

Connecting Structures: Resistance, Heroic Masculinity and Anti-Feminism as Bridging Narratives within Group Radicalization

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Connecting Structures: Resistance, Heroic Masculinity and Anti-Feminism as Bridging Narratives within Group Radicalization

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This article pursues two objectives. First, it provides a literature review of research on group radicalization and, second, building on previous research about narratives and their influence on radicalization, it introduces a new concept for comparative radicalization studies: bridging narratives. We use this term to address commonalities in the ideological elements found across various radicalized groups. As narratives shape perceptions of the world and guide processes of identification, they assume an important (internal) function in group formation. At the same time, various radical groups (ethnic nationalists, Salafist-jihadists and militant leftists) share core ideological elements, commonalities that can lead to the creation of new coalitions and unexpected alliances (an external function). The common factor among them are constructed conceptions of the adversary – be they modernity, universalism, Jewish people or feminism. Such constructions allow for the fabrication of an enemy as well as specific conceptions of hierarchical social orders. We analyze two examples in this context: anti-feminism (including heroic or toxic masculinity) and the resistance dispositif that promotes vigilante terrorism. This approach allows us to investigate processes of group radicalization while also taking into account their ideological content as well as the formal effects of such content on processes of group-building and the dynamics of radicalization. In the final section, we provide recommendations for action.

Keywords: group radicalization, bridging narratives, vigilante terrorism, anti-feminism, ideology

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Radicalization processes are – among other causes – an expression of unresolved social conflict. They force us to address the question of just how strong (or weak) social cohesion really is and why individuals or groups come to assume a confrontational stance, especially for cases in which they legitimize or use violence. Within groups, in particular, processes of interaction and socialization can develop a dynamic through which the members of a given group become ever-more alienated from society.

Three core questions guide our analysis of this process. First, which mechanisms and development conditions that are conducive to radicalization processes occur *within* groups (social *bonding*)? Second, which processes have an effect *between* different groups (social *bridging*)? Third, what is the role of group radicalization *in relation to society*, e.g., in relation to discourses about society as a whole (social *linking*).¹ Although narratives play a role in each of

¹ For the distinction between social bonding, bridging and linking, we draw on a recent study about Community re-

these areas, we focus primarily on the bridging function of narratives between ideologically divergent groups.

When group radicalization is conceptualized as a case of violent political extremism, a major distinction must be drawn between idealistic definitions and behavioral definitions (Stephens, Sieckelinck, and Boutellier 2019, 2). The first definition focusses on the ideological content adopted by the groups, which stands opposed to the pillars of the respective political constitution (or to the core values of society, in the words of Peter Neumann 2013, 874). The second definition focusses on means and methods, irrespective of the political aim. The concept of violent political extremism places greater emphasis on the behavioral aspect, in that it focusses more on the means rather than on ideological content. While this ideal-typical differentiation does not strictly correspond to what can be found in existing literature – as most authors describe a complex interplay between ideology and action (e.g. Corman 2011; Berger 2017) – there are some branches of literature that primarily address the interaction dynamics prevalent in the processes and mechanisms of group formation, which are assumed to be similar across various political and religious groups (e.g. Malthaner, Bosi and Demetriou 2014, della Porta 2013). Our intention here is to build on these findings by taking into account shared ideological content as well as its formal effects on processes of group-building and the dynamics of radicalization. Additionally, as this article evolved from the project “Society Extreme”, which synthesized research on (de-)radicalization in Germany and beyond, another aim is to bridge the gap between the German research field/network and the broader international academic debate/network. Unlike the international debate about radicalization, the discussion in Germany – especially in the rather conservative parts in Political Science, the security services and large parts of federal prevention programs – is dominated by a specific definition of extremism that is premised on the idea of the “liberal democratic basic order” as a core substance of the German constitution. This so-called “extremism theory” imagines the existence of a non-radical center that is being contested by two ends of the

political spectrum. Based on this conception, these two poles, the Left and the Right, tend to be closer to one other than they are to the political center itself and are therefore quite identical, merely differing in their ideology of equality or inequality (e.g. Schroeder/Deutz-Schroeder 2015). Leaving aside the exculpation of the center that has historically proven to be the origin of fascism (*extremism of the center*, see Lipset 1959), German research on comparative radicalization has run the risk of equating two quite different phenomena. By combining German and international radicalization research with our proposed concept of bridging narratives, we attempt to conduct comparative research without reproducing the shortcomings that characterize the dominant German branch of research on the topic.

The core ideological elements (so-called ideologemes, discursive elements or narratives) adopted by various radical groups often follow similar patterns and exhibit overlaps, leading to the creation of new coalitions and unexpected alliances. The common denominator among them are constructed conceptions of the adversary – be they modernity, universalism, Jewish people or feminism. These constructions allow for the fabrication of an enemy and the creation of specific conceptions of hierarchical social orders. Such narratives claim sovereignty over an understanding of how society should work, which forms of community life are legitimate and which must be opposed by radical means – not least in relation to the *proper* family and the *proper* interpretation of gender roles. It is in this context that we introduce the concept of bridging narratives – a term we use to address commonalities among the ideological elements found across various radicalized groups.

1 A review of the literature: group dynamics within radicalization research

This section provides an overview of existing literature on group radicalization processes. We start by summarizing the evolution of this research field along with findings from the areas of group sociology, socio-psychological studies about group dynamics, and research on social movements. We then investigate the role assumed by collective patterns of interpretation in the context of radicalization processes.

silience to violent extremism (Ellis and Abdi 2017).

