

## Research Article

# Transformations in Collective Action Understanding Radicalization in Social Movements

Andrea Grippo\* 

Institute for Education in the Arts (IKL), Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, Austria

## Abstract

In recent years, radicalization has increasingly emerged as a central concern within the study of contemporary social movements. This article investigates the radicalization of collective action as a multidimensional and evolving process within democratic societies, challenging conventional approaches that associate radicalization solely with extremism or violence. Starting from the premise that post-industrial societies are characterized by a “social movement society” in which protest is a routine feature of civic engagement, the study examines how movements can shift from moderate dissent to more radicalized forms of mobilization. To explain this transformation, the article adopts a multi-level analytical framework that integrates macro-level structural triggers, meso-level organizational dynamics, and micro-level identity and framing processes. Empirically, it draws on a multi-method research design—combining frame analysis, protest event analysis, and secondary data—to explore the evolution of a protest movement that underwent significant ideological and tactical shifts. The study highlights how discursive strategies, alliances, and socio-political environments interact to reshape protest trajectories over time. By unpacking the layered and contingent processes that drive radicalization—beyond simplistic or linear models—the article contributes to current debates on contentious politics, protest mobilization, and the challenges posed to democratic resilience. The findings emphasize the need to view radicalization not merely as a threat, but as a complex and contextually embedded phenomenon that reflects deeper tensions within modern democracies.

## Keywords

Radicalization, Social Movements, Collective Action, Protest, Movement Transformation

## 1. Introduction

In post-industrial societies, contentious politics has become a pervasive mode of civic engagement, extending across multiple domains of public life. Meyer and Tarrow [53] described contemporary post-Fordist societies as “social movement societies,” in which “social protest has moved from being a sporadic, if recurring, feature of democratic politics to become a perpetual element in modern life”.

As movements persist and adapt, their sustained presence

has also drawn focus to the dynamic pathways through which they may radicalize. Rather than being an exceptional outcome, radicalization often unfolds through evolving relationships between protest actors, discursive strategies, and the political environments they inhabit. It reflects shifts in meaning-making, identity construction, and repertoires of action that shape how movements define themselves and engage with others. While much of the literature has focused on

---

\*Corresponding author: [a.grippo@akbild.ac.at](mailto:a.grippo@akbild.ac.at) (Andrea Grippo)

**Received:** 11 June 2025; **Accepted:** 21 June 2025; **Published:** 7 July 2025



Copyright: © The Author(s), 2025. Published by Science Publishing Group. This is an **Open Access** article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

violent extremism or ideological radicalism, growing attention is now directed toward understanding radicalization as a multi-dimensional process occurring within broader fields of contentious politics [3, 44, 77, 78].

This article explores the radicalization of collective action through a multi-level analytical framework, examining how protest movements evolve in response to macro-level disruptions, meso-level organizational dynamics, and micro-level processes of identity construction and emotional framing. Rather than viewing radicalization as a linear trajectory, the article approaches it as a situated and contingent process shaped by discursive, strategic, and relational transformations.

The analysis investigates how movements construct meaning, interact with their socio-political environments, and negotiate collective identities. It also considers how radicalization reconfigures both internal organizational structures and the movement's external orientation toward dominant institutions and public discourse. To ground this analysis empirically, the study focuses on a protest movement that underwent significant shifts in its collective identity, alliances, and tactical repertoire. The selected case serves to illustrate broader dynamics affecting contemporary mobilizations, particularly how meaning-making processes, shifting political alignments, and contested notions of legitimacy contribute to the radicalization of social movements.

The article proceeds as follows: after a conceptual discussion of radicalization, it analyzes the framing strategies and protest practices of the case study, examines its transformation over time, and concludes with a multi-level reflection on the factors that shaped its radicalization. By combining theoretical insight with empirical investigation, the study contributes to ongoing debates on protest dynamics, radicalization trajectories, and the resilience of democratic societies.

## 2. Methodological Notes

This study adopts a multi-method research design to capture the complexity of radicalization processes within the Querdenken movement. The approach integrates frame analysis, protest event analysis, and secondary data analysis to triangulate findings and reinforce analytic validity. Frame analysis is employed to examine the movement's narrative constructions and framing strategies as they relate to its interpretation of social and political reality. The analysis draws exclusively on primary materials produced by Querdenken between 2020 and 2022, including oral discourse (e.g., speeches at demonstrations and interviews: n. 38) and digital content disseminated via Telegram, YouTube, Ruptly, and related platforms (n. 317) [52]. Protest event analysis offers empirical insight into the temporal, spatial, and tactical dimensions of mobilization, contributing to a more granular understanding of the movement's public manifestations. Events were included in the dataset if they explicitly referenced opposition to government measures related to the

COVID-19 pandemic, either in their title or description. This criterion allowed the selection to focus on actions thematically aligned with Querdenken's core grievances. Sources were drawn primarily from Querdenken-affiliated platforms and communication channels, as well as from independent media coverage documenting the events. Secondary data analysis complements the primary research by situating findings within broader scholarly debates and enhancing contextual depth. Through methodological triangulation [13], the study synthesizes diverse sources and analytical perspectives, thereby enhancing both the descriptive depth and explanatory robustness of its findings [60].

