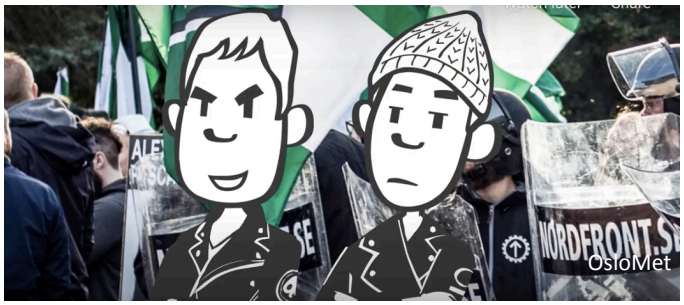
RADICALISATION: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

Summary of Key Findings

- The concept of radicalisation highlights the importance of understanding violent extremism as the outcome of a *process*, rather than as embedded within specific ideologies or beliefs.
- However, the concept suffers from indeterminacy of its object of study, being used in different spheres in different ways and often without specification of the continuum being referred to or the location on that continuum of what constitutes 'moderate' and 'extreme'.
- Although radicalisation is envisaged as a process, empirical studies often measure adherence to extremism at a single point in time and without clearly distinguishing between measures of attitudinal, as distinct from behavioural, extremism.
- Radicalisation discourse positions actors as 'extremist' when they do not recognise themselves as such; this can empty the concept of meaning or lower the cost of radicalisation.
- Despite attempts to take contextual and situational factors into account in studying radicalisation, models remain largely linear. This is partially a result of research that traces trajectories of those who have engaged in violent extremism backwards from their end-point.
- The milieu approach adopted in DARE allows for a more complex understanding of trajectories through radical(ising) milieus including those that do not end in violent extremism but in partial, stalled or non-radicalisation.
- Radicalisation research needs to be closer to its subjects and allow findings to feed more directly into interventions that speak to milieu actors as subjects not objects of Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) policy and practice.

The DARE Research

This Research Briefing is based on qualitative data collected as part of the DARE (Dialogue About Radicalisation and Equality) project. The project focuses on young people (loosely defined as those aged 15 to 30 years) and on two strands of extremism, which we refer to as 'Islamist' extremism (ISE) and 'right-wing' extremism (RWE).



The DARE project uses a mixed-methods approach and has multiple research strands. This Research Briefing draws on findings and reflections from: secondary data analysis of research into the relationship between (in)equality and radicalisation; case studies in five countries of interactional radicalisation; seven country-based case studies of online radicalisation; and 19 milieu based ethnographic case studies of young people's trajectories through radical(ising) milieus conducted across 12 countries. The empirical data cited in this Research Briefing primarily comes from the ethnographic studies consisting of studies of 10 ISE milieus and 9 RWE milieus and including just under 400 semi-structured interviews.

We cannot do justice to the complexity and contentious nature of many terms used in this briefing. For brief conceptual definitions, see: http://www.dare-h2020.org/concepts.html. For critical discussion and contextualisation of these terms, please consult the individual research reports: http://www.dare-h2020.org/research-reports.html

Further information on the project and participating institutions can be found at the end of this briefing.

Introduction

Despite ongoing disagreement over the use of the term, the concept of radicalisation has highlighted the importance of understanding violent extremism as the outcome of a *process* rather than as embedded within specific ideologies or beliefs (Pisoiu, 2012; Neumann, 2013; Khalil et al., 2019). The DARE project started from a critical but engaged approach to radicalisation, seeking to develop a better understanding of what shifts young people towards and away from extremism (attitudinal and behavioural). It adopted a societal, rather than security-focused, approach to extremism and empirically investigated milieus in which young people encounter radical(ising) messages and, in some cases, move towards extremist positions. In this Research Briefing, we outline the implications of our findings for how we understand radicalisation and its capacity to illuminate engagement with radical political ideas.

What is 'radicalisation' and why study it?

A review of the critical literature on radicalisation conducted by Knott and Lee (2018) identified 28 points of contention with the concept of radicalisation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: An overview of the critical literature on 'radicalisation'

In this Research Briefing, we are concerned with two broad strands of this critique of the concept of radicalisation. The first relates to the indeterminacy of what we are studying when we research 'radicalisation'. The second concerns why we are studying it; that is, how research on radicalisation is deployed in policy spheres in order to counter harmful extremism and the potential for its effect to be counterproductive.

Radicalisation as process

'Radicalisation' has been criticised for bringing confusion rather than clarification to the study of political extremism (Sedgwick, 2010). This is because it has been used in different spheres in different ways but also because the continuum of radicalism being referred to, and the location of what is seen as 'moderate' and 'extreme' on that continuum, often remain unspecified (ibid.: 491). The DARE study confirms Sedgwick's observation about the shifting placement of markers of 'moderate' and 'radical' (across different national contexts, spheres and in relation to different extremisms) and his conclusion that 'radicalisation' is best deployed as a relative, or relational concept. This is particularly important in the current period where we see significant 'mainstreaming' of extreme right ideas (Miller-Idriss, 2020: 46).

The value of the concept of radicalisation thus lies primarily in its capacity to understand violent extremism as the outcome of a *process*. However, this is all too often neglected in research practice. As shown by secondary data analysis conducted within the framework of the DARE project, survey-based empirical studies often measure attitudes or behaviour at single points in time, and using a single type of radicalisation or terrorism measure (Franc and Pavlović, 2018: 69). Moreover, despite the recognition of the need to distinguish between radicalisation of opinions (cognitive radicalisation) and radicalisation of action (behavioural radicalisation), the paucity of theories or models that explicitly do so means that such studies are often conducted without distinct, valid or reliable, measures for cognitive and behavioural radicalisation and their determinants (Storm et al., 2020: 8-9). This reflects a wider focus within the field on the *content* of ideologies or beliefs at the expense of attention to their transmission or practice (Knott and Lee, 2020).

While there are exceptions to this rule - including McCauley and Moskalenko's (2017) Two Pyramid model and Khalil et al.'s (2019) Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) model - the notion of radicalisation remains tied to our understanding of what constitutes extremism. This leads to the study of radicalisation from the 'end-point' (usually violent extremism) backwards in order to establish the process of 'what goes on before the bomb goes off' (Sedgwick, 2010: 479) and a working assumption that cognitive radicalisation is a 'gateway' to behavioural radicalisation.

To address this gap, the DARE project adopted a 'milieu' approach designed to allow the study of radicalisation as a process, i.e. in situ and from the starting assumption that shifts in position would be both towards and away from more extreme positions and that milieu actors may never reach the 'end point' of either attitudinal or behavioural radicalisation.

