Abstract

Research on alt-right communities focuses on indoctrination strategies that lead to radicalization, but there is little attention paid to *de*radicalization as a cultural and civil process. Scholars of radicalization provide an institutional and political account of social learning and identity formation, conceptualizing radicalization online as a "pipeline," with individuals recruited into "filter bubbles" and trapped in "echo chambers." The much smaller literature on deradicalization, in contrast, pays less attention to cultural contexts, relying instead on psychological and criminological frames to account for why individuals leave extremist groups. We know comparatively little about the cultural and civil contexts of deradicalization. This research offers a first attempt to describe this context in sociological detail, using narrative methods to analyze 29 accounts of deradicalization posted to social media between 2019 and 2025. The cultural codes and civil frameworks that former extremists use to account for their exit from right-wing communities resemble the structure of awakening narratives, a sub-type of narrative that describe moments of political, religious, or spiritual revelation. In fact, many deradicalization narratives rely on religious language and cite religious belief as a fundamental reason for deradicalization. From the perspective of current policy efforts in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), this insight also suggests there is civil potential in building a fuller public understanding of deradicalization to counter alt-right extremism.

Undoing the Pipeline: Analyzing Narratives of Deradicalization From Extremist Alt-Right Communities in the United States

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Introduction

The election and subsequent re-election of Barack Obama to the presidency in the United States signaled significant progressive momentum for many. Though Obama's politics skewed more center-leaning than many Democrats would have liked, the symbol of an African-American mixed-racial man in the highest position of power in the United States was enough to indicate a major shift of the status quo. While this progressive momentum was playing out in the civil sphere, a reactionary conservative movement was growing that would eventually culminate in the election of a man who espoused alt-right talking points and turned expectations of political norms on their head. 2016 was a major shift for United States politics, as cultural commentators began to fully realize the allure of right-wing populism, social media's role in election outcomes, and just how powerful a "fringe ideology" could become. Looking back on the Obama era reveals that civil society might not have been as unified around a progressive cultural surge as some moderate Democrats claimed. Conservative discourses around the Obama presidency reveal the beginnings of what would become a prominent movement advocating for social norms and policies previously considered to be unacceptable.

This paper assumes that alt-right ideology and Trumpism is beyond the norm of "traditional" United States politics. In a seminal sociological paper on the 2016 election, Jeffrey C. Alexander (2018) analyzes the histories of progressive "frontlash" and conservative "backlash" movements that have come to power at different cultural moments. He sees the rise of alt-right ideology and Trumpism as being directly reactionary to the perceived "frontlash" of the Obama administration, in which white conservatives felt like their voices were being neglected in the sphere of government (6). Fruitful scholarship on the alt-right has considered their roots in white Christian nationalism (Gorski and Perry 2022), experiences with economic

inequality (Hochschild 2016, 2024), their sacred symbols (Bittner 2025), and their usage of media as a means of recruitment (Jacobs and Townsley 2014). I explore these deep meanings of alt-right beliefs, as well as empirical literature on deradicalization and radicalization in Chapter 2.

Amidst the chaos of two Trump regimes, there has been a clear uptick in threats related to right-wing extremist violence in the United States that correlates with his rise to power. According to Hochschild (2024), "between 2015 and 2020, 405 attacks and thwarted plots by domestic extremists were reported, more than double the number in the previous decade, two-thirds by white supremacist and far-right extremists" (189). This trend continued into 2021, as Trump's claim that the 2020 election was stolen inspired the infamous attack on the United States Capitol on January 6th, 2021. A 2024 CSIS report analyzing 30 years of domestic terrorism data stated that "the number of domestic terrorist attacks and plots against government targets motivated by partisan political beliefs in the past five years is nearly triple the number of such incidents in the previous 25 years combined."[1] Radicalization is a pressing social problem, and could be addressed by considering the possibilities of deradicalization.

Deradicalization describes the physical, mental, and social processes of exiting from an extremist group. Deradicalization studies are primarily situated outside of the realm of sociology, but the framework of the sociological discipline is useful in conceptualizing how social and cultural factors affect the way deradicalization experiences are played out publicly. Max Weber, cited in Mast and Alexander (2018), articulates that "sociology is and should be concerned with the subjective meaning of action, and the act of 'verstehen'— empathetic understanding—might

[1] Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS). 2024. "The Rising Threat of Anti-Government Domestic Terrorism: What the Data Tells Us." Accessed April 26, 2026. https://www.csis.org/analysis/rising-threat-anti-government-domestic-terrorism-what-data-tells-us#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20domestic%20terrorist,terrorists%20with%20opposing%20political%20views

allow for sociological 'imaginative participation' in the actions of others who live in differing circumstances or different times" (27). With this in mind, I attempt to move away from depicting radicalized members of the alt right as agents of social oppression and politically "regressive," and instead honor the ways they are reacting to perceived or experienced material and cultural struggles. I am indebted to the scholars who have engaged in this work before me, who bravely scale the "empathy walls" that politically divide the United States (Hochschild 2018, 2024).

I understand the social world to be made up of codes, deep binaries, moral frameworks, and narratives that influence social action directly. This paper explores how people make sense of their deradicalization experiences through narrative. More than that, this paper is a direct call for more public engagement with the concept of deradicalization. Many people have experienced deradicalization, but the term has not entered into public consciousness. Much scholarship has been devoted to the study of radicalization, but there is a considerable gap in the literature in terms of deradicalization. This thesis seeks to call for more research on deradicalization, examines the existing scholarship on the subject, and analyzes deradicalization narratives that are currently circulating around social media platforms. It offers a comprehensive review of the scholarship done so far, as well as proposes concrete measures to increase the amount of public discourse surrounding deradicalization. People experience deradicalization, but having the terminology to explain and label them offers the possibility of new forms of solidarity and mobilization.

Looking at deradicalization also necessitates an understanding of the process of radicalization. I synthesize the prominent scholarly understandings of how radicalization works, as well as how it operates on online platforms. Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) expert Daniel Koehler also employs this method for understanding deradicalization, and much of my

understanding about radicalization is influenced by his scholarship.[2] A limitation of both deradicalization and radicalization studies, though, is that they are primarily situated in the disciplines of criminology and psychology, and I argue for the advantages of a wider sociological lens. Chapter 2 explores this existing empirical literature on deradicalization. I use Daniel Koehler's book titled *Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism* (2016)*,* which offers an in-depth exploration of the current landscape of deradicalization policy efforts across multiple countries, a history of deradicalization, and ethical concerns surrounding deradicalization programs.

To bring deradicalization studies into sociology, this thesis explores the cultural codes used in narratives of deradicalization from extremist alt-right groups in the United States posted to social media platforms. Social media platforms have primarily been studied as drivers of radicalization, and scholarly work has situated itself around the unique social circumstances that might impel someone to seek out extremist content online (Bryant 2020, Koehler 2014). This work is extremely useful for theorizing a vital part of political discourse in the context of online space, but has neglected to produce a unified body of scholarship on exit processes from extremist groups. Further scholarship on deradicalization could provide policymakers with the frameworks necessary to propose policies that would effectively address social issues like radicalization. A wider perspective from cultural sociology reveals the importance of religious ideas and beliefs when discussing how people make sense of their political identities, and acknowledging the fact that people are far more than rational political actors.

[2] Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) work centers on tactics to push back against the rise of extremism, using "prevention, repression, and intervention" across macro-social, meso-social, and micro-social levels of society (Koehler 2016:112). Repressive tools usually include state or governmental initiatives to punish offending individuals or groups. Preventative measures are put in place to prevent extremism from emerging in the first place, such as making positive interventions into communities that may be vulnerable to being drawn into extremism. Finally, examples of intervention programs include those that "target the family or social environment of radicalizing or radicalized individuals to stop or slow down their commitment and involvement in terrorism and extremism" (Koehler 2016:115).

I employ three theoretical perspectives to support my understanding of deradicalization, further explored in Chapter 1. The first is narrative studies in cultural sociology. Drawing on Alexander (2003) and Jacobs (1996), I focus on how narratives circulate through the public sphere, becoming collective stories that social actors draw on to make sense of their social lives in context. I then specify the *type* of collective narrative deradicalization narratives resemble, namely awakening narratives. This term is from Thomas DeGloma's research (2014), which describes how people understand their experience of changing their political perspective as a kind of awakening to "truth." This idea resonates strongly with the deradicalization narratives I study. DeGloma provides important insights on the formal tropes that narratives follow as well as arguing for the sociological significance of narrative. I extend DeGloma's insight by explicating a specific characteristic of awakening narratives — that they draw on religious language — to deepen my understanding of the cultural discourses people use to discuss their own deradicalization experiences.

Chapter 3 is an in-depth case study of a content creator on social media, Caleb Cain, who has been outspoken about his own journey with both radicalization and deradicalization. The case study is a detailed singular example that helps to frame the rest of my research. This creator has been a guest on numerous podcasts, has been interviewed by the New York Times, and has been the subject of numerous news articles. Using a specific case study to explain what deradicalization looks like is vital to understanding deradicalization as a whole, and this particular narrative has the added benefit of being relayed in articles, YouTube videos, and podcast episodes, allowing the creator to settle on a unified understanding of his radicalization and deradicalization experiences. This case study will also be compared to the other narratives I collected in this study.

Chapter 4 describes my methods for collecting and analyzing deradicalization narratives, and presents significant findings. I collected 29 narratives of deradicalization on social media in order to understand the cultural stories people draw from when they explain their experiences. These narratives were collected from Spotify, Apple Podcasts, TikTok, and YouTube. This data was converted into transcripts that were then analyzed. I coded the data using prominent themes I identified within and across deradicalization narratives. Next, I give an overview of my findings, presenting the most common reasons for deradicalization that narrators cited. These findings are analyzed in depth in Chapters 5 through 8.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 utilize the three theoretical pillars discussed in Chapter 1 to analyze these narratives of deradicalization. Chapter 5 explores how individuals draw on a shared timeline of events to formulate their narratives of deradicalization. I reconstruct this timeline hermeneutically, and analyze the contingencies in how specific narrators used this framework. Additionally, I examine the different narrative genres that narrators use to form their stories. I hone in my analysis of narratives more precisely in Chapter 6, which compares deradicalization narratives to narratives of awakening. Thomas DeGloma articulates that awakening narratives describe significant realizations that change how an individual sees and interacts with themselves and the world. Awakenings can be sexual, spiritual, religious, or political, but all of these diverse experiences are described using similar language. Finally, Chapter 7 pulls out an important thread of both deradicalization and awakening narratives: that they use the language of religion as a way to explain the spiritual aspects of having one's worldview completely changed. I also note that religious values can initiate deradicalization experiences, as they can provide strong moral frameworks for interacting with the world that can be more salient than extremism. In the next chapter, I turn more explicitly to these mechanisms of deradicalization.

Chapter 8 further discusses my findings and their relationship to the three theoretical pillars, and offers potential policy solutions that could help address the problems associated with radicalization and deradicalization. Since there is such limited scholarship on deradicalization, an important first step is to attempt to popularize the term so individuals can put a name to their experiences of leaving extremist alt-right groups. I believe that one of the reasons there is such little scholarship and information about deradicalization is that the term has not yet been disseminated into popular culture. Public discourse is a vital arena for garnering more attention to different social phenomena, thus increasing the likelihood that policymakers will address the problem of online radicalization. Before this, though, we must turn to the theoretical perspectives I operationalized to study these public narratives of deradicalization.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

The Strong Program

The strong program approach to sociology centers culture as a relatively autonomous variable, imbued with the capacity to create resonant meanings that have real impact in the world. Mainstream sociology usually treats culture as a force created by structural power, dependent on social structures like economic power and capital. The strong program perspective has roots in Parsonian functionalism, which conceives of society as being structured by a complex cultural "depth" that takes the form of an arbitrary surface. The work of sociologists is to excavate this deep cultural meaning. However, the strong program breaks from this tradition in significant ways, as Parsons did not account for the ways in which culture structures are contested by social actors. He treated culture as being too autonomous and solidarizing, when in reality, meanings are constantly being renegotiated and changed. To account for these flaws, the strong program draws from a plethora of other analytic traditions, such as literary theory, anthropology, semiotics, and social psychology.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz was a student of Parsons who was an outspoken critic of functionalism. In his seminal work, "Ideology as a Cultural System" (1973), he breaks down the idea of "ideology," describing that ideologies are "maps of problematic social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience" (220). He points out that it is more analytically fruitful to avoid evaluating ideologies in moral terms, and instead consider them as cultural schemas that people use to make meaningful sense of the world. Sociologists must commit to considering ideologies — and thus, cultural meanings — aesthetically. Geertz's "Ideology as a Cultural System" was one of the first examples of how to read culture autonomously. Though

these contributions made great strides in terms of pushing the study of culture in the right direction, Geertz's main body of work mostly remains at the level of description rather than theorizing or attending to causality. "Ideology as a Cultural System" is a notable exception, but still is not able to address the causality of how cultural meanings become solidified in public discourse. To address this gap, we must turn to the guiding tenets of the strong program.

A strong program approach to sociology is made up of three central tenets: recognizing the autonomy of culture from other social structures, hermeneutically reconstructing texts, and accounting for the causality of culture within the agency of social actors (Alexander 2003:13-14). Recognizing cultural autonomy means treating culture as an independent variable, one that has the capacity to *influence* structures of power, rather than a passive force that is acted upon *by* power. A "weak program" of sociology treats culture as a "feeble and ambivalent variable" (Alexander 2003:13). Examples in sociological literature would be studies that focus on the economic environments in which culture is "manufactured" (Peterson and Berger 1975), theoretical assertions that culture is a "toolkit" that is used by rational actors (Swidler 1986), or scholarship devoted to the idea that culture's main role is to naturalize the social order (Bourdieu 1990).

The strong program reads culture as a social "text," which requires a commitment to "thick description of the codes, narratives, and symbols that create the textured webs of social meaning" (Alexander 2003:13). Thick description is a concept from Geertz's (1973) seminal paper of the same name, which argues that the goal of ethnography should be "sorting out the structures of signification" to draw conclusions about cultural meanings that look beyond the surface (9). I attempt to thickly describe both the overarching collective narratives that

deradicalized individuals draw from to tell their stories, and the individual narratives that both draw on these frameworks, and resist and rework them.

Finally, accounting for the causality of cultural meanings means taking a more micro-sociological approach to analyze how cultural meanings take form within interactions. Alexander gives concrete steps on how to do this in his 2004 paper, "Cultural pragmatics: Social performance between ritual and strategy." He analyzes how culture is made real in the world by using a dramaturgical lens to study performances of meaning. Performances are made possible by the social actors, who put cultural meanings into practice (Alexander 2004:530). Their goal is to make the distinction between themselves (the actor) and audience disappear, so that the audience members psychologically identify with them. Other important aspects of social performances include audience members, who are crucial negotiators of performative outcomes (Taylor 2022:69); the means of symbolic production, which are the material, iconic representations of cultural meaning; mise-en-scène, defined as the gestures that choreograph a performance; social power, which describes the material and cultural resources performers are able to access; and background representations, which are the "patterns of signifiers whose referents are the social, physical, natural, and cosmological worlds within which actors and audiences live" (Alexander 2004:530). My primary focus in this paper is how the social actors themselves make meaning real by performing deradicalization narratives and the background representations they are drawing from to do so.

Narratives

In this paper, I examine various personal narratives of individuals who claim to have experienced a political deradicalization process. An analysis of narratives is a useful to describe

sociological phenomena, since it helps identify the underlying structures that shape the stories people tell. These stories "involve conceptions of truth that rely and take shape around the worldview—the beliefs, values, perceptions, ideas, feelings, and moral evaluations—of the community to which one belongs" (DeGloma 2014:3). In other words, narratives can reveal the shared cultural codes that are commonly used to explain complicated moral questions within a community. This thesis does not assess how people make empirical claims about the causes and consequences of being deradicalized, but rather explores how people make sense of their deradicalization experiences through narrative.

In this sample, the narratives of focus are personal and individual. Actors detail their own experiences being deradicalized, often drawing from their life histories to construct the context behind their story. However, it's problematic to make a complete distinction between personal and collective narratives, as they often work in conversation with one another; former extremists may draw from the way that popular narratives of deradicalization are depicted to construct their own. These popular deradicalization narratives become collective representations for social actors to draw from. Systems of collective representations "symboliz[e] actors' and audiences' world," and provide narratives and codes that "employ a wide range of rhetorical devices, [...] to configure social and emotional life in compelling and coherent ways" (Alexander 2004:530). In other words, narratives of deradicalization influence one another, but individual narratives also draw from the repertoire of cultural stories that define the moral values of groups as a whole. In Chapter 5, I attempt to identify what a collective narrative of deradicalization looks like, as well as the cultural codes that are often utilized in deradicalization narratives.

Awakening Narratives

DeGloma studies awakening narratives, which he defines as "stories people tell about having once been contained in a world of darkness and ignorance and subsequently awakening to an enlightened understanding of their experiences and situations" (2014:2). Deradicalization narratives share this quality. When people deradicalize from extremist groups, their cognitive process involves both a rejection of the values and norms of extremist groups, and an adoption of an entirely new worldview. DeGloma examines stories of sexual awakenings, political awakenings, and religious awakenings, and I argue that deradicalization can be categorized in the realm of "political awakenings." Political awakeners "account for their personal political blindness or ignorance as 'false consciousness' caused by political power relations" and make sense of their newly discovered truth as an "impetus to social conflict and change" (DeGloma 2014:52). To perform awakening narratives, social actors pull from a complex repertoire of metaphors, emotions, and social rituals.

Narrators who articulated stories of awakening drew from specific narrative tropes common to this genre. These tropes are binaristic, and morally separate the life stages of narrators during different stages of awakening. A prominent cultural example is a stanza from the popular Christian song "Amazing Grace," which reads: "I once was lost, but now am found,/Was blind, but now I see," which mentions two prominent tropes (DeGloma 2014:1). The only binary that this song doesn't mention, but is prominent within the construction of awakenings, is "asleep/awake." The "sleeping" stage involves "intense personal isolation," while the waking stage "typically requires intersubjective cooperation with others" (DeGloma 2014:16). The second is "darkness/light," which connotes the low, negative part of someone's life before they start living their purified truth. The final binary is "lost/found," which denotes the contrasting

experiences of "cognitive alienation (a painful sociomental distance from one's former autobiographical community)" and cognitive solidarity (a sociomental nearness to a newfound community)" (DeGloma 2014:17). To further demarcate these boundaries, narrators also ascribe different emotions to each stage in the process of awakening.

Awakening narrators perform "polarized emotion codes" that help audiences understand the clear differences between the pre-awakening selves, who are characterized by "betrayal, hurt, anger, and fear," and their post-awakening selves, who embody "hope, salvation, pride, and love" (DeGloma 2014:18). The pre- and post-awakening selves are clearly distinct, and awakeners look back on their past extremist selves with anger, pity, or shame. This sense of division stems from the way that awakeners "inflate the moral and cultural distance between their past and present selves in order to undermine and reject their former way of being in the world" (DeGloma 2014:132). These narrators use emotion to emphasize the psychological distance between their past and present selves.

