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Loneliness and radicalization

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Abstract

This article investigates experiences of loneliness in radicalization processes. The main aim is to develop an empirically grounded theory of loneliness in contemporary forms of radicalization. Starting from Hannah Arendt's political theory, which posits loneliness as a breeding ground for terror, the analysis extends to a critical phenomenological approach that adopts the perspective of subjective experience while exploring how these experiences are embedded in specific social structures in contemporary societies. The article therefore bridges the gap between theoretical debates on (the politics of) loneliness and empirical research on the processes of radicalization, extremism, and terrorism. The focus is on two sets of cases: lone-actor terrorists and female Western affiliates of ISIS. The analysis reveals that while the fear of individual and collective extinction plays an important role for right-wing lone-actor terrorists, experiences of discrimination and marginalization are crucial in the case of Islamist radicalization in Western countries.

Keywords

loneliness, social exclusion, isolation, marginalization, radicalization, extremism, terrorism, lone-actor terrorism, ISIS, Hannah Arendt

Introduction

> "What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that *loneliness*, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions

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like old age, has become an everyday experience in the evergrowing masses of our century." (Arendt 1973, 326)

In the last chapter of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt discusses loneliness as a profoundly political phenomenon. She argues that loneliness is no longer merely a condition of members of marginalized and oppressed groups, such as the elderly or the stateless, but rather a defining feature of modern liberal subjectivity itself. Arendt's analysis resonates with other critical continental reflections on modern mass society that address the lack of authentic belonging as a key feature of our current age (Gaffney 2020, 21–80), but it stands out for its emphasis on the political origins and implications of loneliness. Describing loneliness as an immensely painful state characterized by feelings of impotence and superfluousness, Arendt connects loneliness to the destruction of both the public sphere and our private lives. In the context of such an atomized society, totalitarian movements appeal to people through their promise of belonging, understanding, meaning, and recognition.

In the wake of increasing technologization and globalization, the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of right-wing populism, and new forms of authoritarianism and fascism worldwide, Arendt's analysis seems more relevant than ever. We live in a highly technologized global world that, as Jennifer Gaffney (2020, 1) observes, paradoxically brings us closer yet, *at the same time*, isolates us from others, the world, and even from ourselves more than ever before. Accordingly, Arendt's account has attracted renewed attention in both academic and public debates. For example, Gaffney (2020, 157–186) has used her theory to explain the phenomenon of "America's hidden Trump supporters," arguing that their "hiddenness" prior to Trump's electoral success in November 2016 can be interpreted in terms of Arendt's account of political loneliness. In a book-length study, conservative American journalist Stella Morabito (2022) has accused the progressive left of "weaponizing loneliness" and of "stok[ing] our fear of isolation to silence, divide, and conquer." In an opinion piece published in *The Atlantic*, Hillary R. Clinton (2023) has leveled the very same accusation at the conservative right. Uncannily, both camps draw on Arendt's historical analysis and apply it to our time, warning us against what they perceive as proto-totalitarian tendencies. In a different context, Sergei Akopov (2021) has offered an Arendtian interpretation of Russian "sovereigntism," interpreting contemporary narratives of Russian identity and sovereignty as ideological responses to and cures for the condition of loneliness. In this article, we pursue a related yet different project, taking Arendt's claim that loneliness is a breeding ground for terror as a starting point for working toward an empirically grounded theory of loneliness in contemporary forms of radicalization.

Loneliness has received increasing attention as an object of empirical research in recent years. However, the focus has been on loneliness as a public health issue rather than on the political dimension and relevance of the phenomenon. Thus, while the recent interest in "the loneliness epidemic" is in line with Arendt's observation that "loneliness … has become the everyday experience of the evergrowing masses of our century," the political dimension of her analysis has yet to be incorporated into empirical studies of radicalization, extremism, and terrorism. While there is surprisingly little empirical research on

the forms of loneliness in radicalization processes (but see van Tilburg et al., 2019; Vukčević Marković 2021), related yet distinct phenomena have received attention. For example, we find discussions of phenomena such as social isolation, exclusion, ostracism, discrimination, marginalization, alienation, and atomization (e.g., Abbas 2021; Bélanger et al. 2019; Hales and Williams 2018; Pfundmair et al. 2022; Shafieioun and Haq 2023; Welten and Abbas 2022). In addition, the sense of belonging, togetherness, community, meaning, significance, and identity provided by membership in extremist groups has been thematized (see e.g., Hogg 2021; Kruglanski et al. 2014). Loneliness in these contexts is regularly mentioned, but rarely analyzed in detail. An exception to the relative neglect of loneliness in radicalization studies is the recent attention paid to the misogynistic online movement of "involuntary celibates" (incels), which explicitly appeals to and instrumentalizes experiences of loneliness (Creasy forthcoming; Tietjen and Tirkkonen 2023). Moreover, in a related yet slightly different context, loneliness is frequently cited and increasingly explicitly analyzed as a driving factor in conspiracy thinking (see e.g., Bierwiaczonek et al. 2024; Jolley, Paterson, and Thomas, 2023). Within these studies, loneliness is discussed, first, as a factor that *fosters* radicalization processes (e.g., by motivating people to join radical groups); second, as a tool employed by radical groups to *recruit* members and *retain* them in the group; and third, as a reason cited by extremists to *justify* their extremist attitudes and actions.

While we believe that these empirical investigations have provided us with valuable insights, we hypothesize that loneliness also plays a role in radicalization processes beyond these two contexts of incels and conspiracy thinking. Moreover, while we acknowledge that some of the insights gained from research on phenomena such as social isolation and exclusion are also relevant to understanding the relationship between loneliness and radicalization, we argue that loneliness is a related yet distinct phenomenon that deserves attention in its own right. In line with contemporary psychological and philosophical research, we understand loneliness as an affective phenomenon.[1] Rather than describing the objective condition of factually being alone or lacking social relationships, loneliness denotes the subjective condition of *feeling* alone (see e.g., Motta 2021; Roberts and Krueger 2021; Tietjen and Furtak 2021). As such, it involves the painful experience of not having as many, deep or meaningful relationships as one would need or wish for. It implies the intersubjective world of others with whom one would like to connect and flourish, to be recognized as a person and as a part of a community (Pawlett Jackson 2024). Importantly, our social needs and desires, as well as the way we experience their fulfillment and lack of fulfillment in loneliness, are shaped by historical and cultural norms and expectations (Brennan 2021). Loneliness is therefore always a social and political issue (Magnet and Orr 2022; Wilkinson 2022).

The aim of this article is to bring together these three bodies of literature—Arendtian explorations of the politics of loneliness, empirical studies on radicalization, and philosophical and psychological theories of loneliness—in order to work towards an empirically grounded theory of the different forms of loneliness in contemporary forms of radicalization. To this end, we focus on two sets of cases, namely right-wing lone-actor terrorists, and female Western affiliates of the Salafi jihadist terror movement Islamic State

of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Tellingly, the most prominent metaphors used to describe these two groups—"lone wolves" and "jihadi brides"—both evoke associations of loneliness, encounter, and belonging, but in a quite different, gendered way. It is for this reason that we believe they allow for an interesting comparative analysis. In our analysis, we apply the method of critical phenomenology to narratives of radicalization. The critical phenomenological approach takes the point of view of subjective experience while asking how these experiences are embedded in and shaped by specific social structures. In the first set of cases, our primary source is manifestos; in the second, media portraits. Our primary aim is to develop a conceptual and theoretical framework that can be applied to real-world cases in future research, allowing us to better understand and problematize the distinctive roles that loneliness plays in these cases. While we hope that our analysis also has some empirical plausibility for the cases from which we derive it, we acknowledge that our philosophical methodology and sources allow us to make such claims only to a limited extent; manifestos are, after all, pieces of political propaganda, and media portraits are determined by framing.