Radicalisation as an instrument of policy and politics

A second line of critique emanates from a body of work that critically deconstructs the political framing of notions of 'extremism' and 'radicalisation' in relation to 'Islamist' extremism. Kundnani (2014: 9-10) argues that theories of radicalisation, which claim to describe the process by which 'young Muslims become terrorists', have become the lens through which western societies view Muslim populations and have been instrumentalised by policy makers to legitimise practices of surveillance. A number of studies have documented the consequences for Muslim communities of the application of these concepts in the development of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism policy and practice (Thomas, 2016; Kundnani, 2014; Abbas, 2019).

In addition to the societal harm inflicted by this form of misrecognition, the deployment of a concept of radicalisation rooted in a state-led securitising discourse can inhibit understanding. By 'listening and respecting' how members of a radical Muslim milieu in Aarhus relate to the concept of 'radicalisation', Kühle and Lindekilde (2012) demonstrate that the

etic understanding of this phenomenon conflates important distinctions made by milieu actors and potentially hinders radicalisation prevention work. Pilkington (2021) finds a similar disjuncture between etic and emic understandings of what and who is 'extremist' among actors in an 'extreme right' milieu in the UK and argues that assumptions in etic discourse about the 'closedmindedness' of right-wing extremist milieu actors closes off opportunities for engaging them in dialogue.

Lessons from the DARE research

In this Research Briefing, we highlight three conclusions from the DARE research as to how we might reconceptualise radicalisation to better understand the range of outcomes of engagement with radical ideas and to facilitate rather than hinder P/CVE practice (see Figure 2). First, we suggest, radicalisation is best understood as a relational concept. Secondly, radicalisation should be seen as a process that leads to partial, stalled or non-radicalisation more often than to violent extremism (and should be researched as such). Thirdly, while the concept of radicalisation focuses on the 'how?' question, this should not obscure the 'why?'. Taking seriously the grievances expressed by actors in radical(ising) milieus helps explain why they do not cross the threshold into violent extremism and opens up opportunities for P/CVE interventions that can support trajectories away from extremism.

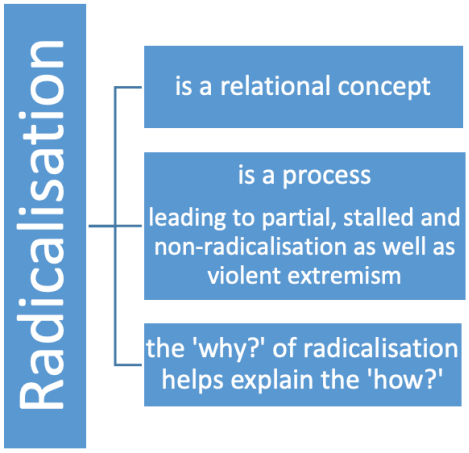


Figure 2: Conceptualising radicalisation for use in future research

Radicalisation as a relational concept

'radicalization stems from complex and contingent sets of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutional actors' (della Porta, 2018: 463)

The DARE research findings support the view that 'radicalisation' and 'extremism' are intrinsically relational constructs (see: Malthaner, 2017; della Porta, 2018).

Recent scholarship has moved towards explaining the dynamics of political violence through a wider interactional frame, especially in relation to meso-level actors (social movements and institutional actors) (Malthaner, 2017: 3). An important finding of the DARE research is that this does not lead to an inevitable 'spiral' of radicalisation as opposing groups, the state and other societal institutions, interact. The DARE Research Briefing on Interactional Radicalisation shows how such interactions do not cumulate until they reach a point of violence, but more frequently appear as 'spikes' in hostilities or violence in relation to particular constellations and interactions of events and actors.

DARE research with individual and groups of actors in radical(ising) milieus provides insight into three dimensions of the relational and interactional nature of radicalisation:

- radicalisation is relational in that it indicates a shift perceived by actors, including institutional actors, towards something defined as extreme or radical;
- what constitutes 'radical' or 'extreme' is determined *in relation to* an external continuum or marker, although this continuum differs over time and place and is often rejected by milieu actors;
- relational dynamics – interactions with others – are an important factor in both *facilitating* and *constraining* radicalisation.

As visualised in Figure 3, these three dimensions of the relational nature of radicalisation suggest that radicalisation is a product of interactions between 'us and them', not something in 'them' (see also: McCauley and Moskolenko, 2011).

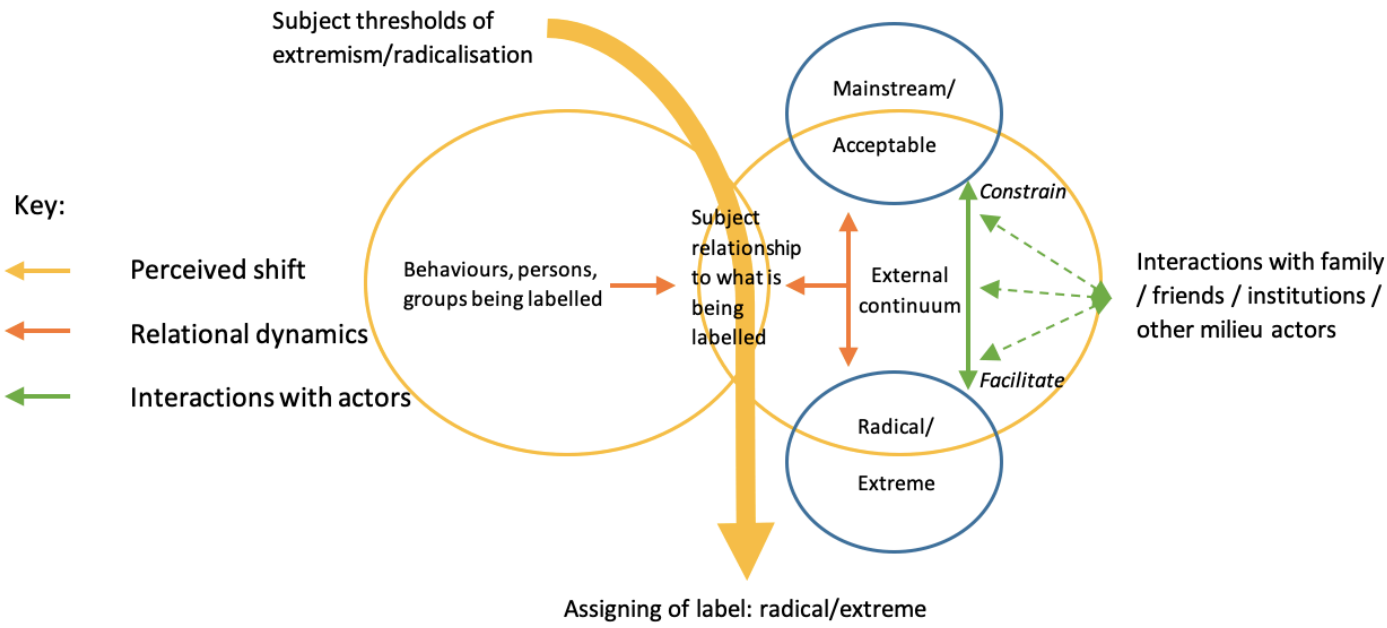


Figure 3: The relational nature of radicalisation

The power of labelling

Radicalisation is relational in that it indicates a shift perceived by actors, including institutional actors, towards something defined as extreme or radical.

