1 The Making—and Unmaking—of Violent Men

Nationalism typically springs from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope.

Cynthia Enloe (1989)[1]

My grandmother used to keep a small suitcase by the door of her apartment in Brooklyn. An "overnighter," you'd call it. Once she showed me what was in it: a change of clothes, some toiletries, an envelope with about $100 in cash, and a nightgown.

"Why?" I asked her.

"Just in case," she said.

"In case what?" I asked, the naïve eight-year-old.

"In case they ever come again," she said.

The year was 1959. Her apartment was on the fifth floor of an apartment facing the water on Shore Road in Brooklyn. As in, New York City. As in, the United States of America. From her balcony we watched the building of the Verrazano Bridge.

When I was a young child in the 1950s, the Holocaust was not ancient history; it was a distinct memory, a terror that lingered. Both the neighborhood butcher and the shoemaker had numbers tattooed on their forearms. The Holocaust was so present that it was never to be spoken of, lest the fates be tempted to return it and this time bring it to our shores.

It is always difficult to approach a historical event in hindsight. My father lied about his age to enlist in the navy in 1944, and I used to ask him, What was it like to not know the end of the story? To not know that when the war ended, we would have won? To fight in a war is, by definition, to not know the ending; indeed, you feel yourself part of what will create the ending your side wants. You hope.

According to an ever-growing number of young men in Europe and the United States and across the Muslim world, we are at the beginning of just such a war. And no one knows how it will end.

To me, what is interesting in the paragraph you just read is not the indeterminacy of the outcome. All crises are like that. No; it is the fact that "ever-growing number of young men" probably does not seem notable to most readers. The fact that virtually *all* of those mobilizing on all sides of this growing clash are young *men*—whether right-wing extremists, anti-immigrant zealots, anti-Muslim skinheads and neo-Nazis, or young Muslims readying for jihad. It's so obvious, it barely needs noting.

And so it isn't noted. When then-president Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry convened a three-day conference titled "Combating Violent Extremism" at the White House in February 2015, hundreds of experts from the diverse fields of law enforcement, security personnel, psychology, international relations, and criminology discussed how young people are recruited into these extremist groups, including scrutiny of recruits' backgrounds, mental health statuses, and religious beliefs. Legal and penal experts discussed court proceedings and incarceration issues. During the entire conference, participants heard not one word about "masculinity." (Indeed, the big controversy was whether President Obama sufficiently and specifically addressed *Islamic* terrorists.)

"We have to confront squarely and honestly the twisted ideologies that these terrorist groups use to incite people to violence," Mr. Obama told the audience. A year earlier, Secretary Kerry had argued that countering terrorism should involve "better alternatives for a whole bunch of young people" and greater "opportunity for marginalized youth." "People." "Youth."[2]

But which "people" exactly? What "youth?" If we close our eyes and imagine those people, those young people, whom do we see? And what is their gender?

If we imagine for a moment that all those amassing on all the different sides of this looming cataclysm, all those drifting to the edges of the political spectrum and toward violent extremism, were female, would there be any other story? Would not magazines be filled with individual profiles, TV news shows highlighting the relationship between femininity and violence, bookshelves sagging from the weight of the "gender" analysis? Yet the fact that virtually every single violent extremist is male creates hardly a ripple.

It can be easy to think, "But wait, what about those female suicide bombers? What about those skinhead girls? Those women of the Klan?" This proves my point. We notice the minuscule percentage of female activists. We overnotice them precisely because they are so counterintuitive. Man bites dog.

To be sure, there *are* plenty of women attracted to extreme politics. Some are comrades in arms, and many more are involved as wives and mothers. About 10 percent of jihadist recruits from the United States are female—in France it's about double that percentage—and many more visit their partners and sons and brothers in prison, even if they are not as often the inmates. Women drink and party at the White Power festivals, but they rarely venture into the mosh pit. Women are definitely part of the movement, but they are underrepresented as activists; they rarely train for war or engage in terrorist activities. It's what makes them interesting to study, of course, and we will meet a few in this book.

When others have examined the women who are attracted to extremism, gender has been front and center in the analysis.[3] When we look at female skinheads or suicide bombers, female neo-Nazis or women of the Klan, we ask about gender, about how their ideas and actions are shaped by, through, and often against their notions of femininity. Gender is visible. In fact, sometimes gender might be overemphasized at the expense of other aspects of women's experience. That's how evident it is.

It can be easy to shrug off this remarkably skewed gender difference with a bemused eye-rolling nod toward biology. Boys will be boys, right? Man-the-hunter avatars, cavemen in caftans or cargo pants, biologically predisposed toward violent rapacious predation, their eyes glazed over with testosterone-fueled rage. Except that only a tiny fraction of young males, driven by their endocrine systems or their evolutionary imperative,

ever remotely consider such extremist violence. Those 99+ percent—are
they not men?

If we do acknowledge something about the prevalence of men—as
men—we're pretty quick to change the subject. It's psychological trauma.
Political disenfranchisement. Downward economic mobility. Gradual
irrelevance in a globalizing world. Religion.

I want to start by asking some different questions. Who are these young
men? What draws them to violent extremism? What are the ideologies
that inspire them, the psychological predispositions that lead some and
not others to sign up? What emotional bonds are forged and sustained
through membership in violent extremist groups?

An answer cannot be found in popular media analysis. In an otherwise
insightful 2015 article in *The New Yorker,* "Journey to Jihad," Ben Taub
promises to explain "how *teenagers* are lured into Syria's war," and then
focuses entirely on the increasingly myopic Manichean worldview of ISIS
clerics, portraying the Belgian and other European boys whom Islamic
State has recruited as impressionable naïfs.[4] (The italics above are mine; it's
not about "teenagers," after all, but about teenage *boys.* The only girls men-
tioned are a couple of ex- and current girlfriends.) There's not a word about
masculinity, not a word about feeling as though they are finally *doing* some-
thing great, for a cause greater than themselves. Not a word about the vis-
ceral, quasi-erotic appeal of extremist politics to young men, offering that
chance to prove their masculinity, to be a man among men and reap the
sexual payoff of women's admiration, either in this or in the next life. Nor
even about the terrifying ways that their terrorist beheadings increasingly
resemble the video games they are playing constantly in the training camps.