The contribution of our article is twofold:

(1) Based on a critical phenomenological analysis of narratives of concrete cases, we support Arendt's claim that loneliness is a breeding ground for extremism. *Pace* Arendt, we shift the focus to processes of radicalization and bracket the question of whether and how these processes are related to totalitarian governance. Moreover, *pace* Arendt, our aim is not to show that loneliness is the *sole* or *primary* cause of radicalization; rather, we consider that it is one of many factors that play a role—but one that deserves more attention.

(2) While we take Arendt's account of loneliness as a starting point in our case studies, we go beyond it in three ways. First, our account of loneliness is *broader* than Arendt's. While Arendt focuses on extreme cases of loneliness that require the destruction of both the public sphere and of meaningful private relationships, we argue that a fruitful account of loneliness and radicalization should also consider cases in which both spheres are harmed but not destroyed in their entirety. Second, using the tools of critical phenomenology, we *extend* Arendt's account of loneliness by reflecting on the question of how the social desires and needs underlying our experiences of loneliness, as well as the way in which we experience their fulfillment and lack of fulfillment, are shaped by historical and cultural norms and expectations. By contrast, Arendt seems to take these desires and needs as a given, or at least does not explicitly reflect on their contextuality. Third, we *refine* Arendt's account of loneliness. While Arendt is primarily interested in loneliness as a mass phenomenon affecting us all equally, we use the tools of critical phenomenology to show that members of different social groups are affected differently by loneliness, depending on their social positionality, and experience their loneliness in unique ways. Arguably, these can be interpreted as different types of loneliness.

Overall, we view our paper as a first step in developing a comprehensive interdisciplinary theory of loneliness and radicalization and encourage its uptake in both theoretical and empirical research.

Our article is not intended to be a comprehensive summary of Arendt's account of loneliness and totalitarianism. Given the complexity of her work, this would be impossible; even more importantly, our primary aim is not to comment on Arendt but to offer a systematic analysis of the relationship between loneliness and radicalization. Accordingly, in our reconstruction of Arendt's account, we draw primarily on the third part and particularly the last chapter of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), as well as selected passages from *The Life of the Mind* (1977–78). It is in the last chapter of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, first published as an article in 1953 and added to the second edition of the book in 1958, that Arendt offers the most systematic and comprehensive account of loneliness as a breeding ground for totalitarianism.[2]

Our paper is divided into three parts. First, we introduce the methodological and theoretical framework of our analysis, distinguishing three levels of analysis in critical phenomenology and outlining Arendt's idea of loneliness as a breeding ground for terror. Second, we explore the role of loneliness in radicalization processes, focusing on cases of right-wing lone-actor terrorists and female Western ISIS affiliates. Third and finally, based on our case studies, we develop a schema that differentiates forms of loneliness in the context of radicalization and identifies their underlying social values, norms, and structures.

Methodological and theoretical framework

Methodological framework: Critical phenomenology

We use critical phenomenology as the methodological framework for our inquiry (see e.g., Salamon 2018; Weiss, Murphy, and Salamon 2020). Philosophical phenomenology investigates the structures of experience from the first-person perspective. Traditionally, these structures have been understood as universal conditions underlying all human experience (e.g., temporality, spatiality, intersubjectivity, embodiment, and affectivity), but phenomenologists have also analyzed how social norms and interactions shape our lived realities (see e.g., Beauvoir 1949; Fanon 2008[1954]; Merleau-Ponty 2012[1945]; Young 2005[1980]). Critical phenomenology thus takes a situated approach to uncovering contextually specific social norms and values that allow our experiences to appear in specific ways (see e.g., Guenther 2020, 12; Salamon 2018, 2). It is a normative endeavor committed to anti-oppressive emancipatory values (see e.g., Guenther 2021).

In short, critical phenomenology takes our lived experience as a starting point to explore how our experiences are shaped by, but also reinforce, oppressive social structures (such as patriarchy, racism, or ableism). For instance, in her early work on solitary confinement, which played a key role in coining the concept of critical phenomenology, Lisa Guenther (2013, xiii) introduces critical phenomenology as "a method that is rooted in first-person accounts of experience but critical of classical phenomenology's claim that the first-person singular is absolutely priori to intersubjectivity and to the complex

textures of social life." Emphasizing the critical and liberatory nature of critical phenomenology, she highlights that "one cannot adequately describe and map the quasi-transcendental structure of white supremacy without engaging in a normative critique of its impact on the world, embodied consciousness, and Being-with Others or Being-for Others" (Guenther 2021, 7). Although the question of what exactly critical phenomenology is and should be is open to debate,[3] based on these shared commitments, we can distinguish three layers of analysis in critical phenomenology:

(1) The phenomenological analysis of experiences,
(2) The analysis of social norms and structures underlying these experiences, and
(3) The level of critique.

Importantly, the distinction between these three layers of analysis is an analytic distinction; in practice, they are closely tied together. Applied to the present context, at the phenomenological level, we investigate how loneliness is described and experienced by people who have become radicalized. At the level of structural analysis, we explore how these experiences and their descriptions are grounded in, but also potentially reproduce and reify, specific social values, norms, and structures. Finally, at the level of critical analysis, we investigate loneliness itself as well as its underlying social values, norms, and structures in a normatively committed way, guided by anti-oppressive values. In particular, we pay attention to the way in which the radicalized person's positionality within different social hierarchies shapes their experiences of loneliness.

From the perspective of critical phenomenology, loneliness can be political in at least two different ways (Tietjen and Tirkkonen 2023). First, distinctively oppressive social structures may make people more prone to feeling lonely (Magnet and Orr 2022; Wilkinson 2022). For instance, social marginalization and discrimination may make members of oppressed groups more vulnerable to feelings of loneliness. Second, loneliness can be politically instrumentalized by members of specific groups to maintain, reinforce, or establish unjust, oppressive, or violent social structures (Tietjen and Tirkkonen 2023). This occurs, for instance, when members of misogynistic online communities instrumentalize their intimate loneliness to advocate a patriarchal social order. As we show in the following sections, the situation becomes more complex when both aspects co-occur—for example, when members of Muslim minorities in Western countries radicalize partly in response to loneliness stemming from marginalization and discrimination in an Islamophobic society, but also partly use these experiences to justify their own extremist beliefs and actions.

Theoretical framework: Loneliness as a breeding ground for terror

> "Loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government, and for ideology and logicality, the preparation of its executioners and victims, is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluousness which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the

> end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our time." (Arendt 1973, 323)

In this extract, Arendt identifies loneliness as "the common ground for terror" and historically situates its transformation into a mass phenomenon in modernity. While some scholars have criticized her for intermingling phenomenological and structural political reflections, it is precisely this combination that makes it an attractive starting point for our critical phenomenological inquiry (see Lucas 2019: 711). In fact, her analysis contains important insights at all three levels of analysis that we have distinguished above. Below, we briefly discuss her contributions to each of these three levels in turn, thereby providing a background foil for our own analysis in the subsequent section.

At the level of phenomena, Arendt distinguishes between solitude, isolation, and loneliness. She frames all three as politically relevant phenomena, while arguing that solitude and social isolation differ significantly from the experience of loneliness. Solitude, for Arendt, is a peaceful state in which one keeps oneself company by engaging in inner dialogue. In her view, solitude is necessary for all thought because it facilitates reflection on one's own views and allows one to distinguish true from false. As long as these deliberative processes involve plurality, the presence of others and the shared world, solitude is productive, but it may also slip into the negative state of loneliness if one remains indifferent to what is happening in the political sphere and does not interact with others (Arendt 1973, 325; Maslin 2020). By isolation, in turn, Arendt refers to the separation of people as political agents: when people are isolated from each other, they are unable to come together in the public sphere and act for a common cause. Arendt argues that tyrannical governments have always used the isolation and imprisonment of individuals as a means of control (Arendt 1973, 322). Totalitarian governance, by contrast, is based on the use of loneliness (ibid., 323; Dumm 2008, 36).