Research participants in the DARE study participate in milieus (movements, neighbourhoods, networks) that are considered in public discourse as extremist, 'hotspots' for radicalisation or targets for those looking to recruit to their cause. The relationship between those who 'label' and those who are 'labelled' is infused with power. Actors in both the ISE and RWE milieus studied express a strong sense of being 'labelled' as 'extremist' or 'radical' by multiple institutions with the power to do so.

Nikos (Greece, ISE) complains that the media inappropriately refer to Muslims as 'Islamists' or 'jihadists'. In the Netherlands, R13 explains how an alarmist newspaper article had set in motion a conflictual political and social dynamic by suggesting that parts of his neighbourhood had become a 'Sharia Triangle' dominated by Islamist fundamentalists.

R13 (NETHERLANDS, ISE)

'At the time of the article, there were, say, very few people leaving for Syria – you could have counted them on the fingers of your hands. So, none of those parents could relate to the story [on the Sharia triangle]. It didn't sound right to anyone […] But on the other hand, I also saw, for example, how people started showing off and laughing about it "look, they got us!" And then it is another 'they', right? The media is seen as the other side. They credit us with our own Sharia neighbourhood, when we don't have any such thing. And so then we play along.'

DAN (UK, RWE)

'[…] what I think do encourage war is the mainstream media. They do. They encourage war. 'Cause one week they'll focus on radical Islam. And then one week they focus on far right. And one week it's radical Islam, then one week the far right. They're just drilling both sides. The mainstream media is the cause of a lot of this.'

Similarly, among RWE milieus, the 'mainstream media' is implicated as a driver of radicalisation in that it exacerbates conflict between radical Islam and the far right by 'drilling both sides'. As for the ISE respondents cited above, the labels attached to RWE milieus are viewed as unjustified.

A particular complaint of research participants in RWE milieus is the broad application of terms such as 'extremist' to the right wing but the lack of recognition of left-wing extremism. Alexander (Germany, RWE) complains that left-wing extremism is given 'no public attention' – being neither reported in the media nor prosecuted by the police even when counter-demonstrators 'throw stones and other objects at the Right'. The conviction that the media do not expose the far left confirms to RWE milieu actors that the media is controlled by 'the Left' (Dan, UK, RWE). It fuels grievance and disempowerment, potentially acting as a driver of radicalisation.

MUSA (RUSSIA, ISE)

'[…] people are told, "These are the radicals, it's bad." But 90 percent do not know what these terms mean […] For me, an extremist is a person who belongs to ISIS […] extremism is more specific. But for police officers, an extremist is anyone who has a beard […]'

Alongside the media, institutions of the state such as the police and judicial system are cited as key actors in the construction of radicalisation. In both Russia and the Netherlands, there was mention of a deliberate construction of radicalisation by state authorities. Whether it be the media, state or societal institutions, such labelling acts to alienate milieu actors and close down the possibility for dialogue.

The invisible (and contested) continuum

What constitutes 'radical' or 'extreme' is determined *in relation to* an external continuum or marker that may, or may not, be explicitly referenced in policy and public discussion. Such etic understandings of what constitutes extremism are often contested by research participants for whom this 'false' labelling undermines the validity of the concepts themselves (see Figure 4). The term 'extremism' no longer signifies a particular positioning but becomes emptied of meaning and reduced to a '*semantic device to discredit people*' (Mikaël, France, RWE).

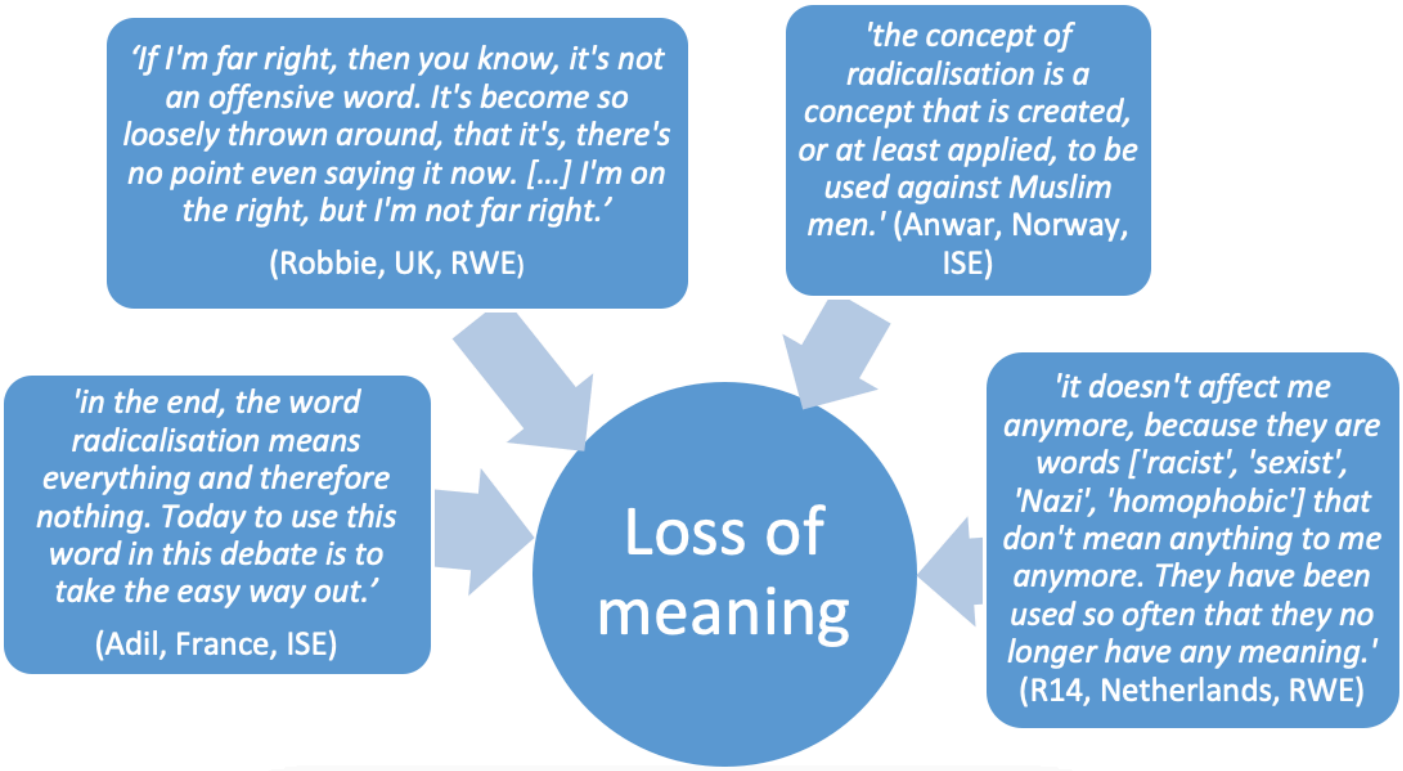


Figure 4: 'Extremism' as an empty signifier

While the fact that actors in these milieus distance themselves from 'extremism' or 'radicalisation' might be interpreted as deviance disavowal, such disjunctures between etic and emic understandings illustrate how such labelling - attributed variously to the state, the media, academia, the public or the police - further undermines already weak trust in societal institutions and becomes a grievance in itself.