And you won't find the answer in official U.S. policy documents. The
official U.S. efforts at "combatting violent extremism" (CVE) focus exclu-
sively on Muslims. Exclusively as in, 100 percent of federal CVE funds are
aimed at Muslim communities within the United States. Officially, the
administration's strategy states unequivocally that "al-Qa'ida and its affili-
ates represent the preeminent terrorist threat to our country."[5] An extract
from a White House briefing document, "Empowering Local Partners to
Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States," discusses solely Islamic
extremism and Al Qaeda.[6] (According to studies by the University of

Maryland's Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism [START] program, the vast majority of attacks in the United States were carried out by non-Islamist extremists.)

Nor will you find it in some of the recent research on deradicalization. Scholars point us in many directions, all useful, and all incomplete. John Horgan, a psychologist and the director of the International Center for the Study of Terrorism at Penn State, sees the appeal of terrorism in group participation and identity formation. While identity formation is a deeply gendered process, Horgan spends scant time on gender; the word does not appear in his index (nor does *masculinity, manhood,* or any other such word). But doesn't "group participation" provide a sort of gendered compensation, an alternate route to experience a successful gender identity, to prove one's manhood? As a result of ignoring gender entirely in his examination of engagement, his model of disengagement stresses only how "individuals" get out.

Anthropologists such as Scott Atran and sociologists such as Marc Sageman successfully refute the immiseration thesis: terrorists are not the poorest of the poor, barely literate and utterly suggestible to groupthink. Indeed, Sageman finds that the majority of the jihadists he interviewed were well educated and reasonably well-off. Atran calls them "patently ordinary people" who simply want to be part of the in-crowd. To him, terrorism is transactional: terrorists commit acts of violence as a way of thanking the in-crowd for letting them join the group. This sounds remarkably similar to a fraternity rush.[7]

There is now a periodical called the *Journal for Deradicalization,* coedited by Daniel Koehler, which lists among its advisors some of the top names in the field—many of whom are scholars whose work I have relied on for background. But if you're looking for a gender analysis of deradicalization, you'd be well advised to look elsewhere. Through ten issues I could find only a handful that might have given any weight to gender. Typical is a "systematic review of the literature" which concludes that one of the primary mechanisms for fostering deradicalization is to "increase social bonds [that] provide individuals a 'stake in conformity' and ease them out of criminal lifestyles." Another article seemed promising, proposing a typology of "thugs" and "terrorists." It suggests attacking frequencies and differences in perpetrators' strategies and organization, but without discussing

how any of this might be related to gender. Yet another article points to "identity crises" as a predictor of entry, without ever considering that they might be linked to questions about proving masculinity.

"Individuals" again. "People." If all these "individuals" were women, we would not be talking about "individuals"; we'd be talking about gender. In the end, I could find not a single article in this new and seemingly authoritative journal that used the word *gender,* let alone *masculinity.* The fish are the last to discover the ocean.[8]

In an intriguing study of terrorist networks, Marc Sageman, a physician and sociologist who also served as a CIA operations officer, notices that the networks he examines are composed exclusively of men. He then examines their age, faith, employment, location, and their experiences of relative deprivation, but does not investigate the gendered emotions or experiences of those factors. If basically no women of identical age, level of employment, experience of faith, and experience of relative deprivation become involved in terrorist networks, it bears investigating why it is only *men* with these backgrounds who become radicalized.[9]

One researcher published in the *Journal for Deradicalization* comes agonizingly close to understanding gender, but then backs away entirely. Charles Mink debriefed hundreds of accused terrorists affiliated with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria between 2007 and 2008. He expected a bunch of "political outsiders, economic pariahs and religious zealots." Instead, he found detainees who were "fairly well educated, completely uninterested in state politics, gainfully employed in one way or another, and—perhaps most surprising—they were religiously apathetic." They were not, by and large, "angry, impoverished, or especially pious." Instead, Mink argues, those drawn to terrorism were "looking to fill their lives with companionship and significance. They join terrorist groups because they see affiliation with a global phenomenon as the best way to experience intimacy and solidarity with like-minded people." They want intimacy, solidarity, community, connection. Mink makes joining ISIS sound more like pledging a college fraternity than joining a group of religious fanatics bent on death. Well, perhaps, to paraphrase Shakespeare's *Henry V,* "he who sheds *someone else's* blood with me shall be my brother."[10]

Mink echoes the analysis of radicalization and deradicalization offered by Tore Bjørgo, perhaps the foremost researcher in this area. It was Bjørgo's

initial insight that the primary motivation for joining extremist groups is not ideology, but rather the offer of a visceral experience of camaraderie and belonging. This insight led to the formation of EXIT, an organization devoted to helping neo-Nazis, skinheads, and other extremists get out of the movement, first in Norway and later in Sweden, Germany, and now, under the auspices of Life After Hate, the United States. But unlike those who see these yearnings for connection and camaraderie as generic psychological needs, Bjørgo recognizes the distinctly gendered route young Scandinavian boys take to meet them.

While several studies of women on the far right consider the relationship between gender and political extremism, no study of neo-Nazi skinheads or other white nationalists considers masculinity in its analysis. The literature on jihadists is far more extensive, but even in that subfield only one book stands out as placing gender at the center of the analysis. Maleeha Aslam's *Gender-Based Explosions* disentangles, as her subtitle promises, "the nexus between Muslim masculinities, jihadist Islamism and terrorism."[11]

Aslam goes way back into Muslim scriptures and images of Mohammad in the Qur'an, and then ties these traditional religious images to the obligations and entitlements that come with being a Muslim man. She comes to understand these men as having "troubled masculinities," embracing traditional religious notions of manhood suffused with deeply cultural understandings of shame and honor, while living in a world in which their capacity to express and experience successful manhood is increasingly tenuous. A man, one of her interviewees told her, is "someone who can take care of family and can afford to keep a wife and certain number of children." When he can't do that, he has to have alternatives. Another interviewee said:

> Men want to take care of their families. If they feel incapable of doing so, in most cases they leave the house and never return. After leaving the house they start acting criminally. Men are vulnerable to external influences. Women remain protected in their house. Men become part of street culture. They opt for drugs. They start abusing people around them. They indulge in physical violence—and they shout, use foul language. They do all this to eliminate the list of demands that their family wants to place on them.[12]

So when men are incapable of living up to the ideals their culture has set for them, they act out, take drugs, act violently, curse, shove—and sometimes they join jihad.

