



Drivers of Far-Left Extremism: a Systematic Review on Current International Scientific Literature^{*}

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. Background. – 3. Methodological notes. – 4. Drivers of far-left extremism in academic literature. – 5. Focus on gender and youth aspects. – 5.1. Gender in academic literature on far-left extremism. – 5.2. Youth in academic literature on far-left extremism. – 6. Discussion and conclusions: gaps in academic literature.

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1. Introduction

In the 1960s and 1970s, far-left terrorism was one of the main threats to democracy in Europe. Therefore, one can say that the whole “classic” theory on terrorism and political violence was established having far-right terrorism as a reference point. Broadly speaking, two classic perspectives can be identified: on the one hand, a standpoint centred on the importance of ideology, a sort of secular religion, as the main driver of far-left radicalisation and, more generally, of each kind of radicalisation (e.g. Voegelin 1939; Bracher 1984; Pellicani 2012; Orsini 2009). On the other hand, a perspective focused on the relationship between social movements, political systems and terrorism that considers the latter to be the result of the “poor functioning” of the other two (e.g. Della Porta 1995; 2013). Nowadays, in a time of international Jihadism and the spread of far-right nativism, how is the state of the art of the scientific research on far-left extremism and terrorism, given their partial decline?

Starting with such a general question, the purpose of this paper is to examine current scientific international literature on far-left extremism with three analytic aims: first, to identify the main trends within the current scientific debate about such political extremism. In particular, the focus will be on drivers that lead people to extremism, a central subject in contemporary discussion on violent radicalisation; that is to say not only a particular empirical phenomenon but also a specific scientific paradigm focused on the search of factors and processes that “push and pull” a person towards extremism (Antonelli 2021). The second aim is to focus our attention on two fundamental factors: gender and youth. How does the scientific debate on far-left extremism take such subjects into



consideration? Several studies indicate (e.g. Khosrokhavar 2014; McDonald 2019) that young people are considered to be the main subjects engaged in extremist activities with women becoming increasingly involved, especially within religious extremism (e.g. Khosrokhavar and Benslama 2017; Musolino 2017; Loken and Zelenz 2017). How are these aspects studied by researchers on far-left extremism? Finally, the third objective of the paper is to develop a “gap analysis” of the scientific literature: what are the main strengths and weaknesses in the analysis of far-left extremism? Furthermore, what direction should future research take to address such weaknesses?

Before tackling these issues, it is essential to clarify what is meant by “far-left extremism”. There is no precise, widely shared definition for this specific kind of extremism in the literature. The concept of “far-left” is flexible enough to include groups (and ideologies) as diverse as:

- radical left parties that participate in elections and claim to respect the tenets of democracy and rule of law. An example is the French party *La France Insoumise*, founded in 2016 and led by Jean-Luc Melenchon;
- fringe groups with a hybrid profile of party and social movement that endorse a more radical view of politics and the use of violence, and who may advocate for the choice of armed struggle. Examples of this include the *French Lutte Ouvrière* and the Maoist *Gauche Prolétarienne*, as well as the Italian organisations *Potere Operaio* and *Lotta Continua* that were active in the late 1960s and early 1970s;



- movements and organisations that, while being issue-oriented, espouse a basic left-wing ideological framework, as in the case of many environmental groups such as “*Earth First!*”;
- movements that identify themselves as “*Antifa*”: short for anti-fascist with a nuance reminding one of Palestinian Intifada;
- terrorist groups openly advocating for change through violence, such as the Italian *Brigate Rosse*;
- violent anarchist groups that engage in acts of sabotage, vandalism, and bombings. Examples of this include the Greek *Conspiracy of Fire Cells* and the wider European umbrella group *Informal Anarchist Federation*.