Disillusionment is a key affective stance when considering the mechanisms of the deradicalization process. DeGloma articulates that awakening narrators "reject a previously discovered worldview" by including "recantations, retractions, reconversions" that "involve vocabularies of disillusionment or disenchantment" (2014:87). These narrators look back on their previous belief systems with a new sense of understanding, and articulate specific moments in which the "falsity" of their previous belief system started to be tentatively exposed. It is sometimes unclear whether or not these narrators *actually* experienced disillusionment while engaged in their previous worldview, but a crucial stage of awakening narratives involves performing this perceived disillusionment of a previous self.

The actual moment of awakening is also choreographed with specific emotion codes. During this process, the awakener is "temporarily shocked, stunned, or overwhelmed with a new life-changing awareness of 'truth'" (DeGloma 2014:109). DeGloma describes this shock as transcendent and transformative, a characterization that I argue is more relevant to religious awakenings than political ones. Narratives of political deradicalization often describe the "awakening movement" as being intensely uncomfortable, as extremists have to sit with the fact that not only was their entire worldview misguided, but that they were engaging in behavior that was actively causing harm to others. Religious awakeners may feel more inclined to see their past selves as living in a state of ignorance to the "truth," but that ignorance was primarily only causing harm to them. These distinctions between religious and political awakenings are relatively minor, as any sort of awakening narrative draws from religious elements to explore the spiritual dimension of being "awakened."

Religious Studies

Since awakening narratives are considered to be "sacred" spiritual experiences, it is worth examining the religious frameworks that make up these kinds of narratives. I understand religion as a practice used to "intensify what we do when we name authority, practice interactions, and interpret life itself" (Lofton 2017:13). Lofton (2017) points out that religion is a cultural structure that organizes other social structures and influences the world. Additionally, Braunstein, Kucinskas, Streensland, and Winchester (2026; forthcoming) point out that American religion has become "unbundled," as the boundaries of religion become increasingly porous. Religion provides communities with "goods" like "communal belonging, moral guidance, shared identity, collective ritual, access to the sacred, individual purpose, and more" (Braunstein, Kucinskas, Streensland, and Winchester 2026:2). These goods are now more widely available to be deployed

outside of organized religion, making religion increasingly salient within political and educational spaces, despite declining membership in organized religious groups. The object of focus in this study is political narratives, necessitating an understanding of religion as it relates to politics.

Sociologist Robert Bellah draws on Rousseau's idea of "civil religion" to demonstrate the blurred boundaries between religion and politics. According to Bellah, civil religion describes the ways in which the political realm has a religious dimension that has shaped American public life in spite of the popular notion that religion is a private, individual practice (Bellah 1967: 3-4). Bellah analyzes presidential speeches that make references to God or the church to make his argument, noting that it is socially acceptable to make these references despite there being a formal separation between church and state. Presidents *perform* civil religion in order to signal their understanding of crucial American symbols and values to audiences, fostering a sense of solidarity. I use Bellah's framework to describe the ways in which deradicalized individuals draw on sacralized versions of civil religion to construct their narratives. Despite these contributions, Bellah remains overly positive about the potential of civil religion as a solidarizing force, ignoring the historical ways in which religion has done harm to marginalized groups and served as a consistent point of contention in United States politics.

Philip Gorski mitigates this flaw of optimism by remaining deeply committed to the possibilities of civic repair through expressions of civil religion, while also acknowledging the ways in which Christianity in particular has been used as means to promote a sacred version of white nationalism. Gorski asserts that civil religion "provides a framework for connecting past and future, and for conjoining sacred and secular" (2017:36). Radical secularists would insist that civic and civil life should be entirely free from religion and religious language, despite the fact

that our "deepest convictions are embedded in religious language—even if we ourselves happen to be secularists" (Gorski 2017:17). In contrast to civil religion, religious nationalism has combined apocalyptic politics and the conquest narrative to construct a version of religion that is in line with American exceptionalism, an ideology that has been used to justify colonialism, racism, and imperialism (Gorski 2017:19).

White Christian nationalism has arisen as a prominent collective representation in conservative political discourse. Gorski and Perry's book *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (2022) examines the narrative construction of white Christian nationalism by looking into its history in American individualism and colonization, and its present secular iteration expressed in the Trump regime. Many narrators in this study had experiences of radicalization in the context of high-control Christian nationalist communities; I use Gorski and Perry's work to help paint a picture of the deep meanings inscribed within this framework. Religion has historically been used to both marginalize and bring communities together in the United States, and it operates as a shared language that actors add to their repertoire when they tell their stories. This shared language extends to how individuals and groups make sense of their civic identities.

In a study of two civic activist groups with ties to religion, Ruth Braunstein offers a comprehensive look at the ways in which organized religion and religious ideas influence political discourse. Though the groups she analyzes operated on opposite sides of the political spectrum, she found that both of them "spoke in a broadly shared religious language that imbued active citizenship and American democracy itself with sacred significance" (Braunstein 2017:53). Civic engagement can be constructed both as a spiritual call to action, and a way to fulfill an end of "America's sacred compact with God" (Braunstein 2017:54). Following

Durkheim's ethos that modernity is not disenchanted and devoid of meaning, and instead structured by sacred rituals that reaffirm communal bonds, I seek to analyze the ways in which political identity is formulated by spiritual, as well as rational, elements. While political identity is often conceived of in rational terms, such as being the product of objective experiences and information, in line with this literature in cultural sociology, I contend that seemingly secular political events, such as inauguration ceremonies and rallies can be read as sacralized rituals that foster a solidarizing sense of collective identity.

I argue that it is worth pushing against the conservative/religious and progressive/secular binary that has become so solidified in public discourse. Though Gorski and Perry unearth the ways in which white Christian nationalism has been insidiously weaponized as a means of exclusion, they also remain committed to the idea that "There is no shortage of resources in American Christianity that might help chart the way forward" (2022:104). I carry this sentiment forward within my work, recognizing that religious narratives have become encoded within civic discourse. These contributions are often expressed in subtle ways, making it difficult to trace the lineages of civic values to their religious origins. A large part of the work of cultural sociologists is to extricate these meanings that disguise themselves as "common sense." Additionally, overt political alignment with religious institutions can have massive impact. Churches have played a vital role in progressive movements, such as the role of the Black church in the struggle for civil rights (Morris 1986). Organized religion should not be blithely dismissed as regressive or irrational, and scholars must pay more critical attention to the ways in which secular and sacred life intersect.

I use these three theoretical perspectives to tell an analytical story about deradicalization narratives from right-wing extremist groups in the contemporary United States. I start out by

demonstrating the ways in which narrative, as a broad theoretical category, functions both as a theoretical lens for analysis and also can be excavated as a broader "culture structure" that is used by social actors to tell public stories. I hermeneutically reconstruct an "ideal type" of the deradicalization narrative timeline that narrators partially or wholly draw from, recognizing that there is an existing discourse around deradicalization narratives.[3] This means that narrators conform to empirical structures of both temporality and genre. I identify that these narratives contain similar elements to awakening narratives, and examine the ways in which they depart from this structure. Finally, I end with pulling out a specific characteristic of awakening narratives: that they are often explicitly or implicitly religious, analyzing what that could mean for how deradicalization is considered in the public sphere. Before this, though, we must turn to the empirical literature on radicalization and deradicalization to recognize the existing scholarship on this phenomenon, which is often grounded in the disciplines of psychology and criminology.

[3] Sociologist Max Weber (1949) constructed the concept of "ideal types" to refer to "'unified analytical constructs' that are 'formed by the one-sided accentuation of certain points of view' so as to sharpen their contrasts with each other (Gorski 2017:7). Philip Gorski describes ideal types as "useful exaggerations," that turn "shades of gray into black and white," which makes it "easier for us to see real contrasts" (2017:7).

Chapter 2: Radicalization and Deradicalization

It is necessary to be specific about the academic and popular understandings of radicalization and deradicalization, as this influences how narratives are shaped in the public sphere. Since my focus is on alt-right radicalization, I begin this chapter by investigating the sacred meanings of the conservative right and their alt-right contemporaries, which draw from historical narratives of America as a racially homogenous, male-dominated, global imperial power that returns to "traditional," and "natural" visions of social roles. These views play out in the dominant media ecosystem of the conservative right, and have contributed to sowing the seeds of political polarization over the years. Next, I review the empirical literature on radicalization and deradicalization, which primarily exist in discourses of psychology and criminology. I end by extending those frameworks to understand radicalization and deradicalization in cultural sociological terms, arguing that understanding deradicalization narratively is an effective way to increase public awareness about this civil pathway out of extremism.

The Contemporary Conservative Right

The term "conservative right" is deliberately broad, encompassing everything from the traditionalist Christian right to online alt-right meme warriors. Narrators in this sample described their former selves as alt-righters, Neo-Nazis, and white Christian nationalists. All of these different labels have their own sacred meanings, but can be conceptualized under the broad umbrella of the conservative right. A large portion of this population favors Donald Trump's candidacy, as he "perform[s] powerful cultural codes that privileged whiteness, Christianity, masculinity, and heterosexuality, as well as symbols of economic and military might" (Mast and

Alexander 2018:7). Progressives code these ideas as profane, creating a public battle across the civil sphere to either sacralize or profane these values. In this section, I hermeneutically reconstruct the sacred meanings, symbols, values, and spaces used by the conservative right, such as the nostalgia narrative, masculinity, whiteness, the MAGA hat, and the far-right media sphere. White Christian nationalism is another important part of the conservative right, discussed further in Chapter 7.

Francesca Polletta and Jessica Callahan analyze media and news narratives that contributed to Trump's rise in 2016. They critique sociologist Arlie Hochschild's idea of a "deep story," which describes "the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols" and is informed by one's life experiences (Polletta and Callahan, in Mast and Alexander 2018:135). Instead, they argue that deep stories are not grounded in life experiences, but are more rooted "in the shared stories of the group" (Polletta and Callahan, in Mast and Alexander 2018:65). In this case, the performed story is a "nostalgia narrative," which sacralizes an imagined past that is preferable to the present. Trump's slogan, "Make America Great Again" is itself a nostalgia narrative, first proclaimed by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. Trump is referencing the glorified conservative wave of the 80s, as well as a broader mythical, idealized American past. In both of these imagined societies, white men remain dominant while women and people of color are excluded from public life.

The conservative right sacralizes and performs masculinity in their politics. Trump himself appeals to the notion that America as a nation has become feminized, necessitating a return to dominant forms of masculinity that deploy power and violence as a means to an end. As women gain more access to public life, men feel like they are losing their dominant status. Because of this dynamic, Trump monopolized "a wave of unease, humiliation and anger at the

erosion of masculine power and patriarchal authority" in his campaign to win (Friedland, in Mast and Alexander 2018:125). Trump's appeals to masculinity are also tied to his performance of American nationalism and imperialism, as the "narrative of the American male body became a metaphor for the nation in its relation to the world" (Mast, in Mast and Alexander 2018:8). The conservative right argues that men should be dominant interpersonally (Trump has allegations of sexual misconduct), and that the masculinized American nation should be dominant globally, justifying militarized imperialism that uniquely impacts countries with marginalized populations.

Another aspect central to the conservative right is an appeal to whiteness as a sacred vision of the "ideal American" that is pitted against a polluted construction of a racialized "Other." This is made apparent through Trump's performance of nationalism, who has come to "symbolize putting America first by binding himself to the "us vs. them" binary more than any other Republican candidate" (Norton, in Mast and Alexander 2018:45). He has enacted xenophobic policy measures, such as travel bans against Muslim countries and the construction of walls around the southern border to keep Mexican immigrants out of the United States. This is all predicated on the basis of intense fear of "non-white and non-Christian immigrants" changing the "country's cultural landscape beyond recognition" (Friedland, in Mast and Alexander 2018:118). The contemporary conservative right has had intense reactions to any attempts to mitigate the difference in power between white, heterosexual, cisgender men and people with marginalized identities.

One of the sacred symbols that conservative right uses to foster solidarity is the red hat sold by Trump emblazoned with white letters that spell out the phrase "Make America Great Again." This symbol is highly divisive among Americans, as people hostile to Trump's politics view it as representative of a polluted era in American history. Bittner (2025) argues that the hat

functions as an "iconic extension" of Trump and Trumpism, allowing audiences to "engage in memetic acts and reinforce iconic power through symbolic reproduction" (351). Since the hat is such a profane symbol in the eyes of many Americans, wearing it in public often warrants confrontations that may turn physically and verbally violent. Stories of these confrontations are extensively reported on by the conservative media ecosystem, which "ultimately contribute to conservative audience's perceived victimhood and exclusion from public life" (Bittner 2025:361). The conservative right plays with competing interpretations of themselves as being culturally dominant while simultaneously being unfairly persecuted for their beliefs. These narratives of imagined victimhood are continuously played out in the conservative media sphere.

The conservative right has had a unique monopoly over the media space for decades, beginning with the 1987 abolition of the Fairness Doctrine, which encouraged "a proliferation of opinion-based media formats," paving the way for a conservative media establishment to emerge (Jacobs and Townsley 2014:244). Jacobs and Townsley (2014) argue that the events of 9/11 permanently shaped conservative media, as pundits "openly abandoned traditional journalistic stances of detachment and neutrality," "refined and purified their partisan positions," and "engaged in a relentless partisan critique of the mainstream media" (241). September 11th was a permanent rupture in the arc of American history, which created an avenue for the conservative right to express their views on potential military action in Iraq (Jacobs and Townsley 2014:242). In particular, Jacobs and Townsley explore the live television show *Hannity & Colmes,* which featured political debates between Sean Hannity, a conservative, and Alan Colmes, a liberal. This show helped develop a "more polarizing, partisan, and morally charged opinion" that was spurred by "the establishment of a 'conservative media establishment,' and the general blurring of boundaries between news and entertainment" (Jacobs and Townsley 2014:252).

This oppositional formulation of political discourse has been exacerbated by the rise of social media as a primary means that Americans access news. Social media encourages the repackaging of complex information into easily digestible, sensationalized snippets of news that are easily circulated. The polarizing discourse of political news media has extended beyond the journalistic ecosystem into the minds of Americans, contributing to the social problem of radicalization.

Radicalization and Deradicalization

Studies indicate that the number of "far-right terrorist attacks, attempted attacks and plots and conspiracies from 2017-2022 represent by far the highest number of such incidents in the United States in any equivalent time span in the past 30 years."[4] Because of this notable increase, discourse around the impact of radicalization on this violence has become more prominent. Radicalization describes a "process of individual depluralization of political concepts and values (e.g. justice, freedom, honor, violence, democracy)" toward an ideology (Koehler 2016:125). In other words, radicalization encourages extremist views toward political progress that often advocates for the necessity of violence to fight against political opponents. Depluralization strips an individual of their identity categories that position the individual outside of extremism and leaves them isolated within a community made up solely of people who agree with their beliefs.

The concept of *de*radicalization describes "a process of individual or collective cognitive change from criminal, radical, or extremist identities to a non criminal or moderate psychological state" (Koehler 2016:2). This term spans multiple academic disciplines, including sociology, criminology, psychology, and politics. Since the field of deradicalization studies is relatively

[4] Anti-Defamation League (ADL). 2023. "Right-Wing Extremist Terrorism in the United States." Accessed April 27, 2026. https://www.adl.org/resources/report/right-wing-extremist-terrorism-united-states#:~:text=right%2Dwing%20extremists.-,Right%2DWing%20Terrorism%2C%202017%2D2022:%20Topping%20the%20Charts,available%20in%20the%20public%20record.

new, much of the literature surrounding it has been informed by adjacent scholarly work on leaving New Religious Movements, desisting from crime, role change, Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR), and debiasing (Koehler 2016:31). This conceptualization of deradicalization has conflicting implications for the field. Firstly, a multi-disciplinary approach can be particularly useful, as it brings together expert perspectives that each contribute crucial new ways of understanding deradicalization. However, this can also mean that scholars of deradicalization have yet to develop a unified understanding of the concept, that data reporting is still a patchwork, and the policy space is in formation.

The field of deradicalization studies would benefit from a more solidified conceptual framework and clear definitions of key concepts, and specifically from a sociological sensibility that complements a focus on "lone wolf" extremists with a collective, cultural account of both radicalization and deradicalization.[5] This fragmentation has led to competing narratives of these civic processes that influence how deradicalized individuals understand their own experiences. What kinds of narratives around radicalization and deradicalization exist in the public sphere?

The Psychological Model of Radicalization and Deradicalization

Radicalization has been studied by psychologists as a complex cognitive process, analyzing the ways in which the decision to enter an extremist groups is negotiated by socio-psychological push and pull factors (Koehler 2016), ideological messages in everyday life (Simi and Futrell 2010), and the impact of constant exposure to extremist messages circulating on the internet (Winter et al 2020). Some scholars (see Horgan 2008, cited in Koehler 2016),

[5] Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS). 2024. "The Rising Threat of Anti-Government Domestic Terrorism: What the Data Tells Us." Accessed April 26, 2026. https://www.csis.org/analysis/rising-threat-anti-government-domestic-terrorism-what-data-tells-us#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20domestic%20terrorist,terrorists%20with%20opposing%20political%20views

advocate for the creation of a social-psychological profile of a terrorist, a potential tool that might help identify real online threats before they escalate to in-person violence.

Psychological approaches to *de*radicalization have taken into account the ways in which exiting extremism is a form of significant identity shift (Liguori and Spanierman 2022:389) or can be spurred on by feelings of disillusionment with leadership or organizational behavior (Mattsson and Johansson 2020:83). Other research has noted that the more dissonant information consumed by an individual, the more likely they are to experience attitudinal change (Zimbardo and Leippe 1991 cited in Dalgaard-Nielsen 2017), which is highly contingent on "individual differences in cognitive styles and psychological traits such as intellectual openness" (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2017:283).

Psychological models of radicalization and deradicalization are extremely useful for understanding how certain individuals might be more motivated to join extremist groups because of their previous exposure to trauma or as a response to repeated ideological messaging, but psychological profiling aimed at catching radicalized terrorists can be dubious at best (Rae 2012). Rae (2012) notes that this area has a history of implementing racial stereotypes into terrorist profiles (65). Thus, profiling can implicate already stigmatized individuals in crimes they have not yet committed. He argues that instead of profiling terrorists, "a more lucrative venture may be to transcend the individual by profiling *terrorism* as a process within a complex system" (Rae 2012:71). The dominant mode of thinking places the weight of the onus on individuals who join extremist groups to account for extremism, rather than the wider social networks or the culture that surrounds individuals. To mitigate this, I turn to criminological literature on radicalization, which places more weight on the impact of collective behavior in radicalization in the increase in extremism.

