# Radicalisation of the Masses?: Ontological Security and the Rise of the Far-Right

## August 2020
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**Presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of**

**International Master in Security, Intelligence and Strategic Studies**

**Word Count: 22,164 words**

**Supervisor: Dr. Huseyn Aliyev**

**Date of Submission: August 6th, 2020**

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# Acknowledgements

To God, who is a god of love, diversity, acceptance, justice and inclusion, and not a god of hate, oppression, intolerance and fascism. Everything I am is because of You.

To my family: my little brother Andrés, my mother Alma, and my father Javier. You are my everything.

To my extended family: Lalo and Andrea, you are my brother and my sister. Esmeralda, you are a mother to me. Guillermo, you are also like a father.

To my uncle Roberto, you have always been and will always be an inspiration.

To my grandparents Guadalupe, Ignacio, Delia and Fernando, wherever you are, you are with me and I am with you.

To my godparents Estela and Martín, your protection and advice has always kept me safe.

To my aunt María Elena and my uncle Luis Guillermo for all their care and protection.

To my aunt Alicia and my uncle Hugo, for always caring about my education and ambitions.

To my aunt Adriana and my uncle Gerardo for their will to help at any time.

To my amazing cousins. Thank you for giving me such an amazing childhood and an amazing life, you are the best family one can have.

To my whole extended family, all my aunts and uncles. I am so privileged to be related to both sides of my family.

To my friends back in Mexico: Antonio, Agustín, Christian, Juan, Samantha, Areli, Alejandra, Ashanti, Ana, and the list go on. You know you all are stars in the sky of my life.

To the wonderful people I met in the Master's and in the cities I visited: Clara, Daniel, Hendrik, Felipe, Hansol, Louise, Demy, Nishant, Mashiyat, Leilani, Melissa, Angelica, Jubbaer, Charlotte, Zoe, Michael, Luna, Daniel, Niko, Louise, Mariana, Amaru, Antonela, Dominique, John, and a happily large etcetera. I have learned so much from you and you have made this the adventure of a lifetime.

To my friends in Prague: you are my new home.

To my team at Amazon: thank you for giving me the opportunity to join you in this, my new adventure.

To Marijn, who introduced me to ontological security.

To Dr. Kai Arzheimer and whoever runs @FFRAFAction for their guidance and recommendations of literature on the far-right.

To Dr. Katarína Svitková and Dr. Emil Aslan for your guidance and mentorship.

To Dr. Huseyn Aliyev, for being a great supervisor full of advice and guidance.

To everyone in the IMSISS programme for making such a life-changing experience.

To everyone out there who is fighting the far-right, fascism, authoritarianism or any form of oppression.

To a better world.

To you, reader, may these upcoming lines move you.

# List of abbreviations

**AfD:** Alternative for Germany

**PEGIDA:** Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident

**Abstract**

For the past decades, the effects of globalisation in societies across the world have not only increased economic development and interconnectedness but also brought about new forms of inequality and loss of social structures, that in the last years have provoked heightened polarisation and, in Western liberal democracies, the rise of the far-right in the form of political parties and movements. This dissertation argues that this phenomenon can be assessed with the lenses of radicalisation studies, proposing that the electoral far-right, as any form of extremism, should be equally treated as a security threat due to its questioning of fundamental rights and liberties. Using the theory of ontological security, this work attempts to demonstrate the processes that mainstream extreme narratives among wider sectors of society, proposing that the avoidance of uncertainty and its resulting existential anxiety opens individuals, groups and societies alike to extreme discourses to find a sense of self, and that in a wider society, extremist actors can do this through processes of mainstreaming taking advantage of the political opportunity posed by rapid socioeconomic and cultural changes like globalisation.

# Introduction

On February 5, 2020, during a vote of no confidence at the German state of Thuringia's parliament in Erfurt, Minister-President Bodo Ramelow  from the Left Party was ousted in favour of the local free democrat leader Thomas Kemmerich. What was unusual and alarming about this otherwise normal parliamentary exercise was that Kemmerich received support not just from his Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) but also from the *Alternativ für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, or AfD), an increasingly xenophobic and extremist far-right party (Cliffe, 2020).

With that move, a tacit agreement between two moderate parties and an extremist one, domestic and international spectators considered that the so-called *cordon sanitaire*, the resolve from moderate parties not to negotiate nor side with extreme formations that ever since the post-war had protected German politics from extremism, had been *de facto* broken, even despite the reversal of the motion (Cliffe, 2020). Ultimately, this situation would be the confirmation that Germany, formerly deemed as safeguarded from it, was just as its other European neighbours, witnessing the rise and normalisation of the far-right (Gedmin, 2019).

The last three decades have seen a series of drastic socioeconomic and cultural changes brought about and accelerated by globalisation. Besides the upsides of these changes, namely economic development and enhanced interconnectedness, new forms of inequality and the disintegration of long-standing social and cultural structures have paved the way for a rise in polarisation and general unrest across the world, that have allowed authoritarianism and extreme discourses spread among different societies, including developing and liberal democracies (Mishra, 2017; Bremmer, 2018).

In the case of Western liberal democracies, these disruptions have been accompanied by the emergence of ethnic nationalism and right-wing populism, namely, the far-right. This ideology, that stems from fascism and Nazism, has become manifest in the West in four different waves: 1) the first one from the interwar period until the end of the Second World War, which saw the rise and fall of fascist regimes in an economically depressed Europe; 2) the second wave, that lasted from 1945 until the late 1970s, witnessing weak support and influence from its political groups and leaders; 3) but the thirds wave, parallel to economic crisis, the start of globalisation, and increased immigration, saw far-right parties start influencing public debates in their host countries between the 1980s and the year 2000; and

finally 4) the fourth wave, that has seen further grow in popularity for far-right groups and the normalisation of their discourse (Mudde, 2019).

Indeed, after decades of being discredited, according to TIMBRO's (2019:18-19) data on authoritarian populism, far-right political parties have experienced an unstopped trend of increasing electoral support from 1980 on, with an accelerated growth in support ever since 2014. Furthermore, it has been argued that along with the electoral surge of the far-right, mainstream politics is also shifting towards the extremes, and formerly extremist right-wing views are increasingly widespread among all sectors of Western societies (Abbas, 2020; Ramalingam, 2014). This raises questions on whether the mainstream of societies is radicalising, going to the extreme (Winter & Mondon, 2020).

It is precisely this question what represents the core intention of this work, namely, proving if whole societies can radicalise. Providing an answer to this issue demands a theoretical framework, which lies in the study carried out in the last two decades on radicalisation into extremism. Nonetheless, the literature has been mostly invested in making sense of two precise forms of radicalisation: violent extremism and jihadi Salafism. Moreover, it has been marked by its political implication in the post-9/11 context of the global War on Terror. Regardless, if this literature aims at being academically relevant it should be able to make sense of any kind of radicalisation, not just violent Salafi jihadism.

Hence, this work will attempt to answer the following question: What are the processes that bring about radicalisation at a societal level? As a preliminary response, this dissertation's hypothesis will argue societies become radicalised through social and psychological processes that allow political actors to spread and mainstream extreme views that are embraced as a response to uncertainty and anxiety avoidance manifest at the individual and collective levels and in an atmosphere of heightened polarisation.

In order to evaluate this assumption, this work will be driven by the general objective of demonstrating the possibility of assessing the radicalisation of mass sectors of Western societies through the frameworks and tools laid down by radicalisation studies. Achieving this goal will require the fulfilment of three specific objectives, namely: 1) analyse current radicalisation theories and propose ontological security as an alternative radicalisation theory that can bring together the main tenets of the other approaches; 2) demonstrate that not only violent extremism represents a security threat, but any form of extremism, far-right extremism included, as they challenge liberal democracy and the fundamental human rights

that it enshrines and protects; and 3) prove through an empirical case how mass radicalisation happens in a society.

The scope chosen to carry out this research will demand narrowing sown the type of society and extremist ideology that will be analysed, thus focusing on the far-right and its emergence in Western liberal democracies. Its methodology will be based on an interpretive that, through the analysis of qualitative data from secondary sources (reports, academic papers, policy papers, news reports, specialised books) will attempt to interpret the processes of radicalisation in societies. Also, it will empirically analyse its finding by addressing the rise of the far-right in Germany, focusing on the AfD party and the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident (PEGIDA) movement, as a case study in order to address the radicalisation of German society.

The structure followed by this work will divide the research in four chapters, starting with a literature review chapter that will present the state of the art of radicalisation theories, presenting social identities approaches and securitisation theories as well due to their importance in understanding how societies perceive threats. The second section, the main discussion, will present the main points this work attempts to raise, namely, that all forms of extremism constitute a security threat and how ontological security can prove itself as a sound theoretical framework to make sense of radicalisation processes. The third section will discuss the far-right, present why both its radical and extreme form constitute the same extremist ideology and represent a threat to security by its challenge to liberal democracy. Then, the ideas discussed in the previous sections will be empirically assessed in the fourth section's case study. Finally, conclusions will be provided based on this dissertation's findings.

# I. Literature Review: Radicalisation Theories

**Defining radicalism, extremism, and radicalisation**

The term "radicalisation" is not new, but it has become widely used in the study of extremism –especially its violent variant, in recent years, arguably as a response to the phenomenon of homegrown terrorism taking place in Western democracies, that raised public and policy makers' attention after the Madrid and London terrorist attacks in 2004 and 2005, respectively (Sedgwick, 2010; Silke, 2008).

Consequently, the study of radicalisation cannot be understood apart from the post-9/11 political landscape and the context of the War on Terror, which explains why its development has gone hand in hand with the analysis of Islamist extremism (Kundnani, 2012; Sedgwick, 2010). As Andrew Silke and Katherine Brown (2016) point out, even though terrorism and political violence were present and thus subject of scrutiny throughout the 20th century, radicalisation was not a concept applied to research on earlier waves of terrorists. It was not until the appearance of Islamist terrorism and the subsequent efforts to examine and counter it, that radicalisation has been studied to make sense of how people become extremists (Malthaner, 2017).

With the introduction of this concept, came the possibility of explaining what happens before someone joins a terrorist group or carries out a terrorist attack (Silke & Brown, 2016; Sedgwick, 2010) and thus revolutionise current understanding of political violence by looking at "the root causes" of terrorism (Malthaner, 2017). Nevertheless, this breakthrough has not been free of critique and even academic efforts to deny the existence of such phenomenon (Neumann, 2013). For instance, early attempts at studying radicalisation deemed Islamist terrorism as exceptional and over-emphasised the role of religion, without paying attention at underlying and structural causes. As result, these first takes saw extremists as irrational rebels and their path towards joining terrorism as a merely individual and ideology-driven journey (Kundnani, 2012).

But the main challenge the study of radicalisation faces comes from the very nature of the concept itself, insofar as "radicalisation" constitutes and ambiguous term. This ambiguity explains why there is series of differing and often clashing definitions and uses of the concept that have been framed according to pre-existing assumptions or political agendas, which can in turn carry different biases and limitations. If this ambiguous nature and its resulting conflicting definitions are not acknowledged and addressed, the study of radicalisation will

cause more confusion than enlightenment (Neumann, 2013; Kundnani, 2012; Sedgwick, 2010).

Broadly speaking, radicalisation refers to the process through which an individual can end up espousing extremism. Hence, in order to define radicalisation, it is necessary first to provide a definition for extremism, but also for radicalism. It is noteworthy that, according to Mark Sedgwick (2010), all these concepts have relative and absolute definitions. As per the former, radical can work as a synonym to "extremist", being then the opposite to "moderate". However, for this to work, a precise understanding of what moderate or normal stands for is needed, as well as the notion of where to draw the line between both sides. Despite it being treated as self-evident, it is not. "Normal" as a point of reference depends on a notion of mainstream that has changed throughout time and differs from place to place (Malthaner, 2017; Neumann, 2013; Schmid, 2013).

The absolute interpretation of "radical" is not equally illuminating, drawing instead several other fault lines. For instance, to be radical can relate to revolutionary stances to change current uses and structures, a strong desire for far-reaching socio-political change, or an opposition to a mainstream worldview. Radicalism can also be conceived as opposed to activism, insofar as the latter refers to engagement in legal and non-violent political action, whereas the former involves illegal and violent measures. However, other accounts view it broadly as the disposition to act, or as youths' manifestation of frustrations (Daalgard-Nielsen, 2010; Sedgwick, 2010; Schmid, 2013).

Academic and policy makers' debates on radicalism and extremism seem to solely agree in the *de facto* treatment of the term "radical" as a reference to extremism and the fact that not all radicals are terrorists (Sedgwick, 2010). As per the former, the equivalence between radical an extremist can be disputed. For instance, considering that different societies throughout time have held very different sets of values, radicalism can at times be a positive force when it is against a mainstream encompassed by oppressive institutions and beliefs. Furthermore, extremism can be distinguished as an outright opposition to the respect of human rights and democratic principles –core values of liberal democracies, or the support of political actions that disregard people's rights, physical integrity or lives. Regarding the second agreement, it is not free of controversy, since extremism and terrorism are political terms that are subject to political agendas, making their meaning and thus that of radicalisation, to differ widely among countries and security agencies (Neumann, 2013).

The variety of political agendas gives way to the debate's main points of disagreement, which revolve around the use of violence, the role of ideology and whether beliefs and action should be equally treated as threat-posing expressions of extremism (Sedgwick, 2010). Split views on these matters produce various assumptions on what extremism is and which manifestations thereof represent a threat. Consequently, disagreements underpin a diverging set of definitions for radicalisation which, based on an end-point perspective, can be divided in cognitive and behavioural. The former considers extremism mainly a psychological condition and portrays radicalisation as a process that leads an individual to embrace extremist beliefs, without necessarily acting upon them. On the contrary, displaying extremist behaviour would fall into the second category (Neumann, 2013; Knight *et al*, 2017).

Academic and policy accounts lack consensus with regards to the linkage between beliefs and action. On the one hand, they can be two different instances of extremism that should be analysed separately. On the other, alternative considerations deem extremist thoughts as a precondition to eventually promote, facilitate or even engage in action. However, extremist beliefs do not necessarily lead to violence even if they can perpetuate or support it, implying that radicalisation's end state is neither always nor in most cases violence (Neumann, 2013; Knight *et al*, 2017).

