# A Critique of "Deradicalization"

The Task Force on Gendered Right-Wing Extremism Prevention

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## 1 Introduction

The current BMFSFJ[i] project "Democracy Lives", seeking to counteract right-wing extremism on all levels of society, receives significant support for its ostensible "Radicalization prevention." In international or pan-European contexts, the term "radicalization" has an even longer history. The Council for Gender-Reflective Right-Wing Extremism Prevention seeks to problematize the term "radicalization", particularly as it is used in primary and secondary right-wing extremism prevention.[ii] We believe that a debate over the term's semantics would, in fact, be both sensible and constructive. We fear that the use of "radicalization" in such contexts threatens to reduce the word to a catch-all term, lumping together movements that differ greatly in strategy, motive and ideology. We therefore advocate for a clarification of and confrontation with the term "radicalization" on the following grounds:

1. The term "radicalization" (in the sense of "deradicalization", "radicalization prevention", etc.) is commonly used for three wholly different phenomena: 1) Islamist fundamentalism or terrorism, 2) leftist militant movements, and 3) right-wing extremism or neo-Nazism. These phenomena are not only ideologically heterogeneous; their scholarship, the challenges they present to a society seeking to prevent their rise and their relevance to the modern political landscape are all wholly different. We believe the term "radicalization" for all three combines themes that should be confronted separately and hinders intervention efforts targeting any one of them.

2. Using the term "radical" in reference to far-right and xenophobic ideologies carries a false implication of marginality or abnormality. In fact, research has shown that such phenomena are disturbingly common across class and cultural lines.

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3. The word "radical" does not and should not always imply a violent or xeno-phobic ideology. Many anti-racist or pro-democratic organizations conceive of themselves as "radical", in the sense of being revolutionary or emancipa-tory; we believe consistently using "radical" to describe violent, xenophobic ideologies delegitimizes the former.

This paper does not claim to judge how individual projects construe the term, nor how it is used in practice in individual cases. Rather, we take issue with how "de-radicalization" is used in anti-extremist scholarship and pedagogy. We recognize the existing criticism of the term "right-wing extremism", which we use in this paper; we nonetheless find it suitable to describe a certain spectrum of political movements, from neo-Nazis to *völkische*[iii] communes to many subcultures of *Reichsbürgern*.[iv]

## 2 Deradicalization

### 2.1 As Societal Analysis

In the BMFSFJ program "Democracy Lives", right-wing extremism, ultranationalism, jihadist or Salafist Islamic movements and violent or anti-democratic leftist militant groups are all labeled and treated as "radical". As with the term "extremist", the term "radical" implies a democratic, moderate societal center on whose edges the "radicals" stand. The term is thereby untethered to a specific ideology, instead simply invoking an image of danger and marginalization. In this way, we lose sight of xenophobic movements of majority or mainstream groups, which in light of the racist and anti-feminist mobilization of PEGIDA and the AFD can even be dangerous. Without an ideological basis, "radical" is nothing more than an umbrella term concealing the very real differences in motive and origin among groups—it is in fact a depoliticizing label. On the other hand, many pro-democratic organizations conceive of themselves as "radical" in a liberatory, revolutionary sense and risk being tarred with the same brush as ultranationalist groups. Scholars both internationally and within Germany have criticised "radical" as a vague "container term' for exactly this reason (i.a. Feustel 2014)[1]

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[1]Feustel, Susanne (2014):*Von der "Glatzenpflege auf Staatskosten" zur Deradikalisierung als Konzept?* In: Kulturbüro Sachsen (Hsrg): *Politische Jugendarbeit vom Kopf auf die Füße. Zum anwaltschaftlichen Arbeiten mit menschenrechtsorientierten Jugendlichen im ländlichen Raum.* Self-published, Dresden, S. 67-79. Online: http://bit.ly/1N7aen3 (accessed 29.10.2015)

## 2.2 Underlying False Assumptions

The term "deradicalization" arose out of national-security and anti-terrorism discourse, not any pedagogical field. The idea of converting terrorist (and mostly Muslim) individuals, lone wolves, so to speak, was implicitly tied to "deradicalization." For example, "deradicalization" has been an explicit program of the GTAZ[v] since 2009. Nonprofits and NGOs began to collect under the "deradicalization" label, as it was judged easier to "create a sensible work mileau and penetrate the culture and speech of criminals, accomplices and their victims alike" (Violence Prevention Network 2014) In the same way, the label made it supposedly "simpler for NGO workers to build trusting and respectful relationships, which in deradicalization work is absolutely indispensable" (Ibid.).[2] These organizations involve all levels of RWE prevention, but especially secondary and tertiary.

