extremism and the Radical Right family. The study is by no means intended to map these complex ideological strands and organizations. Nonetheless, it contributes to this scrutiny by juxtaposing a series of contrasting meanings and strategies these ideologies may offer depending on the reflective method. Overall, the research identifies a fundamental cleavage between critical radicalism and violent extremism in the context of reflexive self-awareness.

Positioning the present study in the radicalization literature

Focusing on ideology-making as a conscious effort to develop strategies of action,¹⁵ this section will first introduce the foundational role of reflexivity in distinguishing between critical radicalism and violent extremism. The first part discusses an intricate tension in radicalization between the pursuit of self-awareness and the premise of having already attained self-constitution. Then the section will introduce a three-pillar approach to exemplify and specify three goals behind making an ideology.

Ideology formation and reflexivity

Self-constitution—i.e. the ability to create and constitute oneself—is a philosophical dream for the sake of human autonomy.¹⁶ The rational choice accounts of agency take self-constitution by definition as a given element in human rationality. In contrast, a series of recent research emphasizes different yet interrelated ‘reflexive guises’ under which a person’s mind presents the *self* to itself, just as it presents the *other*.¹⁷ This research stream is mainly concerned with the reflective methods one may employ in one’s third-personal access to oneself alongside the first-person agential or epistemic access.

While violent extremism may not completely lack self-awareness, it often displays an ‘anti-reflexive’¹⁸ attitude by rejecting the importance of further introspection. The tension lies between, on the one hand, pursuing reflexive awareness for a better understanding of purity, and on the other, being confident that oneself has already reached that state of self-constitution. The former acknowledges the fragmented nature of one’s mind, whereas the latter dismisses questioning them further. Connectedly, the latter has a

¹⁵Ann Swidler, ‘Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies’, *American Sociological Review*, 51:2 (April 1, 1986), pp. 273–286, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095521>.

¹⁶J. David Velleman, *Self to Self: Selected Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 203–223. Christine M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (OUP Oxford, 2009).

¹⁷Catriona Mackenzie, ‘Bare Personhood? Velleman on Selfhood’, *Philosophical Explorations*, 10:3 (September 1, 2007), pp. 263–281, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13869790701535287>. Velleman, *Self to Self*.

Christine M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (OUP Oxford, 2009).

¹⁸Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap, ‘Anti-Reflexivity’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27:2–3 (March 1, 2010), pp. 100–133, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409356001>.

strong sense of ‘uncompromising righteousness,’ as Cassam quoted from Amos Oz.¹⁹ In contrast, occupied with epistemological reflexivity to realize ideological coherence, critical radicalism entails (over)thinking about one’s fragmented mind between one grievance and another, between the social and the individual, and between one word and another in a grandiose ideological repertoire.

As a rare case of reflexive self-awareness among violent extremists, Ali Sonboly was pushed to an avenue of introspection in the crime zone by a stranger, Thomas S., who had an alternative claim on right-wing radicalism. After his attack, he faced Thomas yelling at him: ‘f... foreigner [kanake]!’ ‘F... Turks,’ Ali reacted by referring instead to his migrant-origin victims. Having constructed rigid identity boundaries to resolve their grievances, both became subjects for the study of radicalization.²⁰ However, it is not Thomas who considered massacring others in the name of the Radical Right ideology. According to him, Ali was a ‘disgusting coward [...] not right in the head.’²¹ When Thomas repeated the word kanake, Ali replied that he was qualified to be ‘German’ as he grew up in the *Hartz IV* unemployment benefit area.²² Ali explained his peer problems as Thomas responded unfavourably to Ali’s execution of their shared ideological repertoire.

During the proceedings regarding his defamatory language against migrant-origin citizens, Thomas refused to take back his words by describing migration as a threat against public order and security: ‘Merkel is letting everyone into our country.’²³ Nonetheless, as part of his self-analysis after the incident, he felt ‘nothing but sympathy’ for those who lost their loved ones.²⁴ Thomas did not publicly initiate criticism of the right-wing ideological repertoire for the harm it may cause. Nevertheless, in his narrative, the migrant-origin victims turned out to be ‘innocent people’ instead of ‘kanaken.’ His emotional check-in was the reflective method behind his feeling of sympathy.

On the other hand, Thomas’ strong emphasis on law and order is reminiscent of the Radical Right family of ideologies.²⁵ Similar claims are recurring among the nativist research participants in the PRIME Youth research, which explores nativist and Islamist radicalizations in Europe. They tend to dismiss the option of violent activism despite sometimes expressing low levels of kindness similar to that of Thomas. Ideally, they would prefer to see their ideology in power while the state enjoys the monopoly of violence. For instance, against the French government’s decision to outlaw the transnational Radical Right organization Generation Identity, one research participant argues ‘as a lawyer’ that the organization ‘demand[s] the application of the [already existing] law [on migration],’ instead of breaching it.²⁶ Similarly, a member of the Alternative for

¹⁹Cassam, *Extremism*, p. 95.

Amos Oz, *How to Cure a Fanatic* (Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 57.

²⁰Neil Ferguson and James W. McAuley, ‘Dedicated to the Cause: Identity Development and Violent Extremism’, *European Psychologist*, 26:1 (2021), pp. 6–14, <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000414>, p. 7–8.

Michael A. Hogg, ‘From Uncertainty to Extremism: Social Categorization and Identity Processes’, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 23, no. 5 (October 1, 2014), pp. 338–342, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721414540168>.

²¹Thompson, ‘The Man on the Balcony’, par4.

²²Leon Siciliano, ‘Munich Shooter Responds’.

²³Yascha Mounk, ‘The End of German Exceptionalism’, *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed January 21, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/27/the-end-of-german-exceptionalism-terrorism-merkel-islamic-state/>.

²⁴Thompson, ‘The Man on the Balcony’, par24.

²⁵Andrej Zaslove, ‘The Populist Radical Right: Ideology, Party Families and Core Principles’, *Political Studies Review*, 7:3 (September 1, 2009), pp. 309–318, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-9302.2009.00191.x>, p310.

²⁶PYI, June 11, 2021.

Germany explains his disinterest in violent activism: ‘I am probably too pro-authority for [acting illegally].’²⁷

The present study describes such individual representations of Radical Right under a cross-ideological label, *critical radicalism*, bringing together many Muslims and anti-Muslims. Critical radicals staunchly oppose the political order that they feel sets barriers between them and their essentialist desires. On the one hand, they are considerate enough not to participate in criminal events, receive training to perpetrate violence, or support the illegal financing of such organizations. On the other hand, they do not fall short of violent extremists in terms of essentializing the self and the other and seeking purities passionately. They imagine and idealize some kind of cultural essence or religious purity—*i.e.* clean, wholesome, coherent, free from ‘physical contamination or moral pollution.’²⁸ Hence, from the so-called or self-proclaimed Salafis to the members of Radical Right movements such as Generation Identity, they are often associated with violent extremism in transnational public debates.²⁹ What remains understudied in this picture is the reflective methods these individuals employ while dismissing violence and offering alternative strategies and meanings.

Operationalization of the three-pillar framework

This part operationalizes a three-pillar framework which allows for questioning reflexivity in individuals’ attempts to resolve grievances, seek status and socialize accordingly. Encompassing the building blocks of current frontier research on radicalization, the framework aligns with Kruglanski et al.’s violent radicalization model, which links the ideological, motivational, and social components of violent extremism.³⁰ The framework is also in line with Bartlett and Miller’s emphases on the emotional, rational, status-conscious, and social processes in the different paths to violent and non-violent radicalizations.³¹ Others keep using each of these pillars or a combination of them in radicalization research.³² Offering a reflexive dimension to the available theoretical approaches and models, this part will outline the research expectations driving this study.

Accordingly, I define grievance resolution as developing ideas, procedures and action strategies against grievances. In this research scope, violent extremism denotes the belief that violence against an out-group is a condition of the in-group’s well-being.³³ By definition, violence is its primary method of resolving a perceived injustice. Alternatively, one’s analysis of a grievance may lead to a more complex picture, including grey zones irreducible to a total war, doubts about the physicality of a conflict, and positive

²⁷PRIME Youth Interview [PYI], October 10, 2020.

²⁸Quassim Cassam, *Extremism: A Philosophical Analysis* (Routledge, 2021), p92.