Accordingly, definitions from different institutions are diverse. Canadian Mounted Police's understanding of radicalisation is mostly cognitive, whereas the US Department of Homeland Security's considers both the adoption of extremist views and the willingness to participate in violence. In the case of Europe, despite UK authorities deeming extremism as the opposition to values like democracy, the rule of law, fundamental liberties and diversity, they are not concerned about cognitive radicalisation. Arguments in favour of this approach stress the harm to freedom of speech that countering beliefs would represent, and that it could heighten support for violent displays of extremism. Nevertheless, continental Europe policies aim at confronting both cognitive and behavioural radicalisation, deeming that not only violence, but extremist ideas being upheld and exploiting the freedoms of liberal democracy also represent a threat to the constitutional order. Moreover, besides terrorism, extremists can instil fear and intimidation, thus promoting the division and polarisation of societies. Hence, the European approach seeks to tackle terrorism and the extremist narratives it stems from (Knight *et al*, 2017; Sedgwick, 2013; Neumann, 2013; Schmid, 2013).

Ultimately, radicalisation represents a complex process that involves different actions and can lead to diverging outcomes. It has been lately treated as an individual and psychological process, but its socio-political elements and the role played by external underlying causes should not be taken out of its analysis. Likewise, due to its relative nature, if it is regarded as a growing eagerness to support a change in society that challenges the current order –namely, extremism, any sound understanding thereof needs to stress which society and order are considered (Sedgwick, 2010; Neumann, 2013; Kundnani, 2012).

**Theoretical approaches to radicalisation**

Radicalisation is a phenomenon that affects individuals and collectives alike and, due to its previously mentioned complexity, can be better viewed as a set of diverse processes. It has been studied as a "pathway", a "pyramid", a "staircase" or a "puzzle", which means that it does not manifest in the same way in every individual. Furthermore, it takes place in quite different contexts and ends in several diverging outcomes. As result, no sole theory can explain every case of radicalisation. Nonetheless, this has not stopped scholars' attempts to analyse it and propose various models to make sense of it (Borum, 2011; Neumann, 2013; Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Transnational Terrorism, Security and the Rule of Law [TTSRL], 2008; Silke & Brown, 2016).

It is worth mentioning that what every sound theoretical framework of radicalisation has in common is being grounded on mechanisms that incorporate micro, meso and/or macro-levels of analysis. The first level concerns the individual, and encompasses situations personally lived, like identity crisis, alienation, marginalisation, deprivation, humiliation, revenge, or outrage, that make someone vulnerable to be socialised into extremism. The second refers to group dynamics that provide the setting and the link between aggrieved audiences and wider organisations, by providing an enabling environment through networks and inter-personal relations. Finally, macro analysis focuses on wider societal, governmental and structural factors and processes, such as political, economic or cultural conditions (Borum, 2011; Schmid, 2013; TTSRL, 2008).

As can be noticed, there are several causes of radicalisation, but they do not work independently. Instead, it is their interaction plus the intervention of catalysts like trigger events that can result in changing individuals and collectives' conduct. For instance, external factors cannot directly affect individuals, as it is through a socialisation process that the behaviour of groups and individuals becomes influenced. The role of structural variables in

this setting thus comes in the form of preconditions that along with precipitants or triggers, will lead to extremism. These preconditions must nonetheless reflect a mixture of opportunities and motivation in order to operate accordingly. On the other hand, micro-level factors that make individuals vulnerable to radicalisation are search for a sense of success or meaning, self-esteem issues, exposure to death-related content and a sense of altruism or self-sacrifice (TTSRL, 2008; Silke, 2008; Schuurman *et al*, 2018; Silke & Brown, 2016).

There is still much light to be shed and disagreement when it comes to the study of radicalisation. However, academic work on violent extremism has managed to reach a set of commonplaces that can be summed up accordingly:

> 1. Most terrorists are clinically normal although their acts are considered widely as extra-normal in moral terms;
> 2. Backgrounds of terrorists are very diverse; there are many paths to terrorism and there is no single profile of a terrorist;
> 3. Radicalisations is usually a gradual, phased process;
> 4. Individual poverty alone does not cause radicalisation towards terrorism but un(der)employment may play a role;
> 5. Grievances play a role but often more as a mobilisation device than as a personal experience;
> 6. Social networks/environments are crucial in drawing vulnerable youths to a terrorist movement;
> 7. Ideology often plays an important role in that it can provide the true believer with a 'license to kill';
> 8. Disengagement from terrorism often occurs without de-radicalisation. (Schmid, 2013:21).

*Macro-level analysis*

Structural analyses of radicalisation generally point out at economic and political marginalisation as motivations for individuals to become extremists and carry out violent acts as the means to oppose what they perceive as injustice. This is accentuated in an atmosphere of polarisation and socioeconomic discrimination against a specific group and/or exclusion thereof from decision making processes. Besides these factors, national and international contexts should be considered since their developments can unfold in ways that certain groups might perceive as unjust. The latter, combined with domestic structures that provide a political opportunity for collective action, can enable groups to act violently upon what they perceived as an unjust situation. Both political grievances and economic deprivation are the variables that constitute motivating preconditions for radicalisation (Crettiez, 2016; Schuurman *et al,* 2018; Silke, 2008).

Political opportunity structures for radicalisation in a Western context pose a nuanced debate regarding whether liberal democratic orders function as a facilitator or an inhibitor of extremist engagement. Proponents of the former claim that rule of law's limitations on governmental power plus the free flow of ideas and political organisation in open societies allow extremist groups to take advantage of these liberties to emerge, expand their support base and engage in violence. An alternate view, on the other hand, argues that liberal democracy provides legitimate channels that let people advance their interests without recurring to aggression. However, empirical data shows that both democratic and autocratic regimes are exposed to violent extremism. Other structural conditions have been identified as potential enablers of extremism in the West. The internet, for instance, has become an accessible source of remote training, while it brings together like-minded people and allows for the spread of extremist content and propaganda. Also, popular support among some sectors of a population, as well as assistance from external entities and support networks can bolster extremist groups, while ineffective counter-extremism policies can increase their margin of manoeuvre (Schuurman *et al*, 2018).

A comprehensive understanding of structural conditions that facilitate radicalisation also stresses on the impact of actors' situational perception and consequently the importance of ideology and cognition in the process. On the one hand, normative entrepreneurs can channel a group's anger to a shared feeling of injustice that has to resonate with their beliefs and values in order to mobilise them. On the other hand, an ideology that justifies aggression contributes to individuals carrying out acts of violence in the name of said narrative, sometimes as a way of proving themselves as true to a cause or strong. Thirdly, ideologies make use of emotional responses (mostly those of dread, fear and anger) and even pre-existing attitudes that favour violence or animosity towards other groups, to cause a cognitive distortion and make them embrace a discourse they would otherwise find implausible. There is thus a cognitive process that scholars attempt to trace even though they recognise that no individual goes through the exact same one (Crettiez, 2016; Schuurman *et al,* 2018).

*Social Movements Theory*

Among the theories raised by scholars to make sense of radicalisation processes, the first one to be discussed is the Social Movement Theory. This approach has existed in social sciences for several decades, but its application to the study of radicalisation is comparably recent. It first started as an understanding of social movements as a combination of beliefs among a determinate populace that reflects the search of change in a society's structure,

which "arose from irrational processes of collective behaviour" (Borum, 2011) in response to mass unrest. However, in order to survive, these social movements develop rational-thinking dynamics that aim at motivating, attracting and mobilising new members.

As the theory kept developing, its branches have allowed to look further into structural processes but also at group dynamics, by analysing the way collectives create and spread meaning, adjusting their messages to appeal to their target population's interests or views (Borum, 2011). A. Dalgaard-Nielsen (2010) goes further, explaining that these meanings, known as frames, constitute a set of values and beliefs –namely categorizations about what is good and bad plus assumptions about the world–, that will compete with each other in the social realm in order to become people's worldview referent; this in turn encourages social movements to bolster their frames in order to attract new recruits or followers.

Consequently, this theory gives way to portraying radicalisation as a turn towards militant activism whose research demands the study of processes and structures of mobilisation. It also avoids losing sight of the group and individual components, as well as the social and political context within which all this takes place, by recognising that radicalisation occurs within a wider counterculture of social protest. There are diverging views within this approach, nonetheless. The stress on group mobilisation and recruitment has made some scholars to propose that ideology, political vindications and cognitive radicalisation can be overlooked due to the preponderance of personal links and kinship, and the fact that organisations' ideologies are usually not embedded in the majority of their members (Malthaner, 2017; Neumann, 2013).

However, academics from a more structural position claim that movements radicalisation spans from can be upheld by heterogenous and often disparate organisations, with members that can be openly or unconsciously political, and resort to legal or illegal tactics, but they will always share an anti-system stance. Here, the theory opens the possibility to incorporate cognitive and behavioural radicalisation all the same and recognises that networks alone cannot fully explain radicalisation, and hence ideologies and political stances matter even if not all members become deeply indoctrinated (Malthaner, 2017; Neumann, 2013).

Nonetheless, socialisation and meso-level group interactions are still key to analyse individual trajectories towards extremist movements as processes of self-conceptualisation

that implies an alignment of individuals' and movement's interests and beliefs and happens through intersubjective framing. This analysis will allow for the understanding of mobilisation, namely, the logic behind the level of involvement they end up assuming within the organisation, which marks the difference between non-violent and a violent extremist (Malthaner, 2017; Neumann, 2013; Borum, 2011; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010).

*Sociological approaches*

Another theoretical approach worth discussing is that rooted in French sociology, which is grounded on the core assumption that radicalisation is a sociological phenomenon rather than a political one. Instead of a response to an adverse political and economic outlook, it is the result of individuals' attempts to recreate a lost or questioned identity in their search for belonging amid a confusing and unwelcoming world (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Nilsson, 2018; Al Raffie, 2013).

When confronting the fact that individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds became radicalised and, significantly, that people belonging to social sectors that did not face economic deprivation could become extremists, sociologists from this tradition argue that the identity crisis that gives way to radicalisation arises from the challenge globalisation and its "modernity" –associated with current Western notions of individualism and cultural pluralism–, pose on traditional communities and values, leading to a loss in people's sense of belonging (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Nilsson, 2018; Al Raffie, 2013).

According to Dalgaard-Nielsen (2010), extremist narratives hence show themselves as a solace from the individuals' identity crisis and frustrations that provides a sense of belonging, meaning and dignity against the perceived relativism of plural societies and their hostility towards them. The resulting identity becomes salient in absence of other communal ties, whether religious, national or ethnic. It gives individuals an opportunity for self-definition through their affiliation to an imagined community that can have a transnational scope. Furthermore, the fundamentalist discourse fostered by the salient identity gives its supporters a cause that should be defended in opposition to the hostile globalised society that they will henceforth regard as corrupted and thus condemn (Silke, 2008; Malet, 2010).

Stemming from this tradition, Dina Al Raffie (2013) develops an identity-based theoretical framework nurtured by social identity and self-categorisation theories to analyse the impact of group dynamics and social categories in individual's identity formation through socio-cognitive processes, placing individuals in the social context within which

radicalisation takes place. Following this approach, social identities are the result of an individual's interaction with multiple groups that display their particular social categorisations. The less exposed one is to a diverse set of networks and categories, the more salient the resulting identity will be and thus the affiliation to the few groups the individual interacts with.

Hence, this approach insists on how group dynamics and loyalty to friends and family rather than active recruitment efforts from extremist organisations is what radicalises an individual. Radicalisation thus occurs through intensified interactions with networks of small groups who gradually increase their intimacy, their isolation from other groups and the strength of their shared beliefs in order to maintain the approval of their peers. Also, the indoctrination will be mostly a top-down process led by entrepreneurs, in which the most extreme lines of action and belief will remain fringe and not shared among the majority of adherents to the salient identity (Silke, 2008; O'Duffy, 2008).

*Relational perspective*

In an attempt to bridge macro-level analysis' assumptions regarding structures of political opportunity and social movements theory, scholars like Donatella della Porta (2018) have proposed a relational perspective that makes sense of radicalisation as a process in which a movement's interactions with other groups and state authorities leads to changes in the way it engages with them that can end up in escalation from peaceful activism to the perpetration of violent actions. These interactions are determined by the use of political violence as a means of contention and refers to physical harm exerted against property and persons (Alimi *et al,* 2015).

According to this perspective, structural conditions like underlying causes, precipitants and trigger events are not enough to explain radicalisation. Instead, it is necessary to understand the cognitive processes of motivation and strategic thinking brought about by relations, namely interactions happening at the meso-level. Following this logic, changes between conflicting parties' social interactions will produce cognitive changes that increase inclination towards violence through different mechanisms that take place within and among organisations, and between them and state authorities (Alimi *et al,* 2015).

Social movements will engage in disruptive protest campaigns that will receive a response from their opponents and government forces. Authorities' reaction to movements, in the form of protest policing, will be key to determine whether they will radicalise. If their

encounters are viewed as repressive, protestor movements will not only be met with increased solidarity while the state is portrayed as unfair, but the cohesion of its members will increase. Moreover, portrayals of brutal state response will likely develop subcultures that will deem violence as a necessary resistance mechanism against indiscriminate repression. This attitude also arises when a movement views itself as treated differently from other protestors by policing forces (Della Porta, 2018).

Escalation into violent action can also be triggered by resource availability and competition among and within movements. Depending on contextual opportunities, the logics of resource allocation, and compatibility with the organisation's activist traditions, on the one hand, and efforts from actors inside the groups to strengthen their position on the other, movements might be pushed towards violence. Also, while trying to take over support and recruits, competing movements start a protest cycle where they develop new methods, among which violent engagement might be used and replicated by more than one group. This competition is usually fiercer between likeminded organisations as part of their effort to stand out from the rest (della Porta, 2018).

Following a relational perspective, radicalisation on an individual level takes place through socialisation and networks that make use of affection and family ties in order to recruit new activists. It is through the establishment of cliques of likeminded individuals who increase their loyalty and radicalise their shared beliefs by developing echo chambers, that someone starts the gradual and sometimes discontinuous progress towards terrorism. Involvement starts with small tasks to gain the groups trust and eventually turns into more costly and violent actions (della Porta, 2018).

**Social psychology and theoretical models of radicalisation**
Despite being nurtured by criminology, terrorism studies have come to reject the former's reliance on constructing profiles in order to understand what turns and individual into a (violent) extremist. Likewise, scholars have stopped looking solely into the underlying causes of extremism. Instead, having concluded that both approaches fail at explaining why some people with the same background radicalise while others do not (Horgan, 2008; Hafez & Mullins, 2015).

