

# **RADICALIZATION IN THE CLIMATE MOVEMENT**

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### Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned ..... **Timotheus Paul Goldinger** ..... hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted as part of the requirements of any other academic degree or non-degree program, in English or in any other language.

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## Abstract

Climate change is a global issue that threatens humankind and the environment. The radical climate movement is an emerging movement that seeks to combat climate change through a variety of means, including social media and digital platforms. This paper focuses on the radicalization of the climate movement by using the 3Ns method - Needs, Narrative, and Network - as a structure for comprehending the process of becoming radical within its environment. It identifies key actors and organizations, strategies employed, challenges faced, and potential future trajectories. The study of climate change's path has offered significant ideas by utilizing the three-dimensional network (3Ns) method based on the need, narrative, and network (Ns). In conclusion, the current groups do not pose a threat and cannot be considered terrorist, some of them are starting to show signs of extremism, but the biggest threat stems from forces on the political fringes trying to co-opt members and narratives of the climate movement.

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# 1. Introduction

According to the world's leading scientists, climate change poses a significant threat to our planet, destroying ecosystems, exacerbating social inequalities and endangering human lives (IPCC, 2023). In recent years, the world has witnessed an unprecedented level of global awareness and action on the pressing issue of climate change. The climate change movement has become a powerful force calling for urgent action to mitigate the negative impacts of man-made environmental destruction. While most climate change activists support non-violent means of bringing about change, there is growing concern over the emergence of radicalization within the movement. In recent years, more radical movements came into existence that use tools of civil disobedience to shed a light on the dire situation of the planet. While mainly peaceful, governments as well as intelligence agencies started considering these groups in their risk assessments (e.g. Direktion Staatsschutz und Nachrichtendienst, 2023; Bayerisches Staatsministerium des Innern, 2021). The fact that some of the groups resort to more disruptive means in comparison to a few years ago underlines this progression. There have been examples of self-immolation in front of the United States Supreme Court (Cameron, 2022), violent attacks in the 90s and 2000s, and cases of strategic sabotage such as German oil pipelines (Welt, 2022) or of an entire cement factory in France (OurWarsToday, 2022).

The purpose of this master's thesis is to investigate radical phenomena in the climate change movement and to understand the underlying dynamics, motivations and possible implications for security approaches. Understanding the motivations behind radicalization in the climate movement is important for several reasons. First, it allows us to distinguish and examine the different perspectives and complaints of those who resort to more extreme measures. Second, it allows us to assess the potential impact of radicalization on the overall effectiveness of the movement's goals and ability to garner broad public support. Finally, analyzing the underlying drivers of radicalization provides insight into possible strategies to prevent or mitigate this phenomenon.

This thesis tackles the question of how and how people radicalize in a climate change context as well as placing the current popular movements active in activism related to climate change in Germany and Austria in regards to radicalism.

Going forwards a Literature review will clear-up contentious terms often used in relation to climate activism and give us a better understanding for it as well as give us a brief historical overview of the

radical climate movement and eco-terrorism. Subsequently the 3N model of radicalization is utilized to describe a pathway of radicalization in the climate context. Finally, a brief outlook of possible future developments is presented before ending with a conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. On Definitions

While a few of the environmental groups discussed in this paper sometimes refer to themselves as radical (such as *Extinction Rebellion* or *Last Generation*) such designations usually come from media, which in the past have used loaded and negative terms like “radicals”, “extremists” or even “terrorists” (e.g. Fuentes, 2023; Heute, 2023, SWR, 2023). While these categories are frequently used interchangeably in public debate, a distinction between them is essential for targeted policy interventions, effective counterterrorism strategies, and protecting civil liberties. By understanding the nuances of each category, policymakers can tailor interventions, allocate resources more efficiently, and avoid unwarranted errors. Furthermore, the recognition of difference allows for a constructive dialogue. Therefore, this section will start with defining and differentiating these terms.

No universally accepted definition in academia or government exists, therefore the definition of the term ‘radicalization’ is still debated. In their introductory essay on *Processes of Radicalization and De-Radicalization*, the authors Della Porta and LaFree (2011) provided seven different, while Neumann (2008) once described radicalization succinctly as “what goes on before the bomb goes off”. Other scholars like Anthony Richards have pointed out that it is important to clearly identify the start and end of the radicalization process in order to avoid sowing confusion in the application of the term (Richards 2015). Neumann (2013) rightfully points out that the term radicalization will always be contested, as it is inherently a relative term dependent on context, stance and issue. Thereby, what is radical depends on factors like general consensus within the mainstream of society of society, the particular point of view within a more directly affected section of society and period of time (Sedgwick, 2010). Generally, we can refer to radicalization as the process by which citizens become ever more convinced about the need to address a societal phenomenon and the need to take evermore drastic action (Schmid, 2013). According to Sedgwick (2010), the notion of 'radicalization' can be most appropriately placed in the context of mainstream political activities, particularly in democratic societies. Within the process of radicalization, a person distances themselves from the mainstream, although not necessarily in both their attitudes and their behavior. This is an important distinction, as a radicalization of attitudes does not necessarily need to result in a radicalization of behavior (Moghddam, 2009, p.280).

