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## Impossible Justice and the Allure of the Absolute: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Radicalization

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### Abstract

This paper examines radicalization through the lens of contemporary psychoanalysis and social theory, challenging the dominant view of radicalization as a singular pathological transformation from a “normal” to an “abnormal” state. Instead, it conceptualizes radicalization as a psychosocial process embedded in subjective identity structures and broader historical conditions. Drawing on concepts such as subjectivity, the *sinthome*, split-thinking, hybridity, transitional spaces and hauntology, it highlights the psychological, emotional, and ideological mechanisms that make radical ideologies compelling. It explores how radicalized individuals construct meaning through rigid binaries, invest in utopian visions of justice, and develop cognitive patterns that resist moderation or alternative perspectives. Central to this framework is the psychoanalytic concept of the *sinthome*, which stabilizes subjective identity by providing coherence in the face of existential uncertainty. The discussion situates the appeal of absolute justice within the historical context of modernity’s breakdown and the impact of collective trauma and existential insecurity. The paper concludes by engaging with contemporary disengagement and deradicalization models, arguing that effective interventions must address not only ideological narratives but also the deeper psychological structures that sustain radical identities.

### Article History

Received Jun 23, 2024

Accepted Mar 09, 2025

Published Mar 28, 2025

**Keywords:** Radicalization, Ideology, Psychoanalysis, Political Subjectivity, Justice, Hauntology

### Introduction

The concept of radicalization, despite its frequent usage, has presented significant challenges in terms of definition and conceptual clarity, and hence in terms of what deradicalization needs to be about. As Koehler (2020), Dzhekova et al. (2016), Neumann (2013) and many others have highlighted, radicalization’s meaning is not only variable across different disciplinary contexts and temporal frames, but it also diverges significantly among various stakeholders. And the ambiguity is regularly compounded by the term’s frequent “abuse,” not

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only in colloquial and journalistic discourse but also within scholarly and policy-oriented texts (e.g. Demetriou, 2016; Dzhekova et al., 2016; Neumann, 2009, 2013, 2016; Schmid, 2013; Sedgwick, 2010; Torrekens & de le Vingne, 2021).

The only area of consensus on defining “radicalization” appears to emerge around it being a process whereby an individual assimilates an extremist ideology (Braddock, 2020; Koehler, 2020), even as the precise nature of this process, its theoretical formulation, and its practical pathways continue to remain elusive and open to debate. The European Commission’s (2005) definition of radicalization, which emerged after the Madrid bombing of 2004, understands radicalization as a process of socialization leading to the use of violence. Here radicalization is described as the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views, and ideas from other people—opinions and views that could lead to acts of terrorism. In other words, radicalization is explained as an interpersonal process of social influencing and shaping of perceptions and emotions. The UK Home Office (HM Government, 2009), on the other hand, seems to have focused on the interaction of ideological and emotional dimensions of radicalization, defining it as “the process by which people come to support terrorism and violent extremism and, in some cases, then join terrorist groups” (p. 43). Here the “process” is understood as an almost measurable progression. This interpretation views radicalization as a progressive intensification of ideological influence on an individual’s emotional responses and their interactions with their environment, ultimately escalating from mere support to active identification and participation in ideologically motivated violence. In further contrast yet, models employed in Canada, the United States, Australia, and a number of other countries tend to focus more on the civil and security implications of radicalization, rather than its social, psychological, or ideological characteristics (see Australian Government, 2015; Misra, 2018; National Institute of Justice, 2018; Wiktorowicz, 2013; Public Safety of Canada, 2018). This meaningful diversity of interpretations within Euro-American policy and security frameworks becomes still more so when it includes contexts such as the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Radicalization is often intertwined with such local drives as political interests, ethno-nationalist agendas, socioeconomic deprivation, and foreign intervention, leading to definitions and understandings that differ greatly from those prevalent in Euro-American security and counterterrorism discourses (e.g. Botha, 2014; Fair, 2014; Fealy, 2004, 2017; Hamid, 2016; Jaffrelot, 2021).

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An examination of this diversity of focus and approach across various definitions of radicalization can offer intriguing insights into the cultural, social, and historical nuances that shape the perceptions and interpretations and hence the methods of confrontation with radicalization—a question well worth studying. The diversity notwithstanding, however, the common thread that runs through all these interpretations (focusing here specifically on the so-called “Western” models) is a fundamental emphasis on the notions of “individual” and “process.” Every conceptualization of radicalization, for instance, appears to presuppose it as a transformative process, akin to a chemical reaction, that alters a person’s mindset and essence from one state of being to another. Ravn et al. (2019) underscore this basic idea of radicalization as a process of transformation from “normal” to “abnormal.” How an individual “transforms *from normal into radical and possibly terrorist*,” they write, is today “the focal point” of all major narratives of radicalization (p. 22, emphasis mine. See also Coolsaet, 2016; Sedgwick, 2010).

Once approached from a psychoanalytic point of view, an otherwise commonsensical interpretation of radicalization as the transformation of a “normal” personality to an “abnormal” or pathological one proves to be somewhat inaccurate and therefore prone to generating imprecise analyses and ineffective deradicalization strategies and interventions. Even though more recent literature shows a tendency away from this basic pathologization model, traces persist in many areas of thinking and reacting to the phenomenon, specifically outside academia. I will not attempt to formulate an alternative definition for radicalization here, but this paper aims to provide an alternative framework for understanding radicalization as a composite psychosocial process that involves the interaction of several key factors shaping the subjective state we consider radicalized. I will examine these factors throughout the paper, but to briefly list the main features, they include:

- Patterns of split thinking that divide the world into stark categories of good and evil, right and wrong, etc., leaving little room for nuance or alternative narratives. Split-thinking often leads to a mindset of absolute thinking, where individuals attribute total good or evil to people, groups, even systems and processes.

- Cognitive inflexibility and resistance to gradual change, which can manifest in an aversion to dialogue and compromise and a rejection of temperate or pragmatic approaches to social and political negotiation.
- Intense emotional investment in, and attunement to narratives of grievance, victimhood, and injustice, typically rooted in personal or collective memories (and/or anticipations) of traumatic events.
- Unshakeable conviction in the absolute truth of own (individual or collective) narratives, which can in turn serve as a platform for extreme action including violence.
- Utopian visions of a perfect society or perfect justice which fuel both a sense of urgency to act and further commitment to radical change.

What these features clearly reflect, in addition to the multidimensionality of radicalization, is its deeply psychosocial nature. This is why I argue here for a multi-faceted approach built on a range of contemporary concepts that I broadly classify as psychoanalytic—even if some, such as subjectivity or hauntology, may be argued to have stronger roots in philosophy than in psychoanalysis. It is in this broad sense that I present my approach to radicalization as a contemporary psychoanalytic perspective, and to articulate this perspective, I draw on a number of core concepts such as subjectivity, hybridity, the sinthome, split thinking, the lost object, the economy of desire, and hauntology. I will begin by exploring how subjectivity, as shaped by both unconscious processes and social contexts, impacts individuals' pathways towards radicalization. This discussion emphasizes the importance of understanding radicalized identities not as isolated but as deeply embedded within multiple, intersecting identities and power structures. I will then introduce the concept of the sinthome, a unique psychic formation that serves to stabilize an individual's identity. Here, I will explain how radical ideologies often serve as sinthomic structures as they provide coherence and meaning to individuals facing forms of existential uncertainty or fragmentation of their identities. I will then examine the role of split thinking, a psychic "position" in which individuals perceive the world primarily in stark binaries as a psychological defense against anxieties born from ambiguity and complexity. The discussion of split thinking then ties into (and offers a better understanding of) the allure of absolute thinking and utopian ideologies that promise total justice or purity, which can attract those who are destabilized by

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contemporary uncertainties. Finally I will suggest these various elements come together through Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology, which simultaneously aligns with the psychoanalytic dynamics and economy of desire,<sup>2</sup> and demonstrates the inherent impossibility of achieving 'total justice' as an object of that desire. This serves to critique the destructive potentiality of the utopian visions historically espoused by radical ideologies, and to illustrate why the pursuit of perfect justice is ultimately not just futile and counterproductive, but often dangerous and destructive. Aside from strengthening our understanding of radicalization as a psychological and social phenomenon, the psychoanalytically informed model can point the way to practical interventions for disengagement and deradicalization by understanding and incorporating both individual and collective processes.

### **Subjectivity, Hybridity and Transitional Spaces**

The term "subjectivity" in contemporary psychoanalytic theory refers to the way in which an individual's sense of self, desires, and their ways of understanding and relating to the external reality are shaped by their unique experiences and unconscious processes, which are in turn formed within their social and cultural contexts. In contrast to individuality's implied sense of independence and completeness of the indivisible individual, subjectivity is deeply embedded in and shaped by social and cultural contexts (see for instance Kristeva, 1989, 2024; Lacan, 1978; Mitchell, 1988; Ogden, 2018). This relational and structural model of subjectivity stands in clear contrast to traditional notions of individuality which are built on presumed autonomy and independence of the individual or the ego. Subjectivity, in other words, underscores the embeddedness of the individual within broader social and cultural structures, fundamentally abandoning the idea of the ego as self-determined and separate from its formative context. This model embeds the individuals' very sense of selfhood and identity along with their vicissitudes of desires and perceptions within collective symbolic processes and structures of meaning, power, and history. The notion of "political subjectivity," for

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase "economy of desire" is originally associated with Jean-Joseph Goux and Lacanian theory, I use it here with a Derridean lens to describe the circulation of desire within systems of meaning and symbolic exchange. In this framework, desire is not simply an individual or libidinal force but a structural process that continuously defers fulfilment, producing attachments to unattainable ideals (e.g. Derrida, 1976, 1978, 2001). This reading aligns with how ideological commitments can function as responses to unresolved desire, offering promises of wholeness, purity, or absolute justice while remaining fundamentally elusive.

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instance, is a direct conceptualization of the fact that the individual experience of subjectivity is deeply and inseparably embedded within to sociopolitical structures of meaning and symbolic systems (e.g. Rahimi, 2015a, 2015b).

The notion of hybridity as developed by Homi Bhabha offers another powerful lens for expanding our conceptualization of subjectivity in relation to this discussion, especially concerning such questions as disengagement and deradicalization. Hybridity, as articulated by Bhabha (1994, see specifically Chapters 1 and 6), refers to the emergence of new identities that result from the fusion of previously distinct cultural elements, creating a dynamic space where identity is fluid and continually negotiated, rather than rigid and continually conflicted. Hybridity foregrounds identity as an ongoing process of transformation and negotiation. It is not about a state of interaction and clash of different categories and dimensions of identity, but the way these categories intermingle, converge, and reconfigure each other, leading to a state of perpetual movement.

