

**Workshop on Polarization and Radicalization in Social Systems
Theoretical Models and Empirical Research**

**Utrecht University, Academiegebouw, Kanunnikenzaal,
October 26, 2018, 12:30-17:40**

IOS-Workshop

Organization: Daniel Cohnitz (Humanities) & Werner Raub (Social and Behavioral Sciences)

Topic

Group polarization and radicalization is a threat to open, democratic societies. Polarization into radically different ideological camps may hamper the possibility of finding political consensus. Radicalized, extremist subgroups may adopt highly irrational beliefs that can lead to extremist and even violent behavior.

How does polarization occur? What are the conditions under which an exchange of opinions does not lead to consensus in the long run, but to separated radicalized views, or to a fragmentation of a community into opinion bubbles? How do institutions affect and are affected by such processes? In this workshop we want to consider these issues from theoretical and empirical perspectives, with a focus on formal models and quantitative empirical research, and the aim of exploring common themes and possibilities for collaboration.

From a theoretical perspective, the workshop presents and discusses formal models and simulations for understanding such opinion dynamics as well as their social epistemology that have been developed in philosophy. From an empirical perspective, the workshop presents and discusses work in social psychology and sociology on polarization and radicalization dynamics.

The workshop contributes to IOS-work on urgent societal issues that require fundamental scientific research that benefits from approaches from different disciplines.

Program

12:30-13:30 Rainer Hegselmann: Modeling Radicalization

13:45-14:45 Kees van den Bos: Unfairness and Radicalization

14:45-15:30 Coffee, tea

15:30-16:30 Tobias Stark: Understanding the Role of Social Networks for the Development of Islamic and Right-Wing Extremism

16:40-17:40 Michael Baurmann and Daniel Cohnitz: Trust no one? The (social) epistemological consequences of belief in conspiracy theories

17:40-18:30 Drinks

Abstracts

Rainer Hegselmann (Frankfurt School of Finance & Management)

Modeling Radicalization

There seem to be some stylized facts about radical groups and processes of radicalization. Among them we presumably find the following two: First, a radical group has, compared to "normal"

agents, a comparatively stable in-group consensus on an extreme opinion. Second, in a process of radicalization people tend to get less and less open-minded. The two facts inspire an applied and modified version of the well-known bounded confidence model as introduced by Hegselmann and Krause in 2002. The adapted version is still an extremely simple conceptual model. Under some assumptions the whole parameter space can be analyzed. However, the model shows some surprising results and mechanism at work that inspire new possible explanations, new perspectives for empirical studies, new ideas for prevention policies, and a better understanding of the problems of such policies.

Kees van den Bos (UU, Department of Psychology and School of Law)

Unfairness and Radicalization

Radicalization and associated issues such as extremism and terrorism are important problems in our world. This talk introduces a framework to understand radicalization. The framework proposes that perceived unfairness is a key antecedent of various radicalization processes, especially when these perceptions are combined with uncertainty or other threats and with insufficient correction of self-centered impulses.

Furthermore, in exploring core components that characterize how radical people think, feel, and behave I observe that adherence to law and democratic principles serve a pivotal role in radicalization that may ultimately end in violent extremism and terrorism. In fact, I propose that it is the process of delegitimization and rejection of democratic principles and law that actually constitutes a turning point in the radicalization process of many people. Thus, the rejection of law and democratic principles and the process of delegitimization may serve as red flags for those interested in the prevention of violent extremism.

When people involved in processes of radicalization start to reject the law in democratic states and open societies this is a pivotal signal that something is going seriously wrong, especially when this disdain for the law and democracy is coupled with violent behavioral intentions. Thus, a key issue for understanding the social psychology of violent extremism and terrorism may be the psychological rejection of law and democratic principles. This might be even more important, psychologically speaking, than is often realized in the current research literature on radicalization and societal polarization.

Tobias Stark (UU, Social and Behavioural Sciences)

Understanding the Role of Social Networks for the Development of Islamic and Right-Wing Extremism

Europe faces increasing societal polarization through the rise of radical right-wing parties and religiously motivated extremism. These processes can already be observed among late adolescents, as teachers frequently report of politically or religiously motivated group conflicts among their students. While extensive research has been conducted among right-wing radicals and also among Islamic terrorists, very little is known about the process preceding the step into such extremism among adolescents. In my research, I will use social network analysis to reveal how extreme convictions depend on, are reinforced by, and influence youth's social networks. A *multi-focal approach* allows identifying (1) how and why extreme convictions and friendship networks co-develop over time, (2) how and when peers buffer or accelerate these processes, and (3) whether online contacts play an important role for these processes. Ultimately, this multi-disciplinary research will provide key insights that can form the basis for new network interventions to prevent radicalization processes.

Michael Baurmann (HHU Düsseldorf, Theoretical Sociology) and Daniel Cohnitz (UU, Theoretical Philosophy)

Trust no one? The (social) epistemological consequences of belief in conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theorists are typically skeptical about the trustworthiness of central governmental institutions. Some philosophers have argued that, therefore, conspiracy theorists play an important role in modern democracies. Their scepticism may lead to the exposure of actual governmental conspiracies and it strengthens institutions of open societies that control the different branches of government. We argue that this optimism is misplaced. Believe in false conspiracy theories doesn't make one interested in strong controlling institutions. On the contrary, it is not surprising that the conspiracy theorists that voted people like Trump into office don't mind at all when the president questions the very legitimacy of such institutions.