In just over 100 years, the meaning of the term “radical” has undergone a significant transformation (Schmid, 2013). During the 19th century, "radical" was mainly used to describe liberal, anti-clerical, pro-democratic, and progressive political beliefs, which in many places have since moved into the political mainstream (ibid). It is important to note that radicalization by itself is not inherently bad. Indeed many of the causes that can trigger a process of radicalization are generally considered to be ethically “just” and history has proven many so-called “radicals” to be on the right side causes. As Neumann (2013) points out “many of the rights and freedoms now taken for granted were fought for by individuals who were condemned as dangerous ‘radicals’ by their contemporaries” (Neumann, 2013, p877). However, in modern times, when we use terms such as "radical Islamism," we refer to political positions that are almost the opposite of those of 19th century liberal “radicals”, embracing an anti-liberal and anti-democratic agenda (Schmid, 2013).

Often the terms radicals and extremists are used interchangeably,<sup>1</sup> yet they differ in crucial ways. While both are by definition relational concepts that need a benchmark for reference, extremists generally aim to establish a uniform society through inflexible and doctrinal beliefs; they endeavor to coerce society into conformity by stifling dissent and dominating marginalized groups (Schmid, 2013). This sets them apart from ordinary radicals who acknowledge diversity and belief in the influence of rational thinking rather than rigid principles (Bötticher & Mareš, 2012). This is put succinctly by Schmid (2013) who sums it up as follows, “While radicals might be violent or not, might be democrats or not, extremists are never democrats. Their state of mind tolerates no diversity.” While this is an important distinction between radicals and extremists, in regard to terrorists this might be extended as follows “extremists have the attitude, terrorists the behavior.”

In recent years, a growing number of governments have used the term “violent extremists” as a quasi-synonym for terrorists (Schmid, 2013). Although terrorism often stems from extremist ideologies, it is important to recognize that not all extremists engage in terrorist activities. Extremism refers to the adherence to radical beliefs that deviate greatly from the mainstream and often advocate profound political, religious, or social change. Extremists may engage in non-violent activities such as protesting, advocating, or spreading ideological activities but are not necessarily violent. Terrorism, on the other hand, involves the actual use or threat of violence to achieve specific goals, it is a clear manifestation of extreme ideologies. The term ‘terrorism’ is a further contested and debated term without a

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<sup>1</sup> As done in the Austrian security report for the year 2023 (Direktion Staatsschutz und Nachrichtendienst, 2023), as well as the German report (Bundesamtes für Verfassungsschutzes, 2022)



universally agreed upon definition. Easson and Schmid (2011) for example identified two-hundred-sixty distinct definitions that are actively being used by governments and academics around the world. Indeed, the United States government has twenty different definitions of terrorism in use across its various agencies and departments (Schmid, 2013). Even though a great variety of definitions exist an academic consensus can be identified that “describes terrorism as a tactic employed in three main contexts: (i) illegal state repression; (ii) propagandistic agitation by non-state actors in times of peace or outside zones of conflict and (iii) as an illicit tactic of irregular warfare employed by state- and non-state actors.” (Schmid, 2013). Terrorism is therefore both a doctrine of political violence as well as a practice of violent action (Schmid, 2011. p.86).

While terrorism uses violence for political ends, a distinction has to be made to other forms of political violence and indeed is important if the aim is to determine which use of political violence can be considered justified or legitimate. This is summarized by Schmid (2013) as follows:

“Whether governmental force or non-governmental political violence is used offensively or defensively, with no regard for collateral damage or with maximum restraint, as a means of provocation or as a weapon of last resort; whether it is used against armed opponents or against defenseless people; whether it has the backing of the majority of people or has no democratic legitimization; whether it has the approval of the UN Security Council or some regional security organization or not – these are all important distinctions that bear on the morality, legality and legitimacy of the use of force/violence in the eyes of various audiences.” (Schmid, 2013)

Schmid (2013) proposes a spectrum of political violence that includes everything from blockades and public property damage up until assassinations, civil war, and revolution. In the first stage, which he calls persuasion politics, the rule of law is upheld. In the second stage, pressure politics, the tactics that are applied might or might not be legal and/or legitimate. In the third stage, violent politics, violence is a regular tool used to either challenge the status quo or to defend it (Schmid, 2013). Therefore, the use of political violence per se does not make a movement illegitimate, it depends on the degree of political violence and the states response to it. This distinction is important to bear in mind if we want to talk about the legitimacy of the applied tactics and allows for us to identify asymmetries in the confrontation.

## 2.2. On Radicalization

With a closer understanding of the various terms in place a closer look at the process of radicalization is warranted. The question on what leads people to radicalize has been picked up by scholars from various fields, political scientists, economists, sociologists and psychiatrists all have put forward

theories related to their field and approached the topic from a different angle, as discussed below. The following section will take a closer look at the most prominent theories of radicalization and ultimately elaborate on the 3N model of radicalization.