²⁹Mary Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror, Knowing the Enemy* (Yale University Press, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300130690>.

³⁰Arie W. Kruglanski et al., ‘The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism’, *Political Psychology*, 35:S1 (2014), pp. 69–93, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12163>.

³¹Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, ‘The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference Between Violent and Non-Violent Radicalization’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24:1 (January 1, 2012), pp. 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2011.594923>.

³²Daniel Meierrieks, Tim Krieger, and Valentin Klotzbücher, ‘Class Warfare: Political Exclusion of the Poor and the Roots of Social-Revolutionary Terrorism, 1860–1950’, *Defence and Peace Economics*, 32:6 (August 18, 2021), pp. 681–697, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10242694.2021.1940456>.

³³J. M. Berger, *Extremism* (MIT Press, 2018), p. 44.

meanings found in non-violence. In drawing such a picture, the alternative reflective methods one utilizes from the ideological repertoire represent the foundations of critical radicalism. Policy options such as non-violent activism and social secession interact with methods such as reflective equilibrium, which opens a runoff area for one to disentangle one's grievances and analyse one's multiple reasons for discontent. I operationalize this part of my study by focusing on individuals' different reception of their individual (e.g. family and friendship problems) and collective grievances (e.g. threats to the in-group's well-being).

Secondly, status-seeking activities represent a 'pressure to prove' oneself against others.³⁴ This study examines the experiences of individuals undergoing mental health investigations, which are likely to lead to status threats due to the accompanying stigma and social isolation.³⁵ Many violent extremists in the sample denied reflexivity essentially by refusing to engage with the arguments that amalgamate their status losses with their attacks. While the literature disputes the causal link between mental disorders and violent radicalization,³⁶ it acknowledges that the negative social repercussions of experiencing a mental disorder, among other threats to one's status,³⁷ may act as a potential intervening variable in the making of violent extremism.³⁸ In line with psychological research on the moderating effect of self-esteem on overcoming resistance to new knowledge claims,³⁹ critical radicalism is about restoring self-esteem and reclaiming agency by employing affirmational resources other than violence.

Finally, socialization is the networking process by which individuals access, share, shape and reinterpret knowledge claims that make ideologies. As a socio-cognitive process, socialization is closely linked with pursuing reflexive self-awareness as the latter pushes the self to question the coherence in one's social circles—i.e. virtual or physical.⁴⁰ Lacking this endeavour becomes crucial in the context of violent radicalization since many Jihadi and right-wing violent extremists build discrepant online and offline social identities.⁴¹ While highlighting the importance of strong social networks in the process of violent radicalization, the literature suggests that the members of the violent extremist networks tend to clash with the organizations which promote

³⁴Ari D. Fodeman, Daniel W. Snook, and John G. Horgan, 'Picking Up and Defending the Faith', *Political Psychology*, 41:4 (2020), pp. 679–698, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12645>.

³⁵Jeanne Y. Choe, Linda A. Teplin, and Karen M. Abram, 'Perpetration of Violence, Violent Victimization, and Severe Mental Illness', *Psychiatric Services*, 59:2 (February 2008), pp. 153–164, <https://doi.org/10.1176/ps.2008.59.2.153>.

³⁶Andrew Silke, 'Holy Warriors: Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization', *European Journal of Criminology*, 5:1 (January 1, 2008), pp. 99–123, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370807084226>.

³⁷Cécile Rousseau et al., 'Collective Identity, Social Adversity and College Student Sympathy for Violent Radicalization', *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 58:5 (October 1, 2021), pp. 654–668, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461519853653>.

³⁸Eric Silver et al., 'Assessing the Violent Offending and Violent Victimization Overlap Among Discharged Psychiatric Patients', *Law and Human Behavior*, 35:1 (February 1, 2011), pp. 49–59, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10979-009-9206-8>.

Katarzyna Jasko et al., 'Social Context Moderates the Effects of Quest for Significance on Violent Extremism', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 118:6 (2020), pp. 1165–1187, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000198>.

³⁹Constantina Badea and David K. Sherman, 'Self-Affirmation and Prejudice Reduction: When and Why?', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 28:1 (February 1, 2019), pp. 40–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721418807705>.

⁴⁰Margaret S. Archer, 'Collective Reflexivity: A Relational Case for It', in Christopher Powell and François Dépelteau (ed) *Conceptualizing Relational Sociology: Ontological and Theoretical Issues* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), pp. 145–161, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137342652_9.

⁴¹Elizabeth Pearson, 'The Case of Roshonara Choudhry: Implications for Theory on Online Radicalization, ISIS Women, and the Gendered Jihad', *Policy & Internet*, 8:1 (2016): 5–33, <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.101>.

Yue Qin and John Lowe, 'Is Your Online Identity Different from Your Offline Identity? – A Study on the College Students' Online Identities in China', *Culture & Psychology*, 27:1 (March 1, 2021), pp. 67–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X19851023>.

non-violent activism using the same ideological repertoire.⁴² While this limited and often counterproductive socialization with the broader ideological community may lead to divergent audiences and conflicting performances, critical radicalism represents a socially communicated weighing of violence against ethical considerations such as morality, proportionality, reasonability, and usefulness.

Rethinking definitions and assumptions

The main argument presented in this paper is that the act of actively seeking and analysing one's own ideological beliefs and thoughts may lead to an alternative form of radicalism. Several public debates suggest that the boundary between violent extremist ideologies, as well as between violent and non-violent radicalization remains confusing. I identify two interlinked assumptions that reproduce this confusion in the radicalization literature: the *sameness* and *continuum* assumptions.

The sameness assumption

Identifying different radicalisms that emanate from a single ideology would challenge at least two interrelated assumptions. The first is the *sameness assumption*. According to it, those who use a similar repertoire are unified by their similarity. An illustration of this assumption is the so-called atmosphere of separatism, establishing a network between the 1600-page long letter of al-Qaeda member Abu Musab al-Suri, the European Jihadi violent extremists, and France's impoverished suburbs.⁴³ While Kepel's study bridges the terrain of the Middle East with French *banlieues* and the broader Salafi communities,⁴⁴ other studies contradict the argument that the Jihadi attackers socialized in a *banlieue*, formed or shared their ideology as part of Islamist mosque communities, or considered texts written outside France, such as the manifesto of al-Suri.⁴⁵ The sameness assumption loses the trace of agency for the sake of depicting the structure.

While equating 'Salafists' and 'radicalized Salafists' in essence, studies based on this assumption reduce the 'radical' element in Salafism into violence.⁴⁶ Therefore, they fail to recognize the non-violent, 'conformist' or 'activist' Salafi radicalisms in conflict with militant Jihadism.⁴⁷ This amalgam draws parallelism between violence and illiberal ideological expressions, such as opposing handshaking, wearing the burqa in the public sphere, or criticizing the borders of freedom of expression in the case of prophet cartoons. Studies on Jihadi Salafism in conflict with other Salafi groups in Europe suggest that, as opposed to ISIS militants' obsession with death, Salafism may be radicalized in another direction—i.e. towards non-violence, religious cultivation and ideological discipline.⁴⁸

⁴²Mattias Ekman, 'Anti-Refugee Mobilization in Social Media: The Case of Soldiers of Odin', *Social Media + Society*, 4:1 (January 1, 2018), p. 2056305118764431, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118764431>.

Théo Blanc and Olivier Roy, *Salafism: Challenged by Radicalization?* (European University Institute, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.2870/309942>.

⁴³Gilles Kepel, *Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁴⁴Kepel, *Terror in France*, p. 25.

⁴⁵Olivier Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

Blanc and Roy, *Salafism*.

⁴⁶Kepel, *Terror in France*, pp. 29; 65–66; 74.

⁴⁷Naveed S. Sheikh, 'Making Sense of Salafism: Theological Foundations, Ideological Iterations, and Political Manifestations', *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Politics and Ideology*, 2021, pp. 177–96.

⁴⁸Roy, *Jihad and Death*, p. 6.

The assumption has political repercussions that go beyond Muslim communities. At the outset of 2021, the French legislation on ‘Islamist separatism’⁴⁹ coincided with the banning of the radical right-wing organization Generation Identity.⁵⁰ Both controversies pinned down a great variety of individuals in these organizations into a narrow representation of violent extremism. As such, the sameness assumption lays the groundwork for gigantic suspect communities. Since non-violent radicalization is under the shadow of radicalization into violent extremism, shedding light on the reflexive mismatch between them becomes necessary.