It may also have unintended, and counterproductive, effects in terms of the prevention of violent extremism (Lindekilde, 2012). Actors in RWE milieus, in particular, believed that people labelled extremist feel they have nothing left to lose and that they might as well become extremist. Peter (Germany, RWE), who had been called a 'Nazi' on a number of occasions, thinks such labelling has pushed many people into more radical groups, while R12 (Netherlands, RWE) believes the portrayal of right-wing activists as 'Nazis' has become 'counterproductive'.

R12 (NETHERLANDS, RWE)

'So it is indeed a bit classically counterproductive […] Just, yes, call me a Nazi. What do you expect I'm going to say now? You know, you don't really enable a conversation.'

Will (UK, RWE), who had lost his job after being exposed by an anti-extremism campaign group, believed such actions risked radicalising people by ostracising them.

WILL (UK, RWE)

'[…] the aim of that [exposure campaigns] is like to apply pressure, so that you run out of money, and then you basically have to quit. […] I don't think it works as a kind of anti-extremism tactic, to throw people out of normal life. […] Because I get, from that mentality it's like, "Oh if this becomes normal, it's a danger". But actually I think, I think the problem with these things comes because they are fringe […] I think it's fringe groups that become extreme. […] If it exists way outside the mainstream, it can never get in. Over time, it almost makes sense for them to become violent. […] So I think it backfires that, I don't think the kind of ostracisation thing works.'

This lends credence to Sedgwick's (2010: 491) argument that, if the space that may be described as 'moderate' is contracted to the satisfaction of all agendas, the consequence may be the exaggeration of the security threat posed and the exclusion from normal public and political processes of those deemed radical. As a result, such actors may become more radical in security terms, since exclusion from normal processes encourages a search for alternative means of action.

Relational dynamics as facilitating, and constraining, radicalisation

Relational dynamics – interactions with others – facilitate radicalisation, but may also constrain it. Where people are discursively positioned - how they are talked about - matters because emic understandings are not organically derived and hermetically sealed; they are forged in reflexive engagement with etic concepts. In this sense, extremism, like other 'deviant' behaviours, is the product of the interaction of all actors involved, not just those deemed deviant (Becker, 1997: 183).

As discussed above, the exertion of power through labelling can set in motion a conflictual dynamic and act as a driver of radicalisation. Ihsan (Turkey, ISE) observes how the reflexive engagement on the part of milieu actors with etic categorisations can entrench positions. What he sees as unjustified 'labelling' by the West of Muslims confirms what Islamists – towards whom he also has a critical attitude – perceive as 'the sins' of the West. This, he says, blinds them to their own wrongdoings and, in this sense, engenders an 'extreme reaction'.

IHSAN (TURKEY, ISE)

'I think this is why Muslims are angry. Because violence is always being analysed with reference to Islam and Muslims. The result is extreme reaction from the Islamists, they know the West's sins so well, but they never see their own sins.'

DAN (UK, RWE)

'I thought to myself, "Well, I am a bit, I am tolerant, yeah." People have called me intolerant for years, and I actually started to think I was a bit, but then that [the 'mediated dialogue'] happened, so... And I will be doing a lot more of it. I love doing it.

However, from the DARE research we also saw how relational dynamics can work to constrain the adoption of polarised positions. This is illustrated by the participation in a 'mediated dialogue' by actors in the RWE and ISE milieus studied in the UK. Observing interactions where these milieu actors were trusted to engage in dialogue with those with opposing views, revealed a capacity and desire to hear out others and have one's own views challenged. While not without moments of potential escalation, the dialogue (facilitated by conflict resolution practitioners) was seen as positive by all participants and further meetings were initiated by them, inviting the 'others' to their home cities (Hussain et al., 2019). Reflecting on what he had learned about himself from the mediated dialogue in which he participated, Dan (UK, RWE) says that, after years of being positioned as intolerant, he came to see himself as capable of openness to others.

Radicalisation as process

While there is a degree of consensus on the value of the notion of radicalisation as a way of focusing on extremism as 'process' - rather than as embedded within specific ideologies or beliefs – it is most often studied from the end-point backwards. From this perspective, the process may appear to be more linear than experienced by actors at the time and violent extremism to be anticipated as the outcome of engagement with radical ideas. The milieu approach adopted in the DARE research allows us to see that pathways are far from uni-directional and to identify a range of complex trajectories resulting in what we might call partial, stalled and non-radicalisation. Cragin (2014: 342) conceptualises non-radicalisation as 'resistance to violent extremism'. By following individuals over an extended period of time and using an ethnographic method, however, the DARE research reveals a more complex picture than the embracing or rejection of violent extremism. In particular, it points to the role of agency, situation and interaction in shaping trajectories through radical(ising) milieus.

Enacting agency: online and offline

Entrance into, and participation in, radical milieus exposes young people to encounters with radical(ising) messages and agents. However, our study shows the importance of not conflating even extended presence in such environments with radicalisation. The tendency to understand young people as a social group vulnerable to 'radicalisation' or 'recruiters' often leads to envisaging radicalisation as a process done to them either by external agents or through over-exposure to extremist messages (encountered especially in online spaces). Our findings suggest that young people are far from passive. Their agency is evident, first, in their articulation of the need to address the injustices they perceive. It is also demonstrated in how they themselves shape their own radicalisation and non-radicalisation trajectories. This agency is observable in how they understand the world around them, how they interpret their experiences in it and the decisions they take about voicing or acting upon grievances.

The DARE research shows online spaces to be a significant source of encounter with radical(ising) messages in both ISE and RWE milieus. Actors in RWE milieus encounter hate speech, racist memes, 'jokes' and images, videos and invitations (and pressure) to join extremist movements. These online encounters are powerful because information accessed online is often viewed as more 'trustworthy' and online forums viewed as spaces in which 'people like us' can communicate our ideas and 'be heard'. Espen (Norway, RWE), who became involved with the Norwegian Defence League after watching videos online, believes *'it is much easier for young people to get radicalised through the Internet'*. In ISE milieus, young people came across videos of injustices towards Muslims around the world, positive images of society governed by Sharia law, popular *nashids* and fundamentalist religious content. Online connectivity provides access to an alternative form of Islam not available through traditional or neighbourhood mosques and imams. It also offers the opportunity to engage in activities that create a sense of belonging to a common cause (by distributing video or audio content, fundraising,

participating in public forums) at relatively low risk to the individual. In both RWE and ISE milieus, online communication also provides access to networks of likeminded others and sometimes direct connection with extremist groups.