The root cause explanation proposes that radicalization originates from underlying social, political, and economic grievances (Newman, 2006). This strategy highlights the larger structural elements that facilitate radicalization and promotes concentrating on sociopolitical remedies. Horgan's 2004 book 'The Psychology of Terrorism' identified fourteen such root causes that have been elaborated on by others since then (eg. Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Krueger & Laitin, 2008). The belief in the root cause theory implies that resolving these complaints could decrease the attraction of extreme beliefs. However direct causal links between root causes and violent extremism is unlikely (e.g. Krueger & Malečková, 2002; Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Berrebi, 2007). Nonetheless, most authors agree that these conditions may contribute under certain conditions to an individual's support or enrollment of terrorist organizations (Horgan, 2008). The psychological models investigate micro-processes related to personality, attitude and beliefs. They offer understandings of the mental processes implicated while becoming radicalized. The importance of personal distinctions and the involvement of mental processes are emphasized in this method for comprehending radicalization (Horgan, 2008). The psychological approach allows for an analysis of the radicalization process on the most basic level and attempts to explain why some people become radicalized while others don't if they are confronted by the same circumstances and environment. The rational actor model suggests that people engage in a cost-benefit analysis before choosing to participate in extremist activities (e.g., Anderton & Carter, 2005). This approach highlights the importance of logical decisions and considering the benefits to be more significant than the costs. The approach emphasizes the strategic thought process involved in radicalization. It is important to note that one's understanding of what counts as rational is highly subjective, therefore the question on who counts as a rational actor is disputed (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2009). Critics of the rational actor approach often impose their own or external criteria of rationality on others behavior (Kruglanski et al., 2019, p77). The social network theory highlights the significance of social links and associations in the process of radicalization. It examines how people are impacted, enlisted, and indoctrinated as a result of their engagement in various networks (Ressler, 2006). This method illuminates the interactions and impacts of peers and social factors in the process of becoming radicalized. Critics caution against assuming a direct and deterministic relationship between network connections and radicalization, highlighting the importance of individual agency and the varying

susceptibility within networks (Kruglanski et al., 2019, p80). The social movement theory focuses the process of radicalization in relation to shared complaints, methods of mobilization, and dynamics within a group. This strategy emphasizes the wider social and political setting as well as the influence of mobilization in the process of radicalization networks (Kruglanski et al., 2019, p82). The most important author subscribing to this approach to radicalization, Della Porta, describes political violence “as an outcome of interactions between social movements and their opponents” (Della Porta, 2013, p.15). She identifies onset factors that can lead to radicalization and persistence factors that maintain it. The main criticism brought forward against the social movement theory is its reliance in on qualitative data and lack of a firm empirical base (Kruglanski et al., 2019, p85).

The 3N Model, which encompasses individual needs, narratives, and networks, further integrates and builds upon these approaches to provide a holistic framework for understanding and addressing radicalization (Kruglanski et al., 2018). The fundamental principle of the 3N model revolves around the notion of individual needs, as it understands radicalization at its core as a deeply individualistic process (ibid). It acknowledges that people might be attracted to extreme ideologies or extremist organizations as a result of unsatisfied psychological, social, or identity-related needs. Some of the requirements might be the feeling of fitting in, a reason to exist, importance, individuality, or the ability to take action (ibid). These themes can be summarized under the term ‘quest for significance’. The model acknowledges that radicalization often occurs when individuals perceive these needs as being fulfilled through radical ideologies, providing a sense of meaning, belonging to a community, or a pathway to enact change (ibid). To put it bluntly, if an individual perceives a need for more radical or even violent paths, they become more susceptible for ideological narratives that support this. The 3N method acknowledges the significant impact that ideological narratives have on shaping people's convictions and behaviors. These narratives provide a framework through which individuals interpret their experiences, construct their identities, and make sense of the world (ibid). Radical narratives often present simplistic and polarizing views that offer explanations, solutions, and a sense of belonging to those who feel marginalized or disenfranchised. By examining the narratives promoted by extremist groups, the 3N model seeks to understand how these narratives appeal to individuals. The 3N model's third dimension pertains to networks. It encompasses the social connections and forces that add to the process of radicalization (ibid). Social networks, whether in the virtual or real world, have a notable influence on the formation of people's convictions, mindsets, and actions. Extremist organizations commonly take advantage of these networks to recruit and radicalize people, leveraging

peer pressure, social validation, and ideological reinforcement. By understanding the dynamics of these networks, the 3N model aims to identify key influencers, vulnerabilities, and points of intervention within social networks (ibid.).

What sets the 3N model apart is its emphasis on the interconnectedness and mutual reinforcement of these three dimensions. It recognizes that individual needs, narratives, and networks are not separate entities but deeply intertwined and influencing one another. An individual who has unfulfilled needs may be easily drawn towards narratives that support their significance quest. This could lead them to join certain groups which encourage and promote these notions. Similarly, social media platforms have the ability to influence and strengthen narratives that satisfy an individual's desires, establishing a cycle of radicalization that reinforces itself. For this reason the 3N model will be used as the tool of choice to analyze radicalization.

### 2.3. On Eco-terrorism

While some media outlets and other participants in the public discourse have started to use the term 'terrorism' to describe the actions of the current climate activists, the question whether the threshold towards terrorism has already been surpassed is dependent on the definitions used. Generally, it is the consensus that current forms of civil disobedience, as performed by climate action groups fall short of actual terrorism, this does not mean that there is no link between the movement against climate change and terrorism, as this chapter will elaborate on.

Rapoport (2004) famously identified that terrorism occurs in waves, proposing four major waves of modern terrorism over the past 150 years. While imperfect, the wave model provides a useful starting point for understanding the evolution of terrorism. Throughout the various waves, terrorism has emerged as a result of larger historical forces. It has occasionally been the deliberate and intentional outcome of a political actor's strategy, while other times it has been accidental and unforeseen (ibid). As we look ahead, the crucial question is not just about what forms terrorism will take in the future, but rather about recognizing the significant global processes that will fuel the next waves of terrorism. Some scholars are of the opinion that climate change could be that global process that will give birth to a new and distinctive global wave of terrorism (Silke & Morrison, 2022). This warrants a closer look at the current state of research in regards to the connection between activism against climate change and terrorism.