Arendt describes loneliness as an unbearable experience that manifests itself most clearly in the presence of others (Arendt 1973, 324-325). Whereas tyrannies prevent people from coming together by isolating them, totalitarian governance functions by "organizing loneliness" (ibid., 322). Isolated individuals are not necessarily lonely. They may be able to engage in meaningful solitary practices, and isolated communities may be full of warmth and care—people just cannot participate in political activities with others. In loneliness, on the other hand, one is not necessarily isolated, but still feels cut off from human interaction and meaningful ways of connecting with others (ibid.). Furthermore, loneliness not only concerns the inability to act in the public sphere but one's life as a whole, as it destroys one's private life as well (ibid., 326). Arendt argues that in loneliness, one is not only deprived of the possible company of others, but also of oneself (Arendt 1978, 74). She understands human beings as relational creatures whose selfhood can only be confirmed by trusted equals. Therefore, in loneliness, one loses the sense of a common world and, along with it, contact with one's own opinions and views. Importantly, in loneliness, one loses the capability of creating something new in the common world, of adding something relevant to it (Arendt 1973, 322). In sum, loneliness is "among the most radical and desperate experiences of man" (ibid., 323) because one has the experience of not belonging to the world and, simultaneously, one loses the connection to oneself.

Phenomenologically, then, loneliness is linked, first, to a felt lack of agency and, second, to a felt lack of recognition as a unique subject in a relevant social context (Lucas 2019; Roberts, Osler, and Krueger 2023). The felt lack of agency manifests in feelings of impotence. To use Arendt's words, in loneliness one is incapable of meaningful *action*. Action, as she understands it, is something truly human and characterized by freedom: it is not defined by necessity or utility, but rather by the spontaneity to use one's own capacities to generate new beginnings (Gaffney 2020, 139–140). Second, the felt lack of recognition manifests in feelings of meaninglessness and superfluousness, as one is excluded from subjects who could exert influence in shaping the world (Arendt 1973, 323).

At the level of social and economic structures, Arendt argues that loneliness emerges from a complex socio-political situation. The liberal social order, with its strengths and vulnerabilities, is an integral part of this context.[4] What is it, then, that makes subjects in liberal societies lonely? The answer is not straightforward, but one aspect is that loneliness arises in societies that conflate freedom with liberty, placing emphasis on the latter. In Arendt's view, the political ideal of modern societies is that of liberty—removing obstacles to individual emancipation by securing the rights of individuals. When liberty is the highest political ideal, human beings are merely regarded as self-contained individuals (Gaffney 2020, 120). But freedom, she contends, can only be realized in the public sphere, where people can become visible to others as unique human beings and simultaneously as members of a community, thereby "giving birth to something new in the world" (ibid., 113). Second, she claims that one becomes truly lonely when one is reduced to a laboring subject with no other relevant context or significance (Arendt 1973, 322-323). Arendt understands labor as the activity necessary for sustaining life, but it becomes problematic when reduced to mere survival. While we can still find meaning in *work*, such as building a home or producing artifacts for the community, sheer *labor* disconnects us from any meaningful activity, as it focuses exclusively on producing goods for immediate consumption (Gaffney 2020, 138; Nehra 2021, 5). Loneliness can thus emerge from working conditions in which individuals are deprived of meaning and feel insignificant and uncared for.

At the level of critique, Arendt's theory offers three valuable points of reference. First, Arendt operates with a normative conception of agency, according to which action in general, and political action in particular, requires us to come together in the public sphere, where we can negotiate our values and act together. This normative conception of agency allows us to understand why, on the one hand, radicalization in response to loneliness can be understood as an attempt to reclaim agency, but also why, on the other hand, it is not a proper agency that is acquired through radicalization. Second, Arendt's concept of negative solidarity allows us to understand both why lonely people join extremist groups and what is problematic about the type of belonging they offer. This is important because in most philosophical literature, loneliness is associated with withdrawal, depression, and grief rather than with political agency. Arendt's theory thus helps us to understand how loneliness motivates people to adopt particular political perspectives and attitudes, and to join extremist movements. It clarifies how the identity of these extremist groups is defined by their violent hostility toward outgroups. When lonely, one tends to cling to the promises of fellowship, community, and recognition, even though these groups offer only

a negative form of belonging—one based on exclusion and hostility rather than genuine connection. Third, Arendt's analysis allows us to critique a particular type of ideological reasoning, or logicality, inherent in these movements. She defines ideology as "a logic of an idea," suggesting that ideologies explain the world through a single idea—be it "Nature" or "History"—that can explain everything and serve as a premise for all reasoning (Arendt 1973, 315). Ideologies purport to reveal the true nature of reality or the historical process, presenting them as inevitable. Moreover, these ideas do not remain solely at the level of thought but become guidelines for action. As she explains: "You can't say A without saying B and C and so on, down to the end of a murderous alphabet" (ibid., 319). Claiming to be grounded in science and "hard facts," ideologies cannot be challenged by new ideas or experiences. Arendt argues that totalitarian systems function when people can no longer rely on their sensory perceptions of reality, trust what is true, and form their own stance toward it (325). In her view, loneliness further distorts one's deliberative processes and the ability to distinguish true from false. Extremist movements often encourage subjects to practice "independent" and "critical" thinking and to question their contemporary realities; at the same time; however, they require acceptance of the entire system of thought, and a line of reasoning that derives actions from certain "inevitable facts."

In our case studies in the following three sections, we take up Arendt's insights into all three levels of analysis: the lack of agency and recognition as key features of the phenomenology of loneliness; the struggle to become visible in the public sphere and to find meaning in a world in which one's (self-) worth is defined by the labor market; and the three critical concepts of agency, negative solidarity, and logicality. However, we also go beyond Arendt by complementing her structural analysis with a reflection on the hierarchical organization of gender and cultural relations (patriarchy and white privilege). We demonstrate that loneliness is experienced, expressed, and interpreted differently depending on one's own position within social hierarchies along the lines of gender, religion, race, and so on.

Case studies

We now turn to concrete case studies to explore loneliness in processes of radicalization. Previous studies have suggested that loneliness could be understood as one of the underlying conditions of radicalization that motivates the search for meaning and purpose (Joosse 2017; Kruglanski et al., 2014). Fighting for a cause may promise "relief from loneliness" in a political environment that otherwise appears depressive or even hostile (Joosse 2017, 67). However, only a few empirical studies have actually investigated the link between loneliness and proviolent attitudes in radicalization (see van Tilburg et al., 2019; Vukčević Marković, Nicović, and Živanović, 2021). Hence, we analyze a set of cases of (1) right-wing lone-actor terrorists and (2) female Western ISIS affiliates, with the aim of identifying different forms of loneliness in their social contexts.

Lone-actor and right-wing terrorism

The term "lone-actor terrorist" refers to an individual who operates independently with the intent to harm others for ideological reasons. Traditionally, they have been deemed difficult to detect because they lack social networks, do not seem to share a specific socio-demographic profile (Gill, Horgan, and Decker, 2014), create their own ideologies (see Berntzen and Sandberg 2014), and "act out of a mixture of ideology and personal grievances" (Hamm and Spaaij 2017; Stern 2003). A study by Schuurman and Carthy (2023), however, concludes that lone-actor terrorists largely have problems interacting socially and forming intimate relationships.

Interestingly, academic debate has questioned whether lone-actor terrorists are lonely (Hofmann 2020). Most of them are highly dependent on a virtual community (Meloy and Gill 2016), leak their intentions to social media or other internet audiences, and those around them often know about their grievances, opinions, and leanings before the attack (Borum et al. 2012; Gill, Horgan, and Decker, 2014). Some of their manifestos mention friends. It has therefore been emphasized that the motivations and actions of lone-actor terrorists are always framed by a social context, such as online groups or at least an assumed political community (see Hofmann 2020; Hamm and Spaaij 2017, 72; Kenyon, Christopher, and Binder, 2023). It seems, however, that skepticism about the loneliness of lone-actor terrorists implies a conceptual confusion between loneliness and social isolation. Regardless of whether one is isolated or not, one can feel lonely. Moreover, one may be both lonely and isolated in many spheres of life, but still have some social context, such as a job, an online forum, or other media source that keeps one somewhat connected to the social world and its daily practices (see Arendt 1973, 323).

