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Legal ideological radicalization and contemporary political violence. A comparative hermeneutic reading in the United States and the European Union

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Abstract

In today's complex world, the emergence of authoritarian leaderships, whether far-right or far-left, creates the conditions for the emergence of discourses and practices of ideological and legal radicalization and political violence in general. Given this reality, the objective of this research is to analyze, using a hermeneutic

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and comparative methodology, the processes of ideological and legal radicalization linked to contemporary political violence in the United States and the European Union, to identify their discursive foundations, institutional expressions, and consequences for democratic stability and the rule of law in both contexts. It is concluded that radicalization processes depend more on the existence of similar structural conditions than on the inevitability of a single model of radicalism. These conditions include: the severe political fragmentation of democracies, the delegitimization of traditional elites, the capture of the media by polarized actors, and, essentially, the inability of the institutional frameworks that constitute the rule of law to manage recurring social conflicts through peaceful democratic channels.

Keywords: legal aspects, ideological radicalization, political violence, institutional crisis, comparative hermeneutics.

*Radicalización ideológica, jurídica y violencia política
contemporánea. Una lectura hermenéutica comparativa en los
Estados Unidos y la Unión Europea*

Resumen

En el complejo mundo actual, la emergencia de liderazgos autoritarios, de ultraderecha o ultraizquierda, crea las condiciones de posibilidad para la emergencia de discursos y prácticas de radicalización ideológica, jurídica y violencia política en general. Ante esta realidad, el objetivo de la investigación consiste en analizar, desde una metodología hermenéutica y comparativa, los procesos de radicalización ideológica y jurídica vinculados a la violencia política contemporánea en los Estados Unidos y la Unión Europea, con el fin de identificar sus fundamentos discursivos, sus expresiones institucionales y sus consecuencias para la estabilidad democrática y el Estado de derecho, en ambos contextos. Se concluye que los procesos de radicalización, dependen más de la existencia de condiciones estructurales similares, que de la inevitabilidad de un modelo único de radicalidad, condiciones entre las cuales destacan: la grave fragmentación política de las democracias, la deslegitimación de elites tradicionales, la captura de medios de comunicación por actores polarizados y, esencialmente, la incapacidad de los marcos institucionales que constituyen al Estado de Derecho,

para gestionar conflictos sociales recurrentes, a través de vías democráticas pacíficas.

Palabras clave: aspectos legales, radicalización ideológica, violencia política, crisis institucional, hermenéutica comparativa.

Introduction

Political leadership has generally been a matter of paramount concern in the field of critical social sciences and humanities, as it constitutes a central axis for understanding the configuration of democratic orders and the emergent challenges facing contemporary societies. According to Ofosu-Anim (2022), far from being merely an administrative function, political leadership expresses, shapes, and redefines collective discourses and institutional practices in times of crisis, with unprecedented impact on processes of polarization and social transformation.

Indeed, as various classic and foundational studies on the subject have documented —among which Seligman's (1950) work stands out for its heuristic relevance— both in the past and today in the twenty-first century, the analysis of leadership in contexts of high complexity reveals that its manifestations bear directly on the consolidation of governability, the management of conflicts, and the quality of democracy. This grants leadership a privileged position from which to explore critical phenomena such as ideological radicalization and political violence in general.

More precisely, ideological radicalization, legal radicalization, and contemporary political violence have become substantive categories in debates concerning leadership and power. As Gaspar et al. (2020) contend, these sociopolitical phenomena not only challenge traditional frameworks of rational understanding but also undermine the normative and ethical systems that sustain

democratic coexistence. In light of this reality, scientific research has demonstrated that new expressions of political violence rupture classical dichotomies between legality and illegality, as well as between legitimate conflict and criminality, positioning hermeneutic and comparative analysis as a fundamental avenue for unraveling their logics, discourses, and material and symbolic effects.

In this vein, addressing ideological and legal radicalization demands moving beyond conventional sociological approaches, instead proposing a qualitative assessment of political practices, interpretive frameworks, and intersubjective experiences that shape this phenomenon across multiple scales. According to Wolfowicz et al. (2021), such approaches make visible how radical discourses, in interaction with informal or institutional modalities of leadership, generate spaces for the legitimation of violence and contestation of the democratic order.

In this manner, for the authors of this research, recent events such as the assassination of Charlie Kirk or assassination attempts against Donald Trump have underscored the necessity of attending to both the social impact of radicalization and the contextual factors that facilitate its emergence. This recognition enables the construction of more comprehensive investigative and policy responses to political violence in all its manifestations.