A review of twenty-six studies focusing on the linkage between terrorism and climate change in sub-Saharan Africa by Mavrakou et al. (2022) concludes that the current research suggests a positive correlation between climate change and terrorism. Albeit climate change is only indirectly leading to terrorism as it is also impacted by other factors, which have been long identified as systemic enablers of terrorism, such as poverty, migration, and urbanization (ibid). To a similar result comes a paper by Kingdon & Gray (2022), which focuses on three left-wing terrorist groups in the global south. They conclude that adverse environmental situations have already frequently contributed to the rise and endorsement of left-wing terrorist organizations and most likely will continue to do so (ibid).

However, the idea of a climate-driven, new wave of terrorism is disputed (Silke & Morrison, 2022). Historically, Eco-terrorism has its foundational roots in the radical environmentalism of the late 20th century (Trujillo, 2005). The environmental movement gained strength in the 1960s and 1970s due to concerns about pollution, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity (ibid). Most environmental activists use peaceful tactics, but a few advocates for more radical approaches. In the 80s and 90s, environmentalist groups gained attention for civil disobedience and sabotage. Earth First! was an organization formed in 1980 that employed controversial methods to hinder logging and construction, such as tree spiking, sitting, and road blockades. During this time, some groups formed which would engage in illegal acts including arson, property damage, and sabotage in the following years (ibid). The Earth Liberation Front (ELF) and Animal Liberation Front (ALF) justified their actions by claiming to protect the environment and animal welfare by targeting logging companies, animal testing labs, and genetic engineering facilities (ibid). The media covered eco-terrorism extensively in the late 1990s and early 2000s, highlighting incidents like the 1998 arson attack on a Colorado ski resort and the 2001 firebombing of a horticulture center at the University of Washington, which led to the groups being labelled as the US top domestic terrorist threat by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 2004 (ibid).

Since then, the threat assessment has changed fundamentally, and a look at the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) even reveals a decline in environmentally motivated terrorist attacks. While the Database contains more than 200,000 terrorist incidents only 0.1% (or 291) are linked to eco-terrorism itself (START, 2022). Although the problem of differentiating between different branches of terrorism is a hurdle, it becomes clear that eco-terrorism is not a particularly large or existential threat. This point is underlined by the fact that the fatality rate of the incidents linked to eco-terrorism is only 0.7%, which is extremely small when compared to the average fatality rate in the database, which stands at 49.2% (START, 2022). There are however a number of important considerations that need to be taken

into account before discounting the scope of ecoterrorism. First off, it should be noted that a substantial portion (and perhaps the majority) of violent or destructive acts committed by radicals motivated by environmentalism do not fit the requirements to be labeled as acts of terrorism. In 1999 the UK, for instance, counted approximately 1,200 instances of firebombings, vandalism, and physical assaults that were committed by animal rights extremists, which resulted in significant property damage totaling at least £2.6 million (START, 2022). The Global Terrorism Database does not, however, list any acts committed by extremists with an environmental agenda in the UK during that time (START, 2022). Separating conventional far-right extremism with environmental motivations from certain newer types of far-right extremism might prove to be difficult, too. An example is the October 2019 arson assault on a mink farm in Sweden. The culprits in this case were right-wing extremists who were motivated by eco-fascist ideology, although the assault followed a tactic frequently associated with animal rights arson attacks (Kamel, 2020). Whether ‘eco-fascism’ truly exists as an ideology of its own is subject to debate (Hughes et al., 2022). But it is undisputed that both the perpetrator of the 2019 Christchurch attack as well as the 2019 El Paso attack referenced climate - change in their published manifestos (Hughes et al., 2022; Macklin, 2022).

The overlap between left- or right-wing extremism and environmental concerns is also highlighted in the EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2022. According to this report by Europol climate change may influence parts of the right-wing movement, as “Climate change may deepen dystopic views that some right-wing extremists are emphasizing, such as the collapse of current societal systems, social-Darwinist ideas of the survival of the fittest, and the preservation of humankind” (Europol, 2022). But TE-SAT also acknowledges that categorizing the different types of terrorist attacks sometimes proves challenging (ibid). Regarding threats from environmentalist groups, they formerly referred to them as a type of “Single-issue terrorism”, but changed the category to “Other types of terrorism” in 2021 (ibid). The TE-SAT also goes on to say, that “right-wing and left-wing extremists seem to try to co-opt violent animal rights and environment protection movements, which hitherto were linked to single issue extremism” (ibid). While Europol is highlighting the connection to right-wing terrorism, the federal security report of Austria mentions the recruiting potential of left-wing extremists in the climate movement and is afraid of a merging of the two (Direktion Staatsschutz und Nachrichtendienst, 2023). The state security reports of the German state of Bayern just outright includes the groups Last Generation as well as Ende Gelände in the chapter dedicated to left-wing extremism (Bayerisches Staatsministerium des Innern, 2021).

The security implications of climate change are increasingly recognized by states as well as international organizations (e.g. Direktion Staatsschutz und Nachrichtendienst, 2023). The inclusion of “radical climate movement” in the annual security reports of various intelligence agencies are evidence of the fact that states not only view climate change as a macro-level threat but that groups which see climate change as an existential threat have been identified as a risk to the reigning order.

