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## Radicalization and Left-Wing Extremism

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## **Handbook of Leftwing-Extremism**

### **“Radicalization and Left-Wing Extremism”**

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#### Abstract

Most individuals with radical ideologies will not evolve into violent extremists, let alone terrorists. Understanding the dynamics and various pathways into a radical ideology is nonetheless important. However, empirical research on pathways into left-wing radicalization is scarce. In this chapter, we define the concept of left-wing radicalization in relation to extremism and provide an overview of existing research on left-wing radicalization. Drawing on case studies and our own empirical research, we discuss both individual motives for participation in radical left groups and macro-level factors in the political and societal context that impact the growth or demise of radical left groups.

#### Keywords

Radicalization; social movements; anarchism; left-wing extremism; radicalism

## **I. Introduction**

Left-wing extremism has many faces: In September 2020, the Mikhail Zhlobitsky Cell of the Informal Anarchist Federation in Italy claimed two parcel bombs that were sent to an employer’s union president in Brescia and the police union office in Modena (Europol 2021). Fortunately, neither of the bombs exploded. Elsewhere, many individuals who identify with far-left ideologies joined the fight against the Islamic State in Syria as foreign fighters in various armed groups (Koch 2021). In 2017, during a G20 meeting in Hamburg, several hundred far-left extremists from Germany and other countries were arrested after violent protests resulted in vandalism of streets, cars, and shops in part of the city (Oltermann 2017). Although very different in nature, all these events have been associated with left-wing extremism and all have received attention from the media and governmental security agencies due to their violent features.

Yet, next to anecdotal evidence from reports on violent events like the once described above, there is a lacuna of knowledge on the broader phenomenon of left-wing radicalism and extremism, due to sparsity of academic empirical studies on the subject. Koehler (2021), for example, notices a discrepancy between the relative importance placed on the Far-Left by governmental- and security agencies and the lack of scholarly attention on the topic. Schuurman's (2019) review of terrorism studies published between 2007 and 2016 reveals that only 7.6 percent of almost 3500 academic publications discussed content related to left-wing extremism, compared to almost 75 percent of publications related to jihadism. From these few studies, we gain only few insights into left-wing radicalization and extremism. In addition, most of the available studies, particularly in the field of terrorism studies, focus on violent extremist or terrorist groups. However, what about the majority that follows the same far-left ideologies but do not make use of violent means – individuals we would classify as non-violent radical, rather than extremist? What characterizes radical left-wing groups? What motivates individuals to become part of a radical but non-violent left group or movement? What broader political and societal development impact non-violent radical left groups?

In this chapter, we aim to review the existing literature of radicalization in the context of non-violent left radical groups or movements. Specifically, we present the broad phenomenon of left-wing radicalization as a conjuncture of individual processes on the micro-level, as well as broader socio-political factors on the macro-level that encourage or discourage radicalization processes. The interplay between these individual and contextual factors is central to understand global differences between and historical developments of radical left-wing groups and their individual participants. To provide examples to our arguments, we will make use of existing studies on left-wing radicalization, as well as draw on our own empirical research on radicalization processes of anarchists in the Netherlands to provide examples. The next section defines the concept of radicalization, outlines its differences with the concept of extremism and introduces the social movement approach of studying radicalization, which we will use throughout this chapter. After, we first discuss micro-level factors, before reviewing relevant macro-level factors in the radical leftwing context.

## II. The study of left-wing radicalization

### The concepts of radicalization and extremism

The definition of the concepts of radicalization and extremism originate in the sub-discipline of terrorism studies and have been the subject of many conceptual debates (see for example Borum 2011; Schmid 2013). However, both concepts remain contested in scholarly literature. As pointed out by Borum (2011) in a review of existing definitions and usages of the term *radicalization*, many scholars conflate the concept of radicalization with other related, yet separate concepts of extremism or terrorism. According to most scholars that do apply a differentiation between the concepts, extremism or terrorism is defined through the use of violence, which is sometimes – but not always – paired with radical beliefs, whereas radicalization constitutes the adoption of radical beliefs but is generally non-violent (Schuurman & Taylor 2018; Weggemans 2013). For example, the Red Army Faction (RAF) from Germany is considered an extremist or even terrorist group today, due to several violent attacks organized by the group. However, many of the members of that group started out in (mostly) peaceful protests before splintering off into a separate group that used violence (Aßmann 2018). In hindsight, the RAF is defined as an extremist group, yet could have been considered radical of nature before endorsing and embracing violent tactics.