As an alternative, recent studies of radicalisation have shifted towards approaches based on social psychology. This perspective assumes that people who become extremists are normal from a psychological angle, and thus attempts to explain the social forces that

condition their shift from moderation to extremism through their psychological effects (Webber & Kruglanski, 2018). Following this approach, scholars have proposed a variety of models that also work with different aspects of other radicalisation theories in order to accommodate the interplay of different conditions, such as psychological predisposition, socialisation, networks, and ideologies, that influence the gradual, personalised and dynamic pathway towards extremism that radicalisation ultimately is (Horgan, 2008; Hafez & Mullins, 2015).

The first model worth discussing is Quintan Wiktorowicz', which is based on the social movement theory and its emphasis on frames and networks. Trying to explain a person's path to joining Islamist extremism, this model proposes a path that consists of four different processes. It starts with an individuals' "cognitive opening" produced by a personal crisis, which leads to a questioning of past beliefs and a search for meaning. This search makes individuals more receptive to religion and susceptible to extremist interpretations ("religious seeking"). After exploring and debating these ideas through interpersonal relations and networking, the individual coincides with them, and the "frame alignment" takes place. Then, the final stage, "socialisation and joining" happens when the person fully embraces the ideology, internalises the extremist group's identity and joins, increasing commitment through bonding and peer pressure (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; King & Taylor, 2011).

A second model raised to study radicalisation is Fathali Moghaddam's "staircase", which presents six different stages or steps that reflect not only a sense of progression, but also that the process is not automatic and is reversible, as it depends on individuals' reactions to circumstances surrounding them. The process starts with 1) a subjectively perceived sense of unjust deprivation compared to other groups. If while 2) looking for options to remedy this unfavourable situation they do not find legitimate means like social mobility or procedural justice at hand, they will 3) direct frustrations and aggression towards an entity they will hold accountable for the injustice and share their anger with like-minded people, increasing their differentiation with the target. Further progress takes to 4) moral engagement, where individuals embrace an extremist group's morality and then 5) change their social categorisations into absolute "good versus evil" terms. Finally, the sixth step consists in full engagement, namely, 6) committing an act of terror (King & Taylor, 2011; Silke & Brown, 2016).

In contrast to these models, Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins (2015) raise a case against looking at radicalisation as a pathway or even a process due to its lack of a definite pattern and the overall complexity of the phenomenon. Scholars who agree with this position thus call for a contextual approach that can be easily explained as a puzzle formed by four pieces that manifest and come together in different ways and bring together individual experience, structural conditions, socialisation and narratives. The first piece refers to grievances, which encompass socioeconomic marginalisation, discrimination, controversial policies or personal crisis. The second piece, networks, includes all interpersonal relations that provide a sense of meaning while paving the way for socialisation towards extremism. Thirdly, ideologies encompass discourses that channel grievances against the status quo and build animosity towards another group. Finally, enabling environments regards any online or offline setting that bolster radicalisation.

An alternative to the previous models that can represent a bridge between the "pathway" and the "puzzle" approaches is that proposed by Marc Sageman, who argues that instead of looking at it as a linear pathway, radicalisation should rather be viewed as resulting from an interplay of three cognitive factors and one situational condition. Accordingly, the first kind consists of moral outrage –inspired by perceived external injustice, a frame to interpret the world (the extremist narrative), and identification through personal experience – manifested through discrimination, for instance. On the other hand, the final factor corresponds to socialisation with like-minded individuals (King & Taylor, 2011). This model, also based on social movements theory, has become significantly influential due to its emphasis on "the role of social ties, small-group-dynamics, and networks" (Malthaner, 2017:379).

When comparing all these models it is useful to do so in terms of their commonplaces and disagreements. With regards to the former, all models stress on the importance of relative deprivation and its resonance with personal experience, where real deprivation is less relevant than perception thereof. Also, scholars agree that radicalisation stems from a personal crisis and is deeply related to identity issues. As per the latter, differences among models revolve around whether extremist organisations play an active role on recruiting members, or if joining is mainly driven by spontaneous groups of individuals who eventually connect to a wider movement. Moreover, positions diverge regarding the relevance of situational factors over predisposing personality traits (King & Taylor, 2011).

Other analyses have identified a different set of commonalities among theories and models of radicalisation, that can be summed accordingly: 1) motivation, or the initial grievance and/or incentive that drove individuals to join; 2) interpersonal relations and social settings that introduce individuals to extremism; 3) gradual increase in commitment over time; 4) group dynamics, socialisation and leader's influence help intensify individuals' beliefs; 5) ideologies denouncing an injustice and attributing to an entity or group; 6) the need for defence (even through violence) against a threatening outer group; and 7) the search for belonging (Manea, 2017).

**Threat within societies**

As it has been stated in the previous sections, threat perception plays a relevant role in radicalisation. Indeed, as psychological beings, humans' perception of the world around them is not only different from others' but also from reality itself, the objective realm. Hence, in order to investigate the possibility of this phenomenon manifesting on a societal level, it is necessary to discuss theoretical frameworks that can explain how threats are framed within societies and channelled against certain groups or issues (Manea, 2017 Jervis, 1976, 2017).

*Social identities*

Besides its previously discussed contribution among other theoretical approaches to the study of radicalisation, social identity theory has been used before to make sense of intergroup conflicts. In doing so, it has helped understand how, in the advent or the midst of conflict, identities can become unidimensional and thus become the base of discourses of power constructed in opposition to an outer group. Also, the more salient an identity is, the less likely it will be for an individual to favour conflict settlement (Kaldor, 2013; Roccas & Elster, 2012).

In the face of conflict or political violence, perceived threat *vis-à-vis* an outer group may increase. Threat can be viewed here as the capacity or will of an actor (individual or collective) to inflict damage on another. The perceived threat will cause a psychological distress that can be alleviated through social identification towards an ingroup. Hence, a categorisation will take place in which the ingroup conceives itself in opposition to an "other", namely the targeted outgroup, deeming it detrimental to one's group's values, status or material security (Rousseau & García-Retamero, 2007; Schmid & Muldoon, 2015).

Social identity theory can provide an explanation to threat perception between groups through the negative feelings and attitudes that result from prejudice and discrimination

towards an outgroup. It starts with the assumption that individuals make sense of their social surrounding by sorting objects, actors and themselves into categories. When they place themselves into a "self" category, this automatically creates an "other". Social identities emerge from these social categories, as they create a sense of community that leads to an identification with an ingroup (Rousseau & García-Retamero, 2007; Al Raffie, 2013).

Categorisation establishes imaginary boundaries that sets social categories and thus groups apart. Fitting oneself into an ingroup will consequently imply the creation of an "us" and "them" divide between ingroup and the outgroup, as well as the adoption of beliefs, values and actions associated with it in order to belong to one's ingroup and distinguish themselves from the outgroup. Likewise, individuals will develop an attitude that holds the ingroup and its members in a higher regard than outsiders, since one of the functions of belonging to a group lies on its positive effect on self-esteem and psychological well-being overall (Rousseau & García-Retamero, 2007; Al Raffie, 2013).

Individuals belong to a variety of categories and identify with other people they regard as similar. It is through self-categorisation that they enhance their similarities to their ingroup and their differences with other groups. The impact of socialisation on individuals' ego will determine if a social category will become salient. Accordingly, salient identities will be key to understand individuals' threat perception towards other groups, since their associated values and beliefs will be more accessible when making opinions, thus affecting the level of tolerance with respect to other social categories and thus other identities (Al Raffie, 2013; Rousseau & García-Retamero, 2007).

As David Rousseau and Rocío García-Retamero (2007:749) stress, "the perception of a threat is a function of the line drawn between the in-group and the out-group". Hence, others will represent a threat only if their identity is not similar to one's self's. Shared identities reassure individuals that the other has no harmful intentions. When tension, competition or a challenge to their status presents between groups, their members' response will depend on their level of commitment. Since their self-esteem will be negatively affected by the threat, less committed people will likely switch groups, whereas those more involved will enhance their identification and engage in collective action in defence of the ingroup (Al Raffie, 2013).

*Securitisation*

According to Balzacq *et al* (2016:495), "security issues do not necessarily reflect the objective, material circumstances of the world", but leaders' attempts to reshape societies' way of life through a security process known as securitisation, which consists on the framing of an existential threat which calls for dire action and the use of extraordinary measures to be dealt with. This intersubjective phenomenon has been proposed and analysed by the so-called Copenhagen School, resulting in its homonymous theory (Charrett, 2009).

Securitisation theory is mainly concerned with understanding the nature of security by looking into who casts which issues as security ones and for whom. It attempts to answer this by studying how issues become sufficiently dire among a populace to enable an authority to frame them as a threat and determine how to manage them. Accordingly, in this social interaction, a securitising actor and an audience engage in a discursive exchange, a securitising move, where the former tries to convince the latter through a speech act that a referent object is being threatened by a determined issue. If successful, which depends on power, linguistic factors, context and the nature of the issue, the issue becomes securitised, provoking a shift from "normal" to "emergency" politics (Charrett, 2009; Taureck, 2006).

By viewing securitisation as a process of social issues design, this phenomenon becomes comparable to the construction of social categories studied by French sociology. Nonetheless, the theory goes further into elaborating how the security realm is not fixed nor reserved to the use of force, but instead socially constructed and dependant on a particular context, an audience, and the social capital of a securitising actor that intersubjectively define what threatens a community (Balzacq *et al,* 2016; Taureck, 2006).

After an original perspective that focused solely on decision-makers as the answer to "who" securitises or has the authority to carry out the speech act, scholarly debate has shifted towards proposing the analysis of authorisation processes in order to understand how actors become entitled to make speech acts. Likewise, the success of a securitising move in convincing an audience can be further explained from a sociological perspective by studying the ability of discourses to resonate on people's expectations, culture and emotions through communication strategies and linguistical tactics (Stritzel, 2014).

One of the empirical applications of securitisation theory that further relates it to sociological approaches regards the issue of migration and identity. Migration was originally associated as a matter of societal security due to the challenge it allegedly poses to societies'

preservation of their essence *vis-à-vis* impending change, which constitutes and interpretation of identity that deems it as fixed. Thus, securitisation can provide a framework that helps explain the processes behind the framing of migrants into threats among European societies, by looking at the discourse and practices that reinforce this notion. The securitisation of migration reflects a relevant instance of why securitisation must not only be an explanatory theory or concept, but a framework that calls for emancipation and de-securitisation in favour of democratic and non-exceptional mechanisms to address societal issues (Balzacq *et al,* 2016; Aradau, 2004).

## II. Main Discussion: Mass Radicalisation and Ontological Security

**Addressing the problem with extremism**

The previous section elaborated on the problems associated with treating extremism as a security issue. Namely, it is regarded as a contested term whose understanding depends on a context that changes in space and time. Also, there is a wide disagreement among scholars and policymakers concerning whether only its violent manifestation should be a security issue or if non-violent extremism also represents a threat (Sedgwick, 2010; Neumann, 2013). However, this piece considers that it is possible to propose a definition of extremism that can be applied to liberal democracies' context while it distinguishes itself from the concept of radicalism and shows why both violent and non-violent manifestations thereof should be considered equally threatening to the liberal order and their societies.

Beyond their interchangeable use in terminology, radicalism and extremism only coincide in their rejection of the mainstream or moderate positions. The former can be broadly understood as "the active support for fundamental –system-changing– political change" (Dialogue About Radicalisation & Equality [DARE], n.d.) that despite opposing the established order and norms, does not imply a call to violence (European Institute of Peace [EIP], n.d.). Nonetheless, the main distinctive factor of radicalism lies on its end goal. Not only does radicalism seek the correction of the "uses and abuses" within a society (Sedgwick, 2010), but the overall emancipation of individuals and groups alike, as well as the improvement of living conditions of the wider society. In short, radicalism has historically sought freedom from oppressive or outdated systems. Also, even though it has engaged in violence in past occasions, its approach to it is not one that glorifies it, but a pragmatic one that prefers rational methods and does not aim at subjugating others, but to overthrow a despotic structure (Bötticher, 2017).

On the other hand, extremism is "the overzealous conviction that the survival or success of one's own group can only be achieved through active hostility towards 'other' group(s) […] driven by a belief in […] superiority […] and/or distrust or hatred" (DARE, n.d.). Likewise, Akimi Scarcella *et al* (2016:2) define it as the "[v]ocal or active opposition to fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs". Accordingly, along with its association with authoritarianism –namely, the "[u]nqualified submission to authority, as opposed to freedom of thought and action" (Scarcella *et al,* 2016:2), extremism represents an anti-

democratic and authoritarian rejection of the rule of law and pluralist societies that sacrifices individual liberties in the name of a collective goal. This position, which regards politics as a fight for supremacy that seeks "conquest" through instilling fear and division within and among societies is driven by fanatical and intolerant positions that view the world in Manichean and "us versus them" terms and justify any mean –violence included, in the name of their end. This objective usually implies the subjugation or oppression of another group or minority and the imposition of a conformist society. Likewise, not only does extremism oppose the establishment, but any individual or group that thinks differently, and thus pursue the closure of society to diversity, as well as the exchange and open debate of ideas (Schmid, 2013, 2014; Bötticher, 2017).

Violence appears to be at the core of the fault line separating not only radicalism from extremism, but which kind of extremism should concern counterextremism research and policy. For instance, the acceptance of violence as a legitimate means of political action can be viewed as the factor that determines extremism. On the other hand, scholars and practitioners have engaged in debates regarding the existence of violent and "non-violent" extremism. This ultimately brings about disagreement on whether individuals that hold beliefs against the status quo or the democratic order and even belong to an extremist group but nonetheless refrain from acting violently should be considered a threat. Thus far, empirical studies on the differences between violent and non-violent extremism have been scarce and focused on individuals' behaviour and their motivations to conduct or refrain from violence. Some scholars argue that extremist beliefs and political violence are not forcefully linked and thus should not be addressed together. From a policy-making perspective, targeting non-violent extremists could be anti-democratic and victimise communities and individuals, encouraging them to engage in violence as retaliation (Sedgwick, 2010; Neumann, 2013; Knight *et al,* 2017, 2019; EIP, n.d.).