With a closer understanding of the various terms in place as well as a theoretical concept at hand to analyze radicalization itself, the next chapter will analyze the leading radical environmental groups in Germany and Austria.

### 3. Analysis of Radicalization

The following section will pick up the 3N model of radicalization, apply it to the climate movement and describe the pathway towards a more radical stance on climate issues as experienced by an ever-growing number of people, particularly in the younger generations. For this purpose, a number of groups active in the climate movement will be analyzed and positioned.

The groups as well as the people active within them that will be examined, are: *Ende Gelände*, *Extinction Rebellion* and *Letzte Generation*. Especially the members of Letzte Generation have been subject to increased police interest and repression in the last few months. Utilizing the 3N model to radicalization we will first take a closer look at what it is that motivates people to join the more radical wing of the climate movement, which is described in the model as The Need. Subsequently we will investigate the ideological justifications people use to explain their shift towards radicalization, which the model calls The Narrative, and lastly, we will explore the social context of these radicalizations, The Network.

#### 3.1. The Need

What motivates the people in the growing more radical wings of the climate movement to become engaged? This question will be elaborated on in this section.

While the effects of climate-change have become apparent and a growing number of scientists are calling for more drastic measures to be taken, it is especially younger generations that are becoming active, taking to the streets and engaging in other forms of activism connected to climate change. An EU-wide poll to the conclusion that climate-change is the leading topic of concern to this age cohort (European Commission, 2021). Similar results are presented by comparable studies that focused on Germany and Austria respectively (ibid). A global study by the United Nations Development Program found that 64% of people interviewed believe climate change to be an emergency (2021).

As a first step on the radicalization spectrum, participants need to feel the necessity to act, which, following the concepts laid out in the previous section means, that their quest for significance must be triggered. According to Kruglanski et al. (2014) a quest for significance can be triggered in three distinct ways “(1) through a loss of significance or humiliation of some sort, corresponding to the psychological construct of deprivation; (2) through an anticipated (or threatened) significance loss, corresponding to the psychological construct of avoidance, and (3) through an opportunity for significance gain, representing the psychological construct of incentive.”

Among the many ways that a quest for significance can be triggered there is one that is particularly relevant to the climate movement and the younger age cohort, which is the perception of unfairness.



Recent studies indicate that collective climate protest is greatly influenced by the perception of an injustice (e.g. Della Porta and Parks, 2014; 2014; Thomas et al., 2019; Jansma et al., 2022). The perception of unfairness may trigger this quest for significance, and climate change offers a variety of ways people can first perceive its impact as unfair. This may involve the disproportionate impact of climate change, as extreme weather events, rising temperatures, and sea-level rise hit marginalized communities the hardest (IPCC, 2023). This holds up even at the national level, where communities living near polluting industries are often disproportionately affected by adverse health effects and are often those with a lack of political power (Hajat et al., 2015). This is also true at the global level, where of the countries in the Global North have historically contributed the most to greenhouse gas emissions, while many developing countries in the Global South face the brunt of climate change impacts (Ülgen, 2021). A further factor is the age dilemma, which has many young people feeling marginalized by their respective political elites as they are outnumbered and their needs are not accounted for in an ageing society. They thusly feel a generational gap between themselves, as people who still have to live on this planet for decades, and the politicians in power, who are oftentimes relatively old and build their platform to cater to the older demographic (Jansma et al., 2022). According to a study conducted by Haugestad et al. in 2021, Norwegian climate activists expressed a shared belief that they had been deprived of a future that was promised to them, and this feeling was often conveyed through a sense of unfairness. The authors attribute young peoples' participation in climate protests to their tendency to compare the present with future consequences of climate change, which results in feelings of injustice and irritation. These feelings can trigger a quest for significance and act as a motivational factor that can contribute as the first step in a process of radicalization. Furthermore, climate change intersects with other social issues of gender and race (UN Women, 2022) as well as exacerbating existing economic inequalities that exist today (IPCC, 2023). The recognition of inequalities can lead to a significance quest and therefore acts as a motivational component on the way to radicalize (Jansma et al., 2022). Further factors pointed out that can add to an individual's quest for significance are the level of identification with a specific climate action group (Haugestad et al., 2021).

How injustices are perceived, and indeed if they are perceived at all, is linked to their individual background, psychological disposition as well as their social and national environment. For example, Wahlström et al. (2019) showed that young, female and well-educated persons tend to give more thought to environmental concerns, as well as people from more industrialized countries (Franzen &

Vogl, 2013). Varying attitudes towards climate change may account for the different reactions people exhibit when faced with issues of inequity related to the climate. If an individual is highly distressed about the future of the world's climate, and, after going through the latest IPCC report, comes to the realization that their government is not taking enough action, they will easily form the opinion that this is an unjust situation that needs remedy.

Given the serious situation of the world's climate it is of no surprise that a growing amount of people do see the need for more drastic measures and subsequently commit actions that can be considered acts of civil disobedience or the beginnings of political violence.

### 3.2. The Narrative

Research suggests that an individual is more likely to choose violence as a means if they encounter an ideological narrative that portrays violence as a viable antidote to insignificance and/or social networks that advance this narrative (Kruglanski et al., 2014).