## 3. On the Radicalisation

Neumann and Kleinmann [56] define radicalization as “one of the great buzzwords of our time.” Despite its ubiquity in public discourse, its precise meaning remains contested in academic research. Michel Wieviorka [77] highlights the limits of classical sociological approaches to political violence, stating that “violence is all the more difficult to understand as the classical sociological explanations are not satisfactory [...] The fact is that these [explanations] are never satisfactory and that the move to action, the violence, remains in many respects mysterious. Why should a particular individual commit the crime and why do so at a particular moment?”

Sociological studies have thus attempted to provide a multiplicity of definitions and interpretative approaches to the concept. According to Bonelli and Carrie [9], this diversity stems from the high elasticity of the term, which can be applied across distinct socio-political contexts and analytical frameworks. Xavier Crettiez [16] offers a useful typology, distinguishing between *cognitive radicalization*—the adoption of extremist beliefs—and *behavioral radicalization*—the enactment of radical or violent practices. As he explains, “North American sociology places particular emphasis on behavioral radicalization, often leaving aside forms of ideological extremism that, in the Anglo-American culture of freedom of expression, are not considered condemnable. In contrast, in European, and particularly French, sociology, cognitive radicalization is seen as an indispensable element that fuels and often precedes violent actions” [16].

Veldhuis and Staun [73] similarly differentiate between violent radicalization—where violence is used to achieve defined goals—and nonviolent but radical aspirations for profound social transformation, “which may or may not constitute a danger to democracy and may or may not involve the threat of or use of violence to attain the stated goals”.

To emphasize its dynamic nature, radicalization is often conceptualized as a process composed of stages. Moghaddam [54] proposes the well-known metaphor of a “stairway to terrorism,” in which individuals ascend from ground-level grievances to higher stages of ideological commitment and eventually, violent action. However, as Martinez and Scaini

[47] and Moghaddam [54] himself point out, this path is not linear or deterministic. The stages are not followed teleologically; individuals may interrupt the process or diverge from it entirely.

Despite their differences, most definitions share the idea that radicalization is a process through which individuals adopt systems of belief that “legitimize, support, or facilitate the use of violence [...] as the way through which serious crimes against persons and against the laws underpinning social cohesion are legitimized” [24]. Similarly, Charles Allen [2] defines radicalization as “the process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect societal change.” However, as numerous scholars have emphasized, the adoption of an extremist ideology is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for violent action. For example, Alimi, Demetriou, and Bosi [1] describe radicalization as a “processual shift from non-violent tactics of contention to tactics that include violent means,” where radical ideas and violent strategies are deeply interwoven.

Farhad Khosrokhavar [43] defines radicalization as “the convergence of an extreme ideology and moving into action.” He distinguishes it from both violent behavior lacking ideological grounding—which would be closer to criminal delinquency—and purely theoretical extremism, such as fundamentalist beliefs that remain detached from violent acts. His approach emphasizes the subjective perspective of the actor, focusing on the process of *subjectivisation* that underlies the decision to adopt violent or radical practices.

In Khosrokhavar’s analysis, “the sensitivity of sociology shifts towards the individual, his subjectivity, the modalities of his subjectivation and his adherence to the group, as well as towards the interaction of the group and the individual in a game of mirrors in which individual psychology, but also group dynamics, the charisma of the leader, and the intensity of the attachment to him and to the ideals professed by the group itself intervene” [43].

This echoes earlier work by Wieviorka [77], Collins [15], and Touraine [72], who theorize that individuals may move through distinct subjective states: constructing themselves as central actors in their political experience (*subjectivation*), slipping into apathy and demoralization (*desubjectivation*), or restoring meaning through ideological or religious frameworks (*hyper-subjectivation*).

Radicalization has also been linked to a range of psychological and sociological conditions. These include pathological behaviors [50, 74], experiences of relative or absolute deprivation [73], and perceived discrepancies between value expectations and actual conditions [32, 49]. Several studies also emphasize the importance of belonging to a marginalized or stigmatized group [80].

In this context, the Significance Quest Theory (SQT) de-

veloped by Kruglanski and collaborators provides a motivational account of radical engagement. The theory holds that the search for meaning—defined as “the subjective experience that [one’s life] matters and is worthy of respect” [63]—is a central driver of extreme behavior [8]. Individuals are drawn toward radical ideologies because they offer a path to “make a difference,” to “matter,” and to “be somebody” [44, 45].

From a different theoretical orientation, Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) contends that radical and extremist movements do not arise solely from grievances or beliefs but from the successful acquisition and deployment of material and symbolic resources. In the context of radicalization, RMT draws attention to how groups coordinate efforts, build alliances, and exploit opportunities in their external environment—including political instability, institutional fragility, or support from elite actors.