The Criminological Model of Radicalization and Deradicalization

The criminological model of radicalization understands radicalization in terms of group dynamics and "criminogenic" environments that can influence an individual's decision to enter an extremist group. Whittaker (2022) conceptualizes that the Internet is a "criminogenic environment in which deviant behaviors are learned and normalized," as well as potentially leading individuals to echo chambers that further reinforce already-existing beliefs (28). Whittaker also uses Situational Action Theory (SAT), "which assesses how an individual's propensity to radicalization (such as their vulnerabilities or stressors) interacts with their environment to affect their norm-based motivations (2022:34). This is a socialization-based theory, and can be applied to both online and offline environments.

Like the psychological model, criminological models of deradicalization also center post-extremism identity formation (DeMichele, Simi, and Blee 2025) and disillusionment (Raets 2024). DeMichele, Simi, and Blee (2025) establish a timeline of identity deconstruction and re-construction among ex-extremists, while Raets emphasizes disillusionment in the process of deradicalization, as "53% of empirical works on disengagement and deeradicalization allude to the role of motivation in moving away from violent extremism" (2024:406).

The criminological models of radicalization and deradicalization are closer to a sociological perspective, since they take into account how collective behavior, social psychology, and experiences of social marginalization could potentially all contribute to creating extremists. However, criminology offers less well developed cultural and civil accounts of behavior. Criminology has a long history of drawing on rationalist models of human behavior that argue that humans carefully weigh pros and cons before engaging in social action. In reality, people make decisions that are often directly in conflict with their best interests, despite the presence of

information that might provoke disillusionment. Additionally, theories in criminology have a resonance with behaviorist views of social action, which posit that humans unconsciously mimic the behavior of those that surround them, or adopt their beliefs without question. This ignores the agency of humans to be able to form unique perspectives independently, and assumes that repeated exposure to propaganda always results in agreement with those beliefs. Both psychological and criminological academic discourses produce their own narratives about radicalization and deradicalization, which eventually influences popular culture.

Public Understandings of Radicalization and Deradicalization

Understanding academic literature on radicalization is vital, as some criminological and psychological language used in academia has infiltrated civil spaces. For example, the idea of an "echo chamber," or a "filter bubble" has entered mainstream discourse to describe how our information ecosystem often only confirms our pre-existing beliefs. This reflects discourses around criminology, such as Whittaker's assertion that the Internet is a "criminogenic environment" (Whittaker 2022:28). There are also psychological resonances with the way that we describe the process of online radicalization as falling down a "rabbit hole" or getting funneled into a "pipeline." This does not afford social actors much agency in the process of online radicalization, and instead considers radicalized individuals as being entirely at the whim of algorithms or propaganda.

Public understanding of deradicalization is still emergent, and the predominant discourses that surround it are rooted in criminology and psychology. I notice this surface in the ways in which the narrators in this study make reference to alt-right beliefs as a form of "mind-control" that they escaped from via "deprogramming." In this frame, if deradicalization is thought of as "converting" people to progressive ideology, then it is likely to be drawn back into the

polarization and the stubborn binaries that have produced radicalization in the first place. The goal of deradicalization work should be to encourage individuals to adopt nuanced views of political situations and to consistently challenge their own beliefs.

Another example of the difficulties surrounding the implementation of deradicalization programs are the various controversies stemming from "deprogramming" counseling in the 1970s. Deprogramming was primarily used to help parents of young adults that joined New Religious Movements (NRMs) who wanted their children to leave those groups. The individuals selected for deprogramming interventions were "forcibly removed from the group, incarcerated, and put through radical resocialization processes that were supposed to result in their agreeing to leave the group" (Richardson 2011:323). This framework was met with much controversy due to the ethical implications of violating people's rights to freedom of religion. NRMs were constructed as a social problem that needed to be dealt with, allowing for extreme interventions to which the justice system turned a blind eye. Vulnerable individuals who are drawn into extremist groups can also easily be made more vulnerable by agents who claim to offer help, such as state apparatuses like prison or the judicial system.

As Richardson aptly points out, deprogramming as a framework "implies that those being 'treated through the process have first been 'programmed' by some other entity," implying that entity was "somehow mistaken, or even worse, evil and destructive" (2011:324). NRMs and cults were thought to exercise their power through "brainwashing" or "mind control" (Richardson 2011:324). Contemporary scholarship on cults has moved away from the brainwashing model to explain the allure of cults and cult-like groups, but has not completely left mainstream discourse. Popular narratives of online radicalization are sometimes presented to the zeitgeist as stories of individuals who were "brainwashed" by radical content, a framework that ignores the agency of

the radicalized individual and obscures the often mundane nature of radical content on the internet. Deradicalization programs should distance themselves from "deprogramming" frameworks at the risk of simplifying complicated social factors that draw people to extremism.

Organizational Approaches to Combatting Radicalization by Engaging in Deradicalization Work

In the United States, very few established deradicalization programs exist, as the U.S. tends to have more "concerns about infringing upon civil rights such as freedom of political and religious opinion" (Koehler 2016:255). Additionally, the national discourse around terrorism in the years following 9/11 has mostly centered around Islamic extremism, making it difficult to get stakeholders to address both the threat of Islamic and homegrown extremism (Power 2021). The deradicalization programs that do exist in the United States are in jeopardy due to the new political climate, as the president threatens to cut massive amounts of funding from counterterrorism efforts in New York.[6] Despite these tensions, there are some established organizations engaged in deradicalization efforts in the United States.

Life After Hate is a nongovernmental organization that employs the work of "nonprofit professionals, case managers, and Exit Specialists–individuals who have walked away from hate-fueled violence" to help combat extremism.[7] Employing the help of ex-extremists, dubbed "Exit Specialists" by the organization, they provide therapeutic interventions for individuals who are looking to exit hate groups and provide support for family members who want to encourage their loved one to exit extremist spaces. This organization has also launched some online-based interventions, such as the "#WeCounterHate" campaign that would "identify hate speech using machine learning and then reply to the tweet, explaining that for every retweet it generated, we

[6] Ashford, Grace and Chen, Stefanos. 2025. "Trump Cuts to Counterterrorism Funds for New York Reach $187 Million." *The New York Times,* September 30. Retrieved April 25, 2026. (https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/30/nyregion/terrorism-funds-hochul-noem.html)
[7] Life After Hate. n.d. "About Us." Accessed April 27, 2026. https://www.lifeafterhate.org/about-us/

would make a donation to Life After Hate, a nonprofit dedicated to rehabilitating former white supremacists."[8] This venture was short-lived, as Twitter introduced a feature that would allow users to hide replies from other users.

Another organization that is a stakeholder in the deradicalization space is Moonshot, an organization that works on "protecting millions from online manipulation" and "directly intervening with perpetrators of terrorism online."[9] This organization has partnered itself with big tech companies, and even some major sports institutions to protect athletes from online harassment. Moonshot has also produced extensive data reports about online radicalization and their methods that seek to combat it. A report titled "Adapting Violence Prevention to the Digital World" touched on some of the specific strategies that Moonshot uses to prevent digital extremist messages from spreading. One strategy is called content seeding, which describes "manual advertisement placements within online platforms, channels, and communities associated with violence-justifiying narratives and violent extremism—to reach individuals who may be at risk."[10]

The psychological, criminological, social, and organizational ways of framing deradicalization braid together to form a collective narrative mediated across the public sphere. My research seeks to extend existing frameworks by introducing the discourse of cultural sociology into deradicalization work, and analyzing the ways in which narratives that discuss deradicalization experiences draw from other predominant public narratives of experiences of intense worldview shifts. These micro-narratives have an impact on how other deradicalization

[8] VML. n.d. "Stopping hate one tweet at a time." Accessed April 25, 2026. https://www.vml.com/work/wecounterhate-stopping-hate-one-tweet-at-a-time.
[9] Moonshot. n.d. "Why Moonshot?" Accessed April 25, 2026. https://moonshotteam.com/why-moonshot/#approach.
[10] Moonshot. 2025. "Adapting Violence Prevention To The Digital World: A Framework For Action." https://moonshotteam.com/wp-content/uploads/Moonshot-Adapting-Violence-Prevention-to-the-Digital-World-A-Framework-for-Action.pdf

narratives are framed, understood, and negotiated publicly, making them a significant object of study. In the next chapter, I discuss how I gathered my data for this study across different social media platforms, explain the coding categories that surfaced during data analysis, and present my findings on the most common experiences that individuals understood to be the catalysts for their deradicalization experiences.

Chapter 3: Methods and Data

Within this study, I operationalize a cultural sociological approach, meaning that my central goal is both to reconstruct structures of meaning *and* determine how deradicalization narratives are a causally important cultural force in the public sphere. This approach argues that culture is a "relatively autonomous" variable, one that should be understood to function as analytically independent from structures of power. Since deradicalization narratives play out in the public sphere, narrators draw from cultural forms that are recognizable to audience members, meaning that they use cultural schemas that already exist to create something new. Once these schemas are identified and analyzed, cultural sociologists hermeneutically reconstruct meaning via "thick description." This concept, articulated by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), argues that social scientists should go beyond describing the behavior of social groups and instead account for structures of both meaning and context that go deeper than surface-level observation. Within my research, I hermeneutically reconstruct and thickly describe an ideal type of deradicalization narrative that was used by narrators in the sample, and also identify the repertoire of cultural resources narrators used to form their accounts.

To examine narratives of deradicalization as a novel cultural form, this project analyzes videos from YouTube and TikTok and podcasts posted to the platforms Spotify or Apple Podcasts.[11] All content was transcribed into written transcripts, compiled together, and coded to identify significant themes (see below for specific codes). I chose to code my data by hand via three different passes to fully immerse myself in each narrative, making sure to go through the narratives multiple times in order to find details I may have missed during the first round of coding. Using a software tool like NVivo to code my data might have saved time, but I wanted to

[11] For a brief summary of each narrative specifically used in this paper (n=15), please see the appendix. I drew from a larger sample of narratives (n=29), but ended up using quotes and anecdotes from 15 narratives. However, the 14 narratives that I didn't explicitly draw from did have an indirect hand in shaping my empirical conclusions.

make sure that I could speak to the complexities of each narrative in order to fully honor individual stories. In the first read through, I went through the entire transcript and highlighted the portions where an individual was talking about their deradicalization journey. In the second read through, I read only the highlighted portions and sorted the pieces of the narrative into a list of inductive codes. In the third coding pass, I read through the entire transcripts again and sorted pieces of the narrative using the framework of the deductive codes I developed from the theoretical literature. Utilizing both inductive and deductive codes allows my analysis to generate both empirical and theoretical findings, as the inductive codes were based on findings that surfaced while engaging in data analysis, and the deductive codes were already selected from the literature I chose. Importantly, I chose to categorize pieces of each narrative within multiple established codes rather than just choosing to put entire narratives under one category, as many narrators cited multiple reasons or instances that led to their experiences of deradicalization.

Selecting Narratives

In all four platforms, I used a variety of search terms based on my preliminary research into online deradicalization to look for relevant data, such as “former alt right,” “leaving the alt right,” “leaving alt right,” “escaping alt right,” “former extremist” in hopes to capture experiential narratives of people leaving extremist alt-right groups. Search terms were kept the same across platforms in the hopes of increasing consistency in the type of narrative collected. Narratives were evaluated based on whether or not the user was addressing their own experience being deradicalized, and videos focused on how to deradicalize others and were weeded out. Additionally, many videos showed up that contained personal narratives of only radicalization, and those were dropped from the sample as well.

Ethics and Social Positionality

Sociological researchers have a certain amount of power in terms of how they choose to depict their subjects. Researching former extremists, a stigmatized group, can risk perpetuating the very stigma I critique in my research. To protect the anonymity of narrators, I gave individuals whose narratives I draw from repeatedly pseudonyms, and removed any identifying information within the quotes I included. I submitted my research plan for IRB exemption and received the exemption on Wednesday, November 12th, 2025. All of the data used in this study is within the public domain, and all of the narratives of deradicalization that I collected were from users with public accounts. Therefore, it may have been unnecessary to receive IRB approval for this research. However, users do not typically anticipate their videos being used for academic research purposes. Because of this dynamic, I wanted to include a systematic process to assess the potential harm of doing this research.

YouTube

YouTube is a public platform that allows users to post video content. This platform was chosen for analysis due to its history and present impact on United States politics. YouTube has long been studied as a pipeline of radicalization, as scholars have noted that algorithms have linked consuming content unrelated to extremism with increasingly extremist political content (Bryant 2020). In total, I was able to collect 5 narratives from YouTube. The earliest narrative collected comes from 2019 and the latest comes from 2025. Overall, a total of around 2 hours and 45 minutes of data were analyzed, leading to 50 pages of transcripts that were coded.

Podcasts

Within the last few years, podcasts have become increasingly popular as ways individuals consume political content and keep up to date with current events. The two most popular podcast platforms, Spotify and Apple podcasts were chosen for analysis in this sample. I chose to analyze

podcasts in this sample because of their salience in political discourse, as well as the prevalence and history of right-wing provocateurs in the podcasting world (e.g. Alex Jones, Joe Rogan). I collected 11 different podcast narratives, posted between the years of 2024-2025. In total, 14 hours and 18 minutes of data were analyzed, resulting in 251 pages of transcripts that were then coded.

TikTok

TikTok is a relatively new social media platform that allows users to post short form video content. This platform was chosen for analysis because of its sheer popularity, and because of the political discourse often initiated on the platform. I collected 12 different narratives from TikTok content creators, posted over the 2024 to 2025 period. 1 hour and 33 minutes of data were analyzed, generating 22 pages of transcripts.

Codes

Below is a list of nine inductive codes, which describe different triggers for deradicalization experiences that were mentioned in the narratives. A list of these codes was formulated during data analysis, and a single narrative can be categorized under multiple codes. The final two codes are deductive, and were formulated before data analysis and are based on the theoretical literature. These codes describe *characteristics* of deradicalization narratives.

Religion: This code describes parts of an individual's narrative that makes sense of their deradicalization experience in religious terms. For example, a user may have started attending a church that discouraged their extremist beliefs or even simply read a Bible passage that changed the way they think about violence.

Relationships: This theme describes an individual who, either partially or fully, credits their deradicalization experience to a close social relationship in their life. For example, a user

may have a close friend who challenged their extremist beliefs, or entered into a romantic relationship with someone who occupies a marginalized identity category that their extremist group deems profane.

Conflicting Content: This code describes an individual who encountered conflicting viewpoints on social media, became disillusioned with their extremist beliefs, sought out contradictory content that challenged their preconceived notions, and adopted less radical political beliefs.

Education: Individuals may give some credit in their narratives to having an intellectual epiphany within formal educational structures. For example, a first-year in college might have had a professor who discredited some of their extremist beliefs in a class, initiating an experience of deradicalization.

Disillusionment: This code describes moments in the narratives where an individual became disillusioned with either the extremist ideology or the extremist group. This could encompass things like not being satisfied with the way a group is run or their leadership style, encountering conflicting beliefs that seem more compelling than theirs, or not feeling motivated to engage in the group or ideology's mission.

Maturation: This code describes individuals who either partially or completely attributed their deradicalization journeys to cognitive maturation.

Separation: This code describes people who started or continued their deradicalization journeys after being physically separated from their extremist communities or groups. This could happen when a narrator goes to jail, moves away from their hometown to go to college, or is fired from a job at an extremist organization.

Other: This code describes various moments within the narratives that didn't fit into any of the above categories. Often, this was expressed through individuals saying things like "I started to question my views" or "I started to reevaluate my beliefs" without mentioning the motivations behind those decisions to start questioning or reevaluating.

Awakening narrative tropes: This code describes portions of the narratives where an individual uses either awakening narrative tropes (e.g. darkness/light, asleep/awake, lost/found) or the language of awakening narratives identified in previous work by DeGloma (2014) (see Chapter 6).

Emotion: This code describes how narrators express their experiences by using the language of emotion or how they perform emotions while recounting their narratives. Emotion codes (defined as any reference to emotional language associated with deradicalization experiences) were sorted into three different categories: before deradicalization, during deradicalization, and after deradicalization. I distinguish between different temporal stages in the process of deradicalization to highlight the differences between perceived emotional states along each step in the journey.

Research Goals and Hypotheses

I argue that having an established cultural script would be beneficial to increase the amount of public discourse surrounding deradicalization, and to establish a well-understood and socially accepted pathway to deradicalization in the public mind. Cultural scripts solidify fragmented, individual narratives into collective stories that are more conducive to being expressed on a larger scale. Since there is not yet an established public understanding of deradicalization, I hypothesize that content creators who post deradicalization narratives use

borrowed cultural scripts from other social phenomena to make sense of their experience leaving extremist groups.

Research Limitations

Since deradicalization narratives are just emerging into the public sphere, I was only able to identify 29 narratives that fit all of the criteria for this sample. Some narratives were also much shorter than others due to the nature of the platform on which they were posted (TikTok encourages shorter form content than YouTube or podcast episodes). If I was afforded more time or resources to expand this study, I might have engaged in ethnographic interviews with deradicalized individuals in order to gather more precise details of the narrator's life histories and deradicalization experiences. I also might have looked at the genre of deradicalization memoirs, which similarly would have provided a more in-depth description of these experiences.

Terminology

Terms used to describe processes related to radicalization and deradicalization are often contested, and weaponized by political groups to describe their opponents in negative terms. For example, the word "extremist" is used by Democrats to describe the January 6th insurrectionists, while simultaneously is used by conservatives to describe "gender ideology."[12] For these reasons, it is useful to provide a brief description of how I'm operationalizing major terms used throughout this paper.

Deradicalization: Deradicalization is a process of going from an extremist, or radical worldview (see my operationalization of the word "extremist" below) to one that is more peaceful and/or

[12] The White House. 2025. "Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government." January 20. Accessed April 26, 2026. https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government/

nuanced. This process is extremely complex, and there is an ongoing debate in the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) space about whether or not "successful" deradicalization depends on a desistance from violence or a desistance from violence *and* a disengagement from extremist ideology. For the purpose of this study, I look at people who *self*-identify as deprogrammed, deradicalized, or former extremists. This study does not assess whether or not people have "actually" deradicalized in the eyes of clinical professionals.

Narrative: A narrative is a cultural story told in the public sphere, often containing a beginning, middle, and end. Often, narrative frameworks are passed down through generations, and reflected in popular culture via news stories (Jacobs 1996) or fictional media. In this sample, the narratives told were often of someone's life story in terms of political leanings, moving from a beginning (radical), to a middle (deradicalizing), to an end (deradicalized). This structure is characteristic of an ideal type of deradicalization narrative, which was followed by some narrators in the sample. Other narratives were more variable, reflecting the nuances of life that might not conform to the "traditional" deradicalization narrative.