Importantly, studies on lone-actor terrorism have recently been criticized for being inadequate for grasping the underlying conditions of radicalization (Kenyon, Christopher, and Binder, 2023). It has also been noted that the motivations of lone-actor terrorists might not be as idiosyncratic as has been assumed (Berntzen and Sandberg 2014; Hofmann 2020)—they are embedded in social realities and movements that can be analyzed and understood. Although lone-actor terrorists express their emotions and vulnerabilities in various ways, it is possible to identify the role of loneliness in radicalization and its cultural and economic conditions.

In this section, therefore, we analyze the manifestos of lone-actor terrorists to gain a better understanding of loneliness and the underlying conditions of radicalization. In the manifestos, loneliness is not presented merely as an individual's private grievance. As discussed above, it appears as a politically relevant painful experience that affects one's life as a whole, both private and public. In loneliness, one is deprived of connection and the possibility of interacting with others in a shared reality. Importantly, one loses the capability of creating something meaningful and valuable in the common world.

Manifestos should, of course, be interpreted critically: they often provide unreliable information and aim to maximize the visibility of the attack, influencing the reader, motivating followers to join the mission, directing the police investigation, and

dominating the public narrative of the course of events. Nevertheless, manifestos also provide rich material for analyzing the motivations of the perpetrators (see Capelos, DaVisio, and Salmela, 2024) and the conditions and life situations from which they emerge. In many cases, preparing the manifestos has required considerable effort, which points to great emotional significance and personal meaning. For this reason, they have also been used for research purposes, for example, in forensic psychiatry and psychology (Kupper and Meloy 2021; Leonard et al. 2014, 409–410), sociology of religion (Nilsson 2022), and counterterrorism studies (Ware 2020).

Incel terrorists. Loneliness is most explicit in the manifestos of incel terrorists. "Incel" (involuntary celibate) is the self-proclaimed identity of a person in a highly codified online subculture who struggles to find sexual or romantic partners. The subculture originates from a network of anti-feminist online communities ("the manosphere") that foster a set of beliefs about gender relations and their hierarchical structures in society (see e.g., Ging 2019; Maxwell et al. 2020; Stijelja and Mishara 2023, 722–723; Tietjen and Tirkkonen 2023; Tirkkonen and Vespermann 2023; Vallerga and Zurbriggen 2022). One of the most debated figures in the community has been Elliot Rodger, who committed a mass shooting in Isla Vista, California in 2014 at the age of 22. Rodger describes loneliness at length in his 141-page text *My Twisted World*. Loneliness is explicitly connected to his anger and radicalization, as he explains how his anger intensified the lonelier he felt. At one point, he describes the felt need to plan his attack by writing: "I still end up going back to my room as a lonely virgin, I will have no choice but to plan my Retribution" (Rodger 2014, 120). The objects of his anger are women who, in his view, have caused all his problems and should therefore be punished. Rodger's follower, Chris Harper-Mercer, responsible for a mass shooting in Oregon in 2018, similarly characterizes his life as "one lonely enterprise" with "one loss after another" (Harper-Mercer 2015, 1). He writes that he has no friends, no job, and no girlfriend, specifically mentioning his age (26) and that he is a virgin, stating: "I long ago realized that society likes to deny people like me these things" (ibid.). The sentence reflects the belief that sex is a natural right, but that access to it is unfairly denied by the abstract entity of "society" and its prevailing stance on such issues (see Srinivasan 2022).

Incel terrorists communicate an experience of *intimate loneliness*, a lack of an intimate (romantic or sexual) partner. As their discourse revolves around the alleged prerequisites for dating success and is preoccupied with sex and women, their loneliness aligns to some extent with Arendt's claim that loneliness distorts one's private life and affects one's life as a whole. However, their intimate loneliness appears and is framed within a particular social setting. The preoccupation with sex is thus not only motivated by physical activity but by the wish to belong to a society with specific cultural life scripts—cultural norms and conceptions of how a "normal" life is supposed to proceed (see Donnelly et al. 2001). This aptly illustrates how the experience of loneliness is itself shaped by specific social norms and expectations. Even though incels emphasize that they come from different backgrounds and have individual grievances, they also have a clearly defined epistemic framework with taxonomies and specialized vocabulary for explaining why they are lonely and how intimate relationships are formed. Self-

identifying as an incel involves an experience of being illuminated by "the facts of life." A majority of incels (95 percent, according to the study by Stijelja and Mishara 2023) share a particular outlook and a conviction that physical attractiveness determines whether one can find an intimate partner, and that they cannot change their perceived disadvantages, such as their looks or behavior (ibid.; Tirkkonen and Vespermann 2023). Online communities thus foster a sense of hopelessness and desperation, as group membership paradoxically requires identifying as someone who is lonely with no way out.

Replacement theory terrorists. Compared to incel terrorists, replacement theory terrorists, such as Anders Behring Breivik and Brenton Tarrant, refer to loneliness much less explicitly in their manifestos. Nevertheless, both Breivik and Tarrant have been characterized as lone gunmen on the extreme right. Breivik (now Fjotolf Hansen) is known for his two attacks in Norway in 2011, in which he placed a bomb in front of government buildings in Oslo and perpetrated a mass shooting at a youth camp on Utøya island. Tarrant, Breivik's follower, was found guilty of the Christchurch Mosque shootings in New Zealand in 2019. Their political motivations are also well known, as their intention was to spread their views as widely as possible. Replacement theories are based on conspiratorial beliefs according to which the white European population and its culture will be replaced by non-white, non-Western immigrants and foreign values, norms, and ways of being (see Obaidi et al. 2022). Consequently, they are openly xenophobic and extremely concerned about birth rates in Western countries. Studies have shown a positive correlation between perceived replacement and Islamophobia, as well as a willingness to persecute Muslims by violent means (Obaidi et al. 2022, 1682; see Abbas 2020).

Whereas incels do not hesitate to describe their loneliness, losses, and personal grievances explicitly, replacement theorists reveal their vulnerability less openly, expressing their affective states and emotions (e.g., anger, hatred, grief, and frustration) in a more political and detached context. Loneliness, however, still plays a role in replacement theory terrorists' reasoning. First, potential followers are assumed to be loners, or at least at risk of becoming lonely. They share the experience and frustration of not being recognized as agents whose opinions and perspectives would be heard and taken seriously in the public sphere. Therefore, Breivik promises them a brotherhood of like-minded individuals. Reassuring them that the fear of loneliness can be overcome, he recounts his past in a detached, second-person voice:

> "Your concerns are not for the well-being of your family—close or extended, your neighbors, your kinsmen or countrymen, about the outlook for your country or your compassion for others, but rather the frightening scenario of being alone in this world" (Breivik 2011, 1401).

The purpose of this brief confession is not to share a moment of fragility but rather to display strength and the capability of correcting one's flaws. It seems that "being alone" in the passage refers not just to physical aloneness, but to a more existential state which involves a deep concern about not finding oneself in the world with others in a meaningful way. Loneliness is thus ascribed to the "apolitical" former self, whereas becoming a truly

political subject, a terrorist, appears as a way of overcoming vulnerabilities and caring for others.