People involved in the climate movement who have embarked on their personal quests for significance are driven by narratives that shape their sense of purpose, motivate their actions, and foster connections with a community of like-minded individuals. These narratives are essential in engaging and rallying people who have acknowledged the pressing issues of the climate crisis and are actively seeking avenues for change. The main difference between the groups, besides their tactics, is the question of scope. Some groups like Last Generation, only demand changes directly connected to climate change (Letzte Generation Deutschland, 2023), while other like Extinction Rebellion (Extinction Rebellion, 2023), demand broader societal and economic changes.

Narratives within the climate movement serve as powerful tools for shaping individual and collective perspectives. They lead people to wrestle with the fundamental danger posed by climate change and have them undergo a significant transformation in terms of their beliefs, goals, and self-conception. These narratives tap into an individual's moral values, highlighting the potential consequences for future generations and creating a seemingly imperative need to protect the planet.

Activists affiliated with groups like Extinction Rebellion, Last Generation, and Ende Gelände are motivated by a powerful sense of immediacy and the necessity to act in response to the worsening climate emergency (e.g., Letzte Generation Österreich, 2023, Ende Gelände, 2023, Extinction Rebellion, 2023, Letzte Generation Deutschland, 2023). Therefore, they see the need to act. The

activists view the climate crisis as a significant danger to both humanity and the world that could threaten their very existence. The reason they are driven by a sense of urgency is because they recognize that unless significant actions are taken, the impact of climate change will be disastrous. The prospect of end of a livable planet arouses the immediate urgency within the members of their group. This is made obvious by the names of two of the groups, as both ‘Extinction Rebellion’ and ‘Last Generation’ have references to apocalyptic scenarios of the future in their names.

Kruglanski et al. (2014) propose that ideologies, which justify terrorism, consist of three fundamental elements. At the initial level there is an element of grievance or a perceived injustice or harm, which the group believes to have suffered. Subsequently, the ideology then pinpoints an individual or group which is responsible for the perceived injustice. Ultimately, acts of terrorism are perceived as both morally acceptable and successful approaches to remedying perceived injustices done to the group, particularly if they are targeted at the people who they believe to be responsible. These actions, in turn, earn the actor a sense of admiration and high regard from their community. There are certain beliefs and doctrines that may perceive acts of terrorism as a useful way to bring about change without considering their ethical acceptability or deservingness of admiration. An ideology that does not regard terrorism as a significant source would not be categorized as supporting terrorism. While the broad climate movement still has to come around to the idea of strategic sabotage as an acceptable strategy, such thinking is gaining more and more traction (Malm, 2021).

While the grievance or motivation to act has been already elaborated on, it is important to note that these groups engage in constructing a narrative that builds up an ‘Other’ that is either actively trying to destroy the planet or, at the very least, is doing nothing to prevent it from being destroyed. For these groups, the culprits are companies in polluting industries as well as most of the political parties. They frequently express disapproval of governments and institutions for not having enough political determination to tackle the problem or taking inadequate action to effectively tackle the climate emergency. They contend that current policies, treaties and promises made under agreements like the Paris Climate Accords are insufficient to attempt to halt the progress of global warming within acceptable boundaries (e.g., Letzte Generation Österreich, 2023, Ende Gelände, 2023, Extinction Rebellion, 2023, Letzte Generation Deutschland, 2023). These groups are engaging in activism with the goal of pressuring governments to give climate action greater importance and enact more ambitious and extensive policies. Numerous groups have adopted disruptive strategies with the aim of gaining public notice and eliciting a reaction from those in positions of power. This encompasses

actions of nonviolent resistance like large demonstrations, physical obstructions of large polluters like coal mines, or takeovers of public areas and street blockades. Activists aim to bring attention to the seriousness of the climate crisis and compel both the public and decision makers to face the pressing demand for change by challenging established norms. They thereby engage in the pressure politics described by Schmidt (2013). To this end they utilize tools of political violence such as blocking streets (McGuinness & Kirby, 2023) or engaging in civil disobedience or gluing themselves to pieces of art in museums to the end of generating media attention (Deutsche Welle, 2022). Indeed, these groups have tried in the past to disturb more specific targets, such as the sabotage of more than 30 German pipelines in the summer of 2022 (Welt, 2022), blocking of access roads to Austria's biggest oil refinery close to Vienna (Die Presse, 2023) , or trying to disturb the natural gas conference in Vienna (ibid). However, these activities have so far not garnered the intended media attention or elicited a significant government response.

Additionally, narratives about the empowerment of the general public through grassroots efforts strongly connect with people who have undertaken significant journeys in the climate movement. These narratives contest the idea that bringing about significant transformation is solely possible through conventional sources of authority and organizational pathways. Rather than focusing on external factors, they prioritize the ability of individuals and communities to take action and feel capable, motivating them to achieve a sense of control and effectiveness. Through presenting individual actions as integral to a greater collective movement, these narratives enhance one's sense of belonging and purpose, thus reinforcing one's dedication to both the cause and the group.

As people develop a strong dedication to their beliefs, they may come across stories that justify or validate such acts of nonviolent resistance as described previously (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Although these methods can be regarded as forms of nonviolent opposition or disturbance, they could also verge on or merge with more radical behavior. Accounts that promote or celebrate these tactics frequently hinge on a feeling of ethical necessity and a perceived deficiency in achieving the desired outcome through traditional methods. They use examples from past civil rights movements or resistance efforts to justify their actions and present them as a vital reaction to the pressing and extensive climate emergency.