Other scholars have approached the concept of radicalization from a social movement perspective, which is mostly embedded in the discipline of sociology. In social movement studies, radicalization is mostly defined more so through the types of actions taken by an individual or a group of people that could be perceived as radical in the given context, rather than through specific political or societal beliefs (della Porta 2008; Tilly 1978). Several researchers further differentiate between moderate and radical social movements (Bittner 1963; Fitzgerald & Rodgers 2000). The latter is defined among other things by a radical agenda, non-violent, but not necessarily legal actions, and is “subject to intense opposition and government surveillance” (Fitzgerald & Rodgers 2000, 578). Although originating in different disciplines, both perspectives from terrorism- and social movements studies complement each other rather well. For example, renowned terrorism-scholar Alex Schmid discusses the difference between extremism and radicalization through the use of violent versus non-violent actions, adding that “non-violence as an activist strategy goes beyond passive, peaceful resistance: it involves an array of direct political actions, both individual and collective, such as hunger-strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins, blockades, acts of civil disobedience and other persuasive and even coercive tactics (...) – but all fall short of the use of violence against persons or objects (...)” (2014, 13).

Converging these dominating definitions from terrorism- and social movement studies, we define a radical person, group or social movement as an entity that strives for significant

political social changes through active legal or illegal non-violent means outside the realm of institutionalized politics in this chapter. Still, it must be noted here that this definition is not free from ambiguity, as are previously used definitions of radicalization. For example, a group or movement may be considered radical based on the tactics employed, although many participants may not hold radical beliefs per se. In other instances, a group may be regarded as radical due to extreme, but non-violent tactics, yet individual participants could incidentally make use of violent means – such as in clashes with the police. Similarly, what constitutes a radical belief or tactic may differ between political, social, regional, and historical contexts.

What then constitutes left-wing radicalization? Like the concept of ‘radicalization’, what constitutes radical ‘left-wing’ is contested as well. As pointed out by Carson (2016), left-wing terrorist groups vary from traditional political ideological groups – such as anarchists, socialists, Maoists, communists, and others – that are considered radical in the current capitalist world order to single-issue groups that are concerned with changes to specific aspects of society, such as the climate crisis or animal rights through radical tactics, and through left-wing ideals, but without following a defined political ideology. A similar variety of groups exist in the radical realm, as the examples of the following sections will reveal.

### Researching left-wing radicalization

The literature on radicalization is ever-growing, and contributions are made from various disciplines and subfields, including – but not limited to – terrorism or political studies, history, psychology, criminology, and sociology, including social movement studies. Yet, there are relatively few empirical studies on left-wing radicalization, or even extremism (Schuurman, 2019).

A common approach to study individual or group processes of radicalization in several disciplines is through case studies of specific groups or movements. For example, Wennerhag and colleagues (2017) published a bundle of case studies of different types of left-wing movements, ranging from communist groups in Finland and France to student-protests in Ukraine to highlight the current state of social movements in Europe. Other examples of case studies include Karpantschov’s (2014) study on radicalization and de-radicalization in the Danish squatter movement or Ackerman’s (2003) threat assessment of the Earth Liberation Front in the United States. Some of these case studies draw detailed data from long-term ethnographic fieldwork, such as in O’Connor’s (2003) ethnography on the anti-globalization movement in Mexico. Lessons on radicalization may also be drawn from (historical) case

studies or (auto-)biographies of left-wing terrorist groups, such as the Rote Armee Fraktion (Aßmann 2018), that include accounts about how these groups or individual members came to adopt radical beliefs.

Some studies also employ a comparative approach, contrasting left-wing groups with right-wing or Islamist groups or movements. Windisch and colleagues (2019), for example, compare the disengagement processes of left- and right-wing extremists in the United States through life-history interviews. Cross (2011) made use of participant observation, interviews and content analyses of documents to understand the radicalization processes of a right- and left-wing grassroots movement. Others compare two or more left-wing groups or movements with each other, to understand differences and similarities in the demise of these groups (Zwerman et al. 2000).