The overarching objective of this research is to analyze, from a hermeneutic and comparative perspective, the processes of ideological and legal radicalization linked to contemporary political violence in the United States and the European Union, with the aim of identifying their discursive foundations, their institutional expressions, and their consequences for democratic stability and the rule of law in both contexts.

This overarching objective articulates two cross-cutting research questions that guided the development of the study. First, how do the dynamics of ideological and legal radicalization manifest themselves in political discourse and institutional practices related to contemporary political violence in the United States? Second, in what manner do processes of ideological and normative radicalization interact with security policies and the legal frameworks for democratic defense against political violence in the European Union? It bears noting that these questions are posed with the purpose of fostering a comparative and situated understanding capable of transcending reductionist explanations and nourishing critical debates on democratic resilience in today's complex world.

The relevance of the interdisciplinary perspective characterizing this research lies in its capacity to analyze the diverse—yet frequently interconnected—pathways of political radicalization and their translation into normative frameworks and collective action. Following the logic of scholars such as Astley (2025) and Stephens and Sieckelinck (2021), contrasting the American reality with the plural dynamics of the European Union allows us, first, to make visible the contextual particularities and, second, to identify international patterns, institutional resistances, and divergent trajectories in the management of these risks to democracy.

The study thus underscores the central function of discourses, policies, and leadership practices, raising new questions about the efficacy of legal frameworks, the role of social actors, and the persistence of radicalized leaderships in both global contexts.

The article is organized into five general sections, from which several subsections emerge. Following the introduction, the first section is dedicated to

the theoretical foundations of the research, presenting a selection of seminal readings that philosophically orient the understanding of ideological radicalization, legal radicalization, and political violence.

The second section describes the methodology employed, justifying the hermeneutic comparative option and the criteria for case selection. In the third section, findings are presented differentiated: first addressing the contemporary experience of the United States, and then that of the European Union. The fourth section offers a comparative and critical analysis of the results, highlighting similarities, contrasts, and possible lessons for both contexts. Finally, the fifth section presents the research conclusions as well as recommendations oriented toward public policy and future research agendas in this field of study.

1. Theoretical foundations

The most cited articles on ideological radicalization, legal radicalization, and contemporary political violence offer decisive contributions at both the theoretical and methodological levels, configuring an epistemic corpus that redefines the manner in which critical social sciences and humanities address these phenomena in the twenty-first century.

One of the foundational works in this field is authored by Borum (2012), who conducted an exhaustive review of social science theories on radicalization toward violent extremism. He proposed that radicalization should not be understood as a linear or uniform process, but rather as a set of diverse processes that operate differentially according to individuals, contexts, and historical moments.

Concretely, Borum (2012) argues that ideological radicalization is not necessarily a precursor factor to terrorism, thereby challenging simplistic conceptions that equate radical beliefs with political violence and suggesting that the mechanisms of terrorist involvement require more complex and contextually situated analytical frameworks. Furthermore, the author makes clear that:

Nearly a decade after declaring war on terrorism, it is apparent now—if it was not before—that while removing terrorists from the battlefield and disrupting terrorist plots are, and should be, high priority objectives, they are insufficient to neutralize the global threat of violent extremism. A successful effort to counter violent extremism (CVE) must attempt to stem the tide of new extremists. Assuming that a specific ideology drives that violence (which is, of course, open to some debate), has led some to focus on interrupting the "radicalization" process, referred to here as radicalization into violent extremism (RVE). (Borum, 2012, p. 8)

In a complementary direction, the work of McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) represents a substantial advance in the conceptualization of political radicalization as a dimension of escalating extremism in beliefs, emotions, and behaviors oriented toward intergroup conflict.

These authors developed a model that distinguishes among opinion radicalization (extreme beliefs), affective radicalization (intense emotions directed toward the rival group), and behavioral radicalization (actions that escalate toward violence). They propose that each of these dimensions responds to specific psychosocial mechanisms and that, consequently, political violence constitutes the apex of a broader pyramid of sympathizers. In this regard:

There are many possible meanings of radicalization, but most of the relevant distinctions can be represented with the usual social psychological distinctions among belief, feeling, and behavior. Of

course, it is radicalization of behavior that is of greatest practical concern. In a political context this means increasing time, money, risk-taking, and violence in support of a political cause. As every political cause is associated with a particular group that cares about this cause, we may equally say that behavioral radicalization means increasing time, money, risk-taking, and violence in support of a political group. (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008, p. 416)

Another high-impact methodological contribution is the systematic study and meta-analysis by Wolfowicz et al. (2021) on risk and protective factors for cognitive and behavioral radicalization in contemporary democracies, published in open access and widely referenced in the specialized literature. This work examined 127 studies and identified 101 risk and protective factors, concluding that criminogenic factors—that is, those traditionally linked to criminal attitudes and behaviors—are the most significant predictors of radicalization, alongside psychosocial factors such as social alienation, the search for meaning, and peer influence.