In line with this structuralist tradition, scholars such as Tarrow [64], Tilly [65, 66], and McAdam [48] argue that radicalization is shaped by the configuration of political opportunities [67]. Tarrow emphasizes that when political systems open up, they can encourage mobilization; when they close or become repressive, they may push movements toward radical or violent strategies. Tilly [65, 66] similarly underscores how repression and exclusion often narrow non-violent options, pushing actors to adopt more disruptive tactics. For McAdam [48], sudden shifts—such as an abrupt increase in state repression or the closure of legal avenues for dissent—can precipitate a turn toward radical action.

Radicalization, therefore, must be understood not as an isolated psychological condition, but as embedded within broader relational and socio-political environments [17, 18]. As Toscano and Grippo [69] succinctly put it, “radicalization does not take place in a vacuum, but occurs in the environment in which individuals are embedded.” These environments include structured networks of allies and adversaries—what Wesserman and Faust [76] describe as “a finite set or sets of actors and the relations or relations defined on them.” Such networks serve as vehicles for the diffusion of values, frames, and identities [14, 41], and can either constrain or catalyze radicalization [19].

Finally, radicalization often expresses a collective effort to assert identity in the face of perceived threats, exclusions, or injustices [28]. It is closely linked to struggles for recognition and the desire to challenge dominant power structures [70, 71]. Radicalization thus involves more than ideological drift or tactical escalation; it is embedded in organized, symbolic, and affective practices through which movements define themselves, engage with their opponents, and seek to transform the social and political order.

## 4. The “Lateral Thinking” and the Contagion of Libertarian Frames

### 4.1. Framing Freedom: Critical Thinking and Interpretive Schemata

The term *Querdenken*, introduced by psychologist Edward de Bono [10], merges the noun *Denken* (“thinking”) with the adjective *quer* (“lateral”). According to the *Duden* dictionary, *Querdenker* are those who “think independently and originally, and whose ideas and opinions are often not understood or accepted.” This self-ascribed label aligns with the movement’s narrative of critical thinking and its resistance to institutional authority during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Querdenken activists framed state-imposed containment measures as illegitimate intrusions on individual liberties—positioning these restrictions as the central social problem [33, 34]. This represents what Benford and Snow [6, 62] define as *diagnostic framing*, whereby injustice is identified and blame attributed [81]. These libertarian frames operated as interpretive schemata that enabled actors to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” their environment, thereby “rendering what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something meaningful” [30].

These framing strategies resonated strongly within German society, fueling broader processes of polarization. Government responses to the pandemic temporarily reactivated forms of social control rooted in “external constraints,” where individual impulses were subordinated to collective imperatives [23]. As infection rates surged, public discourse became increasingly antagonistic, characterized by epistemic fragmentation, dehumanization of dissenters, and rhetorical oversimplification [83, 21]. Opponents of public health mandates were not only marginalized but actively stigmatized—particularly through labels such as “*no vax*”, which functioned as *Stigmawörter* or “flag words” [29, 58], connoting unconditional moral disapproval.

### 4.2. Victimhood, Individualism, and Political Heterogeneity

This symbolic marginalization contributed to the movement’s reflexive identity construction—its narrative of *who we are*. Central to this construction was the notion of victimhood: Querdenken portrayed itself as a “blameless victim” of governmental betrayal, deception, and repression [42, 75]. This self-victimization not only galvanized solidarity among adherents but also reinforced the movement’s libertarian ideology. At its core, Querdenken’s conception of freedom centered on individual autonomy and the right to make decisions without external interference. Its manifesto, published in the summer of 2020, declared that “Querdenken stands for personal responsibility, self-determination, love, freedom, peace, truth” [82]. Such an absolutist and hyperbolic framing of

freedom, however, lacks the relational dimension necessary for mutual recognition and coexistence [68]. As Hudson [38] notes, libertarian worldviews tend to “value individual autonomy over social interconnectedness.”

Importantly, this emphasis on radical individualism does not preclude the formation of collective identity. As Michel Wieviorka [79] contends, “modern individualism is not incompatible with an increase in collective identities; quite the opposite because the continual increase in collective identities is caused by people choosing on an individual basis to join or adopt them.” Querdenken’s collective identity emerges precisely through its libertarian premise: the assertion that “freedom must prevail in all institutions of the intellectual and cultural sphere” and that “only individuals who can determine their own actions and develop their full potential are architects of social progress” [82].

Around this libertarian nucleus, Querdenken attracted a politically heterogeneous coalition that included conspiracy theorists, vaccine sceptics, and actors spanning the political spectrum—from the far left to the far right [55, 72]. This ideological plurality produced “a symbolic confusion”: “during the protest, symbols could be seen side by side that had never been seen at the same time at an event before.” The rainbow flag flew alongside the imperial black-white-red flag of German nationalism and placards referencing anti-fascist slogans. In moments of perceived emergency, conspiracy theories tend to proliferate, offering simplified causal narratives and the illusion of control over an opaque and threatening reality.