Aslam carefully and thoughtfully explores the doctrinal and cultural links between economic autonomy, financial security, and domestic patriarchy—that is to say, control over women and children. Domestic patriarchy breaks down when economic security breaks down, and men will often use violence to restore the domestic side of their entitlements, as they feel humiliated in failing to meet the obligations that masculinity places on them in the public sphere. The private is compensation for the public.

And if that doesn't work—if both public and private patriarchies are unavailable or have been compromised—they can, and do, become politicized. "Men divested of economic authority," Aslam writes, "tend to adopt political trajectories that facilitate the restoration of (lost) honor."[13]

This, then, is the gendered political psychology of extremism: patriarchal cultures come with sets of obligations for men about proving masculinity, accompanied by a set of entitlements and rewards. Cultures of honor require successful performances of masculinity, in both public and private spheres. A threat to either or both forms of patriarchy leads to feelings of humiliation and shame, as masculinity is a social performance and other men are constantly evaluating that performance. Breakdown requires restoration, retrieval, reclamation. Little wonder that these young men believe dozens of virgins await them in heaven after martyrdom. What could more strongly represent masculinity restored?

Following Aslam, I argue here that "although not the singular cause behind jihadism, gender as a contributing factor in militant-jihadist Islamism and/or Terrorism has to be recognized."[14] I claim something similar about extremist right-wing politics: I add an understanding of that dynamic as specifically embodied in the emasculation and humiliation, and the physicality of masculinity's restoration, in the worlds of young skinheads and neo-Nazis in Sweden, Germany, and the United States.

In this book, I follow the lead of Aslam and Bjørgo, but add a salient dimension to the otherwise fascinating portraits offered by other terrorism scholars. It's not that they're wrong; it's that their analysis is incomplete. They see the social-psychological need for connection, but they don't see it as a gendered quest. They see wanting to fit in, but they don't see why the men stick out in the first place. They see the social rewards

these "people" may receive, but they fail to see why it's *so* important, why the stakes are so high; and so they fall back on explanations of a vaguely generic human need for connectedness.

Just for a moment, then, let's pay attention to gender and see where it takes us. I do not suggest that once we understand gender, we will fully understand the lure of violent extremism. Of course not. We still need to take many other factors into account. A host of structural variables provide much of the foundation of extremism, including economic displacement in an increasingly interconnected global economy; the threats to, or collapse of, domestic patriarchy (wives working, children getting an education that circumvents paternal authority); political marginalization. Onto this foundation we add the psychological variables: childhood trauma, bullying, child abuse, sexual abuse. Women's employment and education have also set dramatic changes in motion.

But I argue that we cannot fully understand violent extremist movements without a gender analysis. And, more than that, we cannot adequately meet this challenge without understanding how gender—masculinity—is so deeply and intimately enmeshed in participants' experience. I argue that there is a *gendered political psychology* of extremism: that the men who join do experience the need for camaraderie and community; the threats to a solid, grounded identity; the desire for a life of meaning and purpose; and the inability or obstacles to achieving that life as specifically gendered feelings, urges, and emotions.

Research by some of the major figures in this field, especially Tore Bjørgo and Daniel Koehler, relies on a framework of push and pull factors to explain both entry into and exit from radical extremism. What factors make some young men more susceptible to radicalization than others? What pushes them in, and what pulls them in? One might say, for example, that many young recruits are pushed into extremist politics by the economic dislocation of neoliberal economic restructuring, or by the alienation that young British Muslims feel in a world where they experience racism every day. Or young men are pushed toward radicalization by feeling alienation, a loss of identity, a sense that in this world they don't matter. And young recruits are pulled in by the camaraderie, the community, the sense of historical or even divine "mission"—to save the white

race, to establish the Caliphate, to restore Germany to its rightful glory by purging all immigrants. Words like *honor* and *devotion* loom large here. But so, too, do the visceral experiences of embracing your brothers, feeling as though you belong, feeling as though you are seen—seen as a man.

Similarly, push and pull forces operate on getting out. Koehler cites a form of "cognitive opening," some rupture or break with the movement that begins to unravel the tightly wound connections of emotional and political commitment. Push factors are those "negative social incidents and circumstances that make it uncomfortable and unappealing to remain." The active extremist may begin to doubt the ideology; he may become frustrated with the group's hypocrisy; he may decry the violence that the group visits on its own members. Or he may feel pulled to have a normal life, to have a family, children, a steady job. He may feel himself aging out, into that new, more stable and settled life. He may develop new, positive relationships outside the movement. All of these push and pull factors are evident in the chapters that follow. If we are to develop support systems, policy initiatives, and mechanisms that help these men leave the movement, we are going to have to understand the pushes and the pulls, both in and out—and, more than that, how specifically gendered they are.

So this is how it works: These young men feel entitled to a sense of belonging and community, of holding unchallenged moral authority over women and children, and of feeling that they count in the world and that their lives matter. Experiencing threats to the lives they feel they deserve leads these young men to feel ashamed and humiliated. And it is this aggrieved entitlement—entitlement thwarted and frustrated—that leads some men to search for a way to redeem themselves as men, to restore and retrieve that sense of manhood that has been lost. Joining up is a form of masculine compensation, an alternate route to proving manhood. To not see this as gendered is to miss the point.

I am not claiming that gender explains the attraction of violent extremism or that explaining the attraction is impossible without gender. I do say that gender is a vital, necessary, and irreducible element of the experience.

