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Published in:

Civitas - Revista de Ciencias Sociais

DOI:

[10.15448/1984-7289.2016.1.24072](https://doi.org/10.15448/1984-7289.2016.1.24072)

Publication date:

2016

Document Version

Verlags-PDF (auch: Version of Record)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Sigl, J. (2016). Saídas de mulheres da extrema direita e significados de violência. *Civitas - Revista de Ciencias Sociais*, 16(1), 71-84. <https://doi.org/10.15448/1984-7289.2016.1.24072>

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Female right-wing dropouts and meanings of violence

Saídas de mulheres da extrema direita e significados de violência

Johanna Sigl*

Abstract: In the radical right-wing scene, which is generally regarded as a male-dominated interaction space, women are imperfectly perceived as independent actors. The result is a restricted view of realities within right-wing scenes and thus also of violence committed by radical right-wing women. Based on the analysis of biographical case reconstructions, this article expands stereotyped images in respect of female right-wing radicals and discusses the meaning of violence in their entry and exit processes. It is shown that violent behaviour and attitudes towards violence are shaped by a person's overall biographical history, and serve different purposes that cannot be explained in terms of gender alone.

Keywords: Right-wing extremism. Women. Violence. Distancing. Biographical case reconstructions.

Resumo: No contexto radical de extrema direita, geralmente considerado um espaço de interação dominado por homens, mulheres são imperfeitamente percebidas como atores independentes. O resultado é uma visão limitada das realidades no interior dos contextos de extrema direita e assim da mesma forma da violência cometida por mulheres de extrema direita. Com base na análise de reconstruções biográficas de caso, esse artigo expande imagens estereotipadas de mulheres radicais de extrema direita e discute o significado de violência nos processos de sua entrada e saída. Demonstra-se que o comportamento violento e atitudes em relação à violência são configuradas por uma história biográfica geral da pessoa e serve a diferentes objetivos que não podem ser explicados somente em termos de gênero.

Palavras-chave: Extremismo de extrema direita. Mulheres. Violência. Distanciamento. Reconstruções biográficas de caso.

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Introduction

From a gender constructivist perspective, the subject of this paper is male constructed in a double sense. In Germany, both violence and right-wing extremism are spheres which are generally regarded as exclusively male, and dominated by images of martial maleness (Connell, 2006; Meuser, 2001). As a result, women are imperfectly perceived as radical right-wing actors. If they display violent behaviour, they correspond even less to social images of right-wing girls and women. Rather, they are expected to act as caring wives and mothers, and to form a heteronormative stereotyped counterpart to militant male right-wingers. The far right is considered as a male-dominated interaction space in which women are rarely perceived as independent and equally radical right-wing actors.¹ This construction results in a restricted view of possible realities within right-wing scenes. By reconstructing the biographies of female dropouts, I will offer empirically grounded evidence to broaden this view, and in particular I will discuss the meaning of violence in far right entry and exit processes. A biographical approach (Rosenthal, 1995; 2014) to analysing the decisions of former activists reveals structural differences between these processes which depend on the person's biographical background. It will be seen that the most sustainable distancing processes, including comprehensive biographical self-reflection, are carried out by girls or women who adopted right-wing ideology as a result of their primary family socialization. An interpretative analysis of the life stories of dropouts also shows that their different trajectories cannot be explained categorically in terms of gender.² In other words, women show different approaches to violence in their dissociation. Any investigation into the meaning of violence for former right-wing women should not be carried out in isolation but in relation to its embedment in the person's biography. Thus, I am more interested in processes of constructing gender than in identifying differences between male and female violence, for the latter approach tends to conceive of women exclusively as victims of violence (see Neuber, 2011).

¹ This paper relates to the German context, both in its analysis of right-wing extremism and in the research results presented. But other (European) studies in the same field show that Germany is not the only country in which female right-wing activists or dropouts are frequently perceived only in terms of gender stereotypes (see Bjørgo, 2009).

² The material presented here is part of the data collected and analysed for my Ph.D. thesis entitled "Far right entry and exit processes, with a particular focus on gender dimensions and interactions", supervised by Prof. Rosenthal at the Method Centre for Social Sciences, University of Göttingen, Germany.

Right-wing women – female actors in a gender-stereotyped space

Renate Bitzan has created statistics showing the quantitative involvement of women in different spheres of right-wing activity (Forschungsnetzwerk Frauen und Rechtsextremismus, 2014). Attitude surveys indicate that on the level of support for right-wing ideas there are no significant gender-specific deviations, with the exception of the values obtained for the items sexism and violence, which will be discussed below. Women represent about one third of the voters who support radical right-wing parties. If we leave the level of political orientation and turn towards the practical activities and organization of radical right-wing groups, we find that the percentage of women involved is lower. In right-wing groups that are not tied to any party, the estimated percentage of women is between 10% and 33%, while they represent about 20% of the members of extreme right-wing parties.