2. Background

Despite the rich, diverse, radical and extremist landscape just outlined, far-left groups and the ideology itself today receive limited attention from researchers and practitioners. One of the reasons behind this lies in the fact that in terms of its impact on politics and society; its proneness to violence and number of affiliates and sympathisers, far-left extremism in Europe is now a pale shade of itself during the Cold War. Terrorism driven by left-wing ideology marked the history of many European countries in the aftermath of the Second World War. While no terrorist group has succeeded in triggering a violent mass movement on the continent, some of the most prominent among them could count not only on a substantial number of affiliates but also on a wider “grey area” of support. Extreme left-wing ideologies, rooted in anti-imperialism, an-



ti-capitalism, and Marxism-Leninism/Maoism, were shared by the most famous left-wing terrorist groups active in Europe during the second half of the twentieth century. These include, for example, the Italian *Brigate Rosse* (BR), the *Rote Armee Fraktion* (RAF) in Germany, and *Action Directe* in France. These groups were the European protagonists of what Rapoport has termed the “third wave of terrorism” (Rapoport 2004); a New Left Wave that started during the mid-1960s at a global level, fuelled by anti-colonialist struggles in the Third World, active Soviet measures stigmatising the U.S. as inherently evil and the war in Vietnam.

However, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the threat posed by left-wing terrorist groups has diminished both in terms of seriousness and numbers of attacks, as far as violent acts are concerned. Most of the groups operating at their peak in the 1970s were no longer active by the mid-1990s, nor had they left any enduring legacy. Although some exceptions certainly still exist. The Greek organisation 17N, better known as Revolutionary Organization 17 November, managed to commit acts of violence up to the year 2002. Between 1999 and 2003 in Italy, a group led by Nadia Desdemona Lioce and Mario Galesi called *Brigate Rosse per la Costruzione del Partito Comunista Combattente* (also named by the press “*Nuove Brigate Rosse*”) was responsible for several attacks and murders. These included, among others, the killing of Massimo D’Antona and Marco Biagi; both consultants for the Italian Ministry of Labour.

However, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism, did not lead to the end of strong movements and currents within public opinion that questioned the model of advanced societies, capitalism under a globalised economy, and relations between the Global North and Global



South. In some areas of the variegated Muslim world, much of the ideological room once occupied by the left-wing opposition has been hegemonised by other fundamentalist forces. However, in the West this antagonistic role has been taken up by a diverse and articulate set of movements and groups (anti-fascists, anarchists, environmentalists, No Global, animal rights activists, etc.). Since the 1990s, the far-left scene in the West has witnessed greater pluralism; the multiplication of issues of concern, the development of differentiated “language” and a diversification in preferred strategies (non-violent or violent action). This could lead one to imagine a confused and irrelevant phenomenon in terms of violent extremism, when compared to the robust ideologies and granitic organisations present during the Cold War period. On the contrary, this new antagonism represents an answer, sometimes in a questionable manner or through violent actions; through fear, concerns, discomfort and aspirations diffused through large sections of the population. This is precisely why it is a phenomenon that is destined to endure, albeit in shapes and forms which are constantly changing.

Today, violent attacks motivated by far-left ideology are almost exclusively carried out by anarchist cells and organisations. According to Europol’s Te-Sat reports, between the years 2006 and 2019 left-wing extremists (LWE) and anarchists have been responsible for 389 attacks. When broken down, Europol recorded 13 attacks in 2015, 27 in 2016, 24 in 2017, 19 in 2018 and 25 in 2019, down from more than 40 attacks in 2009 and 2010 respectively.

Thus, a diminished direct threat from violent far-left extremist groups in recent years compared to previous decades, as well as the fact that LWE and anarchist attacks mainly damage property instead of causing



human victims, can help explain the parallel lack of attention towards this strand of extremism. In addition, failure to distinguish between goals and means might play a role. According to Ellefsen and Jamte (2021), «numerous practitioners described the core values of the LWE as more aligned with those of the wider society» while explaining why LWE is perceived as a lesser threat than other kinds of extremism. Arguably, using violence against property or people to attain political goals is not tolerated under democratic systems.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the relative scarcity of active terrorist groups does not necessarily mean that the far-left ideology is circulating significantly less in the wider society. Instead, it may be argued that precisely because of the broad variety of nuances and orientations, this ideology is particularly prone to adapting to changing circumstances and evolves accordingly.