1.1 Processes and mechanisms of radicalization²

First coined in the 1970s (Logvinov 2017, 59), the concept of radicalization has experienced a revival and an initial shift in focus towards Islamist-inspired radicalization processes after the events of September 11th (Neumann 2013, 873). In more recent years, an increasing number of studies have developed a general understanding of radicalization processes influenced by the far-right, the far-left or separatists (Dzhekova et al. 2016, 8). One branch of this research addresses the matter of whether and to what extent radicalization, when understood as a process, will necessarily be accompanied by the use of physical violence at some subsequent phase (see Bartlett and Miller 2012; Kundnani 2012). Dalgaard-Nielsen (2010) distinguishes among three currents within empirical research on violent radicalization in Europe: French sociological approaches (such as Gilles Kepel, Farhad Khosrokhavar and Olivier Roy), the theory of social movements and networks, and empiricist or case-study-driven approaches. Additional research currents have formed in response to matters of definition, concept and contextualization (see Schmid 2013, 8), to debates about whether people and groups radicalize on their own or are radicalized by others (see Murshed Pavan, and Sirseloudi 2010), and to the connections between religion and radicalization in the context of recruitment strategies (see Abou-Taam et al. 2016). In addition to the matter of “how”, past research has also addressed the question of “where”: the latter has primarily focused on correctional facilities (Neumann 2016), educational institutions (Gambetta and Hertog 2016) and concepts of on- and offline activism (von Behr et al. 2013).

When considering the individual career paths of radicalization, the sheer diversity of underlying motivations as well as biographical and external drivers leads us to the conclusion that addressing the meso-sociological mechanisms of radicalization is indeed more effective.³ This is the level at which the collective

identities that structure options for interpretation and action are channeled together and gain the potential for radicalization – position taken by critical terrorism research, with Donatella della Porta as its most well-known proponent (see della Porta 2013). Moreover, the rationality behind terrorist actions is not extrapolated from the micro-level but, rather, becomes evident in the context of (political) group objectives (Hegemann and Kahl 2018, 78–79; see Neumann 2016, 34).

Besides models describing processes of individual radicalization (Ayanian et al. 2018; for a critical view, see Sedgwick 2010, Schmid 2013, 5), a number of process models have been proposed that adopt socio-psychological research findings by analyzing group processes (following Tuckman and Jensen 1977). These models presuppose the existence of formal mechanisms with an effect on all group-building processes, regardless of their ideological orientation.

In Germany, some of the more well-known case studies have investigated groups such as the NSU (National Socialist Underground, see Quent 2016a; Koehler 2017) or the RAF (Red Army Faction, see Aust 2009). A study by Kiefer et al. (2017) provides insights into the radicalization process of a German Islamist network through an investigation of their communications via a WhatsApp chat group. Outside of Germany, researchers have done case studies about groups such as The Weather Underground (Varon 2004) and the English Defense League (Copsey 2010; Bartlett and Littler 2011; Busher 2018). In the United States, two broad umbrella movements can be identified: the anti-government extremist movement and the white supremacist movement (Anti-Defamation League 2018). As Taylor points out, it is not necessary for a perpetrator to be an actual member of these groups; instead, white supremacists are ideologically radicalized in an “overlapping web of movements” comprised of multiple groups such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK),⁴ neo-Nazi groups such as Atomwaffen Division, and skinhead groups such as the Hammerskin Nation (Perliger 2012; Simi, Windisch, and Sporer 2016, as cited in Taylor 2019, 227). Increasingly, what were once largely interpreted as single perpetrator

² In a previous publication, we described the development of extremism research and our reasons to completely forgo this concept. Instead, we only speak of radicalization processes (see Meiering et al. 2018; Teune 2018).

³ For the recent shift from the lone actor paradigm towards meso-sociological approaches, see Hofmann 2018; Schuurman et al. 2018; Jackson 2018.

⁴ For more about the less well-known second coming of the KKK, vigilantism and the long tradition of White Supremacy in the United States of America, see Gordon 2017.

attacks in the context of right-wing political violence are now conceptualized as international, interrelated phenomena. The perpetrator of the Christchurch attack that killed 51 Muslims, for example, claimed to be motivated by white terrorist attacks in the United States (Charleston), Norway (Oslo/Utøya), Canada (Quebec City Mosque Shooting), Sweden (Trollhättan school attack) and others. In turn, the 2019 El Paso shooter with anti-Latino-American sentiments, who killed 22 people, claimed to have been inspired by the Christchurch attack. Meso-sociological perspectives should, as such, not only include group case studies but also investigate ostensibly single attacks as parts of national and international movements and networks, especially online (see Blackburn, McGarrity, and Roach 2019; Champion 2019).

Besides internal dynamics, other studies have also compared external interaction dynamics. The contentious-politics approach proposed by Tarrow, Tilly and McAdam (see McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2007; Tarrow 2016) considers various theoretical investigations from hitherto separate lines of research, unifying them within the field of social movement studies (della Porta and LaFree 2012; Bosi, Demetriou, and Malthaner 2014 in connection with political violence). Sageman (e.g. 2004) and Wiktorowicz (2003; 2005) – followed by Bakker (2006) and Neumann and Rogers (2008) – also consider radicalization, first and foremost, as the outcome of social interactions. The work of della Porta (2013), in particular, assumes a central position in the field of comparative research on group radicalization processes. According to her findings, escalation mechanisms within interactions entail the key elements of radicalization, taking place among state actors as well as within the respective movements (della Porta 1995). Finally, Malthaner and Waldmann (2014) have investigated the connection between terrorist groups and their supporting milieus.

These branches of research have identified numerous mechanisms that contribute to processes of radicalization. The results have proven eclectic, encompassing not only meso- but also micro-level mechanisms. In the area of group radicalization, McCauley and Moskalenko (2011) offer us a wide range of options. For the purpose of this study, we present the

mechanisms that are relevant for the phenomenon of group radicalization. As Winter et al. (2020) have already addressed the role of online communication within radicalization processes in depth, we have left this aspect aside.

Research on social movements and political violence emphasizes the significance of interpersonal processes and contacts (as opposed to explanations of psychological or social “pathologies”). *Personal relationships* (friendship, family relations and love) enable access to the respective social groups. Whether left-wing, ethno-nationalistic or religious movements, personal connections also contribute to building trust and loyalty beyond the first group phase, ensuring that solidarity with the group remains intact, despite arising pressure or high risks posed for the individual. The mechanism proposed by the *slippery-slope* argument is related to this (McCauley and Moskalenko 2011, 44–45): even an initially low-level of engagement within a broader social movement can pave the way for “high-risk activism” (Malthaner 2017, 377), as this allows for new roles to be tested out and additional contacts to be established. The predominant perceptions, attitudes and values are gradually adopted, contributing to a progressive process of *cognitive radicalization* (Malthaner and Waldmann 2014). Entry into the new group (core group) is often connected with complete personal reorientation and breaking contact with one’s previous social circles (*unfreezing*). The pace of this process can vary greatly, from a sudden withdrawal to a gradual reorientation (for a gender perspective, see Alava, Frau-Meigs, and Hassan 2017, 44; Brown 2013; Sjöberg and Gentry 2011). Offers of inclusion are often linked to demands for exclusivity, such as claims of being the true believers. The more ideologically rigid and homogeneous the group becomes through the process of self-affirmation in relation to attitudes, views and options for action, the more likely moderate members of the group are to exit, leaving behind a core group that eventually comes to accept violence as a means of action – a process that della Porta (2013, 146–152) describes as *ideological encapsulation*. In addition to personal, affective connections, we must also consider the environmental conditions discussed below that enable and promote the use of political violence.