Furthermore, political scientists and philosophers have reviewed the history of the traditional leftist ideologies, which are often considered radical today, such as anarchism, Marxism, Maoism, and others. Some of these studies also comment on the development of the movements behind these ideologies. For example, Uri (2007) and Williams (2007) both discuss contemporary anarchist movements, and how the current historical context impacts the characteristics of the movements today.

Notwithstanding these efforts to shine a light on current left-wing radical groups or movements, there is still relatively little (empirical) research on non-violent radical groups or movements compared to religious or right-wing radicalization. The following sections will review what is known about socio-psychological micro-factors of left-wing radicalization – specifically the radicalization process of becoming part of a radical group or movement – and the environmental macro-factors that determine individual, as well as group-level radicalism in the current age.

### III. Micro-factors of left-wing radicalization

Researchers have developed different models to explain the process of radicalization on the individual- and group-level. The initial proposition that radicals, extremists, or terrorist are all mentally ill has long been debunked (Horgan 2004; Trimbur et al. 2021). Since then, terrorism scholars, social psychologists and social movement researchers have contributed several models to understand individual processes leading to radicalization and, specifically, engagement in radical groups or movements (see Borum 2011 for an overview). In these model, individual propensity for radical beliefs still plays a role, yet environmental push- and pull-

factors are considered equally, if not more, important. The motives for engaging in radical groups or movements commonly identified in the literature (see for example della Porta 2018; Krüsselmann & Weggemans 2018; van Stekelenburg et al. 2011) can be categorized into four categories (following the categorization provided by Demant et al. 2008): ideological motives, collective instrumental motives, identity motives, and individual instrumental motives. This section will review the relevance of these factors in the context of left-wing radicalization, making use of existing literature, as well as data collected from interviews with Dutch anarchists by the authors. In these in-depth life-history interviews participants were asked about their motives for joining the radical Dutch anarchist movement, direct or indirect recruitment processes through peers, family and factors that motivated them to remain part of the movement or leave (see Krüsselmann & Weggemans 2018 for detailed methodological discussion).

### Ideological motives

Ideological motives reflect an individual's need to a sense of purpose in life. Social movements can provide such a purpose, through clearly defined shared values and beliefs that are expressed not just amongst the participants but also in direct action (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans 2017). Participation in radical social movements, more specifically, provide an outlet for individuals whose values are not shared by the government or the general public – or even more poignant: whose values are violated by them. Next to being an outlet for expressing one's morals, radical social movements often also provide goals to work towards to – an ideal world order according to the respective ideology. Ideological motives for participation are noted in several studies on radical left-wing groups. For example, Bosi and Della Porta (2012), who studied mobilization processes of (later) members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army ((p)IRA) and the Red Brigade in Italy, describe how early ideological education from parents lead to a 'sort of moral obligation' to join the groups (371). Similarly, several of the anarchists interviewed in our own study mentioned how the anarchist movement showed them how to combine many of their beliefs about certain aspects of society, such as environmentalism or feminism, into a greater, all-encompassing ideology, including a certain associated lifestyle (Krüsselmann & Weggemans 2018).

Although the importance of ideology is generally acknowledged in literature, some scholars note that the importance of ideology may be overstated as such a coherent system of beliefs generally develops only after becoming part of a radical movement or group (Schils & Verhage 2017). The latter is also supported through our interviews with Dutch anarchists. Although all felt ideological identification with radical leftist ideas, only few – and in particular

the older generation who joined the movement during the 1970's or 1980's - had received any formal or informal education through school, parents, peers, music or films about the anarchist ideology in particular. Most sharpened their ideological beliefs through involvement with the movement: they took part in ideological discussions or reading groups and gained more understanding of the ideology behind the collective action they were already taking part in (Krüsselmann & Weggemans 2018). Similarly, Kitis (2015) observes that not all participants of the anti-authoritarian *chorós* in Greece are driven by ideologies.

### Collective instrumental motives

Closely related to ideological motives are collective instrumental motives. Collective instrumental motives reflect an individual's need to obtain justice for perceived injustices. Injustices, in the realm of (radical) left-wing ideologies can range from injustices against certain groups of people - based on their background, skin color or (political) beliefs -, as well as injustices against animals, nature, groups of people or humanity as a whole. Whereas an individual may not be able to achieve the intended political or social change to correct said injustices by themselves, taking part in collective action or becoming part of a group or movement can increase chances of success. According to some scholars, participation then becomes a rational cost-benefit calculation in which the expected success of the movement is weighed against the costs associated with participation (Klandermans 1984; Olsen 1965; van Zomeren 2013).