Furthermore, it is striking to see the limited attention that far-left extremism receives in the literature, when in fact this kind of extremism is responsible for dozens of attacks every year in Europe, as shown by Europol (2020). In 2019, the left wing and anarchist terrorist scene was responsible for 26 attacks, the highest number for any kind of extremism recorded in the Te-Sat report. Attacks motivated by jihadist ideology over the same period were 7, and even when adding failed and foiled attacks the total amounts to 21. The comparison with far-right extremism is even more telling, as the right-wing ideology fuelled 6 attacks in 2019 in Europe.

That said, recently in Europe left-wing violent extremism and anarchist extremism have gradually begun to receive more attention, at least in the academic literature with particular reference to two develop-



ments: (1) the emergence and spread of different kinds of violent extremisms, and (2) the worsening of the economic and environmental crisis at a global level.

Regarding the former, it has been observed that there is a presumed correlation in the emergence and diffusion of the various types of violent extremism, according to the scheme of what has been defined as the phenomenon of “cumulative extremism” (Eatwell 2006). Therefore, radicalisation processes and violent manifestations of jihadism, far-right and far-left are, in part, linked according to a sort of “reaction” principle. Some scholars are observing the development of new forms of “hybrid radicalisation” (Lucini 2017) and hybrid scenarios characterised by contamination. An example of this includes the recent phenomenon of support in the fight against ISIS by both European left-wing and right-wing extremists who travelled to Syria to combat a common enemy despite being driven by different ideologies and personal motives (Koch 2019).

Regarding the latter development, since the global economic crisis that began in 2008, social inequalities have been exacerbated and environmentalist claims have emerged with more fervour; issues that are now being further aggravated by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Extremist groups aiming to change societies and governmental systems through violence seek to exploit major crises in order to achieve their objectives by fuelling crisis narratives. Nowadays, this trend is most evident in the activities organised by white supremacist groups, that are using the Covid-19 crisis to claim the failure of democracy. They are calling for insurrectional violence and, in wider extremist circles, opportunistically using the ongoing pandemic to spread conspiratorial hate speech. Far-left groups and movements have adopted similar narratives.



Violence is in fact a “social force” that is often activated during deep economic and political crisis. The result is a general “deregulation” (at cognitive, evaluative and affective levels) that produces uncertainty and increases aggressiveness in the social body. In our late-modern, pluralistic and fractioned societies, this aggressiveness increasingly manifests itself in a liquid, changing form, which also tends to escalate (Maniscalco, 2012).

3. Methodological notes

The objective of the research is to select the most relevant scientific articles that focus on the causes of far-left violent extremism and radicalisation in Europe, covering the period from 2015 to 2020. This specific timeframe has been chosen as important developments have occurred in Europe as well as across the world since 2015. Analysing the last five years allows us to take into account the sudden increase in literature about radicalisation and violent extremism for several reasons, e.g. the rise of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS or Daesh), the spike in terrorist attacks in Europe, increased polarisation of public debate and hate speech occurrences and the general fatigue of democratic systems confronted with the spread of populism. In order to ensure the significance of the chosen literature within the international scientific community, it was decided that only English articles be selected. The search of scientific articles was carried out mainly using two relevant databases: *Scopus* and



*Web of Science*¹. Nevertheless, it was decided to also extend the search to other specialised journals that are not present in the two aforementioned databases. These include *Perspective on Terrorism* and *Journal for De-radicalisation*.

The selection was performed in several steps, which are summarised below:

1. An initial basic search was carried out using the very general keywords within TOPIC (title article, abstract and keywords): “extremi*”, “radical*” and “de-radical*” combined with “far-left”, “left-wing”, “anarchis*” and “anti-fascis*”. The search was limited exclusively to journals in the following subject areas: social sciences, psychology, and economics. The result of this search produced a total of 391 articles.
2. More targeted research was carried out into the following aspects of violent extremism and radicalisation: gender, youth, polarisa-

¹ For Social Sciences the most comprehensive journal databases are Elsevier's Scopus with over 23,452 peer-reviewed journals (as of 2020) and Web-of-Science owned by Clarivate (formerly Thomas Reuters) covering 12,000 high impact journals (as of 2017). Both databases have fairly comprehensive social science citation indexes and they represent the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature including scientific journals, books and conference proceedings. They also cover the subject areas that this review is focusing on, i.e. Sociology, Psychology, Political Sciences, and International Relations; making these two databases most suitable for our systematic literature review. Both databases were used to search and identify the relevant peer-reviewed articles for our topic. For Web of Science the search was carried out selecting the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) and Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI). For Scopus, the search was carried out within the social science and psychology indexes.



tion and causes. The results were found to be too limited and there was a risk of missing some relevant studies.

