
Radicalism within the Context of Social Movements: Processes and Types

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Abstract

Drawing on work within the study of social movements and on conversion processes that is relevant to understanding radicalization, as well as on our own relevant research experiences and findings, especially on radicalism in right-wing and left-wing movements, we focus attention on the elements and dynamics of social movements, both intra-movement and extra-movement, that facilitate the grassroots development and maintenance of radical identities and enhance or diminish the prospect of engagement in radical action. In particular, we note the importance of free spaces to associate apart from the reach of control agents and adversaries, the development of affinity groups and a security culture within which associational trust might develop, and the role of perceptions of the prospect of persecution by social control agents as working together to contribute to the development of radicalization. However, we emphasize that there is no single pathway to radicalization, or type of radical, but that different types, and thus pathways, result from the different ways in which the contributing factors can interact and combine.

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Abstract

Drawing on work within the study of social movements and on conversion processes that is relevant to understanding radicalization, as well as on our own relevant research experiences and findings, especially on radicalism in right-wing and left-wing movements, we focus attention on the elements and dynamics of social movements, both intra-movement and extra-movement, that facilitate the grassroots development and maintenance of radical identities and enhance or diminish the prospect of engagement in radical action. In particular, we note the importance of free spaces to associate apart from the reach of control agents and adversaries, the development of affinity groups and a security culture within which associational trust might develop, and the role of perceptions of the prospect of persecution by social control agents as working together to contribute to the development of radicalization. However, we emphasize that there is no single pathway to radicalization, or type of radical, but that different types, and thus pathways, result from the different ways in which the contributing factors can interact and combine.

Introduction

Despite the variance among activist careers, the vast majority of social-movement activists adhere to a routine form of activism that stresses non-violent engagement with authorities and the cultivation of resources and

political allies.¹ This is the standard playbook in which movement activities are scripted and executed in a manner agreed upon by both the protesting organizations and local authorities.² There are, however, activists who step outside these boundaries and engage their targets in a more direct manner. Often branded *radicals* by both authorities and their peers, they are at the same time admired and reviled by their non-radical fellows. Radicals are admired for their dedication and courage, often risking bodily harm or imprisonment, such as the Tiananmen radicals who risked safety and freedom in the hopes of sparking a wider protest.³ Radicals are also reviled for their confrontational and often violent tactics. Confrontation and violence (such as that demonstrated by the anarchists who protested during the Seattle World Trade Organization meetings) can unravel carefully planned campaigns, garner negative media attention, and shift focus away from the intended message and towards violence.⁴

While persistent in social movements, the radical is the subject of few studies; and the factors that lead to radicalization are poorly understood.⁵ In this article we examine how social movements facilitate the development of radicals, as well as the factors related to movement activity that may influence radical violence. Our observations are based not only on a review of the literature on social movements, but also on our ethnographic research of various social movements, including Cross's (2011) recent comparative study of two movement coalitions—a right-wing coalition and a left-wing coalition—and Snow's studies of conversion to off-beat religious movements.⁶

What is a Radical?

Sociological understandings of radicalism and radicals have often been vague and ill-defined, stretching as far back as Thelma McCormack's overly broad definition: "[radicals are] persons who advocate institutional change."⁷ Other early attempts to understand radicalism, such as Bittner's 1963 essay on the psychology of radicalism, argued that radicals possessed the "personality traits of dependence, rigidity, [and] sado-masochism," which combined to fuel what Bittner saw as the quixotic nature of radical movements.⁸

This conceptual ambiguity is due in part to the fact that radicalism and radicals are often defined by their context.⁹ What may seem radical in one context, strident street protests in 1989 Beijing, are seen as more commonplace and routine in another, such as throughout much of Europe. Koopmans (1993) noted that what counts as radical is often determined

by the state, and how it responds to a situation.¹⁰ The tolerance of different regimes for certain types of behavior can cause dramatic shifts in what constitutes radicalism over very short periods of time.

Cross defines three types of radicalism.¹¹ He argues that political radicals and radicalism can refer to the *practice* of high-risk or extreme movement activity, the *process* by which activists become radicals, and an *identity* ascribed to those activists who may or may not already be radicalized.