Initially, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution [25] assessed the protest field as “extremely heterogeneous, but democratic at its core.” However, over the course of 2020 and 2021, this assessment evolved. In its later reports, the agency observed a significant ideological and regional differentiation of the movement and noted “a significant increase in the influence of right-wing extremist actors” [26]. This trend signaled not only a drift in the movement’s political composition but also the increasing entanglement of libertarian claims with far-right narratives and organizational actors.

## 5. Radicalization of Protest Politics and the Alliance with the Far Right

### 5.1. From Civil Disobedience to Political Violence

On September 18, 2021, a 49-year-old man shot and killed a 20-year-old gas station employee in Idar-Oberstein, Germany, after being asked to wear a surgical mask—a measure mandated by the federal government in response to the coronavirus pandemic [61]. The event shocked public opinion and was widely interpreted as a symptom of a broader radicalization of public dissent. Holger Münch, president of the Federal Criminal Police Office, remarked: “in 2020, the



number of cases of politically motivated crime reached a new peak. The statistics reflect the extent of social tensions and the increasing radicalization of the population” [11]. During the first year of the pandemic, Germany recorded 44,692 such crimes—the highest number in its history. Over the following two years, this figure rose by 31.8%, reaching 58,916.

According to official reports, demonstrations against coronavirus policies were increasingly characterized by widespread non-compliance with police directives, repeated violations of hygiene rules, and—on several occasions—serious acts of violence. Attacks and threats directed at police and journalists became a recurring feature of protest events [12]. While “right-wing extremism remains the greatest threat to the liberal democratic order,” authorities noted that “Germany shows clear tendencies towards brutalization” [11].

Querdenken’s protest repertoire became progressively more confrontational. Many participants underwent what can be described as a process of radicalization understood as “resocialization and transformation within a symbolic-organizational universe that legitimizes and normalizes political violence” [3, 35, 51]. As Daniel Heinke [36] observed, “Querdenken rallies have turned into violent riots, and individuals who seem to have shared some of the same beliefs as the protestors plotted or even employed deadly violence.” These developments included numerous violent episodes targeting journalists, public officials, and citizens who supported containment measures.

A particularly telling moment came in March 2021, when a group affiliated with Querdenken plotted to kidnap Health Minister Karl Lauterbach. Police arrested members of the group—called “United Patriots”—who were found to possess firearms and maintain links with other extremist organizations. Later that year, in October, coordinated police raids across twelve German cities dismantled another plot to target politicians and public figures. These episodes signal a clear shift from protest to organized and premeditated violence.

## 5.2. Strategic Convergence: Protest Coalitions and Far-Right Participation

The radicalization of Querdenken was not limited to tactics but extended to its network of alliances. As the movement expanded, it increasingly attracted actors with preexisting extremist ideologies. This convergence—initially grounded in shared opposition to state interventions—gradually reshaped Querdenken’s collective orientation. Anti-establishment sentiments served as a unifying thread between ideologically disparate groups, fostering a fluid coalition under the Querdenken umbrella.

The presence of far-right actors became especially visible during large-scale demonstrations. Frei and Nachtwey [27] document such collaboration in Leipzig on November 7, 2020, calling it “an exemplary model of how radicalization and orchestrated interactions with the far right led to militant vi-

olations of the demonstration ban and violence against journalists and police officers.”

This strategic alignment was most dramatically demonstrated during the so-called “storm on the Reichstag” on August 29, 2020, when around 38,000 protesters gathered in Berlin under the slogan of resistance to the “Corona-dictatorship.” Leaders of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), including Tino Chrupalla and Björn Höcke, encouraged party members to attend. Gätz Kubitschek, a key ideologue of the German New Right and founder of the think tank *Institut für Staatspolitik*, also mobilized support for the protest. As the demonstration escalated, hundreds of participants breached police barriers and occupied the steps of the Reichstag, waving the black-white-red imperial flag associated with the far-right *Reichsbürger* movement [31].

Further episodes reinforced this trajectory. On October 3-4, 2020, in Konstanz, some 12,000 demonstrators—many masked and equipped with pyrotechnic devices—once again broke through police lines and occupied city streets. In March and April 2021, Querdenken mobilized 20,000 protesters in Kassel and Stuttgart. On the anniversary of the Reichstag event in August 2021, thousands returned to Berlin to commemorate what they saw as a symbolic act of resistance. Even in late 2021, 10,000 marched in Nürnberg; according to police estimates, one in four was affiliated with the AfD [4].