In the Islamist context, *subjective experiences of injustice* can be brought about by discrimination or marginalization by majority society or the state. In the far-right context, such sentiments can result from the perception that one is being cheated on account of society's growing concern with facilitating immigration. An experience of injustice may lead the individual to develop a desire for revenge, thereby differentiating such experiences from mere perceptions of deprivation. While personal resentment can prove to be detrimental to the achievement of the group's objectives, individual experiences of injustice develop their greatest potential for radicalization when they are interpreted "in the context of a group and as part of the greater political struggle" (McCauley and Moskalenko 2011, 220). Whether or not the threat derives from a personal experience is irrelevant; for an individual, it is enough to feel that he/she is part of a group (or movement, etc.), consequently believing that any attack, experience of injustice or threat – affecting the entire group or just part of it – constitutes a personal affront (Obaidi et al. 2018). Taylor, Currie and Holbrook (2013) state that this not only incites prejudices but also the potential for violence. Building on approaches of "fraternal" (as opposed to egoistic) experiences of deprivation (Runciman 1966), there are a number of studies that address how certain groups attempt to create such individual identification with the group (e.g. Joyce and Lynch 2018 about the self-victimization of political ex-prisoners in Northern Ireland; Macdonald 2011; Heath-Kelly 2013). McCauley (2001, 349) even claims that political attitudes and actions tend to be more related to group identifications than they are to overriding self-interests. In other words, the effectiveness of experiences of injustice or feelings of endangerment depend on how processes of attributed identification are steered and framed (for more on framing, see Snow and Byrd 2007). Narratives prove to be of crucial importance for this process. Through the application of an opposition narrative (see chapter 2.2), for example, perceptions of a threat come to be related to a specific in-group: an imagined racial community in the case of the Identitarian right, the principle of *al-walā' wa-l-barā'* (fealty and disavowal) in the case of Islamists, or the "many from down here" as opposed to the "few from the top"

("We are the 99%" from Occupy Wall Street) in the case of the left-wing movement.

Across all areas, empirical research has unanimously shown that *confrontations with state power* and forms of repression, in particular, exhibit a high potential for mobilization whenever they are deemed to be unjust or excessive, thereby triggering subjective or fraternal experiences of injustice (Lindekilde 2014; Quent 2016a, 64; McCauley and Moskalenko 2008, 425). This type of confrontation increases the risks and the costs of membership and leads moderate members of the group to drop out, leaving behind a hardened core group with the tendency to radicalize more rapidly. Particularly with regard to left-wing violence – which, in contrast to right-wing or Islamist violence has been largely limited to confrontational violence towards the state and political opponents – the "image of a disproportionately violent and unfair state" (Quent 2016a, 64) serves as justification for violence. This also applies to labeling young people from the protest scene as sympathizers or supports of terror groups: the current legal proceedings involving the riots during the G20 Summit in Hamburg, along with the strategy adopted by the police forces ("Hamburg Front") and depictions in the media serve as a prime example of this (Malthaner, Teune and Ullrich 2018, 2f., 44). Within a group, state repression can dictate the boundaries of violent action that is understood to be legitimate. Moreover, it is quite evident that the repressive strategy of instituting organizational bans are prone to causing radicalization into violence, attracting solidarity from other groups and boosting publicity (see Minkenberg 2003, 32–33). The same can be said of Salafist groups, which present themselves as an "oppositional" struggle: for them, "every form of repression [serves] as confirmation of belonging to the chosen elite and of following the right path" (Abou-Taam et al. 2016, 9).

In recent years, the concept of *co-radicalization* has gained traction, especially in studies of Islamism. This concept is used to describe interrelated phenomena of radicalization through which groups interacting with one another mutually contribute to each other's radicalization. Such processes of radicalization can be fueled or even generated through social dramatization, banalization and misdirected acts of prevention

(Logvinov 2017, 89). Responses to jihadist attacks, in particular, carry the risk of inciting resentment and securitization among society as a whole that can subsequently promote processes of co-radicalization. Numerous studies and analyses have dealt with Islamophobia, the criticism of Islam, anti-Islam attitudes and anti-Muslim racism in this sense (Uenal 2016). Islamist and Salafist groups, in turn, reinterpret the idea of the outsider (*Ġurabā*) and use it to attract new members (Köpfer 2014, 446). Douglas Pratt expands on the concept of co-radicalization by proposing the idea of interactions among radicalizations (so-called *reactive co-radicalization*). Based on this approach, he considers the attacks carried out by Anders Behring Breivik as a radical reaction developed as a consequence of the presence of Islam in an otherwise secular environment, which is perceived – and intentionally framed – to be a threat (Pratt 2015, 216, see also Moghaddam 2018). The mobilization of anti-fascist groups against right wing groups or populists is another example of reactive co-radicalization (see the discussion in Doyle (ed.) 2019; Copsey 2017; Busher and Macklin 2015, discussing *cumulative radicalization*).

Here, radicalization is taken to be a relational process of activities pursued by political groups that unfolds in phases and is accompanied by spirals of escalation and cognitive framing. In the next section, we look into the socializing functions of group cultures and their influence on processes of radicalization.

1.2 Collective patterns of interpretation:

socialization, subculture, counterculture and pop culture

Another area of investigation within radicalization research concerns collective patterns of interpretation. While ideology often appears to be rather insignificant in the nascent stages of a radicalization process, it gains ever-greater influence as the process of group formation advances. Research on youth-specific types of social group formation considers this condition through the concept of group culture (della Porta 2013, 12–13).