3. Starting from the basic search and eliminating duplicates, we then proceeded to select the articles through their abstracts, initially by geographical area and then by topic, obtaining a final list of 28 articles.
4. Of these 28 articles, 16 are based on the comparison of different types of extremism (mainly far-left, far-right and jihadist), and only 12 are focused exclusively on far-left extremism.
5. Due to the limited final number of articles, it was decided not to make a further selection on the basis of journal ranking.

A mixed approach that combines qualitative and quantitative (textual-statistical) analyses is utilised in this paper. In order to conduct a text analysis, we used Python and Wordstat combined in order to build a hierarchical cluster analysis by computing co-occurrence and frequency matrices. The data used for this analysis of research and academic articles was on far-left extremism across the aforementioned forms.

In the end, we utilised a framework that organises data retrieved from the literature in three main clusters of factors or drivers: micro level, meso level and macro level. They are defined as follows:

- Micro level is broadly defined as the level of the individual. Examples of factors and drivers working at the micro level are identity formation and issues, quality of integration, perceived alienation and relative deprivation. It basically includes personal trajectory, grievances, and motivations.



- Meso level relates to the wider radical milieu where the individual's reference group acts. It is understood as a group/community level which identifies the enabling environment that fosters a radicalisation process.
- Macro level takes into account the role of government(s) and society at home and abroad. This level includes, for instance, the evolution of public opinion, party politics, the State's foreign agenda and actions carried out abroad.

4. Drivers of far-left extremism in academic literature

The textual analysis of the literature on left wing extremism which we present here emerges from a wider analysis carried out on four types of violent extremism (far-left, far-right, religious and separatist)². We report the main results in order to focus our attention exclusively on those related to left-wing extremism.

As we can see from table 1 below, it provides us with information on which keywords are associated with which form of radicalisation most frequently found in the literature (using Pearson's chi-squared test and biserial correlation coefficients).

² The analysis referred to was carried out within T2.1 "Far-right, far-left, separatism and religious extremism; a comparative desk research on drivers" within the H2020 project PARTICIPATION. The main goal of this task was to provide an updated and well-informed state of the art of the research on what factors influence pathways of radicalisation towards violent extremism in the European landscape.



Literature on far-left extremism appears to be moving in a very traditional direction, typical for such a kind of extremism: the nexus between social movements and far-left extremism as well as terrorism, the relationship with the police (and probably, with public order troubles) or with the political system are all subjects characterising the actions of and the reflection on far-left extremism since the 1970s; its “golden age”.

Far left	
<i>More</i>	<i>Less</i>
<i>Movement</i>	Islam
<i>Extremism</i>	Religion
<i>Terrorism</i>	Local
<i>Police</i>	Education
<i>Politics</i>	Social network
<i>Ideology</i>	Gender
<i>Populism</i>	Youth
<i>Democracy</i>	Radical
<i>Society</i>	Policy
	Community
	Trust
	Government
	Regional
	Hate
	Propaganda
	Economy

Table 1 - Most and least associated words with far-left extremism.

As argued in the introduction, studies on the current far-left in Europe are not as numerous as those concerning far-right or religious ex-



tremism. This, as a kind of collective action, is nowadays less common and, in its violent extremist forms, less lethal than the others. Consequently, there is a lack of specific studies on the drivers of far-left radicalisation in the academic literature. Notwithstanding, it is possible to put together different suggestions through an in-depth and qualitative analysis of scientific literature on the far-left, in order to find the main factors identified by scholars.