Querdenken’s *decentralized organizational structure*, initially intended to foster inclusivity and grassroots participation, also created openings for strategic infiltration by far-right actors. The lack of centralized leadership or clear ideological boundaries enabled diverse—and often conflicting—groups to operate under the same banner, facilitating what scholars describe as “*movement hijacking*” (Teune 2021; Frei & Nachtwey 2021). Without formal mechanisms for internal gatekeeping, far-right organizations capitalized on Querdenken’s open protest spaces to disseminate their own narratives, symbols, and agendas. They embedded themselves within local chapters, provided logistical support, and increasingly shaped the movement’s protest repertoire and public messaging. Over time, this porous structure blurred the lines between libertarian dissent and ethno-nationalist rhetoric, allowing right-wing extremist discourses to gain legitimacy through their association with a broader—and initially more moderate—mobilization. The movement’s fragmented structure thus functioned as both a shield against top-down repression and a *vector for ideological radicalization*, accelerating its drift toward far-right convergence.

## 5.3. From Libertarianism to Ethno-National Identity

Beyond tactical and organizational collaboration, the alliance between Querdenken and far-right movements has resulted in a discursive and ideological transformation. While Querdenken originally emphasized libertarian individualism—focused on bodily autonomy, personal sovereignty, and

anti-authoritarianism—its rhetoric has increasingly shifted toward national-collective frameworks. The notion of *Volk* (the people) as a culturally and ethnically bounded collective has begun to surface in the movement’s discourse.

This transformation is visible in the reframing of core values. Alongside calls for freedom and self-determination, the movement now emphasizes the triad of “Marriage - Family - Children,” echoing traditionalist and nationalist moral codes. These themes reflect a convergence between libertarian claims and far-right cultural conservatism, where individual rights are subordinated to a vision of national identity anchored in heritage, gender roles, and heteronormative kinship structures.

Querdenken thus illustrates how libertarian protest can, under certain conditions, morph into a vehicle for collective identity formation that aligns with far-right imaginaries. The shift from a discourse of individual freedom to one of ethno-national preservation marks a crucial phase in the radicalization of the movement and reveals the deepening ideological entanglement between protest politics and right-wing extremism in contemporary Germany.

## 6. Understanding the Radicalization of Collective Action

Querdenken’s collective action evolved significantly over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, growing more confrontational and ideologically rigid. What began as opposition to public health restrictions increasingly adopted disruptive and violent tactics. Physical assaults and threats against journalists, public figures, and citizens adhering to containment measures became common. This transformation invites a multi-level analysis of the drivers of radicalization, encompassing macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors [3, 43].

### 6.1. Macro-Level Triggers: Crisis, Uncertainty, and Systemic Distrust

The pandemic functioned as a major structural rupture—a “trigger event” comparable to war or terrorism—in which long-standing grievances were catalyzed into mobilization. It intensified political polarization and acted as a crucible for radical ideologies to take hold. In Beck’s [5] terms, the pandemic marked the realization of the “risk society,” where a permanent state of emergency normalizes exceptional governance.

Economic precarity and social isolation fostered widespread alienation, heightening receptiveness to radical framings that promised restoration or redemption [46]. As Plümpert, Neumayer, and Pfaff [57] argue, “distrust in the political system and in the necessity or appropriateness of lockdowns reinforce each other,” and were especially prominent in strongholds of non-mainstream parties such as the AfD and Die Linke. Gurr’s theory of relative deprivation [31] also

finds resonance here: radicalization is linked to the perceived gap between societal expectations and real-life opportunities.

Moreover, state repression—particularly the heavy-handed policing of protests and the criminalization of dissent—acted as an additional macro-level driver. Drawing on insights from the political process tradition [64-66], the closure of institutional channels for expressing discontent, combined with restrictive measures and public delegitimation of protest, often intensified feelings of exclusion and injustice. Rather than de-escalating tensions, such responses reinforced antagonistic perceptions of the state, contributing to a shift from moderate dissent to radical mobilization.

The crisis atmosphere also legitimized simplified or conspiratorial narratives. In this context, radicalization can be seen as a reaction to existential uncertainty, where individuals seek meaning in ideological communities that offer certainty and identity.

### 6.2. Meso-Level Dynamics: Polarization and Organizational Interactions

The pandemic not only accelerated societal polarization but also reshaped Querdenken’s internal dynamics and external alliances. Polarization is understood here as “a process where groups in society become adversaries when there is a sharp psychological division between ‘us and them’”. This antagonism encouraged an “in-group vs. out-group” mentality, fostering conditions for hate speech, scapegoating, and radical mobilization [39, 40].

Querdenken’s radicalization was not driven solely by structural pressures or emotional responses. As Alimi, Bosi, and Demetriou [1] argue, “interactions are key to the emergence and dynamics of violent strategies,” where motivations and norms are shaped and transformed through contention. As Querdenken increasingly collaborated with far-right actors, its repertoire of action and ideological orientation began to shift. Meso-level interactions—including joint demonstrations, symbolic overlap, and converging rhetorical strategies—reinforced this trajectory.