Hybridity expands the analysis of oppression and its psychological effects, for instance, by highlighting the transformative and adaptive capacities of identity through the concept of a ‘third space’ (Bhabha, 1990, 1994). The third space, which is akin to the psychoanalytic notion of a “transitional space” (Winnicott, 1953, 1971; see below) is a space of potentiality, movement and change, precisely due to its interstitial nature where clear-cut categories give their place to ambiguity, overlapping and hybridity. This idea emphasizes that individuals are not passive recipients of intersecting identity categories, but active agents engaged in continuous processes of self-redefinition shaped by cultural interaction.

Bhabha’s hybridity theory is particularly relevant to the study of radicalization and deradicalization because it showcases a “healthy” alternative where individuals navigate shifting cultural forces without splitting. Radicalization, from this standpoint, may be seen as a disruption in the negotiation of hybrid identity—a withdrawal from the ambiguity inherent in hybridity, toward the illusory stability of rigid, binary identities which is characteristic of radical ideologies. Bhabha’s “third space” (1994, see Chapter 1, *The Commitment to Theory*) is a site of in-betweenness where cultural identities are continually recombined, contested, and reimagined. This third space holds the power of challenging rigid binary conceptions of identity, and allowing for a fluid movement beyond dichotomous distinctions between self and other. In the context of deradicalization and disengagement, hybridity provides the

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conceptual possibility for dismantling rigid ideological structures and identities. Rather than relying on the false security of mutually exclusive categories, in other words, it offers the option of accepting cultural ambivalence and identities capable of thriving within overlapping and intersecting influences in an otherwise unstable context (see below for a detailed discussion). The notion of hybridity underscores the real potential for embracing complexity, ambiguity, and multiplicity—rather than retreating into rigid binaries and absolute ideologies—as a constructive path away from radicalization. This combined framework simultaneously deepens our understanding of the psychosocial dynamics that underlie radicalization and provides a practical model for addressing its internal causes and promoting transformative reconstructions.

### **The Sinthomic Nature of Radicalization**

The concept of *sinthome* offers another relevant psychoanalytic tool for understanding radicalization which also depends on the notion of subjectivity. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the *sinthome* is a unique (that is, non-compliant with common norms) symptom-like formation that serves to stabilize a person's psychic structure (see Fink, 1995; Lacan, 1975; Žižek, 1991; see also Evans, 1996, pp. 191-3). Even though it emerges as a reaction to one's adverse life events and thus serves as what we call a coping mechanism, *sinthome* is not a symptom to be treated through symbolic interpretation, but a fundamental part of the individual's unique way of being in the world -their subjectivity. It represents a psychic structure often involving novel or unconventional approaches to politics, language, art, or other systems of power/meaning.

Unlike symptoms, which are often manifestations (signs) of internal upheavals and can be debilitating, the *sinthome* plays a more functional role—it holds the subject's psychic structure together where it could otherwise fall apart, and does so without leading to regular internal tensions and conflicts. The *sinthome* successfully compensates for inherent inconsistencies or conflicts within the various registers of the mind, acting as a source of comfort and a way individuals find meaning in their lives where meaning is otherwise unavailable or would impose too much pain on their specific subjective state. As Evans (1996) put it, the *sinthome* represents “a kernel of enjoyment immune to the efficacy of the

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symbolic. Far from calling for some analytic ‘dissolution’, the sinthome is what ‘allows one to live’ by providing a unique organization of *jouissance* [the satisfaction of total reunion with the lost object]” (p. 191).<sup>3</sup> Unlike traditional symptoms, which may shift or even disappear over time or through identification and interpretation, the sinthome tends to be more persistent and durable, representing a fundamental way of structuring the subject’s psychic life that is not easily altered or removed, because much of the subject’s sense of identity is constructed around it.

Radical belief systems have often emerged and served as sinthomic formations. They provide a sense of identity and coherence to individuals and groups, particularly in mental or social spaces of significant change, uncertainty, or threat. As Jazani (2020) notes, “we could think of a ‘radical belief’ as a sinthome which protects a subjective knot of being from unravelling” (p. 100). In fact, much of the religious, political, and other forms of radicalization observed in the late 20th century and early 21st century can be attributed to broad social sinthomic patterns emerging as psychic reactions to the transition from a modern to a postmodern condition, where traditional narratives and structures of faith, meaning, and indeed truth as such have become severely undermined and destabilized.

This transition can be conceptualized through Lacan’s formulation of the *Nom du Père* as a structuring function that stabilizes subjectivity through symbolic authority, historically linked to institutions such as religion, the state, and ideology. The shift from modernity to postmodernity represents a weakening of this organizational function, as previously stable symbolic anchors become fragmented and contested. This fragmentation contributes to radicalization by intensifying investments in rigid ideological structures as a means of restoring symbolic certainty. While politically motivated violence and militancy have existed across historical periods, the specific conceptual framework of “radicalization” as an ideological transformation process is a product of modern and postmodern sociopolitical conditions (see Sedgwick, 2010; Neumann, 2013, but also Giddens, 1991; Khosrokhavar, 2017). This shift reflects the fragmentation of traditional authority structures and the rise of identity-driven ideological struggles in an era of globalization and political uncertainty (Giddens, 1991; Kundnani, 2012). The contemporary discourse on deradicalization is thus

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<sup>3</sup> This last note, concerning the relationship between sinthome and *jouissance*, in fact plays a significant role in the emergence and tenacity of radicalization, one which I will unfortunately not have the pleasure of engaging in this text.

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best understood within the transitional context where the erosion of stable authority structures amplifies the appeal of totalizing ideologies. This analysis, therefore, is situated specifically in relation to radicalization as a modern and postmodern phenomenon rather than as a historically universal process.

Sinthome, according to Lacan, is constructed to stabilize the subject's psychic world, especially in cases where the "Name of the Father" function is unstable or altogether absent (Lacan, 1975/2016, p. 147). "Name of the father" or *Nom-du-Père* in Lacan's jargon represents the symbolic function of authority and law that integrates the subject into the symbolic order (such as language and culture). It stands as a structural representation of the organizing principle that holds a system of meaning together—the very function which has been lost in the transition from the modernist paradigm of truth to the current post-truth condition. In this transitional state, sinthomic structures have a chance to become major modes of stabilization, acting as psychological anchors of subjectivity that help individuals navigate and make sense of a world that is increasingly fragmented and devoid of clear, overarching meanings.<sup>4</sup>

This sinthomic approach stands in clear contrast to the common view that seeks to explain radicalization as an inherently pathological process that hinders or bars healthy functionality and should be removed/cured before the individual can regain proper functionality. Compare this perspective to Peels' (2023) view, for instance, who attempts to distinguish benign or justified forms of radicalism from problematic radicalization through building normative elements into the definition of radicalization itself. Peels suggests that radicalization inherently involves beliefs, actions, emotions, or goals that are morally, psychologically, or epistemically defective in some way, specifically under what he categorizes as "cognitive vices" and "moral vices." The examples abound of course, such as Trip and colleagues (2019), or Haleem and Masood (2022), whose research is dedicated to

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<sup>4</sup> While outside of this paper's focus, it may be worth noting here that the concept of the 'Name of the father' also helps explain parallel contemporary phenomena such as the seemingly global rise of authoritarian political figures and muscular law enforcement approaches. Like radicalization, these represent sinthomic responses to the destabilization of traditional symbolic structures. Both phenomena represent attempts to restore a lost sense of certainty and order in response to the weakening of traditional symbolic structures. However, rather than genuinely fulfilling the integrative function of the 'Name of the father,' authoritarian manifestations, much like radicalized ideologies, operate primarily through intensification of splitting and binary thinking. They offer not genuine symbolic integration but rather a sinthomic substitution that provides temporary psychic stability at the cost of cognitive flexibility, nuance, and complexity/hybridity.

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unearthing “irrational beliefs and personality traits” they believe to be the psychological causes of extremism and radicalization, or Corner’s (2024) emphasis on radicalization and/as psychopathology, among numerous examples of identifying or associating radicalization with moral, cognitive, and emotional “vices” and psychopathologies.

The concept of the *sinthome* provides an effective framework for understanding the psychological dynamics of radicalization without falling into the trap of trying to understand it as an illness of the mind which requires a cure (for details and more discussion see e.g. Campelo et al., 2022; Gill et al., 2021; and Misiak et al., 2019 for literature reviews). In short, and just like subjectivity itself, a *sinthome* is a unique psychological structure that allows the subject to bind together the three basic registers of psychic reality - the Symbolic (the realm of language, social norms, and cultural codes), the Imaginary (the domain of internal images, fantasies, and identifications), and the Real (the “unsymbolizable” dimension of reality which resists integration)<sup>5</sup> - in a way that is unique to their subjective positioning (e.g. Lacan, 1975/2016, 1966).

Some scholars such as Žižek (1991, see ch. 7, “The Ideological *Sinthome*”, 1989), Stavrakakis (2007), Jazani (2020) or Engley (2023) have successfully and convincingly established the appropriateness of applying the notion of *sinthome* beyond individual clinical space to social phenomena ranging from political ideologies to social media. Stavrakakis in fact goes far enough to assert, “to know where to find and what to do with the social *sinthome*, with the *jouissance* implicated in particular socio-historical configurations, could be the goal of political analysis” (2007, p. 81).

When the internalized sociopolitical and cultural order is called into question and destabilized, individuals and groups can experience a deep sense of subjective dislocation in the form of an existential threat or disruption. In this context, strong, radical perspectives can offer clear and unambiguous *sinthomic* frameworks for making sense of the world by

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<sup>5</sup> In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the “Real” refers to that which escapes symbolization, the remainder that cannot be fully integrated into the subject’s symbolic framework (Lacan, 1973/1998; Žižek, 2007). It manifests in ruptures, the breakdown of meaning, trauma, *jouissance*. Though unassimilable, it is not altogether inaccessible; the Real exerts force via symptoms, anxieties, and compulsions that signal an underlying void. Psychoanalytic work does not attempt to “assimilate” the Real, but navigates its disruptive presence—through symbolic rearrangements, the resignification of trauma, or the partial sublimation of *jouissance* (Lacan, 1973/1998; Fink, 1995).

providing a set of beliefs, values, formulations, and sometimes even solutions that anchor the individual's and the group's sense of identity, meaning, and purpose.