The continuum assumption

Before proceeding with this task, the second assumption I shall problematize is the continuum assumption. The helpful radicalization models find that ‘radical ideas’ very rarely turn into action. However, they also tend to assume that a radical idea is the one that enables violence.⁵¹ The *continuum assumption* does not give a chance for radicalization to lead to any other route.⁵² Instead of representing a vector between various ‘malevolent’ and ‘benevolent’ outcomes,⁵³ radicalization in this context means the one-way shift from *tabula rasa* to *extreme*. In this frame, studies tend to conceptualize violent extremism as the behavioural extension of a complete ideology. Therefore, the prescription of resilience against violent extremism is not in the ideology but in developing skills that prevent one ‘from being drawn toward’ the ideology.⁵⁴ As such, the classification blurs the reflexive components, which require alternative conceptions of radicalism, fundamentalism, and fanaticism.⁵⁵ Alternative conceptions of radicalization are needed, at least because violent extremists are not those who are the most occupied ones with the ideology.⁵⁶

Sources and method

The study first collects descriptive statistics, followed by qualitative narrative analysis. In this task, I use the following two pillars of data: 1) a collection of violent extremist profiles based on media narratives, 2) the PRIME Youth interviews with young to middle-aged individuals who support movements categorized as Radical Right and those who self-identify as religiously conservative Muslims.⁵⁷ It is challenging to merge two datasets

⁴⁹Bisserbe, ‘France’s Macron Wins National Assembly Backing for ‘Islamist Separatism’ Bill.’

⁵⁰Willsher, ‘France Bans Far-Right ‘paramilitary’ Group Génération Identitaire.’

⁵¹Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, ‘Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model’, *American Psychologist*, 72:3 (April 1, 2017), pp. 205–216, <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000062>, p. 21.

⁵²Metin Koca, *Beyond the Continuum: Contrasting Images from Violent and Non-Violent Radicalization* (Istanbul Bilgi University, European Institute, 2022).

⁵³Ken Reidy, ‘Radicalization as a Vector: Exploring Non-Violent and Benevolent Processes of Radicalization’, *Journal for Deradicalization*, 14 (March 23, 2018), pp. 249–294.

⁵⁴William Stephens, Stijn Sieckelink, and Hans Boutellier, ‘Preventing Violent Extremism: A Review of the Literature’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 44:4 (2021), pp. 346–361, p. 348.

Alex P. Schmid, ‘Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin’, *ICCT Research Paper*, 2014, 1–29.

Susilo Wibisono, Winnifred R. Louis, and Jolanda Jetten, ‘A Multidimensional Analysis of Religious Extremism’, *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02560>.

⁵⁵Bötticher, ‘Towards Academic Consensus Definitions of Radicalism and Extremism’, p. 76. Cassam, *Extremism*, p. 115–144.

⁵⁶Vera Mironova, ‘Handling Ultra-Radicals’, in *From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 173–208.

⁵⁷The Dataset and Coding Information for ‘Juxtaposing Violent Extremism and Critical Radicalism in Europe,’ July 23, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8176226>.

Table 1. Collection based on the post-2016 attacks in Europe.

Pool Sample Type	Violent Extremism	
	Jihadi	Right-wing
Cases (Attacks)	48 (80%)	12 (20%)
Individuals (Total)	66 (78,6%)	18 (21,4%)
Median Age	27	35
Young-Adults (15–36)	54 (79,4%)	14 (20,6%)
Female	2	1

with different narrative styles, such as self-reported interviews and externally gathered media-reported data. On the one hand, media representations tend to lack avenues for introspection. To bridge this gap, the study concentrated on positive data concerning anti-reflexivity rather than the lack of data regarding introspection. Conversely, interviews are open to social desirability bias, resulting from the research participants censoring their views. The research project's objective was to minimize bias by educating data collectors, utilizing comprehensive narrative-style transcriptions with various evidence to support an argument, and implementing stringent confidentiality measures.

Violent radicalization

The first pillar of my data is qualified as open-source records, collected on the acts of violent extremism and then the individual profiles of the actors. These records were compiled in various languages (English, German, French, Italian, Dutch) from the media narratives, court minutes, police reports, biographic works, and personal notes. In this task, there are well-known limitations such as unreported cases, variations in the nature and amount of detail, and the lack of coherent terminology. However, since the detailed first-hand information that media narratives provide would otherwise be very difficult to gather, the study rests on this type of data to access relatively thick descriptions for the narrative analysis.

Classifications. The step that precedes collecting narratives on individuals' profiles is identifying the cases of violent extremism in Europe. I relied primarily on Europol's annual TE-SAT to identify the reported cases. In total, sixteen basic variables have been determined to initiate an analysis for each act of violent extremism. Apart from *sex* and the integer type *age* and *participants*, all basic variables, submitted as a supplementary document, are initially coded as dichotomous variables, 'yes' and 'no/unassigned.' Once the descriptive statistics had been gathered in this way, I analysed each narrative behind the codes as part of my qualitative analysis. The type of violent extremist act has been recorded as 'Jihadi' or 'Right-wing' per Europol's classification.⁵⁸

The sample is relatively comprehensive in covering acts of Jihadi violent extremism in Europe. However, there are important variations in European governments' definition of right-wing extremism. Therefore, Europol shares a small selection of notable incidents. To close this gap, I paid particular attention to a set of non-classified yet mediatized cases. In this endeavour, I defined 'right-wing' as a family of ideologies carrying racist, culturalist, anti-migrant, or anti-Islam elements.

⁵⁸The 2021 Terrorism Situation Report combines 'terrorism and violent extremism' in ten occasions. see EUROPOL, 2021.

Table 2. 'ISLAM-OPHOB-ISM,' ERC Project (No. 785934).

Pool	Critical Radicalism							
	France		Germany		The Netherlands		Belgium	
Country	M	N	M	N	M	N	M	N
Self-Identification (Muslim, Native)	M	N	M	N	M	N	M	N
Interlocutors (Total)	13	21	26	6	23	17	10	13
Interlocutors (Female)	6	1	13	0	10	3	6	6
Median Age	25	25	24	27	23	20	24	24

Demographic Overview. In unity with the available data in several other studies, my collection suggests that violent extremist action is primarily a phenomenon of youth and middle-aged individuals. Of 60 completed, failed, or foiled attacks in Europe,⁵⁹ 46 were made by one or more young to middle-aged adults (15–36). Arguably because the pool was based on direct physical action instead of examples of non-violent extremism (e.g. backyard support), it could capture only three female profiles (see Table 1).

Non-violent radicalization

The other pillar of my data is the PRIME Youth semi-structured interviews conducted in France, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands. The interviews were conducted by four field researchers in collaboration and knowledge exchange with a principal investigator and two postdoctoral researchers, one of whom is myself, the author of this article. Aged between 18 and 30, our interviewees broadly identified themselves with Islam ($n = 73$; 56,15%) or nativism ($n = 57$; 43,85%) (see Table 2).

The research team (hereafter, 'we') primarily reached individuals who had organizational ties at the time of our interview. To reach 'natives', we contacted members of several Radical Right organizations, including the Generation Identity, National Rally, Alternative for Germany, the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), PEGIDA, the Reformed Political Party, Party for Freedom, Forum for Democracy, New Flemish Alliance, and Vlaams Belang. To reach Muslim individuals, the Turkish and Moroccan migrant-origin communities in the four countries were contacted. Most of the research participants were members of mosque communities, either encouraged or partly financed by these states. Based on snowball sampling, the sample was widened towards those with less communitarian and more universalist orientations, including deconstructive approaches towards traditional Muslim societies.

In line with this sampling criteria, the participants' narratives include arguments, value expressions, and discourses of action which are associated with violent Jihadi and right-wing extremism in the public debates. Among these expressions are viewing the cartoons of prophets as unacceptable, promoting the deportation of migrant-origin people, preparing for a future conflict by practising combat sports with comrades, insisting on wearing a veil in the public space, justifying fascism and its economic model, or declaring as unbelievers (*takfir*) the traditional Muslims for their neglect of religious purity. In their self-narratives, the vast majority of the participants were discontent with the status quo in their countries ($n = 86$; 66,15%). Many offered fundamental

⁵⁹i.e., 16 cases each in France and Germany, 14 in the UK, five each in Belgium and the Netherlands.

political change by explicitly challenging the mainstream arguments and conventional modes of doing politics ($n = 20$; 15,38%).