In Tarrant's case, in turn, loneliness could be understood as one of the justifications for the attack. His manifesto portrays a scene that is typical of descriptions of loneliness in a new cultural environment, where people feel out of sync and pace with their surroundings (see Motta 2023). When Tarrant incites others to take action, he tells a sentimental story about his trip to France. He describes how white Europeans are walking the streets alone, whereas immigrants appear "young, energized and with large families and many children" (Tarrant 2019, 8). Sitting in a car, crying, he feels alienated from the world around him—particularly from the people in a parking lot in front of a supermarket. This experience is described as the tipping point when he decides to commit himself to violence. At the heart of this experience is a sense of threat that the social world is changing dramatically and that white men are doomed to be superseded and left lonely. Loneliness concerns not so much the past self, but the present state of finding oneself in the world—and the future self, which cannot flourish without taking action.

Tennessee valley church shooting. The shooting at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in 2008 is particularly interesting in the Arendtian context because the manifesto presents the attack as a critique of liberal politics. In the manifesto, the shooter, Jim David Adkisson, accuses Democratic politicians of being traitors and the mainstream media of being a propaganda machine. He also expresses his hatred toward African Americans and sexual minorities. In practice, he opened fire in a liberal church where people had gathered to see a youth musical performance.

In this case, loneliness and aggression appear against a backdrop of harsh economic conditions. At the time of the attack, Adkisson was a 58-year-old loner who had been a truck driver but was struggling to find a job. His four-page manifesto states that he had "no next of kin, no living relatives" (Adkisson 2008, 4) and that he had held "some good jobs," but had also always been dismissed (ibid., 1). Adkisson's *economically framed loneliness* is closely linked to the experience of losing one's social status in a highly competitive social setting that values individual success and where one's sense of self-worth is entirely dependent on having a job. Not having a job signifies a loss of dignity, and reports indicate that he was fixated on the fear of ending up under a bridge (Hamm and Spaaij 2017, 72). In the manifesto, Adkisson wonders why he was living at all, revealing that he had wished to die in Vietnam, and that one of the motives for the attack was to be killed by the police while doing "something for your country." For him, dying in action appeared to be a more dignified option compared to slipping into poverty with no way out.

It should be stressed, however, that the aim of Adkisson's manifesto is not to express his loneliness, but rather his political frustrations and feelings of helplessness in America's war on terrorism. He accuses the Democrats of allying with the enemy and claims that liberal values pose the greatest threat to the country, destroying its most important institutions: education, the military, and religion. The manifesto frames the shooting as *a hate crime* ("I hate the damn left-wing liberals"), *a political protest* ("I'm protesting the major news outlets"), and *a symbolic killing* because his real targets

remain inaccessible to him. Mark Hamm and Ramn Spaaij (2017, 72) have argued that even though Adkisson was a loner, he did not act in *total* isolation but was inspired by conservative commentators (authors, television news hosts, and radio personalities) in the popular media who identified the kind of people he wanted to target. Bernard Goldberg's book *100 People Who Are Screwing Up America* is explicitly mentioned in the manifesto.

Arendtian critique of lone-actor reasoning. As explained above, Arendt operates with a normative conception of agency, arguing that the capability for action is what makes us human—the ability to create something new and meaningful in the common world. Loneliness, by contrast, is characterized by feelings of impotence and superfluousness, the experience of being unable to affect society in any meaningful way. In this light, the appeal of extremist movements lies in the reclamation of agency and the promise of changing the world. However, Arendt's concept of action allows us to question the terrorist call to act. While she similarly stresses that people should break from the mainstream mentality and create something new in the public sphere, her notion of action is fundamentally different from the incitement to violence. She recognizes that violence often stems from frustration when the opportunities and capacities for political action are diminished (Arendt 1970, 83). However, Arendt's notion of action is grounded in the principle of plurality. What qualifies as action involves interaction with others in the public realm, "acting in concert," and listening to diverse opinions, instead of overpowering them with force (ibid., 82). For Arendt, the public sphere is an open space for dialogue and shared reality, while counter-spheres, such as those of incels or replacement theorists, reject plurality and create closed, exclusionary spaces. These counter-spheres further isolate individuals within narrow, anti-pluralist frameworks, eroding the conditions necessary for public life. For these reasons, terrorist acts should not be mistaken for action.

Furthermore, Arendt's concept of negative solidarity helps identify what is problematic about the type of belonging that terrorist movements offer. She observes that lonely individuals not only cling to promises of fellowship and recognition but also tend to develop negative future scenarios and become suspicious of others (Arendt 1973, 326). Empirical studies have similarly pointed to a positive correlation between loneliness and a lack of interpersonal trust (e.g., Rotenberg et al. 2010), loneliness and vigilance (Cacioppo and Hawkley 2009; Hawkley and Cacioppo 2010; Meng et al. 2020), and loneliness and a heightened sense of threat (van Tilburg et al. 2019). In particular, right-wing terrorists portray the "majority population as victims" under an existential threat (Obaidi et al. 2022, 1690), which fosters a sense of togetherness and urgency to act. According to van Tilburg et al. (2019), loneliness is threatening because it undermines one's personal significance when sources of meaningful life—such as social connectedness and ways of belonging—are out of reach. This loss of meaning seems particularly important in Adkisson's case, where Arendt's distinction between labor, work, and action becomes critical. As noted above, Arendt argues in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that one becomes truly lonely when reduced to a laboring subject with no other relevant context or significance (Arendt 1973, 322-323). While labor is driven solely by the need

to fulfill basic biological needs, work involves activities that create a sense of shared meaning and continuity. For Adkisson, "having a job" signifies not only fulfilling basic needs but also achieving social significance. His anger and the urge to act emerge from the loss of this meaningful context. However, the existential threat expressed by right-wing terrorists concerns not only their personal significance but also a historical process in which white Westerners—with their communities and possibilities of belonging—are perceived as being swept away like an endangered species. This perceived existential threat thus legitimizes violence as self-defense. Their group identity is defined by hostility toward the perceived sources of this threat: foreign populations and their individual members.

Moreover, all the cases above have affinities with conspiratorial thinking, particularly the belief that a powerful entity and its allies (such as feminists, liberals, Democrats, or the mainstream media) are orchestrating social and political changes that threaten familiar values and the established world order. Within the Arendtian framework, communities of radicalized incels and right-wing extremists can be perceived as ideological. Incels believe they possess insight into the "true nature" of human behavior and partner preferences, while right-wing extremists claim to hold "hard facts" about the historical process of population replacement. Both groups, furthermore, anchor their beliefs in "scientific facts" that cannot be challenged. Lone-actor terrorists, of course, would not agree with Arendt that loneliness has made them lose the capacity for critical thinking and discerning true from false. From their perspective, they have finally uncovered the truth, which they believe is grounded in statistics and rational reasoning, and which is precisely why they are fighting for a society in which women and/or minorities would not have equal rights. However, as noted above, Arendt argues that ideologies come with a particular type of *logicality*, which is also evident in these cases: the requirement that if one accepts A, one must also accept B, C, and D—the entire set of claims leading to an implementation program, even though no real logical connection exists between them (Arendt 1973, 319). For example, if one agrees that A) European values are threatened by a historical process of population replacement, one must also agree that B) immigration is fatal, C) that one should fight against this development for self-defense, and D) that one should be against everything that "the opposition" or "enemies" stand for, such as human rights, environmentalism, and women's rights. Similarly, if one agrees that A) it is part of human nature to desire certain types of intimate partners, one must also agree that B) women are picky, C) it is their fault that men experience loneliness, and D) that women should be punished accordingly. Arendt, of course, reminds us that the function of this type of reasoning is to prepare people for the polarizing mentality of "victims" and "executioners" and to make certain actions appear as logical consequences (Arendt 1973, 319), rather than to promote clear, logical, fact-based thinking.