Barak and colleagues (2024) report a fascinating study where they interviewed 33 individuals who had lost a close family member in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and subsequently became politically radicalized. Their results show an intriguing progression of the individuals' subjective configuration from loss to radicalization through what may well be considered a process of *sinthome* formation. Across the group, they started by stabilizing their beliefs through an ideological decision, then adapted and applied the ideological kernel to a broader political context, which in turn led to a deeper commitment to the ideological cause, ultimately integrating the ideological conviction with their very subjectivity, becoming "radicalized":

[They] initially stabilize their beliefs through a preliminary ideological decision, followed by adopting a broader perspective (zoom out) that encompasses the political context. As the process unfolds, a deep commitment to an ideological cause (mission) emerges, leading to the integration of ideology with self-identity (radicalized self). (2024, p. 1)

Significantly, the very first step, the kernel around which all further steps to radicalization were constructed, was a binary one: "a preliminary decision based on specific and fundamental principles of good and bad/right and wrong" (p. 4). Next, this split model, which they name "ideological meaning," was generalized, with "the personal loss [serving] as a 'calibration point,' which later allowed the individual to evaluate other political/ideological situations and make broad ideological choices... zooming out to the political situation between Israel and Lebanon, and then zooming out further to similar ideological conflicts around the globe" (pp. 4-5). That same split interpretation, the "meaning," then continues to inform and define over time a general world view, a way of interpreting the world and their "mission" in it.

The sense of responsibility that accompanies such mission grows incrementally if their internal *sinthome* is reflected back on them from the social environment. When the *sinthome* is confirmed and echoed by a social group of reference, the sense of identification with that

sinthomic ideology solidifies through such social reflection/confirmation, and gradually becomes the narrative with which the individual identifies -their identity. This process of sustained “confirmation” of the sinthomic identity crystalizes the sinthomic pattern into a solid sense of identity and a responsibility to act accordingly. Ironically, this confirmation does not need to come in the form of agreement, all it needs to be is a confirmation of “this is what you are,” regardless of whether it is conveyed in approval or disapproval of such identity, specifically when the social group is not necessarily the group of moral reference. And nor does the confirmation need to be understood as direct communication, it is a process of social reflection, which can be gleaned from various sources that represent the views of the individual’s group of reference, including traditional and social media, art and literature, and other social and cultural products.

### **The Lure of the Absolute**

The binary kernel of the radicalization process reported by Barak et al. (2024) is not coincidental, but a core feature of contemporary stories of radicalization, and typically among the main results of what in psychoanalytic jargon we would call the “traumatic core” of the process (e.g. Herman, 1997; Ross, 2007; Van der Kolk, 2015). The Manichean nature of radicalized ideologies, which typically divides the world into clear categories of good and evil (e.g. Juergensmeyer, 2017; Neumann, 2009; Rapaport, 2004; Stern, 2003, etc.) can also be seen as a direct response to the traumatic effects of what Anthony Giddens refers to as the breakdown of “ontological security” in the context of a radicalized modernity (see Giddens, 1990, 1991). By imposing a rigid and simple dichotomous order on the complexities and uncertainties of difficult real life experiences, radicalized ideologies can provide a sense of certitude and control in the face of the unknown and unassimilable trauma. This dimension of ideological commitment is also developed in Barak et al.’s (2024) work, which emphasizes how radicalized identities are sustained not just by ideological content but by deep subjective investment. While much of the literature focuses on ideological content and cognitive shifts, Barak’s analysis suggests that ideological attachment often serves as a means of stabilizing emotional distress. Even though Barak et al. do not employ a psychoanalytic framework, their findings align with Lacan’s concept of *jouissance* as they emphasize the repetitive, affective

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nature of ideological commitment, which extends beyond cognitive adherence to a deeper emotional compulsion. Radicalization, from this perspective, is not simply a cognitive transformation but also an affective one, rooted in the emotional rewards and compulsive repetitions of *jouissance*. This framework allows for a deeper understanding of why ideological attachments persist even in the face of counter-evidence or disillusionment. This emotional dimension is particularly relevant to the later discussion on trauma here, where the desire for ideological purity functions as a response to unresolved psychic distress. Just as trauma restructures subjective experience by marking an unassimilable rupture, ideological investment offers a compensatory framework that provides both coherence and affective intensity. Barak et al.'s observations, in this sense, support the argument that radicalization must be understood not only as an ideological process but as an emotional one as well. This, again, is part of the sinthomic function of radicalized beliefs that allows the individual or group to maintain a sense of coherence and meaning, even as the broader social and ideological fabric shifts rapidly. This sinthomic function of radicalized ideologies also explains their tenacity and appeal, even in the face of contradictory evidence or negative consequences. Sinthomic beliefs are not easily relinquished or transformed, as they develop to serve a vital psychic function in holding together the individual's sense of identity, reality and purpose/meaning. Efforts to challenge radicalized ideologies must therefore take into account this fundamental psychological function, and the need for viable alternative sources of meaning and stability in the process of deradicalization.

It may also be worth noting, however, that despite their stabilizing function, and to a large extent because they are built on a rigid binary worldview, radicalized ideologies are continuously threatened by the actual complexities, nuances and ambiguities of the real world. As a result, with the exception of contexts where the social environment tends to endorse their views, the radicalized individual must constantly work (cognitively and psychologically, that is) to maintain their belief system, often leading to increasingly narrower, more rigid, and more easily violent extremes. This dynamic is well reflected in Barak and colleagues' (2024) findings, for instance, that once the radicalized ideology has taken sufficient hold within the structure of the identity, especially once it becomes an outwardly (i.e. socially) observable aspect of the individual's identity, then the interactive process of being in the public eye

initiates a circular process of escalation, whereby “being in the public eye increases one’s ideological fervor, and vice versa” (p. 8).

Despite this fundamental fragility, however, recognizing the sinthomic role of radicalized ideologies (i.e. holding an otherwise precarious psychic structure together) is crucial for understanding their tenacity and resistance to change. Attempts to challenge or dismantle these ideological formations must therefore take into account their significant psychic function for the individuals or groups holding them. Effective interventions need to be acutely conscious of not only the ideological content but also of the invisible psychic needs and processes that specific ideological structure serves. The mind will go to great lengths to protect and preserve a sinthomic construct that holds it together. A direct challenge, or worse yet, an attack on the logical soundness or veracity of the content of such radicalized ideologies can lead to an ironic strengthening of those psychic structures and the beliefs associated with them. This phenomenon aligns with findings from several studies on counter-narrative approaches, which have documented how direct ideological confrontation can produce unintended negative or iatrogenic effects (Hemmingsen & Castro, 2017; Carthy et al., 2020; O’Connell, 2023; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Kaderbhai, 2017). As Cherney (2021) notes, counter-narratives may inadvertently reinforce the very ideological constructs they aim to dismantle by triggering defensive cognitive mechanisms. A primary goal of deradicalization interventions should therefore be to offer individuals *alternative* pathways to interpret and interact with social realities, construct identity, and achieve a sense of stability. And to note, such alternative pathways often need to include or at any rate admit the need for real-life changes in policies, discourses, laws, etc. Rather than directly challenging the core beliefs of radicalized individuals, which may only serve to reinforce their commitment to the ideas, interventions should aim to help them become aware of the extraordinary demands and limitations that their radicalized mindset imposes on them, while simultaneously offering legitimate pathways to liberation from these constraints -again, such legitimate pathways can almost never remain limited to discursive tropes alone, it often has to include or at any rate openly address and admit the need for real-life changes.

Needless to say, conceptualizing effective alternatives that in fact “speak” to the radicalized individual or groups and convince them to speak back, requires a broad understanding of the contextual forces that have led to the emergence of the sinthomic

ideology as a coping mechanism to begin with. As important as it is to examine this aspect in a more practical sense, I will need to postpone that to a later opportunity, since this text is primarily dedicated to outlining a theoretical and conceptual model from the point of view of contemporary psychoanalytic theory. Having said that, the psychoanalytic framework presented here suggests certain principles for more effective engagement with radicalized individuals. Such approaches would, for instance: 1) avoid direct confrontation of ideological content which may reinforce sinthomic attachments; 2) create and cultivate transitional spaces where ambiguity and complexity can be gradually tolerated; 3) address and take seriously the underlying emotional and existential needs that radical ideologies satisfy; 4) work with the grain of existing identity structures rather than attempt to undermine or dismantle them; and 5) recognize and defend the legitimate grievances and desires for justice that are often embedded within radical narratives. These principles invite development of communication strategies that engage individuals at the level of subjective experience rather than ideological content, facilitating the gradual integration of split thinking without triggering defensive reinforcement of radical positions.

In what follows I will take a closer look at a few more pieces of the larger puzzle, if you will. These include the global shift from the modernity's world of incessant quest and prioritization of certitudes to the postmodern world of uncertainties and hybridity, the concepts of split- and absolute-thinking as developmental processes and coping mechanisms, the psychoanalytic notion of "the lost object" as a fundamental element that shapes and directs both personal desires and ideological choices and its relevance to such questions as total justice and utopianism, the slippage of meaning and desire, and the notion of hauntology.

### **Split and Radicalize**

From a cultural psychoanalytic point of view, the prominence of binary thinking in modernity and its subsequent destabilization in postmodernity constitutes a key aspect of understanding radicalization in its broader context. The modernist emphasis on binary thinking provides the right structural scaffolding for radicalization when combined with intense emotions like fear, frustration, and rage engendered by collective traumas and sociocultural ruptures. See for instance Hogg and Blaylock's (2011) great collection of essays, *Extremism and the*

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*Psychology of Uncertainty*, for a range of takes on the strong relationship between sociocultural ruptures, uncertainty, and the rise of radicalization. The ruthless global transition from the certitudes and singularities of a binary modernity to the multiplicity of truths of the postmodern life may be described differently by different people, but one thing seems to be generally agreed by all: that it has raised great waves of uncertainty and existential fear across the globe. And of course, “rigid ideological systems are particularly attractive,” as Hogg (2011) asserts, “in a world of moral and behavioral relativities and ‘limitless’ choice. They resolve the postmodern paradox that individual freedom creates uncertainty about what to do and who to be and thus a yearning for moral absolutes embedded in groups circumscribed by powerful ideologies” (p. 26).