Before moving on to the analytical discussion, two important issues must be underlined: firstly, the main far-left groups currently tend to be mixed with other forms of radical collective actions/political narratives, such as neo-populism (Greece) or separatism (Basque Region), rather than presenting themselves. Such a trend seems to depend on a national context. Secondly, the contemporary far-left seems to be more linked to anarchist traditions than the Marxist-Leninist background, which was dominant in the 1970s; the “golden age” of far-left radicalisation and terrorism in Europe. By dividing the different drivers into three analytical levels, it is possible to argue the following:

1. *Micro-level*: the most important micro-driver underlined by the literature is perceiving themselves or their group (included reference group) as deprived or unfairly treated (Doojse et al. 2012; Jahnke 2020) as well as believing that the world is ruled by injustice (Shils 2017). When the radicalisation process is about to begin, such a driver appears to be mainly existential rather than political or theoretical. Furthermore, it is reinforced by the presence of specific personality characteristics (Besta 2021): “mean-



ness” and “inhibition” that instils a sort of paranoid enemy-building sentiment.

2. *Meso-level*: is the most referred to driver within the scientific discourse. Three ideological factors characterise “push and pull” dynamics towards far-left radicalisation: antifascism, intellectualism and, particularly when the far-left is hybridised with neopopulism, the rhetoric of victimisation linked to a Manichean standpoint that opposes “innocent people” and “corrupt élites”. Such a peculiar ideological mix sometimes spreads through counterculture expressions, like music and squatted social centres, which can lead to legitimising violent action as a means of a just reaction to the ruling-classes and, in general, “the System” (Arlow 2020; Gerodimos 2012; Koch 2018). Next to ideological aspects, similarly to far-right, independentism or religious extremism, many authors highlight the fundamental role of group dynamics in far-left radicalisation. In other words, “no group; no radicalisation”, meaning that the group and in particular the peer-group with its specific social relations, is the catalyst to counterculture and ideological subjects (Schils 2017). According to Besta (2015) and Swann et al. (2012) the so called “identity-fusion” is important to understanding far-left radicalisation (and probably other kinds of violent radicalisation): it is a way to create a collective identity based on a fusion between personal and social identity. In other words, people who belong to such a group, perceive it as a real collective person no different to themselves. Marone’s study on Italian anarchist group dynamics and



their ideologisation is very interesting: according to him, the anarchist organisation is based on Alfredo M. Bonano's theory of the "affinity group". As the fundamental element of direct action, this kind of informal group is made up of no more than 20 people. They are all similar in ideological perspective and it is where discussion, decision and action takes place through a horizontal process based on the exclusion of a vertical leadership (Marone 2015). The Internet and cyber-space is also important to understanding far-left radicalisation, although compared to other kinds of extremism, not just for socialisation or recruitment means. One of the most important aspects of action for far-left extremism is cyber-space, including the hacker culture and cyber-punk image.

3. *Macro-level*: this is the most neglected area overall in the analysed scientific literature on far-left radicalisation. In such works, classic reference to the theory of social and political movements as well as the importance of social conflicts is almost non-existent. While all key factors used to understand and analyse such kinds of extremism between the 1960s and the 1980s were drivers at macro level. Nonetheless, there are two research papers that stress the influence of the macro-level on far-left radicalisation: the first, by Bruckner and Gruner (2020), points out how the economic cycle has a scarce influence on the spread and popularity of the far-left in Europe when considered as a whole. The second, by Koch (2019), focuses on far-left foreign fighters involved in the fight against ISIS in Syria (for example, those enlisted with



Kurdish militias). Such a study could be useful to hypothesise whether global political and geo-political cycles also influence far-left collective action, similarly to Jihadism.

5. Focus on gender and youth aspects

5.1. Gender in academic literature on far-left extremism

Gender is a variable that is a predictor of certain social and political behaviours. However, as Sjoberg (2011) argues, it is important to clarify that any such differential effects between genders are common due to culturally and organisationally imposed gender roles; the so-called “gendered socialisation”. For example, women are often relegated to, what is considered by an extremist organisation, non-combat roles, while young extremists are often men (Guarrieri, 2021).

The gender aspect in the analysis of far-left extremism seems to be barely explored and lacks in-depth analysis also in academic literature. Additionally, there are no studies devoted to the issue of gender as a driver of radicalisation. In the selected academic articles on left-wing extremism, the gender dimension was analysed either as one of the variables considered in order to explain individual involvement in acts of violence belonging to the ideological universe of the extreme left, or as a theoretical and methodological perspective to be adopted for the analysis of relationships between the extreme left and specific forms of collective action.