Identifying this dataset as a pool of critical radicalism does not mean that it is exhaustive of critical radicalism, full of critical radicals, or limited to this concept. Despite its inclusion of the vast array of searches for ideological completeness, the pool will not likely exhaust the behavioural and ideational patterns that may lead to or be representative of critical radicalism. For instance, the sample does not include Muslim converts who characterize unique ideology-making experiences. In some respects, the selection also goes beyond non-violence, depending on the temporal dimension of each narrative. For example, during the interviews, the three interviewees in the exit programmes often entered the grey zone between violent extremism, moderated ideological views that signify centrism, and a remaining urge to resolve one's grievances through ideological purity.

Interview content

During the interviews, which lasted about 90 min on average, the interviewees were asked to discuss their personal histories, neighbourly relations, family and friendship ties, mobility history, their thoughts on diversity, religion, the current state of politics and economics, and finally, their future expectations. In doing so, the interview protocol did not mention any specific policy, event, political figure, religious or cultural value, or hot topic. In sum, the participants were invited to narrativize their lives at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Based on the coding manual, each interview is coded into twelve principal codes on areas stated above and 157 sub-codes that saturate each bullet point.⁶⁰ These thematic codes helped this study establish a general framework to complement its analysis of the reflective elements.

Analysis and discussion

This part discusses how the representations of violent extremism and critical radicalism part ways while developing reflective methods to (1) locate their grievances and tailor strategies against them, (2) claim rationality in the face of threats to self-esteem, and (3) align the social bonds and practices with the ideology.

Locating the grievances to tailor strategies

Nearly a third of violent young adult profiles in my collection have an individual grievance that might be loosely or tightly connected to their attack ($n = 22/68$, among Jihadi = 37,03%, among Right-wing = 14,29%). These grievances include social isolation, exclusion, alienation, humiliation, or bullying. Including eight individuals from this group, the same number of individuals shared notable family problems ($n = 22/68$, among Jihadi = 37,03%, among Right-wing = 14,29%). Some of the interlocutors in the pool of critical radicalism ($n = 19$, 14,62%) reported comparable family problems, including neglect and abuse, divorced parents with unresolved conflicts, domestic violence, alcohol, drug addiction, and suicide.

⁶⁰Ayşenur Benevento, Metin Koca, and Ayhan Kaya, 'Coding Manual: Nativism, Islamophobia and Islamism in the Age of Populism', *ISLAM-OPHOB-ISM ERC Project (Number 785934)*, August 8, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6976652>.

In the face of these individual grievances, the participants differed in terms of their interest in epistemological reflexivity and reflective equilibrium. Their identification of different root causes disentangled their grievances from each other and diversified their friends and foes depending on the context. On the one hand, reflecting on their admittedly fragmented minds pressurized them to think further to reach ideological coherence. On the other hand, the fragments that they noticed also lend them the ability to go beyond the option of violence and instead offer multidimensional imaginations of activism. Both processes exceed the scope of physical conflict and render the main issue an ideational one.

Epistemological reflexivity

Individual grievances are understated in the manifesto-like documents that violent extremists leave behind. Beyond reproducing researchers' suspicion about such documents, I take violent extremists' insistence as reflexivity denied.⁶¹ Accordingly, they prefer to do great power politics as rational calculators and refrain from shuffling through their possibly vulnerable aspects. However, like Ali, who recalled his friendship problems after his attack, a few among them questioned themselves by showing reflexive self-awareness. For example, Michelle R. (36), who took the name Safiyya and plotted an attack after her conversion to Islam, explained to an undercover officer that she needed a subversive authoritative knowledge against the memory of her drug-addict family's abuses.⁶² She envied the friendliness of their Muslim neighbours years before her conversion to Islam. Also neglected by his parents, S. Ernst (46), who planned his first major-scale attack in the mid-1990s as a young adult, explained his troubles in the neighbourhood and at school, where he had problems with a group of Turkish peers. He felt his parents liked their dogs more than they liked him when he needed support.⁶³ These narratives suggest that family and peer issues, possibly recalled with their haunting details even after many years, can be abstracted away and channelled into a single grand battle.

In the narratives of our nineteen interlocutors, such individual grievances became crucial matters of self-scrutiny. While regularly reiterating the central role of family and peer problems in their ideological formations, the research participants meant to emphasize the existence of ideological means other than violence pinned down to a single and simple target. In this endeavour, our Muslim interlocutors described a mission of epistemological reflexivity to purify their egos (*tazkiya*), rituals (*tahara*), and hearts (*tasfiya*). For instance, between his father's mistreatment and his teachers' everyday racism, Ömer (26), from Schaerbeek, had to become 'a militant' in his own words. Having realized, however, that his militancy would possibly make him a 'negative' as well as a 'positive force,' Ömer channelled his discontent into social work against drug addiction. In reaction to his father, who thinks drug addicts would go to hell, Ömer's

⁶¹Lorne L. Dawson, 'Taking Terrorist Accounts of Their Motivations Seriously: An Exploration of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13:5 (2019), pp. 74–89.

⁶²Dominic Casciani, 'Safiyya Shaikh: How Undercover Operation Caught a Drug Addict Jihadist', *BBC News*, July 3, 2020, sec. UK, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-53264640>.

⁶³'Mordfall Lübcke: Das Leben Des Stephan Ernst', HNA.de, November 6, 2020, <https://www.hna.de/kassel/luebcke-prozess-mord-leben-stephan-ernst-straftaten-kassel-90091938.html>.

desire for religious purification taught him that Muslims should support vulnerable individuals by respecting their personal trajectories.⁶⁴ His epistemological reflexivity led him to regulate his militancy by disciplining his soul (*nafs*) against conceit and arrogance (*kibr*).

On the nativist front, dysfunctional families provoked the research participants to problematize some established definitions of race, nation, and essence. For example, Claude (25) remains a National Rally (RN) voter like his parents, but criticizes his parents' nativism 'based on hatred.' He identifies the problem of white French as 'low-level racism' and believes that becoming French is attainable for migrants. In his mission to rejuvenate the cultural essence, this statement includes favouring the 'Frenchmen of immigrant origin' over 'a nationalist by hatred' and 'a leftist Gaul who vomits on France.' Despite maintaining his support for the RN, Claude has also begun to see 'a lot of demagogueries' in the party discourse. He laughs while evaluating his ideological position at home and the university: 'I am a moderate in my family, while in the university, I am a fascist.'⁶⁵

Evaluating the universe of knowledge claims serves to disentangle one's grievances from each other, thus eliminating the reductionist tendency of violent extremism. From Paris, Asmaa's (29) narrative is a remarkable illustration of this reflective element in the context of the polarization between 'French values' versus 'the Muslim world.' Asmaa thinks she did not have a proper religious education from her family. Therefore, she felt alone in her Islamic 'spiritual quest.' As a French-Moroccan, she also suffered from racism and reactions against her veil in the neighbourhood: 'recently, an old lady shouted at me on the street.'⁶⁶ Despite her feelings against French secularism and national pride, her search for religious purity helped her self-identify more with France than Morocco. She criticized Moroccan society for following traditions blindly. In France, mixing with Muslim citizens of other origins at mosques helped her deculturate herself from the remnants of Moroccan customs: 'for giving me this opportunity, I say thank you to France from the bottom of my heart.' Asmaa's friends and foes become interchangeable as the context shifts.

Reflective equilibrium

Reflective equilibrium, a method used also by normative philosophers to study extremism,⁶⁷ may also be involved by individuals in the process of radicalization. As an endeavour to turn the consciousness back to the self iteratively through value analyses, this method comes with nuanced arguments about one's ideological repertoire. The process often leads to a fragmentation of the ideology, rendering its unmodified form incomplete, incoherent, or groundless. Once our interlocutors realize such shortcomings, they pursue an equilibrium between their foundational values and judgmental statements about others. For example, Christianity as a belief system and Paganism as its alternative often enter a clash in the Radical Right's internal debate over violent extremism.⁶⁸ Among our interlocutors, Anthoine (23) criticizes Christian ethics for 'turning the

⁶⁴PYI, September 28, 2020.