Split thinking, which is a core feature in fundamentalism, extremism, and radicalization (Hogg & Adelman, 2013; Khosrokhavar, 2017; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017; Strozier et al., 2010), is certainly not a new human phenomenon, but binary thinking as a culturally stressed and “pushed” paradigm for thinking can be traced back only to the foundations of modern Western thought (Bauman, 1991, 2000; Latour, 2012; Toulmin, 1992). Built on the foundations of reason, logic, and scientific inquiry, the enlightenment process gave birth to a worldview fundamentally structured around binary oppositions and geared towards a presumed totality -of knowledge, of truth, and of reality as such (see e.g. Taylor, 1989; Outram, 2013; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997; etc.). While the fundamental attribution of binaries may be explained as a “requirement” for a mode of connecting with reality, something of a side-effect of this new mode of relating to the world gradually emerged as the failure to understand “binary” as just that, i.e. a way of understanding reality, and projecting it instead onto the very nature of reality, leading to split thinking becoming the dogmatic underpinning of an ideological interpretation of enlightenment. It is quite important, of course, that this formulation not be understood as a simplistic rejection of “binaries” and the fundamental role played by binary oppositions in a productive interaction with reality. The use of binaries as a tool for understanding and organizing the world is not inherently problematic, nor is it the target of criticism here. Drawing distinctions and creating oppositions is a fundamental aspect of language and logic, not a creation of modernity. Modernity, however, succeeded to master and hegemonize this basic feature of human perception into a paradigmatic state.

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As I suggested earlier, the rise of binary thinking as the dominant cultural paradigm in modernity, followed by the shift towards more complex, integrative, and hybrid modes of thinking associated with postmodernity, mirrors the developmental transition from split-thinking to integrative thinking observed in individual psychology. Specifically, object relations theory in psychoanalysis describes an intriguingly similar trajectory: the emergence of split thinking in early stages of development, followed by a transition to integrative, complex modes of perceiving oneself and the world as the child matures. In the early stages of psychological development, according to this theory, the child tends to engage in “splitting,” characterized by the division of objects (including the self and others) into essentially “good” or “bad” categories. This early mode of thinking is so pervasive that the child splits and perceives the same object, say the mother, into “good mother” and “bad mother” as if two distinct entities.

The split mode of thinking/perception for which Melanie Klein, a primary figure of the object relations school, selected the unfortunate label of “the paranoid-schizoid position” (Klein, 1946, 1952), serves as a way of managing anxiety and emotional experiences by simplifying the complexities of experience into more manageable, black-and-white terms. Klein explains that in the paranoid-schizoid position, “persecutory and ideal objects are kept apart,” because the infant is not yet fully capable of comprehending and tolerating the object in the fullness of its nuances and inconsistencies and so, “perceives objects in parts, in fragments” (Klein, 1952, pp. 51-52). As infants develop, they gradually move towards a more mature state of the mind, also unfortunately-named by Klein as “the depressive position” (Klein, 1946). This more advanced developmental state is theorized in terms of the psychological capacity for a more integrated and nuanced mode of perceiving and relating to the world that affords the child the cognitive and emotional ability to move beyond split-thinking and perceive good and bad as simultaneous properties of the same object/person/situation. The ability to recognize and accept the coexistence of both positive and negative as aspects of the same object is psychologically more “costly” and requires higher levels of cognitive processing, but yields in return a more complex, realistic, and stable

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understanding of the world in which an object can simultaneously have good and bad qualities or be present and absent.<sup>6</sup>

Without suggesting a one-to-one connection, I would like to point out the intriguing parallels between the general transition from modernity to postmodernity and the individual's developmental trajectory in object relations theory. The modernist logic, specifically in its fundamental commitment to split thinking and its relentless search for universal truths, can indeed be compared to the psychoanalytic paranoid-schizoid position where the mind systematically simplifies complex experiences into stark categories, reduces multifaceted phenomena into basic elements, and seeks absolute certainty to manage anxiety and achieve a sense of security through assertion of binary-based explanations. The breakdown of binary thinking and the emergence of the capacity for integrative thinking and transitionality that accompany the shift from modernity to postmodernity then seem to parallel the developmental progression from the split mode of the paranoid-schizoid position to the integrative mode of the depressive position. In both cases, the "development" consists of a movement from a basic, split view of the world to a more hybrid, integrated view that can accommodate hybridity, ambiguity and contradiction without an urge to resort to aggression. The parallel is not to suggest that postmodernity creates a new unified whole—indeed, its fragmentary, decentered nature produces profound existential uncertainty—but rather that like the depressive position, it reveals an interconnected complexity where rigid binary oppositions can no longer be maintained as ontological absolutes. This dissolution of binaries creates precisely the conditions of uncertainty that make radical ideologies appealing as they promise a return to the comforting simplicity of clear divisions.

Psychologically, the object-relational move from splitting to integration, from Manichean thinking to a more nuanced integrative worldview, constitutes a crucial marker in human emotional and cognitive development. In the social and historical processes, one could argue for the historical evolution of thought from modern binarism to currently emerging

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<sup>6</sup> The latter capacity is identified as "object permanence", which is the ability of the child to understand that when an object (say, mother's face) disappears (for instance behind mom's hands, in a peek-a-boo game), it is not annihilated, but it may be present even though no longer visible, and there are good chances it may show up again. These concepts (the notion of depressive position, and the notion of object permanence) come from distinct analytic schools, but they capture the emergence of the same basic developmental capacity, i.e. the capability to "hold" an object in its totality of states (the absent and the present, the gratifying and the frustrating) at the same age range of between 6 to 12 months.

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hybridities<sup>7</sup> in terms of an epistemological maturation from split-thinking to integrative perception. The transitional processes associated with this change, such as the rise of identity politics, the dethroning of grand narratives, and the increasing sense of uncertainty and complexity that accompanies the loss of “Truth” may be considered liberating by some, but they are also accompanied by substantial growing pains, specifically in the form of collectively experienced anxieties and upheavals.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Melanie Klein’s theory of splitting and the paranoid-schizoid state provides powerful “clinical” models for interpreting much of the manifestations of the cultural disruption in transition. I will not enter a detailed examination of the idea here, but clinical methods such as containment, interpretation, holding environment, mourning, reparation, and integration can offer meaningful perspectives for addressing societal issues during this transitional passage.<sup>9</sup>

The more explicit trend of re-examination, questioning, and criticism of modernist binary thinking emerged in the second half of the 20th century, leading to the contemporary post-modern or post-truth condition (e.g. Lyotard, 1984; McIntyre, 2018). This trend was driven by several interrelated factors, reflecting shifts in scientific knowledge, intellectual thought, cultural perspectives, high-tech advances, and socio-political realities. The emergence of postmodern and poststructuralist theories in philosophy and the humanities can be (and has been) traced back to the paradigm shift in the fundamental sciences. The fundamental discoveries in these scientific fields not only revolutionized our understanding of the physical world but also had far-reaching implications for how we conceptualize reality, knowledge, and human experience (e.g. Heisenberg, 1958; Kuhn, 1962). The rejection of grand narratives, the emphasis on the constructed nature of knowledge, the recognition of the misleading nature of the binary interpretation of reality and the inherent complexity and

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<sup>7</sup> Think of the waves of emerging hybridities in areas of culture, disciplinary boundaries, sciences and technologies, gender and sexuality, linguistic code-switching, and so much more. While many of the emergent hybrids have provoked and face strong resistances, they have nonetheless continued to expand and proliferate.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Douglas Murray’s (2019) extensive analyses of current social upheavals based on this reading of the impact of transition from modernity to postmodernity.

<sup>9</sup> Interested readers may want to consult the following for more detailed discussion of these clinical concepts: Containment: see e.g. Salzberger-Wittenberg (2013) for a comprehensive exploration of psychological containment and its therapeutic applications. Interpretation: see for instance Kristeva (1987) for insights into psychoanalytic interpretation and cultural meaning-making. Holding Environment: see Winnicott (1965) for the foundational theory of holding environments and their crucial role in psychological development. Mourning: start with Freud’s (1917/1957) seminal work on mourning and its psychological processes. Reparation: see e.g. Britton & Novakovic (2023) for an in-depth examination of psychological reparation and healing. Integration: see Klein (1940, 1946) for the original theoretical framework of psychological integration and the movement beyond splitting.

interconnectedness of social phenomena in these theories clearly echoed the insights from “new” basic sciences.

Whereas early 20th century discoveries in basic sciences fundamentally challenged our modern epistemological and ontological certitudes, by early 21<sup>st</sup> century new technologies of information and communication finally brought the impact of over a century of scientific and philosophical developments into our daily lives and sociopolitical realities -leading to the range of instabilities and challenges we are continuing to witness across the globe. The stream of exposures to and interactions with diversities increasingly exposed the limitations and indeed the fragility of mistaking the binary paradigm for an ontological reality. And of course the explosive emergence of technologies of information and communication dealt the final blow, washing away the last vestiges of the illusion of stable binaries. The complexity and interdependence of global systems, facilitated by technological advancements, proved binary models of perception, and along with them various social practices and political structures, fundamentally unstable and circumstantial, rather than stable and essential.

The collective confusion and upheaval that characterize the present moment, evident in the arena of political unrest and the broader sense of societal agony, can thus be understood as symptomatic of the profound transitional process from “the modern condition” to the “postmodern condition.” As Murray (2019) and many others have argued, much of the sociopolitical upheaval experienced across the globe in recent decades can be attributed to this transitional process. As societies grapple with the challenges of navigating from a world of (imagined) certitudes, clear identities and obvious boundaries into one that is increasingly unclear, hybrid, intersected, and rapidly shifting, the appeal of simple binary narratives appearing in the form of radically clear interpretations of the world becomes more pronounced (e.g. Brahms, 2022; Murray, 2019; Dutton, 2019; McIntyre, 2018). Understanding the nature and the impact of this transition as a large piece of the puzzle of radicalization is crucial for developing broader-visioned and more effective strategies addressing the social and political challenges of our time, including extremism and radicalization.

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### City of Pure Justice

The pursuit of justice—total justice, to be exact—forms another large piece of the puzzle of radicalization (see for instance Alonso et al., 2008; Kepel & Rougier, 2016; Van den Bos, 2018, 2020). This is a large piece because in effect it consists of a convergence of split thinking and absolute thinking into a single and all-encompassing ideological project. The so-called “justice seekers,” as Van den Bos (2020) calls them, are deeply convinced that they themselves (individual deprivation; see Crosby 1976) or their specific group of reference (group deprivation; see Runciman 1966) are (or have been) targeted, wronged, and disenfranchised, and they deserve better. Regardless of historical accuracy (or lack thereof), from a psychoanalytic point of view, this process does not remain a simply “political” ambition, since it merges with the basic structure and economy of desire driven by the fundamental quest for the ‘lost object,’ which is a cornerstone concept in both British object relational (Klein, Winnicott, Bion, etc.) as well as French structural (Lacan, Laplanche, Kristeva, etc.) psychoanalysis.