The adoption of nationalist frames and emphasis on the “German people” (*Volk*) gradually supplemented the movement’s initial libertarian focus on individual freedom. Over time, Querdenken’s discourse began incorporating traditionalist and ethnocultural themes aligned with far-right ideologies.

### 6.3. Micro-Level Pathways: Victimhood, Identity, and the Quest for Significance

At the micro-level, Querdenken mobilized powerful identity-framing strategies rooted in perceived victimhood. The movement cast itself as the blameless victim of a corrupt and oppressive political elite [7, 20]. By linking opinion to emotion, it strengthened internal solidarity through a common sense of threat, drawing symbolic boundaries between “us”

(the victimized) and “them” (the oppressors).

This victimization frame was often expressed through cultural-historical references, evoking national trauma and memory. Protesters routinely invoked Germany’s authoritarian past, comparing pandemic measures to the GDR or the Third Reich. Some demonstrators wore Stars of David to liken themselves to persecuted Jews; others carried placards with the slogan “*Impfen macht frei*” (“Vaccination sets you free”), a macabre paraphrase of the Nazi concentration camp motto “*Arbeit macht frei*” [4].

Such framing not only drew upon collective memory but also mobilized what Kruglanski and colleagues [44, 45] term the *quest for significance*: the desire to matter, to reclaim personal or collective meaning in a time of disruption. Radical ideologies provided a narrative that filled the existential vacuum left by the pandemic’s upheaval. As Hogg [37] and Doosje and collaborators [22] note, identity insecurity and uncertainty often precede radicalization, especially when individuals feel they have lost control over their social world.

Querdenken’s protest practices also invoked historical continuity. Its weekly Monday evening demonstrations in German city centers deliberately referenced the *Montagsdemonstrationen* of 1989–1991, evoking the successful mobilizations against the GDR regime. In doing so, the movement discursively framed itself as part of a tradition of legitimate resistance.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

The transformation of Querdenken’s collective action during the COVID-19 pandemic underscores enduring dynamics in contemporary protest politics [59]. Rather than suppressing dissent, the pandemic reconfigured the terrain of activism—shifting some mobilization online while intensifying offline protests that challenged public health measures. In Germany, Querdenken emerged as a prominent actor opposing state-imposed restrictions, initially grounded in libertarian ideals centered on individual autonomy and civil liberties.

Over time, however, the movement underwent a significant evolution. What began as a decentralized opposition to lockdowns gradually radicalized, culminating in ideological convergence and operational cooperation with far-right actors. This shift was accompanied by a transition from a focus on personal freedom to an emphasis on collective identity—particularly framed through ethno-cultural nationalism. The radicalization of Querdenken was shaped by a complex interplay of factors: macro-level disruptions triggered by the pandemic; micro-level processes such as perceived victimization and identity threats; and meso-level dynamics involving strategic alliances and network diffusion.

The movement’s rhetorical construction of itself as a persecuted minority—drawing heavily on historical analogies to authoritarian regimes—deepened its internal cohesion while reinforcing external antagonism. Simultaneously, its increas-

ing collaboration with far-right groups not only redefined its tactical repertoire but also transformed its ideological orientation.

The case of Querdenken illustrates how radicalization is neither linear nor monolithic but rather the outcome of interactions across structural conditions, organizational pathways, and individual experiences. Integrating macro-, meso-, and micro-analytic perspectives provides a more nuanced understanding of how and why protest movements escalate in their demands and tactics. Although specific to Germany, the trajectory of Querdenken shares features with other pandemic-era protest movements, such as Canada’s “Freedom Convoy” or Italy’s anti-pass mobilizations, suggesting broader patterns of libertarian convergence and radicalization. Understanding these processes is essential for anticipating the trajectories of contentious mobilization and for formulating effective responses. Addressing radicalization requires more than surveillance or repression; it entails engaging with legitimate grievances, reducing social fragmentation, and amplifying alternative narratives grounded in democratic values, mutual recognition, and constructive civic participation.

## Abbreviations

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland
PEGIDA	Patriotische Europäer Gegen Die Islamisierung Des Abendlandes
RMT	Resource Mobilization Theory
SQT	Significance Quest Theory

## Ethical Approval

No committee was required to approve the research since human participants were not involved (b) Ethics approval was not expected for this research.