Groups are considered to be the most effective agents of socialization for adolescents in their struggle for identity (Davydov 2015). They encourage the

separation of young people from their original families and provide members with the attention, recognition and appreciation that society has otherwise denied them. Cliques serve a double role: they create stable conflict constellations based on ideologically-driven concepts of the enemy (*kuffār*, the West, foreigners, the left, Antifa, the police, the state) (Bergmann and Erb 1994) and, at the same time, their subcultural elements are attractive for young people, who come to adopt the ideological elements of the group during their time as members of the clique. Groups thereby assume a politicizing, ideologizing and normalizing function. Internally, they set up a new social reality that influences the perceptions and behavior of its members (for more on the cognitive dynamics, see Malthaner 2017, 374). This process becomes particularly potent when the group culture is framed as a “counterculture”, or oppositional (El-Mafaalani 2018; Davydov 2015, 8). This was not only the case for the hippie and anti-war movement but is also adopted as a strategy of the European New Right today (“*Kontrakultur*”).

The concept of subculture has enjoyed a long research tradition within sociology and cultural studies and it is closely connected to the Birmingham School from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (see Schulman 1993). The latter synthesized interdisciplinary approaches such as Marxism, feminism, critical race theory and ethnographic methods and investigated the relationship between different cultures (always in the plural) as power relations within a struggle for cultural hegemony (see Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 2012 [1977]). Group cultures are characterized as subcultures when they significantly differentiate themselves from majority culture – or “parent-culture” as Hall and Jefferson (1976, 12f.) state – through their own binding norms, values and activities. Early studies looked into skinhead subculture (Clarke 1976) as well as nonpolitical youth cultures, such as the Mods, and investigated the cultural meaning of drug use (see Hall and Jefferson 1976). Beyond being internal to the group, subcultures may also comprise a heterogeneous and uneven network of disparate groups. According to Bergmann and Erb (1998, 157), one feature that is of tremendous significance is the “special language code that solidifies core ideolog-

ical beliefs through key concepts [...] while also signaling belonging and exclusion by way of an opposition scheme". For right-wing mobilization, this may include terms such as the nation, culturally foreign (*kulturfremd*), the occident (or West) and the lying press; for Islamism, it may include *Dār al-Islām* (abode of peace) versus *Dār al-Harb* (abode of war), *kuffār*, brothers and sisters; and, for left-wing scene, it may include system, imperialists and fascists. Such subcultural codes serve to create a sense of belonging that can even consolidate into a collective identity. According to della Porta and Diani (2006, 113), collective identities are a precondition for the emergence of collective action.

Drawing on studies about (sub-)cultures, discourse analysis and subsequent discursive network analyses have contributed to our understanding of radicalization processes, as well. In recent years, the boundaries have blurred among various groupings, meaning that certain terms, symbols and codes are no longer exclusively claimed by a particular subculture but now affect various groups and networks in terms of their perceptions and behavioral structures through different concrete codings (Wimmer 2008, chapter 3). Concurrently, subcultures hardly distinguish themselves along the lines of the classic socio-structural indicators any longer. For example, the new-right Identitarian grouping not only attracts people from the conventional "far-right extremes" but also from the student, middle-class and artistic milieus. Protests organized by Pegida likewise draw in participants from diverse social milieus, and, with regard to Islamist recruiting, as well, class backgrounds have limited explanatory power (Bundeskriminalamt 2015, 16–17, Malthaner 2017). Classic subcultural phenomena such as right-wing rock do, nevertheless, continue to exist alongside such new alliances (Bundesministerium des Innern 2017, 157–158).

Subculture also plays a key role within Islamist processes of radicalization (Toprak and Weitzel 2017). Abou-Taam et al. (2016, 16) point to pop jihad, which is marketed and promoted through videos, texts, *anāshīd* (Islamic a capella chants, see Pieslak and Lahoud 2018) and other forms of internet content (see Said 2016; Ahmed and Pisoiu 2017). The ongoing television series *Inside of the Caliphate* is illustrative of

the strategy adopted by the Islamic State (ISIS) of imparting its viewers with a feeling of being close to the global struggle and the life of Mujahideen. In relation to the right, the topic of "pop culture" has been the subject of controversy with regard to phenomena such as "right rap" and "nipsters". Through this, we can identify the trend of radicalized groups seeking to increase their appeal to the outside world. The New Right, for example, is adopting established, disruptive forms of protest such as climbing buildings, squatting and staging sit-ins while also rhetorically defusing ideological patterns of interpretation. Animosity towards foreigners is being reformulated as "love for the homeland", racist nationalism is being renamed "ethnopluralism" and the slogan "foreigners out!" is being rephrased as "remigration!" The aim of these amendments is to create inroads into the general social discourse and the middle-class milieu in order to gradually attain "cultural hegemony" (Kellershohn 2016). Using this strategy, groups are able to reformulate, intensify and spread radical content for radicalization processes; in so doing, they assume the role of a catalyst. Particularly in relation to the resistance dispositif and vigilante terrorism (such as committed by the right-wing group "Gruppe Freital"), such groups are laying fertile ground that empowers radicalized groups and individual perpetrators while also allowing them to vicariously legitimate their actions.

1.3 Preliminary conclusion

Beyond individual dispositions and motivations, research on group dynamics can elucidate how radicalization is able to become increasingly energized once access to the respective groups, networks and movements has been established. Groups close themselves off to the outside and become inwardly homogeneous; they increase the likelihood of violent action by turning to personal connections, by influencing attitudes, perceptions and structures of action, and by relying on relational processes outside of the group through engagement with other groups or state actors. While a branch research on such movements has investigated the dynamics of interaction through confrontation and repression, we refer to another approach that

focuses on how perceptions are structured.⁵ Framing processes assume a key role for steering subjective experiences of injustice, intensifying feelings of belonging, concretizing conceptions of the enemy and shaping the discursive formulation of external political events – process forms that are often structured according to a particular narrative. In the following section, we propose the concept of a “bridging narrative” to describe identity-imparting narrative structures between groups (*social bridging*). In general, groups function as a catalyst for reformulating and spreading radical content within discourses, strategically striving to achieve cultural hegemony and discursive power (see Zick, Küpper, and Krause 2016). Ultimately, the framing of certain terms and the associated narrative work can have a radicalizing effect on the groups themselves (*social bonding*) as well as on society as a whole (*social linking*).