Western female ISIS affiliates

In the academic discourse, explicit discussions of loneliness in the context of Islamist radicalization in Western countries are rare. What is discussed, however, are related yet slightly different phenomena. A few recent studies have experimentally investigated the

relationship between social ostracism—being ignored or excluded—and radicalization (e.g., Hales and Williams 2018; Pfundmair 2019; Pfundmair et al. 2022). While such studies provide interesting insights, their applicability to members of groups who are systematically marginalized is limited. Unlike under experimental conditions, in real life, people are repeatedly and systematically exposed to marginalization, and their feelings of loneliness are intensified by a lack of acknowledgment of their grievances. Other empirical studies focus on emotions such as feelings of alienation and marginalization, while implicitly or explicitly bracketing the social and political conditions under which these emotions emerge (see e.g., Bélanger et al. 2019). Most closely connected to our research is the investigation of discrimination and marginalization as structural underpinnings of radicalization (see e.g., Welten and Abbas 2022), as well as their experiential manifestations in grievances among individuals and groups (see Shafieioun and Haq 2023). By taking a specific type of existential grievance—namely that of loneliness—as a starting point for exploring whether and how this experience, at least in some cases, is grounded in problematic social structures and norms, our analysis complements studies that cover a broader range of existential grievances. It also aligns with studies that start, conversely, from social structures to investigate how they manifest experientially.

One context within which loneliness has been discussed in connection with Islamist radicalization is the public debate on girls and women who migrated, or planned to migrate, to join the Salafi jihadist group *Islamic State of Iraq and Syria* (ISIS), which ruled over its self-proclaimed caliphate from 2014 to 2019. From 2013 to 2018, there were 41,490 foreign ISIS affiliates in Syria and Iraq, 4761 of whom were women: 1023 from Western Europe (Jackson 2021, 7), up to 1396 from Eastern Europe, and 122 from the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand (Cook and Vale 2018). According to a meta-study (Dawson 2021, 2–3), the majority of Western ISIS affiliates were men from Muslim immigrant families, with an average age of 26. Women who left had an estimated average age of 21 and made up about 18 percent. While the majority of those who left were single, more than a third were married or had children. Conservative estimates suggest that at least 15 percent were converts, with the proportion of converts among women being higher. Data on the economic and educational status of those who left remain inconclusive. In the following, we introduce and discuss three such cases of (attempted) female Western ISIS affiliates: Alex from rural Washington State, Kimberly from Vancouver, and the Bethnal Green girls from London. Our article relies on media presentations of these cases. While we are aware that this method has limited empirical validity for the specific cases under study—given that media presentations are subject to various biases and stereotypes—we maintain that as narratives, these stories allow us to develop a more nuanced theoretical framework for better understanding the role that loneliness may play in processes of radicalization.

Alex. In an article published in *The New York Times*, Rukmini Callimachi (2015) portrays Alex, a 23-year-old woman who was recruited online to join ISIS but was prevented from doing so through an intervention by her grandparents, as a "lonely young American" living with her grandparents in rural Washington state. "My grandparents enjoy living in the middle of nowhere. I enjoy community … It gets lonely here," she quotes Alex. The

article describes Alex as someone who already felt lonely and isolated, and whose vulnerability was exploited by ISIS as part of their online recruitment strategy. On the one hand, they offered her a sense of belonging, meaning, and understanding; on the other, they further isolated her from her immediate environment. Her initial sense of loneliness stemmed from living with her grandparents in a rural area, the discrepancy between their social needs and hers, as well as her boredom and lack of purpose in life after dropping out of college, and subsequently working two days a week as a babysitter and as a Sunday school teacher at the weekends. As Callimachi points out, her radical online friends offered her a sense of belonging, meaning, understanding, and acknowledgement: "Her life, which had mostly seemed like a blurred series of babysitting shifts and lonely weekends roaming the mall, was now filled with encouragement and tutorials from her online friends." "She finally had something to do." At the same time, her secrecy about her online life and her conversion from Christianity to Islam isolated her from her immediate environment—"As Alex's secret grew, so did her sense of isolation"—and her online friends discouraged her from joining a mosque close by.

The article conveys the impression that Alex's initial loneliness was connected to her low-skill, part-time work and lack of social connection to peers, making her an attractive target for Islamist online recruitment. Interpreted through an Arendtian lens, the narrative points to a felt lack of agency, manifesting in a sense of not making a meaningful difference to the world, and a perceived lack of recognition in both the private and social spheres. At the same time, the article pays attention to how Alex's radicalization further exacerbated her feelings of loneliness and isolation through her secrecy and increasing detachment from her offline friends and environment. Loneliness can therefore function both as a trigger and as an effect of radicalization.

Kimberly. The second case is that of Kimberly Pullman, a 43-year-old nurse in training, with three grown-up children, who traveled to Syria in 2015 after marrying an IS fighter. She is one of the interviewees in Anne Speckhard's extensive study "ISIS in their own words" (Speckhard and Ellenberg 2020). As Speckhard explains, Kimberly had a long history of trauma, including a violent marriage to a Kuwaiti man and multiple instances of rape (International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism 2020; Speckhard 2020). Media coverage of the trial against one of her rapists (a serial rapist against whom she did not testify) left her in a suicidal state. In this vulnerable condition, her future Somali husband promised to restore her honor and appealed to her need to feel loved and needed in Syria as a nurse (Speckhard and Ellenberg 2020, 96). As Kimberly puts it in the documentary *The Return: Life After ISIS* (2021), directed by Alba Sotorra:

> Back in Canada, my children had grown, and they were now moving on with their own direction, so I found myself alone with an empty nest, and I wasn't ready for that. I was really in a terrible space and—he found me. … I got married from a distance, online. He said 'Come where you are actually loved, where you are actually needed,' because he knew that I felt like I was really not needed at that time at all.

Here, we see a form of loneliness linked to the experience of a single mother and a woman severely traumatized by sexual and domestic violence. In a world in which women and members of sexual and gender minorities are far more likely to face such violence, it would clearly be a mistake to treat these experiences as purely "personal" (see, however, Gentry and Sjoberg 2015).

Moreover, as Jill Stauffer (2018) powerfully demonstrates in her analysis of ethical loneliness, it is not only the traumatic event itself that makes victims of extreme violence such as rape feel lonely but also the individual, social, and structural failure to listen to and adequately respond to their testimonies. They thus face a double injustice: the traumatic event itself and the injustice of not being heard. In this regard, loneliness in connection with trauma is not explained by individual grievances alone; it is also shaped by the environment and structures in which the victim is embedded. First, these structures make certain groups more likely to be exposed to specific types of traumatic experiences, such as rape, and second, these environments fail to respond adequately to the experiences in question. Speckhard (2020) reports that a rape specialist discouraged Kimberly from testifying against her rapist—advice that "turned out to be less protective than hoped, as the trial received mass media coverage and Kimberly was exposed anyway, without being empowered to speak against him in court in any manner that mattered." Using Stauffer's framework, we can see how broader social structures can contribute to making the re-making of the self after extreme violence impossible. In this context, her future husband's promise to restore her purity may have felt to her (however misleadingly) like being heard. Similar considerations apply to cases of collective trauma, in which the original trauma becomes reinforced by individual, social, and political failures to properly acknowledge it and help the victims restore their sense of self and world. An example of such collective ethical loneliness might be Muslims in Western countries who are marginalized and discriminated against *and* whose grievances go unseen and unheard in societies in which Islamophobia has become normalized (Shafieioun and Haq 2023, 4). As these reflections aptly demonstrate, the way we experience loneliness depends on how we are situated within the social hierarchies that structure everyday life.

The Bethnal Green girls. This brings us to a third set of cases—women who grew up and were raised in the Muslim faith rather than converting to it in the context of their radicalization (like Alex), or earlier in life (like Kimberly, who converted in her early twenties as a single mother of three young children). One such case is that of the Bethnal Green girls from London, Khadiza Sultana, Amira Abase, and Shamima Begum, who joined ISIS together in 2015 at the age of 15 or 16. While the fate of Khadiza and Amira remains uncertain, as of 2024, Shamima was still living in a camp in Syria, having been stripped of her British citizenship.