Among the most recent articles, two have explored the relationship between left-wing extremism and feminism. The first, written by Giorgio Del Vecchio (2018), analyses engagement with the issues of feminism and women's liberation to which the group *Prima Linea* (PL) gave particular attention when it was active in the 1970s and early 1980s. The starting point of his analysis is an act of violence almost unique in the history of the Italian armed struggle: the intentional injuring of a female prison guard at the detention centre *Le Nuove* in Turin. The author's main focus is on the PL's claim of responsibility, the content of which fiercely criticised the elaboration of the issue of the liberation of women within the feminist movement, but also its practices and its development. The author of the article points out that the PL attack has to be re-contextualised within the dynamics of radicalisation, which deeply affected the feminist movement concerning also and foremost the issue of violence (Del Vecchio, 2018).

Staying on this issue, Katharina Karcher (2016) analyses the German radical left group *Red Zora*, formed in the mid-1970s; a subgroup within the militant leftist network Revolutionary Cells and responsible, between 1977 and 1995, for dozens of attacks with an explicitly feminist agenda. The author argues that feminist activists in Germany were understandably reluctant to discuss ideas and activities that could associate the women's movement with left-wing "terrorism". It shows that the "Hollaback!" and other recent campaigns by feminist activists in Germany have reinforced rather than challenged feminist silence on the Red Zora (Karcher, 2016).



5.2. Youth in academic literature on far-left extremism

Youth has received relatively more attention than gender in the research on drivers of far-left radicalisation in the academic literature. However, more research is needed to develop tools that can assess different types of radicalisation in young people.

What we know from the more recent academic literature is that adolescence and early adulthood are of special interest in radicalisation research. This, like young age, is consistently associated with radicalisation risk (Jahnke 2020).

Ariel Koch, in an article from 2018, examines this under-researched phenomenon focusing on popular and recent modes of mobilisation and recruitment of the “new revolutionary left”, which is a developing threat in Europe, North America and the Middle East. The article specifically sheds light on contemporary left-wing extremism that is embodied today in anarchists and anti-fascists violently mobilising in Europe and North America. This is also found through expression on the Internet and in music. Evidence suggests that the anti-fascist music scene is a useful tool for the recruitment and mobilisation of a young generation of leftist revolutionaries. Moreover, democratic and capitalist countries have become a hotbed of anarchist theories that continue to influence many people, especially the younger generation. Anarchist ideas, points out Koch, still have the power to mobilise young men and women.

Finally, Jahnke (2020) conducted a qualitative study to explore the psychological construct of personal sensitivity to injustice from either a victim or an observer’s perspective; and its power to shape political attitudes and actions. In particular, the author investigates the hypotheses



that victim and observer sensitivity are differentially linked to political orientation and early radicalisation outcomes among adolescents and young adults. The results, first of all, confirm that victim sensitivity grows during adolescence and tends to decrease during adulthood, which may contribute to young people's higher risk of being radicalised. Furthermore, results of the study demonstrate that young left-wing respondents mainly referred to general social problems and injustice in society. Consequently, observer sensitivity seems more likely to be associated with a left-wing political orientation (Jahnke 2020).

6. Discussion and conclusions: gaps in academic literature

The analysis of the academic literature produced from 2015 to date on left-wing violent extremism in Europe reveals a limited number of papers aimed at investigating the causes and drivers behind the radicalisation processes of individuals and groups gravitating around this varied and nuanced universe of activists. Probably one of the factors that explains this low interest, also at a scientific level, in this phenomenon is the very low-perceived threat posed by the "New Revolutionary Left" within European societies (Koch 2018). The underlying causes of this perception are perhaps to be found in the peculiar nature, organisation and modus operandi of far-left groups. As already mentioned, they are a highly variegated universe, both in terms of interests, strategies and also objectives. Furthermore, they are characterised by a loosely networked informal organisation, much more elusive than other types of extremism and which would seem to imply a deeper existential dimension; as in the case of the



new anarchist-insurrectionist groups of the Informal Anarchist Federation (FAI) in Italy (Marone, 2015). These transformations show a clear caesura between the “solid-modern” forms of terrorism of the second half of the last century, characterised by a granitic ideology, a specific culture and a paramilitary organisation; and the current manifestations of “liquid violence” that characterise late-modern societies (Maniscalco 2012)