2 Bridging narratives

The previous section presented an overview of the existing literature on meso-level sociological approaches within radicalization research, which has been dominated by *formal* approaches to identifying common mechanisms across various radicalization phenomena. In these approaches, ideological elements appear, in particular, within the framework of *intragroup* processes of socialization and homogenization. What cannot be explained by these approaches, however, are the ideological discursive elements (ideologemes) and narratives that are shared by diverse groups. While these narratives are customized to the respective area in specific ways, they remain part of the same narrative pool and fulfill similar functions, structuring patterns of perception, attributions of belonging and options for action while also serving as conveyor belts for processes of radicalization.

Moreover, we witness many cases of shifting memberships (conversions) from one group to another over time – and perhaps even shifts in ideology. Indeed, members of radical groups can adapt their ideological framework to the new environment with little effort, especially when the principle ideological elements are

shared between the old and new group. This is not so much an indication of ideological arbitrariness of radicalization processes but rather an indication that the radicalizing potential of certain discourses and narratives deserve further investigation. Furthermore, this is also not to imply that we are dealing with different manifestations of the same phenomenon (such as a general form of extremism) or that all phenomena should be treated identically; the narratives are selectively applied for the respective area, specifically coded and assimilated.

In a broader sense, past investigations have referenced a “third position” with regard to the strategic and partial amalgamation of right and left-wing currents and the commonalities of their content.⁶ These entail alliances with anti-emancipatory overlaps that cut across issue areas such as anti-semitism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia and anti-feminism (Culina and Fedders 2016). Yet, at the same time, these are often intentionally formed strategic alliances. Through the concept of bridging narratives, we seek to emphasize that ideological connections are not necessarily created deliberately.

In the following section, we introduce two collections of closely interconnected narratives: first, anti-feminism along with gender constructions such as masculism, heroic and toxic masculinity and femininity as a reproductive function; and, second, the *dispositif* of resistance, which expresses itself in vigilante terrorism.⁷

⁶ Historically, the Third Way was developed as a self-description by various fascist groups between the two world wars, claiming a third position beyond capitalism and Marxist socialism. It was later revived in the second half of the twentieth century, e.g. as *Troisième voie* in France until 2013 (Leclercq 2012), *Terza Posizione* in Italy (Caldiron 2013) that is now succeeded by *Forza Nuova* and *CasaPound*, a fascist activism network with ties to the Identitarian Movement in France, Austria and Germany, and the *National Front*, a fascist political Party in the UK (Busher 2018).

⁷ Elsewhere (Meiering et al. 2018; Meiering, Dziri, and Foroutan 2019), we included anti-Semitism as a junction at which anti-imperialism, anti-modernism and anti-universalism converge. For this article, we opted for anti-feminism and the resistance *dispositif* as there is less literature about these narratives within radicalization research.

⁵ McAdam and Rucht (1993) investigated diffusion processes of ideas in social movements, especially within cross-national left movements. In this study, we analyze diffusion processes between ideologically different groups.

2.1 Anti-feminism and constructions of masculinity and femininity

The 2017 UNESCO Report about Youth and Violent Extremism emphasized that “[t]here is an absence of research into the construction of masculinity in relations to ideas of femininity [sic], when it comes to gender, social media and radicalization” (Alava, Frau-Meigs, and Hassan 2017, 44). One of our intentions is to help fill this void, particularly considering that anti-feminism serves as a key contextual bridge that stretches across various groups. Though this position takes on different expressions among different radicalized areas, they all share an operating principle of producing coherence inwardly and connections outwardly.

2.1.1 Anti-feminism in the New Right

Investigating anti-feminism among right-wing groupings in Germany, Andreas Kemper argues that the classic anti-feminism of the 1960s has undergone fundamental changes. Men are no longer assumed to be (natural and therefore legitimate) perpetrators but have, inversely, been declared as victims of “state feminism”, a line of reasoning that Kemper designates as “masculism” (2012). By extension, whenever (“originally German”) families are construed as victims of this development, one can speak of “familialism” (Kemper 2014, 61): familialists refer to a very limited, population-biological, national and normative image of the family that seeks to marginalize or combat families that do not correspond to this model, such as single-parents, non-Germans, financially disadvantaged households and so-called patchwork or rainbow families. Within the New Right, three currents propagate the idea of familialism for different reasons. First, the neo-liberal current rests on the conception of a middle-class family that includes a single-earner model. It seeks to destroy the welfare state or radically limit it, and the family is supposed to absorb whatever the socio-political consequences of this may be. The second current consists of evangelical and ultra-Catholic Christian fundamentalists. The third area is the *völkisch* (racial-nationalist) current that fears the gradual “elimination” of the alleged “original” or “indigenous” white Christian European population through migration (in part based on the assumption

of the “great replacement” conspiracy). Instead, families of “pure” origin are called upon to have as many children as possible in order to hinder this demographic development. Consequently, this branch also rejects homosexuality.

What these familialist currents have in common is that they turn sexuality into the core element that connects the middle-class family to the nation state. In Foucauldian terms, one can say that the anti-feminism of the right is used as a bio-political instrument in order to regulate the populace in accordance with a biological-national or racial conception of the family. In this sense, anti-feminism serves as a point of intersection between racism, apocalyptic conspiracy theories and the opposition narrative.

Despite the presence of racist views – often linked with anti-feminism – different religious groups seek to establish close alliances, such as Catholic and Islamist groupings or evangelical pro-lifers and orthodox Jewish activists in the United States. For example, the Forum of German Catholics declared Islam to be a “natural ally” in the fight against the “culture of death” (Kemper 2014, 23). How can these disparate alliances of Christian and Islamic fundamentalists be explained?