Ideology: Ideology is often discussed in negative terms, as "ideas that were deemed irrational and unreasonable," and coded "as backwards, anti-modern and anti-scientific" (Alexander and Taylor 2024:11). I operationalize the term in line with Geertz's interpretation of ideology as a framework that "allows[s] people to make sense of the world, not rationally in the scientific sense but meaningfully" (Alexander and Taylor 2024:12). Extremist ideology is a framework that views the world through the lens of hatred, violence, competition, and exclusion, but it does help people conceptualize their place in the world. Ideologies should be evaluated in terms of their impact on the rest of society rather than dismissing them as "ideological" simply because they provide a universalizing framework for understanding the world.

Extremist: Extremist is another term that is hotly contested within Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) spaces. In this case, I define "extremists" as individuals who subscribe to a radical belief system that encourages black-and-white thinking, political violence as a means to an end, and/or exclusion based on categories of race, religion, gender, class, or other identities. Many narrators in my sample defined *themselves* or their former beliefs as extremist, making it a label that does carry stigma, but one that is willingly taken on by narrators. Additionally, it is important to note that I use this term interchangeably with "radical" throughout this research.

Data Results

Code	Social Media Platform				
	TikTok	YouTube	Podcasts	Total	Percentage
Education	5 narratives	0 narratives	2 narratives	8 narratives	29%
Disillusionment	7 narratives	4 narratives	7 narratives	18 narratives	64%
Religion	3 narratives	0 narratives	5 narratives	8 narratives	29%
Conflicting Content	0 narratives	4 narratives	0 narratives	4 narratives	14%
Interpersonal Relationships	5 narratives	4 narratives	10 narratives	19 narratives	68%
Maturation	1 narrative	0 narratives	0 narratives	1 narrative	4%
Separation	2 narratives	0 narratives	6 narratives	8 narratives	29%
Awakening Narrative Tropes	3 narratives	1 narrative	8 narratives	12 narratives	43%
Emotion	10 narratives	5 narratives	10 narratives	25 narratives	89%
Other	1 narrative	2 narratives	4 narratives	7 narratives	25%

Figure 1: Codes of deradicalization from extremism, sorted from 28 narratives

Of the inductive codes, people cited interpersonal relationships as being the catalyst for deradicalization journeys most often (68% of narrators), and cited maturation as a catalyst for deradicalization the least (4% of narrators). Within the theoretical codes, the vast majority (89%

of narrators) used emotional language or performed some kind of emotional reaction when discussing their narratives. Just under half (43% of narrators) invoked some form of awakening narrative tropes when discussing their narratives.

Perhaps the most unique finding was within the "Conflicting Content" category. No narrators who told their stories on podcasts or within TikTok videos cited seeing conflicting content as being a reason for their deradicalization journeys, and yet 80% of narrators who took to YouTube to share their narratives mentioned it as a prominent reason for prompting their deradicalization processes. YouTube has long been studied as a platform that encourages extremist ideas leading people down "pipelines" of radicalization (Bryant 2020). Cited in Bryant (2020), a 2018 study from Kaiser and Rauchfleisch revealed that since alt-right communities are more tightly bound, leading to "a bias of recommending racist or white supremacist videos more often to users" (87). Thus, narrators might be attempting to undo the logic of the YouTube alt-right pipeline by publicizing their narratives in a place where people radicalizing might be likely to see it. One YouTube content creator, who I profile extensively in Chapter 4, encourages radicalized viewers to reach out to talk with him via a messaging app called Discord.

Conflicting content is also a difficult variable to study due to the amount of both misinformation and disinformation online. Boler and Davis (2018) have remarked that we are living in a "post-truth" era where objective information is less important to formulating a political stance than emotion (75). Seeing content online that conflicts with our political beliefs is fairly commonplace, and people often automatically decide to disregard that conflicting content as false. In fact, a 2018 study revealed that exposure to content on Twitter that conflicted with one's political beliefs can actually *increase* political polarization, a finding that was especially statistically significant among Republicans (Bail et al. 9216). However, for Caleb Cain, a young

man from West Virginia, seeing content on YouTube that pushed against his alt-right beliefs was exactly what he needed in order to deradicalize.

Chapter 4: A Case Study of Radicalization and Deradicalization

On June 8th, 2019, an interactive article from *The New York Times* detailed the radicalization journey of a young man named Caleb Cain on YouTube, written by tech columnist Kevin Roose[13]. Cain gave Roose permission to download his entire YouTube history, and Roose created a database on the political leanings of each content creator Cain watched over time. Roose observed as the videos took a significant right-leaning turn in 2015 and 2016, causing the algorithm to recommend more and more of those kinds of videos until they were the vast majority of Cain's video consumption. In addition to Cain, Roose interviewed employees at YouTube, prominent content creators who gained notoriety on the platform, and academics studying online extremism to provide a fuller picture of the social context in which Cain's story was mediated. The article ends with the argument that Cain's journey might be applicable to other "vulnerable young men" like him, who then might "drift away from radical groups as they grow up and find stability elsewhere."

Soon after the profile was published, Kevin Roose hosted an eight-part podcast series titled "Rabbit Hole" that featured Cain in the first three episodes, and was also affiliated with *The New York Times*. The podcast aimed to examine the internet's role in processes of radicalization, and suggested YouTube had a responsibility to its audience to remove harmful content. The podcast posed the question of how much agency people actually have when they consume content online, and illuminated the role of algorithms in shaping people's political attitudes. On the first episode of the series, Roose interviews an ex-employee at Google named Guillaume Chaslot, who worked on the YouTube algorithm and explained that there were "filter bubbles" being created on YouTube, which led users to "only one side of reality." His response was to start

[13] Roose, Kevin. 2019. "The Making of a YouTube Radical." *The New York Times*, June 8. Retrieved December 17, 2025. (https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/08/technology/youtube-radical.html).

work on another kind of algorithm that would avoid filter bubbles. The response from management was negative. He was told to stop work on the new algorithm by a manager, and was eventually fired for pursuing the project over his primary tasks. The podcast ends without resolving these issues, but includes the sentiment that "the more and more time we spend online, the more this distorted vision of the world actually becomes our reality."[14]

Stories like Cain's shape public understanding of both radicalization and deradicalization, becoming collective representations for future social actors that perform deradicalization narratives to draw from. I profile Cain in this chapter, as all of the YouTube videos that featured his story alone amassed more than 200,000 views. Narrative analysis is a useful way to approach a case like this, as it allows us to take into account both the ways in which Cain presents a unique personal story, draws from other prominent stories, and contests different attempts to represent his story. I have chosen not to anonymize Cain's story, as he is considered one of the primary claims makers in deradicalization discourse outside of scholarly spaces and has been the subject of numerous high-profile pieces of journalism.

Cain's Radicalization Journey

The story goes like this: Caleb Cain was a college dropout living in West Virginia with his grandfather when he turned to YouTube for mental health advice. At this time in his life, identified as a liberal who was interested in social justice issues and climate change. He had been struggling with depression, and desperately wanted to enact a significant change in his life. According to him, YouTube took him "down this rabbit hole of self-help and it led [him] to

[14] Roose, Kevin. 2020. "Eight: 'We Go All.'" June 4 in *Rabbit Hole,* produced by *The New York Times,* podcast, 35:34. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/podcasts/rabbit-hole-qanon-youtube-tiktok-virus.html.

someone named Stefan Molyneux."[15] Molyneux is a Canadian white nationalist media figure, whose channel Cain describes as "a propaganda outlet for … right-wing beliefs." Molyneux would feature guests on his show who were ideologically aligned with him, which introduced Cain to more extremist content creators. Cain explains that his trust in Molyneux extended to who the creator featured on his platform, because, as he says, Molyneux "vetted" his guests appropriately.[16] Cain's YouTube algorithm had also started to shift, offering him more and more right-leaning content as he went further down the rabbit hole.

Cain was a fan of many high-profile far-right figures, such as Lauren Southern, who famously attended the "SlutWalk" protests against sexual assault and confronted protesters with her issues with feminism. Southern's main issue was primarily around immigration, expressing conspiratorial beliefs in line with the Great Replacement theory[17]. Cain also consumed content from Jared Taylor, an American white supremacist and Richard Spencer, a Neo-Nazi and far-right conspiracist. By proxy, he "would even have been listening to David Duke [the former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan], because he would have been appearing on some of these podcasts."[18]

Eventually, the way that Cain identified himself politically completely changed. He referred to himself as a traditional conservative, and though he "never bought into the far right's most extreme views, like Holocaust denial or the need for a white ethnostate," "far-right

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[15] Sreenivasan, Hari. 2019. "Caleb Cain Became Radicalized Watching YouTube | Amanpour and Company." Produced by Amanpour and Company, August 21. Video, 19:06. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IpwddS8RDY.
[16] Seder, Sam. 2019. "The Making Of A YouTube Radical w/ Caleb Cain - MR Live - 8/30/19." Produced by The Majority Report w/ Sam Seder, August 30. Video, 1:06:56. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIJFCISzXDs.
[17] The Great Replacement Theory refers to a conspiratorial belief among the alternative right that villainizes people of color and immigrants by placing "demographic change in a millennial, apocalyptic context and seek to extract ideological advantage from change by positioning 'white people' as victims of nefarious elite intent" (Davis 2025).
[18] Louv, Jason. 2022. "Ultraculture Podcast Ep. 107: Faraday Speaks on Deradicalization." Produced by Jason Louv, May 16. Video, 3:07:43. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d93FMFu055k.

ideology bled into his daily life."[19] He started to buy into what far-right influencers call "race realism," which is the idea that differences in social outcomes for different races are tied to immutable, biological characteristics rather than social structures. He describes being "impacted by right-wing ideology, but I wasn't aware of that because it wasn't being sold to me that way. It was being sold to me like this was libertarianism, this was patriotism, this was conservatism."[20] He mentions the "libertarian to alt-right pipeline" frequently, which describes the journey from advocating for less governmental control and more individual freedom to becoming increasingly conservative in terms of social views. This seems to be a common theme for some people who travel down the alt-right pipeline, as "the freedom identified with neoliberalism" is converted from "mere moral libertarianism to an aggressive attack on democracy" (Brown 2019:44). Despite Cain's convictions, he was eventually able to extricate himself from the alt-right pipeline.

Cain's Deradicalization Journey

In 2018, things changed. Cain's algorithm started to recommend content from left-wing creators, as they sometimes hosted debates with some of Cain's favorite far-right media figures, which is why they showed up in his feed. Cain clicked on a video from YouTuber Steven Bonnell (known as Destiny), because he was debating Lauren Southern on immigration, who Cain enjoyed watching and respected. Cain describes how "Destiny completely dunked on her and just embarrassed her," which he enjoyed watching because he found it to be entertaining. He says this moment was "impressive, but it was also terrifying" because it led him to question the

[19] Roose, Kevin. 2019. "The Making of a YouTube Radical." The New York Times, June 8. Retrieved December 17, 2025. (https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/08/technology/youtube-radical.html).
[20] Hotel Bar Sessions podcast. 2022. "S5E68: YouTube's Alt-Right Rabbit Hole (with Caleb Cain)." Produced by Hotel Bar Sessions podcast, August 26. Video, 1:00:33. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d93FMFu055k.

foundations of his entire belief system.[21] As Cain's algorithm started to shift, so did his political opinions. He was watching "more left-wing content" during this time, but was " also watching right-wing content." Roose describes him as "ricocheting between this far left YouTube universe and this far right world."[22]

Cain also joined an online chatroom hosted by the YouTuber Destiny, and started talking to "actual leftists," who were having "very long, actually intellectual conversations."[16] He would sometimes see members of the right-wing come into this space, and the people on the server would just "laugh them out of the chat," further contributing to Cain's intellectual conviction that some of his right-wing beliefs might be incorrect. Not only did Cain observe these conversations happening, but he also personally contributed to them. He describes talking with "people from all the different backgrounds that I was supposed to be afraid of. Muslims, Muslims from Saudi Arabia, trans people, anarchists, leftists…"[23]

There were also news events that spurred Cain's journey out of the right-wing content bubble. When he read coverage about the 2019 Christchurch shooting in New Zealand, for example, Cain looked into the perpetrator. The perpetrator's alt-right ideology seemed to mirror his own, and Cain describes hearing him "repeating back to me all the things that I believed" on the live-streamed video of the shooting.[21] The realization that he had ideological alignments with a mass murderer was enough to make Cain question his commitment to alt-right ideology. Like many others, Cain's deradicalization journey was not spurred by a singular moment, but by multiple moments of reflection and connection. This also begs the question: How does this way

[21] Faraday Speaks. 2019. "My Descent into the Alt-Right Pipeline." Produced by Faraday Speaks, March 21. Video, 38:14. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfLa64_zLrU.
[22] Roose, Kevin. 2020. "Three: Mirror Image." April 30 in Rabbit Hole, produced by The New York Times, podcast, 28:28. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/30/podcasts/rabbit-hole-internet-youtube-virus.html.
[23] Louv, Jason. 2022. "Ultraculture Podcast Ep. 107: Faraday Speaks on Deradicalization." Produced by Jason Louv, May 16. Video, 3:07:43. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d93FMFu055k.

of experiencing deradicalization online differ narratively from people who experience real-life events that lead to their deradicalization experiences? I will explore this question in later chapters, but for now, I will analyze Cain's story both in its individual complexity and as a window into a developing deradicalization narrative in the public sphere.

Analysis

The amount of public exposure to Cain's narrative attracted the attention of journalists, content creators, and academics alike. This gave Cain the chance to articulate the same story many times over, to different people and in different formats, helping him solidify his sense of what happened to him. This provides researchers with a sophisticated and specific narrative from which to draw conclusions about other narratives. Cain's narrative also informed my coding strategy for analyzing other individual narratives of deradicalization. Below, I provide an analysis of his story using some of the codes I formulated in Chapter 3.

The primary reason for Cain's deradicalization was his encounter with content that conflicted with his previously held beliefs. When Cain encountered the debate between Lauren Southern and Destiny, it was "like a crack in the dam" for his political ideology.[24] He started watching more and more of Destiny's content, which included debates with some of his favorite right-wing influencers, such as Sargon of Akkad, an anti-feminist, right-wing YouTuber. According to Cain, Destiny "cut them down and destroyed their arguments." Significantly, Destiny also platformed some left-wing creators, such as Contra Points, a transgender YouTuber

[24] Louv, Jason. 2022. "Ultraculture Podcast Ep. 107: Faraday Speaks on Deradicalization." Produced by Jason Louv, May 16. Video, 3:07:43. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d93FMFu055k.

who makes videos about conservative ideology. This led Cain to seek out content from those creators, and start to "deprogram [him]self."[25]

Cain's narrative also had some accounts of interpersonal experiences he had with others that pushed him further along on his deradicalization process. For Cain, these relationships started on Destiny's Discord server, where he would "meet trans people" and started "talking to more people of color and more minorities."[26] However, these events were not as salient in his political awakening journey than his encounter with conflicting content on YouTube. In terms of themes related to DeGloma's awakening narratives, Cain does not use many awakening narrative tropes, but does describe hearing about the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville as a "wake-up call," for him (referencing the asleep/awake binary).[27] He also describes alt-right content as being a "dark hole" (referencing the darkness/light binary).[26] Both of these descriptions are psychological self-accounts of emotions related to his deradicalization.

Cain described his experiences of deradicalization using the language of emotion to differentiate his mental state between the different stages of deradicalization. Before deradicalization, Cain describes himself as being in a state of depression that persisted throughout college and informed his decision to drop out and move back to his hometown. These mental health struggles were what attracted Cain to self-help content on YouTube, hoping that he could regain control over his battle with depression. He also describes feeling that he was "entitled to more in life" than the low-income and unstable household of his childhood.[28] While he was actively being radicalized, he "felt like [he] was chasing uncomfortable truths" and that

[25] Seder, Sam. 2019. "The Making Of A YouTube Radical w/ Caleb Cain - MR Live - 8/30/19." Produced by The Majority Report w/ Sam Seder, August 30. Video, 1:06:56. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIJFCISzXDs.
[26] NonCompete. 2019. "Faraday Speaks Interview." Produced by NonCompete, March 30. Video, 2:11:31. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0AeJwWaTv8.
[27] Hotel Bar Sessions podcast. 2022. "S5E68: YouTube's Alt-Right Rabbit Hole (with Caleb Cain)." Produced by Hotel Bar Sessions podcast, August 26. Video, 1:00:33. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d93FMFu055k.
[28] Citarella, Joshua. 2024. "Faraday Speaks: Pipelines and Rabbit Holes | Doomscroll." Produced by Joshua Citarella, November 5. Video, 1:42:34. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qRIPfneSVg.

far-right ideology gave him "power and respect and authority."[29] Identifying as a right-winger felt "surprising" to him, because he "never would have thought that would happen to me."[23] While Cain was watching videos that contradicted his previously held beliefs, he describes feeling "uncomfortable" and "angry," because he "didn't understand how he [Destiny] was able to dismantle these ideas so easily."[10] After the Charlottesville rally, Cain felt "confused" at the presence of actual Nazis marching through the streets, which was a "jarring" event for him, as he did not consider his fellow members of the alt-right to be that extreme.[30] After completing his deradicalization journey and realizing he wanted to become a spokesperson for teaching others how to avoid getting caught up with the alt-right, Cain felt "scared" and because he "didn't know who to talk to" and "who to trust."[31]

Speaking generally, Cain's story is an example of a romantic narrative, or a story about an individual who engages in an "adventure with the ultimate triumph of hero over enemy" (Jacobs 1996:1245). In this particular case, Cain acts as the hero of the story, with the enemy being both YouTube's algorithm and alt-right ideology. The hero goes on an adventure "through the rabbit hole," and comes out the other side to help others either avoid the pipeline altogether or escape it. Cain went from a depressed college dropout to a successful YouTuber who had various media organizations invested in his story, a "drama of redemption" that was compelling for audiences (Jacobs 1996:1249). This story had a clear beginning, middle, and end that was satisfying to audiences to witness.

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[29] Holt, Jared. 2019. "60: 8chan vs The Feds (6/17/19) ft/ Shoshana Wodinsky & Caleb Cain." June 18 in Posting Through It, podcast, 57:09. https://open.spotify.com/episode/4uiVMjXgu7e6R89HqCEGyq?si=a4ad94fc83d14b66&nd=1&dlsi=23f79b0f81bc422e.

[30] Seder, Sam. 2019. "The Making Of A YouTube Radical w/ Caleb Cain - MR Live - 8/30/19." Produced by The Majority Report w/ Sam Seder, August 30. Video, 1:06:56. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIJFCISzXDs.

[31] NonCompete. 2019. "Faraday Speaks Interview." Produced by NonCompete, March 30. Video, 2:11:31. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0AeJwWaTv8.