Although political violence stories may appear to be a quick and drastic solution, they also come with substantial dangers. Participating in these actions may work against the overall objectives of the climate movement, cause possible allies to feel disconnected, and lead to unfavorable public opinions. In

addition, the use of more extreme methods could result in legal penalties such as arrests or criminal charges and may also cause harm to those participating in the actions. Such as the most recent police raids in Germany aimed at the organization 'Last Generation' (McGuinness & Kirby, 2023).

They have the knowledge that the climate emergency is linked with various social and environmental problems such as biodiversity depletion, inequality, and social justice. They see climate change as an indication of a more extensive unsustainable and unfair system. Engaging in Narratives that allow for some degree of political violence is not inherently a negative, as discussed before, but the degree of violence matters and influences whether the tactics applied are appropriate. The step towards more radical narratives opens the door for the creation of larger networks that allow or even encourage such activities and in turn can affect and quicken the radicalization process.

### 3.3. The Network

The third "N" in the 3N model to radicalization refers to the *Networks* that climate activists may engage with as they become more involved in the movement. These networks play a significant role in shaping individuals' perspectives, providing support, and influencing their actions. Within these networks, there is not just potential for the spread of extremist ideologies but also for positive collaboration (Jansma et al., 2022). A group can further enhance an individuals understanding and frame of a problem.

As climate activists deepen their involvement in the movement, they often seek out like-minded individuals and join networks that share their passion and commitment. These networks can provide a sense of belonging, camaraderie, and validation, giving a sense of purpose, reinforcing an individual's beliefs and motivating collective action (Kruglanski et al., 2018). Within these networks, activists can exchange ideas, share resources, and organize various forms of activism, such as protests, direct actions, or grassroots initiatives. One explanation for this phenomenon is that groups can offer individuals with extreme perspectives. As an example: An individual concerned about climate change could initially opt to alter their personal habits and adopt a vegan lifestyle but might eventually come to the realization that this is insufficient and choose to partake in demonstrations for climate action. Having taken part in various protests to address climate change, this individual might become aware that their actions are insufficient, despite their best intentions. This could cause them to feel indignant and ask themselves what other actions could be taken. In response to this uncertainty, a movement focused on the climate can put forth a perspective of injustice to persuade those in doubt of the necessity of joining them and engaging in more concrete action. This would entail pinpointing the

unfairness (negligent behavior on the part of the government), interpreting it as evidence of prioritizing financial gain over public welfare, and urging participation in taking action (joining them in demanding accountability through disruptive measures). Further, they evaluate who is to blame and this judgment shapes their actions. If governments, multinational corporations, or the fossil fuel industry are acknowledged as the primary source of climate injustice, they could become a common enemy that has to be fought against. According to Martin et al. (1990), assigning responsibility may provide more justification for illegal or violent means of protest.

Several group characteristics can have an impact on the extent to which individuals engage in radicalizing actions. The behavior exhibited by people during a protest can be determined by group norms regarding the use of violence or breaking the law, as well as social dynamics such as the presence of role models and structures of social control. This is because individuals tend to comply with specific social norms and regulations when in a group setting (Jansma et al., 2022). In their 2015 research Littman and Paluck found, that individuals in a society are more likely to participate in violent behavior if violence is considered acceptable within the group they are with. In contrast, if a group or society at large prescribes non-violence, it could discourage individuals from behaving violently. If a non-violent group is threatened by the police, even though they promote non-violence, certain members may still instinctively respond in an aggressive way. However, other members of the group can intervene to correct these violent tendencies as they go against the group's nonviolent standard. The interaction among individuals within a society can either encourage the adoption of extreme violent behavior or hinder it. Strategies selected by groups are of course also influenced by the resources and opportunities at their disposal, as well as the likelihood of government response and repression (Della Porta, 2018). According to Chenoweth and Cunningham (2013) climate protesters in democratic societies may regard acts of civil disobedience and violation of laws as a viable and potent method. However, resorting to violent means could also have negative consequences as it might result in the public perceiving the protest in a negative light and reduce public support for the group's goals (Simpson et al., 2018).

#### 4. On the future of climate radicalization

The radical climate movement's future is a subject that produces both anticipation and concern. Groups such as Ende Gelände, Extinction Rebellion, and Last Generation have already showcased their ability to rally significant numbers of people and challenge the current system while pushing for immediate action on climate issues. It is important to contemplate the probable paths these groups could take and the difficulties that could arise as these movements progress and develop.

One aspect that has garnered attention is the risk of co-optation by extremist actors, both from the left and the right. Intelligence agencies and analysts have expressed concerns about the potential infiltration and manipulation of the climate movement by extremist elements. The cause of this unease is the understanding that the movement's vitality, enthusiasm, size, growth and sense of urgency make it an attractive target for those seeking to advance their own radical agendas.

There is a worry that extremist organizations on the left and right edge of the political spectrum could co-opt narratives followed by climate activists and try to recruit them into their own circles. On the left, this means using the narrative of urgent systemic change for their own revolutionary ends, while actors on the right may seek to co-opt the climate movement to advance their own nationalist, neo-Malthusian or anti-immigration ideologies. It is crucial to differentiate the rightful complaints and requests of climate activists from the likelihood of extremist factions taking advantage of the situation.