Deradicalization was defined by Köhler (2013) as "…the individual or collective change from a criminal, ideologically-radical or extremist identity to one that is non-criminal or moderate. Deradicalization must be strongly shaped by disengagement, which is better described by physical behavioral or habitual changes and is generally left out in a purely ideological understanding of the process."[3] Although Köhler's definition allows for both ideological and behavioral change as separate concepts, it still assumes "radicals" on the fringes of society. The stereotype of marginalized, right-wing "radical adolescents", on whose behalf so much effort towards integration is spent, is unfortunately quite prevalent in modern pedagogy. This stereotype could not be further from the truth: right-wing extremist teenagers are usually not marginalized, but instead quite well-integrated into their communities. It elides the arch-conservative cultural hegemony present in many German communities, in which extremist adolescents are not outcasts, but rather "one of our boys". This false assumption underlies, among others, the orientation of the XENOS project "Exit to Entry", which aims to professionally re-integrate ex-members of the neo-Nazi scene.

## 2.3 In Pedagogy

"Deradicalization", as it is applied in traditional anti-terrorism work, addresses ideologically fixed, violent individuals already part of a terrorist movement. (For these criteria, "lone wolves" not actually part of an organization can still be considered part

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[2]Violence Prevention Network (2014): European Network of Deradicalization. Final report. Berlin. Online: http://bit.ly/1OP2xr8 (Accessed 29.10.15)

[3]Köhler, Daniel (2013): On the Necessity of German Deradicalization Research and the Associated Bases In: Journal EXIT-Deutschland. Zeitschrift für Deradikalisierung und demokratische Kultur, Issue 1/2013, S. 20-40. Online: http://bit.ly/1OhUOQR (Accessed 29.10.15)

of a movement insofar as they draw inspiration from organizations e.g. al Qaeda.) The "preventative turn" approach employed in this field has influence on other pedagogical anti-extremism fields, and blurs the line between social work and national security strategies. We confuse very different ideologies, namely Salafist fundamentalism and neo-Nazism/ultranationalism, by adopting "deradicalization" paradigms from traditional anti-terrorism work into primary and secondary RWE prevention. The tactics employed in tertiary extremism prevention cannot be simply reapplied in other contexts. Here we see the danger that the pedagogical goals of "being open for all" and "maintaining relationships" could fall to the wayside, and that we could thereby repeat the mistakes of anti-extremist youth work of the 1990s.

Our experiences in right-wing extremism prevention, as well as current pedagogical scholarship, support prioritizing a target group analysis: we must draw a line between work with actual far-right activists and mere sympathisers or "fellow travelers". Tertiary RWE prevention is a very specialized field, and its methods do not and cannot apply to primary or secondary RWE prevention nor vice versa.[4] A critical evaluation of our methods is necessary: Whom am I attempting to reach? How? And what is my desired result?

## 2.4    In Right-Wing Extremism Prevention

The prevention of right-wing extremism, properly carried out, requires a discerning eye for the opinions, positions and outlooks of the youths whom it addresses. A modern strategy, taking advantage of the latest pedagogical advances, includes not only work with potential extremists, but also the support of their victims and the strengthening of local democratic culture and structures.[5] "Deradicalization", as a motivating principle for RWE prevention, narrows the focus of such projects to *exclude* victims and society at large. Moreover, other youth groups who self-describe as "radical" (in the aforementioned liberatory, emancipatory sense) are easily tarred with the same brush, and are not considered as a potential part of the "solution" for a healthy local democratic culture. We believe the aforementioned strategic missteps underlay the widespread failure of 1990s anti-extremist youth work and the resulting *strengthening* of far-right cultural hegemony.

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[4]Cf. MBR & VDK e. V. (2006): *Integrierte Handlungsstrategien zur Rechtsextremismusprävention und -intervention bei Jugendlichen.* Online: http://bit.ly/1RLYjl1 (Accessed 12.12.2015)

[5]Cf. Foreword in Hechler & Stuve (2015): *Geschlechterreflektierte Pädagogik gegen Rechts.* Published by Barbara Budrich.

# 3   Deradicalization and Gender

Gender-reflective extremism prevention confronts, among other things, the "double invisibility" of girls and women in the far-right, neo-Nazi and ultranationalist scene. The contribution of young women and girls to these communities is still overlooked and underestimated. With an understanding of these feminine roles and a model of neo-Nazi gender-specific attitudes, we can develop a pedagogical strategy to turn young women away from such scenes. However, a better grasp of gender's intersections with the far-right would advance our efforts everywhere. Work with young men and boys would benefit from an understanding of the relationship between traditional and far-right conceptions of masculinity.

A focus on "radical" adolescents, to the exclusion of other groups, leads inevitably to an underestimation of the roles of women and girls. Anti-extremist work of the 1990s has already taken criticism for its attempts to construct "masculine target groups" (Stützel 2011)[6], but the failures of this approach are more extensive. When a "moderate" identity is assumed to be the goal—that is, a normal appearance and freedom from legal prosecution—women and girls often slip entirely from view. Thanks to societal conceptions of women as caregivers, mothers, apolitical and peaceful, they are frequently left out of anti-extremist programs unable to conceive of women diverging from such a "moderate" identity. For example, women are highly underserved by "exit" programs designed for and aimed towards men.

Johanna Sigl (2014)[7] points out that the very organization of "exit" programs, as well as the clichés surrounding such "exits" from the neo-Nazi scene, are highly gendered in a way that depoliticizes and disempowers women. These gendered images are connected with a conception of right-wing extremism as always-violent and criminal, in this way erasing extremist women (for example, in *völkische* communities) whose contributions are not directly criminal or violent. For them, it is thought, no societal reintegration programs are necessary.