In psychoanalytic theory, the so-called “lost object” refers to an unconscious, internalized representation of a perfect, idealized state of being that the individual experiences as having lost and must strive to regain. The process, and the experience, are fundamentally unconscious, and it is designed to explain and theorize the very emergence of the sense of self and all other psychological processes are in some sense mobilized and motivated by this inherent “urge” to seek the lost object. The concept can be elucidated for instance in developmental terms of the early experiences of the infant, who, having been separated from the “total” experience of being a biological outgrowth of the mother’s body, perceives the mother as a complete, all-satisfying presence, returning to which could therefore solve all problems experienced subsequent to birth. As the infant grows and experiences the inevitable frustrations and separations not only from the mother’s body but also from her manifestations and even her actual presence, the infant comes to the harsh realization that the perfect, omnipotent presence is irretrievably “lost” to them. This loss constitutes a profound and formative experience, and the individual spends the rest of their life seeking to recover this lost state of wholeness and perfection. In the British object relations tradition, theorists such as Melanie Klein (1946) and D.W. Winnicott (1971) emphasized how the individual’s early

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relationships with caregivers shape their internal world and their lifelong patterns of relating to others. In the French structural tradition, Jacques Lacan (1978, 1993) further conceptualized the lost object, and identified it as the eternally unattainable object of desire that drives the individual's psychic life. Across these different psychoanalytic perspectives, the lost object represents a powerful, unconscious fantasy of completeness and fulfillment that the individual strives and struggles to recover through all aspects of life, ranging from the very process of meaning making and participation in social life, to their personal relationships, their diverse pursuits, and their political and ideological commitments (e.g. Stavrakakis, 2002, 2007; Fink, 1995; Žižek, 1989). Furthermore, various objects<sup>10</sup> can take on the symbolic role of representing the "lost object" in a stronger manner, thus elevating to specific places of attention, interest, and psychic investment. This dynamic plays a specifically defining role in the formation and impact of ideological "ideals" such as freedom, justice, democracy, etc.

The yearning for the lost object of justice amplifies the intensity and appeal of radicalized ideologies which are already built on the logic of split/absolute perception, to create a powerful sense of purpose and coherent meaning for individuals who feel dispossessed, disempowered and disenfranchised by the perceived/experienced history of injustice. Radicalized ideologies can offer the alluring promise of a perfect, utopian world where the wrongs will be righted, and all injustice will be remedied. The psychoanalytic concept of the lost object thus provides a powerful framework for understanding the psychological dynamics at play in the pursuit of this utopian justice. The lost object, embodied here in the imaginary perfect state of affairs of which the individual or group has been deprived by the evil forces of oppression, injustice, and moral decay, becomes what Jacques Lacan termed the "object cause of desire", aka *objet-a* (Lacan, 1966, 1978; Rahimi, 2019) - a "sense" that can be projected onto various objects, goals and ideas, turning them into extremely appealing objects of desire.

The pursuit of the lost object of total justice can become a defining feature of the radicalized individual's psychological landscape, deeply informing and coordinating their social and political thoughts, emotions, and actions. It is in this sense that the psychoanalytic

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<sup>10</sup> Keep in mind that the term "object" in psychoanalysis includes actual external objects, but also individuals, goals, ideas, concepts, as well as an entire class of "internal objects." See for instance Rangell (1985).

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dynamics of desire play a crucial role in radicalization, with the allure of utopian visions both intensifying and organizing radicalized beliefs and actions. Even though much has been explored about the role of the sense of injustice in deradicalization (e.g. Crosby, 1976; Alonso et al., 2008; Kepel, 2004; Kepel & Rougier, 2016; Moghaddam, 2005; Van den Bos, 2020; Van den Bos & Maas, 2009), a psychoanalytic perspective, specifically one built on object relational and structural theories, can offer new insights into the mechanisms at play. As indicated earlier, radicalized ideologies (that is, ideologies driven to their logical extremes, thus rendered inevitably absolute and extremely Manichean) offer the promise of delivering the “lost object,” in the guise of a utopian state of justice, where all wrongs are righted and injustice is eradicated. Once this utopian vision is established as an “object of desire,” it becomes itself a new powerful motivator and organizer of radicalized thought and action as individuals and ideological communities become increasingly committed to the cause and the (exciting) conviction that their radical actions can/will bring about this idealized state of pure justice. This is now a self-sustaining cycle, consisting of the subject of an ideology, a well defined pattern of desire, and a designated object of desire, a self-contained system with a strong and clear objective, which can easily justify and prescribe violence, if or when needed.

### **Impossible Justice**

Paradoxically enough, the very nature of desire is such that it can never be fully satisfied (see e.g. Sartre, 1956; Lacan, 1957, 2006; Derrida, 1978). The pursuit of the utopian vision is ultimately a futile endeavor. Not just that the reality of the world can never match the perfection of the idealized fantasy, but history, especially modern history, is riddled with instances of the utopian fantasies leading to not much besides genocides and other colossal devastations. From the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution, where the Jacobins’ pursuit of a perfect, egalitarian society led to mass executions and political violence, to Stalin’s Soviet Union, where the pursuit of a communist utopia resulted in forced collectivization, mass deportations, and extermination of millions in gulags and famines, utopian projects have changed names but delivered similar results. The Nazi vision of a racially pure beautiful utopia led to the Holocaust, World War II, and the deaths of millions. Mao Zedong’s attempt at transforming China into a clean pure communist utopia produced

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the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, widespread famine, destruction of cultural heritage, and the obliteration of tens of millions of people. The Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia simply wanted to realize Pol Pot's clear vision of an agrarian classless utopia. The ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the Islamic Republic in Iran have each been simply trying to realize the visions of a clean, pure Islamic utopia. Significantly, these examples, varying in context and ideology as they may be, all share a deeply modernist logic of binary splitting and pure totality in their utopian visions, whether they understand and define themselves as essentially European or vehemently anti-Western.

Because of the depth of identification with the ideological narrative, the inherent impossibility of what, from a psychoanalytic point of view, amounts to the wish for reunification with the lost object ironically serves to intensify the individual's commitment to the radicalized ideology. This intensification invigorates the cycle of escalation as they become increasingly desperate to bring about the realization of their desired utopia. At the heart of this dynamic lies the psychoanalytic understanding of desire itself. In Lacanian theory, for instance, desire is always a desire for something that is lacking, something that is absent—the lost object. This absence, or lack, is what propels the individual to seek out ways to fill the void, to achieve a sense of wholeness or completeness, a fundamental longing for reunification with the lost object. This fundamental drive mobilizes the processes of making meaning and desiring, which are the two most fundamental drivers of human life in both individual and social realms. In the context of radicalization, the utopian vision presented by radicalized ideologies becomes the basic object of desire, the means by which the individual believes they can overcome the so-called lack, and achieve a state of perfect fulfillment.<sup>11</sup>

Utopianism, as a belief in the possibility of creating a perfect society, or in this case a society free of injustices and inequalities, can be recognized in two basic orientations: a

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<sup>11</sup> While this analysis focuses on radicalization as a process driven by a desire for transformative change—whether societal or personal—it is important to note that not all ideologically motivated extreme behaviors share this driven orientation. Incel Black Pill ideology, for example, appears to lack the transformative drive characteristic of radicalization as it promotes a resigned acceptance of an apparently immutable reality. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this reflects what may be called a collapsed state of the economy of desire, where the dynamic circulation of desire has come to a halt, and the symbolic representation or reproduction of the lost object is foreclosed. Without the possibility of symbolizing the loss, desire cannot be redirected toward alternative objects, resulting in psychic immobility. Not dissimilar to Kristeva's (1989) concept of melancholia, this state leads to resignation, passivity, and self-destructive behaviors, as the subject identifies with or surrenders to the loss rather than seek its resolution. While such movements share with radicalized ideologies a narrative structure of grievance, they diverge fundamentally in their rejection of transformative aspiration, raising the question of whether they should be categorized as forms of radicalization.

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future-oriented or messianic utopianism, and a past-oriented or nostalgic utopianism. Nostalgic utopianism entails a longing to re-establish an idealized beautiful and satisfying (but lost) past, often seen as a time of great peace, harmony, justice, etc. (Boym, 2001). Messianic utopianism, on the other hand, intends to create a future version of such perfections, but it may not necessarily imagine that the utopia has existed in the past (Bloch, 1986; Levitas, 2013). These ideologized expressions of desire (from a psychoanalytic point of view) are inherently linked to the limitations of binary thinking and the dangers of radicalization in the pursuit of pure justice, as discussed earlier. Both messianic and nostalgic forms of utopianism foster and require oversimplified and polarized models of understanding the world and its processes. It should be noted, however, that both messianic and nostalgic forces in fact also represent deeply ingrained natural aspects of human psychic apparatus. They reflect (and motivate) a range of inherent desires for exploration, belonging and attachment, meaning making, creativity, progress, and more (Bloch, 1986; Boym, 2001). The utopian motivation of either orientation fuels the aspirations for a better future and for reestablishing a lost state of satisfaction. “Utopian consciousness,” to use Bloch’s (1986) terminology, is motivated by the human desire for happiness. Once the projected fulfillment of desire (*objet a*, in Lacanian jargon<sup>12</sup>) converges with the absolute certitude of split-thinking, utopianism turns into a highly effective cognitive “mental trap”: strongly attractive, logically self-contained, perfectly convincing, and fundamentally clear of the complexities and contradictions inherent in the lived social reality (Bloch, 1986).

While messianic (future-oriented desire for lost object) and nostalgic (past-oriented desire for lost object) tendencies need to be understood as basic aspects and tendencies of human subjectivity and meaning making (see Rahimi, 2016, 2021), ideologized renditions of these innate tendencies are far from natural or healthy processes. Once melded with split- and absolute-thinking, they reduce complex social and historical processes to simplistic, rigid, polarized and absolute oppositions along with the intense urge to act towards a highly desirable alternative—the imagined utopia. Oriented according to either the perfect future to be arrived at, or the harmonious past to return to or reproduce, these ideologies then create a sharp dichotomy between the desirable and the undesirable, the just and the unjust, the good and the evil. This process distorts the reality of social relations and produces a false yet clear

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<sup>12</sup> See for instance Lacan (2006) pp. 699ff.

and fundamental sense of opposition and division, along with a strong roadmap for elimination of the evil/polluted/unjust and establishment of the good/pure/just.

### Hauntological Justice

The quest for total justice, which can also be conceptualized in terms of utopian thinking, and which I have tied to the problem of radicalization here, has long acted as a driving force behind various social, political, and philosophical movements (Moody-Adams, 2021; Rawls, 1971; Sen, 2008). Like utopian motives, the search for perfect justice is in some sense a manifestation of foundational psychic processes, another expression of the perpetual quest for the lost object. The word perpetual is key here, however, and requires emphasis because it is precisely this endlessness that marks the difference between natural features of the psyche such as the utopian desire for total justice and sinthomic radicalized ideologies of total justice. Whereas the natural tendencies are open, fluid, flexible and “endless”, the radicalized ideology is closed, solid, rigid, and has a very clear end in mind. The notion of hauntology coined originally by the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida (1994), offers a powerful framework for understanding this key difference, and for conceptualizing options for countering it, such as the notion of hauntological justice (Rahimi, 2021).