Another concern is the potential for acts of sabotage or disruption targeting critical infrastructure. While mainstream climate activism often focuses on peaceful protests and civil disobedience there have been incidents where extremist factions have resorted to direct action that results in destruction or disruption of infrastructure. For example, flash mobs targeting industrial sites, such as a cement factory in France by Extinction Rebellion, aim to disrupt and draw attention to the environmental impact of specific industries. Other, newer actors like the group *Tyre Extinguisher* engage in anonymous sabotage of SUVs, deflating them as a symbolic protest against carbon-intensive transportation (Tyre Extinguishers, 2023).

The ongoing radicalization within the climate movement presents a complex and evolving landscape. A significant change that has occurred involves certain organizations, such as Extinction Rebellion in the United Kingdom, abandoning their strategies as they feel that their previous methods of protesting did not yield the desired outcomes (Boyle, 2023). The reassessment of strategies may result in the possible emergence of more extreme groups, coming to the conclusion that their peaceful means of

protest did not reach their intended goals and to move forward more extreme tactics need to be applied. This sentiment is also mirrored in the bestselling book *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* by the Norwegian author Andreas Malm which also inspired a movie about a pipeline sabotage that was released in 2023. In his book, Malm criticizes the climate movement for their strict adherence to non-violent principles and calls for strategic property destruction as a preferable tactic (Malm, 2021).

It is essential to acknowledge the fact that climate activist groups, even those with more extreme views, typically consist of individuals who were born in the digital age and are proficient in digital media. They use social media networks, virtual forums, and digital tools that facilitate communication to connect, share information, and rally people to act. These groups can use the digital platform to avoid traditional means of media and communicate directly with their intended audience. Having direct access to information allows them to influence the narratives, challenge mainstream discourse, and gather support more efficiently (Winter et al., 2020). Furthermore, the online environment offers a medium to exchange tactics and insights, coordinate spontaneous gatherings, and distribute knowledge regarding direct action strategies. The movement's rapid adaptability and ability to mobilize collective action is enhanced by the convenience of communication and coordination in virtual environments.

Nonetheless, the digital world presents difficulties and potential dangers. Online echo chambers can facilitate the rapid spread of extremist ideologies, which can in turn cause increased radicalization (Winter et al., 2020). Online anonymity can make it simple for fringe groups or individuals with radical viewpoints or strategies to flourish (ibid). There exists the not unlikely possibility of splinter groups or factions forming within the climate movement that could resort to aggressive and even more violent methods to accomplish their goals.

Moreover, it is important to recognize that the issues brought up by these groups advocating for climate action are significant to a substantial portion of the population. The widespread recognition of the urgency of the climate crisis is giving these groups legitimacy. These groups receive societal support and influence due to the legitimacy of their concerns helps them in garner financial support as well as support in other ways.

Yet the danger of repressive responses from the state continues to remain. Recent raids by the German police against activists of the Last Generation under a paragraph originally designed to prosecute terrorist groups (McGuinness & Kirby, 2023), as well as the clearance of a squatted village in Western



Germany that aimed to halt the expansion of a coal mine (DW, 2021), showcased that the state is willing to resort to more extreme measures as well if its interests are perceived to be at stake.

To sum up, the radical climate movement's fate is determined by a range of elements, such as the possibility of being manipulated by extremist forces, the likelihood of carrying out destructive actions, and the changing methods and techniques used by activist organizations. Having a sophisticated comprehension of the situation, promoting inclusive conversations, responding to valid worries, and actively opposing any extremist takeover are all crucial in navigating these dynamics. The climate movement can ensure its importance, credibility, and ability to bring about necessary change amidst the pressing issue of climate change through these actions.

## 5. Conclusion

The radical climate movement, driven by urgency and a sense of the impending climate crisis, has emerged as a powerful force demanding immediate action and systemic change. Throughout this paper, various aspects of the movement, including its historical context, key actors and organizations, strategies employed, challenges faced, and potential future trajectories were explored. At first some key-terms had to be discussed to create a clear understanding of the challenges at hand at the topic. With such an understanding in place a closer examination at the process of radicalization in the context of a Western European climate movement was undertaken. The study of the radical climate movement's path has offered significant ideas by utilizing the 3Ns method - Needs, Narrative, and Network - as a structure for comprehending the process of becoming radical within its environment. The individuals within the movement have been motivated by the acknowledgement of the immediate need to tackle the climate crisis. The problem's fundamental and inherent nature has motivated activists to advocate for prompt intervention and call for comprehensive transformation. Narratives have had a significant impact on the development of the radical climate movement. The movement's capacity to create engaging stories that strike a chord with a broad spectrum of people has played a key role in rallying backing and grabbing the public's interest. Finally, networks have played a significant role in the process of radicalizing individuals within the climate movement. Digital platforms and social media have allowed activists to unite, exchange knowledge, and coordinate collective efforts worldwide due to their interconnectivity. Through networks, the movement has been able to expand and adjust by creating an environment for sharing concepts, approaches, and plans.

In conclusion, the current movements do not represent a grave danger for public security. Utilizing our definitions of radicals, extremists, and terrorists, it is worthwhile to note that while most of these groups represent radical views, extremism and the use of political violence is still only a fringe phenomenon. But the narratives are shifting, with the ongoing disillusionment of their current tactics some groups might shift towards more disruptive tactics. But by far they do not seem to become a serious terroristic threat, indeed the question arises whether eco-terrorism really ever was a serious or more of a media phenomenon. The most worrying possibility is the chance for a co-opting of some of the climate movements demands or narratives by more politically inclined groups on the left and right fringes of the political spectrum.



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