⁶⁵PYI, August 12, 2020.

⁶⁶PRIME Youth Interview, Jul 25, 2020.

⁶⁷Rik Peels, 'Extreme Beliefs: The Epistemology and Ethics of Fundamentalism', H2020 Research Proposal, *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*, p. 12.

⁶⁸Roger Griffin, 'Shattering Crystals: The Role of 'Dream Time' in Extreme Right-Wing Political Violence', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 15:1 (March 1, 2003), pp. 57–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550312331292967>.

other cheek' against aggressors, even though he has not yet given up his Christian beliefs against the Paganistic alternatives.⁶⁹ He finds Paganism tempting simply because it allows for racism. Nevertheless, after making his self-analysis as a person who values mutual non-interference more than conflict, he appreciates how Christianity tames his temptation to violence: 'the religion prevents me from acting too horribly.' Having made this diagnosis, he revises his view of a group of 'noisy' immigrants whom he almost got into a fight once on a bus: '[...]but frankly, it would be dishonest to say these populations are criminogenic: there are no crimes here, no harassment.'

Similarly, our Muslim interlocutors with ties in the organized Turkish ($n = 34$) and Moroccan diasporas ($n = 16$) tend to bounce between traditional Muslim societies and an imagination of Islam purified from cultural artefacts. Although many of our interlocutors idealize the deculturating mission of universal religious purity, they do not necessarily provide a definition of the latter. For instance, Meryem (25), a Turkish-origin French citizen, realized the fragility of what she had assumed to be religious purity after seeing the different Islamic practices of her 'Algerian-origin' husband.⁷⁰ Many in the diaspora communities had to reify a local Muslim culture to externalize the violent extremist representations of Islam: 'Name me a single Turk who made an attack in France? There is none!'⁷¹ In other words, they were content with a narrower definition of the in-group rather than falling under the rubric of a violence-inclusive universalism. As a result, they choose to frequent mosques funded by Turkey, even when they simultaneously 'find it strange that mosques are divided according to people's origins.'⁷² The equilibrium they reach drifts them closer to the parochialism of a cultural community despite being aware of its implications against envisioning a Global Ummah.

Critical radicalism welcomes the option of further reflection to overcome such limits. In this endeavour, it can confront the status quo by exceeding the scope of physical conflict. Halle synagogue attacker Stephan B. (28) blamed racial conspiracies for his lack of friends and the 'Jewish invention' of feminism for his lack of a partner. Our interlocutor, Martin (25), also complained about the crushing of 'white heterosexual men.'⁷³ Nevertheless, he considered refining his values by living as 'a hermit' in another country where 'Femen and Antifa' would not bother him. In the face of social pressures, some of our interlocutors deliberated their options of social secession or moving away ($n = 9$; 6,92%). As well as illustrating the concentration of the Radical Right ideology in rural and peripheral areas,⁷⁴ this finding aligns with previous research on the inclination towards isolationism among Salafis.⁷⁵ As an illustration, Ömer, whose militancy for the rehabilitation of drug addicts emanated from his religiosity, feels that his religious path would 'blossom' in another location where there is 'freedom of thought in terms

⁶⁹PYI, March 1, 2020.

⁷⁰PYI, June 11, 2020.

⁷¹PYI, November 18, 2020.

⁷²PYI, September 12, 2020.

⁷³PYI, July 9, 2020.

⁷⁴Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, 'The Revenge of the Places That Don't Matter (and What to Do about It)', *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 11:1 (2018), pp. 189–209.

Ayhan Kaya, 'Working Paper 12: State of the Art on Radicalisation: Islamist and Nativist Radicalisation in Europe', Istanbul Bilgi University PRIME Youth Website, April 2020, p19, <https://bpy.bilgi.edu.tr/en/publications/working-paper-12-state-art-radicalisation-islamist/>.

⁷⁵Ineke Roex, 'Should We Be Scared of All Salafists in Europe? A Dutch Case Study', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 8:3 (2014), pp. 51–63.

of religion.’ Writing books in isolation, engaging in small discussion groups, and attending retreats turned out to be viable options for these individuals in their pursuit of reflexive self-awareness.

In short, this section contrasted the thinking patterns employed to channel individual grievances towards or away from violence. The option of violence involves abstracting away one’s grievances and denying further reflection to gain resilience against a single, omnipotent enemy. In contrast, the methods involving a pursuit of reflexive awareness, such as epistemological searches, reflective equilibrium, continuous self-scrutiny, and the contextualization of allies and adversaries, enable opportunities to derive ideological tools for a non-physical confrontation.

Seeking status and various ways of saying ‘I am rational’

Individuals’ varying capabilities to access clinics restrict sampling, whereas poor reporting and low benchmarks overinflate it.⁷⁶ With these limitations, the narratives suggest that many violent extremists in the dataset had a mental illness record ($n = 18/68$; Jihadi = 24,07%, Right-wing = 35,71%). In this part, my focus is on the violent extremists who managed to survive and were resistant to mental investigations, as they were the ones who were most vocal in their opposition to such measures. Some of the research participants ($n = 11$; 8,46%) also informed the research team about their mental health issues, including a series of mood and personality disorders. The two samples differed in the way individuals reclaim agency against various social pressures that threaten their self-esteem. The violent extremists in the sample denied reflexivity mainly by refusing to question their mental challenges along with their ideological approaches to violence. On the other hand, our interlocutors engaged in reflective thinking, questioning their inclination to violence before their ideological development and how the ideology allows for bolstering their self-esteem in safe and supportive environments, stress-free jobs and non-militant friends.

Violent extremists’ dismissal of mental health challenges

From ethnopsychiatrists to sociologists, many sought the subjectivity of violent extremists in the socially constructed ‘super Muslims,’ ‘negative heroes,’ and ‘terrorist superegos.’⁷⁷ Accordingly, popular and accessible ideological frames are helpful for disaffiliated young people to react to social stigma and the humiliation of being regarded as unstable or incapable.⁷⁸ Presenting an ideological agenda may help one be considered an agent.⁷⁹ What interests me in the context of this paper is the denial of reflexivity and cognitive closure on this path.

⁷⁶E. Corner and P. Gill, ‘Is There a Nexus Between Terrorist Involvement and Mental Health in the Age of the Islamic State?’, *The CTC Sentinel* 10:1 (January 23, 2017), pp. 1–10.

⁷⁷Fethi Benslama, *L’idéal et La Cruauté. Subjectivité et Politique de La Radicalisation* (Lignes Éditions, 2015).

⁷⁸Neil Ferguson and James W. McAuley, ‘Radicalization or Reaction: Understanding Engagement in Violent Extremism in Northern Ireland’, *Political Psychology* 41:2 (2020), pp. 215–230, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12618>.

⁷⁹Steven R. Corman, ‘The Narrative Rationality of Violent Extremism’, *Social Science Quarterly*, 97:1 (2016), pp. 9–18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12248>.

Ronald Wintrobe, *Rational Extremism: The Political Economy of Radicalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511511028>.

Ahmad A. (26), whose suicide attempt failed during his solo attack, was not an EU citizen but a long-term resident of Europe. According to his cousin, Ahmad suffered from the ‘mental exhaustion’ of not achieving any legal status despite spending almost ten years in Europe.⁸⁰ Ahmad’s uncle claimed that his apparent ideological motivation contradicts his upbringing in Egypt.⁸¹ In the same vein, the investigator psychiatrist emphasized how Ahmad moved to Europe, hoping for a ‘relaxed lifestyle’ in the first place. Accordingly, he was a party guy, taking alcohol and smoking marijuana. Judge Norbert Sakuth described Ahmad’s personality as ‘unstable’ in court. Refusing to think through any of these readings, Ahmed called himself a ‘terrorist’ during the proceedings and insisted that he intended to die as a ‘martyr.’⁸²

Ahmed’s claim suggests that seeking status might include the courage to face death or life imprisonment as a fully responsible individual instead of living as a failure. Similar examples are Mohiussunnath C. (28) and Usman K. (28), who were dedicated to deceiving deradicalization programmes and juries judging their mental progress.⁸³ During the proceedings, Halle attacker Stephan had a wry smile on his lips while listening to the psychiatrist Norbert Leygraf’s report, which described him as a disturbed personality suffering from schizophrenia, paranoia, autism, lack of friends, and unemployment.⁸⁴ Among five other people (aged 24–36) charged in an arson attack at a mosque in Enschede, at least one refused to participate in the mental health analysis.⁸⁵ When questioned about their mental state and its potential impact on their actions, these people refused to introspect or talk about the output of their introspection.