Perhaps the best known element of the practice dimension of radicalism is Freeman's radical flank theory.¹² Freeman introduced the idea as a means of referring to elements within the women's liberation movement, whose goals deviated from the majority of other movement organizations. Haines applied the radical flank theory to radical civil rights organizations.¹³ Haines and Freeman both argued that radical organizations and activists exert positive or negative influence on more mainstream movement organizations by pushing for more action than non-radical actors are willing to commit. While they may bring negative attention by way of extreme or violent actions taken on behalf of the movement, they can also exert what Haines termed the "positive radical flank effect" by casting the actions of moderate movement organizations in a more favorable light. It is the second two elements of Cross's definition that are the focus of this article.

Prior work by Della Porta (1995) found that militant radicals in various leftist movements in Italy and Germany were bound together by strong personal ties, as well as by their shared activist experiences.¹⁴ Della Porta found that participating in radical actions reinforced and facilitated future participation in similar actions, which acted as a self-reinforcing mechanism to drive radical activists to become increasingly more radical. Della Porta's analysis, though performed at a time and in a place significantly different from the contemporary American context, still provides one of the best assessments of the evolution of radicals and of one type of outcome of the radicalization process. She also provides a template for other studies of radicalization and radicals regarding the process and outcomes of radicalism.

Cross has recently expanded on Della Porta's work by examining two grassroots social movements.¹⁵ Cross found that while Della Porta's theory of radicalization was, in many ways, confirmed, there were both structural and psychological factors that affected the development of the radical identity. These processes strongly influenced not just how radicals interacted with their fellow activists and radicals, but also their willingness to see violence as a viable political strategy.

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We define a radical as *a social movement activist who embraces direct action and high-risk options, often including violence against others, to achieve a stated goal*. The definition of risk, in this context, is determined by contemporary local standards, but is assumed to include a degree of illegality. We begin by examining the context in which social movement activism facilitates radicalization, and then examine how this context may produce different types of radicals.

The Group Context of Radicalism

Radicals can be found almost anywhere.¹⁶ They are most likely found, however, in arenas that allow them freedom to operate, and have few constraints. Their tendency towards risk often sets them at odds with established movement organizations. Radicalism in movements is often a result of the close bonds among activists and the development of a collective identity that places them in opposition to the "normal" way of achieving social change.

Collective identity, within social movements, is typically conceptualized as a:

"shared sense of 'we-ness' or 'one-ness' anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined sets of 'others.'"¹⁷

This sort of oppositional identity construction typically occurs in relation to, or against, counter-movement or non-activist identities. Radicals' identities, however, are also constructed in contrast to and in interaction with their fellow activists.

The process of radicalization, wherein many professed radicals claim to have a more "authentic" or "true" sense of how to best achieve social change, draws comparisons to converts to religious movements, and so-called "cults."¹⁸ Indeed, radicalization follows a similar process, in that radicals may recast their activist identities anew and see their former, non-radical activism as ineffectual. As one of Cross's informants exclaimed when reflecting back at his non-radical activists: "They just don't get it." Or, as another radical informant put it, the non-radicals "are fighting with one hand tied behind their back."

Grassroots activism, with its informal structures and often temporary organizations, offers the kind of fertile ground in which radicals can flourish.

ish and thrive. Such activism finds new recruits and converts among the dedicated cadre of activists drawn to the often more direct type of activism the grassroots represent. Activists point out that formality and established hierarchies inhibit risky and potentially illegal behavior. They increase the likelihood of failure or discovery since they lack the flexibility and autonomy necessary for clandestine or extreme actions. Turning to the view of actual activists, we see that the grassroots is an ideal location for both established radicals and for creating new radicals.

An oft-repeated quote among grassroots activists is Angela Davis's statement that "radical simply means grasping things at the root." This means that there is a basic authenticity in grassroots activism. This underscores a belief among activists that the grassroots are where the "action" is and where radicalism is thus enabled. Additionally, grassroots organizations allow for potential radicals to explore a deepening radical identity by serving in "free spaces," which are defined by "small-scale community or movement settings beyond the surveillance and control of institutionalized authorities that are voluntarily frequented by dissidents and system complainants."¹⁹

For radicals, these places are especially important. The nature of their protest, high risk and direct action, increases the likelihood of arrest if they discuss their activities in public. Free spaces, particularly those embedded in other activists' spaces where they are welcome, or at the very least tolerated, give radicals places where they can engage in radical identity work, meet with like-minded activists, and even do some limited planning of radical actions.