The notion of collective instrumental motives is reflected in several studies. Unfairness and perceived injustice for oneself as well as others also formed a motivation for participants of the Global Justice Movement in Scandinavia (Zackariasson 2009). Participants of Bosi and Della Porta's (2012) study on the (P)IRA and the Red Brigade, recounted that their participation in these radical groups seemed like the only effective strategy to reach change, thereby supporting the notion of instrumental motives for engagement in radical groups and movements. In addition, perceived injustices motivated several Dutch Anarchists to search for a group of like-minded individuals that are equally willing to take action (Krüsselmann & Weggemans 2018). Some interviewees observed injustices against other individuals, whereas others felt personally affected. For example, the grandfather of one of our participants was evicted due to his participation in the socialist labor movement. This perceived injustice has instilled his grandson to fight for left-wing values 40 years later.

At the same time, however, there is not a lot of evidence here for a rational cost-benefit analysis that motivated their participation with the anarchist movement. Although some



respondents who engaged with the movement during the 1970's and 1980's recollected the benefit of housing through the squatting culture of the movement, most respondents expected more costs than perceived benefits before joining, such as the risk for backlash from the government in the forms of arrests or potential involvement in violence. Furthermore, most of the respondents did not expect any significant political or social changes through successful collective action in the movement, but joined anyways (Krüsselmann & Weggemans 2018).

### Identity motives

In addition, to ideological and collective instrumental motives, motives related to one's own identity or the group's identity could lead to engagement in a radical group or movement. From an individual perspective, participation in a radical group or movement allows for identification with a (ideally) well-defined social group – the “I” changes to “we” (Schils & Verhage 2017; van Stekelburg & Klandermans 2017). Next to the expression of similar values and morals by being part of the group and the opportunity to express anger or other grievances, participation in a radical group or movement thus also offers the chance for social belonging and a social identity (Demant et al. 2018).

Social aspects related to continued participation in the Dutch Anarchist movements were important to our interviewees. Some joined the movement through peers, others found their group of peers once they started participating in illegal demonstrations or other forms of direct actions (Krüsselmann & Weggemans 2018). Furthermore, some interviewees identified that the anarchist movement also came with a subculture that prescribes a certain lifestyle – from appearances and clothing to music or nutrition. In other words, the movement offered them not just ideological belonging, but also the opportunity to evolve one's identity around the movement. Similar observations of identity-related aspects are made in other radical left-wing movements or groups. For example, through interviews with participants of the 2013 Gezi protests in Turkey, Uncu (2016, 204) demonstrates how the protestors bonded through shared feelings of “isolation, atomization and despair” and how these shared anger against the authoritarian leadership and belonging to a community lead to positive feelings of hope in the light of the protests.

### Individual instrumental motives

Finally, participation in radical social groups or movements can provide other, individual, incentives that could influence the cost-benefit analysis mentioned previously (Klandermans

1984). Such incentives can be material, as well as non-material, such as a career within the movement or group organization.

Individual incentives are not often discussed in the limited literature on left-wing radicalization. In our own study, some Dutch anarchists who became associated with the movement in the 1970s or 1980s mentioned that the movement's culture of squatting houses helped them overcome the housing crisis of that time. With the introduction of the anti-squatting laws, this incentive is not applicable anymore to the younger generation of Dutch anarchists. Other material benefits gained from participation seem limited, possibly due to the often-non-hierarchical structure and limited resources of radical social movements (Fitzgerald & Rodgers 2000).

In the end, individual motives underlying the radicalization process vary for everyone. Whereas ideological motives play an important role for some, others initially join a radical movement to find social belonging with a group, or to express anger with regards to a certain topic. Furthermore, radicalization processes may also be impacted by external factors, such as direct or in-direct recruitment by radical groups, peers, family members, or through social media and other types of online formats (Schils & Verhage 2017). Such influences have not been explored extensively in the context of left-wing radicalization yet. Of particular interest here is a comparison with other types of radicalization, as some of our conclusions mirror findings from studies on right-wing radicalization, whilst others differing on some aspects. For example, Mayer and Klandermans (2005) identified how individual instrumental motives, such as the possibility of a career in the movement, motivated some to join radical right-wing groups. While not mentioned in many studies on left-wing groups, including our own, one could expect that similar motives exist in left-wing groups as well. This short summary of findings, based on a limited number of studies, intends to provide some direction for further exploration.