## Informed Consent

The author confirms informed consent is deemed not necessary for this research. This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

## Author Contributions

Andrea Grippo is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## References

- [1] Alimi EY, Bosi L, Demetriou C. (2015) The dynamics of radicalization. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- [2] Allen C (2007) Threat of Islamic Radicalization to the Homeland. Homeland Security U. S.
- [3] Antonelli F (2021) Radicalizzazione. Milano, Mondadori.
- [4] Polizei Bayern (2021) Versammlungsgeschehen in Nürnberg am Sonntag (19.12.2021), 19.12.2021.
- [5] Beck U (1992) Risk Society. London and New York, Sage.
- [6] Benford RD, Snow DA (2000) Framing process and Social Movement. Annual Review of Sociology 26: 611-639.
- [7] Best J (1987) Rhetoric in Claims-Making. Social Problems, 34(2): 101-121.
- [8] Blee KM (2003) Inside organized racism: Women in the hate movement. University of California Press.
- [9] Bonelli L, Carrie F (2018) La fabrique de la radicalité Une sociologie des jeunes djihadistes français. Éditions du Seuil.
- [10] Bono E (1976) The Use of Lateral thinking. Jonathan Cape Ltd.
- [11] Bundeskriminalamt (2021) Vorstellung pmk 2020. [www.bka.de](http://www.bka.de)
- [12] Bundeskriminalamt (2022) PMK im Jahr 2022, Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat.
- [13] Campbell D, Fiske W (1959) Convergent and Discriminant Validation by the Multitrait-Multimethod Matrix. Psychological Bulletin, 56(2): 81-105.
- [14] Cinalli M (2006) Relational Structures and the Study of Collective Action. Political Sociology Seminar of CEVIPOF-Sciences PO.
- [15] Collins R (2008) Violence: A Microsociological Theory. Princeton University Press.
- [16] Crettiez X (2016) Penser la radicalisation. Revue Française de science politique, 66(5): 709-777
- [17] Della Porta D (1995) Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State. A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany. Cambridge University Press.
- [18] Della Porta D (2013) Clandestine political violence. Cambridge University Press.
- [19] Diani M, McAdam D (2003) Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action. Oxford University Press.
- [20] Dieckmann W (1975) Sprache in der Politik. Carl Winter Universitätsverlag.
- [21] Dietz M, Roßteutscher S, Scherer P, Stövsand, L. C. (2021) Rally effect in the Covid-19 pandemic. German Politics, 1, 1-21.
- [22] Doosje B, Loseman A, Den Bos K (2013) Determinants of radicalization of Islamic youth in the Netherlands. Journal of Social Issues, 69(3): 586-604.
- [23] Elias N (1988) Il processo di civilizzazione. Il Mulino.
- [24] Fabbri L, Malacarne C (2023) Understanding Radicalization in Everyday Life. McGraw Hill.
- [25] Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (2020) Extremistische und hybride Einflussnahme auf das Demonstrationsgeschehen im Zuge der Corona-Pandemie, BfV-Newsletter, 1+2/2020, 1.
- [26] Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (2022) Verfassungsschutzbericht 2021, Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat.
- [27] Frei N, Nachtwey O (2021) Quellen des Querdenkertums. University of Basel.
- [28] Giorgi S (2017) The mind and heart of resonance. Journal of Management Studies, 54(5): 711-738.
- [29] Girth H (2002) Sprache und Sprachverwendung in der Politik. De Gruyter Mouton.
- [30] Goffman E (1974) Frame Analysis. Harper Colophon.
- [31] Grippo A (2024) Noi, Loro, gli Altri. Aracne editrice.
- [32] Gurr T (1970) Why men rebel. Princeton University Press.
- [33] Haring N, Jagers SC, Löffgren Å (2021) COVID-19: Large-scale collective action, government intervention, and the importance of trust. World Development, 138, 105236.
- [34] Hattke F, Martin H (2020) Collective action during the Covid-19 pandemic: The case of Germany's fragmented authority. Administrative Theory Praxis», 42(4): 614-632.
- [35] Hegghammer T (2010) The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters. International Security, 35(3): 53-94.
- [36] Heinke D (2022) The Security Threat Posed by the Corona-skeptic Querdenken Movement in Germany, CTCSSentinel, 15(3): 18-25.
- [37] Hogg M (2014) From uncertainty to extremism: Social categorization and identity processes. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 23(5): 338-342.
- [38] Hudson A (2013) Individualisation. Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, 1(3): 1-16.
- [39] Hunger S, Hutter S, Kanol E (2023) The mobilisation potential of anti-containment protests in Germany. West European Politics, 46(4): 812-840.
- [40] Hutter S, Weisskircher M (2022) New contentious politics. Civil society, social movements, and the polarisation of German politics. German Politics, 1, 1-17.
- [41] Jackman R, Miller R (1998) Social capital and politics. Annual review of political science, 1(1): 47-73.
- [42] Jenness V (1995) Social movement growth, domain expansion, and framing processes. Social Problems, 42, 145-170.