Additionally, the maintenance of free spaces often requires the development of a *security culture*, which embodies the norms and practices meant to ensure that free spaces remain "free." Learning how to keep a space free is particularly useful for radicals as it provides them with a trusted environment in which to develop and make connections, and teaches them how best to keep clandestine activities out of sight and away from the notice of local authorities.

Finally, free spaces allow radicals to form relationships with each other, as well as influence and recruit initially non-radical activists. This allows for the formation of *affinity groups*, which often function as the social units within which radical action is planned and executed. Affinity groups are the small groups that form between trusted activists who are able to make connections with each other in the safe spaces of grassroots organi-

zations protected by their security culture.²⁰ Through engagement in more conventional sorts of activism in this environment, bonds of trust allow for planning of, and/or engagement in, riskier action.

Illustrative were the *tertulias* that were formed to oppose the fascist government forces during the Spanish Civil War.²¹ The *tertulias* were small dedicated groups, usually based upon friendship ties, which made them especially cohesive. These close relationships, built upon mutual trust, enabled relationships that enhanced the ability to plan illegal or direct-action types of protest, the sort of high-risk activism that defines radicals.

Della Porta's 1995 study of political violence perpetrated by leftists in Italy and Germany offered a model for radicalization.²² Her theory begins with a standard account of movement recruitment: initial involvement, usually via pre-existing ties to current movement members, leads to the formation of more movement ties, which in turn leads to increased involvement. She argues these movement ties became friendship ties that, in turn, converted into activist ties, essentially forming affinity groups. Radical activists develop a collective identity that reinforces movement values. These two, the formation of activist/friendship ties and the development of a collective identity, become a repeating cycle that binds the radical activist more firmly to the movement and its goals and tactics.

To this point, the account offered by Della Porta is similar to that experienced by non-radical activists. She pinpoints the dichotomy between participation of the activist and violence undertaken by, or on behalf of, the movement. She argues that radicals internalize the justification for violence, and rather than turn away from violent political acts, embrace them and use them to further internalize movement values, thus strengthening their commitment to the movement. This becomes a self-reinforcing cycle where acts of violence lead to a more strident belief in the movement, increasing radicalization in the activist.

This account is incomplete because it describes only the radical who is able to establish close bonds with other radicals, and who also sees violence as the primary means of social change. It is not just the group/collective identity formation process that matters for radicalization to occur; rather, it is also how activists interact with authorities, especially social control agents such as the police, which shapes their orientation towards the efficacy of violence in achieving social change.

Policing of Radicals

Gamson noted that part of what makes radicalism difficult to study is its highly contextual nature.²³ Radicalism requires the kinds of internal movement dynamics discussed above, but it is also defined by external structural factors, such as state and police responses. What law enforcement authorities determine to be illegal protest, and how they respond to such protest, can shape the way radical activists develop, and define the form their radicalism takes. Part of the appeal and perceived effectiveness of radicalism lies in its illegality. Thus, more permissive policing could lead to more extreme acts of radicalism, and this was something of which radical activists in both coalitions seemed to be aware.²⁴ During a left-wing coalition planning session, for example, one of the activists suggested several increasingly violent tactics, and offered the justification that "we don't have to do all of them, just until we get the desired result...the attention of the cops and any media there."²⁵

Perhaps the most significant effect of policing, in regards to radicalism, is how police react to violent protest and how past encounters with the police are conceptualized by radical activists. Additionally, the experience of radical activists with grassroots organizations places them in situations involving the police that may not be typical of activists in more formal protest organizations.

It is a commonly held belief among radical activists that contemporary styles of policing compromise their ability to engage in meaningful and effective protest.²⁶ The radical activists in Cross's study felt that new policing methods, such as the establishment of "free speech zones" and increased permitting of protests, are but thinly veiled attempts to stifle speech and legitimate some forms of protest activity while making other forms, such as non-negotiated and spontaneous protest, more difficult.²⁷

For the most part, the radical activists' attitudes towards the police are in line with those of their fellow, non-radical activists', in that they feel the police are at best indifferent towards their causes, and at worst openly opposed. Few activists with whom Cross spoke, however, perceived an intentional threat from law enforcement activities, or felt they were deliberately targeted by the police. A small minority feel threatened by, and are openly hostile towards, the police to the point where they believe their activism was actively monitored and suppressed by law enforcement.²⁸

This smaller subset of radical activists fear active suppression by the authorities and often reference the kind of domestic surveillance that occurred during the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as COINTELPRO.²⁹

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Often, these radical activists were involved in some of the more extreme movements where past incidents of violence led to some justification for fearing official repression. Examples include the cases of radical environmental, animal rights, militia, white supremacist, and anti-abortion movements. This belief in state oppression ran deep for these activists and provided greater justification for violence on behalf of the movement.