A counterargument to this position has been mentioned in the previous section, which underpins the European counterextremism approach. Mainly, it revolves around the "tolerance paradox", stating that extremist beliefs can eventually encourage violent political action, and that extremism takes advantage of democracies' liberties in order to curtail them by fostering an environment of fear, intimidation, division and polarisation in society (Neumann, 2013). This claim can be further developed by proposing that even "non-violent" extremism is inherently violent. By striving for a state of authoritarian subjugation and conformity and claiming supremacy over an "other" group, extremists instil a state of

structural violence where individuals cannot fully enjoy their freedoms nor satisfy their basic needs due to the psychological threats, danger of potential physical harm and intimidation they might be subject to, even without actual personal violence being carried out against them. If extremism is founded on a belief of superiority and hate towards an "other", it represents a threat to the health of societies due to its potential to bolster the already existing hate that manifests daily through racism, sexism, ultra-nationalism, and any form of discrimination in any given society, which reproduces different forms of symbolic, cultural and institutional violence through the "otherization" of a determined group (Bötticher, 2017; Schmid, 2013, 2014; Galtung, 1969; Zakrison *et al,* 2019; Henkeman, 2016; Schultz *et al,* 2019).

Scholarly and policymaking efforts have focused on political violence and terrorism as the cornerstone of extremism and radicalisation studies. In doing so, the literature has misguidedly put emphasis on an outcome of extremism rather than on its nature and main objectives. As Astrid Bötticher (2017:74) mentions, "holding extremist without the political will to translate thoughts into action might be more a question of circumstances and opportunities than principles". Terrorism should not be the determining factor of extremism and the threat it poses to societies, since it is just a tactic (Schmid, 2018; Scarcella *et al*, 2016) among many others in which extremist groups can engage in order to achieve their goals. As the relational approach to radicalisation proposes, (physical) violence is a question of political opportunity (della Porta, 2018; Alimi *et al,* 2015).

However, while proponents of relational perspectives focus their analysis on political violence, they overlook the fact that extremist groups can also use democracy in order to advance their inherently violent agenda of subjugation and conformity, because its analysis has mostly revolved around fringe or protest movements and physical violence. If politics is seen as a "continuation of war by other means" (War, 2014) then, it could be argued that it is a continuation of conflict by non-physically violent means. Hence, democracy as a political mechanism becomes a way to channel grievances, advance interests and allow conflicting views and groups to compete through institutional and non-violent practices. Democracy thus aims at containing or at least channelling hatred and passions in order to avoid them transforming into violence (Piccone, 2017; MacDonald, 2004; Thorup, 2018).

What determines why some extremist groups engage in violence while others can take advantage of democratic means, political opportunity can provide a sound answer if the

distinction between low- and high-power groups proposed by Jonas Kunst and Milan Obaidi (2020). Since the former do not hold the "dominant" or majority status in a determined society, it will be likely that they will find little to no utility or even legitimacy in promoting their interests or attacking their grievances through democratic mechanisms. However, notwithstanding that these groups can also engage in political violence, high-power groups have a wider set of alternatives in order to maintain or challenge the status quo, democracy being among them.

Consequently, it is argued that radicalisation should be defined in terms of attitude (embracing extremist views or ideologies) instead of violent engagement, as:

> [t]he process by which an individual or group comes to adopt increasingly extreme political, social, or religious ideals and aspirations that either reject or undermine the status quo or reject and/or undermine contemporary ideas and expressions of freedom of choice (Scarcella *et al,* 2016:2).

Ultimately, all forms of extremism –in this case, Salafi and far-right extremisms, are essentially similar, as they are populist narratives that are incompatible with democratic values and liberties, due to their Manichean "us versus them" rhetoric, their disregard for liberal democracy and human rights, their rejection of modernity and thus pluralism and multiculturalism (Hegghammer, 2010; Malet, 2010; Neumann, 2014; Dunajeva, 2016; Ajayi, 2016; Bieber, 2019). The difference between them in terms of political opportunity is the group they target; in Western liberal democratic societies, Salafism is targeting low-power groups, namely the Muslim minorities, whereas the far-right aims for a high-power group, the native majority in each country. This raises the following question: is it possible to radicalise a wide sector of a society and not just a fringe group?

**The case for mass radicalisation**

After reviewing the literature on radicalisation and the theories and models proposed to make sense of it, it is possible to notice its extensive focus with the phenomenon of Islamist terrorism and their application to fringe groups and political violence (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Alimi *et al,* 2015; della Porta, 2018). If the study of radicalisation does not aim to turn the concept into a solely political term produced by the context of the 9/11 attacks as it has been warned (Kundnani, 2012; Sedgwick, 2010), it has to be able to demonstrate the application of the concept to other forms of extremism and, especially, other social sectors and movements.

The models explored in the previous section mostly dealt with radicalisation on an individual and groups level. This could arguably be due to the difficulty that studying mass behaviour and psychology imply. However, analysing mass psychology is relevant for addressing radicalisation in order to understand how masses can become the base of support for extremists and even shift public opinion on their favour. Accordingly, Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko (2008, 2011; Silke & Brown, 2016) have proposed a theoretical model that considers individual-, group- and mass-level radicalisation. Their line of argument claims that people become extremists –namely, by embracing the belief that they belong to a superior group that has faced injustice and cannot trust anyone but the ingroup to resolve their dire situation, through at least twelve different mechanisms, of which three belong to the mass level.

McCauley and Moskalenko's (2008, 2011) model's first mass radicalisation mechanism is called "jiujitsu politics" and is widely related to relational perspectives. It consists on extremist groups displaying non-violent or violent actions with the intention of provoking the government into overreacting against them. The aim of this mechanism is not only to mobilise recruits, but also to move government supporters, bystanders and other groups aggrieved by government violence, against it and in favour of the extremist group in question. Another mechanism, "martyrdom", refers to keeping or bolstering the salience and the appeal of a cause among recruits and an audience by the effect of individuals' sacrifice in its name, which creates a shocking testimony. This tactic has been historically carried out by extremists in Russia, South Asia, besides Islamist terrorists.

Nonetheless, the most important mass radicalisation mechanism to this research is "hatred", which also manifests at group level and can be understood as "a high level of categorical hostility toward another individual or group" (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008:427). It constitutes a negative identification associated with multiple emotions that, the more it advances, the further it dehumanises the target thereof. Likewise, it leads to essentialist thinking that, in Manichean terms, regards the target as bad and is manifested and reinforced through generalisation, contamination and language. Ultimately, attributing a bad essence to the "enemy" paves the way to its association with other groups based on cultural or social similarities (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011).

According to the authors (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008), this mechanism is derived from a prolonged state of conflict, but direct involvement in it is not necessary. This has two

important implications for the context of radicalisation in Western societies. First, it was found that hate against enemies is more fervent in areas not affected by combat and among populations that have not engaged with nor faced the target directly. Similarly, Andreas Steinmayr (2016) has found that neighbourhoods exposed to refugee populations presented fewer support for far right and xenophobic political parties than those who were not. On the other hand, despite not being an interstate conflict, the post-9/11 political context and the Global War on Terror has brought about hatred towards Arab and Muslim populations within Western societies. Consequently, a dynamic has been set in motion in which Islamist terrorism and far-right extremism are fuelling each other (Abbas, 2019; Ruipérez, n.d.; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011; Obaidi *et al,* 2018).

Other scholars go even further, arguing that (when referring to the extreme right or fascism) extremism's notions are deep-down rooted in ideas and attitudes that are well installed in societies' mainstream, making the difference between their views a matter of degree more than opposition. As Catarina Kinnvall (2014) argues, far-right narratives only represent an exacerbated interpretation of mainstream positions and the idea of nation-state. In this so-called "pathological normalcy", the appeal of extreme ideas is always underlying on societies, which implies that the study of extremism should not be about what causes it, but about what makes it surge among masses and elites, ultimately stating that extremism's emergence responds a set of processes that can account for the radicalisation of the mainstream society. Furthermore, this line of argument claims that crises do not stem extremist attitudes but provide the political opportunity for these dormant notions to attract a wider sector of society (Kallis, 2015; Acha Ugarte, 2018).

**Ontological security and radicalisation**

Besides recognising the existence of mass radicalisation, McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) acknowledge the possibility of their model being further expanded or complemented. The following lines will take on this endeavour, in order to develop how mass radicalisation can happen in the context of Western societies, and thus make sense of the logics behind the emergence of far-right extremism among the mainstream of these populaces.

As a starting point, it is worth discussing a model of radicalisation characterised by its psychological foundation, the so-called "quest for significance" theory. As its name implies, it suggests that people's motivations for involvement in violent extremism can be traced back

to an effort to find meaning and achieve recognition. This search starts when significance has been or can be lost –through personal or social identity humiliation, or when there is a chance to increase it, creating a "need" for closure. Individuals experience elevated uncertainty and thus become vulnerable to "narratives" that help them find meaning. Among these ideologies, they can end up embracing extremist ideas that offer closure and justify violence against an out-group. Their exposure will depend on the social "networks" of friends and family that surround them, which also includes ideologues' and leaders' discourses and any content found on social media and the internet in general (Kruglanski *et al,* 2019, 2018; Silke & Brown, 2016).

The importance of this model lies on its consideration of societal and structural factors that contribute to radicalisation, such as polarisation (Silke & Brown, 2016), and its reliance on the impact of basic needs satisfaction and individuals' psychological state. Indeed, this approach argues that a need can become dominant and overshadow the rest, taking away all investments and efforts put on their fulfilment. With their displacement, any constraint associated with them are also taken away, leaving the satisfaction of the dominant need unbound and thus paving the way for radicalisation (Kruglanski *et al,* 2019). Hence, it can be argued that extremism is intrinsically linked with the avoidance of the negative psychological effects associated with unsatisfied needs.

Nonetheless, this model, just like those discussed in the previous section, is focused on political violence, Islamist terrorism, and radicalisation at individual and group levels. Consequently, this research will propose the application of the theory of ontological security to make sense of mass radicalisation in Western societies, due to its ability to bring together elements of Social Movement Theory, social identities approaches, the relational perspective and incorporate the phenomenon of securitisation, as well as radicalisation models' social psychological factor (Browning & Joenniemi, 2017; Rossdale, 2015).

Ontological security, as an alternative to positivist conceptions, studies security from a perspective concerned with how individuals relate and routinize values and identities, developing self-affirming narratives and self-expression processes that help them overcome feelings of existential anxiety. Complimenting this theory with a relational point of view, it assumes that selfhood cannot be understood nor secured if not within social arrangements, turning security into an intersubjective construction. In order to achieve ontological security, individuals need biographical continuity –subject to the social environment's changes, the

establishment of a network of trust relations –centred around symbols and people, self-integrity and the appropriate countering and avoidance of dread, which is associated with anxiety and thus insecurity (Pratt, 2017; Croft & Vaughan-Williams, 2017).

Attempts to apply this theoretical framework to a societal and thus macro-analysis level have portrayed ontological security as a "sense of place" that brings together individual's biographies and the time-space setting where they exist, amidst and ever-changing world. In this context, security lies in the continuity of self-experience and the dispelling of uncertainty through narratives that constitute "safe havens" and routine situations that will reinforce them but run the risk of being challenged by critical situations. As part of the search of this identity stability, "securitisation has been viewed as a key political process in the containment of anxiety and the production of ontological security" (Kinnvall, 2019:285).

Uncertainty thus becomes a key determining factor of existential anxiety due to the startling response and aversive responses it provokes. These emotions pave the way to radicalisation when they are followed by extreme reactions that can be bolstered by closeness to extreme groups whose narrative helps cope with the personal uncertainty. From a perspective that views anxiety as arising from the state of uncertainty produced by failed goals accomplishment or needs satisfaction. Ultimately, these feelings of uncertainty, dread and anxiety are what constitutes ontological insecurity. Hence, to mitigate this insecurity, individuals in distress will embrace extremist political ideologies or engage in antisocial extremism. At the same time, the overconfidence that stems from their simplistic and Manichean worldview will make them defend it with increased fervour, decreasing tolerance towards different positions. This alarmingly raises the risk of inter-group conflict within societies. When this extreme defence of own views transcends to a group level, it increases ingroup bias –due to the propensity towards uniformity as a coping mechanism against fear of one's perception's inaccuracy, and the intensity of reactions against those who think differently (van den Bos, 2020; McGregor *et al*, 2013; Wichman *et al*, 2014; Kinnvall, 2018; Hogg *et al*, 2013; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019).

On a societal level, uncertainty arises during times of crisis and socio-political turmoil. To overcome it, people give in to heuristic shortcuts that make them susceptible to social influence, which represents an opportunity for extreme groups and figures to frame their simplistic and Manichean views as certainty-producing discourses through

demagoguery. Uncertainty also forces the groups that form a society to try and overcome it as fast as possible that the means they choose pave the way for fringe groups with extreme views increase their margin of manoeuvre and influence. Consequently, the anxiety produced by uncertainty raises the demand for or the appeal of extreme views in a society while increasing the political opportunities of groups and figures who espouse them (Hogg *et al,* 2013).

People tend to believe authoritative figures (Hogg *et al,* 2013), who can come from society and politics. Regarding the former, the development of communications technology has allowed for an increase in the supply of narratives, including extreme ones. The media constitutes a tool that can promote stereotypes, animosity and violence. Content posted on social media and the spaces provided by mainstream media have increased the exposure of wider sectors of society to extremist narratives –like Salafism and far-right extremism in the case of Western societies, which has produced the mainstreaming of such views and given a platform for individuals and groups upholding these ideas to gain support (Kallis, 2013; Woods & Hahner, 2018; Leistedt, 2016). As per the latter, when mainstream political factions face self-uncertainty, the impact of more extreme formations' influence increases since their discourse bolsters their self-definition especially *vis-à-vis* other relevant political outgroups. Consequently, the narrative upheld by the extreme fraction will increase contrast with other political views and result in the polarisation of the overall political formation away from the mainstream or more moderate positions (Gaffney *et al,* 2014; Hogg, 2014).

Ultimately, a society's embrace of extremist narratives stems from its need to avoid chaos and dread brought about by quick political and economic changes and the inability of mainstream political groups to manage these emotional upheavals, through the routinisation of institutions that bring its members a sense of self-definition, such as religion, tradition, family, community, and/or nation. The emotional appeal of these social imaginaries is played out by extremist groups in the form of populist rhetoric and more recently the use of alternative facts that resonate among society to construct and normalise imagined others and ontological insecurities supposedly created by them. This process of mainstreaming can take place with active participation of extremist formations and eventually gain its own momentum. In the context of Western societies, the imagined other has become immigrants and refugees, and once the imagined wrongs of a society have been attributed to them, an "anxiety-reducing" securitisation process takes place in which the other becomes an "evil

stranger" that threatens the "righteous self" (Kinnvall, 2004, 2014, 2018; Acha Ugarte, 2018; deRaismes Combes, 2017).