Journalists and researchers usually start by focusing on the content of radical extremist ideology and then work backward to search for the fertile political and economic ground in which such hateful ideologies can

take root. Such research strategies can explain long-term political and economic causes, but they can't explain the filter mechanisms by which thousands experience the same political and economic circumstances yet only a handful are smitten by the cause.

It is common to then move immediately from these large-scale macro-level explanations to an individual psychopathology model. There must be something "wrong," with these particular guys, something in their family life or their upbringing. It seems possible—probable—that their fathers beat them, abandoned them, were implacably ruthless with them. Or perhaps the boys were victims of abuse and bullying from male peers.

Psychological reductionism runs rampant as an explanation of violent extremism, but it begs the same question as the overly macro-level structural explanation: in the vast universe of kids who are abused, beat up, abandoned, bullied, and otherwise mistreated by a hostile world, why do only a few of them ever blow themselves up as suicide bombers or begin training to defend the white race from "outsiders"? Why these particular boys and men and not all the others?

In a sense, these two explanations turn understanding on its head. We need to ask why there are so *few* who end up in extremist movements, not why there are so many. After all, there are thousands—no, hundreds of thousands—of boys in America who are bullied and gay-baited every single day. Yet they don't pick up assault weapons and "pull a Columbine" in every middle school and high school in the land. So we need to ask what are the structural features of those schools where they do pick up assault weapons, as well as the psychological characteristics of those particular boys.

What mediates between these overdeterministic structural explanations and the reductionist psychopathological ones is gender. Masculinity. It is the specific ways that specific groups of young men understand and enact masculinity that help us navigate between the macro and micro, between the structural and the psychological. It's within the gendered connection between humiliation and violence where we will find the key to understanding how some young men get into extremist politics and, therefore, how we, as policy makers, civil and community leaders, parents, religious leaders, and citizens, can provide a route they can use to get out. We need to explore the experience of deep emotional connection, belonging, compensation for shame and humiliation, and purpose and mission

in life—the sense of finally living a life of glory and strength and power that provides the emotional nutrients that generate a breeding ground for young men eager and energized to prove their manhood.

It's quite astonishing really, after listening to these guys talk (in my research for *Angry White Men* I interviewed forty-five "active" white nationalists in the United States, and for this book I interviewed more than seventy "formers"), that there is virtually no mention of gender, of masculinity, when policy makers get together, when law enforcement officials discuss strategy, or when journalists profile activists. Not even when the experts get together. For example, a groundbreaking conference in Dublin in 2011, the Summit against Violent Extremism, is generally credited with inspiring many organized efforts to understand the experience of extremists groups—neo-Nazi skinhead organizations, jihadists, inner-city gangs, ultraleftist groups, and others—in order to develop strategies to facilitate deradicalization. Sponsored by Google Ideas and organized by Jared Cohen, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, this conference was the founding moment of Life After Hate, the North American organization that helps ex–right-wing extremists and skinheads get out of the movement. It brought together groups so disparate that they'd never been in the same room together, yet they found much in common to discuss.

The documents the conference produced aggregate the survey findings of these different groups. The researchers identified virtually all of the routes of entry, as well as the most successful strategies of disengagement. But their analysis missed entirely the one crucial variable that provides much of the experiential glue that both attracts young men to these groups and binds them when they join. "A need for a sense of belonging, an identity, and a sense of purpose" they write, "drives individuals down the path toward radicalization."[15] "Individuals." Although that's true of course, these questions of identity, purpose, and belonging are experienced as profoundly gendered experiences. Yet the documents contain not a word about gender.

The same is true of the work of other serious researchers in the field. For example, Daniel Koehler, who once guided me into the world of EXIT Deutschland and who is one of the most astute observers of the scene across many different venues, has now established the German Institute on Radicalization and De-radicalization Studies (GIRDS), one of the most

important research centers addressing radical extremism. In his collected work and in two books published simultaneously in 2017, he develops a structural and processual model of radicalization and deradicalization, a useful typology. It is perhaps the most ambitious effort to map the various trajectories into—and out of—extremist movements.[16]

Yet the word *gender* appears only once in the text, and not at all in the index. Where *gender* does appear is in a single paragraph in Koehler's brace of books—a paragraph that discusses women. The role of women—as extremists themselves or as mothers, sisters, partners, wives, or daughters—factors not at all in the analysis. This, despite the fact that his major case study—the National Socialist Underground (NSU) cell in Germany responsible for ten murders, three bomb attacks, and fourteen bank robberies between 1998 and 2011—was a neo-Nazi love triangle among Uwe Mundlos, Uwe Bohnhardt, and Beate Zschape. (Both men committed suicide in 2011; Zschape is currently standing trial.) While Koehler notes that gender has been "only marginally discussed" and acknowledges "the need for gender-specific disengagement," the notion never appears again.[17]

But does it matter that these "individuals" drawn into these movements are virtually always male? Does this craving for a sense of belonging, this need for an identity, this desperate desire for a sense of purpose differ between women and men? It does, and this and the following chapters explore in depth the reasons why.

Gender—masculinity—provides both the psychological inspiration to young men to join these groups and the social glue that keeps them involved. Challenging violent extremism, therefore, means engaging these young men *as men,* not simply as jihadists or neo-Nazis or white supremacists. It means offering them new ways by which they can prove their masculinity, to feel that they are real men, that their lives matter.

But just as my grandmother's preparations for some new, American Holocaust were based on a fantasy of vulnerability and invasion, so too are the machinations of these young men, who ride, as Bruce Springsteen so famously sang, "through mansions of glory in suicide machines." Theirs are gendered fantasies of glory, of brotherhood, of mattering—as men. Women—or, more accurately access to women—are their reward, whether the myriad virgins promised in heaven or their wives, girlfriends, and comrades here on earth. Or both.