Self-affirmation of the resilient self against vulnerabilities

One common theme among our research participants is their challenge in defining their fundamental values as they search for fresh opportunities to fulfil their quests for meaning. Their self-narratives referenced violent extremist organizations as exploiters of vulnerable individuals. By recognizing this danger and developing a sense of self-worth accordingly, some could make positive self-talk and self-validation regularly. From Cologne, the story of Adil (26) is remarkable in this context. Adil was approached by individuals he believed were recruiters for ISIS, trying to take advantage of his struggles with depression. While his friend with similar problems ‘disappeared,’ Adil explained he was not swayed as he could remain steadfast. Adil says he devoted himself to praying five times a day, cultivating his true self, and contemplating the

⁸⁰Yassin Musharbash and Marc Widmann, ‘Messerangriff in Hamburg: Ist Ahmad A. ein Terrorist?’, *Die Zeit*, August 3, 2017, sec. politics, <https://www.zeit.de/2017/32/messerangriff-barmbek-supermarkt-ahmad-a-hamburg>.

⁸¹‘Familie distanziert sich von Ahmad A.’, *Die Zeit*, August 2, 2017, sec. society, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2017-08/messerattacke-hamburg-attentaeter-is-flagge>.

⁸²Musharbash and Widmann, ‘Messerangriff in Hamburg.’

⁸³Haroon Siddique, ‘Man in Terror Trial ‘Bragged of Deceiving Jury into Clearing Him,’ the Guardian, January 8, 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jan/08/man-in-terror-trial-bragged-of-deceiving-jury-into-clearing-him>.

‘London Bridge: Usman Khan Completed Untested Rehabilitation Scheme’, *BBC News*, December 4, 2019, sec. UK, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-50653191>.

⁸⁴Beate Lakotta, ‘Halle-Attentäter Stephan Balliet Und Seine Welt: Letzte Worte’, *Der Spiegel*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/halle-attentaeter-stephan-balliet-und-seine-welt-letzte-worte-a-81f7e600-0e1a-41bd-90d7-b8294f02eae3>.

⁸⁵‘Rechtbank Overijssel, ECLI:NL:RBOVE:2016:4134’, Pub. L. No. 08/952265-16 (October 27, 2016), <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/inziendocument?id=ECLI:NL:RBOVE:2016:4134>, 14.

value of tolerance. In his mission to acquire a new religiosity, he made new friends that would keep him away from any form of religious innovation (*bid'at*).

Coupled with his non-violent radicalization process, Adil's appreciation of controversial Salafi preacher Pierre Vogel shows the diversity in the Salafi milieu: 'he is a very nice person you can talk to [...] [H]e would never recruit someone [to a terrorist organisation].'⁸⁶ Examining the case of foreign fighters who depart to Syria and Iraq from Germany, Reynolds and Hafez found that, before departure, many foreign fighters 'had links to one or more recruiters, supporters, or Salafist scene leaders,' including Vogel.⁸⁷ While supporting the argument that recruiters are around, Adil's anecdote also shows that just because they have links in a mosque community, it does not necessarily mean the recruiters have good relationships with others, including the scene leaders under the spotlight.

Others involved in activism sought to restructure their social circles while being keen to reproduce their ideological expressions of discontent. Our interlocutor from Zittau, Leo (30), was a member of the NPD for two years and active in the neo-Nazi street scene for nearly six years. The neo-Nazi recruiters approached him when he had school problems that, he diagnoses, were related to learning disabilities and poverty. Leo himself recruited economically disadvantaged teenagers like himself, particularly from schools attending to children with learning disabilities. After participating in the exit programme, he kept many of his old views against migrants and refugees. For instance, he thinks they receive unjustly more benefits from the state than a single mother who gets the *HartzIV* unemployment benefit. However, having a steady income became the recipe for him to stay away from the right-wing milieu fed by economic disparities. That said, he asks 'who [would] want to hire an ex-Nazi' under such circumstances.⁸⁸

Finding a new rank was especially critical for the self-esteem of the research participants who have participated in an exit programme. From Dresden, Mirko (30) successfully opted out of the Free Forces neo-Nazi scene. In the process, he built a businessman identity, which qualified him to offer solutions to Dresden's grave economic problems. As these problems were the driving force behind his appeal to the Nazi ideology, our interlocutor emphasized that he still understands the rise of the right-wing against the German state: 'the Alternative for Germany (AfD) did not emerge overnight.'⁸⁹ Mirko has already met three of his four new goals: enjoying life with his family, travelling in different parts of the world as a businessman, and earning enough money while doing so. He has yet to meet his greatest aim, which is 'to become an expert in the field of right-wing ideology.'

Social bonds and practices

As an indication of co-occurrence, if not causation,⁹⁰ many violent extremists construct alternative personalities in their incubation period.⁹¹ The digital era invokes a much

⁸⁶PYI, September 28, 2020.

⁸⁷Sean C. Reynolds and Mohammed M. Hafez, 'Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 31:4 (2019), pp. 661–86, p. 677.

⁸⁸PYI, September 24, 2020.

⁸⁹PYI May 11, 2020.

⁹⁰Gilbert Ramsay, 'Relocating the Virtual War', *Terrorism* 31:10 (2009), pp. 883–902.

⁹¹See the interaction of 'social dislocation' and 'active engagement with online social media' in Adrian Cherney et al., 'Understanding Youth Radicalisation: An Analysis of Australian Data', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 14:2 (April 3, 2022), pp. 97–119, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2020.1819372>.

larger group of youths to engage with a wide array of data to re-configure conventional territorial spaces and authorities.⁹² Uniquely, however, compared to our interlocutors, it seems much more likely for violent extremists to end up having discrepant offline and online social circles, leading to incomplete ideological statements, incoherent performances, and disjoint audiences. Not caring about these mismatches is an aspect of their reflexivity denial.

Community ties, virtual lives, and born-again ideology makers

Despite rarely risking cognitive dissonance throughout their narratives, nearly a fourth of our interlocutors referred to an effort to understand opposite views ($n = 33$; 25,39%). They engaged in various peaceful ways with people they other ($n = 31$; 23,85%). Many of them put forward this kind of engagement as proof of one's ideological completeness: 'when you're ideologically trained, I think you're less aggressive.'⁹³ Among them was a migrant-origin Muslim interviewee who understood the frustration of a 'German family' who could not buy a bicycle while the German state was giving bikes to refugee children.⁹⁴ Similarly, the sample includes a nativist interviewee who felt for a Syrian refugee who told him about the massacres: 'I define myself as conservative and nationalist, but I am not a hatemonger.'⁹⁵ Considering that such multidimensional thought processes deviate from the target and avoid all-out-attack, many violent extremists explicitly denigrated such engagements ($n = 19/68$, Jihadi = 12,96%, Right-wing = 85,71%).⁹⁶

The participants tended to consult social media to complement the rest of their lives. They use social media mainly to follow the news not filtered by the traditional media ($n = 56$; 43,08). Many participate in online debates as an extension of the offline ones they make ($n = 34$; 26,15%). In their descriptions of their social media activities, some compared online and 'real life' communities: 'the people you meet in real life are very different from those you meet online.'⁹⁷ This element of scepticism often limited their participation in online ideology-making processes: 'I only put stuff from reality, from real life[...] even though I [am] a member of Generation Identity.'⁹⁸ Even for the most active networkers in the sample, catching a link between the two social circles was essential: 'I will not hesitate to add [to my social media network] someone [...] if I see that we have 300 friends in common.'⁹⁹ In contrast, many young and middle-aged violent extremists in the sample grounded their ideologies on a virtual life detached from their physical environments ($n = 33/68$, Jihadi = 53,70%, Right-wing = 28,57%).

While some violent right-wing extremists seem to feel connected to certain political parties and organizations, the participants' statements from within these organizations

Caroline Joan S. Picart, 'Jihad Cool/Jihad Chic': The Roles of the Internet and Imagined Relations in the Self-Radicalization of Colleen LaRose (Jihad Jane)', *Societies*, 5:2 (June 2015), 354–383, <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc5020354>.