In an article published in *The New York Times*, Katrin Brennhold (2015) offers an early portrait of the Bethnal Green girls, describing them as "praised by their teachers and admired by fellow students at Bethnal Green Academy." The article highlights two key factors explaining their radicalization: their sense of not fitting in and their desire to take control of their lives. Brennhold quotes a Twitter message posed by Amira 9 days before they left Britain, saying: "I feel like I don't belong in this era," connecting it to their

"search for religious virtue and meaning." Both factors are directly linked to their Muslim identities. Their sense of not fitting in is reinforced by growing Islamophobia (Abbas 2019; see also Bayrakli and Hafez 2019) and the double standards that Western societies apply to women. "They see Western fashions sexualizing girls from an early age, while Western feminists look at the hijab as a symbol of oppression." At the same time, the society that critiques them also offers them no real opportunities. In this regard, the decision to join ISIS may appear as an act of emancipation from both their immediate social environment and broader society (Abbas 2021, 204). Given that they migrated together, one might argue that they were not entirely lonely in the Arendtian sense, which requires the total destruction of both the public sphere—where one can appear before others as a unique self—and the private sphere as a space of meaning and recognition. However, we believe it is important to acknowledge that weaker forms of loneliness, in which the public and private spheres are not entirely lost, can still be conducive to radicalization. Even in their case, both spheres were affected in that they felt lonely both within their communities and in society at large. Overall, the article draws our attention to the fact that the loneliness experienced by these girls was not merely an individual problem rooted in personal psychological traits or living conditions, but rather connected to their status as young Muslim women in a world in which Muslims face discrimination and marginalization while being told that they have the same opportunities as everyone else. While Arendt primarily focuses on the loneliness of the masses, the cases of Kimberly and the Bethnal Green girls illustrate that while loneliness affects all of us, it is not equally distributed. Instead, it reflects and reproduces unjust power structures—a fact that Arendt herself partly accounts for in her reflections on refugees and stateless people.

Implications for studying loneliness in the context of radicalization and Arendtian critique. Critical feminist reflections on gender-specific explanations for radicalization and terrorist violence have highlighted that there is a tendency in both academic and, even more so, public discourse, first, to present women as emotionally (or personally) motivated and men as politically motivated; and second, to portray radicalized women as groomed and bereft of agency (for a critical discussion, see e.g., Gentry 2019; Friedman 2007; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Jackson 2021). From this perspective, our analysis may appear problematic, as its focus on loneliness as a driving force in women's Islamist radicalization risks falling into the same trap as much previous work.

However, the idea that loneliness is an affective phenomenon and, *therefore*, private rather than political is itself based on a simplified understanding of what affective phenomena are—namely irrational or a-rational rather than rational, private rather than political, and passive rather than active. As our analysis has shown, when connected to discrimination and marginalization or experienced in response to trauma, loneliness may very well be a political phenomenon. In response to gendered explanations of terrorist violence, feminist theorists have argued that we must move beyond the notion that women are motivated by emotions and other affective phenomena while men are driven by political beliefs and acknowledge that women can also be politically motivated (Gentry 2019). Going further, and in line with contemporary research on affectivity in general and loneliness in particular, we contend that we also need to overcome the problematic

dichotomy between affective phenomena and reason, the private and the political, and acknowledge that political motivations can be affective, and that affective phenomena—such as loneliness—can be political.

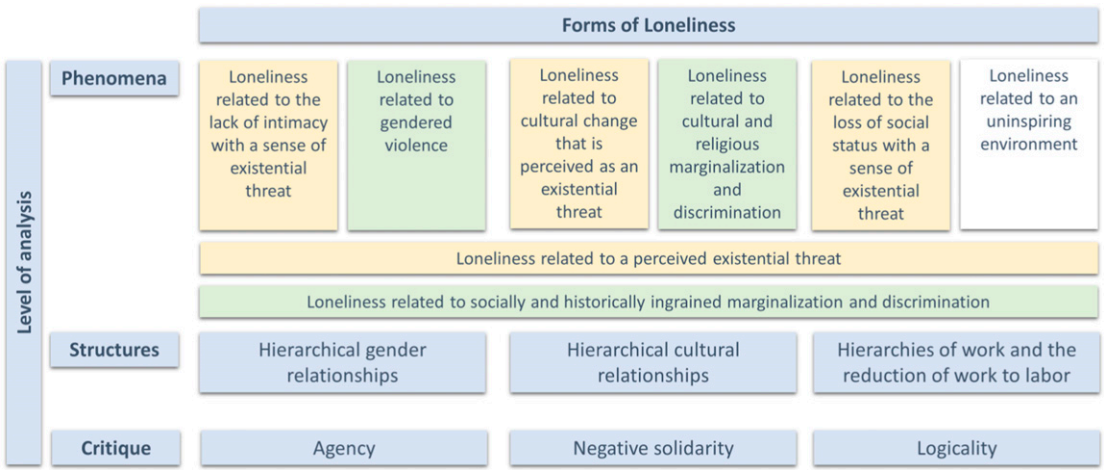
Radicalization research and prevention often focus on the question of why people *join* radical groups and how radical groups *recruit* members. What is striking about this perspective is the omission of broader society from the picture. Adding this third dimension to the picture shifts our attention to a different set of questions, namely why people *leave* society and how society *pushes* them out (Shafieioun and Haq 2023). Applied to the case of loneliness, the first perspective tends to treat loneliness as an individual phenomenon and problem, including (but not limited to) cases where it is connected to psychopathological conditions. The second perspective treats loneliness as a social and political phenomenon and problem, emphasizing how individual experiences of loneliness are rooted in (unjust and oppressive) socio-political structures.

Importantly, as in the cases of the lone-actor terrorists discussed earlier, the attempt to understand experiences of loneliness and their underlying structural underpinnings as motives for radicalization does not preclude taking a critical stance on these processes themselves, even while accounting for their ambiguity. First, as we have argued, some forms of female Islamist radicalization in Western countries can be interpreted as attempted acts of emancipation. However, clearly, a terror organization such as ISIS does not provide a public sphere; on the contrary, it is based on the violent suppression of opposing opinions. Hence, while migration to ISIS can be interpreted as an attempt to reclaim one's agency, this does not imply that this attempt will be successful. Similarly, the sense of solidarity provided by such groups is consistent with what Arendt describes as negative solidarity, as it is grounded in shared hostile antagonism toward an outgroup. Finally, one might ask whether ISIS is ideological in the Arendtian sense of the word. Intuitively, "God" (or another religious idea) might take on the role of "Nature" and "History" as the guiding principle in this context. However, as noted above, Arendt's concept of ideology is complex and culturally situated; applying it to the context of ISIS would require a careful analysis of both its ideological framework and its cultural, social, and political context.

Forms of loneliness and levels of analysis

We started our analysis with the Arendtian claim that loneliness is a breeding ground for terror and proceeded with an exploration of the role of loneliness in lone-actor and right-wing terrorism, as well as Islamist radicalization among Western girls and women. In doing so, we paid particular attention to the different forms that loneliness can take in various social settings. This approach allowed us to refine Arendt's account of loneliness in three key ways. Following Arendt, we initially conceptualized loneliness as a profoundly negative affective phenomenon in which one feels cut off from meaningful connections in both the public and private spheres. In line with Arendt, we emphasized that understanding loneliness requires a structural analysis. However, going beyond Arendt, we made three specific contributions. First, we highlighted that the social norms and desires underpinning experiences of loneliness are themselves culturally situated.

Table 1. Forms of loneliness and levels of analysis in radicalization.



Second, we pointed out that loneliness is experienced differently depending on one's social positionality, particularly one's position within different power hierarchies. Third, we argued for a broadening of the concept of loneliness to include cases in which meaningful social connections are not entirely destroyed but are still significantly diminished in both the private and public domains. In this section, we weave the different strands of our analysis together by developing a schema (Table 1) that distinguishes various layers of analysis and experiences of loneliness in the context of radicalization.