Besides women, right-wing extremist men performing (to borrow from Judith Butler) masculinity in ways differing from hegemonic masculinity are also erased (Hechler 2012).[8] We claim that the goal of a "moderate identity" is all too often the

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[6]Stützel, Kevin (2013): *Männlich, gewaltbereit und desintegriert - Eine geschlechterreflektierende Analyse der akzeptierenden Jugendarbeit in den neuen Bundesländern.* In: Radvan, Heike (Hrsg.): *Gender und Rechtsextremismusprävention.* Berlin: Metropol-Verlag, S. 211-229.

[7]Sigl, Johanna (2014): *Ausstieg und Gender. Eine gendersensible Betrachtung von Distanzierungsprozessen.* In: Lotta. Antifascist Newspaper of NRW, Rheinland-Pfalz and Hessen, 52, S. 19-20. Online: http://bit.ly/1W78pO2 (Accessed 29.10.2015)

[8]Hechler, Andreas (2012): *Männlichkeitskonstruktionen, Jungenarbeit und Neonazismus-Prävention.* In:

goal of a hegemonic gender identity, that is, hegemonic masculinity. Such hegemonic, traditional, *normative* gender roles are essential parts of the far-right and neo-Nazi culture (see, once again, rural *völkische* communities) and contradicting them is a vital tool in preventative praxis.

"Deradicalization" programs are fundamentally based on a gender-specific perspective. In fact, many such programs, when examined closely, are concerned almost exclusively with Islamic terrorism. In this framework, women are either potential suicide bombers or the mothers and sisters of male terrorists, useful only insofar as they moderate the extremist views of their loved ones. A perspective inclusive of gender is to be welcomed, but we must apply a critical eye to the "othering" that can come with it. It is easy to simply refer to women as "oppressed by Islam" and part of a backwards society, but this othering (and the corresponding elevation of the "in-group" as more developed) hinders an honest confrontation with gender roles in our own society. Gender is an essential part of the discussion around "deradicalization" or anti-extremism programs, but it must be approached in a way that clarifies, rather than conceals.

# 4   Conclusion

The term "deradicalization" in pedagogical anti-extremist work introduces paradigms and attitudes arising from wholly different fields. As a consequence, practical as well as theoretical anti-extremist work lose a clear perspective on gender. Moreover, we risk misrepresenting right-wing extremism and xenophobia as purely marginalized phenomena, when their more "normal" expression in every-day society—be it racism, sexism, homo/transphobia or anti-immigrant sentiment—is in some ways more urgent. Those "less-extreme" prejudices are central parts of far-right ideology; a strike against them is a strike against the whole structure.

The implications are therefore twofold. "Deradicalization" must be discarded from pedagogical extremism prevention, that is, primary and secondary RWE prevention, in favor of an appropriate and gender-reflective pedagogical approach. A clear line must be drawn between the methods and goals of this work and those of tertiary extremism prevention of all kinds. Gender-conscious strategies must also be developed adopted in "exit" and deradicalization work towards refuting far-right gen-

Dissens e.V. & Debus, Katharina / Könneke, Bernard / Schwerma, Klaus / Stuve, Olaf (Hrsg.): *Geschlechterreflektierte Arbeit mit Jungen an der Schule Texte zu Pädagogik und Fortbildung rund um Jungenarbeit, Geschlecht und Bildung.* Self-published, Berlin, S. 73-92. Online: http://bit.ly/1mVajF4 (Accessed 29.10.2015)

der roles and de-erasing far-right and ultranationalist women.

*The nationwide Task Force on Gendered Right-Wing Extremism Prevention—the* Arbeitskreis Geschlechterreflektierende Rechtsextremismusprävention—*is composed of diverse individuals, projects and organizations dedicated to strengthening gender-reflective methods in anti-extremist research and praxis. The task force meets twice a year in the Amadeu Antonio Foundation.*

# Notes

[i]*Bundesministerium für Familien, Senioren, Frauen und Jugendlichen* – Government Ministry for Families, Seniors, Women and Youth.

[ii]Primary RWE prevention is the work done in primary schools and other community organizations to educate citizens and "immunize" against neo-Nazi recruitment: civics courses, a comprehensive historical curriculum, and education that emphasizes diversity and tolerance. Secondary RWE prevention describes outreach efforts to young people already in the right-wing-extremist or nationalist sphere. Tertiary RWE prevention concerns work with convicted offenders or those who have already committed hate crimes or acts of terrorism.

[iii]Subscribing to a national-socialist theory of race and culture, typically venerating an alleged ur-German white cultural ideal.

[iv]German variant of the sovereign citizen movement, usually holding that the BRD (the modern German government) is not a true successor state to the German Reich (the pre-1918 government) and that as such, *Reichsbürgern* (literally "imperial citizens") need not pay taxes nor obey federal laws.

[v]*Gemeinsamen Terrorismusabwehrzentrum*, German anti-terrorism bureau.