2.1.2 Femininity within Islamist Fundamentalism

The Islamist ideal of establishing an Islamic State is based on concepts of social and political conditions that existed on the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, presented as the “ideal society governed by Allah’s law” (Mahood and Rane 2017, 27, see Brown 2018). One key part of this state utopia rests on the Salafist ideology of gender, which is depicted as the alternative to the West and its idea of the equality of men and women. Overall, social life abides by a diametrical gender construction of men and women that deems that to be completely opposed characters. In accordance with ethnic conceptions of a “national community”, gender narratives form the heart of the religiously defined community in this context (Cook 2017, 156ff.). They assume an important role for recruiting potential supporters in that the glorification of the masculine and feminine gender roles they promote have a high degree of appeal for young people. In particular, gender narratives demonstrate just how

sexuality can be practiced in harmony with religious precepts, especially when expectations of the family or conservative-religious groupings are set in contrast to the “majority society” (see Saltman and Smith 2015).

Along with Salafist preachers and authors, glorifications of the Islamist gender order in the media are also influential. Moreover, word-for-word adaptations of verses from the Quran and popular hadiths (instructive narratives about the life and beliefs of Muhammad) play a decisive role, as well. Additionally, writings by ISIS followers targeting broad audiences are utilized, e.g. “Women in the Shade of Islam” (Al-Sheha 2000) and “Women of the Islamic State” released by the Al Khanssaa Brigade (Mohagheghi 2015), a group which has been characterized as the “female moral police of ISIS” (Gilsinan 2014). Making use of a rhetorical inversion, these texts argue that the “Western” discourse of emancipation actually oppresses women by forcing them into activities that are opposed to their very nature, such as professional occupations. Islam, on the other hand, is said to free women by liberating them to pursue the reproductive tasks that God intended (see Shapiro and Maras 2018).

Accordingly, the primary role of female jihadi Salafists is to bear sons. Motherhood is conventionalized as a religious effort while wives are largely treated as the object of disciplining and control. The high value placed on motherhood is a significant motivation among German converts as well as Muslims. Since 2016, when ISIS losses were accumulating, the female gender role started to adapt and promote the idea of the fighting woman, “Mujahidah”.⁸ Up until 2016, ISIS never made use of female suicide bombers, which would later change in response to calls to carry out attacks in Western countries, including the knife attack perpetrated by a 15-year-old female student from Hanover in January 2016 and the foiled attack that was to be executed by various women in Paris in September 2016. One important exception was the female Sharia police officers of the Khanssaa brigades in the “caliphate” of Abu Bakr al Bagdhadi. Their task was to enforce Islamic morals among the public and

execute rigorous controls, including even the torture of deviant women. The Khanssaa brigades were disproportionately comprised of foreign female jihadists, indicating that European women who migrated to Syria also sought to live out their fantasies of violence and adventure (Günther et al. 2016, 181). Therefore, even if we know that single life is not possible in ISIS and single women are soon made to marry, Islamist women cannot only be reduced to their instrumental function as wives and mothers as they themselves are ideologically convinced of their actions (Herschinger 2017).

Commonalities between Ethnic Nationalist and Islamist gender ideologies are not only present in the way femininity is constructed; the gender narratives promoted by the New Right and Salafist Islamism also share heroic masculine world views. Generally speaking, cults of masculinity are “a stable bridge linking all authoritarian currents” (Weiß 2017, 237).

2.1.3 Heroic masculine world views as a common narrative for the New Right and Islamism

One remarkable example of an image of masculinity adopted by the New Right is depicted in Jack Donovan’s book “The Way of Men”, which invokes a barbarian alliance of men. Though he is an avowed homosexual, Donovan does not call himself “gay” as this term was forwarded by the liberal, urban and “feminist-friendly” community (Donovan 2006). Instead, he refers to himself as an “androphile”. According to this conception, homosexuality is only acceptable if balanced by an absurdly augmented hypermasculinity. This heroic model of masculinity glorifies pure instincts and violence as male virtues, falling back into a form of barbarism considered to be “natural”. As these role structures foster violent behavior and misogyny, they can fuel radicalization processes among already constituted groups that see themselves in a marginalized position (Lehnert 2010) – such as the 2014 Isla Vista Killings or the 2018 van Attack in Toronto, both carried out by self-claimed “members” of the so-called “Incel” online community (Involuntary Celibates). Even though masculists like Donovan explicitly despise Incels and the Men’s Rights Movement for “whining” about their subordination to women and therefore adopting a weak masculinity, Incels vio-

⁸ See the East African jihadi magazine for women “al Ghurabaa”: <https://jihadology.net/?s=al-Ghurabaa&C4%81%E2%80%99+Magazine>.

lently “restore” masculist patriarchy in killings or attacks. As part of the “Incel Rebellion”, they seek revenge for being oppressed or ignored by women. Large parts of the community share white supremacist, racist or alt-right views.

The cult of masculinity constitutes an important commonality across different processes of radicalization. “The terrorism of September 11th, Donovan’s masculism [...] come together in the heroic gesture of the warrior who scorns civilization” (Weiß 2017, 237). The actions of male jihadists are seldom considered from a gender perspective (e.g. in Hegghammer (ed.) 2017; Aslam 2012; Brown 2018; Shapiro and Maras 2018). In an analysis of the presentation of jihadist masculinity in the media, Günther et al. (2016) highlight the *violent warrior* as one of three primary categories of male gender (next to the *potential lover* that addresses young women and the *dutiful individual* that promotes religious and moral legitimation). The *violent warrior* is depicted as an invincible, merciless agent acting in the service of the Islamic State. Feroocious presentations of this warrior are meant to scare off the enemy (*Kuffar*), e.g. by depicting brutal scenes of executions on YouTube. In 2015, adolescents were presented in the role as executioners for the very first time and celebrated as “Lions of tomorrow” by the ISIS magazine “*Dabiq*” (2015, 20–21). Here, masculinity is constructed as unrestrained power in an archaic battle that often presents stereotypes of masculinity borrowed from action films and computer games (see also Bouzar 2014).

More generally, when considering the society of the Islamic State, sexuality norms also assume a core function for exercising political dominance. Drawing on Foucault, one can speak of a sexuality *dispositif* – or a politics of the body – in re-traditionalized Islamic societies. Weiß notes that the Western middle class has also regulated sexuality to an immense degree (Weiß 2017, 252; see Foucault 1978). As this sexuality *dispositif* likewise exists within Judaism and Catholicism, we are likely dealing with a specific, orthodox *dispositif* and not merely a strictly Islamic one. As all other religiously based systems of domination, Islamism “has been modern in recognizing that sexuality, as the key into the private sphere, allows for the establishment of complete dominance over all of soci-

ety” (Weiß 2017, 250). In order to attain total access to all areas of life, ISIS seeks to impose strict discipline on women. This process is also fortified through a revolutionary dynamic in that Islamist movements assume an oppositional stance vis-à-vis the nation state and formerly predominant Kemalist or Baathist secularism – and certainly vis-à-vis the “immoral” West, as well (see Hegghammer 2009).