The far reaching aspects of hauntology as a theoretical framework extend well beyond this text. Insofar as concerns our discussion, however, the core feature of hauntology comes to relief in contrast to the notion of ontology. Hauntology challenges the strict distinction between the past and the present (Derrida, 1994; Gordon, 2008), and perhaps more significantly, it also challenges the strict distinction between being and not being. “Hauntology does not ask, ‘to be or not to be,’ it claims instead the simultaneous playfulness of ‘to be and not to be’” (Rahimi, 2021, p. 4). On the one hand, the idea that the past is always present, impacting our lives and societies in various ways in the context of law and order, means that historical injustices, legal traditions, and cultural norms continue to inform and shape contemporary social, political, and legal systems (Hartman, 2007; Trouillot, 1995). This hauntological aspect of law and order can manifest in various forms, such as the shadowy persistence of otherwise outdated legal doctrines, the entrenchment of systemic inequalities, and the echoes of past injustices reverberating through current legal disputes (Azoulay, 2019;

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Bevernage, 2018). One of the major implications of the hauntological nature of social and cultural structures, however, lies in the impossibility of absolute transitions. That is to say, no “total revolutions” can ever occur to change the totality of the structural foundations of a society, and by extension, no state of “total justice” is imaginable. As Walter Benjamin (1968) put it in his own poetic language, “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another” (p. 256). Through this fundamental challenge to the belief in absolute binary splits in political, social and cultural systems, hauntology undermines the psychological and cognitive conditions of existence of split- and absolute-thinking as such, and hence the phenomenon of radicalization.

The hauntological interpretation of civilization, order, law, and justice developed by Derrida is very much an extension of the line of thought advanced by Benjamin, albeit in a very different language. In his “Force of Law,” for instance, Derrida (1992) undermines not just the attainability, but the very possibility of absolute order or absolute justice. He emphasizes that any legal, social, and cultural system incorporates all its implicit and explicit historical and cultural events, contexts, and references into its structure, be they good, bad, or ugly. These otherwise “pasts,” and especially those voices and meanings that have been erased, silenced or otherwise subdued in the process of establishment of an existing system of law and order, continue to “haunt” the totality of the order (see Azoulay, 2019; Benhabib, 1992, 2004; Bevernage, 2018; Young, 1990; Rahimi, 2021). Derrida insists that justice needs to be understood as an “undeconstructible” ideal—one that exceeds the domain of legal norms and regulations, such that the force of law can never be entirely just, and justice can never be expressed or established in its totality (Derrida, 1992, pp. 22-29). This is an understanding that fundamentally subverts the core assumption of radicalized utopian ideologies.

In “Force of Law” Derrida highlights the inherent impossibility, the aporia, within the law itself, as it oscillates between just and unjust expressions in a state of undecidability. “The undecidable,” in this case, “is not merely the oscillation between two significations or two contradictory and very determinate rules, each equally imperative... [it] is not merely the oscillation or the tension between two decisions; it is the experience of that which, though heterogeneous, foreign to the order of the calculable and the rule, is still obliged” (p. 24).

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Justice, he says, transcends the structure of law. Justice is an ethical ideal that strives for fairness, equity, and moral rightness, and which cannot be fully captured by the codified rules of any legal system. This is where the concept of the undecidable comes into play. The undecidability of law, he explains, is not simply about being caught between two clear and opposing choices or objectives. It represents a deeper reality that emerges in moments of legal decision-making where the irreconcilable tension between the calculable/structural nature of law and the incalculable demands of justice becomes evident and unavoidable.

It is only through addressing and engaging the inherent contradictions of the law and order, including the “contradictory” voices that have been pushed to the margins, silenced or even erased, he insists, that we may open up possibilities for more meaningful and less violent interpretations of justice. This is in fact the hauntological approach to structures—all human structures of organization. Order and law are haunted by the traces of past violences, injustices, and to go back to Benjamin, the “barbarism” that has and will always continue to inform them. So the notion of hauntological justice puts under question all civilizational claims to “justice” as incomplete, contradictory, and unsatisfactory at best. And by the same token, it also problematizes the very idea/ideal of arriving at some alternative or emancipatory form of justice, specifically and severely undermining the radical basis of both past- and future-oriented utopian narratives of such justice.

From the hauntological point of view such ideals as utopian justice are unattainable, or to be more precise, they are perpetually deferred (Derrida, 1976, 1978, 1994). This acknowledges, as mentioned earlier, the complexities and nuances underpinning our understanding of law, order, and justice, and the ways historical injustices continue to shape and influence contemporary law and order (Hartman, 2007; Trouillot, 1995), but more importantly, it takes seriously the fact that all social structure, and every narrative, including (in fact especially) utopian narratives of good and justice, is haunted by that which it had to suppress in order to become a dominant structure or even a coherent narrative, such as the structures of law and order and the narratives of justice, liberation or emancipation.

From a more explicitly psychoanalytic point of view, Lacan’s concept of the “slippage of meaning” (e.g. Lacan, 1957, p. 419) coincides directly with Derrida’s notion of the impossibility of justice. Lacan, who formulates human subjectivity in terms of the structural processes of language and the symbolic system of meanings, emphasizes the inherent features

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of instability, multiplicity, and endless deferral of meaning in language and hence in human desire—which functions through symbolic connections and representations (e.g. Lacan, 1993, 1978, 2006). He discusses the idea of the deferral of meaning in his works quite extensively, particularly through the concepts of the slippage of meaning and *glissement*, or the sliding of the signifier. “It is in the chain of the signifier that meaning insists,” he writes, “but none of the chain’s elements consists in the signification it can provide at that very moment. The notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier thus comes to the fore” (1957/2006, p. 419). Meaning is neither fixed nor completed within a single signifier or linguistic unit, it is perpetually deferred along the chain of signifiers and references from phonemes to words to sentences to texts to multiple layers of social and environmental contexts...never complete, never final, and certainly never absolute. Note specifically how this move undermines the idea that “binary oppositions” are foundational elements of language, and gives that fundamental role to an unending flow of slidings and deferrals instead. This process, to the subjective manifestation of which he refers as metonymic desire, illustrates how the meaning and hence desire is always postponed and never fully graspable at any single point within the chain of signifiers (Lacan, 1957). This is precisely the mechanism that explains why from a psychoanalytic point of view full justice, the object of utopian desire, is perpetually deferred, and will never be fully obtained at any point in history and via any ideological roadmaps. Like meaning in language, justice is never final, always elusive and subject to reinterpretation, as different perspectives and contexts challenge established norms and assumptions, as repressed meanings resurface, and as a result, justice always represents a certain order of power consolidated in and represented by a specific order of representations and associations, but never final, complete, or total.

What Derrida’s and Lacan’s theories of the ubiquitous and interminable slippage of meaning and desire shed light on is that the real dynamics behind otherwise basic attempts at justice are much more intricate and in fact much more precarious than the split/absolute paradigm of modernity would have us believe. “Every legal institution, every contract,” to quote Derrida, “is founded on an act of violence that, at the limit, does not and cannot have anything but a de facto legitimacy” (1994, p. 12). Both psychoanalytic and hauntological analyses (if one really has to make such distinction, that is) lead to the inevitable exposure of the potential violence inherent in any ideological formulation of a final or total justice, which

would then become active in any radical attempts at implementing such ideology or establishing such justice.

Last but not least, while this paper was intended primarily to outline a theoretical overview, and a framework for understanding radicalization from a contemporary psychoanalytic point of view, it may nonetheless be useful to briefly also examine some of the ways in which such a framework can accommodate or be put into dialogue with current interpretive models and methodological approaches to deradicalization. In the remaining section, I will address some senses in which this psychoanalytic model can perhaps “thicken” our understanding of radicalization, in a way that also complements and interacts with existing deradicalization models. By examining the intersection of psychoanalytic insights with established frameworks (whose intellectual roots often stretch back to a cognitive-behavioral frame of reference), I will try in this final section to highlight pathways and points of convergence of both the psychological and experiential underpinnings of radical ideologies and the practical considerations of disengagement and deradicalization models. This can ideally serve as a bridge between theoretical understanding and pragmatic intervention, towards a nuanced, interdisciplinary approach that may serve more effective deradicalization efforts.

### **Disengagement, Deradicalization**

As fascinating as the theoretical discussion of radicalization might be for those of us curious about the broader questions of human subjectivity, the basic fact remains that the effort to understand the radicalized experience and its internal dynamics is ‘relevant’ only so long as it can help answer a crucial question: how can radicalized persons or groups be walked away from that mindset—specifically from its behavioral consequences, and more specifically yet, from its violent potentialities? The psychoanalytic perspective, rooted as it is in both clinical and intellectual/theoretical grounds, has the unique vantage of offering a model for the inner workings of the process which tend to elude many other models. At the same time, the implications of the psychoanalytic model seem to align with and enhance existing empirical models of deradicalization and disengagement, even those formulated in the languages of cognitive-behavioral or social psychology. This section aims to highlight some of the ways in

which these theoretical and practical approaches can be aligned towards a more comprehensive understanding of radicalization as well as potential pathways for change, including disengagement and deradicalization. For clarity, disengagement refers to the behavioral withdrawal from extremist activities, while deradicalization involves cognitive and emotional shifts away from extremist ideologies. Though related, not all disengaged individuals are deradicalized.