With the failure of mainstream political positions to govern the anxiety and frustrations of a populace, extremist groups position themselves against the purportedly ill-fated "establishment", arguing that in failing to address the issue they framed as salient – immigration, the ruling class has betrayed the "people", who they claim to represent. In doing so, these formations create an imagined community that will provide individuals with ontological security through their belonging to it, while it securitises subjectivity, migration and religion. At the same time, this process of normalisation of extremist positions ends up imposing a surveillance dynamic in which populist rhetoric attempts to seize the capability of regulating what people perceive, how they perceive it and what they believe in, due to extremists' pretention to be more legitimate than democratic institutions themselves (Kinnvall, 2014). The radicalisation of a society, it can be argued, takes place when formerly fringe extremist positions have been successfully mainstreamed among a society, as result of the psychological need for closure created by societies' ontological insecurities, who find a narrative that provides significance through social imaginaries that are normalised by political groups that seize the opportunity to polarise the mainstream views.

**Polarisation as the kick-starter of radicalisation**

It is worth exploring the phenomena that could provoke the state of uncertainty at a societal level needed to provide extremist groups with the opportunity to exploit the resulting ontological insecurities and thus mainstream their extreme discourses. With regards to this, Kinnvall (2004) argues that globalisation constitutes the main source of uncertainty in the world, as it questions traditional institutions and definitions of oneself and one's sense of belonging. Also, it has accentuated the divide between the winners and losers of the global economy, while its democratising momentum challenges the status and privileges of certain groups. All these disruptions generate insecurities that have provoked a "war of emotions" where people seek a collective identity to appease their anxiety, giving political figures an opportunity to rally them behind simplistic but emotional discourses.

The author is not alone in her claims. More recently, Pankaj Mishra (2017) has warned that globalisation's enhanced communications and mobilisation have weakened old forms of authority and social structures while enabling the emergence of unconventional

international actors and the spread of their messages and style. The hopeful triumph of globalisation and democratisation in the last years of the 20th century ended up in an unfulfilled promise that its promotion of individualism, liberalism and modernity would bring about emancipation and prosperity for the masses. At a first glance, it is hard to deny that economic integration and political democratisation have promoted growth and connectedness in developed and developing countries. However, at the same time millions of people across the world have suffered increasing inequality, crumbling social cohesion, questioned value systems and the abandonment from weakened states (Bremmer, 2018).

In the last years, wide sectors of society in different corners of the globe have increasingly believed that globalisation or globalism as well as their governments have failed them, and various political, civil and economic actors have taken note and used this frustration to foster divisive discourses that antagonise other religions, minorities, foreigners, the poor or other groups. Shocks provoked by the downsides of globalisation have ushered various forms of resistance against governments and the status quo overall, like peaceful protests and riots. At the same time, this worldwide socio-political turmoil has caused a wave of "anger" that vindicates nationalism, despotism, xenophobia, racism and violence. This rage and hate have been the driving force behind the surge of Islamist extremism, far-right populism, and other authoritarian and hateful movements (Mishra, 2017; Bremmer, 2018).

Democracy as a model for political competition and governance has also been affected by the collateral damages of globalisation and the polarisation that derives from them. Ever since the political upsets provoked by the *Brexit* referendum and Donald Trump's electoral victory in 2016, it became evident that liberal democracies' current model, based on the competition between forces of social justice and economic liberalism (left versus right divide) has been challenged and reframed in terms of acquiescence to globalism. The resulting political divide confronts supporters of globalisation and the liberal order against nativists and antiliberals, and while mainstream political formations have not fully grasped the new divide, extremist parties have taken the upper hand and seized the protagonist role in this debate (Simpson, 2016; Veugelers, 2001).

Anger and frustration catalyse societal radicalisation when they set the groundwork for polarisation. This phenomenon is understood as the "process through which complex social relations come to be represented and perceived in Manichean "black and white" terms, as resulting from an essential conflict between two different social groups" (McNeil-Willson

*et al,* 2019:6). It goes beyond the widening wealth gap within a society, as it is currently also associated with social and political aspects, and even security implications, especially ever since the Global War on Terror. From a socio-political perspective, polarisation disrupts traditional political practices and turns normal competition between parties and different views into antagonistic relations that destabilise governmental and legislative processes.

Following the argument that the last two decades' fight against terrorism has provided polarisation with a securitised component (McNeil-Willson *et al,* 2019) goes hand in hand with McCauley and Moskalenko's (2011) argument that a context of conflict promotes the radicalisation of wide sectors of a population against an "enemy". If the Global War on Terror is considered as a state of conflict that affects Western societies, then a perceived societal threat purportedly associated with it –like immigration, can push people and political groups who see their values or social imaginaries at risk exacerbate their political stances in order to defend them (Bose, 2019; Elad-Strenger & Shahar, 2017). This line of argument could suggest that those identifying with conservativism would be further pushed towards upholding nationalist and even authoritarian positions, separating them from moderate and liberal positions.

The reflections provided above shed light on the radicalisation process societies can undergo in their search for ontological security. People have become so frustrated with the status quo and the perceived or real injustices they suffer because of it that they have become divided, and the resulting polarisation process has become fertile ground for extremism and violence to arise. In short, "the exacerbation of political, social and cultural cleavages and inequalities […] have created a context in which […]" (McNeil-Willson *et al,* 2019:7) the resulting climate of political and social polarisation enables unmediated clashes of worldviews in the public debate, allowing extremist formations to emerge, accentuated that atmosphere of polarisation and make their way into the mainstream views of the population (van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019; Shutters, 2013).

# III. The Far-Right as a Security Threat

The following section will attempt to present the far-right as a source of disruption for liberal democracy and social cohesion, which turns it into a relevant security threat among liberal societies. In order to achieve this, this work will firstly explore the academic efforts to define this ideology. Then, it will contrast different theoretical approaches to make sense of the radicalisation process that leads to embracing far-right views. Finally, this piece will argue the ways in which the threat the far-right poses to democratic structures and pluralism turns this phenomenon into a security threat.

**Defining the far-right**

The emergence during the 1970s and the 1980s of several political parties in Western Europe that, despite espousing right-wing ideas, they were not directly connected to extreme right formations, nor to openly authoritarian and racist stances reminiscent of the interwar period's fascist systems. Nonetheless, the electoral successes some of these parties started to experience, plus their rejection of immigration and liberal democracy, sparked vast academic research on these political groups (Arzheimer, 2018a).

Scholarly work on this new variant of the extreme right and its evolution over the last four decades has led to a diverse amount of definitions and terms to study it. Nowadays, the term "extreme right" is just one among many others like "radical right", "new right", "populist right", that try to make sense of the ideologies, attitudes, behaviours and movements lying at the right end of the political spectrum. Consequently, these conceptual overlaps, plus the heterogeneity displayed by extreme right formations with regards to their ideology and behaviour, can become a source of confusion and an instance of the difficulty to propose an overarching terminology and definition (Arzheimer, 2018a; Jackson, 2020).

Just like with the general case of defining extremism, the problem with finding a definition for the extreme right lies on its political charge. The relation of the extreme right to fascism explains why most attempts at defining it are usually accompanied by negative connotations, associating any characteristic despised by scholars or deemed as anti-democratic with it. Regardless, even before the conceptual diversification of the last years, attempts at definitions showed a trend that linked the extreme right with exclusionist and authoritarian views (Mudde, 1996). From the aforementioned diversification, a first term that emerged as an alternative to extreme right was radical right. Despite being interchangeable in

a wide array of publications (Arzheimer, 2018a), finding the differences between both concepts and their use can shed light on the prospects of proposing an over-arching definition for the extreme right.

It is possible to draw the line between the extreme and the radical right in their attitude towards democracy. While the former is overtly opposed to democracy, the latter is only against the liberal variant thereof due to its constitutional and pluralistic order (Mudde, 2010; Golder, 2016). In the end, both represent a rejection to liberal democracy, and the intensity of such opposition is a matter of political opportunity. Some groups will choose embracing radical stances instead of extremism to avoid prosecution and become political parties or pressure groups in order to get electoral support or engage in direct action, while others might see political violence as their most convenient course of action and become extremist (Jackson, 2020).

Accordingly, it is possible to group both concepts as two different manifestations of the same concept: the far-right. This work will argue that the far-right as an overall extremist phenomenon. Despite the coincidence in use of words, the radical and the extreme right should not be seen with the lenses of Bötticher's (2017) categorisation discussed in the previous section. Bötticher's distinction between radicalism and extremism refers to a dichotomy revolution/emancipation versus conformism/subjection, whereas the difference between radical and extreme right lies on methods (electoral or political action versus violence) and the intensity of their opposition to democracy (anti-liberal order versus anti-democracy). Both manifestations are extremist ideologies since, notwithstanding the divergence in their methods, they seek the establishment of an exclusionary and authoritarian system that enforces what they deem as "natural" differences between the members of a society, through a draconian "law-and-order" regime that persecutes cleavages and plurality (Golder, 2016). Even the radical right, which takes a reformist approach, is against minority rights and the rule of law, implying oppressive stances. This peculiarity can be explained by the side of the political spectrum the far-right stems from. The political right holds a conservative view of society, is not revolutionary and sees disparities and inequalities as part of a "natural order" (Mudde, 2019). Hence, the right-wing cannot be emancipatory nor radical in Bötticher's terms, making both the radical and extreme variants of the far-right part of the same extremist manifestation of the political right.

The far-right, as mentioned above, is not a heterogeneous movement. Its diversity does not just come in terms of ideology (radical or extreme) and methods (electoral competition, protest, violence), but also regarding support base, history, leadership, organisation, scope (local, national, regional or global), impact and success (Mudde, 2019). However, it is possible to find similarities among far-right formations. Identifying and these commonalities will help pave the way towards a better understanding of what the far-right stands for and why it represents a form of extremism and a security threat to liberal democracies.

According to Vidhya Ramalingam (2014:5) the far-right can be defined by "racism, xenophobia, ultra-nationalism, and authoritarianism, more often than not manifesting in anti-democratic, or anti-liberal democratic, means". On the other hand, Robin Wilson and Paul Hainsworth (2012:3) point at "1) populism, […] 2) authoritarianism; and 3) nativism" as the far-right's main characteristics. After comparing both takes at the far-right's defining features, it can be seen that they agree on authoritarian stances being an essential piece to the definition, but they view nationalism in different terms and one of them includes populism. Consequently, before going further, two main features of the far-right demand a deeper dive: populism and nationalism/nativism.

With regards to the former, populism has been wrongly associated exclusively to the far-right overall, when in reality this aspect is presented by other movements like the far-left in Latin America and the extreme right does not exhibit it due to its lack of trust in popular action. Regardless, it is considered a predominant feature of radical right (main concern of this work) groups nowadays, especially political parties, which have used it as a tool to gain support. Due to its compatibility with a vast array of ideologies, populism is labelled as a "thin" ideology that portrays society as divided between a homogeneous and virtuous populace, and a corrupted elite. Hence, it rejects pluralism, –namely the existence of multiple groups and interests within societies, and the resulting need for compromise, checks and balances, and representative democracy–, in favour of an imagined vision of a monist society and direct democracy based on simplified "yes or no" and "black or white" decision-making mechanisms. Thus, populists are at odds with liberal democracy, proposing unconstrained democracy and majority rule instead, while depicting themselves as being the representatives of the people. However, in the case of the far-right, the populism displayed by them falls within the category of "exclusionary", since it not only divides society between the people and the elite but tries to marginalise groups or minorities from the wider populace.

Particularly, the far-right attempts to exclude minorities, foreigners and immigrants based on cultural and ethnic terms, since they portray them as threatening and external "others" (Mudde, 2019; Golder, 2016; Stanley, 2008; Stavrakakis *et al*, 2017).

The previous line brings the discussion to the issue of nationalism. The nationalist stances exhibited by the far-right are usually regarded as ultranationalism or nativism in order to state their xenophobic and racist foundations. Unlike moderate takes on nationalism and quite in line with populism, the far-right's nativism promotes an imagined notion of nation that is culturally and ethnically homogeneous, and excludes others that do not fall within the ethnic, cultural and religious categorisations with which they depict "the people". However, unlike political formations from previous decades, current far-right parties have re-framed their nativist stances in order to appeal to wider sectors of the electorate and justify their anti-immigrations and anti-multiculturalism tenets. Accordingly, instead of depicting different nations as superior to others, they argue that some are incompatible with each other and thus should not be together. Moreover, in the case of Muslim immigration to the West, far-right parties currently argue they are defending liberal democracy values by opposing it due to the threat they argue Islam poses to Western secularism and liberal values. Nonetheless, this is just a framing technique in order to gain supporters who would otherwise feel unidentified with openly xenophobic discourses, and the defence they claim of liberal values is just a call to make these values and their benefits available only for those deemed as belonging to the "nation" and accentuate the divide between them and outsiders (Golder, 2016; Margulies, 2018; Nilsson, 2015; Wilson & Hainsworth, 2012).

Ultimately, this work will argue that the far-right, heterogeneous as it is, can manifest one or more of the following traits: 1) advocacy for a strong state or authoritarianism, which manifests psychologically as conformism, submission and aggression, as well as upholding traditional values and morals against social progress; 1) an ideology that, stemming from fascist tradition, bolsters hierarchy, elitism, and superiority among different groups and persons; 2) opposition to democracy, in the form of disregard of diversity, equality, tolerance and fundamental freedoms, granted by the constitutional liberal order; 3) nationalism in the form of nativism and the seek for the establishment of an "ethnocracy" or "ethnostate"; 4) xenophobia and racism; and 5) populism (Mudde, 2019; Carter, 2018).

**The far-right's threat to liberal democracy**

Extreme right violence has sparked different government responses ever since the terrorist attacks in Oslo and Utøya on July 22nd, 2011, which made decision-makers across the West aware of the rising threat of far-right terrorism to national and international security. However, not only is the possibility of the extreme right forming a wider social movement still questioned, but the fact that the radical right does not explicitly resort to violence has cast doubt among authorities and societies regarding the need to consider the far-right a security threat as relevant as other security issues (Ramalingam, 2014; Lee, 2017).