Cain also uses codes associated with psychology throughout his account to emphasize his lack of agency. He tells Kevin Roose that he "was brainwashed" by the alt-right pipeline, "falling deeper and deeper" into conservative ideology.[32] The metaphors Cain uses to articulate his experience also indicate his conceptualization of the algorithm as an agential force acting upon him, rather than his own decision to keep consuming right-wing content. The concept of "falling" into an ideology also takes blame away from the individual, despite them taking the initial steps that drew them closer to the rabbit hole. The algorithm could have been simply recommending him content based on content he was already clicking on, but he theorizes that the algorithm played a significant role in his radicalization journey.

Cain became involved in numerous personal and academic projects in the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) space. Initially, Cain intended to use his platform (a YouTube channel titled "Faraday Speaks") as a way to facilitate conversations about the political landscape online. He had a weekly stream called "Dislimited Hangout" that invited people with many different perspectives to talk about their political views. In addition to his YouTube channel, Cain launched a Discord channel (an online chatroom) that was associated with his YouTube channel that was intended to initiate "conversations with people within the alt right" and "talk them down from their positions."[33] However, he ended up shutting it down because "it was a hectic mess" with "manipulative" and "dangerous people" coming into the channel.[34]

For a time, Cain worked at the PERIL lab at American University, which works on counter messaging strategies to prevent extremism online. However, he stopped his work with

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[32] Roose, Kevin. 2019. "The Making of a YouTube Radical." The New York Times, June 8. Retrieved December 17, 2025. (https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/08/technology/youtube-radical.html).
[33] Uygur, Cenk. 2019. "How YouTube 'Radicalizes' The Alt-Right." Produced by The Young Turks, July 10. Video, 15:58. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExrjcktO3PQ.
[34] Citarella, Joshua. 2024. "Faraday Speaks: Pipelines and Rabbit Holes | Doomscroll." Produced by Joshua Citarella, November 5. Video, 1:42:34. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qRIPfneSVg.

the organization after becoming disillusioned, saying the organization focused too much on "the securitization of the problem."[35] Cain noted that he felt like the PERIL lab was fixated on strategies to track, monitor, and punish those who engaged in online extremism. He also became more disillusioned with the mainstream democratic politics of the organization, saying that extremists "are not going to be lulled back into some deradicalized position. They need an equally revolutionary position to be drawn into." This anti-establishment rhetoric echoes populist sentiments on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. It is also very different from his previous political identification with liberal politics. Cain was also involved with a web project called "Future Freedom," which was intended to collect stories of people's deradicalization experiences. Cain worked with two other people who had also experienced deradicalization, Caolan Robertson, who had produced documentaries for Lauren Southern, Stephen Molyneux, and Alex Jones and then transitioned to working in left right-wing media. The other participant was a woman named Samantha, who was once involved with Identity Evropa, an American white supremacist organization. As of 2026, the website is no longer active.

Despite the clear dynamism of Cain's story, the clarity of his narrative is blurred by the nuances of real life. For example, Cain's story moves from a romantic to a tragic register when his online presence (including his successful YouTube channel) is completely wiped from the internet. This is a tragic point of a narrative, and "the development of the plot is one of ultimate failure" (Jacobs 1996:1251). Cain went from an actor who was highly motivated to use his experience to help others to someone who seems to have disappeared from the media sphere

[35] Louv, Jason. 2022. "Ultraculture Podcast Ep. 107: Faraday Speaks on Deradicalization." Produced by Jason Louv, May 16. Video, 3:07:43. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d93FMFu055k.

completely. It's unclear what facilitated this disappearance, or where Cain would place his current political beliefs.

Contesting a Public Narrative

As Cain did more and more interviews outside of mainstream media, primarily with content creators on YouTube, it became clear that he disagreed with the way he had been framed in *The New York Time* article. His (very public) deradicalization narrative can be read as a co-production between Roose and himself, with *The New York Times* bringing their own agenda based on their politics and views on the current political moment into Cain's highly personal experience. This does not mean Roose's and Cain's intentions are fundamentally misaligned, but it changes the way Cain's story should be analyzed. He tells a podcast host that he felt like he was "portrayed as a victim a little bit too much," and that it was implied that his political shift was just him "getting brainwashed down another rabbit hole, which is simply not true."[36] Cain also had issues with the way the article portrayed him as dependent on YouTube, saying that he felt like Kevin Roose wanted him to say that he was "brainwashed by technology" and "obsessed with [...] the internet."[37] Two (sometimes conflicting) narrative timelines emerge: Cain's biographical experience of deradicalization and the narrative espoused by *The New York Times.*

At first, Cain's story followed a heroic arc, but then ended abruptly with silence. It also goes to show how much we need resources for individuals who have been deradicalized when they are in vulnerable emotional spaces. This is an opportunity for the positive aspects of deradicalization's roots in psychological discourses to make an impact. However, we also need

[36] Seder, Sam. 2019. "The Making Of A YouTube Radical w/ Caleb Cain - MR Live - 8/30/19." Produced by The Majority Report w/ Sam Seder, August 30. Video, 1:06:56. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIJFCISzXDs.
[37] Citarella, Joshua. 2024. "Faraday Speaks: Pipelines and Rabbit Holes | Doomscroll." Produced by Joshua Citarella, November 5. Video, 1:42:34. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qRIPfneSVg.

cultural resources in order to take some of the stigma away from occupying a liminal space between political ideologies. While we can only speculate as to why Cain disappeared from public spaces, it is possible that the amount of people reaching out to him to be a part of their projects may have been overwhelming.

Cain's story is a good reminder that deradicalization narratives are not quite as cut and dry as they may seem. Deradicalized individuals might be at a higher risk of falling back into their old extremist viewpoints, or be drawn to extremist views on the opposite side of the political spectrum. As much as researchers would like for deradicalization narratives to follow a clear path from extremism to a more moderate political stance, that vision does not reflect the contingencies of life. Despite these contingencies, though, I argue that a clear deradicalization timeline has emerged within the public sphere.

Chapter 5: Narratives

Cain's story of deradicalization has a narrative structure that can be found across the landscape of American social media, which I attribute to the presence of an underlying public narrative. Following Alexander and Smith (1993) I conceptualize this as a larger "cultural structure" through which communities and individuals like Cain "understand their progress through time in terms of stories, plots which have beginnings, middles, and ends, heroes and antiheroes, epiphanies and denouements, dramatic, comic and tragic forms" (156). Narrative structures make it easier for people to tell compelling stories, as they draw on a complex repertoire of shared cultural stories that contain familiar formats. As Jacobs (1996) reminds us though, "[t]he same event can be narrated in a number of different ways and within a number of different public spheres and communities" (1241). Narratives can also be contested, as social actors compete for control over a public narrative. I find in my research that individual deradicalization stories do follow familiar narrative formats. In each account, there are common narrative elements, as well as a wider range of specific experiences that depart from this structure. In this chapter, I examine the individual and collective stories of deradicalization in my sample using narrative methods.

To observe an underlying narrative structure does not mean that each individual story can be reduced to a universal narrative. Rather, narratives are open structures that enable many specific stories to develop and interact with each other, eventually solidifying into something more general that many actors draw from. This takes the form of a collective narrative, which "provide[s] story templates, convey ideologies, and contain symbolic codes that modern individuals use to construct their self- stories" (DeGloma 2014:29). Individuals are still able to exercise agency by choosing which narrative frameworks, codes, genres, and ideologies they would like to draw from, but there is a point in which narratives that circulate in the public

sphere around a certain topic (in this case, deradicalization) start to resemble one another, thus becoming part of a collective narrative. I will now turn to the idea of a collective public deradicalization narrative, examining the framework of the narrative timeline and genre used by deradicalization narrators. To conclude this chapter, I also account for contingency and individuality in the stories in this sample while still arguing that even narratives that were more "fuzzy" in terms of how they applied traditional ideas of deradicalization nonetheless embedded elements of the collective narrative in their stories.

Narrative Timeline

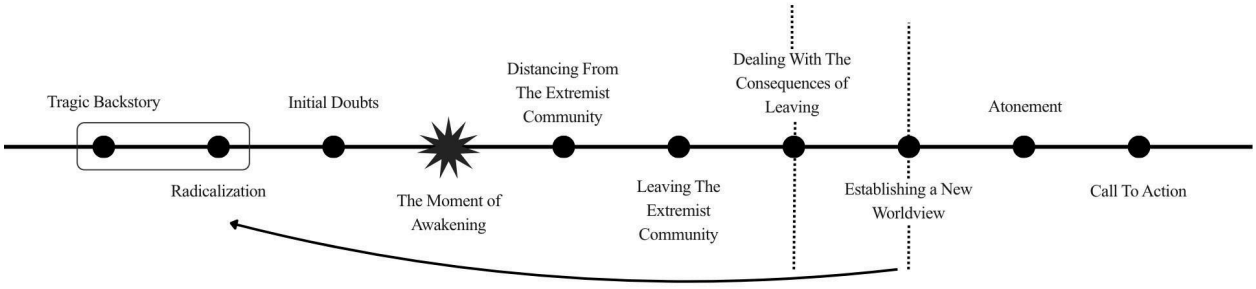

Figure 1: Narrative timeline of deradicalization from an extremist group

Figure 1 is a schematic, or timeline that many deradicalization narratives followed. Not every narrator articulated the elements of their stories in this exact order, but a significant number of them did. One of the key characteristics of narratives is that they contain a clear beginning, middle, and end. In the case of deradicalization narratives, the beginning encompasses both the childhood of the narrator and their radicalization journey. The middle of the narrative includes the initial doubts that set in and the climactic point, which is usually when the narrator "awakens," makes the decision to leave the extremist group and/or the process of actually leaving. The ending of the narrative is usually built around the theme of civil repair, as the narrator deals with the consequences of leaving the extremist group, establishes a new

worldview, atones for their past indiscretions, and uses their past as a tool to inform their current work. Most of the narrators who told their stories via podcasts adhered to this timeline most precisely, as those narratives were usually the longest, allowing the narrators to give more details when explaining their stories.

The Tragic Backstory

A significant proportion of narrators (50% of all narratives in this sample) mentioned experiencing some sort of childhood trauma that preceded their foray into extremism. Much of it was family related, from divorces to alcoholic parents, but many other narrators simply mentioned growing up with the feeling of being lonely or not fitting in with others. One narrator downplayed his tragic backstory while recounting the events of his life, emphasizing how he was relatively privileged in numerous ways but adding that he had an alcoholic parent. This environment contributed to his decision to start drinking at 14. Narrators are aware that their backgrounds have a significant impact on their journeys into extremism, but that those backgrounds don't account for the agency that people have to make non-extremist choices. Some narrators actually grew up in an extremist environment, and for a while, were unable to even imagine a life outside of extremism. Figure 1 also depicts the tragic backstory and radicalization stages being connected, indicating that some narrators grew up embedded within an extremist belief system. Their radicalization journey cannot be extricated from their tragic backstory. No matter the amount of struggle, emotional distress is undoubtedly implicated in the process of being drawn to a radical group, making the tragic backstory a stage usually framed in psychological terms.

Radicalization

Deradicalization narratives almost always include an explanation of how the narrator was radicalized. This provides researchers working to understand the mechanisms of radicalization with vital data about the spaces in which individuals are radicalized, as well as the techniques used for indoctrination. In this sample, the most highly cited impetus for radicalization was online content (45%), and the second highest was being raised in a family with extreme beliefs (34%). This data reflects the prioritization of stories of *online* radicalization circulating the public sphere. Given the rapidly changing media landscape and how little people understand about the nature of algorithms, this makes sense. Online radicalization makes for a more compelling story than tales of recruitment via social circle (21% of narratives), working in conservative media (7% of narratives), or a massive global event directly leading to one's radicalization (3% of narratives).

This is the portion of the narrative when the hero succumbs to the morally disreputable ideology of the villain in the story. Within deradicalization narratives, the villain can be the members of the extremist group, but can also be a more amorphous concept like an algorithm that brings extremist content to the narrator (a criminological framework) or a mental health issue that causes an individual to seek out extremism (a psychological framework). Narrators might emphasize their lack of agency by employing familiar cliches, like "falling" down a pipeline. Narrators also might find ways to demean the "ignorance" of their former selves, performing an appropriate amount of self-deprecation that makes it clear to the audience that they no longer subscribe to radical ideology.

Initial Doubts

Deradicalization narratives usually include some sort of explication of an individual's initial doubts about being a part of an extremist group, or doubts surrounding the ideology of the group. There is a sense of openness in this stage, as some narrators choose to step back and observe more before making the choice to leave, and some are much more hasty in their decision to exit. This builds narrative tension, foreshadowing what is to come in the narrator's journey. Individuals sometimes express the benefits of being a part of an extremist group, such as being able to act on taboo biases or being a part of a community united around a common goal. Reflecting back on their initial doubts about extremist ideology positions the narrator as not being fully "in" on every aspect of the group's ideology. Sometimes, it is unclear whether or not the narrators are looking back on previous experiences in a new light, or had actually experienced those doubts in the moment. Despite this uncertainty, it is necessary for narrators to perform these initial doubts to highlight the contrast between their past doubts and the moral certainty of their current worldview.

The Moment of Awakening

The moment an individual "awakens" from extremist ideology is often the climactic point in the narrative. Many narrators stress that this process was gradual, but some are able to point to a particular interaction or realization that was instrumental in helping them leave their community. This process almost always happens psychologically, making the process of actually leaving much more materially daunting. Even the narrators that had their awakenings due to social interactions had to grapple mentally with the huge shift in their political beliefs they experienced. Though none of the narratives were specifically phrased as being "awakening"

narratives, narrators did use language consistent with these kinds of stories, as I will discuss when I explicate awakening narratives in detail in Chapter 6.

Distancing From The Extremist Community

Distancing oneself from an extremist community can either be physical (not attending meetings, opting out from a leadership position), or mental (not putting as much stake in what group leaders say, or starting to doubt the ideology). Distancing can also help subtly prepare group leaders for an individual's exit, making the full blow of actually leaving less painful for both the narrator and the remaining group members. One narrator, Helen, who worked on a white supremacist radio show with her father, started to request to be featured on the show less and less when she was experiencing significant doubts in her belief system. Eventually, she wrote an open letter to her community that denounced the white supremacist belief system (P10). For individuals who were radicalized online, distancing can look like not engaging with as much extremist content or seeking out communities with opposing worldviews.

Leaving The Extremist Community

The process of leaving the extremist community is often on the narrator's terms, but can sometimes be initiated by circumstances outside of the narrator's control. A number of deradicalized individuals were sent to jail, and were forced to separate themselves from their extremist group. According to one narrator, being in prison felt like a relief, because "it was a way for me to completely cut ties with the life I had and the people that I knew" (P7). Being separated from an extremist group is not a psychological account of deradicalization, but a social and situational one. Other forced separations might include moving away to college, or being fired from employment at an extremist organization. Leaving an extremist group voluntarily also can be difficult, but for different reasons. One narrator likened leaving her extremist group to

leaving an abusive relationship, as she found a new place to live two months in advance of her leaving (P8). Individuals involved in in-person extremist groups might fear the wrath of their ex-community members after their disengagement.

Dealing With The Consequences of Leaving

After an individual officially leaves the extremist group, they must deal with the consequences of leaving. Some narrators were part of skinhead gangs, and had to fear for their safety after leaving, anticipating potential punishment from current gang members. For others, their extremist group also included members of their family, so leaving the group also meant leaving behind loved ones. Narrators coped with the consequences of leaving the group in a multitude of ways, including making connections with people they had previously cut ties with (or people who had cut ties with them) due to their involvement in extremism. This portion of the narrative arc has a resonance with the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous, which includes making amends with people who the offender has harmed and engaging in a sustained process of self-reflection. Many narrators actually expressed that this process was more painful than being involved in extremism, as being part of a group gave them both a community and a shared goal. This part of the narrative is marked by a dotted line in Figure 1 to indicate that it's a place where some narrators ended their journey across the timeline. In these cases, individuals chose to disengage from formulating a new political worldview and remained disillusioned with both sides of the political spectrum.

Establishing a New Worldview

For some former extremists, their new worldview is entirely in opposition to their previously held beliefs. For others, this was not as black and white. Some narrators chose to withdraw from politics entirely, choosing to focus on their personal lives and disengage from any

kind of political organizing. Establishing a new worldview is part of the process of dealing with the consequences of leaving an extremist group, as the narrator is rebuilding their political identity. It is at this point in the narrative that individuals are the most vulnerable to being drawn in by other extremist groups or going back to their original one. Narrators are caught in a liminal space of having no coherent worldview, as they have deemed their previous worldview to be false, and might be unwilling to trust the allure of another. In Chapter 4, I argued that Caleb Cain's struggle with accepting himself as a stakeholder in the deradicalization space could be attributed to this issue. Narrative resources alone are insufficient when there are no larger cultural resources available to assist individuals caught in between ideologies. Like the previous stage, this part of the narrative is also marked by a dotted line in Figure 1 to indicate that some narrators in this sample stopped here before advancing into the next stage. Some narrators had new political worldviews that were adopted in opposition to their previously held extremist beliefs, but chose not to atone for their previous mistakes or take on advocacy work around pushing back against extremism. This is a major "hinge-point" stage, where some narrators chose to adopt new worldviews that were ideologically different from their past extremist viewpoints, but were just as radical. This is marked in Figure 1 as an arrow that goes from the "establishing a new worldview" stage back to the "radicalization" stage.

Atonement

For narrators who accept a more progressive political position, public atonement is a vital part of initiating themselves into progressivism. Atonement practices are also expected of longstanding members of progressive groups that commit actions that are not in line with their publicly stated values. One narrator acknowledged that it might be hard to gain trust from others who are aware of his past. He distances himself from the narrative of victimization and says that

he was drawn into extremism because "I have character flaws, I have insecurities, I have things that I did not deal with and that I have to take responsibility for" (P5). I explore this process further, and its religious significance in Chapter 7.

Call To Action

The call to action portion of deradicalization narratives was a surprising but consistent finding. This is often what makes a narrative "heroic," as individuals are drawing from their past experiences with radicalization to construct their worldview and find their new calling. Many ex-extremists chose to engage in work in the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) space, are involved with liberal political organizing, or push back against extremist ideas through creating original social media content. The call to action wraps up the narrative in a clean way, providing audience members with a recollection of a clear transformation from extremist to anti-extremist activist.

Narrative Genre

Genre is a category that "provides a temporal and spatial link between the characters and events of a narrative," but defining a single genre for deradicalization narratives, which are real life narratives, is complex (Jacobs 1996:1245). These stories are simultaneously varied and similar, and suggesting that all of them fit into one coherent narrative genre is reductive. Rather, features of different well-established genres are in play in the deradicalization narratives I study. In the proceeding sections of this chapter, I attempt to honor the ways in which deradicalization narratives bring unique insights that reflect the nuances of the complexities of a person's life, while also acknowledging that it is helpful to recognize patterns and similarities.