In terms of theoretical-methodological innovation, the 3N model of radicalization developed by Bélanger et al. (2019) introduces a psychosocial perspective that articulates three fundamental cognitive needs in the analysis: the need for personal significance (Need), the ideological narrative that justifies violence (Narrative), and the social network that facilitates recruitment and collective action (Network).

This model was validated through the creation of two new psychometric instruments—a social alienation scale and a political violence support scale—applied across four different cultural contexts (Canada, Pakistan, Spain, and the United States). The findings demonstrated that high levels of social alienation predict greater support for political violence, which in turn predicts the desire to

join radical groups. Methodologically, this approach represents a significant advance by offering cross-culturally validated tools that enable systematic replication and comparison of radicalization processes across diverse contexts. The authors conclude that morality plays a key role in the political radicalization process:

The present research examined a radicalization trajectory proposed by the 3N model of radicalization whereby individuals transition from losing significance (feeling socially alienated), to adhering to violence-justifying ideologies, to wanting to join radical groups. In addition to finding empirical evidence for this model across four culturally distinct samples, this research showed that moral justification is one of the mechanisms linking social alienation to support for political violence. (Bélanger et al., 2019, p. 10)

Beyond their particularities, the theoretical and methodological contributions reviewed in this section (Borum, 2012; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Wolfowicz et al., 2021; Bélanger et al., 2019) converge on a multidimensional, contextual, and processual understanding of ideological radicalization, legal radicalization, and contemporary political violence. From a conceptual perspective, a consensus has solidified that radicalization is not a monolithic phenomenon but rather a heterogeneous process influenced by individual, group, institutional, and structural factors that interact in complex and nonlinear ways.

Methodologically, the most cited studies (Borum, 2012; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008; Wolfowicz et al., 2021; Bélanger et al., 2019) underscore the necessity of combining consistent quantitative approaches—such as meta-analysis, predictive models, and multilevel analysis—with interpretive qualitative approaches that capture the richness of lived experiences, discourses, and

intersubjective dynamics. This mixed methodological synthesis, together with cross-cultural validation of instruments and critical attention to specific democratic contexts, constitutes the nucleus of a mature research agenda that seeks to understand and, insofar as possible, prevent radicalization without compromising the foundations of democracy and human rights.

2. Methodology

This research, in keeping with its qualitative epistemological nature, was developed through a hermeneutic approach that privileges critical interpretation of contemporary political phenomena linked to ideological radicalization, legal radicalization, and political violence in advanced democratic contexts. According to Gibbons (2006), hermeneutics, conceived not only as a method of textual analysis but as an epistemology of understanding, enables a critical approach to the discourses and practices of political actors. This approach considers both their manifest meaning and their latent ideological foundations, their horizons of meaning, and their institutional effects.

For the authors of this research, this perspective is particularly appropriate for the study of radicalized phenomena, where political discourses are not merely rhetorical instruments but rather factors that construct intersubjective realities—realities that legitimate, mobilize, or challenge existing democratic frameworks (Foucault, 1981). Consequently, political hermeneutics, as developed in recent scholarship (Ilieva, 2015), challenges the limits of traditional positivism by emphasizing the centrality of language, the historicity of interpretations, and the necessity of a dialogical understanding that acknowledges both the alterity of

political phenomena and the situated position of the researcher before a socially constructed reality.