Female participation is lowest in the field of violent crime committed by right-wing groups. The figure is in the range 5-10% (Forschungsnetzwerk Frauen und Rechtsextremismus, 2014, p. 1). This low value correlates with the fact that in attitude surveys women approve of violence significantly less often than men. This finding is echoed in the figures for the participation of women in right-wing crimes. It does not serve to prove that women are more peace-loving by nature; rather, the low participation of women points to the significant role of a person's socialization, in which gender images are still frequently learned according to which approving of violence and using violence as a means of achieving one's own ends is not part of the image of femaleness (on the discourse around socialization and gender, see Bilden and Dausien, 2006). There are very few academic studies of violence by right-wing girls and young women,³ because sociological and criminological research on violence always tends to focus on adolescent and adult males (see Sitzer and Heitmeyer, 2007).

Birsl (2011) comments on the need to look deeper into the dynamics and development of female right-wing violence. There is nothing to date apart from a few references to the fact that the roles and the positioning of women

³ In academic debates, it is commonly argued that there is a causal relationship between right-wing violence and adolescence. This masks the specific ideological character of right-wing violence, which is generally interpreted as an expression of juvenile protest (see Oevermann, 1998), and correspondingly depoliticized and trivialized. In addition, the heteronormative gender discourse is frequently extended to include the idea that violent rightists are not only male, but also adolescent (for more details, see Dierbach, 2010).

differ within the extreme right, and that an increase in readiness to use violence can be observed. But there has been no research on the development processes that lead to the use of violence (Birsl, 2011, p. 240).

Right-wing violence is mainly visible as group violence and is based on the inhuman far right ideology (Inowlocki, 2000, p. 367). The group contexts in which right-wing violence is carried out are either purely male or mixed gender. There seem to be no purely female violent far right groups (Bruhns and Wittmann, 2002; Köttig, 2004). Even if right-wing girls do not practise violence themselves, they must at least be prepared to tolerate the use of violence (Bruhns and Wittmann, 2002, p. 256). This is an important point: if violence is regarded as a structural element of the ideology of the far right, then it exists independently of individual behaviour. This means that all women who join a far right group automatically accept violence as a structural part of its ideology and political orientation. But it does not mean that practising violence is a part of their everyday interaction repertoire.

On the basis of a qualitative analysis of newspaper articles on right-wing violence, Bitzan, Köttig and Schröder (2003) have produced a typology of women's involvement in right-wing violence. They come to the conclusion that women have different roles and functions in right-wing violence. They can be violent themselves or they can incite others to behave violently; frequently they are involved as onlookers who encourage the violent behaviour of the (male) actors and in some cases trigger such behaviour through their presence (Bitzan, Köttig and Schröder, 2003, p. 156-157). The low level of active involvement by women in right-wing crimes and violence is explained not only in terms of gender-specific socialization patterns but also by the fact that the perception of right-wing oriented women is subject to an equally gender-specific filter. As a result, neither the investigating authorities nor reports in the media perceive women in their role as potential perpetrators (Bitzan, Köttig and Schröder, 2003, p. 156-157).

In sum it can be said that women are a stable and stabilizing part of far right scenes. By joining the far right they move in a social space where violence is structurally accepted. However, their structural acceptance of violence must not be understood as willingness to practise violence themselves. Women can be active in far right groups without displaying violent behaviour. And they can also be victims of violence. Their positioning must be understood in the context of their individual life stories (see Köttig in this volume). These different relationships to violence and the structural acceptance of violence are also found in the different meanings ascribed to violence by people who decide to quit the far right.

Former female right-wing activists and their exit processes

In Germany the term *Ausstieg* or exit is used when someone decides to leave a far right organization. But on closer consideration this is not an apt way to describe the distancing process. It suggests that there is a far right scene that is socially isolated from the rest of society, and that quitting the far right is equivalent to re-entering this other, democratically conceived, world. But the biographies of former rightists show that it is possible to belong to a right-wing scene while continuing to lead an ordinary life at the same time. Right-wing women often succeed in staying unrecognized and in behaving in accepted ways in various social spheres, despite their radical political orientation. Quantitative attitude surveys have also repeatedly shown that the number of potential activists is far higher than the number of those who are actually active in a radical right-wing movement (Zick and Klein, 2014). Thus, the idea of exiting one world and entering another corresponds only partly to reality.