Whereas the former neo-Nazis and skinheads in the United States and Europe wanted to usher in the new Reich in their lifetimes, and to be around to celebrate the fall of the "Zionist Occupied Government" (ZOG), their Islamist neighbors harbor no such illusions. They know the establishment of the Caliphate will take centuries of struggle, and they seek their rewards more immediately, if transcendentally. Most dream of going out in a blaze of glory, martyrs to a cause, in order to reap their rewards in heaven in the form of the hot virginal girls they couldn't meet in real life. Suicide bombers are the Muslim version of American school shooters who, since Columbine in 1999, almost always end their school massacres with suicide. Theirs is "suicide by mass murder"; the goal is to die and to take as many with you as you can.[18] These are young men who feel small, who resent being made to feel small, and who are looking to get big by destroying others. They search, sometimes literally, for that magic bullet that will make them a real man.

THIS PROJECT

Healing from Hate is about what brings young *men* into radical extremist organizations, and what we can do to help them get out. Drawing on in-depth interviews with more than seventy "formers"—ex-activists, ex-neo-Nazis, ex-jihadists and -Islamists, and ex–anti-immigrant skinheads—and on organizational profiles of those groups helping to bring about social and personal deradicalization, I strive to fill in the big blank between ideologies of extremism and their organizational manifestation, to connect the dots between word and deed. That connective tissue is social and emotional.

Developing such a gendered political psychology requires that we look underneath the stated reasons to the emotional foundations of both radicalization and deradicalization. It's more important to focus on these experiences than on the ideologies these young men espouse. To focus only on the ideologies in order to deradicalize—to attempt, for example, to provide a rational, market-based explanation of why immigration might be a net positive economic benefit for European and American society—is to doom that effort to failure. The motivation to join is emotional, social,

psychological—and, even more, visceral, physical. Those motives must be addressed. After all, the ideologies are so broadly professed, yet while many would be chosen, only a few feel called. At the same time, to treat these young men as if they were simply an aggregation of mentally ill individuals, a collection of zombies following insane leaders into maniacal fantasies, likewise misses the rational foundations of radical extremism.

To know the seductions of extremism—the visceral, emotional, psychological excitement that accompanies recruitment and enlistment—is only half the story. Once in, how do they get out? How can we, a concerned public, help them get out? And how are the organizations that have sprung up to help facilitate their exit helping them?

For my earlier book, *Angry White Men,* I interviewed forty-five American neo-Nazis and white supremacists to understand how they experience masculinity on the extreme right. I heard many stories of what I came to call aggrieved entitlement—a gendered sense of entitlement thwarted by larger economic and political shifts, their ambitions choked, their masculinity lost. Joining these right-wing groups lent a gendered coherence to their sense of emasculation and frustration; their manhood had been taken from them by unseen conspiratorial forces, and their recruitment was seen as a way to reclaim their manhood and to restore that sense of entitlement. To "take our country back," in the words of the Tea Party slogan.

Once inside, these men developed a worldview that constantly shored up their own sense of masculinity through the emasculation of the "others" against whom they were fighting: feminist women, immigrants, Jews, gays—all depicted as not "real men," but unqualified poseurs who've taken over the government and turned it against its authentic native sons. So consuming was this seduction of manhood regained that I began to wonder how it would be possible for them to get out. Once you drift into the world of extreme-right political movements, once you completely buy the Manichean worldview of "us" versus "them," is there any hope? Is there any way to reach you? Is the world of the extreme right like the old ads for the Roach Motel: once you check in, you can't check out?

Or is there a way out for these angry white men? Is there a way to return to their former lives, their families and friends, their workplaces, schools, and churches? Is there, as the North American organization I profile here asks, "life after hate?"

The answer is definitely yes. While I've been researching and interviewing men of the extreme right in the past twelve years, I've spent the past three focusing almost exclusively on the dynamics of "exit"—how to help them get out. Do they drift away, having grown impatient preparing for a war that never comes, or fed up with the hypocrisy of their leaders? Have turns of events led them to question the ideologies to which they were once so committed? Or are they disgusted by the horrific consequences of some of their beliefs?

Those are some of the questions I address in this book. I have not only interviewed ex-extremists in the United States but also gone to Europe, where there are excellent established programs entirely devoted to deradicalization of young extremists. And I've gone to Canada and London to meet with members of an organization that is helping ex-jihadists leave the radical Islamic sects that have been so successful in recruiting them.

I've been fortunate to have been granted access to clients of EXIT, in both Sweden and Germany, organizations that have been helping neo-Nazis, skinheads, and other far-right extremists for more than a decade to "jump" from the movement. Swedish EXIT was the first such organization, founded in 1996 by Kent Lindahl, himself a former skinhead white supremacist. Working through the youth center in Stockholm (Fryshuset), EXIT is today a well-run and well-funded organization that has seen nearly 400 clients—375 male and 25 female—and provided them with job training, group therapy, individualized job counseling, and safe houses and transport if they are threatened by the organizations of which they were members.

In Germany, EXIT has been a somewhat less formal affair, in part because of a greater need for secrecy (due to ongoing threats from neo-Nazi organizations) and in part because the government does not directly fund it. Begun in Berlin not by a former skinhead, but by a former East German police officer, Bernd Wenger, EXIT has relied mostly on word of mouth and contacts with the prison system, especially parole officers, to identify and reach out to potential clients. (In Germany, EXIT recruits most neo-Nazis in prison after their arrest for petty crimes, such as burglary, and so they are in the system on probation or parole when they jump.) EXIT provides counseling and safe houses, but lacks the infrastructure to help formally with job placement.

In Sweden I have interviewed 35 clients (29 male and 6 female), and in Germany I have interviewed 20. I've interviewed the founders and the current heads of the organization, as well as ministerial-level government officials about their understanding of the work that EXIT can do. I am therefore in a position to present a novel, interview-based analysis of the gender of violent extremism.

In Germany I interviewed a young man whose neo-Nazi activities offered an opportunity for an intergenerational reconciliation, and a middle-aged woman who saw Nazism as the only alternative to global socialist domination. In Sweden I interviewed a young woman who came into the movement because her sister had been beaten by her Iraqi boyfriend, and I spoke with several guys who came for the parties and stayed for the fights. And I have conducted three interviews with Jackie Arklöv, "the most hated man in Sweden," who is in a maximum-security prison serving a life sentence for murder, after killing two police officers in a botched bank robbery to raise money for the Nazi organization. (I am, to my knowledge, the only US researcher to have interviewed him.)