Nonetheless, as stated in previous lines, the radical right stems from the same ideological basis as the extreme right, the far-right, which remains at its core an extremist ideology just like Salafi jihadism, even though this ideology has received more attention than other forms of extremism (Doering *et al*, 2020). As stated previously, counter-extremism efforts will not be able to overcome the stigma of post-9/11 politicisation if research and policy do not start treating other instances of extremism, far-right included, as security threats. Furthermore, addressing the threat of far-right discourses and activism can also help counter jihadism, since the Islamophobia bolstered by the far-right and anti-Western Salafism are fuelling each other as a consequence of the post-9/11 political context and the stigmatisation of Muslim communities in the West that counter-terror policies have brought about as collateral damage (Abbas, 2019, 2017; Pratt, 2019; Obaidi *et al*, 2018).

There is an intrinsic relation between security and the far-right. Security is embedded in its discourse, linking the concept not just to individuals but also to collectives, culture, identity and overall, the preservation of a "natural order". Hence, every social and political issue is portrayed as an existential threat that requires ruthless law enforcement and harsh policy responses. In other words, the far-right seeks to securitise socioeconomic and political topics and thus justify the application of authoritarian measures to address them. Furthermore, according to far-right narratives, problems are attributed to an "alien" other, namely immigrants, and try to securitise immigration by relating it to surges in criminality, unemployment, and social cohesion deterioration. Beside this nativist view, the far-right also associates socioeconomic and political crackdowns to "value crises" brought about by social progressive policies, multiculturalism and pluralism –what it calls "cultural Marxism", which makes this ideology call for a turn back to "traditional values" and thus promote an overtly conservative agenda that antagonises diversity and social progress, especially minority and sexual rights (Mudde, 2019).

On the other hand, the far-right represents a security issue on itself. Indeed, different far-right groups carry out a wide variety of activities that are considered non-violent and yet can be threatening to societies' social cohesion and peaceful coexistence. For instance, harassment of minorities, public display and depiction of racist symbols and phrases, xenophobic chants, the promotion and distribution of hateful content, hate speech, incitement, as well as protests and other kinds of demonstrations can build a climate of intimidation and polarisation that, if accentuated, can derive into violence. This violence can take the form of hooliganism, hate crimes, clashes between rival groups, physical attacks and altercations, that despite their isolated impact, can have a wider impact in local communities (Ramalingam, 2014).

Furthermore, "non-violent" far-right groups, such as radical right parties, can directly and indirectly incite violence. Despite using peaceful and democratic means to gain wider support and being legally constrained to abstain from violent methods, these formations can be loosely or secretly linked to other organisations that are openly violent. Likewise, their discourse can bolster aggressive attitudes from young supporters who might decide to take matters in their own hands and carry out violent acts. Another way in which the radical right can provoke violence is at rallies and demonstrations that usually end up in confrontations against counter-protesters or minorities. Finally, in a climate of widespread social polarisation and ahead of an election, opposing forces might increase the aggressiveness of their discourse and thus encourage supporters to carry out violence against rival party supporters or leaders (Weinberg & Assoudeh, 2018; Weinberg, 2020).

However, this work's core concern is the threat the far-right's radical manifestation poses to liberal democracy. This goes beyond the challenge raised by populist politics, that despite being seen as a purer form of democracy and even a corrective to an exhausted party system, it represents a threat to representative democracy that can lead to unconstrained and uncontested majority rules (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Kriesi, 2014). Populist radical right parties can not only disenfranchise the majorities they want to attract from the liberal order's political processes but it also builds distrust among the minorities and groups they target, who end up seeing democratic institutions and the society they live in as indifferent, hostile, or unreliable as guarantors of their safety and interests (Mudde, 2019).

Even being in government, through populist rhetoric and the mainstreaming of their discourse in the media and in political debate, far-right parties have managed to affect policy

making by determining the salience of certain issues and topics among public opinion and politics, which bolsters their appeal among the electorate by giving them the upper hand. In order to avoid losing voters to far-right parties, moderate or mainstream parties end up centring their political platform around the far-right's topics and even embracing some of their proposals. Furthermore, in case of highly fragmented electoral results, moderate formations are forced to include far-right parties in their coalitions to achieve working majorities, providing them decision-making capabilities to promote their agenda. Among the issues they have managed to turn into salient topics in the last decades immigration stands among the rest. In the context of the War on Terror and the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, the far right has influenced migration and counter-terror policy, both as opposition and in government (Mudde, 2019; Wodak, 2020).

Ultimately, the impact of the far-right's end goal of hampering the liberal democratic order both at domestic and international levels becomes manifest once they have the political capital to abolish their country's judiciary's autonomy and free media, and tear down minority and progressive rights, all in favour of an illiberal regime; in the international stage, the far-right in power aims at the disruption of political and economic integration and multilateralism, destabilising international politics and globalisation (Mudde, 2019). Moreover, leaders of authoritarian regimes across the world have taken advantage of the far-right's rise in the West in order to advance their global influence and bring down the post-war international order by promoting authoritarian and far-right discourses through different channels, hybrid warfare (interfering in elections and cyberattacks), and getting close to far-right leaders in liberal democracies (Liyanage, 2020; Puddington & Roylance, 2017). This international alliance of authoritarian and far-right leaders has also reached the new goal of formerly Eurosceptic far-right parties and their leaders to, instead of leaving the European Union as they originally wanted, turn this political and economic integration project into an entity that promotes their nativist ideals (Bieber, 2019).

Examples of these security implications have been accentuated since 2016. According to Freedom House (Puddington & Roylance, 2017), the year 2016 saw a backlash in freedom and democracy spearheaded not by autocratic regimes or rump states but well-established liberal democracies. Furthermore, Donald Trump's electoral victory and its effect on drawing uncertainty regarding the future of American leadership in international politics, as well as the victory of the Leave vote in the Brexit referendum that same year marked landmark wins for the far-right in the international stage (Mudde, 2019). Finally, a still ongoing and

alarmingly increasing phenomenon is Poland and Hungary's autocratic drift. In the last decade, the Law and Justice (PiS) party in Poland and Viktor Orbán's leadership of Fidezs in Hungary have consolidated power under a nativist political platform, radicalised their discourse and dampened democratic institutions and civil society (Zgut, 2019). Nonetheless, wide sector in both countries societies are still opposing this authoritarian transition, which raises the question: how did these societies allow these parties to seize power in the first place? The following subsection will attempt to answer this based on ontological security.

**The causes of the far-right's rise as mass radicalisation**

For the past three decades, coinciding with the last two waves of this movement, scholarly work has tried to make sense of electoral support for the far-right in order to understand their recent success. One of the most widely approaches to this endeavour is looking into voters and supporters' personal background and personality traits. Studies carried out in the former's direction have pointed out that, from a socioeconomic perspective, people with low educational backgrounds and income represent the group that is most inclined to vote for a radical right party. Also, from a political perspective, people voting for far-right formations tend to hold immigration and law enforcement-related issues at the core of their political views and be against of the government or moderate parties' handling of such affairs; this goes hand in hand with an overall negative attitude towards the government and conventional politics in general. Finally, salience of their racial identity and inclination towards social dominance has also been stressed as a predictor of individuals' support for the radical right (Arzheimer, 2009a, 2009b, 2012, 2018; Allen, 2017a, 2017b; Bai, 2020).

As per the relation between far-right vote and personality, scholars have paid a significant amount of attention to the role of authoritarian traits in activist and electoral support for radical right groups. For instance, using the so-called "big five" personality model –which measures openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion and neuroticism, low levels of agreeableness and openness to experience –aspects related to an authoritarian personality, have been associated to support for the far-right. Also, far-right supporters in these studies have exhibited positive attitudes towards the existence of hierarchical or superiority relations between groups (Ackermann *et al,* 2018; Bakker *et al,* 2015; Aichholzer & Zandonella, 2016; Donovan, 2019). Moreover, traditionalism has also been linked to voting for the radical right. Accordingly, studies (Altemeyer & Hunsberger,

1992) have found similarities between religiosity and authoritarian attitudes, reaching the conclusion that religious fundamentalism is considerably correlated to far-right views and support.

Nonetheless, these explanations cannot explain the recent electoral emergence of far-right parties on their own. For instance, studies have shown inconsistence regarding whether people who vote for the radical right uphold authoritarian stances or abide to conformism and subjection as core personal values (Muis & Immerzeel, 2017). Likewise, research on the relation between Christian religiosity and supporting far-right parties points out that religiosity does not necessarily inform ethnocentrism, xenophobia nor, resultingly, support for the far-right, especially since practicing Christians are still more prone to vote for conservative and Christian democratic parties (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009).

Indeed, far-right voters and supporters can display populist, authoritarian and even authoritarian attitudes, be against immigration and distrust conventional politics (Akkerman *et al,* 2014, 2017), but overall, scholarly work shows that far-right supporters are "perfectly normal", rational beings who usually show no sign of isolation, anger, unrest nor distrust, and are well integrated and active in society (Muis & Immerzeel, 2017; Cuperus, 2017; Ramalingam, 2014). This reminds of the current approach to the study of radicalisation, that from a perspective based on social psychology, argues that extremists are mostly normal individuals with no pathological personality.

Attempts to understand the emergence and spread of the far-right as a case of radicalisation have normally divided their efforts between the extreme and the radical right, thus deriving in separate analyses of extreme right terrorism and radical right activism. In regards to the former, scholars have used approaches based on criminology that stress the role of personal trauma and processes of socialisation –through family and friendship ties, as well as access to content, which remind of radicalisation theories applied to explain the pathways to violent extremism (Simi *et al,* 2016). Alternatively, other takes on right-wing extremist violence find an inconclusive relation between economic hardship and right-wing terrorism, whereas resistance to social change (related to a perceived reduction of white or male privilege) and political resentment appear as precipitating this kind of political violence (Piazza, 2017). On the other hand, efforts to explain far-right activism have referred to processes of continuity, conversion or compliance that lead individuals to supporting the movement. The first process refers to persons that following their normal course of life and,

through socialisation, end up supporting the radical right; the second is related to life-changing experiences that drive people to the movement; finally, the third process happens when individuals are compelled or forced into joining (Linden & Klandermans, 2006).

These processes are similar to those discussed by the various models of radicalisation that stem from social psychological approaches. Considering the radical and extreme right as a cognitive and behavioural form (respectively) of the same extremist ideology, the far-right, and insisting on the proposal discussed in the literature review and the main discussion section that cognitive and behavioural radicalisation should be analysed together, this work will embark on making sense of far-right activist and electoral support as a form of radicalisation.

Hence, in order to understand what leads people to support an extremist movement like the far-right through activism or in the ballot, and to address one of its objectives and present this phenomenon as a case for societal or mass radicalisation, this work will start by analysing it as suggested by Kai Arzheimer (2018b), from a micro-, meso-, and macro-level perspective, just as radicalisation theories have been addressing such phenomenon according to the literature review. Accordingly, the macro-level analysis will focus on the structural conditions, the meso-level will investigate the processes of socialisation in the form of mainstreaming, while the micro-level lenses will look into the connection between the first and second levels and how they impact individuals (activists and voters), by using ontological security's framework.

*Structural analysis: the disruption of globalisation*
From a structural or macro-level perspective, voter support for the far-right can be attributed to the socioeconomic conditions brought about by post-industrial societies, where working class' exposure to international markets and competition has affected its interests and attitudes, aligning them with authoritarian and right-leaning ideas (Veugelers, 2001). This claim goes hand in hand with arguments discussed in the main discussion regarding the disruptive effect of globalisation in societies, specifically exposing people in welfare state countries to new forms of inequality and deprivation (Mishra, 2017; Bremmer, 2018).

Economic instability that started reconfiguring industrial economies toward the service sector during the 1970s started a process that, along with globalisation later on, would affect the welfare state and rise unemployment and disparities within and among liberal

democracies. This newly experienced inequality in post-industrial and globalised societies like Western Europe was further intensified by the 2008 global financial crisis and the resulting austerity measures implemented in order to cope with it. Indeed, several regions and sectors of societies within liberal democracies have increasingly felt marginalised and left behind by their globalised and modern countries, being forced to deal with lack of social security or better economic opportunities. Their resulting unrest becomes fertile ground for far-right parties' populism to resonate and rise in popularity among these social sectors (Schain, 2018; Abbas, 2020; Cuperus, 2017).

Nonetheless, the processes of deindustrialisation and decreased social mobility were not the only disruptions brought about by globalisation in these societies. It also provoked a crisis in people's identity and sense of belonging which has translated in ethno-religious mobilisation among some sectors and allowed the far-right to reframe socioeconomic issues as cultural questions (Abbas, 2020; Cuperus, 2017). This issue goes hand in hand with the question of immigration. As this phenomenon increased in globalised societies, so did the concern over the possibility of integrating immigrants into their host country, and the cultural implications of their influx. Some of the government responses to this issue were the heightening of restrictions to immigration, on the one hand, and relative openness on the other. Regardless of the path chosen, immigration policies did not stop the flow of immigrants during the past decades and now liberal democracies look more diverse ethnically and culturally, causing mixed attitudes from various sectors in the host societies (Schain, 2018).

Finally, all the socioeconomic disruptions mentioned above have caused drastic socio-political shifts. Over the last decades, party membership and unions' mobilisation capacity have decreased drastically. At the same time, the left-wing's championing of social justice through the monopoly over workers' rights vindications was challenged and eventually lost as centre-left parties' policies started aligning with those of the centre-right. Their lack of discourse ever since the 1990s turned them towards socially progressive proposals like minority rights and policies that fostered diversity, further alienating people in the working class who nonetheless held socially conservative ideas. On the other hand, policies like the austerity measures have disenfranchised several sectors of the population and bolstered distrust in conventional politics and unrest. These developments have caused societies to shift their preference to conservative and populist parties seeking the representation they no longer feel from moderate and left-wing parties (Schain, 2018; Allen, 2017; Veugelers, 2001).

*Meso-level analysis: the mainstreaming of the far-right*

Personal backgrounds, personality traits and structural level analysis alone cannot fully explain the surge of the far-right among voters and activists. These arguments merely constitute one side of the full explanation, or the so-called demand-side factors. In radicalisation studies language they would represent the "push factors". Recent studies on the far-right have started focusing on the supply-side explanations, that analyses how political organisations behave in order to take advantage of political opportunities, gain momentum and attract supporters or voters; this would be the equivalent to "pull factors" (Golder, 2016).