#### IV. Macro-factors of left-wing radicalization

The previous section reviewed micro-factors associated with engagement in radical left-wing groups or movements. However, these individual pathways do not take place in isolation, but are embedded in broader political and societal context that set the conditions in which individuals, groups and movements exist and operate. Over the years, a large number of such

macro-factors influencing radical groups have been identified through case-studies, participant observation and other types of studies across various radical left-wing movements.

One important factor to consider is the political context in which radical left groups or movements operate. First, the political context defines what is deemed radical to begin with. The term 'radical' already signals that the group or movement or even the individual person does not (a) follow conventional political or social beliefs and/or (b) does not make use of conventional tactics. For example, in the current context in which the most countries are capitalist, fighting for communist values seems radical. However, just thirty years ago, a significant number of countries identified with communist political values (e.g. Soviet Union and related satellite states) - and Cuba still does today. In these contexts, communist beliefs would not be deemed radical. This dependency on the (historical) political context lies at the heart of any definition of what is deemed *left* or *radical* to begin with.

Furthermore, the political context also determines the demand for radical left groups or movements. If individuals can express their left ideological beliefs through existing institutionalized left-wing political parties, and if they believe that such parties can bring about the desired political or social change, they may be less inclined to take part in a radical group or movement, thus decreasing the need for radical groups. Williams and Lee (2012), for example, highlight how the win of communist parties in Greece and other countries lead to a demobilization of the anarchist movement, as most of the left found a way to use institutionalized politics as a tool for political change. Similarly, Zibechi (2005) remarks how left-wing political leaders in the Americas have adopted demands and the language of (radical) social movements, resulting in the end of some initiatives without the actual goal being reached. On the other hand, electoral wins of far right-leaning parties in Scandinavian countries created a demand for the radical anti-fascism movement to find new ways to confront their adversaries. Whereas some members choosing to confront their adversaries through conventional political means, others tried to open and broaden the movement for further mobilization of the (local) masses (Jämte 2018). Either way, radical left groups and movements operate in a political context that shapes goals, tactics, and mobilization and thus, cannot be ignored.

Another important factor to consider as a macro-factor shaping affect radical left groups and movements is state repression. Repression by the state can have varying impacts on a radical left movement, as becomes evident through comparative case studies. Williams and Lee (2012) illustrate how state repression almost eradicated anarchist activism in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan, whereas in Greece and the Czech Republic, state repression actually led to further

radicalization and increased mobilization for the anarchist movement. Zwerman and colleagues (2000) paint a similar picture for New Left movements in Japan, Germany, Italy and the US: whereas state repression of these movements may have led to a decline of mass protest, many of the movements went underground instead; the core groups who continued their activism radicalizing further, with some making increasingly use of violence. Other examples show how specific events of state repression can trigger a mobilization of the masses, or at least a significant increase in support for radical left groups or movements. Aßmann's (2018) biography of Gudrun Ensslin, a former member of the terrorist Red Army Faction, shows how the violent death of German student Benno Ohnesorg during a demonstration in Berlin set off a process of radicalization that later turned into extremism.

Finally, general changes in the political as well as social landscape can generate the need for radical action from extra-parliamentary left groups and growing public support for such radical actions. In recent years, in the light of growing poverty, a shortage of affordable housing, the exposure of structural and institutional racism, rising awareness for violence against women and many other societal issues, the support for radical political and societal changes and radical actions has grown. As a result, existing radical left groups or movements, that seemingly offer potential solutions against such problems, or at least a plan of action to mobilize the masses. have grown in size. Simultaneously, new movements – often targeted at specific societal issues, such as the Occupy Movement against austerity measures – emerged. At the same time, however, it must be noted that societal changes may also have the opposite effects: the influx of refugees, following several conflicts, such as in Afghanistan or the Ukraine, increased nationalism, the call for closed borders and electoral success for right-wing parties in many countries. Another factor impacting the growth or decline of (demand for) radical left groups and movements is growing (scientific) knowledge about certain topics. For example, recent reports about the disastrous effects of climate change and perceived shortcomings in governmental responses may fuel individual, as well as broader societal radicalization processes and strengthen the demand for radical actions and broader political and societal changes as proposed by radical groups or movements. Like this example shows, radical left groups or movement do not operate in a vacuum, but are intrinsically impacted by their societal and political context.