However, we should not over-interpret the power of messaging to 'radicalise' individuals. Across the milieus, research participants emphasise their critical engagement with what they see or hear and pride themselves on using, and checking, multiple sources to get as near to 'the truth' as possible. While research participants may be inclined to emphasise their own agency, their narratives also reveal a multitude of ways in which individuals negotiate, avoid or manage social relationships to fit the attitudes and behaviours with which they are comfortable rather than adapting those attitudes and actions to conform to those around them.

This is evident also in their interactions offline, which evoke responses that question or resist the direction of travel in the milieu (see Figure 5). Encounters with people or ideas that are 'too extreme' for them may cause them to question or step back from the milieu or they may become disillusioned with the milieu because of its self-affirmative nature. As Espen (Norway, RWE) explains, his attraction to the Norwegian Defence League waned quite early because *'it was a typical echo chamber. And I liked to discuss things. So I did not get much out of it after a while*'.

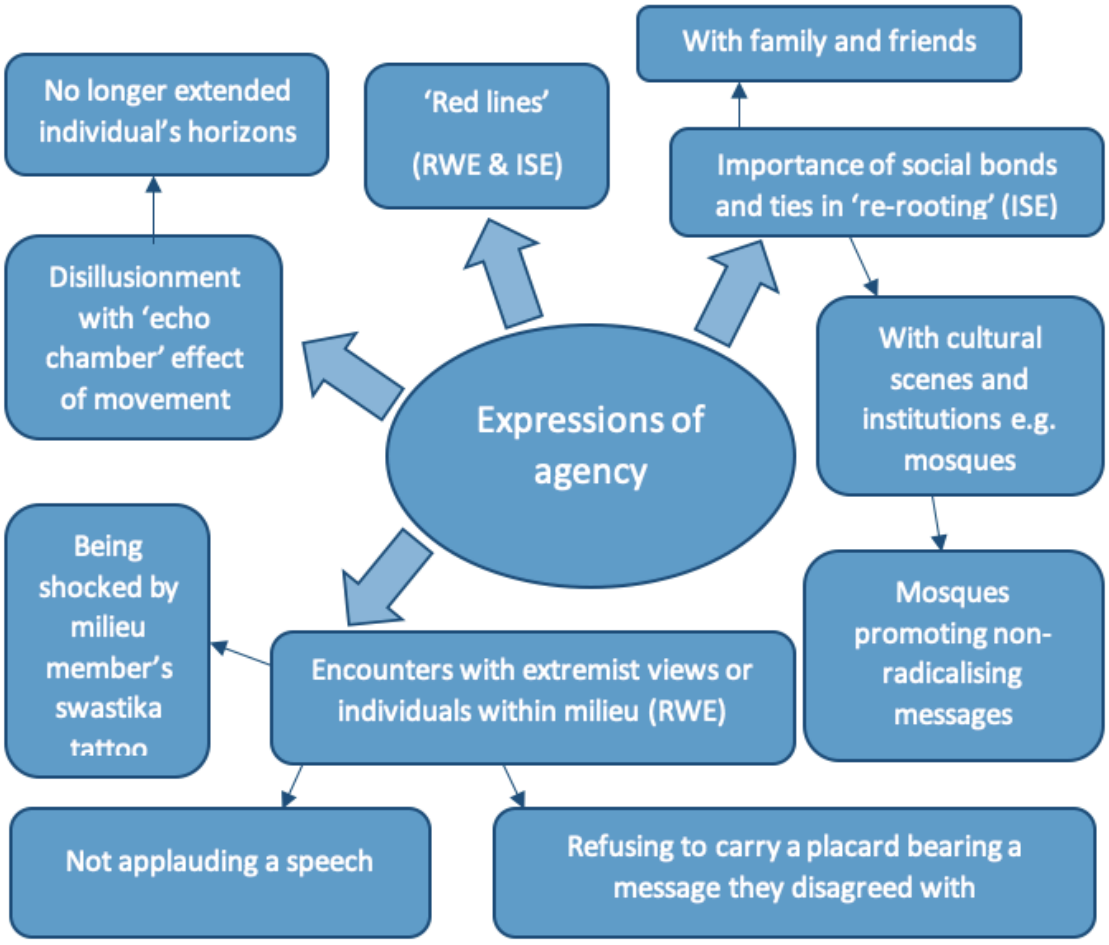


Figure 5: Expressions of agency in trajectories through radical(ising) milieus

Among respondents in ISE milieus, research participants emphasise the importance of social bonds and ties, with family and friends but also with cultural scenes and institutions, such as mosques, in their neighbourhood which ground and re-root them in a way that protects them from radical(ising) messages. As R2 (Netherlands, ISE) articulates, while 'it hurts' to see what is happening abroad, seeking 'well-founded' knowledge is the key difference between those who follow radicalising messages and agents and those who are resilient to them: '*[…] it is unjust ... but how do you deal with it? They*

see the wrong people, do not listen to advice ... were warned but did not listen ... the main factor is knowledge, going to mosque and taking classes, that is a shield against radicalisation' (R2, Netherlands, ISE).

Situation: beyond chance encounters

Exploring how young people narrate their journeys to date, it is evident that situation is crucial to understanding why and how people move towards (violent) extremism. This does not mean that radicalisation is no more than 'being in the wrong place at the wrong time and in the wrong company' (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010: 805). 'Situation' does not refer to a one-off or chance occurrence but the immediate setting in which behaviour occurs (Birkbeck and Lafree, 1993: 115) and to which participants bring the emotions and consciousness generated from previous interactions and situations (Collins, 2004: 3). Factors including the role of family, peers and significant others as well as situations of isolation, social and health problems, loneliness and desire for community play a crucial part in understanding how our research participants came to be where they were.

Particularly illustrative examples of the situational dimension of radicalisation trajectories were identified in Lee's (UK, RWE) and Nadia's (Norway, ISE) narratives.

LEE (UK, RWE)

'Do you know the meeting they [National Action] had in the [names pub]? […] They're in jail for that now. Well me and two of my mates were meant to go to that meeting. […] But because I'd been out the night before and I were rough and I were in bed, I didn't go. […] there were a few of them meetings that we were meant to go to. But I thank God now that I didn't go.'