Deradicalization narratives often follow the format of a traditional "hero's journey" narrative. The "hero" characters "try to cast themselves as rational and controlled in their

motivations, open and trusting in their relationships, and regulated by impersonal rules in their organizational activities" (Jacobs 1996: 1244-1245). Heroes typically go on journeys that ultimately lead them to their destination, which in this case, is the state of being deradicalized. I argue that the stage of "radicalization" is characterized by the narrative elements of a tragedy. Within these types of narratives, "the hero typically possesses great power, but is isolated from society and ultimately falls to an omnipotent and external fate or to the violation of a moral law" (Jacobs 1996:1245). Jacobs' use of language here resonates with deradicalization narratives, as people describe "falling" down an alt-right pipeline, just as a hero "falls" victim to external forces. Additionally, being a part of an extremist group often requires some sort of violation of moral laws or legally defined social standards. These tragic situations befall the narrators due to the presence of an alluring, extremist, "enemy."

In this context, enemies are defined as the extremist group the narrator was a part of before they decided to leave, or the algorithms that provided them with extremist content. The "heroic" narrators "try to narrate their enemies as irrational and uncontrolled in their motivations, secretive and deceitful in their relationships, and arbitrary and factionalized in their organizational activities" (Jacobs 1996:1244-1245). Within my data, I might extend Jacobs' formulation of the "enemy" as negative and highly *controlled* forces that are adept at luring in innocent narrators. To illustrate this point, one narrator described that he was "indoctrinated" by online alt-right communities that "made me a bigot and propelled me into insane beliefs" (T8). This narrator portrays himself as having succumbed to an agential, deeply evil force that acts *on* him, influencing his political views. Deradicalization narrators were close to becoming villains themselves. Now, he proclaims that he uses his "personal experience to inform you on how these

cults have flipped American culture on its head in favor of the actual people pulling the strings." In other words, he uses his personal experience with extremism to inform his current activism.

When the hero begins to "awaken" and exit their extremist group, I argue that they enter a *romantic* stage in their narrative. In romantic narratives, "the hero has great powers, the enemy is clearly articulated and often has great powers as well, and the movement takes the form of an adventure with the ultimate triumph of hero over enemy" (Jacobs 1996:1245). In deradicalization narratives, this describes the stages that extremists go through as they decide they want to exit their extremist group (the climax of the narrative), actually make that exit, and deal with the consequences of leaving their community. This stage usually involves the realization that the narrators have agency over their life choices, and start to see their current community as inhibiting their freedom. The defining climax of the narrative usually happens in two stages. In the first one, the narrator *realizes* that they want to leave their extremist community. In the second, the narrator *actually* breaks off from them. Ultimately, in most stories in this sample narrators win the battle against their extremist enemies, but experience lasting consequences due to their involvement with them.

Here, I am adding to the repertoire of non-fiction narrative analysis to encompass the ways in which deradicalization narrators subvert the structure of the traditional hero's journey by utilizing their past forway with extremism as a tool to engage in advocacy work. A common element of heroic stories is that the hero operationalizes their past experiences: both the tragedy of their early lives and the lessons they've learned on their romantic adventure to inform their current worldview and vocation. Generally, adherence to these genre conventions were present in most of the narratives in this sample, but there were a few narratives that resisted this traditional structure.

“Fuzzy” Narratives

There were a few narratives in this sample that existed almost entirely outside of the traditional timeline of the ideal deradicalization narrative I have identified. Some of them served as a reminder about the contested nature of what it means to be “deradicalized,” as well as the wide contingency of life experiences that impact how deradicalization is experienced. It is important to understand that even if some individual stories have satisfying conclusions, the lives of each narrator are still unfolding. People who are vulnerable to extremist communities might ultimately be more prone to falling back into their old community, especially if their new worldview is not measuring up to expectations. Narrators might leave one clearly defined extremist group only to enter another group that doesn’t have a stigmatized label like “Neo Nazi” attached to it, but still has extremist views. One such narrator, who we’ll call Ian, provided a slew of details about his life that made it clear he still sees the world as a messy battlefield between good and evil. It was difficult to piece together a coherent timeline of the events in his life, and his rhetorical style sometimes made it unclear about when the events he was discussing took place.

There was one anecdote within Ian’s story that had some continuities with the traditional structure of a deradicalization narrative. He explains that his involvement in Neo-Nazism went beyond ideology, as he describes having lightning bolt tattoos that express that he has shed blood for the white race. While he was in prison, he met a Nation of Islam gang member who was espousing the same framework of white supremacist ideology, just with the goal of Black separatism and nationalism. He says that “I realized if I'd been born black, I would have been just like him. And I thought to myself: ‘Everything in your life, every failure is your fault because you've been blaming Black people and Latinos for this whole time’” (P3). Later, the Nation of

Islam members that he had been interacting with gifted him a book by Malcolm X, which Ian credits as something that "helped save [his] life."

Similarly, a narrator on TikTok also met someone in jail who gave him a book about anti-racism that shifted his views (T5). This narrator, Joe, received a copy of the book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, written by Michelle Alexander. This book touches on the systemic issues surrounding the prison system, and for Joe, this was enough to realize that his white supremacism was founded upon harmful beliefs. He describes that the book "forever changed my life," and now does work in the anti-racism space. Both Ian and Joe had the experience of being deradicalized via reading literature that espoused conflicting views to their extremist ideology.

However, there are numerous parts of Ian's narrative that diverge from the traditional narrative format of going from a far-right extremist to an anti-racist (this structure is followed by Joe). In this sense, narratives are able to elucidate multiple pathways into, out of, and *into a different form* of extremism. In the podcast, he doesn't talk much about his stance toward racial issues now, but does allude to supporting Trump and indicates that he intends to continue trying to join military organizations. Trump has continually aligned himself with white supremacists and enacted discriminatory policy toward Muslims and immigrants, making it difficult to believe that Ian has fully left behind the racial prejudices of his past. He repeatedly told the podcast hosts that his ultimate goal was to fight drug cartels in Mexico, and that he had tried and failed to join the military numerous times. Ian sees his narrative as a continual struggle between good and evil, with the characters who embody each role changing over time. Overall, even when narratives are expressed in indeterminate ways, Ian's anecdote about reading a book by Malcom X and having

it significantly impact his worldview reveals that even "fuzzy" narratives resonate on some level with the traditional structure of deradicalization narratives.

There are numerous insights that we gain from looking at narrative structure. Since deradicalization narratives are usually fairly consistent, this indicates that they might be conducive to being distributed on a larger scale. Media have an interest in adopting stories that follow formats that are both familiar and clear, as that makes them more acceptable and easily redistributed by audiences. Additionally, if the common view of deradicalization narratives is that the last phase includes a call to action that draws an individual to social justice work, people will come to expect that from deradicalized individuals and may hold them accountable to follow through with that work. Doing social justice work necessarily involves an immersion in some sort of community, which can serve as a replacement for the extremist community a deradicalized individual might have lost. Collective narratives can influence self-identity too, making it in all of our best interests to highlight the ways in which deradicalization narratives include healthy ways to reestablish one's ties to community. Public narratives are reflexive, as they both influence and are influenced by other cultural stories. I discuss one of these resonant collective narratives in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Awakening Narratives

To make my study of narratives more analytically precise, I classify them as "awakening narratives," a subtype of narrative extensively studied by Thomas DeGloma. Awakening stories are a prominent cultural tool that provide a way for people to articulate the experience of awakening to the "truth" of reality, realizing that they had previously been living according to a "false" belief system (DeGloma 2014:36). According to DeGloma, people invoke the awakening framework "to make sense of the world in the face of complexity– to resolve contradictions about moral obligations and to negate the feelings of anxiety that often stem from moral uncertainty" (2014:152).

Of all the narratives in this study, nearly half of them contain language consistent with the framework of awakening narratives. This suggests that it is worthwhile to analyze deradicalization narratives as examples of awakening narratives. Thinking of political deradicalization as an example of an "awakening" is helpful in reframing the formation of political identity as an affective, embodied experience rather than a product of rationalized truths that come to form one's worldview. In other words, political identity is just as much informed by how one feels about the world than information one "knows" about it (Hochschild 2018). I now turn to Thomas DeGloma's framework to fully analyze these narratives using the structure of his book *Seeing The Light: The Social Logic of Personal Discovery.*

Awakening Narrative Tropes

There were a few narrators who used awakening narrative binaries (darkness/light, lost/found, asleep/awake, blindness/sight). For example, one narrator describes that they have "come to the light" after rejecting alt-right beliefs, now identifying as a progressive radical (T1).

The darkness/light binary was the most common, with 5 mentions across all narratives (4 mentions of light and 1 mention of darkness). The asleep/awake binary was the second most common, with 4 mentions across all narratives (all of the mentions were of "waking up," or a "wake up call"). The lost/found binary did not yield many mentions, with only 2 references to being "lost" across all narratives.

Finally, the blindness/sight binary was only mentioned by one narrator, who I call Emma. Significantly, she described that "… much like Paul who became Saul, once I could see, I couldn't unsee" (T10). Emma is referencing the apostle Paul's spiritual awakening while traveling to Damascus to persecute Christians (DeGloma 2014:44). Paul was initially blinded by his awakening experience, but after being visited by the Christian disciple Ananias, he regained his sight, "symbolically seeing through new or reborn eyes" (DeGloma 2014:44). Despite Emma's negative experiences in a high control religious extremist group, her religion provided her a language through which to express her experience of deradicalization. I explore this dynamic more in Chapter 7.

One narrator, David, also used a binary that DeGloma didn't mention in his list, but has a lot of resonance with the other ways of conceptualizing awakenings through binary oppositions. This particular narrator, who had previously worked at Identity Evropa, an American white supremacist group, eventually started to become disillusioned with their organizational methods and leaders that seemed to be self-serving rather than responsive to the needs of their community. Once David decided to look at his community as *negatively* impacting society, for him, "it's like someone opened the window. Now I can breathe air" (P5). This binary, which we might call confinement/freedom, highlights the way that narrators conceptualize their past experiences as being constricting, and now have more agency because of their new worldview.

Mnemonic Revisions and Transformations

Many narrators embarked on a complicated process of distancing from both their previous selves and their previous ideological convictions in order to psychologically separate themselves from their past identity. DeGloma describes two processes associated with this: mnemonic transformation and mnemonic formation. Mnemonic transformation occurs when individuals both describe and undermine a previous belief, and mnemonic formation describes the process in which individuals emphasize their previous ignorance or negative mental state associated with their pre-awakening selves (DeGloma 2014:66-67). For example, one deradicalized narrator describes how their "former beliefs disgust me" and that they have "put in a lot of work in over the years to undo the harm I've done and to seek actual truth" (T8). The implication in this statement is that their previous "truth" had been a false truth, and that adopting a more progressive stance (this narrator now identifies as a leftist) will get them closer to "actual truth." This element is perhaps more salient when dealing with former extremists, as their former identities are associated with activities that might either be illegal or widely considered to be immoral.

Mnemonic revisions and transformations are also characterized by language around disillusionment. Awakeners perform "recantations, retractions, or reconversions and involve vocabularies of disillusionment or disenchantment that the storyteller uses to reject a previously discovered worldview along with the community with which they were previously joined" (DeGloma 2014:87). Awakeners are able to look back on their previous experiences and worldviews and see the ways in which they were suffering from not embodying their "true" selves. They intentionally construct their past as being indicative of a false reality where they can clearly see the ways in which they were exploited, via the wisdom of their new beliefs. While it

is unclear whether or not these narrators actually experienced the level of disillusionment while they were a part of an extremist group, an account that highlights disillusionment serves to reassure audiences that they were not fully "bought in," even at the time. The implication is that the alt-right version of themselves was a "false self."

Liminal Language

A few narrators employed vocabularies of liminality to explain their experience of deradicalization. DeGloma describes these liminal spaces as "a transformative episode that separates their past commitment to 'falsehood' from their current grasp of some 'truth' yet also allows for their passage from one phase to the other" (2014:96). Perhaps the most evocative example is one narrator, Helen, who described being deradicalized as "the feeling of walking into a void" (P10). The evocative image of a "void" "provide[s] a dramaturgical element of setting" to her narrative, situating Helen in a temporal and cultural state of "in-betweenness" (DeGloma 2014:99). Helen goes on to say deradicalization also "felt like death," because "I've lost basically every connection that I've had up until this moment in my life." Helen grew up in a white supremacist community, with parents who were prominent spokespeople in the movement. Stepping away from white supremacism also meant stepping away from her family. Her feelings of liminality only get stronger, as she worries that she can't dedicate herself to anti-racism because "people are not going to trust me." Helen has alienated the community that she was raised in by speaking out against white supremacism, and fears that the anti-racist community of activists will be distrustful of her if she tries to join as an advocate. This liminality is social, as Helen is considering the cultural associations others would hold that are implicated in her involvement with white supremacism. She is trapped between identities and stuck in a liminal void.

The Temporally Divided Self

Perhaps the most salient element of cohesion between DeGloma's formulation of awakening narratives and deradicalization narratives would be the sense that many narrators had that their extremist and former-extremist selves were psychologically separate people. DeGloma calls this phenomenon the "temporally divided self," describing the way that many awakeners make distinctions between their pre- and post-awakening selves. One narrator, who I will call John, describes that after deradicalizing, he "lived a new life as a new person, experiencing the world in a completely new way" (T8). Another narrator, Emma, explains that "It feels like a different life… It feels like the [Emma] I was the first 25 years of my life, I don't even know her anymore. I know her 'cause I was her but … I would not be friends with her" (T10). For deradicalized individuals, this negation of their past identity is especially salient due to the social stigma attached to being part of an extremist group. In order to be redeemed, they must draw a clear line between who they were in the past and who they are now, and perform atonement for their past discretions.

Not only did many narrators mention a disconnect between their past and present selves, many individuals also used the language of rebirth when discussing their experiences. One narrator said that after he adopted his new political identity, "A new person [was] born and awakened" (YT5). Rebirth is a deeply transformative process, and implies that the person was spiritually cleansed while renouncing their previous identity and accepting their new one. John also mentioned that "progressive politics and human centered morality were the tools for me to metamorphose" (T8). The process of metamorphosis involves a complete transformation into something entirely new, and is often considered "better" or more advanced than the original form. Using the language of metamorphosis also makes it unclear about the temporality of the

transformation. Metamorphosis can take weeks for some species, but invoking the supernatural side of transformations implies an instantaneous change.

Though this is not mentioned in DeGloma's work, awakening narratives also recall the Christian idea of transfiguration. This originates from the Biblical story of Jesus transfiguring before his disciples, Peter, James, and John into a radiant being of light. This story of transfiguration was a tale of an "authentic transformation meant for our soul and for the human history," which "is divinely designed to take place in none other than that supernatural event, the unfolding of God's redemptive drama" (Kang and Feldman 2013:5). The idea that transfiguration accompanies an experience of "redemption" is very much resonant with deradicalization narratives. Additionally, the ways in which deradicalization narratives can be characterized as pure forms of social contagions is also relevant here because it describes the impulse that many narrators had to spread deradicalization by engaging in formal or informal attempts to counter the rise of extremism.

The Call to Action

Perhaps an undertheorized piece of DeGloma's analysis of awakening narratives is the call to action that many narrators experience after their awakening. DeGloma primarily examines experiences of religious awakening, which may account for this theoretical gap, as the time before a religious awakening is unlikely to be characterized by stigmatized or illegal activities in the way a former extremist's past might be. The process of public atonement serves two important functions: it aids the narrator in performing their guilt, and it shares the spiritual benefits of awakening with others. This takes on a religious tone in many cases, as the public atonement for sin serves spiritual benefits for an individual's conscience and upholds the moral standards of the community in which they live. This is an apt example of a civil repair. It's also a

performance of authenticity, as many narrators express anxiety that they won't be taken seriously by their new political community because of their extremist past.

One narrator, when directly asked if she'll "ever be done apologizing," responds by saying, "I don't think I've done enough" (P8). This narrator, who we'll call Margaret, worked as an interviewer at Identity Evropa, a white supremacist organization with ties to neo-Nazism and the far right. She goes on to say that "I still have work to do" and that "by no means do I think I've done enough." She also establishes herself as a certain type of extremist, as she "never was violent or anything like that" but did help by "bringing people in" to the movement. This suggests some sort of atonement hierarchy for former extremists, as a formerly violent radicalized individual would have to atone for their sins through jail time. For Margaret, she must socially atone for the way that she used her interpersonal skills to draw people into extremism.

Similarly, one narrator, Fiona, told her interviewer that she is trying to atone for the harm she has inflicted on others, which is a "lifelong process" (P4). It reflects modes of discourse in contemporary social justice spaces, as claims makers in those spaces emphasize the importance of looking at social justice projects like anti-racism and advocacy as ongoing instead of having a clearly defined end for an individual. Employing this kind of rhetoric legitimizes the narrator as authentic, as they can "speak the language" of the new political group they are involved with. Fiona worked as an editor at a prominent far-right news media outlet, and now frequently passes information about her former coworkers to organizations working to eradicate extremist groups, such as the Southern Poverty Law Center. Fiona says she does this because she feels "a sense of obligation" to counteract the harm she may have caused from the content she created.

Atonement also involves promoting the benefits of a new, non-extremist way of thinking. One individual says that she wants people to hear that "I feel that the way that I viewed the world and interacted in it was harmful to me" and "harmful to everybody around me" (P9). Now, she says, perhaps hyperbolically, that her "life is a million times better and I'm happier than I've ever been." Atonement can be self-serving for the narrator, as a few narrators talked about how publicly sharing their stories was part of their healing process. Sharing something so difficult and personal has an element of asceticism to it, as narrators must suffer through the humiliation of recounting the worst mistakes they have made to a wide audience. In order to be fully accepted by their new political community, they must suffer the shame of revealing their extremist past to the public. Without this, they might be deemed inauthentic or deceitful.

By condensing the nuances and complexities of their awakening stories, narrators make them more accessible to audiences. In fact, framing people's experiences of leaving alt-right extremism as the simple act of "waking up" might be a useful way to condense a complicated process. This also re-appropriates some of the language associated with right-wing ideology as being a way to "escape the matrix" by "taking the red pill."[38] This framing is alluring, as it implies the existence of secret knowledge that might be attainable should one choose to investigate further. In the alt-right, this "secret knowledge" often takes the form of conspiracy theories rooted in anti-Semitism and racism. Progressives could weaponize this framework, and help individuals "wake up" to the realities of social and economic exploitation.