The Phoenix Model of disengagement and deradicalization (Silke, Morrison, Maiberg, Slay & Stewart, 2021) has emerged as a promising framework in recent years and might be an ideal point of entry into this conversation. The Phoenix model attempts to converge various factors observed in the field with cross-disciplinary views and traditions, along with a strong grounding in research and contemporary methods. The model identifies basic ‘catalysts’ that contribute to an individual’s exit from extremist involvement. Silke et al. (2021) describe the three types of catalysts—Actor, Psychological, and Environmental—which interact in turn with “filters” such as perceived opportunity, trust, and security concerns to shape the disengagement process. Separately, Webber et al. (2020) have also highlighted how the psychological process of disengagement is motivated by a combination of ‘push and pull’ factors, such as disillusionment with the organization’s internal dynamics and external opportunities for positive change. The Phoenix model, claim the authors, was originally derived “solely from a systematic review of the strongest contemporary research” across various models and practices (Silke et al., 2021, p. 318), with emphasis on such key social, cognitive, and psychological factors as identity transformation and the role of disillusionment, which highlight the centrality of external and environmental influences in the internal process of deradicalization. Central to this model is the notion of “identity transformation,” which aligns closely with the concept of the *sinthome* as discussed here—a core psychic structure that holds fragmented parts of identity together. Koehler (2020) emphasizes the importance of ideological flexibility during the transformation, suggesting that deradicalization efforts should involve both direct interventions, like ideological counseling, and indirect methods, such as community engagement, to facilitate effective identity reconstruction. Webber et al. (2020) underscore that addressing psychological needs, social networks, and ideological narratives—the ‘3N’ factors—are crucial to both radicalization and deradicalization, emphasizing the need to restore balance among these aspects for successful identity

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transformation (p. 55). This understanding generally highlights that identity transformation involves the rebirth of pre-existing elements that have been subsumed by extremist ‘identities,’ providing a pathway to reintegration (e.g. Morrison et al., 2020; Silke et al., 2021). Silke et al. (2021) emphasize that identity transformation forms the foundation of the disengagement and deradicalization process, involving either the rejection of the extremist identity or a transformation towards a non-militant identity (p. 315). The transformation of identity in this account becomes key to disengagement, not just in the social sphere but also at a deeper psychological level. This basic idea, that disengagement would involve not just a shift in social roles but also a transformation of the fundamental psychic anchors that provide individuals with a sense of coherence, aligns clearly with the psychoanalytic model I have outlined here. It is important to keep in mind, however, that while disengagement may in some cases involve elements of identity reconfiguration, full ideological and psychological transformation conceptually belongs in the domain of deradicalization, insofar as disengagement claims its focus to be on behavioral withdrawal. In addition to the obvious connection with the notion of *sinthome* and *sinthomic* function of radicalized ideologies, this approach to transformation connects specifically with the idea of subjectivity and intersectional/hybrid identities, where different aspects of an individual’s identity simultaneously influence their attraction to or disengagement from extremism. Radicalized identities are often formed at the nexus of multiple social factors, and understanding these layers is key to comprehensively approaching deradicalization, regardless of what terminology is used in understanding this core process and its workings. It may be worth mentioning also that radicalized identities do not necessarily remain fluid or transitional. While the psychoanalytic approach conceptualizes radicalization as a dynamic process, as the notion of *sinthome* highlights, radicalized identity increasingly crystallizes into a more rigid “state of being,” deeply embedded within the individual’s self-concept. This distinction has important implications for interventions, as individuals at different points on the radicalization continuum may require tailored approaches—those in a transitional phase may still retain ideological flexibility, while those with more entrenched identities could require more intensive engagement strategies to facilitate cognitive and emotional shifts.

As discussed earlier, the concepts of hybridity and third space as developed by Bhabha (1984, 1990, 1994) offer a compelling framework for expanding our understanding of identity

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transformation in disengagement and deradicalization efforts. These concepts point towards the need for dynamic, overlapping spaces where identity can be experienced in its fluid and constantly negotiated form, rather than as a rigid and conflicted structure. Unlike the fixed radicalized identities that thrive on split readings of themselves and others, hybrid identities can tolerate (or even thrive in) a state that accommodates the integration of diverse influences, experiences and points of view. Incorporating such notions as hybridity and 3<sup>rd</sup> space (or transitional space, in psychoanalytic jargon) into the design of deradicalization and disengagement programs can help individuals reimagine themselves beyond static ideological categories and cultivate psychological and social spaces where alternative identities can flourish. In psychoanalytic terms, Winnicott's (1971) concept of transitional space refers to an intermediary psychological zone where individuals can experiment with new identities and perspectives without the immediate pressure and consequences of external reality. In the context of deradicalization, this can mean creating environments—be it therapeutic, social, or educational—where individuals can feel safe enough to explore alternative discourses and identities without fear of rejection or punishment. Programs that incorporate arts-based interventions, storytelling, role-playing, or facilitated dialogue across ideological divides can easily serve as vehicles for transitional spaces, allowing individuals to deconstruct rigid ideological frameworks and engage with new, more integrative, more flexible ones. By fostering such spaces, deradicalization programs can provide psychological and social bridges that help individuals move beyond absolute thinking toward an openness to their own open and hybrid identities. Despite the apparent abstractness of such ideas as transitional space or hybridity, the real life functionalities of these concepts are quite accessible, and can be operationalized through specific, concrete interventions. One such example would be the school-based creative expression workshops developed by Cécile Rousseau and her team in Montreal (e.g. Rousseau et al., 2005, see also Rousseau et al., 2023, 2024 for further thoughts on hybridity and transitional spaces). These workshops are designed as transitional spaces that allow immigrant and refugee children to bridge their past and present experiences, their cultures of origin and the host society, as well as their internal and external worlds. By engaging in drama and artistic expression within the regular school day, participants can explore and reconstruct their identities in a supportive environment, fostering psychological flexibility and resilience.

In the framework of a program following the Phoenix Model, for instance, incorporating the notion of hybridity and the third space (specifically in its “Identity Transformation” process) can enable the participants to negotiate a transitional identity that isn’t solely defined by either their radicalized discourse and their extremist involvement or by the pressure to adopt an entirely new identity as demanded by the existing institutional order. The transitional identity offers a more gradual, psychologically safer route toward reintegration, allowing for experimentation and negotiation in a supportive environment. Rather than attempting to replace one fixed identity with another, hybridity would promote an ongoing process of identity development, reducing the psychological resistance that would arise against abrupt identity shifts.

The implicit interplay between these transformations and the concept of the lost object may also be worth mentioning here. As is well reflected in research and other literature, radicalized individuals appear to be driven by a quest for a lost state of affairs, a lost state of justice or a lost sense of completeness, which is then mirrored by their ideological commitment. As discussed earlier, radical ideologies typically present a utopian vision that promises to reach or restore a lost sense of justice or fullness/identity (see also Bartlett & Miller, 2012; Horgan, 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2014; Moghaddam, 2005; Stern & Pascarelli, 2020). However, the messy reality of political action often creates stark contrasts with this clean fantasy, leading to disillusionment. Successful deradicalization must therefore be able to offer or at least point towards new frameworks that symbolically replace this lost object or inherently fulfill its function, addressing both the initial desire and the subsequent disillusionment, a second loss that can deeply affect the psyche (e.g. Horgan, 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2014). In practice, such frameworks often take the form of reintegration programs that emphasize social belonging, educational and vocational pathways, and alternative ideological or spiritual narratives. For instance, mentorship programs pairing former extremists with individuals who have successfully reintegrated (Koehler, 2017), initiatives that provide new collective identities through community engagement (Rabasa et al., 2010), or psychosocial support structures that help rebuild meaning and purpose outside of extremism (Feddes et al., 2015) all serve as transitional frameworks that symbolically replace the lost object. By providing a structured yet flexible pathway to identity reconstruction, these approaches help mitigate the psychological rupture caused by disillusionment with extremist

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ideology. Once helped to recognize and come to terms with the inherent complexities and ambiguities of their actual lived identities, individuals become better capable of processing disillusionment with previous extremist commitments and the frustration of giving up the highly attractive notion of total justice or a utopian solution (i.e. the reunification with the lost object promised by radicalized ideologies), and adopt a more flexible perspective. This can reduce in turn the psychological impact of disillusionment by enabling the individuals to view their past experiences as part of a broader, continually evolving identity/process, rather than demanding them to understand that as a single, definitive failure or error.

The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model by Khalil et al. is another framework that addresses the disconnect between attitudes and behaviors in violent extremism (Khalil et al., 2019; Webber et al., 2020). Khalil et al. (2019) argue that earlier models like Borum's Four-Stage Model (Borum, 2003, 2011) and Moghaddam's Staircase Model (Moghaddam, 2005) often fail to adequately differentiate between sympathizing with violent actions and actively participating in them, a discrepancy, they say, that suggests the need for a more accurate understanding of the dynamics between attitudes and behaviors. The ABC model critiques existing frameworks that assume attitudes predict behaviors, emphasizes the complexity of this relationship, and suggests that, in order to be more effective, disengagement efforts need to understand the two elements (attitude vs. behavior) as separate registers in a dynamic relationship with each other. Here a psychoanalytic perspective helps explain why the disconnect exists, and can recommend methods for examining their relationship. This is the sense, for instance, in which radical ideologies can provide crucial psychological stabilization for some individuals, even as they do not directly act on such beliefs. Understanding and incorporation of this dynamic can enhance the application of the ABC Model by highlighting the need to address the unconscious desires that sustain ideological sympathy and which can effectively explain (or fill, if you wish) the gap between behavior and attitude. As detailed earlier, these desires are often tied to realities that go well beyond individual life history, such as historical traumas and collective grievances, or profound existential disillusionments, in the face of which individuals may seek to resolve the resulting anxiety, inadequacy, or fragmentation with the help of certain psychic strategies or structures (such as split thinking, totalization, sinthomic formations, etc.). These implicit and invisible processes which, unlike attitudes and behaviors are inaccessible even to the

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individual's own conscious interrogation, are determining factors that lay in the dark gap between conscious attitude and actual behavior and modulate the relationship between the two.<sup>13</sup>

While this paper primarily examines radicalization within structured ideological movements, its core theoretical framework remains relevant beyond these settings. The approach taken here is primarily structural, focusing on how radicalization unfolds in group-related individual behavior, where identity formation, ideological commitment, and social belonging interact in an intricate intersubjective space. Keep in mind, however, that even in cases of so-called "lone" actors, the assumption of total isolation would be misleading. Lone-actor violence, even when not ideologically driven, is still socially embedded, shaped by broader cultural and political narratives, online networks, and personal grievances that are constructed within social contexts. While this paper does not explore those specific pathways in depth, many of the psychoanalytic and structural concepts discussed here—particularly those related to identity, desire, and ideological investment—can offer insights into their cases, albeit in different ways.

Findings from a systematic review of post-2017 research on disengagement by Morrison and colleagues (2020) highlights disillusionment as a key push factor driving individuals away from extremist groups (pp. 15-17). The Phoenix Model in turn identifies disillusionment, particularly with leadership or the ideological inconsistencies within extremist groups, as a primary psychological catalyst in facilitating disengagement. From a psychoanalytic point of view, this disillusionment can be described as a rupture in the fullness of the symbolic coherence that the radical ideology once provided and which promised a coherent path all the way to the city of Justice and Good. Individuals may indeed experience regular frustration with group members or the group's tactics or its internal culture, but they

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<sup>13</sup> Practitioners seeking to address these unconscious processes must employ approaches that allow individuals to articulate, reflect upon, and gradually reconstruct the hidden psychic investments sustaining their ideological commitments. Psychoanalytically informed interventions, such as guided self-narration, reflective interviewing, and associative dialogue, can provide structured spaces where individuals engage in meaning-making beyond rigid ideological frameworks. Additionally, methodologies like motivational interviewing and even psychodynamic counseling can help surface underlying anxieties, grievances, and existential tensions that fuel radical engagement. Programs integrating these techniques within broader deradicalization efforts such as trauma-informed counseling and structured mentorship can enable individuals to recognize and work through the conflicts that shape their ideological sympathies. By creating conditions where alternative symbolic identifications can emerge, these approaches support the gradual decoupling of rigid ideological attachments from the deeper psychological needs they initially served.