Lee had missed a meeting (due to a hangover) with members of the proscribed group National Action at which one of the members shared his plan to murder a Member of Parliament. One individual who had attended informed the anti-extremist group Hope not Hate about the plot. The perpetrator was arrested and later convicted under the Terrorism Act for engaging in conduct in preparation of a terrorist act and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Lee was not a member of National Action and never had been; although at an earlier point in time they had tried to recruit him. What he called an 'unspoken relationship' to support each other's events had developed. When asked what his own reaction would have been had he been at the meeting, he responded *'I probably would have let them do it, with mind-set that I were in then, yeah. I wouldn't have grassed them up or owt. It's like honour, innit?'* Had Lee attended that meeting, and failed to stop the planned action, he could have become complicit in a terrorist act without any evident radicalisation of his beliefs. Moreover, his failure to prevent that act, would not have been motivated by the belief that it served a noble cause or grand idea, but his personal moral compass about what was the right way to behave in a particular situation.

Nadia (Norway, ISE) recounts not her own story but that of a friend. She describes how she had got to know a young man during a course designed to assist people in making job applications and they became friends. She characterises him as 'really pleasant and nice', happy that his wife had just found employment and his daughter had got a nursery place. He had a nice circle of friends, all with immigrant backgrounds and well connected. But then the situation changed, leading him down a path that ended in his perpetration of a suicide bombing in Iraq.

NADIA (NORWAY, ISE)

'*Then suddenly he and his wife divorced, and he fell into a depression. […] when you're depressed some people drink alcohol, use narcotics and substances to get through it. The path he chose was to go to the mosque. In the mosque, people used to come over and invite him to take part in terrorist things. He divorced and had to move house. He moved into a flat-share on the West side and I visited him there one time. It was such a cave, where he was living. He couldn't afford it, he said, because he didn't have a job. He had to pay child support to his wife and this and that. The only thing he could afford was a little room in this huge villa, where he shared a toilet with forty other people. It was disgusting […]*'

As Nadia recounts (above), his situation changed abruptly. She noticed that he now 'hung around the mosque' until, one day, he disappeared. The next Nadia knew was when she saw a photo of him in a newspaper: '*He carried out a terrorist attack in Iraq. That was how I found out about it. Suicide bombing!*'

These situational factors are significant not only in bringing research participants into radical milieus, however, but also in constraining their engagement or encouraging them to set their own parameters for engagement. Dan (UK, RWE) is proud that he has never been arrested despite his attendance at many demonstrations, at some of which there has been violence. He puts this down to his ability not to be drawn into violent situations.

DAN (UK, RWE)

'No, no. Like I said, it is hard, because you've got the adrenaline kicking in and you think "Whoa". And I'm only young, know what I mean. And you know, a lot of youngsters, you can't say when you're young, you don't like that sort of stuff. But like I said, I've got a bit of a brain for me age like. I don't want to be arrested for something stupid.'

R1 (NETHERLANDS, ISE)

'The mosque was not accessible to young people, the sermon was not translated, it was an inaccessible place, we could not learn about faith.'

A similar pattern is found among research participants in ISE milieus. In some cases, specific circumstances such as the inaccessibility of the mosque (see R1, Netherlands, ISE), led people to turn away from the mosque and seek to find out about faith elsewhere (often from internet sources that led them towards radical messages and groups).

However, in other situations, social connections were what pulled individuals back from the brink. Hassan (Norway, ISE) was angry at the Assad regime and initially hopeful about the promises of IS. However, he became disillusioned as the war in Syria unfolded and the atrocities committed by IS were revealed. He lost a number of friends in the fighting and was prevented from leaving for Syria himself only through the advice of a friend.

HASSAN (NORWAY, ISE)

'[...] if an important person, a good friend of mine, hadn't come and given me what we call nasiha, that is advice to guide another […] if he'd not made me able to understand that this type of thinking was completely wrong, then I myself would have travelled to Syria. [...] He was a good friend who has guided me and helped me to understand and see the bigger picture, and not only the parts of it. He made me realise what is right and wrong […]'

While 'situation' does not explain everything, it plays an important part in individual outcomes of engagements with radical ideas. In DARE, we thus employ the notion of 'trajectories through radical(ising) milieus', rather than 'radicalisation' to signal the complex ways in which 'why' and 'how' factors are integrated in individual journeys and their outcomes.

Radicalisation: the will to change (but not to violence)

While the concept of radicalisation focuses on 'how' young people move towards extreme attitudes and actions, it should not obscure the question of why they do so. The DARE research finds that grievances play a key role in how young people explain their journeys through radical(ising) milieus (see Research Briefing on Perceived Inequalities). In this Research Briefing, we consider the *relational* nature of the perceived inequality experienced and explore whether taking seriously the grievances expressed helps understand not only what drives young people towards radical ideas but also prevents them crossing the threshold into violent extremism.

The relational nature of perceived inequality

Analysing the narratives of research participants confirms that *why* people radicalise cannot be explained solely by individual socio-demographic profiles (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010: 810; Horgan, 2008: 80) or through correlations between objective indicators of inequality and radicalisation (Franc and Pavlović, 2018). The objective socio-economic circumstances of RWE milieus were mixed and material insecurities expressed by respondents in a minority of milieus (most notably the Greek milieu). The majority of fieldwork sites in the study of ISE milieus are districts where social exclusion, poverty, low-skilled and precarious employment prevail and material deprivation was mentioned by respondents in these milieus more frequently. However, in both sets of milieus, perceived socio-political injustices resonated in narratives of milieu actors more consistently than socio-economic injustices.

Perceived inequality also appears in milieu actors' narratives as *relational*. In terms of horizontal inequality this is expressed as being treated differently and unfairly because of who you are, or who you are thought to be. In relation to vertical inequality, it is experienced as feeling subordinated to institutions and powers whose authority you do not recognise e.g. global elites, politicians, state and law enforcement bodies, teachers, parents. This sense of relational inequality, although differentially experienced among actors in ISE and RWE milieus, is articulated in both (see Figures 6 and 7).