Moreover, these groups are characterised by the widespread use of the Internet for both propaganda and mobilisation purposes (Koch, 2018) as well as fighting tactics through an increase in cyberattacks that has been matched by a decrease in physical violence (Holt, 2019). Manifestations of physical violence are in fact limited and often take place in the form of sabotage and urban guerrilla warfare. These groups mostly use simple, inexpensive tactics that pose little risk to the perpetrator but can cause extensive damage. There is a continuity of objectives in both online and offline activity, i.e. to carry out decentralised attacks against political, diplomatic and military targets in order to cause damage to businesses, governmental organisations and individuals (Marone, 2015; Holt, 2019). Their *modus operandi* are, therefore, more likely to be confused with the manifestations of common crime (Robinson *et al.*, 2019). In the case of the most involved European countries, such as Italy, Spain and Greece, state institutions perceive and treat it mainly as a problem of public order. Finally, an important factor in putting the study of left-wing extremism on the back burner in recent decades has been the growing attention to emerging extremisms; primarily jihadist and far-



right extremism which, given their impact and level of damage, have monopolised the European scene since the early 2000s³

An interesting element that emerges from the analysis of the literature selected on the new forms of left-wing extremism is a renewed interest in studying this phenomenon. However, it is mainly conducted through comparative studies with other extremism types, both right-wing and jihadist; thus, both in the analysis of the motivations and drivers underlying the radicalisation process (Besta *et al.* 2015; Besta *et al.* 2021; Schils and Verhage, 2017), and in the modus operandi and disengagement processes (Altier *et al.* 2017). As pointed out in the section on methodology, out of 28 selected articles, only 12 have left-wing extremism as their sole focus, while most of the research (16) is dedicated to comparing different types of violent extremism (left-wing, right-wing and religious).

On the one hand, this is an important sign as it recognises the necessity to fill a gap within the scientific literature. On the other hand, it is evident that it starts from the concept of “cumulative extremism”, thus focusing on the far left insomuch as it relates somehow to two other types of extremism (far right and religious). It is the latter that actually continues to monopolise attention within the academic world.

³ The Madrid and London bombings in 2004 and 2005, the attacks in France in 2015 and 2016, and the right-wing extremist attack in Norway in 2011; just to mention those that have shaken European societies the most in terms of their modalities and level of damage.



In fact, there is almost a total lack of specific analyses on the new forms of far-left violent extremism in Europe, both at a diachronic and synchronic level. In the timeframe considered for this research, there are no papers that examine the transformations that this phenomenon has undergone in recent years within specific contexts and countries, just as there are no papers that analyse and compare the different cases within the European territory.

A further under-researched aspect concerns the link between local and global dimensions in explaining the new forms of social and political conflict that characterise European societies. In particular, the case of the variegated phenomenon of left-wing extremism. Here we refer to the lack of analysis on the links and interdependencies between the historical political and ideological fractures that have marked the recent history of some European countries (see the fascist experience in Italy, Spain and Greece or separatist claims in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country, just to name a few) and the new challenges linked to globalisation (claims against neo-liberalism, the fight for the environment, migratory flows and the balances of international politics, etc.).



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Abstract

Drivers of Far-Left Extremism: a Systematic Review on Current International Scientific Literature

The purpose of this paper is to examine systematically current scientific international literature on far-left extremism with three analytic aims: first, to identify the main trends within the current scientific debate about such political extremism; second, to focus our attention on gender and youth; third, to develop a “gap analysis”. According to current scientific literature, far-left groups are characterised by the widespread use of the Internet for both propaganda and mobilisation purposes as well as fighting tactics through an increase in cyberattacks that has been matched by a decrease in physical violence. Manifestations of physical violence are in fact limited and often take place in the form of sabotage and urban guerrilla warfare. On the contrary, within this literature, a fundamental under-researched aspect concerns the link between local and global dimensions in explaining new forms of social and political conflict that characterise European societies, as left-wing extremism is.

Keywords: extremism; radicalisation; far-left; gender; youth.