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often remain involved because the ideology fulfills a deeper unconscious need for meaning and identity, and above all, promises both the existence and the possibility of arrival at “true” and “total” meaning and identity. Understanding and addressing this psychic investment is inescapably critical for a successful program of deradicalization.

The notion of split thinking, where complex realities are divided into simplistic binaries of good versus evil, plays a significant role in sustaining radical engagement. As elaborated earlier, psychoanalytic theory teaches that splitting establishes the cognitive framework that allows totalization, as reflected in the “mechanisms” of idealization and devaluation, to occur. From a clinical point of view, splitting, as a so-called “primitive defense mechanism,” creates the cognitive structure that facilitates both idealization and devaluation, as is often acutely observable in borderline and narcissistic personality organizations. According to Otto Kernberg (1975), individuals utilize splitting as a way to manage intense internal conflicts and overwhelming emotions. This process, again, as discussed earlier, involves a stark division of the self and others into “all-good” or “all-bad” categories, as the ego cannot tolerate ambivalence or ambiguity. Melanie Klein’s (1946) theory of object relations had earlier traced the process of splitting back in early infancy, where it serves as a defense against the infant’s anxiety and frustration rising from rapid and unsurmountable change, vulnerability, and near-total lack of control. More recently, Nancy McWilliams (2011) emphasizes that, in adulthood, splitting continues to underlie extreme relational dynamics where idealization and devaluation are used to cope with unresolved internal conflicts. This model covers all relational dynamics, ranging from internal relationship to self, all the way to familial relations, friendships, and sociopolitical views and behaviors. And it is in this capacity that splitting provides the psychological and cognitive groundwork that enables the rapid shifts between idealization and devaluation, that is, “total” idealization, and “total” devaluation: perception of other individuals, groups, or systems as pure evil or pure good. And it is in awareness of this mechanism that deradicalization and disengagement work must be geared towards integrating fragmented perspectives into a more nuanced and cohesive worldview, one that acknowledges and tolerates complexity, ambiguity, and even discrepancies, rather than profess simplicity and absolute clarity.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Addressing splitting in deradicalization requires interventions that facilitate cognitive flexibility and encourage the integration of conflicting perspectives. Structured exposure to pluralistic narratives (for instance through

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Recent research has also highlighted the significance of opportunity and trusted networks in facilitating disengagement. These trusted networks are often the bridge that helps individuals transition away from radicalized ideologies (Morrison et al., 2020; Webber et al., 2020; Silke et al., 2021). Silke et al. (2021) found trusted networks such as family and friends to be critical not only for initiating disengagement but also for maintaining long-term commitment to non-extremist identities, particularly when trust in intervention programs is established. Koehler (2020) emphasizes that community and social environments play a crucial role in supporting disengagement, highlighting how fostering trust within these networks is essential for long-term success. Webber et al. (2020) argue that rehabilitation efforts should focus on fostering these trusted social networks, including reconnection with family and community members, to provide emotional stability and validate new non-extremist identities. These networks can help create a sense of belonging and stability, and the emotional and practical support for disengagement which is vital during the identity transformation phase (Morrison et al., 2020). Seen from the psychoanalytic point of view, these networks must offer an alternative source of stabilization for the identity. A key strategy here would be to create spaces where individuals can reconstruct their identities in a meaningful way, be it through education, community involvement, or personal engagement and individual change. The Phoenix Model's focus on identity transformation, for instance, can be significantly enhanced by incorporation of the insight that make clear sustainable disengagement is about both external opportunity and internal psychic restructuring. It is also necessary to acknowledge the emotional risk associated with disengagement—leaving behind the safety/security of an ideological structure means facing a profound sense of loss and uncertainty, which must be mitigated by the establishment of new sources of psychic security in the form of points of cognitive reference and intersubjective belonging. In practice, such sources may include a range of ideas such as structured mentorship programs, religious or

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guided discussions, dialogical encounters with former extremists, and cognitive reframing exercises) can help individuals move beyond rigid ideological dichotomies. Incorporation of techniques such as mentalization-based approaches (which foster the individual's capacity to reflect on their own and others' mental states) and Socratic questioning (which challenges absolutist assumptions) can gradually weaken the defensive function of splitting. As mentioned earlier, programs that emphasize reflective storytelling and autobiographical narration also create opportunities for individuals to engage with contradictions and complexities in their own lived experiences, reinforcing a more nuanced and inclusive worldview. Needless to say, while such imported techniques offer potential pathways for intervention, their implementation and effectiveness in deradicalization programs require further research and contextual adaptation.

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spiritual communities that provide alternative moral and existential frameworks, and educational or vocational pathways that offer new cognitive anchors for self-definition. Intersubjective belonging, on the other hand, can be fostered through trusted peer networks, community-based reintegration initiatives, and support groups designed to help individuals process their ideological departure in a socially supportive setting. By providing these alternative structures of meaning and connection, disengagement efforts can reduce the psychological vulnerability that often accompanies ideological disillusionment.

Drawing from the Phoenix and ABC models, it is quite important that disengagement programs offer safe, durable opportunities that not only address logistical needs but also deal with the psychological fears and uncertainties experienced by the individuals disengaging from extremist ideologies (Morrison et al., 2020; Khalil et al., 2019; Webber et al., 2020; Koehler, 2020; Silke et al., 2021). Silke et al. (2021) indicate that perceived opportunity, combined with security concerns and levels of trust, are crucial determinants in whether an individual will decide to disengage from an extremist group. Koehler (2020) argues that the process of deradicalization must also involve flexible, individualized approaches that account for the specific context and needs of each participant, underlining the importance of community-based support and tailored intervention measures. Webber et al. (2020) emphasize that a successful transition requires both reducing the significance of extremist ideology and weakening social ties to radical networks through deliberate community reintegration strategies. The concept of perceived opportunity and the removal of security concerns are crucial elements in ensuring successful disengagement and deradicalization, as emphasized in the Phoenix Model (Silke et al., 2021; but see also Khalil et al., 2019). These opportunities should not only be logistically feasible but must also address the fear of loss and existential uncertainty that comes with disengaging from a deeply held ideology. Psychodynamically informed approaches can offer valuable strategies to help individuals confront and process these fears, facilitating a more secure transition away from extremism.

Future research and intervention programs should aim to bridge the gap between behavioral change and subjective transformation towards a more comprehensive approach to disengagement and deradicalization. To that end, a hauntological framework, one which simultaneously acknowledges the persistent presence of unfulfilled past ideals and understands the futility of split-thinking and the impossibility of total solutions, could

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significantly enrich deradicalization efforts by providing a conceptual tool to deal with the specters and the spectral promises of ideological commitments, helping individuals to symbolically and psychologically “mourn” and move beyond them into a space of construction. The pursuit of absolute justice, which often forms the core of radical ideologies, must also be examined, identified, responded to, and exorcised of the ghosts of unfulfilled/destroyed futures. Recognizing the impossibility of achieving perfect justice, and the way this unattainable ideal drives extremist beliefs, can play a key role in cultivating disillusionment and prompting individuals to reconsider their ideological attachments in a meaningful way. Promising, providing, and accommodating alternative pathways to meaning, identity, voice, and legitimacy—pathways that do not rely on rigid binaries or unattainable fantasies and yet are not dictated by the logic of mainstream discourses of power—is of fundamental significance when demanding long-term disengagement and transformation.

### Closing

I have sought in this paper to offer a reading of radicalization not as a pathological departure from mental normalcy, but as a complex psychosocial process shaped by both internal psychological dynamics and broader social, historical, and existential conditions. By drawing on psychoanalytic concepts such as Lacan’s *sinthome*, split thinking, and the lost object, alongside social theories like hauntology and hybridity, I have outlined a framework that extends somewhat outside conventional models of radicalization. Central to this perspective is the understanding that radicalized ideologies, while rigid and absolutist, serve an essential psychological function by offering individuals a sense of coherence and certainty in the face of existential dislocation and historical trauma.

At the heart of this process lies the appeal of split thinking and utopianism, which simplifies complex social realities into stark binaries, providing radicalized individuals with a seemingly clear and morally certain worldview. However, as this paper has argued, the pursuit of utopian justice—whether through nostalgic longing for a lost past or a messianic vision of the future—is ultimately a response to a deeper psychological desire for fulfillment and wholeness. In this sense, radicalized ideologies can be understood as *sinthomic*

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formations, offering a sense of purpose and stability in and against a world where meaning is increasingly fragmented and uncertain.

This psychoanalytic perspective carries significant implications also for how we approach disengagement and deradicalization. Rather than viewing radicalization as a mental disorder to be cured, we need to recognize it as a response to unmet existential needs for meaning, identity, legitimacy, and justice. Effective deradicalization, therefore, must go beyond ideological deconstruction and address the underlying psychological and social drivers that make radical ideologies attractive in the first place. While many contemporary programs have already shifted toward this approach, particularly in community-based and preventive settings, others, especially those implemented in prison environments, often remain centered on ideological interventions. The emphasis on ideology versus psychosocial factors also varies by geography, with some regions prioritizing ideological disengagement while others focus more on reintegration and mental health support. Given the existence of such differences, deradicalization efforts should be tailored to their specific contexts while making sure that the deeper psychological and social needs of individuals are not ignored.

To move forward, efforts to combat radicalization must incorporate a multifaceted strategy that combines psychosocial interventions with broader social policies aimed at fostering inclusive and supportive environments. Educational initiatives that promote critical thinking and emotional resilience, alongside community-based approaches that cultivate a sense of belonging and identity negotiation, are essential in reducing the appeal of absolutist ideologies and utopian fantasies. These approaches should emphasize the transitional nature of the cultural space and the hybridity of selves and identities, reinforcing a more adaptive and flexible understanding of identity formation.

Understanding radicalization as an existential response to the disintegration of meaning and truth, rather than a pathological condition, may be more challenging and complex, but it also provides a more effective framework for addressing the problem. By recognizing the psychosocial functions that radical ideologies serve, and by offering viable alternatives for identity (re)construction and meaning-making, we can help individuals disengage from radicalized worldviews and transition to more nuanced, flexible social and psychological spaces.

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ISSN: 2363-9849

Editor in Chief: Daniel Koehler