Complete dissociation includes both the dimension of political orientation and the dimension of action. Successful distancing is a process which can be described as comprehensive biographical reflection. It is closely related to the biographical identity transformation processes described by Berger and Luckmann (2004, p. 168). Irritating experiences are the basic condition for beginning an exit process. These may be on the level of relationships with friends and comrades, or they might be related to the feeling of a lack of perspective for future personal development. In addition, experiences with the outside world may reinforce doubts about staying inside the far right (Rommelspacher, 2006, p. 199). Bjørgo argues that distancing processes are usually initiated by a combination of pull and push factors. Push factors are negative social sanctions and consequences to be feared if the person stays in the far right, while pull factors are positive hopes for the future that are tied to leaving it (Bjørgo, 2009, p. 36 et seq.).

Building on the experience of many former neo-Nazis who have distanced themselves from the radical right, and who say they were able to do so only with the help of outside persons, a number of exit programmes have been set up in Germany over the past fifteen years. These programmes can be divided into government and civil society projects. The former are organized by the federal or state criminal investigation office or by the office for the protection of the constitution. One of the aims of state-run programmes is to prevent the individuals concerned from committing further crimes. The number of women in these programmes is very low and thus in no way reflects

the number of those who are active in the far right and who distance themselves from it (Glaser, Hohnstein, Greuel, 2014, p. 68). Beyond the non-presence of women in these government programmes, there is very little information available about female right-wing dropouts. This applies even more so to formerly violent female dropouts. The problems of women are usually treated separately, because special measures need to be taken if they decide to quit together with their children while the father of the children remains active (Wagner and Krause, 2013). A cursory look at the reality of the programmes shows that women are more likely than men to organize their own escape from radicalist groups, which means that they not only have to find ways of protecting themselves alone, but also that they get no institutionalized help with their biographical reflection process.

There are very few academic studies of women dropouts (Rommelspacher, 2006; Möller and Schuhmacher, 2007; Sigl, 2013), and these studies do not focus on female distancing processes (with the exception of Sigl, 2013). Exit processes are mainly treated from a gender-stereotyped perspective, and the male-dominated view of right-wing extremism includes not focusing on female dropouts. By contrast, gender-sensitive empirical analyses using a biographical approach can help to increase our knowledge of women's distancing processes. Below I present extracts from such analyses. They show how different interaction patterns and references to violence can be understood in terms of their embeddedness in and interplay with the person's biography and experiences.

Results of biographical analyses: distancing processes and the meaning of violence in the biographies of right-wing women

The following results are based on case reconstructions carried out for my Ph.D. thesis on far right entry and exit processes. Dissociation can only be understood by taking into account the layers of experience that have led to someone becoming active in a far right group. I therefore conducted biographical-narrative interviews (Schütze, 1983) and carried out case reconstructions according to the method developed by Rosenthal (1995; 2014). Here, it is only possible to briefly outline of some of the results.

I will describe two distancing processes that differ from each other structurally with regard to the intensity and the biographical value of the processes. I will also use them to show that violence, experiences of violence and the practice of violence are constitutive components of far right reality constructions, but can differ in their biographical meaning and in their significance for the production of images of femaleness.

Claudia Bremer: presentation as female right-wing activist in an exposed role

Claudia Bremer was born in a small town in West Germany in the 1980s. When she was four years old, her parents separated and she moved with her mother to a big city far away. For several years she had no contact with her father and later they met only occasionally. Claudia's mother married again and Claudia grew up with her mother and her stepfather. However, she continued to remember her biological father and tried to keep in touch with him. Since it was not possible to build up a relationship with him, she turned to the past: in her early childhood she had a close relationship with her paternal grandparents, who, following the defeat of Nazi Germany in the Second World War, had been forced to leave their home village in what was then Germany's eastern territory and move to the west, where they built up a new life. By romanticizing this story of the family's origin, Claudia created for herself a deep connection with her father's family. Her radical right-wing politicization was connected with revanchist ideas. For her, the concepts of homeland and origin were highly charged and nationalistically coloured, not least because neither with her father nor with her mother and stepfather was she able to build up stable and secure relationships (Bowlby, 2005).⁴

Claudia joined the far right as a young teenager. She explained this was the inevitable consequence of constant conflicts in her area between young people of German parentage and others with an immigrant background. She very quickly began to feel at home in the structures of the far right scene, and at sixteen she took on a leading position in supraregional radical right-wing organizations. In her presentation, she said that did not approve of the radical right-wing skinhead milieu because she did not like the aimless violence and uncontrolled consumption of alcohol. However, this dislike was not due to a rejection of violence as such, but rather to the fact that the skinhead culture did not meet her need for control. She preferred to surround herself with people who constantly practised violence, not aimlessly but for clear reasons. Even if Claudia was not violent herself, she was put under observation by internal security agencies during her active time within the far right, meaning she was classified as dangerous.