⁹²Rebecca W. Black, 'Online Fan Fiction, Global Identities, and Imagination', *Research in the Teaching of English*, 43:4 (2009), pp. 397–425.

⁹³PYI, July 16, 2021.

⁹⁴PYI, July 29, 2021.

⁹⁵PYI, December 12, 2020.

⁹⁶The gap between the two sample groups in this context is worth additional analysis.

⁹⁷PYI, May 24, 2021.

⁹⁸PYI, February 9, 2021.

⁹⁹PYI, July 16, 2021.

refer to a one-sided love. Luca T. (28), who carried out a shooting spree in Macerata, shuttled in his daily life between his mother's home, the gym, and a local right-wing scene led by the likes of *Casa Pound*, which he desired to enter. Francesco Clerico, the gym owner that banned Luca due to his emergent racism, described him as a person who was 'constantly looking for a community.'¹⁰⁰ Luca became a candidate for the Italian radical right party *Lega Nord* but failed to get even a single vote.¹⁰¹ The narrative suggests that he had neither a charm nor an argument to impress the Italian right-wing scene.

In a similar vein, the Forum for Democracy (FvD) members among the Dutch research participants referred to the allegations about neo-Nazi elements in the youth branch. On the one hand, they admitted that the screening of newcomers becomes increasingly tricky for mass movements like theirs.¹⁰² On the other hand, they criticized the party administration for neglecting membership procedures and not being tight and committed enough to the ideology. According to some, the commitment is needed not just to distinguish themselves from violent extremists but also to recruit members who care about the ideology: 'I am not a member of JFVD [the youth organisation of the Forum for Democracy] because they only drink beer with each other and have sex.'¹⁰³

As for the Jihadis from all age groups, having contradictory online and offline social circles helped many of them be born into entirely new worlds ($n = 23$; 34,85%). They made abrupt changes in their life to erase the marks of the past that they despised. Regardless of their age, most of them neither went to a mosque regularly nor identified with any Islamist or traditional Muslim community organization ($n = 35$; 53,03%). Those who visited mosques either hid their agenda from fellows or quarrelled with them just as Khuram B. (27) did.¹⁰⁴ They were absent or on the periphery of the broader religious and religio-political landscape. In contrast, most of our Muslim interlocutors ($n = 50$; 68,50%) were active members of these community mosques whom violent extremists failed to mobilize.

Indifference to ideological incoherence

At the time of their attacks, many violent extremists in our sample were not at the end but at the outset of their journey to ideological completeness. Ali's case demonstrates that a migrant-origin citizen might act as a right-wing extremist without engaging with a local right-wing milieu. Indeed, it is exceptional for a non-white to resort to white supremacist violence.¹⁰⁵ More common are Ali's Jihadi counterparts, who are white native citizens

¹⁰⁰James Reynolds, 'Italy Migrants Attack', *BBC News*, February 12, 2018, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43030951>.

¹⁰¹Pietro Castelli Gattinara and Francis Patrick O'Connor, 'Why are some Italians shooting migrants? Far-right terrorism, anti-migrant discourse and the Italian election', *PRIF BLOG* (blog), February 13, 2018, <https://blog.prif.org/2018/02/13/why-are-some-italians-shooting-migrants/>.

¹⁰²PYI, November 23, 2020.

¹⁰³PYI, November 24, 2020.

¹⁰⁴Sarah Knapton et al., 'Khuram Butt, Rachid Redouane and Youssef Zaghba Named: Everything We Know about the London Bridge Terrorists', *The Telegraph*, June 5, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/05/ringleader-london-bridge-terror-attack-named-khuram-butt/>.

¹⁰⁵Steven Chermak and Jeffrey A. Gruenewald, 'Laying a Foundation for the Criminological Examination of Right-Wing, Left-Wing, and Al Qaeda-Inspired Extremism in the United States', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 27:1 (January 1, 2015), pp. 133–159, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.975646>, p145.

converted to Islam and adopted a Muslim name months before attacking in the name of Jihad.¹⁰⁶ Nearly half of the post-2016 failed, foiled, or executed right-wing and Jihad attacks in our sample include at least one perpetrator with an experience of conversion or being born again ($n = 27/60$, 45% in total; 54,17% among Jihadi; 14,29% among right-wing attacks).

Indifference to incomplete or incoherent ideological discourses is another illustration of denying reflexivity. For example, Ali's non-Nazi role models are emblematic of such incoherence. Although Ali rationalized his attack based on the Aryan/non-Aryan distinction, he reportedly visited the spot where Tim K. (17) killed 15 pupils at a school.¹⁰⁷ Tim, on the other hand, had not produced a similar racist ideological pretext for his attack. Despite this mismatch, Ali may have empathized with Tim's school problems, suicidal tendencies, passion for shooting games, and ability to take revenge as a kid. Stephan made more explicit references to the neo-Nazi and the broader right-wing symbols. However, beyond the neo-Nazi scene, he imagined an audience extending to gaming and anime communities, which aligned with his other ideological expressions only arbitrarily, almost as a sense of humour, and without discussing their amalgamation.¹⁰⁸ Like Stephan, the Hanau attacker Tobias R. is one of the new-wave right-wing extremists who target a global audience rather than relying on the local arsenal of right-wing circles. As Musharbash examined, their imaginations of leading a global struggle against a global enemy often come at the expense of nativism.¹⁰⁹

Regardless of their clashing Jihadi and right-wing repertoires, many individuals in our sample shared a pool of online instructions about accessing weapons, making explosives, broadcasting attacks, avoiding detection, and discovering ritualistic methods that would make a remarkable media impact. Michal S. (19), who promoted the idea of assassinating Prince Harry for marrying a woman of mixed race, kept guides about conducting 'Islamicist terror attacks' alongside a 'white resistance manual'.¹¹⁰ Tahar (20) researched the Christchurch attacker Brenton alongside Sharia4Belgium and a man who made a fortune in cryptocurrency.¹¹¹ London attacker Mohiussunath had a signed copy of anti-Islam activist Tommy Robinson's book and spent time on the far-right websites while developing attack plans.¹¹²

¹⁰⁶see religious converts in Tore Bjørgo, 'Dreams and Disillusionment: Engagement in and Disengagement from Militant Extremist Groups', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 55:4 (2011), pp. 277–285.

Karagiannis, Emmanuel. 'European Converts to Islam: Mechanisms of Radicalization.' *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 13:1 (March 1, 2012), pp. 99–113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2012.659495>.

Monika G. Bartoszewicz, 'Controversies of Conversions: The Potential Terrorist Threat of European Converts to Islam', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7:3 (2013): 17–29.

¹⁰⁷Dunn, 'Munich Maniac Had 'Why Kids Kill' Book in Rucksack during Murder Spree.'

¹⁰⁸Daniel Koehler, 'The Halle, Germany, Synagogue Attack and the Evolution of the Far-Right Terror Threat', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, December 18, 2019, <https://ctc.usma.edu/halle-germany-synagogue-attack-evolution-far-right-terror-threat/>.

¹⁰⁹Yassin Musharbash, 'The Globalization of Far-Right Extremism: An Investigative Report', *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinal*, 14:6 (2021).

¹¹⁰'Teenage Neo-Nazis Jailed over Terror Offences', *BBC News*, June 18, 2019, sec. UK, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48672929>.

¹¹¹Claire Hache, 'Attentat Déjoué Contre Des Enfants et Un Policier', *LExpress.fr*, April 5, 2019, https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/enquete/attentat-dejoue-contre-des-enfants-et-un-policier-les-details-d-un-projet-glacant_2071393.html.

¹¹²Lizzie Dearden, 'How Jihadi Used Signed Copy of Tommy Robinson Book to Justify Terror Attack Plans', *The Independent*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/mohiussunnath-chowdhury-terror-buckingham-palace-sword-attack-tommy-robinson-a9322286.html>.

Including Mohiussunath, a third of the Jihadi representations in our sample ($n = 22$; 33,3%) seemed more experienced about common law crimes than about making an ideology. As a crucial illustration of not being bothered with ideological imprecision, Mohiussunath's notes revealed the order of his religious values. In his 'plans for Jannah,' meeting his 72 wives was the second bullet point, whereas 'meeting Allah' was the seventh on the same to-do list.¹¹³ Adel K. (19) and Abdel P. (19), who attacked people at the Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray church, met on an instant messaging application just four days before their attack. Their messages revealed that they barely exchanged their first names with each other before the attack.¹¹⁴ During their conversation, Adel only wanted to know whether Abdel was not an informant and would join him in mass-acting people.