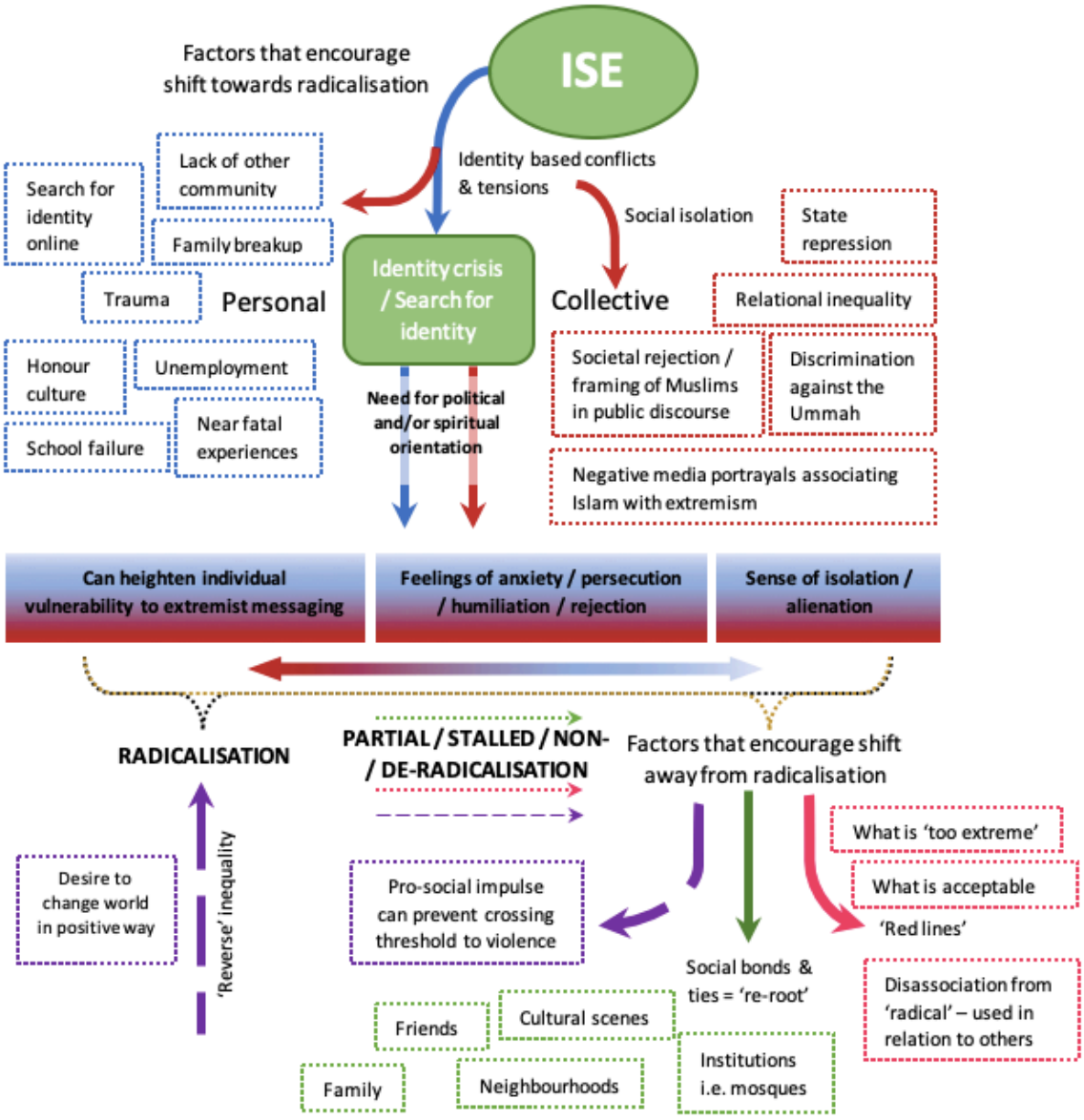


Figure 6: Trajectories through 'Islamist' milieus

Those in ISE milieus have grown up with the sense that just being of immigrant background and growing up in the districts they reside in means they are subjected to the arbitrary brutality of the state (see R13, Netherlands, ISE). For those in RWE milieus, the injustice is expressed as a vertical inequality - some have 'money on their side' while others are 'living in poverty' - but one that is attached, horizontally, to groups of people. Thus, 'people like us' live in poverty while 'they' ('the elites') are 'living in complete luxury' (see DT, UK, RWE). It is this relational inequality that provides the emotional drive in these statements and renders it into a perceived injustice.

DT (UK, RWE)

'[...] the establishment are in a bubble [...] where they have [...] everything on their side - they've got money on their side, they've got the buildings, as in the parliament buildings on their side. [...] we the people are living in poverty and all that are above this threshold of elites are living in complete luxury. [...] I think that the whole spectrum: government, establishment, police at the top level, not the bottom level, the top level, the whole thing is corrupt.'

R13 (NETHERLANDS, ISE)

'[...] in the past when we sat on a square and a policeman drove past and got out, everyone already assumed they would be hit. [...] Everyone in the neighbourhood grows up with the idea of "okay, I'm going to be hit by the police".'