The first supply-side factor that comes to mind is that political opportunity structures, which goes hand in hand with the relational approach to radicalisation. These structures can enable the surge of the far-right when electoral rules are permissive for small parties to increase their representation thanks to strategic voting. Also, when rival parties' policies converge or turn further to the political centre, and when far-right parties manage to make their main topics salient or gain the upper hand in the debate over the currently salient issue, they will have better chances to thrive. Finally, if the media and public discussions provide them enough space to promote their discourse, and if they manage to frame their ideology in a way that appeals to the wider society without losing a significant amount of long-time supporters, far-right parties will be more able to turn their topics into salient issues. This explains why some far-right parties are more or less open about their extremist narrative, and support or reject certain policies depending on the time and place. It could be argued that, in the end, they remain essentially extremist, but they will reframe their proposals and omit their most controversial ones in order to appeal to more voters (Golder, 2016; Wilson & Hainsworth, 2012; Winter & Mondon, 2020; Arzheimer & Carter, 2006).

The previous lines work as an introduction to the phenomenon that, from a meso-level perspective, accounts for the recent emergence of the far-right in various societies across the world, and that constitutes an equivalent to what radicalisation theories call socialisation between groups: mainstreaming. This concept refers to the process through which an idea or narrative makes its way from the fringe to mainstream discussions and becomes more acceptable among a society (Winter & Mondon, 2020). Mainstreaming can be seen when the rhetoric and language of politicians, opinion leaders and other public figures starts resembling that of extremist groups like far-right formations, thus blurring the lines between the mainstream and the far-right. It can also refer to the progressive normalisation of far-right policies and narrtives, as discussed above (Lowles, 2020).

In order to understand the mainstreaming of the far-right, it is worth starting with Cas Mudde's (2010, 2019) assumption that extremist views do not represent an exception or a "normal pathology" that afflicts societies and emerges or recedes from time to time depending on different conditions. Instead, society lives in a state of "pathological normalcy", where extremist ideas, in this case the far-right, are embedded within the mainstream, which means that they are only the radicalised version of conventional ideas and that they are not upheld only by the fringe.

Following this line of argument, understanding how the far-right has radicalised the mainstream it is necessary to go back to the 1970s. Before that decade, radical right groups were not able to appeal to a wide sector of societies across the West. However, economic instability and the socioeconomic disruptions caused by globalisation that would define the following years provided the opportunity they had not had available ever since the post-war make one of their topics, immigration, salient. From an ontological security perspective, existential anxiety provoked by socioeconomic disruptions and the inability of moderate parties to address them allowed far-right formations to channel the fears and anxieties of the population towards immigration and modernity, turning immigration into a hegemonic discourse that creates a notion of antagonism and struggle in order to maintain the ontological security of the affected society in place, thus securitising immigration by associating it with criminality and crisis (Kinnvall, 2014; Yilmaz, 2012).

Moreover, the scapegoating radical right parties does with immigrants as response to crisis goes hand in hand with ontological security explanations, insofar as the far-right frames a discourse of self and "others" a group, namely immigrants, framing them as threatening to society's sense of continuity. Collective memory, and thus the continuity of the national identity become essential according to the radical right's discourse in order to relieve the existential anxiety caused by modernity and globalisation. In a context where new socioeconomic realities make societies vulnerable and anxious, they become more open to embrace these discourses to achieve that sense of continuity they have lost (Steele & Homolar, 2019; Vieten & Poynting, 2016; Thorleifsson, 2017).

Crisis or, in other words, framing situations as crisis, has been another mechanism the far-right has used in order to mainstream its discourse, access power or implement authoritarian policies. The aim of portraying an issue as a crisis is to instil an atmosphere of fear and cause emotional responses that pave the way for the demand or the legitimisation of

exceptional measures and the securitisation of a group or issue. It was through fabricated crisis that fascism came to power in the inter-war period and in the past years it has been through the framing of immigration and the influx of refugees as a "crisis", especially since 2015, that far-right parties have risen in popularity across the West (Schain, 2018; Clark, 2020; Kallis, 2015).

According to Aaron Winter and Aurelien Mondon (2020), the mainstreaming process behind the far-right's emergence can be described as a top-down process, where political elites, leaders, groups, parties, the media and the academia have been at the forefront of the normalisation of the far-right's discourse. First, they argue that after the post-war, liberal democracies did not fully eliminate racist discourses, but allowed them to coexist with ideas that, despite being liberal in nature, had traces of racism embedded in them. Moreover, during the 1990s, as left-wing and right-wing politics started converging, the far-right restructured its discourse and hid its most overtly racist tenets for more cultural narratives, and using liberal ideas like gender equality and protection of sexual rights in order to promote racist and xenophobic proposals. Thirdly, the far-right made use of the blurry line between liberalism and illiberalism described by the "pathological normalcy" argument and the role of politicians, academics and media outlets in legitimising their discourse.

These arguments suggest that societies have reacted to political realignments happening among the elite and the distrust it caused by embracing a discourse that was increasingly legitimised in the public sphere by the spaces provided in political and media discussions. In this process, polarisation plays a significant role insofar as it has driven away people from the political centre and towards ever more extreme and undemocratic ideas, distancing them and putting them at odds with those who think differently and starting a vicious cycle in which political parties, who had already shifted their proposed away from moderation to attract disenfranchised supporters, further radicalise their stances (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Dreyer & Bauer, 2019). From an ontological security perspective, as the dichotomy between the opposing views further polarises, it will become a source of existential anxiety. Consequently, supporters on both sides will turn their views into salient identities and thus make that opposition part of their biographical continuity (Taylor, 2018).

*Micro-level analysis: the role of uncertainty*

As mentioned previously, ontological security theory studies how individuals construct their notion of security intersubjectively through their attempts at building biographical continuity

and trust networks in order to avoid or cope with existential dread or anxiety. In doing so, it binds structural explanations of identity formation with individual experiences, while making sense of how *insecuritising* discourses that allude their identity affect them. Namely, these discourses make individuals securitise members of an imagined "out-group" through an "othering" process that turns them into "evil" strangers and sources of dread and thus threats to the "righteous" self (Croft, 2012; deRaismes Combes, 2017).

Notwithstanding that, as previously discussed, authoritarianism and submission to tradition are not necessarily a trait that informs far-right support, the *insecuritising* discourse the radical right promotes and its mainstreaming can change voters attitudes towards more extreme views and thus, an inclination towards authoritarianism (Muis & Immerzeel, 2017). Voters accordingly keep embracing more extreme ideas. In the case of conservatives, the more polarised their views are from liberals, the more they uphold anti-democratic tenets, like hostility towards minorities, primacy of a particular ethnicity or the need for an undemocratic leader, to differentiate themselves from their ideological opponents (Galston, 2018).

Following ontological security's assumptions, the connection between the structural and meso-level with individuals' attitudes or, in other words, the cause of their opening to far-right discourses, stems from uncertainty. As argued in the main discussion, uncertainty lies at the core of existential anxiety, turning uncertainty avoidance into a key driver of individuals towards extreme discourses that can alleviate their dread. Accordingly, the need to avoid or reduce uncertainty has been reportedly associated with support for radical right parties, since their views help afflicted individuals grasp a sense of "certainty" against the anxiety caused by socioeconomic changes around them and how they affect their sense of self (Gründl & Aichholzer, 2020; Aichholzer & Zandonella, 2016).

Likewise, moments of collective uncertainty can pave the way for reconfigurations of social norms and thus allow for the embracing of far-right ideas. These disruptions can be attributed to the structural changes mentioned in the macro-level analysis; they do not inform far-right support on their own because they need to turn into sources of uncertainty and avoidance in order to open individuals to the resonance of extreme views. It is not until individuals and collectives see features of modernity like immigration as threats due to their being perceived as sources of uncertainty and anxiety, that they will vote for radical right

parties (Portelinha & Elcheroth, 2016; Aichholzer & Zandonella, 2016; Kinnvall, 2004, 2018).

# IV. The Far-Right in Germany: A Case of Mass Radicalisation?

In the last years, different studies carried out across Germany have pointed out that a wide majority of Germans support liberal democracy, pluralism, diversity, and European integration. Nonetheless, they have also found that around a third of the country's population upholds anti-democratic and anti-pluralistic ideas. Moreover, while prejudices and ideas that oppose equality remain present within society, negative attitudes towards asylum seekers have been increasing since 2016 (Zick *et al*, 2019).

Recent surveys have also warned of the increasing concern among German society about the increasing level of polarisation and right-wing radicalisation in Germany, as well as a worrying increase in hate crimes from 7,913 to 8,113 incidents between 2017 and 2018. At the same time, one fact that stands out in these surveys on the presence of anti-liberal and anti-pluralistic attitudes within the country, is the proclivity of radical right party AfD supporters to uphold anti-liberal and anti-human views aligned with far-right extremism (Zick *et al*, 2019; State of Polarisation..., n.d.; Perceptions of right-wing..., n.d.).

Consequently, the studies suggest that the political centre is losing its strong hold in Germany (Zick *et al*, 2019). This claim will be the core of this work's last section, as it will attempt to prove, from a perspective based on the main discussion, if the recent emergence of the radical right, in the form of the AfD party and the PEGIDA movement, represent a case of mass radicalisation. In order to do so, it will first look at the recent history of the radical right in Germany. Then, it will explore the East-West divide the country has experienced ever since the reunification as an instance of polarisation. Finally, this section will analyse the way AfD and PEGIDA have used German society's ontological insecurity to mainstream their far-right discourse.

**A history of the German post-war far-right**

Ever since the end of the Second World War, Allied powers and the governments of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) made sure that no far-right government would take over again as did Nazism between 1932 and 1945. For instance, West Germany's Basic Law introduced a full ban on antidemocratic extreme right groups while significantly constraining illiberal radical right political parties and movements. By the time the German reunification took place in 1990, far-right activism and support was weak and insignificant in both Germanies, unlike other

countries in continental Europe like France, where the radical right was already a relevant player in party politics (Arzheimer, 2018b; Bötticher, 2017; Backer, 2000).

After unification, Germany kept on being unaffected by the influence of radical right parties through landslide electoral victories. During the first years after reunification, the radical right was represented by the *Republikaner* (Republicans or REP) party, the *Deutsche Volksunion* (German People's Union, DVU), and the phyllo-Nazi *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (National Democratic Party of Germany or NPD). Besides not enjoying federal parliamentary representation, during the 2000s decade, their performance at the European Parliament elections was underachieving. However, two phenomena have to be considered from Germany's experience of the far-right's third wave. On the one hand, extreme-right violence rose during this period, arguably as a response to the electoral channel's failure to bring political gains. On the other, the NPD's platform managed to resonate among Eastern Germany, while the REP and DVU achieved prominence during the "asylum problem" public discussion in 1992, as well as constitutional changes in 1993 that demonstrate their capability to seize the political debate and spread their notion of German nationhood among other right-wing parties (Arzheimer, 2018b; Minkenberg, 1998).

These successes would be short-lived, nonetheless, as the beginning of the 2010s decade would see their electoral push wane and yield the stage to new groups representing the far-right in Germany. Nowadays, according to information from the CHAMPIONs project (What prominent righ-wing..., n.d.), among the most prominent far-right actors, it is possible to find the following: 1) AfD, a formerly Euroskeptic party that over the years has embraced more openly nationalist and populist stances; 2) PEGIDA, a movement born in Dresden after organising weekly protests against Islam; 3) the "new right" think-tank Institute for State Policy; 4) the *Identitäre Bewegung*, a movement based on identity politics that targets youths; 5) neo-Nazi network Blood and Honour; 6) revisionist, pro-imperial, phyllo-Nazi and anti-Semite group *Reichsbürger*; and 7) remnants of the previously mentioned parties. This work will focus on the first two, whose history will be discussed in the next lines.

Unlike its predecessors, AfD managed to break former Bavarian conservative leader Franz Joseph Strauss' statement that there could be no political party to the right of the CDU and his Christian Social Union (CSU) in Germany. Founded in late 2012 by disenfranchised CDU politicians and neoliberal intellectuals and businessmen who were against Chancellor

Angela Merkel's handling of the Eurozone crisis, deeming it as a sacrifice of German interests. Instead, the newly established party embraced a Euroskeptic agenda ahead of the 2013 federal election where, despite not overcoming the 5% threshold needed to access the *Bundestag* (Federal Parliament), its 4.7% share of the overall votes raised alarms in Germany and elsewhere. By the electoral cycle leading up to the 2014 European election, where it secured seven seats, AfD assumed an increasingly nationalist and xenophobic position, ditching off its neoliberal anti-Euro branch. But the party's most notorious breakthrough up to now was in the 2017 federal election where not only did it make it to the *Bundestag* but became the main opposition and further consolidated its stronghold in the Eastern states of Brandenburg and Saxony, provoking a political disruption that still goes on (Kemper, 2015; Jerez, 2019).

Regarding PEGIDA, the movement was formed in October 2014 in the context of Angela Merkel's open doors policy –that welcomed increased numbers of asylum seekers from the war-torn Middle East into Germany, and Western efforts against the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). Dresdner Lutz Bachmann started sharing content on social media commenting against what he deemed as the "Islamisation" of the West and specifically Germany. In a matter of days, the momentum generated by his posts allowed for the first rally to take place in Dresden, bringing together 300 people. Ever since, and as the influx of refugees increased, PEGIDA kept organising weekly rallies, with increasing attendance. By January 2015, considered the height of the movement, more than 25,000 people attended its protests. As per 2019, PEGIDA has 62,000 followers and various international offshoots (Sikdar, 2019; Measures, 2015).

**Two Germanies: The East-West divide as a source of polarisation**

According to Kai Arzheimer (2019), despite the recent emergence of the radical right in its political and social landscape spearheaded by AfD and PEGIDA, Germany remains a widely tolerant and pluralist country, but he recognises the polarisation the far-right has bolstered. Hand in hand with this, during the last state elections carried out in the Summer of 2019, AfD consolidated its electoral hold in the states of Brandenburg, Thuringia and Saxony, confirming the position of Eastern Germany, in direct contrast with the more austere vote share the party has in the West (Bivar, 2019; Vehrkamp, 2019), suggesting that the polarisation the country faces might come in the form of a new East-West divide.