Ideological and strategic considerations of violence

'What fascinates [some] is pure revolt, not the construction of a utopia,' according to Roy.¹¹⁵ Given their abovementioned disinterest in the depths of the ideology, many violent extremists in the sample cease to differentiate between violence as an end and a means. In contrast with a pure fascination with violence, our interlocutors took violence unexceptionally as a means. More remarkably, they are clearly at odds with 'the violent methods extremists,' who see violence as a means but do so without necessarily reflecting on its morality, proportionality, reasonability, and usefulness.¹¹⁶ Accordingly, they assessed violence as ideologically untenable ($n = 40$; 30,77%), useless ($n = 7$; 5,38%), or self-destructive ($n = 5$; 3,85%). A large group of them described some kind of illegal but non-violent activism ($n = 27$; 20,77%).

In their value expressions, seven interlocutors, five being nativists, oscillated between legalism and insurrectionary temptation. However, as part of their nativist recursive thinking, deducting the theme of violence eventually to a despised identity (e.g. 'Islam,' 'Leftists,' 'Black blocs') laid the groundwork for its dismissal: 'we don't behave like national terrorists, Islamist citizens.'¹¹⁷ For our self-identified Muslim interlocutors, the primary way of denouncing violence was showing its incompatibility with the moral principles behind the ideology: 'no Muslim would destroy lives.'¹¹⁸ Also, based on their values, they rejected the idea of suicide in the name of martyrdom, for which many Jihadi violent extremists long ($n = 33$; 50%).

Nevertheless, dismissing violence does not require a reference to the foundational values and identity. In the sample, what brought together the seekers of cultural essence and religious purity were the cost-benefit calculations regarding the survival of the in-group members. Ilyass (30), from Paris, 'understands' violence as an option against 'Islamophobic' groups. According to him, Muslims should be patient but 'firm'

¹¹³Dominic Casciani, 'The Takeaway Worker Who Plotted to Attack Pride', *BBC News*, February 10, 2020, sec. UK, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-51405537>.

¹¹⁴Jérémie Pham-Lê and Boris Thioly, "Frère, Mon Âme Est Faible", *L'Express.fr*, July 26, 2017, https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/attentat-de-saint-etienne-du-rouvray-les-derniers-messages-des-tueurs-du-pere-hamel_1930204.html.

¹¹⁵Roy, *Jihad and Death*, p. 5.

¹¹⁶Cassam, *Extremism*, p. 72.

¹¹⁷PYI, July 23, 2021.

¹¹⁸PYI, August 4, 2020.

against blasphemy, which he refuses to define as freedom of expression. That said, he eliminates the violence option as it would be a ‘door’ to chaos, ultimately devastating for everyone.¹¹⁹ From Cologne, Adil (26) targets ISIS on behalf of the self-proclaimed Salafis against violent extremism: ‘those people [...] [who] killed others harmed me.’¹²⁰ Mustafa (30) calls her mother-in-law, raised as a Dutch Catholic, an ‘infidel’ as she thinks believers are ‘stupid.’ Nonetheless, he adopts ‘realism,’ which requires him to get used to living in the same environment with infidels, as long as the dominant culture is not imposed on him: ‘normally, I want to give my opinion about [homosexuality].’¹²¹ Mustafa also asks his ‘Salafi friends’ to be realistic about the war in Syria. With a similar manifesto of realism, Meryem (25) concludes with a burst of laughter: ‘we cannot kill all racists, so the least bad option is to try to live together.’¹²²

Though nativists were much more inclined to support ‘illegal action’ than our Muslim interlocutors ($n = 20/27$; 74,07%), their arguments resembled our self-identified Muslim interlocutors’ cost–benefit calculations. Most of them justified illegality on the condition that it is proportional and the last resort of action: ‘there are plenty of other ways to make your point clear in the Netherlands.’¹²³ Seven right-wing activists put forward some kind of realism to stress the importance of legal action: ‘an activist in prison is useless.’¹²⁴ Arthur (28), a Generation Identity member, describes the chief cost as discrediting the movement in broader society’s eyes.¹²⁵ Also, after exemplifying the dissolution of Generation Identity in France, Julien (29) dismisses any form of violent activism as it would ‘go against my party,’ the National Rally.¹²⁶

Even when they rationalize illegalism, distinguishing it from violence was also important for them. While most self-identified Muslim interviewees in all four countries opposed the idea of illegal activity, the very few ($n = 7$; 9,59%) who consider it an option imagined illegality in entirely different contexts, such as roadblocks. The participants’ justifications of illegal action depended more on the political culture of their countries than their clashing ideological orientations and self-identifications: ‘because the French people are always demonstrating, nobody cares when it is peaceful.’¹²⁷

Conclusion

Dismissing violence does not make an ideologue moderate, and not all violent extremists possess a fervent commitment to understanding themselves through their ideology. The climate of mass scapegoating signals the need to scrutinize different types of radicalization alongside radicalization into violent extremism. While violent extremism is helpful as a narrow category about the willingness to kill and die for an ideology, it should not be conflated with the aspiration to reach ideological completeness. This received wisdom has limited the concept of radicalization as a linear progression towards extremism,

¹¹⁹PYI, September 6, 2020.

¹²⁰PYI, September 28, 2020.

¹²¹PYI, January 23, 2020.

¹²²PYI, June 11, 2020.

¹²³PYI, November 2, 2020.

¹²⁴PYI, May 19, 2020.

¹²⁵PYI, February 9, 2021.

¹²⁶PYI, May 25, 2021.

¹²⁷PYI, June 11, 2021.

and extremism simply as violence without action. Imaginations of cultural essence and religious purity are often intricate, offering individuals a multitude of possibilities once they immerse themselves into the repertoire.

The relationship between violent and non-violent radicalization is characterized by ruptures, discontinuities, and conflicts instead of a continuum. Having problematized the continuum and sameness assumptions, I argued against imagining violent radicalization necessarily on a single continuum with the path between the milder and purer versions of the same ideology. This argument, however, is concerned with the individual-reflective components and shall be accompanied by institutional-historical approaches. Focusing on the institutional dynamics might answer, for example, the extent to which the mainstream Radical Right movements in Europe escape themselves from forming a continuum with the right-wing violent extremist outlook. Such an analysis would concern whether an ideology that vocalizes critical radicalism is capable of bringing something new to the table. Additionally, it might identify different potentials for cultural essence and religious purity, which I did not separate in this research context.

This study analysed the reflective elements that render youths seeking religious purity or cultural essence different from the representations of Jihadi and right-wing violent extremism. I demonstrated that they pursue reflexive awareness, which generates methods such as reflective equilibrium, intellectual needs such as epistemological reflexivity, and perspectives for regular self-analysis and validation. As such, their critical radicalism helps them develop various senses of realism and multifaceted strategies of action, which replace the violence option with other means of (re)action. They do not only think about ideological matters that violent extremists tend to deny, dismiss, or underestimate; they also overthink as they realize the existence of many contrasting sources to reconcile.

There are several methodological, empirical, and theoretical limits to the project. Although the study provided a detailed description of known cases of violent extremism by using publicly available media data, there are significant gaps in the information available for even primary demographic factors, let alone the reflective elements such as their reading materials and topics of discussion. Therefore, the efforts to build open-source datasets should be appreciated and encouraged further to include tangible data about the reflective methods introduced in this article. The interview sampling could also be enhanced in future research, for example, by introducing more Muslim converts or individuals who participated in exit programmes. It is important to mention that this research does not aim to aid the creation of early detection tools for violent radicalization. This comes as a limitation because there is no assurance that individuals who were once critical radicals have not become violent extremists.

Despite these limitations, the argument is established, based on empirical data and conceptual elaboration, that there should be a break rather than development in such a transition between violent extremism and critical radicalism. The fault lines between them relate to ideology-making processes before a given ideology. This concluding remark has implications for the specificity of radical thinking and its value in democracies. While Europe goes through cultural contestations alongside a democratic deficit, any transformation will likely be driven by critical radicalism's desire for mindfulness. The point is to combine critical radicalism with ideologies that will give the right prescription against the grievances of those who pursue it.

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