At both the phenomenological and structural levels, we can distinguish between different types of loneliness and the structural contexts in which they arise. Each type of loneliness is connected to a distinct set of social norms and structures: gender relationships, cultural relationships, and economic relationships. This list is not meant to be exhaustive; other case studies might point to additional sets of norms and structures and corresponding forms of loneliness. Gender relationships, among other things, play a role in the cases of Elliot Rodger and Chris Harper-Mercer, whose misogynistic ideology is rooted in their intimate loneliness. However, they also play a role in Kimberly's case, as she had been repeatedly exposed to gendered violence. Cultural relationships play a role, among other things, in Anders Behring Breivik's and Brenton Tarrant's experiences of loneliness in response to what they frame as "the great replacement." They also shape the loneliness and alienation experienced and described by some of the Muslim women in Western countries who joined ISIS. Finally, economic relationships play a part in both Jim David Adkisson's case and that of Alex.

Importantly, all three types of relationships—gender, cultural, and economic—are hierarchical in nature. This has implications for both the phenomenology and critique of loneliness. Starting with the former, loneliness is experienced differently depending on one's position within a given hierarchy. For instance, it makes a difference whether one feels lonely as a white man afraid of "the great replacement," like Anders Behring Breivik and Brenton Tarrant, or whether one feels lonely as a Muslim woman with a migration background exposed to marginalization and discrimination in a Western country, like Khadiza Sultana, Amira Abase, and Shamima Begum. Since both gender and culture play a role, this example also illustrates the importance of intersectionality, which remains invisible in our schema. To take another example, a person like Jim David Adkisson might be privileged according to one scale (e.g., gender) and marginalized according to another (e.g., economically); this gives rise to a distinctively gendered experience of his unemployment.

While one's social positionality shapes how one experiences loneliness (in our schema, the level of phenomenology), it also influences how loneliness is assessed (in our schema, the level of critique). This does not imply, however, that radicalization in response to loneliness that reflects experiences of marginalization and discrimination cannot be critiqued. In our analysis, we used Arendt's normative framework of agency, negative solidarity, and logicality to question some of the dynamics of radicalization in response to loneliness. Again, these tools are not meant to be exhaustive.

Overall, the schema helps us to understand both important differences and commonalities between the two sets of cases, as well as within the two sets. To begin with an important commonality, as Tahir Abbas puts it (with a focus on Britain and an interest in

radicalization in general, not just in extreme cases): "The ideological concerns that affect white working-class young men and British-born Muslim minorities relate to issues of national and local identity, social opportunity and mobility, economic marginalization, political disenfranchisement, and cultural alienation. In effect, both groups are experiencing the same kinds of issues, however complex" (Abbas 2021: 197). This observation is consistent with Arendt's claim that what is special about our time is that loneliness has become an experience that affects us all. As we have seen, an important aspect of this is the transformation of work into pure labor, which affects both white working-class men like Jim David Adkisson and Muslim minorities. This hypothesis might help us to explain why we observe radicalization in these seemingly disparate groups. In particular, it directs our attention beyond the extreme cases we have considered in our analysis to a much broader phenomenon of polarization, manifested, for instance, in the success of right-wing extremist parties in various European countries.

In terms of differences, it is striking that in all of the lone-actor cases, loneliness is predominantly linked to an overwhelming sense of threat (marked in yellow in our schema), which does not seem to be an issue in our other cases. An important difference between the two sets of cases that we have discussed is that the alienation and loneliness experienced by Muslims in European and other Western countries is, at least in part, a reaction to the prevailing discrimination and marginalization as a consequence of the normalization of Islamophobia. This brings us back to Arendt's account of loneliness as a condition linked to marginalization and discrimination. This also draws our attention to the ways in which right-wing extremist and Islamist radicalization mutually reinforce and fuel each other. Rising Islamophobia is arguably a key factor contributing to feelings of exclusion, alienation, and loneliness among Muslims. At the same time, increasing securitization—namely, the focus on Islam and Muslims as an existential threat in response to Islamist terror and terror regimes—serves as a significant breeding ground for right-wing extremism.

Conclusion

In this article, we set out to develop an empirically grounded theory of the role of loneliness in processes of radicalization. Employing the methodology of critical phenomenology, we conducted a comparative analysis of two sets of cases: lone-actor terrorists and female Western ISIS affiliates. Our analysis covered three layers. At the phenomenological level, we examined how loneliness is experienced; at the structural level, we explored how these experiences of loneliness are grounded in socio-political structures; and at the critical level, we thematized the hierarchical and oppressive nature of these structures, highlighting that, in order to fully understand and assess a person's radicalization, we need to pay attention to their socio-political positionality within these structures. Our comparative analysis revealed that while, in right-wing long-actor terrorists, the fear of one's own (individual and collective) extinction plays an important role, in the case of Islamist radicalization, experiences of discrimination and marginalization are crucial.

As stated in the introduction, rather than viewing our exploration as the endpoint, we see it as the starting point for the important task of developing a comprehensive interdisciplinary theory of the role of loneliness in radicalization. Our contribution lies in methodological, conceptual, and normative clarifications. Looking ahead, we propose the following directions for future research. First, given the limited number of our case studies, our analysis should be extended to additional cases and case types. Second, empirical qualitative research is needed to specifically investigate the role of loneliness in radicalization from a first-person perspective. Third, based on such research, a more comprehensive and refined framework should be developed to categorize different experiences of loneliness and their underlying structural conditions. Fourth, more broadly, we need a more articulate and refined understanding of the various ways in which loneliness can be political. Fifth, beyond extreme cases of extremist violence, the scope of the investigation should be expanded from cases of radicalization to cases of polarization. Sixth, while our analysis has focused on loneliness as a potential trigger for radicalization, attention should also be given to the question of whether, how, and at what cost affiliation with extremist groups alleviates members' loneliness, as well as to loneliness as a potential consequence of radicalization. Finally, the exploration of the role of loneliness and belonging in radicalization processes should be complemented by an analysis of their role in the processes of deradicalization.

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Notes

1. Here, we use the concept "affective phenomenon" as an umbrella term to encompass different kinds of affective phenomena such as emotions, moods, existential feelings, and the like. For a helpful introduction to the debate, see for example, Goldie (2012); Roberts (2003). Although we do not discuss it here, we believe that loneliness can take different forms, including that of an emotion and an existential feeling. On loneliness as an emotion, mood, or existential feeling, see for example, Tietjen and Furtak (2021); Tietjen and Tirkkonen (2023); Roberts and Krueger (2021); Motta (2021); Ratcliffe (forthcoming); Seemann (2022).
2. We acknowledge that there may be a tension between our goal of working toward an empirically grounded interdisciplinary theory of loneliness and radicalization and Arendt's skepticism toward empirical and particularly sociological accounts of totalitarianism (see e.g., Baehr 2010). While we describe and justify our methodology below, engaging with Arendt's methodological concerns is beyond the scope of our article.
3. We cannot fully engage here with the debate in critical phenomenology between those who argue for a critical turn—explicitly addressing socio-political dimensions of lived experience, such as oppression, marginalization, and power—and those who maintain that phenomenology already provides a rigorous methodology for these issues (Aldea et al., 2022; Zahavi and Loidolt 2022). However, to understand loneliness in a contemporary context rather than as a purely philosophical concept, we argue that new tools, informed by critical and interdisciplinary perspectives, are essential to capture the socio-political conditions that shape this phenomenon.
4. For Arendt, the emergence of loneliness is conditioned by several structural factors. These include the historical, economic, and political developments she outlines, such as European colonialism, the political emancipation of the European bourgeoisie, the rapid increase in refugees after World War I, and the failure of Western democracies to uphold universal human rights. Together, these factors shape the broader context in which loneliness arises, as discussed throughout *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Here, however, we focus on the aspects most relevant to our later analysis of radicalization.

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