Radical activists who believe they are specifically targeted by the state for oppression use this belief to justify more extreme tactics and increased acceptance of violence as a method. The radical militants of Della Porta's study were openly hunted by Italian and German authorities and driven underground.³⁰ These measures forestalled more moderate approaches to social change, as the activists believed there could be no useful negotiation with authorities. Many militant radicals feel the state is actively pursuing them. This belief is reinforced by occasional incidents involving authorities engaging in behavior meant to prevent violence. These incidents are seen as proof of the persecution of radicals, thus creating a circular feedback loop of radical acts and violence.

Types of Radicals

Not all grassroots radicals are the same. The radicals in Della Porta's account evolved into the more militant type. This is due in part to the way they interacted with law enforcement, and their ability to build trust among tightly knit groups. This is only one type of radical. Below we identify four types of radicals, or pathways that activists can take as they evolve into radicals.

The four types of radicals: Opportunistic, coordinated, militant, and loners are all radicals in their acceptance and embrace of direct action high-risk activism, but they differ in other ways. The different types or pathways are presented in Table 1, along with the important variables that affect each pathway. Specifically, they differ in their perception of law enforcement oppression and the degree to which they are able to join an affinity group.

Table 1: TYPES OF RADICALS

Perception of Persecution \ Degree of Trust	Perception of Protest as Not Actively Persecuted	Perception of Protest as Actively Persecuted
Trusted By Grassroots Peers	Coordinated	Militants
Not Trusted by Grassroots Peers	Opportunistic	Loners

Opportunistic Radicals

Radicals who do not perceive targeted persecution from law enforcement, and who are unable to make a tight connection with their fellow radicals, follow a path towards radical activism that is somewhat limited. We designate these types of radicals as *opportunistic*, due to the fact that their activities are constrained in terms of what they can accomplish by themselves. Not all radicals are able to make a connection with other radicals. For a variety of reasons, some may be kept on the outside of an organization. Typically this is an issue of the activist being unable to engender the trust of his or her fellow activists.

While often tolerated by movement organizations, these opportunistic radicals are often viewed as potential security risks. Their inability to form affective bonds means that they exist on the fringes of the groups to which they belong, and that their radicalism is, by necessity, a solo affair. While radical, they tend to eschew especially violent forms of activism. Intuitively, they understand that they lack support should they be caught, and that engaging in excessive violence might result in expulsion from any organizations to which they nominally belong. In time, however, these opportunistic radicals may drift towards the loner type discussed below.

Coordinated Radicals

In contrast, those radicals who are connected to an affinity group engage in a type of radicalism we refer to as *coordinated* radicalism. It is marked by close associational ties and the support facilitative of high-risk activism, as well as by a pragmatic approach towards violence and illegality. The relationships that these radicals have with other grassroots activists are almost symbiotic. They are committed, experienced, and savvy activists who can form a backbone of any project. In turn, these coordinated radicals gain the safe spaces and security provided by their organizations. They also gain a place where they can make contacts and build friendships with other potential radicals and bring new blood into their affinity groups.

For the coordinated radicals, there is a premium placed on discretion. They know their actions can blow back upon their comrades, placing them in danger and disrupting the organizations of which they are a part. Therefore, they tend to keep their radicalism to themselves, in order to not endanger people not directly involved with radicalism.

In general, the coordinated radicals are those who have found a happy medium between more conventional grassroots activism and their radical activities. They are able to make connections with other activists who can be activated and used to engage in high-risk activism that marks them as radicals. They are also content engaging in lower-risk activism on a day-to-day basis. They approach activism from a pragmatic stance. They are willing to follow the majority when practical, but they are also willing to embrace radicalism when necessary. They recognize the importance of their grassroots relationships, however, and are careful not to risk those relationships.