⁴ Several studies offer empirical evidence confirming a connection between insecure parent-child relationships and the development of right-wing ideas (e.g. Hopf et al., 1995); the interconnection between this and other factors that lead to joining right-wing groups is discussed by Köttig (2004, p. 314).

Claudia presented herself as a neo-Nazi activist who differed from large parts of the far right. Her gender served her as a useful component of her presentation of herself as a special neo-Nazi. She underlined that in her activities and in her self-perception she rejected the image of femaleness propagated by right-wing groups, but nevertheless was fully accepted as an independent, politically committed person. Despite her beliefs, she criticized the right-wing gender ideology because it reduced women to the role of an apolitical mother and housewife. By contrast, she saw herself as equal to her male counterparts and always felt she was respected despite her gender. However, this gender ideology was an irritating experience in Claudia's right-wing world. She said she decided to leave when it became clear that her attempts to change attitudes towards women were futile. At the same time, quitting was also a way of raising herself up intellectually, because she could make the whole of the far right seem intellectually inferior to herself. Claudia subsequently ended her far right activities and in the eyes of outsiders she was a dropout, but no processes took place, which could be described as biographical reflection. She reflected on her behaviour and her political orientation only to the extent that she continued to regard both as legitimate, but no longer felt that belonging to the radical right was a good way to assert her interests. Thus, her positioning remained unchanged.

Claudia repeatedly underlined her rejection of violence by referring to the fact that she was not violent. At the same time it was clear that she needed people around her who were prepared to commit violence in order to present herself in a powerful role as a special woman. Inside the far right she was able to link this image with her need to be able to refer to homeland and origin in terms of a national collective.

Wiebke Hansen: leaving the far right as emancipation from parents and family

Wiebke Hansen grew up in the 1990s in a rural area of northern Germany. She is one of several siblings and her parents practised the classic heteronormative distribution of roles, according to which the mother as housewife was responsible for bringing up the children and the father supported the family financially with his wages. Wiebke's parents both came from conservative families and at least her paternal grandparents were loyal to the system during the Nazi period and continued to display Nazi patterns of thought in the present. Wiebke's parents were active in several right-wing organizations and their political orientation affected the everyday life of the family. Wiebke grew up in a nationalistic family in which mental and physical

violence were accepted methods of training children. By becoming used to hardship, the children were to be made into strong and assertive right-wing radicals; any kind of physical or mental weakness was looked down on, and the children were unable to build up loving, close emotional relationships. Especially Wiebke's father was not only violent, but made his approval dependent on obedience and achievement. Of all the children, Wiebke was the one who least came up to his expectations, which explains why she became the most active and convinced right-wing radical: it was the only way she could see to earn her father's approval.

She was still at primary school when she started going with her siblings to camps at which the children were taught Nazi ideology and prepared for leadership roles in the far right. Characteristic of these camps was a strict gender separation, which involved not only clothing rules, but also the teaching of gender-specific skills. While Wiebke and her sisters were taught handwork, her brothers learned boxing and did survival training. Thus, a right-wing orientation was an elementary component of Wiebke's primary socialization, which was also linked with the teaching of culturally hegemonial gender-role stereotypes. Her school and other social institutions noted the direction her development was taking, but did nothing to stop it. Even when as a teenager Wiebke expressed her views openly and provocatively through the clothes she wore and the comments she made in history lessons, neither the teachers nor her fellow pupils tried to intervene. At fourteen Wiebke began to join right-wing parties and groups. She spent her free time at events, concerts, demonstrations and trips organized by different radical right-wing scenes, and was accepted even as a young girl because of her family background and the fact that she had attended nationalistic camps for many years. In the context of her group activities, Wiebke repeatedly became involved in attacks on political opponents in which she used violence and injured her victims. Violence, as she argued in retrospect, was an elementary component of radical right-wing scene and women practised violence. The more Wiebke became established in far right scenes, the more strongly she engaged in conflict with her parents. This could be explained in terms of typical adolescent rebellion, but on the other hand it was the respect she earned for her right-wing orientation outside the home which gave her strength to fight back against her oppressive upbringing. She began to regard her parents as people who were good right-wingers but who had failed as educators. This was the first crack in her positive perception of right-wing ideology. Through her right-wing activities, Wiebke was at first able to continue enjoying the approval of her parents, but she gradually cut herself off emotionally from them and thus succeeded in creating a protective