And I have been granted access to clients' files (except for therapeutic information) and also examined the organizations' libraries and archives. (I have had helpful translators in both countries.)

In the United States, I've interviewed 8 formers whom I met through my old contacts in the movement, and all but one of the founders of Life After Hate, a relatively new organization whose sole formal presence is on the Internet, but that is working to provide support for guys who are getting ready to jump out. I also rely here on the initial interviews I did earlier with 3 dozen actives in the movement.

Finally, I've interviewed 12 former jihadists in Canada and Great Britain, some through the Quilliam Foundation, a London-based organization that helps Islamic extremists deradicalize. I've interviewed the young Canadian Muslim who infiltrated the Toronto 18, the terrorist cell that was planning the single biggest terrorist attack in Canadian history, a plot to assassinate the prime minister and members of Parliament and take over the Canadian government. I've also interviewed a white Canadian convert to Islamic extremism who came perilously close to blowing himself up in jihad.

Not everyone agrees that this type of organization—nongovernmental and nonideological in the case of EXIT and Life After Hate; nongovernmental and decidedly ideological in the case of Quilliam—offers the best way to help young men get out of the movement. Daniel Koehler, at GIRDS, is skeptical about nongovernmental organizations in general. Quilliam, he concedes, is successful "because their passive contact approach is specialized at a later stage of the disengagement and deradicalization process," and because the guys they work with "display an intrinsic and credible motivation to leave a radical environment."[19]

But EXIT, in both Sweden and Germany, earns his skepticism because of their susceptibility to corruption and recidivism. For example, he cites Kent Lindahl, the founder of EXIT Sweden, who resigned and left the organization after some 60,000 Swedish kronor (about $6,500) went "missing" and he was asked to reimburse the organization. And another EXIT staffer, in the small town of Motola, was one of the leaders of a plot in 2010 to steal and sell the entry gate sign at the Auschwitz concentration camp and memorial site.[20]

It is true that EXIT Germany has had some wobbles in personnel, and some recidivism. But rates of recidivism among the EXIT members who were contacted in prison are no greater than among other prisoners, and many committed crimes again but did not return to neo-Nazism. Those who did may also be part of a longer-term in-and-out-and-back-in trajectory encountered again and again in these stories. This alone hardly seems justification for dismissing the important work that these organizations do.

THE GENDER OF EXTREMISM

This book represents my effort to tell these young men's story. Or rather to tell a story about them—one of many stories that can be told, that need to be told. I'm especially interested in understanding what draws young men to the movement, what keeps them there, and what strategies enable them to leave. I show how proving masculinity plays a central role in recruitment, or entry, into the movement. In Sweden young men enter the movement in their early teens—the average age of EXIT clients is about

seventeen (and remember, these are people already *leaving* the movement). They come because they experience downsizing, outsourcing, or economic displacement in specifically gendered ways: they feel themselves to be emasculated. This political-economic emasculation is accompanied by a more personal sense of emasculation: they come because they are isolated or bullied in school, and feel they need the support of something much bigger than they are.

Entry is a gendered effort to ward off the shame that comes with their failures—their failures as men. "The emotion of shame is the primary or ultimate cause of all violence," writes psychiatrist James Gilligan in his stunning book *Violence.* "The purpose of violence is to diminish the intensity of shame and replace it as far as possible with its opposite, pride, thus preventing the individual from being overwhelmed by the feeling of shame."[21]

Recruits stay for the parties and the music. Their activities consist largely of getting rip-roaring drunk, downing a handful of painkillers, and going out as a group looking for someone to fight with. Finding an opponent is easy enough; there are plenty of groups of anarchist anti-Nazis or immigrant teenaged boys who are likewise drunk and juiced on painkillers, equally itching for a fight. They are sympathetic to a generally nationalist message—Sweden for Swedes—and come to identify as white. But it is when they confront the more political aspects of their membership in the organization, and as they grow older and begin searching for jobs and consider starting a family, that they begin to question their participation.

In Germany, these young men are often petty criminals, arrested for street crime (assault, robbery) or more property-related crimes like burglary and breaking and entering. In prison, organized groups of neo-Nazis rule the prisoners and ensure the separation of white prisoners and immigrants, who outnumber the white prisoners by significant margins.

Four very different countries: Germany, Sweden, the United States, Great Britain. Four very different groups of men: adolescent boys in Sweden, former petty criminals in Germany, ex-jihadists in Canada and Britain, and ex–white supremacists in the United States. Four different entry points into their extremist politics. But one thing in common, one trait that binds them all—and that helps to explain both their entry and their exit: they are men.

And it's not just that they are male—anatomically so, chromosomally so—but that they see themselves as men. They enter feeling like failed men, like men who need to prove their masculinity, need to feel like real men, yet are thwarted at every turn. Top of the corporate ladder? Able to provide for a wife and family? Sexual prowess among the ladies? Competitive prowess among the guys? A man among men?

To a man, the ex-Nazis, jihadists, and white supremacists I have interviewed felt like failures as men. But instead of turning that sense of emasculation inward toward depression, interpersonal violence, suicide, or self-medication through drugs or alcohol, these young men were somehow convinced to externalize their sense of emasculation, turn it into righteous political rage, and lash out at those forces that they came to believe responsible for their emasculation. Their failure was not theirs, as individuals; it was something done to them—by an indifferent state, by predatory corporations and rapacious bankers, by a host of "others" who had preyed upon global sympathies to get special bargains. They were not failures; they were victims.

It is this sense of victimhood—that they are the new victims of the politically correct, multicultural society—that lends a degree of righteousness to their political activities. For the extreme right-wingers, theirs is a movement not to take power, but to restore authority to its rightful heirs, white men—"us," not "them." To restore what was, and what should have been. And, in the process, to restore their manhood. And it is through their participation in the movement that they see an opportunity to retrieve that sense of masculinity that has been stolen from them by illegitimate poseurs and their government and its corporate henchmen.