Militant Radicals

The measured, pragmatic approach to violence and direct action of the coordinated radicals is in direct contrast to that of the more *militant* radicals discussed by Della Porta.³¹ While the militants, like the coordinated radicals, are able to form tight knit affinity groups, their embrace of more extremist approaches often puts them at odds with their less radical peers. The sense of persecution among militants often leads them to espouse attitudes that reinforce a belief that any sort of civil discourse with authorities is "a sucker's game," that "the time for talk has ended," and therefore the only viable options are force and violence.

Militant radicals maintain the same precautions as the coordinated radicals when discussing radical actions, and they keep such discussions within their affinity groups. The often more violent and extreme nature of their activities means there is an increased perception that their actions could bring blowback to their organization, as well as to other groups. This makes their exposure as militants something they strive to avoid. Typically, though, other activists are able to spot militants, due to their tendency to be "too quick to go for the most extreme solution to a problem" and that "that kind of thing only makes us all look bad."

Loner Radicals

The final category is the *loner*, or lone-wolf radical.³² Loners, like the opportunistic radicals, are unable to find an affinity group. Like the militants, they share the impression that they are hunted and oppressed by law enforcement, and that extreme methods are the best solution. This particular combination makes them ill-suited for involvement with other sorts of activists. Their inability to make ties, and their often violent rhetoric, makes them a liability for any group with which they are affiliated.

Loners can best be described, in the words of other radical activists, as the sort of people who are "careful but paranoid." Our research suggests that they are unwelcome in radical groups because they "aren't team players" and "wouldn't trust us anyhow." The overall impression was that while radical loners existed, they did so away from the sorts of socially coordinated activism in which other radicals participated. Well-known violent loners include the "Unabomber" Ted Kaczynski, the Oklahoma City Bomber Timothy McVeigh, the recent Norwegian mass killer Anders Behring Breivik, as well as would-be freelance terrorists. The last is of growing concern to state departments around the world because it is easier to track radical organizations than freelance operators.

The four types of radicals identified above represent what we believe to be the most common forms of radicalism that can emerge from grassroots activism in a democratic context. We focus on the grassroots as a location for radical development because of the unique freedoms it offers both established and potential radicals. Large formal hierarchical organizations are set up in such a way that the freedom to explore radical beliefs found among grassroots activists and radicals is unlikely to exist, or at least be more circumscribed, making the radicalization process more difficult. Additionally, types of radicals aside from the opportunistic and the loners are unlikely to flourish due to difficulty of forming affinity groups within an already highly structured organization.

Conclusion

We have reviewed the processes and dynamics that produce radicals within social movements. Further, we maintain that grassroots activism provides a pathway to radicalism by nurturing activists who question the effectiveness of traditional forms of protest, and embrace a more direct action and high-risk form of activism. This process is shaped by a potential radical's understanding of the degree of freedom offered by law enforcement and his/her own personal beliefs in the effectiveness of violence as a method of protest, thus resulting in different types of radicals.

Additionally, grassroots organizations and activists themselves provide a safe place for radicals to gather and develop, and maintain at least some security culture that keeps hostile counter-movements or police infiltration away. These havens allow radical ideas and identities to be explored and nurtured. Finally, these grassroots organizations facilitate the development of friendships between activists and the formation of affinity groups, which facilitate more coordinated types of radicalism.

Further examination of radicalism and radicals can only give us a better understanding of these processes, and should focus on several potentially rich pathways for scholarship. Foremost would be to explore whether loners follow a similar path as militants or opportunists, or whether they conform to their own particular process or pathway.

Finally, radicalism is hardly constrained to the American grassroots. While we have provided a blueprint for radicalization, there is still much more to learn about how radicalization occurs, the dynamics that drive it, and the outcomes of different paths to radicalization. Radicalism, within the context of grassroots activism and elsewhere, is a complex but compelling social movement dynamic. It is compelling for the degree of intensity and feeling it produces, but also problematic for the extreme, violent, and often dangerous action it inspires. Thus, it remains a vital element of social-movement behavior and an important area of study.

About the Authors

Remy Cross is an Assistant Professor of Criminology at the University of South Florida. His areas of interest include social movements, deviance, radical activism, and the effects of new communication technologies on political behavior. His dissertation examines the decision making and organization of grassroots anti-authoritarian movements on both the political right and left. His published work has appeared in the *Journal of*

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