space for herself. This was reinforced when at seventeen Wiebke formed a steady relationship. Her partner was also an established neo-Nazi. She soon moved in with him in a nearby big town and thus moved away from her parents. At first Wiebke and her partner were accepted as a couple within their right-wing world, but soon they both began a process of distancing themselves from the far right. This first took the form of an inner distancing, and then they withdrew from the group for practical reasons. Their close relationship enabled them to talk to each other about the irritations they had experienced in their right-wing orientation and in their activities within the neo-Nazi structures, and to discuss their doubts. This was a process of “maturing out” (Möller and Schuhmacher, 2007, p. 372) with a corresponding desire for biographical normality. Wiebke and her partner saw no personal future for themselves within the far right and blamed this personal lack of perspective on the right-wing ideology. With the aid of critical publications, they succeeded in distancing themselves from this ideology. After a few months they announced publicly that they had dropped out of the scene. Wiebke broke off all contact with her parents, with whom she had only had sporadic contact since leaving home.

Together with her partner, Wiebke has built for herself a new and socially respected life, in which right-wing radicalism plays a role only in connection with her past. The most important aspect of her new life is the feeling that for the first time she is free to make decisions without any ideological pressure or violence. When she thinks about her past, she repeatedly tells herself she has become another person. As part of this change, she has actively reflected on the crimes she committed and has sought contact with some of her former victims, apologizing to them for her violent behaviour. She also tries to make amends on other social levels. For Wiebke, leaving the radical right also meant leaving her family and thinking critically about her primary socialization. She not only regards herself as a new person, but can also be described as someone who has undergone a total transformation (Berger and Luckmann, 2004), someone with two completely separate life phases.

Discussion of the results

This account of the life stories of two female dropouts shows not only how different entry and exit processes can be, but also that presentations of violence and gender in the context of right-wing radicalism are not variables that can be understood independently of their systematic embedment in the life stories that produce them.

The aim of this study was not to produce statistics showing the differences between male and female violence, but to question the essentialist connection

between violence and maleness, and to find out to what extent violence can be integrated into images of femaleness (see Neuber, 2011).

Although there is a close link between violence and gender on the cultural level, this cannot be directly transferred to the level of biography (Neuber, 2009, p. 192). For here, as we have shown, violence is subject to a “biographical willfulness” (Neuber, 2009, p. 15) that takes different forms; this also applies to violence carried out by women.

As right-wing activists, women play different roles in connection with violence. Especially in their own self-presentation, the significance of violence varies. In the case of Claudia Bremer, her own power and strength are reflected in her approval of violence, even if she is not violent herself. For Wiebke Hansen violence is a normal and familiar behaviour pattern up to the time of her exit from the far right, and she begins to question it and finally abandon it only as part of the distancing process. During her socialization as a child Wiebke was regularly subjected to both mental and physical violence, and later she uses violence herself as a means of asserting her own interests and as a way to present herself as a powerful member of a radical right-wing group. These results show that it is wrong to associate violence exclusively with maleness, because this detracts attention from female violence (Neuber, 2011, p. 7). Empirical research shows that violence is also practised by girls and women in order to acquire supposed male attributes such as power, strength, recognition and assertiveness, and thus can also be read as belonging to femaleness (Neuber, 2011, p. 8).

The two biographies presented here show not only that distancing processes can be very different, but also that people have different ways of relating violence to their own life. The biography of Wiebke Hansen corresponds to the idea of total transformation proposed by Berger and Luckmann. Her distancing means distancing from a far right political orientation, as well as reflecting and distancing herself from her own past behaviour patterns, including her violent behaviour. In Wiebke’s case, the distancing process triggers a comprehensive biographical reflection process which leads to her distancing herself from her family of origin and breaking off all contact with her parents.

By contrast, Claudia Bremer uses the public announcement of her exit to gain extra attention. Although she leaves the far right scene, she retains her basic behaviour pattern, according to which she presents herself as a special woman in contexts defined as male by continuing to oppose heteronormative ideas of gender. Her biography shows that a superficial exit from the radical right does not necessarily lead to critical reflection in respect of one’s own

interpretations and behaviour patterns. In Claudia's case this means that she does not question her own relationship to violence.

This contrastive presentation of two biographical analyses shows that, despite sharing the same gender, female right-wing radicals have different relations to violence. Perhaps it will help to stir up the established view of gender differences which still largely dominates research on the far right.

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Recebido em: 16 ago. 2015

Aprovado em: 18 nov. 2015

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