Their paths to entry are deeply gendered. The overwhelming majority of the members of every group I've worked with, and of every group that's been studied, are attracted to the movement because it will give them something they are not getting in more traditional ways: a pathway to manhood.

Many come from deeply dysfunctional families. Divorce isn't the half of it. Many were abused, physically or sexually, by stepfathers or mothers' boyfriends. The fathers of many were absent, simply nonpresences in their sons' lives. Others might as well have been absent, they were so emotionally shut down, opaque, phantom presences in their own homes.

Nearly two-thirds of all the people I interviewed for this book were targeted in school as well. Some found it hard to make friends; others didn't fit in for some reason or another. Overweight or underweight. Too smart (condescending egghead) or not smart enough ("retard"). Acne, bad at sports. Maybe just being the new kid or wearing the wrong sneakers on the first day of school. As we all know, middle school and high school children are amazingly creative in the criteria they develop to make other people feel worthless and like nothing. The drift into extremism helps redefine the situation, transforms shame into power, and transforms one's own fear into others' fear. "Just being part of [the gang was] like, 'You're the man,'" says one former. "So you went from being a nothing, a nobody, to being somebody, and it just happened overnight."[22]

Let me be clear that I am not in any way arguing that entry into these extremist organizations is preordained by adverse family lives or social isolation in school. The number of cases of young people being abused, bullied, abandoned, or humiliated is far greater than the numbers who end up in extremist politics. There are many routes from such sad and terrible beginnings.

Two logical fallacies often blind us to the element of choice as well as the element of randomness, coincidence. First, we often fall prey to the compositional fallacy. Quite simply, we assume that since all members of group A are also members of group B, all members of group B are therefore also members of group A. This is not necessarily the case. To cite a standard example in logic, from the fact that all members of the mafia are Italian it does not follow that all Italians are members of the mafia. That virtually all recruits to extremist organizations come from dysfunctional, abusive, or otherwise broken families does not mean that all survivors of those family conditions are members of extremist politics. That should be obvious.

Second, we often explain the trajectories of actions from back to front, teleologically. We see an outcome and go back looking for possible explanations that determined the outcome. For example, let's say a search of a convicted rapist's home reveals a stash of pornography. Aha! The rapist's obsession with pornography must have "caused" the crime. The problem is, of course, that the home probably also had a Bible, and there are far more rapes in the Bible than in an average porn magazine. But no one ever says "Aha! It was the Bible that caused it." Believing is often seeing.

So now let's look again at these young boys. Alone and isolated, bullied and beaten, emasculated and sad: this describes a few kids in probably every single middle school and high school in the United States and Europe. Yet not even a tiny fraction of such young men find their way to becoming skinheads or jihadists. Some retreat into a fantasy world, playing video games all day, blowing up imaginary galaxies rather than actual buildings. Some self-medicate with alcohol or drugs. Some harm themselves. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for all Americans aged fifteen to twenty-four.[23] For a large number of teenagers, adolescence is a world of pain.

I argue that it's a gendered pain. Boys and girls experience that pain differently. And while there are a large number of girls who, like many boys, turn that anguish on themselves—self-harming, self-medicating, self-annihilating—those who decide to go out in a blaze of glory, opening fire in their high schools before turning the guns on themselves, are far more likely to be boys than girls. It is almost entirely boys who decide to blow up their schools, murder their parents, or join extremist political movements.

Some find their way to the Internet, and some, while there, search out others, and find them. Others just like them, or others whom they want to be like them. They find a virtual community—others who understand, others who have experienced the same torments, the same abandonments, the same humiliations. And sometimes the recruits are sought out on websites, actively recruited on Facebook and Twitter. One of the guys I spoke with described himself as a "keyboard warrior."

(I confess that it is a constant source of wonder to me that this quintessential twenty-first-century medium the Internet is the primary way to recruit religious or political fundamentalists. Whether it's Islamists who yearn for a caliphate that would take us back to the seventh century, or those hardcore right-wing survivalists living in cabins in rural Montana, everyone seems to have a website and is connected to others just like them through the most modern technology. These wired anti-modernists have websites and cell phones and use the Internet constantly. Their idea of the sixth-century Caliphate seems to include cellular technology and modern explosives.)

Others have a relative—a cousin, typically—or some older neighbor who is already in the movement. Movement entry usually demonstrates

what sociologist Mark Granovetter called "the strength of weak ties." Whether it's finding a job or meeting the person you will marry, Granovetter argued, the connection is generally not the result of strong ties—immediate family members or your closest friends. It's a "weak tie," one or two removes from your immediate circle. How do you get a job? A friend of a friend. How do you meet your mate? A friend's partner knows someone who is single and available.[24] The same is true for recruitment into the movements I discuss here. A neighbor, a cousin, a new guy in the neighborhood who comes with a crew.

The group's dynamics—the intense bonding, the camaraderie, the parties, the fights—forms much of the glue that keeps the groups together. Ideology comes later, if at all. For some of the Swedes and Germans, the ideology was a negligible part of their movement participation. For others, the ideology becomes just another sticky part of the group dynamic. "In the beginning, it was purely social and had nothing to do with the views that were involved," says one former female American white nationalist. "I pretty much tailored my racism according to whom I was involved with."[25]

What is important about the ideology, though, is not its content, at least not its content alone. The vast Zionist conspiracy, the great American Satan—these are not just ideological constructs based on rational assessments of political events. Such ideas are the substance of paranoid politics, vast webs of seemingly isolated incidents rolled together to form a coherent incoherence, a worldview in which every shred of random detail proves the vastness of the conspiracy and the depth of the corruption and deceit of those in charge. Paranoid politics also serve as a glue, a way to keep people connected. Where else would you get that knowing wink, that bemused shrug, that wise nod from someone who knows an event or occurrence illustrates exactly how "they" are taking over? Ideology is not just content; it is also form. Sharing the ideology—any ideology—provides the glue. If racism is the warp of the paranoid political blanket, then the fact that we share that racist ideology is its weft.

Recruits feel both connected and isolated—connected to one another through their intense bonding, and isolated from the rest of the world. There is a hostile world out there, and only in the combination of maternal care and paternal authority do we re-create a family that is a haven in a heartless world.