Narrators in this sample very much evinced awakening narratives, but also pushed them further to articulate their experiences around feeling compelled to adopt an "advocate" identity. I argue that the idea of Christian transfiguration is the missing link here, as it accounts for the

[38] This is a metaphor used by the alt right, which references the popular film *The Matrix* (1999). They conceptualize the "red pill" as a tool for overcoming the ideology of political correctness (Tuters, in Fielitz and Thurston 2019).

ways in which some narrators in my sample made it their mission to encourage the same awakenings they had in other people. Identity transformation does not end with the individual, instead reverberating outward into society. Zero narrators mentioned transfiguration explicitly, so this is an example of an *underlying* cultural structure rather than one that manifests on the surface of culture. Many narrators grew up in high-control religious groups that fundamentally influenced their way of seeing the world. Even if they reject these beliefs now, they might use cultural *schemas* and *frames* for seeing the world that stem from organized religion, thus influencing the collective narrative of deradicalization. I find that even narrators who have no ties to Christianity or any other form of organized religion still draw from religious frameworks for understanding the world, underscoring the importance of religious studies as it pertains to deradicalization.

Chapter 7: Religion

As described in the previous chapter, moments of "awakening" are intensely spiritual. This necessitates a closer examination of the role religion plays in deradicalization. Religion is a contentious issue in discussion of right-wing extremism, since many extremist groups weaponize religion within their ideologies. All of the narrators in this sample who were involved in a form of religious extremism were involved in an extremist group with ties to Christianity. The moral frameworks and shared symbols of Christianity are capacious and flexible, and as we will see in the deradicalization narratives below, they created instabilities in extremist ideologies, operating as resources for an immanent critique of the hate, hierarchy, and violence of white Christian nationalism.

In this chapter, I begin by breaking down the collective representations of both Christianity and white Christian nationalism. I then analyze specific moments when narrators draw on the moral values and symbols of their faith to break down extremist beliefs and articulate their deradicalization experiences. Next, I examine two central "stages" in deradicalization narratives that have both spiritual and political significance: the crisis of faith and atonement/redemption. I argue that religion provides moral frameworks for deradicalization narrators that directly contradict extremist framings of Christianity as well as providing a language for expressing the spiritual nature of deradicalization experiences.

In recent years, identifying as a Christian has become less common, as Christianity has become coded as a conservative ideology with negative connotations around stubbornly clinging to tradition and preventing progress. Around 62% of adults in the United States identify as Christians, which is a decline of 9 percentage points since 2014 and drop of 16 percentage points

since 2007.[39] However, Christianity has had a crucial impact on how Americans conceive of themselves, each other, and civic life. As Gorski (2017) points out, "We think in languages that have been handed down and taught to us," noting that it is impossible to achieve a total separation between religion and politics (6). Whether people agree with all of the teachings of Christianity or not, it has undoubtedly influenced how civil religion is expressed in the public sphere.

One of the ways that Christianity has infiltrated the political realm is through white Christian nationalism. White Christian nationalism uses the language of Christianity to mobilize adherents around the idea that America is, and should be, a Christian nation. In order to fully explicate the deradicalization stories, then, we must understand the stakes of white Christian nationalism. Gorski and Perry trace the roots of white Christian nationalism to a "deep story" grounded in free-market capitalism, masculinity, individualism, and apocalypticism. White Christian nationalism is "rooted in white supremacist assumptions and empowered by anger and fear" of racialized others (Gorski and Perry 2022:8). This way of thinking about Christianity has supporters within many different denominations of Christianity, such as white evangelicals, white Protestants, white Roman Catholics, and white Pentecostals (Gorski and Perry 2022:18).

Religion as Mechanism for Exiting Extremism

Emma's Story

One narrator who cites religion as a mechanism for exiting extremism posted her narrative in a three-part series to TikTok in 2024. Emma describes that she grew up in a form of evangelicalism that she labels as "Christofascist." She says she was taught to use weapons, as "it

[39] Pew Research Center. 2025. "Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off." Accessed April 18, 2026. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/.

would become necessary for me one day to kill in the name of Jesus" (T10). Emma says she was very isolated growing up, which "ensured that I didn't trust others and would not be led away from the beliefs that they were grooming us into." She was sexually assaulted for the first time when she was only three years old, and the abuse continued until she was eleven. Despite the prominence of religious extremism within her community, her Christian beliefs were what facilitated her initial doubts in the movement. She says that she "wasn't just somebody who said they believed in God … one of the things I loved so much is the fruits of the spirit: love, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control." Emma resonated with the positive messages she found within Christianity.

The religion Emma grew up within, white evangelicalism, prioritizes spreading the gospel of Christianity to others and personal transformation of the self. It leans conservative, emphasizing sexual morality and a libertarian ethos of personal responsibility (Gorski 2017:189). Gorski and Perry did a study measuring the levels of white Christian nationalism across different ethno-religious traditions, finding that white Evangelicals scored the highest (Gorski and Perry 2022:18). According to them, white evangelicalism is becoming more synonymous with reactionary politics and Republican voting (Gorski and Perry 2022:9). They describe that many evangelical leaders initially distanced themselves from the moral pollution of supporting Donald Trump, but later, along with many evangelical followers, decided to give their support of his presidency. We can see the difference between white Christian nationalism and white evangelicalism because of the former group's lack of enthusiasm at the prospect of a Pence presidency, despite his commitment to the evangelical Christian faith. As distinct from evangelicals more broadly, the goal of white Christian nationalists is "power, not piety," which is why Trump's appeals to violence resonate more with them (Gorski and Perry 2022:11).

When Emma grew older, she reports that she "started seeing a disconnect between what I was taught and what my Bibles actually said" and "what was happening in my church." She "started seeing discrepancies" between the values that were instilled within her by her community and the teachings of Christianity. Ironically, in placing such a focus on religion in everyday life, Emma's extremist community had given her the tools to see through it. When she "would hear a politician… quote the scriptures and use it as a defense of a policy or decision" she explains, she "immediately …had red flags, because I knew that's not what that meant." Emma makes an explicit link between her religion and her deradicalization process when she says that she "started leaving the alt-right because I loved Jesus." It's unclear whether or not Emma still holds her Christian faith, but politically, she identifies as a leftist. Her story illuminates the power of a moral belief system in undoing the influence of extremism.

Maya's Story

Like Emma, Maya used to be a Christian nationalist who was born into a religious family. Her dad was a traveling Pentecostal evangelist, and her grandfather was a preacher. Maya grew up traveling all around the United States as her father preached at different churches. When 9/11 happened, Maya was only a teenager, but she still noticed that a lot of the rhetoric used after the event became more nationalist in tone. Public figures blamed liberals for allowing sin to come into the country via the terrorist attack, stressing the importance of putting "godly men in power," who would infuse righteousness into laws again (P6). They believed that Republicans were the Christian party, mainly because of their stances on issues of abortion and gay marriage. Maya defines Christian nationalism as "the desire to make the nation Christian by establishing laws that promote a very narrow, fundamentalist interpretation of scripture," as well as the fact that it attempts to legislate morality and enforces American exceptionalism.

Pentecostalists believe that God plays a “direct, active role in everyday life” and engage in traditions like “speaking in tongues, divine healing, and prophesying.”[40] In terms of their politics, 70% of Pentecostals identify as Republican or Republican leaning, and skew conservative in their views toward same-sex marriage and access to abortion. Of all of the different Christian denominations, Gorski and Perry (2022) found that Pentecostals scored the highest in levels of white Christian nationalism, data that supports Maya’s characterization of her and her family as Christian nationalists (18).

Maya told her deradicalization story on a podcast in 2025, citing multiple instances when her faith (and thus, her political opinions) were questioned. Prior to 2016, she was “very loudly Republican," but felt alienated from her community because most of them were voting for Trump. This alienation was also expressed in church, as she describes “singing the same worship songs as everyone around me and thinking: ‘We’re not worshipping the same God.’” Maya was angry, as she was seeing her fellow church members posting “the most hateful, nasty stuff about marginalized people” on Facebook, while they were simultaneously preaching morality in church.

Despite Maya’s conservative views on abortion and same-sex marriage, she did not support Donald Trump’s bid for presidency in 2015. Maya noted that her community had imparted upon her that “‘You want moral men in the White House,’” but were not phased by Trump’s adultery or tendency to lie. She was loudly anti-Trump on Facebook, which led to people telling her that she “was going against the will of God” by refusing to vote for him. This is consistent with Gorski and Perry’s findings that “religious terms like ‘Christian’ and ‘evangelical’ are becoming markers of social identity and political views rather than just

[40] Pew Research Center. 2006. “Spirit and Power – A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals.” Accessed April 18, 2026. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2006/10/05/spirit-and-power/.

religious conviction" (2022:107). Maya describes feeling like she was "kicked out of the club" because she was a Christian who didn't support Trump.

The final turning point for Maya was when her brother came out as gay. Gay marriage was officially legalized in the United States in 2015, and Maya describes sitting at her office cubicle when the news broke, and hearing her community members cry and lament at the news. At this point, she was feeling some degree of alienation from her coworkers, because she seriously disliked Trump while most of her coworkers supported him. Maya watched the live feed of queer people reacting to the news on CNN, and felt a sense of unease about the juxtaposition between the happiness she saw represented on the screen and the devastation she witnessed in her community. She "could not figure out why I wasn't sad, like all the other Christians around me," though she still believed that being gay was a sin. About a month later, Maya's brother visited her and came out to Maya as gay. Maya describes having a flashback of all of the homophobic things she had said either to or around her brother, and felt guilt and shame at her actions. At this point, she recalled thinking "I have to choose my brother" over theology. As she was questioning her Pentecostal theology, this questioning extended to her political beliefs "because the two were so intertwined."

Maya's brother tells her he had spent countless nights begging God to make him straight, which made her question the notion that being gay was a choice. Maya felt that she had changed politically, but not yet theologically. However, she describes wanting "my theology to be wrong because I wanted to be able to celebrate him [her brother]." A majority of evangelical Pentecostals believe that homosexuality should be discouraged — around 68%, according to a 2023-2024 Pew Research Center study — and Maya was angry at God for putting her brother in

this situation.[41] Eventually, however, she came to terms with the belief that "God does create queer people, and that just makes creation that much more diverse and beautiful." Deconstructing her political opinions was easier than dismantling some of the beliefs of her faith, because "You're taught how to defend your faith" via talking points to people outside of Pentecostalism. Maya's belief system was hard to dismantle due to years of indoctrination.

Now, Maya has a very different relationship with her faith. She still identifies as a Christian, and says that she has had "a consistent connection with the divine." Along with this more personal reason for staying true to her faith, she says that she has a more "petty reason" for doing so as well. Her goal is to "wake people up out of Christian nationalism," and Maya believes that she can do that more effectively if she identifies as a Christian. Since there is so much demonization of agnostics and atheists within the church, she thinks that Christian nationalists would take her insights much more seriously if she still has that connection to the faith. She repeats the talking points that made her doubt her own Christian nationalism, as she fights "their interpretation of scripture with my interpretation of scripture." Maya's in-group knowledge of white Christian nationalism will help her establish rapport with extremists who subscribe to the white Christian nationalist ideology. She believes that citing scriptures that go against common white Christian nationalist talking points can go a long way in changing minds, because it demonstrates some degree of insider knowledge around the shared language of the Bible.

Both Maya and Emma's experiences highlight the fact that religious morality and beliefs have implications for deradicalization. Gorski and Perry acknowledge this as well, saying that "There is no shortage of resources in American Christianity that might help chart the way

[41] Pew Research Center. 2025. "2023-24 U.S. Religious Landscape Study Interactive Database." Accessed April 18, 2026. doi: 10.58094/3zs9-jc14.

forward" out of the recent wave of white Christian nationalism (2022:104). Although survey research documents a decline in religiosity among young adults in the last ten years, from 63% in 2014 to 56% today, religion remains important in people's lives.[42] More careful attention to religious beliefs and organizations might prove useful for secular progressives if they want to harness the shared language of Christianity and leverage the organizing power of churches.

Religious Rhetoric in Deradicalization Narratives

Narratives in this sample have revealed that religious values can be the catalyst for deradicalization experiences. I also find that deradicalization narrators use the *language* of religion to frame their experiences. Both of these findings are politically important in the US context where political party affiliation is tightly connected to religious affiliation and spiritual life; in the most recent Presidential election, for example, white Protestants and Catholics overwhelmingly supported Trump, while voters in other religious groups preferred Harris.[43] This finding extends to the nature of political association too. Adherents of a particular political party feel a devotion to both their community and their political leaders, and political rallies often serve similar functions as church services in the sense that they are communal, transcendent experiences.

[42] Pew Research Center. 2025. "Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off." Accessed April 18, 2026. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/.

[43] Pew Research Center. 2024. "White Protestants and Catholics support Trump, but voters in other U.S. religious groups prefer Harris." Accessed April 18, 2026. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/09/09/white-protestants-and-catholics-support-trump-but-voters-in-other-us-religious-groups-prefer-harris/.

The Crisis of Faith

Christianity provides resources for describing deradicalization experiences that may even translate to "secular" narratives — that is, narratives of people who were involved in an extremist group that was not religious. Broadly, deradicalization experiences can be described as crises of faith, which upend how one sees and experiences the world. One narrator articulates this in a TikTok video, saying that members of her community "worshipped politics," and for her, "to question my political views was akin to having a crisis of faith" (T2). Political identity is now being increasingly conflated with both personal and spiritual identity, giving weight to the idea that the personal realm can't be separated from the political. For Maya, whose narrative was discussed in the section above, her experience of deconstructing both her political beliefs and her faith felt like an "existential crisis," as she questioned if "everything I believed [was] a lie?" (P6). Political affiliation fundamentally shapes the way people see and interact with the world, evidenced by Maya's crisis of identity that coincided with her crisis of politics.

Many narrators articulated that their political views bled through into their daily interactions, with one saying that she did not allow her children to have teachers of color, and would put in a request for her children to be placed in a classroom with a white teacher (P9). After disengaging from her extremist ideology, she describes walking through a farmer's market and approaching "the world with this openness and curiosity. And I just want to connect with everyone around me. I'm not judging anymore." Previously, she would make snap judgements based on a person's real or perceived racial, sexual, or religious identity, but now she makes a conscious effort to approach the world with curiosity rather than judgment. Political views run deeper than party affiliation, making the case for the public treatment of political affiliation as being both a spiritual and civic identity.

The Arc of Atonement and Redemption

Atonement has a vast history in Christianity, describing the process of making amends for spiritual or earthly sins. DeGloma (2014) calls the process of atonement in awakening narratives a performance of an apologetic metanoia, which he defines as "a transformation of self that stems from publicly repenting and seeking forgiveness for the actions of the past self character" (138). Repenting is an ascetic practice in which an individual must undergo the painful process of publicly recalling their past social transgressions in order to come out the other side "redeemed." Redemption is a process by which an individual makes up for their previous "self-ascribed failures, mistakes, and misbeliefs by casting their current worldview as a positive moral contrast to their former worldview" (DeGloma 2014:14). Within Christianity, God is sometimes referred to as a "Redeemer" of humanity's sins. In this case, if a deradicalization narrative is accepted by the general public, the former extremist is able to reenter public life newly purified. Redemption transforms an individual, bringing them spiritually closer to sacrality.

As discussed in Chapter 6, narrators feel a sense of obligation to atone for the actions of their past selves and commit to present action that undoes the harm they have caused. The narrators often engage a similar process as former alcoholics in Alcoholics Anonymous, a program that is affiliated with the Christian church. Some reconnect with people who they lost touch with because of their involvement with extremism, and others underscore that publicly recounting their experiences is part of their personal healing journey. Redemption is a communal act, as it requires people to perform both an apology for their past actions and also to commit themselves to changing in the future.

Audiences might decide to reject an individual's redemption arc, deeming it either insufficient in comparison to how much harm the former extremist caused or inauthentic to the narrator's true intentions. Because of this power, they function as gatekeepers between the narrator and their entry into mainstream society. Caleb Cain, whose narrative I discussed in Chapter 4, experienced this tension in profound ways. Cain mentioned in an interview with two YouTube influencers that he had been receiving comments after quitting his job to pursue content creation, which "people took that to interpret that I was trolling for money."[44] Since Cain monetized his narrative, this morally polluted the validity of his deradicalization journey. These creators themselves also questioned Cain's intentions, and one of which told Cain that he was "not necessarily ready yet to say that I fully trust you." Cain had to morally purify himself in the eyes of the public sphere by both atoning for his previous actions and materially living out his stated commitment to anti-extremism advocacy.

In many ways, redemption is a Christian framework that is used in progressive spaces, secular or otherwise. For example, what right-wing critics criticize as "cancel culture," might be interpreted as holding community members accountable among progressives. Whatever the case, the mechanism of atonement is similar for someone who is canceled and someone who is deradicalizing. In both cases, individuals are required to distance themselves from the harm they have caused, express genuine remorse, and state concretely how they are committing themselves to acting in opposition to their previously held beliefs. Even following these steps is no guarantee, since audiences might accept or reject such efforts at atonement. If the audience accepts the performance, the person is redeemed and the deradicalized individual is "purified" of their previous bad actions and beliefs. This idea pushes against conservative/religious and

[44] NonCompete. 2019. "Faraday Speaks Interview." Produced by NonCompete, March 30. Video, 2:11:31. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0AeJwWaTv8.

progressive/secular binaries, revealing hidden structures of meaning beneath the surface of political discourse that are widely shared by conservatives and progressives.

The religious understandings that inform many deradicalization narratives reveal the profound entanglement of spiritual belief, religious identity and political faith in people's lives. The narrators I describe are not one-dimensional rational actors who carefully weigh the pros and cons of remaining a member of an extremist group. Rather, they make political decisions for multiple reasons, and often at their own cost (such as losing a sense of purpose and one's community). Similarly, we must recognize how the complexity of people's worlds shape their decision-making and shift analytical focus from processes of radicalization, which dominates much of the extant political literature, to include an empirical focus on the emotional and meaningful aspects of people's decisions to leave extremist lifestyles. Currently, changing one's political stance is considered as an inevitable product of maturation or education rather than a significant shift in *worldview*. Narrators in this study were drawn into extremism for a variety of different reasons, and they were drawn out of it for equally complex reasons. Framing leaving extremism as a crisis of faith not only highlights this complexity and illuminates the vulnerable, spiritual place that deradicalized individuals are placed in, it is also able to account for the emotional dimensions of political identity. I believe this will prove useful in supporting former extremists like Cain as they navigate the possibilities in public pathways out of extremism. In the next chapter, I review my key findings and discuss the potential future for deradicalization narratives in the public sphere.

Chapter 8: Discussion

Key Findings and Interpretations

One of the most compelling findings within this study is that there is an emerging, clearly articulated collective narrative of deradicalization in the public sphere. Though many narratives didn't fit neatly into the collective timeline, all of the narratives had some sort of resonance with at least one stage of a shared deradicalization narrative. This suggests that a collective deradicalization narrative is in the making in the public sphere, with evidence that people are drawing from a range of other narrative types and discursive conventions to tell their stories.