All in all, gender narratives assume a domination function in ethnic nationalism as well as in Islamism. Constructions of masculinity and femininity essentially serve to stabilize a community that is defined along ethnic or fundamentalist lines. Numerous studies have taken a differentiated approach to this issue, though most only address far-right groupings and phenomena that occurred in the 1990s (Fangen 1997 and 2003; Bitzan 2017; Lehnert and Radvan 2016). Additional studies are needed to pick up from where previous attempts left off.

2.2 Resistance *dispositif* – vigilante radicalization

Another bridging narrative is that of “resistance”. We have also chosen to speak of a *dispositif* here in order to demonstrate that this is not specifically a matter of (systematic) ideology but instead constitutes a plethora of connected narratives, activities and structures.⁹ Resistance enjoys legal protection within the German constitution. Article 20, section 4 of the Basic Law states that: “All Germans shall have the right to resist any person seeking to abolish this constitutional order if no other remedy is available.” Some protest groups refer to the right of resistance in this sense in order to legitimize their own actions (Kleger 2013). In other cases, resistance is also invoked without a positive reference to the constitution.

As highlighted earlier, groups often tend to develop strong internal coherence and an affinity for violence when they code their group culture as a counterculture, when they experience injustice, or when they are engaged in a struggle against state actors (or other groups). Acting as a web that spins connections between these elements, the *dispositif* of resistance is capable of bundling together such types of experi-

⁹ A *dispositif* comprises linguistic and non-linguistic artefacts that are connected to one another. They therefore include discourses and concepts as well as works of architecture, laws, rules and behavior. See Meiering 2018.

ences, meaning that various groups can claim to be acting in the name of resistance. Whether acting out against the decadent West that is destroying one's identity or against non-believers, imperialism, "capital" or the great "ethnic replacement" caused by immigration, whoever finds themselves in a position of resistance must seize upon violent means once all others have been exhausted – for something greater is thought to be at stake.

Talk of resistance has gained currency in recent years, not least through right-wing populism and the New Right. One of the most prominent conceptions is that of a "great replacement", referring to claims that immigration from non-European countries is insidiously leading to Europeans being "replaced". Words such as "reconquista" open up a military as well as historical framework that inserts contemporary political events within a broader historical context (the expansion of Christian Kingdoms on the Iberian Peninsula between 711-1492), evoking apocalyptic doomsday scenarios and creating an acute impulse to take militant action. Germany, for example, witnessed an explosive increase in racist and politically motivated attacks, often framed as reactions to refugee migration in 2015-2016. The Federal Ministry of the Interior recorded more than 2,200 attacks on refugees and their places of residence in 2017 alone,¹⁰ with investigators having only been able to successfully close the case on a handful of the attacks. Strikingly, the portrait of the perpetrators who have been apprehended hardly corresponds to those of classic far-right extremists of the 1990s. These are neither young people nor strictly economically disadvantaged individuals: they stem from the so-called bourgeois middle class and, in most cases, the attacks are not organized. Due to their lack of organization, such attacks are often considered as isolated incidents and, as such, they are not included in statistics of politically motivated violence. Since many incidents are single-perpetrator attacks, until recently, literature has treated them as lone-wolf terrorism. But with the rise in far-right terrorism, there is a growing awareness of the limitations of this paradigm and a need for a re-orientation of radicalization theory (Taylor 2019). Blackburn, Mc-

Garrity, and Roach recently stated that the orthodoxy that defined terrorism "as political violence by a minority community against the State" (2019, 184, referring to Wilkinson 2011) no longer holds true.

While much of the existing literature differentiates between terror from above – state-sponsored terror in a totalitarian regime – and terrorism from below (such as that committed by the RAF), these incidents operate at a different level. Such manifestations of terrorist violence are neither directed at the state nor are they perpetrated by the state. They do not target the population as a whole but are rather aimed at a specific part of the population: against members of marginalized groups, such as refugees or Germans with foreign ancestry, as well as against allies who actively provide assistance to or support refugees. In the context of a comprehensive analysis of the NSU (National Socialist Underground) in Germany, Quent (2016a; 2016b) proposes conceptualizing this form of terrorist violence as *vigilantism*.

This concept refers to representative acts of violence committed *in the place of the state, as a better state or beyond the state* (Abrahams 1998; Johnston 1996; Schmidt-Lux 2013). In the United States, it is used to describe certain forms of political violence in the Reconstruction era, especially lynching. Many case studies from the United States allow for generalizations and hypotheses to be drawn for comparative research on vigilantism (Abrahams 2007; Berg and Wendt 2011). When vigilantism acts in the place of the state, it aims to make up for deficient governmental structures, such as those found in failed states. In acting beyond the state, vigilantism establishes parallel and special structures alongside existing ones, such as in the case of the Islamic State, to some degree. When vigilante terrorism aims at the removal of a corrupted government that is unable or unwilling to act, we refer to cases of the "better state". This variant accounts for the rapid increase in the number of attacks against refugee accommodations, militia groups such as Gruppe Freital, the racist Ku Klux Klan in the United States and right-wing terrorist groups such as NSU, which are connected with the idea of "leaderless resistance" (Kaplan 1997; Dobratz and Waldner 2012; Quent 2016b).

¹⁰ FAZ online <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/gesellschaft/kriminalitaet/rassismus-mehr-als-2200-angriffe-auf-fluechtlinge-im-2017-15471220.html> (accessed 23 July 2018).