ENTRY AND EXIT

Most analyses of radicalization and deradicalization follow the analyses of Norwegian researcher Tore Bjørgo, who is now the director of the Center for Research on Extremism: Right-Wing Extremism, Hate Crime and Political Violence (C-REX), at the University of Oslo. It was Bjørgo who initially conceived of the idea of EXIT, an organization specifically designed to help people get out of the movement by addressing the psychological and social factors that attracted them in the first place. Bjørgo is not insensitive to the role that gender plays in their trajectory.

This book attempts to take Bjørgo's and others' analyses one step further, to specifically "gender" the experiences of entry and exit. In the stories you'll read in the pages that follow, some guys just get tired and age out of the movement. What seemed exciting at age fourteen doesn't seem so exciting at thirty-four. And it's downright unseemly at fifty-four. The raves, the all-night binges, the drinking and fighting, these can get old after a while. And since for many of these guys the commitment to the ideology was never that strong to begin with, it's relatively easily discarded.

Aging out may not be purely a function of age, but also of life circumstance. A few of the men became fathers and had moments of rupture with their extremist groups when they considered what kind of life they wanted for their baby. Or a relationship, most often with a woman, put in stark contrast the life they were living and the lives they wanted to be, or could be, living. Mothers, girlfriends, and wives often forced the guys' hand: the movement or me. The formers I spoke with are the ones who chose the real world, the actual women they loved. The ones who made that other choice are still out there, lost to us, choosing ideology and group membership above all else.

Others get disillusioned with the ideology. Paranoid politics doesn't wear that well after a while. There are too many unexplained random events that cannot quite be hammered into those neat little slots. Or the ideology propels some to do things that others find repugnant or even contrary to the very ideologies they're espousing. Once members break ideologically, it's not uncommon for them to swing wildly to the other side. Quilliam Foundation research found that some of the ex-jihadists careened from Islamism, with "all sorts of crazy ideas about Jihad this,

bomb that," to becoming counterterrorist spies for the British government, and from preaching hate to preaching love and empathy.[26] Several of the Swedes I interviewed had gone from National Socialism to supporting the Social Democrats in the most recent elections.

And others become disillusioned by the group's dynamics. Too much hypocrisy. Several of the formers I spoke with found it unsettling that the group's leaders seemed to be playing by other rules. One Swedish leader was sleeping with an Iraqi immigrant. Another told me that the former leader of the Danish National Socialists, Povl Heinrich Riis-Knudsen, who was also the head of WUNS (World Union of National Socialists), was having an affair with a Palestinian woman. One or two of the Swedes complained to me that the leaders were eating meat (Hitler was a vegetarian), drinking and taking drugs, and were not living the pure Nazi life they insisted on from their followers. Several times I heard that men became disillusioned because the group abandoned them in a fight or during an argument. When your membership in a group depends on your comrades having your back, without question, all the time, it's a rude wake-up call when you turn around to find no one there.

All of this means that to help these young men get out of the movement, we have to give them an alternative way to feel successful *as men*. They need to believe that there are alternative paths to manhood besides either capitulating to their subjugation by the forces of political correctness or violently rising up in defiance of those same forces. They need to feel like successful men. Or at least they need to see a path *toward* that successful restoration of masculinity.

Any program that promises deradicalization must address gender. It must substitute new ways to demonstrate masculinity—a visceral, sexual, physical sense of embodied power (fighting, partying, moshing at concerts), coupled with a grounded sense of masculine identity that comes from pride in one's work, civic and political participation, and perhaps even the beginning of one's own family. One cannot ask these men to jump from their extremist views into a genderless void where they don't know any other way to be a man.

Radicalization is a deeply gendered process, one that virtually no one has addressed, because the gender composition has been so normal that it has passed entirely under our analytic and journalistic radar. Becoming an

extremist is a way to prove your manhood, to feel like a man. And just as the process of radicalization is deeply gendered, so too must be the process of deradicalization.

Although I pay only a little attention here to the women and girls who are tempted to join, I do pay attention to gender overall, and not just to masculinity. I've interviewed some of the female clients of EXIT in both Sweden and Germany, as well as some of the women involved in Life After Hate. So there are stories to tell. Different women enter through different paths. Some, especially those who join traditional racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, are frustrated that they cannot establish families like those of their grandparents' generation; they yearn to stay home and raise their children, but their economic situation prevents it. Some young women ache to be fierce skinhead women, as kick-ass and ferociously racist as their brethren. (Some encounter serious problems of acceptance; in the United States, only the White Aryan Resistance welcomed young women as equals.) Some come for the same reasons as the boys: drinking, partying, and dancing. (But they often leave for very different reasons, as they become frustrated by gender inequality within the movement and resent the guys seeing them only as "mattresses.")

Do I think that once we have addressed gender, we've solved the problem and will successfully deradicalize these young men? Of course not. But I do think that unless we take gender into account, we will not be able to offer these young men anything they consider worthwhile enough to encourage them to jump.

EXIT Sweden addresses these questions by providing group counseling that supports and sustains formers' efforts to find alternate paths to manhood: landing a job, supporting a family, developing civic pride through environmental nationalism and youth efficacy. EXIT Sweden is the model for its German and American counterparts, while the ex-jihadists are still a ways from any sort of formal organizational infrastructure. Working with law enforcement, counterterrorism psychologists, and social workers, we can give these young men a new way to feel like successful men. If we do that, we can offer these men, poised to jump from their extremist pasts, a safe place to land.

There are many differences among the four groups I write about in this book. One of the cases involves ex-Islamic jihadists in London and

Canada, and the other three, to varying degrees, involve anti-Islamic, white supremacist, and anti-immigrant groups. I have tried to remain sensitive to the specific differences. But what if there are commonalities, points of contact among such disparate cases? What if all of these young men have a similar emotional, visceral, and gendered narrative about the attractions of extremism? Similar paths in—and often similar paths out? Then wouldn't it be a wise policy move to also address the aspects they have in common as well as the ideological positions they espouse that keep them apart?

That is the challenge of this book.