Chapter 5 discusses the different narrative formats that people draw from to construct their stories. The beginning of most deradicalization narratives start with some sort of tragedy (often a traumatic event in childhood) and ends with a romantic narrative of triumph over struggle. There is also a common narrative arc of deradicalization narratives as individuals move through their political journeys, containing a climactic point that is often when the former extremist realizes that they want to change their political views, or the actual moment of exit. Many deradicalization narratives also usually ended with an expression of atonement and a commitment to some form of anti-extremist advocacy work.

As I established in Chapter 6, people draw from the cultural resource of awakening narratives to express their shift in political beliefs. These awakening narratives are spiritual experiences, which necessitates a further understanding of the religious aspects of deradicalization narratives, discussed in Chapter 7. Religious identity can provide resources for deradicalization, as some narrators express that they left their extremist group because they wanted to follow their religion more closely and felt that their extremist worldview was not

compatible with their spiritual beliefs. In deradicalization narratives from individuals who did not mention religious ideology, they often used religious language to articulate their experiences. This is also reflected in general discourse around politics, as both scholars and some narrators in this sample have made connections between spiritual worship and the worship of political beliefs or figures.

Implications of This Research

Empirically, my research reflects other studies that have asked similar questions. For example, a 2022 study from Liguori and Spanierman revealed that most former extremists in their sample cited interpersonal relationships as being the most significant factor in their desistance from extremism. In my sample, 68% of narrators mentioned an interpersonal relationship as being significant in their deradicalization process. From these valuable findings, we can conclude that a vital part of deradicalization programs should be centered around rebuilding or building community ties. I argue that there needs to be more public emphasis on political deradicalization narratives. There is also the potential for some of these public narratives to spark wider discussions about deradicalization and deradicalization experiences.

Limitations

There were some limitations within the design and implementation of this study, too. The empirical codes were inductive, meaning that they were coding categories that were created while the data was being examined. Contrastingly, the theoretical codes were deductive, meaning that if my research had guided me to different literatures, the deductive codes, and thus, the data results, would likely be very different. Additionally, all of the podcast narratives were within the format of an interview, and all of the other narratives were just one narrator speaking to the camera (besides one YouTube narrative: YT4). The presence of an interlocutor has the potential

to change the structure of the narrative, as they are the ones in charge of asking questions that guide the conversation. In this sense, they are co-constructors of an individual's narrative. Different podcast hosts have different priorities about how they want to frame the conversations in order to align with their goals as a podcast. The podcasts in this sample were framed around religion (P9), cults (P8, P10, P11), politics (P1), religious politics (P6), true crime (P7), psychology (P2), extremist politics (P4, P5), and general internet discourse (P3); a diverse array of genres.

One could argue that this study neglects to analyze the role of economic structures in radicalization and deradicalization. For example, Arlie Hochschild's book *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning On The American Right* partially adopts this view, as her book "argue[s] that American conservatism can be explained as an anxious or stress-induced reaction to the plights of white poverty, undereducation, drug abuse, and feelings of being left behind or left out of the American dream" (Alexander and Taylor 2024:17). This leaves out the "appeal of radical individualism as a *creed* at all levels of American life, not to mention the ideational impact of Christianity, patriotism, sexism, and racism" (Alexander and Taylor 2024:17). While I have no doubt that the amount of extremism in society would decrease if material resources were more equitably distributed between the rich and poor, this does not account for the deep cultural meanings that also make up extremist worldviews. Additionally, many people hold extremist views without having experienced economic instability. This points to the fact that extremists tell themselves significant *stories* in order to make sense of their relative success and explain why the lives of others look different. To construct these stories, they draw from a plethora of cultural resources around the Protestant work ethic, individualism, racism, sexism, and others. These stories can be untangled and explored through the work of cultural sociologists.

Another critique of this study might examine the lack of psychological explanations for desistance from extremism. As I established in the beginning of this paper, deradicalization has primarily been situated within the frameworks of psychology and criminology. However, I am more interested in how these narratives are performed, which impacts how some individuals in this sample framed their experiences. Many of them pointed to their emotional states or issues with trauma as catalyzing their involvement with extremism. Psychology has the advantage of liberating people from the idea that political decisions are made completely rationally, but still proposes that extremists can be "fixed" through proper psychological counseling and ignores some of the wider societal structures that contribute to the prevalence of extremism, and might contribute to deradicalization. Contrastingly, looking at deradicalization narratives through the lens of culture and performance allows for an explication of how deradicalization is experienced and framed *collectively*.

Future Directions For Activism, Policy, and Advocacy

Many narrators noted the lack of support systems in place for people leaving extremist groups. Some mentioned that the process of leaving the group was more painful than being part of an extremist group itself, as it requires being in a transitory state between identities without the support of an established community. There are organizations that are devoted to helping people regain their sense of self after exiting an extremist group, but they are not nearly large enough to support everyone who has exited extremism. Additionally, I argue that these organizations *do* need to be somewhat ideologically focused. This is not to say that they should be centered around "converting" people to progressive ideology, but they should help guide former extremists to a political worldview that helps them make sense of the world without

violence or exclusion. This is both a civic and therapeutic approach to conceptualizing deradicalization. The first priority should be to make sure that extremists desist from violence, but helping former extremists make sense of the world on their own terms should also be prioritized. We can learn a lot from Caleb Cain's narrative in Chapter 4, as it is a good example of what can happen when an individual is pulled into doing deradicalization work before they fully establish a new worldview that they feel represents them. Cain was pulled in all sorts of directions, from academic research to grassroots activist projects, perhaps feeling overwhelmed by the amount of people who wanted to use his story for their own agenda. There was not a social or political space in which to locate himself, which may have created an adverse response to becoming more involved with deradicalization work.

While there are numerous policies that could help support funding for organizations centered around deradicalization and more academic research about deradicalization, a more powerful shift needs to happen culturally. There is significant stigma attached to being a part of an extremist group, and that stigma leaves individuals morally polluted in the eyes of society even when they have denounced their former group. Society at large seems to shy away from trusting former extremists with community building work and political organizing because of their perpetual state as "in-betweeners": not fully deradicalized, because their former extremist ties morally pollute all of their future actions. In reality, former extremists possess vital knowledge about the way extremist ideology is formed and the cultural resources extremist groups draw from to achieve mainstream status. Empowering deradicalized individuals to share their stories with the general public helps destigmatize former extremists and normalizes vulnerability about shifting one's political identity.

Though I argue for decreasing the stigma attached to former extremists within the public sphere, I also acknowledge that valorizing former extremists as "heroes" might reinforce racial stereotypes about who can be redeemed in the eyes of society. Understandably, people of color might point out that they are held to higher behavioral standards (both culturally and institutionally), and when white people behave badly and apologize, they are more likely to be both forgiven and accepted back into mainstream society. This could be part of the reparative work of racially privileged sociologists, who might take on the burden of analyzing the depths of extremist worldviews.

Future Directions For Study

There are numerous directions that further study of deradicalization narratives could take. Firstly, ethnographic interviews with deradicalized individuals could enhance an even "thicker" description of the symbols and stories used by deradicalized individuals (Geertz 1973). While reading the transcripts of the deradicalization narratives in this sample, there were often times I wished I could ask the narrator to elaborate on a specific theme or idea. Within my list of data codes, there was one category for "Other," which often included the pieces of narratives in which a narrator discusses questioning their ideology, but does not attribute that investigation to a specific cause. Additionally, if the ethnographic interviews are kept anonymous, narrators might be more willing to reveal personal details about their experiences. All of the narratives used in this study were posted in the public domain, so the narrators might have adjusted some of the details to either fit with what they thought the public might want to hear, or the severity of their involvement with extremism was either downplayed or emphasized, depending on the kind of persona they wanted to perform. There was only one podcast narrative that attempted to conceal

the identity of the narrator by applying a voice filter over his speech and assigning him a pseudonym used during the episode. There are most likely numerous individuals who would not want to share their story publicly as narrators in this sample did, but who would be willing to engage in a research project that would keep their identities confidential.

Secondly, there were numerous narrators in my sample who wrote memoirs about their experiences around leaving extremism. Like ethnographic interviews, books could provide a richer description of these narrators' deradicalization experiences and context behind the life circumstances that led them to extremism. Memoirs are also interesting because they are constructed as narratives, with a beginning, middle, and end of the story. There are also new questions that could arise within the memoir genre, as books have to be filtered through a team of editors in order to be published. In this sense, the narratives within deradicalization memoirs are co-constructed by the narrator themselves and their writing team. Deradicalization narratives on both social media platforms and in memoirs are examples of public narratives, and ethnographic, anonymized interviews might yield new sets of insights. A synthesis and/or comparison of both publicly available and confidential narratives would be a strong way to move forward within the study of deradicalization narratives.

Further study of deradicalization narratives could also benefit from examining adjacent narratives of desistance from other high-control groups. For example, there seems to be a more established group of individuals who publicize their narratives of leaving high-control religious communities than political groups. The term used instead of deradicalization in these spaces is "deconstruction," which refers to the mental process of dismantling religious views or leaving a religious community. With communities formed around a high-control religion, it's difficult to disentangle religious from political ideology, as they are often deeply intertwined. In my sample,

I chose to include some narratives in this category, selecting the ones in which a political deradicalization accompanied the narrator's religious deconstruction. Within the attempt to bring deradicalization narratives into the public sphere, there might be benefits to encouraging individuals to muddy the waters between their stated religious and political beliefs. Often, the two are more intertwined than people consider them to be. To conclude this project, I explore the opportunities that this unlikely connection can provide.

Conclusion

Encouraging political conversations both interpersonally and within academic scholarship is a helpful way to move forward out of this crisis of polarization. Interestingly, "liberal Democrats are more likely than conservative Republicans to cut off contact at first signs of a difference in political opinion" (Hochschild 2024:241). It is understandable that progressives might feel hesitant talking with people who voted against policies that would benefit their lives or affirm their identities. However, more needs to be done to encourage intervention in the early stages of indoctrination to extremism. Hochschild notes that "Republicans and Democrats share more views than they think they do," a statement that seems absurd in the context of current news coverage of political events (2024:241). Appealing to shared political goals or schemas for understanding the world might help combat polarization and help individuals on the path to extremism find their place in politics.

The importance of starting political conversations with individuals on opposite sides of the political spectrum was constantly underlined in my analysis of public narratives of deradicalization. Often, extremists don't share the full extent of their beliefs with people who they know will disagree with them. This means it is vitally important to develop public understandings of common "surface" extremist talking points that might indicate deeper involvement in extremist ideology. In a narrative posted to YouTube, for example, a young man named Mike describes his relationship with his aunt, who he credits with helping him "into a more sane place of mind" (YT1). Mike had been delving into conspiracy theories around Holocaust denial, and his aunt encouraged him to talk to her about his ideas. He felt like his aunt would "actually listen" to him, rather than shut down the conversation or ridicule him for believing in a conspiracy theory. He was arguing with her about the total death toll in the

Holocaust, to which his aunt responded by asking him where he had gotten his information. Mike then was forced to look back through the content he was consuming, and while trying to find the original source of his information, he describes that he "found someone who showed me how absolutely wrong I was." He did more research into the ideologies that he believed and realized that "everything [he] had basically ruined my entire life over, was just a lie." Without the initial prompting from his aunt, he would have never been forced to question the course of his beliefs. Even a simple question like "Where are you getting that information from?" can initiate conversation or encourage an individual espousing extremist views to think more critically about their information sources.

Importantly, many mechanisms of radicalization already contain the possibility of being useful tools for deradicalization, and it is just a matter of knowing how to frame their usage. Christianity comes to mind as a significant example. James Talarico, a current member of the Texas House of Representatives draws from Christianity to frame his resistance to the current presidential administration. Christianity is also such a fundamental institution in the United States, meaning that there is a wide array of cultural touchpoints and shared symbols that can be mobilized for fighting for peace.

Part of the reason that progressive talking points are met with distrust is that many of them seem like they are completely new forms of discourse, which are gatekept by elite academic institutions. I believe these points can be refashioned to draw from cultural logics already set in place, making them more accessible to the public at large. A public strategy is important, as it coalesces highly divergent experiences into a collective story that can be easily referenced by others. For example, Talarico says that "Not once in the entire Bible does Jesus ask us to worship him. All he asks, is that we follow him. Love like He loved. Love the outcast.

Welcome the stranger."[45] Talarico is drawing from the teachings of Jesus to allude to his political stance on welcoming immigrants and refuting the rhetoric of Christian nationalism. This strategy seems to be working, as he defeated popular Democratic candidate Jasmine Crockett in the 2026 United States Senate Democratic primary election in Texas.[46] Talarico is an example of how politicians can cross the divide between the right and left, as he remains committed to both his Christian faith (traditionally coded as being "conservative"), and taking left-leaning, progressive stances on social issues.

Indeed, economic motivations play a large role in shaping one's trajectory both into and out of extremism. People may feel less drawn to extremist political viewpoints if their lived experience does not involve extreme economic inequality. There is a lot of work to be done in the United States to fully address the unequal distribution of wealth between the rich and poor. However, this is not the full story. Culture has the power to push economic change forward, and it also has the capacity to influence how we understand political differences and significant shifts in political opinions for years to come. This is a strong program argument premised on the idea that the symbols, narratives, values, morals, and frameworks for understanding the world that former extremists use to articulate their experiences are important to understand. Understanding these prominent cultural resources illuminates possibilities for using them as tools for dismantling polarizing political barriers.

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild is a crucial example of what can happen once you reach across what she calls "empathy walls," describing the moral boundaries between partisan identities. She describes empathy walls as "obstacle[s] to deep understanding of another person,

[45] James Talarico Quotes. n.d. "Best of James Talarico." Accessed March 15 2026. https://www.jamestalaricoquotes.com/

[46] AP News. 2026. "Texas U.S. Senate primary results." n.d. Accessed April 26, 2026. https://apnews.com/projects/elections-2026/texas-primary-us-senate/

one[s] that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances" (Hochschild 2018:5). Many narrators in this sample unknowingly scaled empathy walls in the midst of their involvement in extremism, and it fundamentally changed their lives for the better. Others had people in their lives that chose to scale empathy walls to talk with them. This does not have to mean permanently changing our political opinions, but it does mean being able to have a better *understanding* of what an extremist might consider to be important and why they think that way. It means challenging our assumptions about what extremism looks like, and being able to have productive conversations with people who we disagree with politically. It means fostering a more open, democratic civil sphere based on radical empathy, trust, and a shared commitment to building a better world through the use of a public deradicalization pathway.

Appendix

TikTok Narratives

T1: This narrator describes being radicalized by both femininity content online, which valorized weight loss and fat shaming, and Hotep culture, which she describes as adhering to rigid gender roles. She now identifies as a progressive radical.

T2: This individual posted about her experience working at "Turning Point USA," a conservative nonprofit organization. She grew up within a conservative family in a red state, and found that her views started to change when she studied political science in college. Now, she is involved in liberal politics in the state she grew up in.

T5: Joe played sports professionally, but started experiencing drug addiction which eventually led to a stint in prison. At this time, he considered himself a Christian conservative, but now identified that his beliefs were more in line with white Christian nationalism. In prison, he met an individual who educated him on the deep systemic injustices that people of color experience. He now does anti-racism work.

T8: This narrator was radicalized online via YouTube and grew up in a small conservative town. He began deradicalizing when he met people who contradicted his beliefs about trans people, and felt disconnected from his community members when they denied the existence of the COVID-19 virus. He now embraces progressive politics and "human centered morality."

T10: Emma grew up in the alt-right, and was immersed in a belief system that she labeled as "Christofascist." She left the alt-right because she started seeing discrepancies between the violent rhetoric and values of her community and Jesus' teachings about peace and inclusion. After this experience, she now identifies as a leftist.

YouTube Narratives

YT1: Mike started out as a Republican, and went from a Trump supporter to a white nationalist. This process of radicalization was aided in part by his consumption of right-wing content on YouTube. When his aunt started to push back on his beliefs, he started to engage in more critical research about his adherence to conspiracy theories. Now, he tentatively identifies politically as a liberal.

YT5: This narrator grew up in a red state with a conservative father who was part of the Tea Party movement, which influenced his decision to apply for jobs in conservative politics. He worked for a state representative, and witnessed politicians go back on their promises to voters behind closed doors. Eventually, he adopted a form of class consciousness that led him to disengage from right-wing politics.

Podcast Narratives

P3: Ian's narrative was the hardest to follow out of all the stories in my sample. It was unclear how he was radicalized, but he ended up becoming part of a "skinhead" gang at some point in his life. He was arrested and sent to jail for committing or participating in an act of violence on behalf of his gang, which led to the dismantling of his racist beliefs. Now, he is attempting to join the military to "fight drug cartels in Mexico."

P4: Fiona spent many years of her life working in conservative media. She worked for a prominent Fox News spokesperson, and eventually became an editor at a far-right news organization. She describes that writing these articles made her radicalize further, even delving into some of the "Great Replacement" conspiracy theories. After she was fired for posting anti-Muslim tweets, she started questioning her politics. Now, she describes her appreciation for progressive policies.

P5: David describes going through a "libertarian to fascism pipeline," after becoming disillusioned with liberal politics. He belonged to Identity Evropa, an American white supremacist group and started questioning his ideology after witnessing the internal chaos of the organization. He now describes his politics as "left wing."

P6: Maya used to be a Christian nationalist, and grew up in an evangelical Pentecostal family. She started questioning both her faith and her politics when her brother came out to her as gay. Now, Maya identifies herself as a progressive Christian, who uses her experience within the faith to help others deradicalize.

P7: This narrator had a complicated childhood, as both of his parents struggled with substance abuse. He got involved with a local skinhead gang when he was a teenager, and participated in bank robberies to fund his extremist group. Eventually, he was arrested and sent to prison, which was the wake up call he needed to end his involvement with radicalism. He managed to obtain his GED in prison before he was released, and now has a family and a stable career.

P8: Margaret grew up in a household with abusive family members, and a parent who was battling with alcoholism. Her radicalization journey started when her boyfriend at the time started delving into online white nationalism. The couple joined a formal white supremacist group in the United States, until the violent events of the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville led Margaret to question her involvement with the group and formally leave.

P9: This narrator was raised in a poverty-striken, conservative family, and describes herself as a former white supremacist. As an adult, she was bedbound by a physical disability, which forced her to pause and reflect on the impact of her worldviews. She also started to have productive conversations with friends who would call out her racist beliefs and challenge her thinking. Now, she runs a nonprofit organization aimed at helping houseless people.

P10: Helen grew up enmeshed in the white supremacist movement, as her father was a prominent spokesperson for the movement. When she went off to college, her friends discovered her ties to extremism and genuinely tried to understand her worldview, but also deliberately pushed back against Helen's beliefs. After Helen's worldview changed due to these conversations, she wrote an open letter to her community that condemned white supremacism.

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