- [43] Khosrokhavar, F. (2014) *Radicalisation*. Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme.
- [44] Kruglanski A, Bédanger J, Gelfand M, Gunaratna R, Hettrachchi M, Reinares F, Orehek E, Sasota J, Sharvit K (2013) Terrorism-A (self) love story: Redirecting the significance quest can end violence. *American Psychologist*, 68(7): 559-575.
- [45] Kruglanski A, Molinario E, Jasko K, Webber D, Leander N, Pierro A (2022) Significance-Quest Theory. *Perspect Psychol Sci*, 17(4): 1050-1071.
- [46] Maddanu S, Toscano E (2024) *Inequalities, Youth, Democracy and the Pandemic*. Taylor Francis.
- [47] Martinez D, Scaini S (2019) Il fenomeno della radicalizzazione nelle sue fasi di sviluppo, consolidamento e dissoluzione. *Safety Security Magazine*, <https://www.safetysecuritymagazine.com/articoli/il-fenomeno-della-radicalizzazione-nelle-sue-fasi-di-sviluppo-consolidamento-e-dissoluzione/>
- [48] McAdam D (1982) *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*. University of Chicago Press.
- [49] McBride M (2011) The logic of terrorism: Existential anxiety, the search for meaning, and terrorist ideologies. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 23(4): 560-581.
- [50] McCauley C, Moscalenko S (2011) *Friction. How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us*. Oxford University Press.
- [51] McDonald K (2018) *Radicalization*. Polity Press.
- [52] Mehan A (2023) The digital agency, protest movements, and social activism during the Covid-19 pandemic. In G. Erk (ed.), *Amps Proceedings Series 32* (pp. 1-7)
- [53] Meyer DS, Tarrow S (1998) *The social movement society: Contentious politics for a new century*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- [54] Moghaddam F (2005) The Staircase to Terrorism: A psychological exploration. *American Psychologist*, 60, 161-169.
- [55] Nachtwey O, Schäfer R, Frei N (2020) *Politische Soziologie der CoronaProteste*. Universität Basel.
- [56] Neumann P, Kleinmann S (2013) How Rigorous is Radicalization Research?. *Democracy and Security*, 9(4): 360-382.
- [57] Plümper T, Neumayer E, Pfaff KG (2021) The strategy of protest against Covid - 19 containment policies in Germany. *Social Science Quarterly*, 102(5): 2236-2250.
- [58] Reisigl M, Wodak R (2001) *Discourse and Discrimination*. Routledge.
- [59] Rohlinger DA, Meyer DS (2024) Protest during a pandemic: How covid-19 affected social movements in the United States. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 68(6): 810-828.
- [60] Seawright J, Collier D (2004) Glossary. In E. Brady, D. Collier (Eds.), *Rethinking Social Inquiry* (pp. 273-313): Rowman Littlefield.
- [61] Silk J (2021) *Killing sparks fears of anti-masker radicalization*, dw. de.
- [62] Snow DA, Benford, R. D. (1988) Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization. *International Social Movement Research*, 1, 197-217.
- [63] Steger M, Frazier P, Oishi S, Kaler M (2006) The meaning in life questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 53(1): 80-93.
- [64] Tarrow S (1994) *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- [65] Tilly C (1978) *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Addison-Wesley.
- [66] Tilly C (1992) *Coercion, Capital, and European States*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- [67] Tilly C, Tarrow S. (2007) *Contentious Politics*. Paradigm Publishers.
- [68] Toscano E (2023) Libertà contagiosa. Come l'estrema destra ha cavalcato i movimenti free-vax tra sfiducia e panico morale. In M. Polesana E. Risi (Eds.), *Comunicazione e pandemia. Mimesis*.
- [69] Toscano E, Grippo A (2023) Italian far-right foreign fighters in the Ukrainian war. The long chain of Transnational Recruitment Network (TRN). *International Review of Sociology*, 33(2), 363-379.
- [70] Touraine A (1981) *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements*. Cambridge University Press.
- [71] Touraine A (1985) An Introduction to the Study of Social Movements. *Social Research*, 52(4), 749-787.
- [72] Touraine A (1995) *Critique of Modernity*. Blackwell Publishers.
- [73] Veldhuis T, Staun J (2009) *Islamist Radicalisation, a root causes model*. Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael.
- [74] Victoroff J, Kruglanski A (2019) *Psychology of Terrorism. Classic and Contemporary Insights*. Taylor Francis.
- [75] Weed FJ (1997) The framing of political advocacy and service responses in the crime victim rights movement. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 24, 43-61.
- [76] Wesserman S, Faust K (1994) *Social network analysis: Method and applications*. Cambridge University Press.
- [77] Wieviorka M (2003) *Violence and the subject*. Thesis Eleven, 73, 42-50.
- [78] Wieviorka M (2013a) An interview with Michel Wieviorka: Violence, evil, and good. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 16(3): 377-390.
- [79] Wieviorka M (2013b) *Identity and Social Movements*. European Institute of the Mediterranean, 5, 1-16.
- [80] Wiktorowicz Q (2005) *Radical Islam rising: Muslim extremism in the West*. Rowman Littlefield Publishers.

- [81] Williams RH (1995) Constructing the public good: Social movements and cultural resources. *Soc. Probl*, 42, 124-144.
- [82] WiR2020 (2020) Satzung der Partei. *Wir2020*.
- [83] Yarchi M, Baden C, Kligler-Vilenchik N (2021) Political polarization on the digital sphere. *Political Communication*, 38(1-2): 98-139.