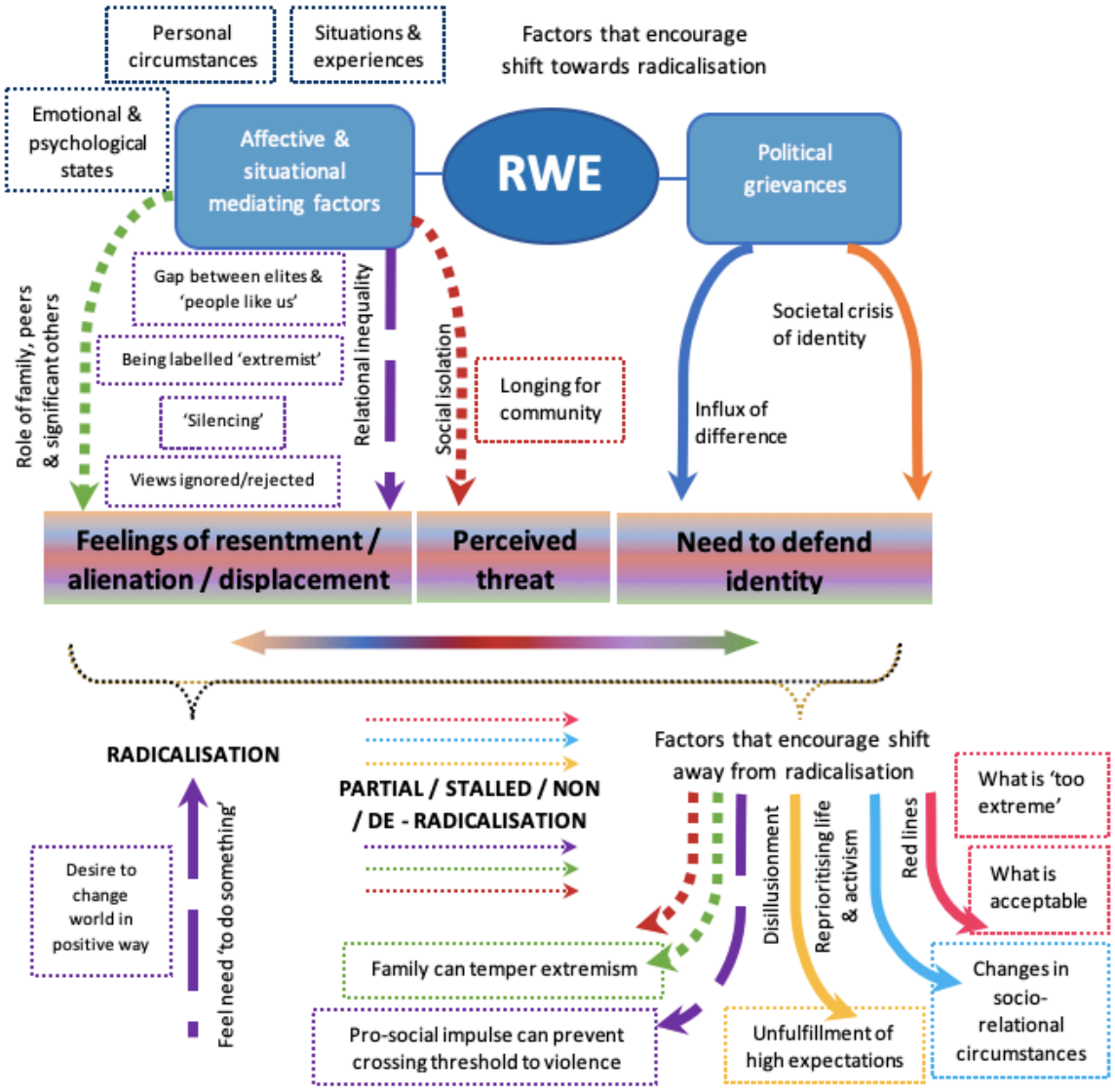


Figure7: Trajectories through 'right-wing extremist' milieus

Enacting change (not violence)

No one grievance propels individuals towards extremism; indeed most engage with radical ideas or beliefs partially or temporarily rather than completing a process of radicalisation to violent extremism. However, grievances are central motivations for participation in radical(ising) milieus because they offer some prospect of challenging, or at least escaping, relational inequality.

In the case of ISE milieus, radical Islamism appears to offer a reversal or way out of relational inequality. As Romain (France, ISE) conveys, belief brings with it certainty and thereby also strength and power.

> **ROMAIN (FRANCE, ISE)**
>
> *'I have no doubts. Never. May Allah keep it that way. Doubt is for those who don't have the strength […] The Prophet taught us that everyone questions themselves, but that people go astray on their own […] I have no uncertainty, ever. Doubt is for those who act unjustly towards themselves.'*

> **TEODORO (FRANCE, ISE)**
>
> *'Precisely, these are gaps that I would like to fill. Simply. It would be good if we could fill them, instead of thinking about filling only the bank accounts. That's what we need to fill in. Regarding equality, we have to create much more equality. The same with freedom. In relation to freedom, let people think, do as they want and accept. And brotherhood. That's it, and we will be [...] That's what's missing in the end. We put up the flag, we ask people to sing the Marseillaise, but that's not enough. You have to explain it to them, you have to explain the story. What the history of France is. They have to be able to become part of this history.'*

Moreover, what is sought in its place is 'more equality'. When Teodoro (France, ISE) is asked to name three things he wants for himself and for society, he replies '*Freedom, equality, fraternity*'. Indeed, across the ISE milieus, respondents appear to agree that establishing connections with something larger is central to making society better, whether it be connections with family, the nation, or religion.

In the case of RWE milieus, becoming politically active is a statement of the unwillingness to stay silent just because your 'truth' is denied. As participants in a Democratic Football Lads Alliance (DFLA) event in the UK display through their flags, 'we will not be silenced'.

Actors in the RWE milieus studied often express the need to have at least tried to bring about the change they seek. Jason (UK, RWE) says 'I need to be able to say I've fought and done my part to try and make this world a better place'. Dan (UK, RWE) is also driven by wanting 'to make a difference'. For one research participant in the Russian milieu, who, as a former football hooligan, had often been in conflict with the police, participation in the Cossack movement had given him 'a way to do good, but within the framework of the law, so that I don't end up in prison for it' (Vladimir, Russia, RWE).

'[…] this is why I do what I do. […] I want to make a difference, you know what I mean. I want to live for something. Even, even if people don't agree with me, you know, what I feel is right, I want to do something.'

(Dan, UK, RWE)

The will to enact change 'within the framework of the law' as Vladimir puts it or by achieving, in reality, the three principles of French national political identity (Teodoro,

France ISE), confirms that radical milieu actors can be viewed within the spectrum of social movement actors, participating as members of a smaller or larger collective to find ways to address experienced grievances. For Peter, formerly a member of a neo-Nazi scene, the marksmen's collective felt like being 'part of democracy'. It also confirms the importance of agency in shaping radicalisation trajectory outcomes.

PETER (GERMANY, RWE)

'You can change things. If I, as an individual, can make at least a few waves in the lake, what could a few hundred people who are really engaged do? Especially if they take up a meaningful topic. But that's what people lack, to live democracy. And for me, what I do there is already a part of democracy among the marksmen. Just simply participate, get involved.'

While political grievances are, for the reasons noted above, at the core of our understanding of young people's trajectories towards extremism, they far from determine a path towards violent extremism. In some cases, personal grievances such as negative experiences in school or employment, low income, as well as adverse childhood experiences, personal trauma, mental health issues (related or unrelated to these experiences) play an important role in how young people narrate their journeys to date.

Moreover, we identify a number of vital - affective and situational - factors including the role of family, peers and significant others as well as situations of isolation, social and health problems, loneliness and desire for community that play a crucial part in understanding how our research participants came to be where they are. These factors are important not only in bringing research participants into radical milieus but also in constraining their engagement or encouraging them to establish their own 'red lines' in terms of how much, and what forms of, engagement they have. Finding a welcoming community and gaining in self-esteem, moreover, may not only sustain participation in radical milieus but also facilitate the development of skills, self-belief and identity that reduces ontological insecurity and allows participants to see ways to pursue the change they desire without recourse to violent action.

Where do we go from here?

There are, of course, many limitations to the DARE study and the critique of the notion of 'radicalisation' outlined here should be read in the context of its specific design and method. These include its milieu approach, that is the focus on environments in which radical messages are encountered rather than the reconstruction of the trajectories of individual extremists. Our findings may well have been different had the majority of our research participants been actors who had crossed the threshold into violent extremism. There is also a certain self-selection in terms of access to radical milieus and to individuals and groups who were willing to engage in such a research study. These factors also mean that the milieus studied, as well as the local and national contexts in which they are situated, are extremely diverse.

On the basis of the findings, nonetheless, we argue that, if the notion of 'radicalisation' continues to be employed, it should be used as a relational concept and accompanied by a clear statement of the context in which it is being studied and the continuum against which it is being measured. We also emphasise the importance of reflecting emic as well as etic conceptualisations of what constitutes extremism and movement towards it. It is through listening to individuals' reflections on their everyday experience, including their encounters with radical(ising) messages, and their response to these experiences that we can capture the social complexity, yet everyday-ness, of young people's engagements with radical ideological positions. This approach also allows us to access the experience of actors in these milieus who choose, for the most part, not to cross the red lines to 'extremism' that they mark for themselves and see them as potential actors in developing new, and effective, ways to prevent and counter extremism.

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