The old and the new the radical Left?

Changing political or societal contexts can have short-term impact on how radical left-wing groups or movements operate, what tactics they employ or how their organizational structures look like. However, scholars have also observed significant long-term changes in the characteristics of radical left-wing movements. In the most recent decades since the 1960s, researchers have noted a shift from traditional left-wing radical groups or movements based on political ideologies, such as anarchism or Marxism, to radical activism increasingly oriented towards single issues, including environmentalism or feminism that are based on broader social or cultural values, rather than political ideals (Wennerhag 2018). As put by Della Porta (2017, 268):

“[...] while NSMs [New Social Movements] were considered as promoters of innovative values, reflecting a shift into a new society, the radical left was seen as a remnant of the past. [...] The NSMs were peaceful and colourful, the radical left rather dull and, at times, violent. Radical left ideology was considered as perpetuating an outdated class vision, appealing to a society that was long dead”.

In interviews with Dutch anarchists, some voiced concerns that traditional ideologies have become too complex for activists, who are taking part in relatively short-term single-issue radical activism rather than committing themselves long-term to the anarchist movement that strives for a complete change of the political and social world order<sup>i</sup>. Are these new (radical) social movements thus taking over? Do these changes reflect the demise of traditional radical left-wing groups?

No, according to some scholars who argue that new radical social movements and the traditional radical left are not only co-existing, but actively cooperating (Wennerhag et al. 2018). Hammond’s (2015) analysis of the occupy movement, for example, shows its deep rootedness in the anarchical philosophy of horizontal organizational structure, anti-authority values and autonomy from institutionalized politics. And although the Occupy movement never adopted a specific political ideology, its popularity helped to spread anarchist ideals amongst a broader population. Likewise, a sub-group of anarchists consider themselves eco-anarchists, and find common grounds with radical environmental groups like EarthFirst!, which make use of similar forms of radical direct actions as traditional political anarchist groups (Clark 2020). One of the Dutch anarchists that we interviewed equally identified himself as a political anarchist with a strong focus on environmental issues. He founded his own radical environmental group which attracted many members, equally from the Dutch

anarchist movement, as well as from activists mainly concerned with the single issue of environmentalism<sup>ii</sup>. Thus, rather than taking over from traditional radical left-groups, the new left radical social movements have incorporated characteristics from traditional groups. Equally, traditional groups can make use of social support for the new movements by embedding parts of their political and social values in new types of activism.

## V. Conclusion & Future Research

In the introduction, we asked: what about the majority that follows the same far-left ideologies but do not make use of violent means – individuals we would classify as non-violent radical, rather than extremist? In this chapter, we discussed the contested concepts of radicalization and left-wing radicalization in particular, highlighting the lacuna of empirical research on this phenomenon and how both terrorism- as well as social movement research have contributed to the discussion. Furthermore, we described a variety of individual motives for engaging in radical left activism, ranging from the need for a purpose in life or social belonging, to feelings of injustice. However, individual radicalization processes do not take place in a vacuum, but are impacted by the societal and political context, which can both fuel as well as repress individual and group radicalization.

This short overview of left-wing radicalization is possible due to empirical studies conducted by sociologists, anthropologists, social movement- and terrorism researchers. In-depth interviews with radicals and detailed (historical) case studies form the basis of this knowledge. However, the quantity of studies on non-violent left-wing groups or individuals is still low in comparison with left-wing violent extremism or other types, such as Islamist or right-wing radicalization. There is a need for substantial research on both traditional radical left groups, as well as affiliated modern movements and their interactions; multi- or interdisciplinary approaches that combine micro- and macro-level factors associated with left-wing radicalization and comparative research that explores the various manifestations of left-wing radicalization in different global regions.

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<sup>i</sup> Interview conducted with male Dutch anarchist in November 2017

<sup>ii</sup> Interview conducted with male Dutch anarchist in November 2017