At a first glance, economic disparities between Eastern and Western Germany can be considered as the source of this polarisation. Indeed, after the original optimism that German reunification and the spread of liberal democracy to the new states of the former East Germany, the embrace of modernity and market economy did not meet Eastern Germans with significantly better socioeconomic opportunities and conditions, but with unemployment and new forms of inequality not experienced during the times of communist rule. Up to now, economic prosperity is noticeably lower in Eastern German states than in their Western counterparts, with higher unemployment and lower growth rates from the former compared with the latter. Although this argument seems compelling, data says otherwise. According to recent surveys, citizens of Eastern Germany overall perceive their socioeconomic situation as positive. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous section, socioeconomic issues are not considered salient in far-right parties' agenda, a fact confirmed by AfD's renouncing to the originally neoliberal discoursed it used to spouse before the 2013 federal election (Bivar, 2019; Vorländer *et al,* 2018).

Instead, the source of polarisation, and point of access to far-right discourses resonating among society, is found in cultural perceptions of threat and memory. Namely, the fault line between Eastern and Western Germany lies on a difference of "mindset" that goes back, from an ontological security perspective, to the former East Germany's experience of self and biographical continuity. With regards to that, the political system in the times of communism instilled a notion of nationhood that distinguished separated East Germans from its other socialist neighbours and did no attempts at integrating foreigners living in the country. Moreover, unlike West Germany's admittance and addressing of historical guilt due to Nazi Germany's atrocities, the communist regime in the East denied and hid its fascist legacy. Consequently, life in East Germany promoted a sense of ethnic homogeneity as a way of achieving collective harmony that still lives on in the new federal states and goes hand in hand with new and nostalgic interpretations of communist past as time goes on (Bivar, 2019; Vorländer *et al,* 2018; Chase, 2017; Adam, 2015).

At the same time, a sort of resentment can be perceived from this Eastern German biographical continuity towards its Western counterpart insofar as it has been perceived as it is perceived as a foreign entity that despite bringing democracy and modernity, it did so in a paternalistic way that has ended up turning the population of the new federal states into second-class citizens in the reunified Germany, as well as imposing on them its elites and its social and political values (Vorländer *et al,* 2019). For instance, according to Manès

Weisskircher (2020), when asked whether they feel like second-class citizens in Germany, more than 60% of the people from AfD strongholds Brandenburg, Thuringia and Saxony answer affirmatively, and this percentage goes up by more than 10% in all three states among AfD voters.

Thus, Eastern Germans see the media, the mainstream and the political system as alien and imported instead of self-made, while they also resent how Western German society looks down on them as "incapable" of embracing modernity and pluralism. This informs why anti-establishment and populist discourses have widely resonated among former East German states. Nonetheless, notwithstanding the resentment towards Western German "imported" elites, far-right groups and leaders have been overall accepted by like-minded people in the East and found in these new federal states fertile ground to spread their extremist discourses and advance their agenda (Vorläder *et al,* 2018; Chase, 2017).

Notwithstanding these arguments pointing at a cultural and biographical divide between Eastern and Western Germany, other studies insist that this polarisation is not limited to the borders once marked by the former Iron Curtain. Based on the electoral results of AfD in the 2017 federal election, had AfD's momentum been rooted only in the Easten states, it would not have made it past the 5% threshold. Furthermore, AfD's supporter base in the new federal states represents barely one third of its whole base, the rest being in Western Germany. Hence, following Robert Vehrkamp's (2019) analysis, the fault line allegedly dividing Western Germany from its Eastern counterpart is in reality dividing Germans throughout the whole country. The question on why AfD has an electoral stronghold well delineated on an East-West divide remains thus open.

**Ontological insecurity in Germany and the mainstreaming of the far-right**
Rescuing the last points from the previous subsection, it is worth noting that in their respective most recent state election, all Western German states reported a vote share for AfD not above 15%, whereas all Eastern states, with the exception of Berlin, registered en electoral share for AfD never below 20%, suggesting that at least. Nonetheless, despite seizing a wider share of electoral preferences in Eastern Germany (21%) during the 2017 federal election, in more populated Western Germany, the radical right party secured a 10% of the total share of votes (Weisskircher, 2020).

Not only is AfD well inside every federal state parliament already, but also all the recent major far-right attacks carried out in Germany have taken place in Western states. This adds up to the fact that, between 5 and 8% of the population in Western Germany uphold anti-democratic stances or views that are critical of democracy –*visà-vis* the margin between 14 and a 23% in the new federal states. Indeed, despite the difference in proportion, there is a fault line and an acceptance of populist discourses well installed within German society that have allowed for the emergence of the far-right as testified by the popularity of AfD and PEGIDA in the last six years (Weisskircher, 2020; Vehrkamp, 2019). The question worth asking then is how to make sense of this development.

As a starting point, it is suggested to look at the analyses that try to understand AfD and PEGIDA's emergence from a party politics and social movements perspective. This approach demands digging into voters and supporters' profiles. Usually, and ever since the third wave of the far-right, it has been a commonplace for scholars to portray radical right supporters as less educated, low-income individuals, and AfD and PEGIDA supporters were not exempt from this portrayal. This is the so-called "losers of modernity" argument, which wrongly implies that any person with a low socioeconomic status will be driven to vote or support a populist or extremist political actor. Going back to the literature on radicalisation, it would be the equivalent to arguing that grievances alone turn people into (violent) extremists. Indeed, recent academic takes on the rise of far-right parties, AfD included among the electorate in liberal democracies, stresses that besides low income and educational background not being determinants of electoral preference for the radical right, this appeal has already reached wider sectors of society that do not match with this profile (Goerres *et al,* 2018; Hansen & Olsen, 2019; Arzheimer & Berning, 2019).

Hence, the ontological security approach to radicalisation is proposed to make sense of support for AfD and PEGIDA by tracing the existential anxiety that led to wider sectors of the German society to uphold far-right stances. Accordingly, this research identifies two sources of uncertainty and resulting existential dread that have afflicted German society in the past three decades. The first one, helps explain the higher proportion of supporters of the far-right in Eastern Germany *vis-à-vis* the Western states. Namely, Eastern Germans' existential and cultural shock brought about by reunification, had them see the institutions, social status and values that informed and held their sense of self and belonging together. By the time society in the East was overcoming this traumatic experience, the second shock was

taking place: the increased influx of asylum seekers that started in late 2014 (Vorländer *et al,* 2018; Gazit, 2018).

And this time, the feeling of uncertainty and anxiety was felt among all Germany. As the country precipitated to accommodate the constant flow of newcomers, German society's perception shifted towards viewing the waves of immigrants as "others" and their arrival as a drastic challenge to the country's routinised way of life, bringing about uncertainty and anxiety (Gazit, 2018). Overall, it could be argued that the rapid social changes faced by German society ever since the fall of the Iron Curtain, exacerbated by the so-called "refugee crisis" (more on this later; Kemper, 2015; Jerez, 2019), provoked a widespread feeling of ontological insecurity due to Germans' anxiety and fear of the decline of life as they were used to. The lack of social institutions to rely on for certainty and belonging due to the drastic modernisation during reunification broke social cohesion and opened the way for irrational and extreme discourses, as wide sector of society in Western and Eastern Germany alike started assuming anti-modernity and anti-system attitudes (Meyer & Storck, 2015; Vehrkamp, 2019).

And this is where the processes of mainstreaming started taking place in order to drive wide sectors of the electorate to vote for the increasingly extremist AfD and attend the rallies of xenophobic and nativist PEGIDA. It is worth noting, though, that this process was initiated by mainstream politicians when they took interrelated two courses of action between 2014 and 2015: First, when, just as the rest of the political actors (moderate or populist alike) elsewhere in Europe, the German political parties and leaders yielded to framing the influx of refugees that was coming from the Middle East as a "refugee crisis", as that terminology resonated among already existentially anxious citizens and provided the far-right in Germany to gain the upper hand in the public debate. Second, when Angela Merkel defended her open doors policy using the "there is no alternative" discourse she had previously used during the Eurozone crisis, which alienated and disenfranchised voters who did not see themselves represented anymore by the political system (Jerez, 2019; Kemper, 2015; Arzheimer & Berning, 2019).

The "refugee crisis" framing provided AfD the political opportunity to achieve a hegemonic discourse by securitising the incoming asylum seekers. It is no coincidence that it was precisely in 2015 that its xenophobic and more extreme wing seized control of the party, and that, on the other hand, PEGIDA emerged and gained momentum in the same period.

AfD and PEGIDA carried out a process of scapegoating or "othering" through which they presented German society on one side, and immigrants and the political elite that promoted the open doors policy on the other, in terms of "us and them". Thus, immigrants are framed by both as a threat to German identity and values. As PEGIDA's manifesto exemplifies, both entities have had to tone down the racism and xenophobia of their discourse in order to reach a wider audience, but in the Eastern states they have been able to be overtly extremist and even evoke the socialist past due to the region's unaddressed fascist legacy and its nostalgia for the communist order. Finally, both AfD and PEGIDA have recurred to performance strategies, victimisation and controversial statements that allow them to frame themselves and their supporters as victims of the elite, real representatives of the people, and set the ground for others to replicate their rhetoric and expand their follower base (Meyer & Storck, 2015; Önnerfors, 2018; Kemper, 2015; Arzheimer, 2015, 2021 [forthcoming]; Göppfarth, 2020; Volk, 2020; Virchow, 2016; Patton, 2017; Breeze, 2019; Schmitt-Beck, 2017).

And now, after six years and the participation in two federal elections and several more state elections, the far-right in Germany has arguably started changing the face of its society. From the unaddressed psychological shocks brough about by three decades of accelerated social, economic and cultural changes (Arzheimer, 2021 [forthcoming]), AfD have managed to destabilise Germany's society and politics and turn the debate around immigration into the salient issue in the country. Moreover, they have secured a solid support base formed by anti-establishment and anti-immigration individuals with no determined socioeconomic background. Finally, despite not being part of this research, Germany has witnessed an increase in far-right violence, with the terror attacks carried out in Hanau in 2020, and the murder of the mayor of Cologne in 2015 and a local politician near Kassel in 2019 (Goerres *et al,* 2018; Weisskircher, 2020; Arzheimer, 2019; Ravik & Koehler, 2020). Spearheaded by a party that is becoming more extreme and open about its authoritarian and xenophobic agenda (Havertz, 2019), the electoral results of the far-right in the upcoming 2021 federal elections will be a further indicator on whether the world is witnessing the radicalisation of German society.

# Conclusions

In the past four decades, as globalisation has taken over, the spread of modernity and the increasing interconnectedness has expanded the opportunities at a better life for many across the world. However, globalisation's promise has failed to deliver to wide sectors of societies, while bringing down the structures, institutions and values that used to provide them a sense of belonging and self. At the same time, the world is witnessing an alarming and increasing wave of polarisation among and within societies, while new forms of extremism emerge and take over the minds of people. In the case of Western liberal democracies, it has been the far-right that has risen after its post-war containment, threatening the liberal order and the lives of those who live under it.

This work has taken on the task of proving that the phantom of extremism is a phenomenon that can take hold of wide sectors of society and not only fringe groups. For the past two decades, the study of extremism and the process leading to it, radicalisation, have been defined in terms of the post-9/11 context, mainly focusing on violent extremism and jihadi Salafism. In order to overcome this political context, radicalisation studies should go beyond this issue and explore its ability to make sense of other forms of extremism and radicalisation, especially those that are currently on the rise, that being the case of the far-right in the West.

Specifically, the core intention of this work was answering what processes constitute the radicalisation of a society. The results of the research carried out point at ontological security as a theoretical approach that could inform this issue. Accordingly, from an abstract to an empirical perspective, it could be assessed that individuals, groups and societies can become radicalised, namely embrace an extremist ideology, insofar as social, economic, political and cultural changes around them provoke a sense of uncertainty that, when not countered, turns into existential anxiety, which opens them to extreme narratives in order to find a sense of self.

While addressing the feasibility of ontological security as a theory of radicalisation, other theories from radicalisation literature were analysed. Namely, social movements, sociological and relational approaches were studied, in order to find the processes and concepts that presented them as sound explanations to the embrace of extremism. From the first theory, it was observed that it could not account for the interactions between social movements and their wider environment nor the notion of political opportunities. The second

theory, focused on the loss of sense of belonging from a grievance point of view, could not explain why people with the same profile or identity ended up choosing different paths. Finally, the relational perspective did account for structures of political opportunity but was focused on political and physical violence.

Instead, ontological security, as an approach based on social psychology, goes deeper into the psychological processes that open individuals and groups' cognition to narratives through socialisation and the perception of others. However, its use during this research was informed by key concepts present in the other theories analysed, like framing processes, identity formation, sense of belonging and political opportunity. Thus ontological security can be seen as a framework that can bring together the other theories and prove that these processes are not exclusive to fringe or violent groups and movements, but could be applied to any form of socio-political behaviour, in this case, people voting or protesting in favour of an extremist discourse.

This leads to the debate on whether non-physically violent extremism should be considered as a security threat just like political violence and terrorism. It was argued throughout this research that, despite voting or protesting peacefully, bolstering an extremist view as a domino effect insofar as it promotes an atmosphere of intimidation, structural violence and even inspire others to escalate into violence. In the case of the far-right, cases like Poland and Hungary have proved that, despite framing their discourse as in favour of direct democracy, once in power, the far-right embarks on authoritarian policies that take down liberal democracy, minority rights and pluralism.

It is recognised that other theories could explain the rise of the far-right in Western democracies in other terms that do not present activists as extremists or anti-social actors. However, this work's line of argument has pointed at the fact that extremism is about the ideological core and what it represents instead of the methods and tactics, because choosing peaceful means over terrorism is more a matter of opportunity than a matter of principles, since the principles of peaceful and violent extremists is the imposition of a system based on monism, conformism, the abolition of diversity and pluralism, ideas that contradict fundamental rights and liberties.

It is worth mentioning that ontological security and the analysis of mass radicalisation pose the opportunity to apply this framework to other societies that have embarked on a populist, authoritarian and/or extremist drift, such as India under the Hindutva movement

promoted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's fascist stances in Latin America, or Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdogan's political Islamism. This task is not just a matter of academic development, but a responsibility to the preservation of democracy in a time of heightened polarisation and authoritarianism across the world. Finally, despite this dissertation not having addressed it, one important development that should be accounted for in future studies of radicalisation, polarisation and their rise in societies, is the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in these phenomena.

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