While the “extremism of the center” is also referenced when addressing such phenomena, as extremism theory starts from the basis of sidelined individuals – those with deviant views and those who oppose the state – this idea is unable to analytically resolve the issue at hand. According to Quent, the specific character of vigilante terrorism lies in the act of self-justice to uphold the system, or: “breaking the law in order to respect it” (Abrahams 1998, 153, see also Culberson 1990, 8). These actors do not aim to institute any sort of fundamental revolution of the system but instead believe that they are merely “defending” the existing or the old order – even if the state’s power monopoly must temporarily be suspended in order to do so (see Abrahams 1998, 9 and 2007, 423 with the notion of cultural and structural “frontier zones” rather than geographic divisions). Vigilantism is an authoritarian movement or, rather, a conformist rebellion: its protagonists act in the name of something greater than themselves, appealing to a superordinate power – the state or its people – that has momentarily failed (see Rosenbaum and Sederberg 1976 on “establishment violence”). On the other hand, the objective is also to invoke fear among outsiders that are defined as being non-conformist, as not belonging, as damaging or of lower value. Concurrently, part of the strategy involves using political violence to force the state to strengthen the security apparatus at the expenses of freedom and equality and to enact restrictive laws in line with the views of the vigilantes (such as the so-called Asylum Compromise from the 1990s in Germany). Essentially, for them, no contradiction exists between the formal acceptance of democracy and racist violence.

There are three (ideal-type) levels of vigilantism: first-order vigilantism is directly oriented towards minority groups (e.g., the NSU’s murdering of ten people of foreign ancestry); second-order vigilantism targets political enemies (such as party offices or refugee helpers); and third-order vigilantism attacks the state and its representatives (including the assassination attempt on the Mayor of Cologne, Henriette Reker, or the assassination of Kassel district president Walter Lübcke).

In Germany, in the aftermath of the high influx of refugees in 2015 and 2016, vigilante groups organized

city or village patrols in place of the government or to oppose the government’s refugees policies – which, in their view, was no longer able to enforce law and order (Korsch 2017). One example is the group “Bürgerwehr Freital/360” from the German state of Saxony, whose members received prison sentences for founding and abetting a terrorist organization. Established by a bus driver from the town of Freital, the group carried out bombings and attacks against refugees and activists in 2015 while seeking to gain public prominence on social networks. The perpetrators justified their actions in the name of protecting their *heimat*. According to Quent, this group is illustrative of “a great number of largely unknown individuals and groups that make use of or endorse violence all across the country in the name of defending or preserving ‘the people’ as well as standing opposed to change” (Quent 2016b).

The so-called Sharia Police – conceived by Sven Lau in Wuppertal, Germany, in September 2014 – is a slightly different case of vigilantism. Donning safety vests, this group addressed individuals in front of gambling halls and other entertainment establishments to warn them about the officially endorsed crime of gambling, alcoholism, pornography, etc., and to establish a Sharia Control Zone. Studies are yet to investigate how much trust Salafist powers place in the technical capabilities of the state and the extent to which they cast doubt on its moral legitimacy.

The vigilante narrative serves as a source of strategic self-justification for the use of violence. Kowalewski (2002, 433) considers vigilantism to be “among the most violent social groupings that exist”. The extent to which this narrative plays a role in the area of leftist militancy or Salafist jihadism is yet to be investigated. In terms of ISIS, we can certainly claim that the narrative is presented as the savior and cleanser of a degenerated state order (resistance against the hegemonic West or against the Crusaders or Zionists and in preparation for the arrival of *ad-Dajjal* – similar to the eschatological figure of the Anti-Christ). In this case, we are dealing with a variation of vigilantism. Either way, the resistance dispositif and its form of vigilantism is a bridging narrative for processes of radicalization that should not be underestimated.

3 Conclusions

Research on group radicalization has shown that processes of radicalization are more forcefully driven by mechanisms of interaction than they are by specific ideological orientations: among members *within* the group, *among* different groups (relative co-radicalization) and in *struggles with state actors* (co-radicalization). Inwardly, this leads to processes of homogenization and, outwardly, to processes of exclusion. At the same time, however, radicalizations are not only intensified by way of exclusion or through conflict with other actors: the bridging narratives described above are used across various groups to share models for perceiving the world and narratives to foster identity; they promote the formation of situational alliances and new coalitions. Through this process, radical narratives that are hostile to certain populations and that legitimate the use of violence are strengthened across these groups and come to form a toxic discursive context. One element that is both dangerous and novel with regard to such bridging narratives is that radical groups are increasingly turning to pop-cultural elements to have a greater impact on the overall social discourse as well as the middle-class milieu. Despite the continued existence of conventional exclusionary narratives in the sense of sub- or countercultures, as well as archaic presentations, groups that initially appear to be moderate are, in fact, paving the way for the radicalization of society. The consequence of this process of normalization is that it induces a feeling among group members that they are acting as a silent majority, ultimately setting up an environment that favors violent measures.

4 Recommendations for action

First, radical critiques must be taken seriously. Promoting a critical view of the system is a key component for recruitment strategies and for the self-image of radicalized groups. Radical critiques are not, however, problematic in themselves but are rather an expression of existing social contradictions: throughout time, fundamental social advancements have also been borne out of radical critiques. Offers for participation of actual substance place the image of an unalterable status quo into doubt and allow individuals to experience self-efficacy. In contrast, attempts at re-

pression lead to escalation spirals and co-radicalization.

Orient approaches towards new target groups. Research and preventative efforts should not neglect the deep-seated changes occurring within right-wing radicalization processes in favor of solely addressing Islamism; rather, their approaches should be adjusted to consider new target groups (age, educational level, economic power) and forms (e.g., vigilantism).

Avoid stigmatization. Prevention efforts should not specifically target individual groups of persons but rather address inter-group bridging narratives such as the heroic-masculine world view, anti-feminism, anti-semitism, conspiracy theories, conceptions of the enemy and resistance in order to avoid stigmatizing specific groups and therefore speak to a broader target group.

Take gender seriously. Gender roles, e.g., heroic or toxic constructions of masculinity, represent a constant bridge that spans across various radicalized groups. Preventive efforts should therefore apply concepts that reflect upon the issue of gender.

Do not treat prevention work as a separate sphere. Prevention efforts should be integrated within regular structures. Findings from sector-funded programs such as *Demokratie Leben* ("Live Democracy") should flow into the work performed by institutional agencies within civil society and the government administration. To this end, we encourage policymakers to draft laws that endorse wide-ranging political education and the promotion of democracy.

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