Complementary to hermeneutic comparative analysis, case study methodology was employed for phenomena falling within the spectrum of ideological radicalization, legal radicalization, and contemporary political violence, drawing on the conceptualization of radicalization identified in Helclová's (2015) work. This approach was applied both to the United States of America and to the geographic and social space of the European Union. Fundamentally, four cases of individuals clearly representative of far-right or far-left political extremism were intentionally selected. In this manner:

Radicalisation is a context-bound phenomenon par excellence. Global, sociological, and political drivers matter as much as ideological and psychological ones (European Commission, 2008, p.10). The ever-changing nature of radicalization makes it hard to define and even harder to counter effectively (Schmid, 2014, p. 19). In recent years, the rise of rightwing and far-right political parties across Europe has reshaped national and international political landscapes. This trend highlights that radicalization is not only a domestic concern but also a transnational phenomenon lodged in a broader global political discourse. The transformation of political landscapes is apparent in the growing popularity of right-wing populist parties that base their agendas on nationalism, Euroscepticism, and anti-immigration rhetoric... (Helclová, 2015, p. 3)

For the United States, the study focused on Donald Trump, a paradigmatic representative of right-wing nationalist populism, and Charlie Kirk, founder of the movement Turning Point USA and an emblematic figure of youth conservative activism.

For Europe, the study examined Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Rally (*Rassemblement National*) in France and a reference point for European right-wing nationalism, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of *La France Insoumise* and an exponent of radical anti-capitalist left-wing populism. In all studied cases, a representative sample of 100 speeches delivered by these figures between 2015 and 2025 was analyzed. These were selected through stratified sampling to ensure the temporal, thematic, and contextual representativeness of the study.

To support the primary sources—comprised of the political speeches of the study subjects, commonly published in internationally circulated press releases, official transcripts of parliamentary interventions, social media statements, and programmatic documents of their organizations—documentary materials of proven academic and scientific value were employed.

The secondary corpus consisted of scientific articles published in double-blind peer-reviewed journals, prioritizing open-access publications indexed in high-impact international databases such as Scopus and Web of Science. It also included specialized monographs, academic books, and publications from websites specialized in studies on radicalization, political extremism, and violence.

Central importance in the management of documentary sources was given to the traceability process for primary and secondary sources, which was structured following the principles of transparency, replicability, and methodological rigor established by open science, as explained by Edgell et al. (2025). For primary sources, the date, location, context of enunciation, medium of publication, and audience of each analyzed speech were systematically

documented, creating a coded database that enables independent verification and methodological audit.

For secondary sources, scientific quality criteria were applied, including peer review, indexation in recognized databases, currency of publications, and epistemological coherence with the hermeneutic approach of the research. Furthermore, a cross-verification system was implemented, where each empirical claim was supported by at least two independent sources, and bibliographic management software was utilized to ensure correct attribution, citation, and retrievability of all sources employed. This traceability process not only strengthened the internal validity of the research but also, and this is most significant, contributed to transparency and academic accountability.

Finally, in accordance with the parameters established by Bengtsson (2016), the methodology was developed in five differentiated yet interconnected stages, in keeping with the hermeneutic and comparative nature of the research. The first stage consisted of constructing the theoretical framework and delimiting the conceptual categories—ideological radicalization, legal radicalization, political violence—through systematic literature review. The second stage involved intentional case selection and exhaustive collection of political speeches, applying theoretical sampling criteria until thematic saturation was achieved.

Following this methodological thread, the third stage focused on hermeneutic content analysis of the discourses, identifying units of meaning, rhetorical patterns, interpretive frameworks, and discursive strategies through open, axial, and selective coding. The fourth stage developed systematic comparative analysis between the American and European cases, contrasting their

ideological, legal, and contextual dimensions through analytical matrices that enabled visualization of convergences and divergences.

Finally, the fifth stage integrated the findings through interpretive synthesis, relating empirical results to initial theoretical frameworks and generating new analytical categories that enrich understanding of contemporary political radicalization in the advanced democracies of the Global North.

It bears noting that the adoption of a hermeneutic comparative approach faces both objective and subjective limitations that require explicit acknowledgment. Objectively, dependence on public discourses generates a visibility bias that excludes latent motivations and private deliberations; the intentional selection of four cases most certainly limits generalization to other political contexts, and the temporal proximity of the analyzed period (2015–2025) prevents obtaining the historical distance necessary to identify structural patterns with clarity.

Subjectively, as inferred from Prager et al. (2019), hermeneutics entails the inevitable inscription of the researcher's or researchers' interpretation, their conceptual horizon, and their theoretical presuppositions in the reading of political texts—biases that, although controlled through validation, cannot be entirely eliminated. These limitations, far from invalidating the research, situate it within an epistemological humility that strengthens the credibility of its conclusions by neither claiming an impossible neutrality in the social sciences nor denying the sociohistorical conditioning of all knowledge.

3. Results

3.1. Political and ideological radicalization in contemporary european history: the case of fascism

Political and ideological radicalization in contemporary Europe had one of its most decisive moments in the interwar period, when fascism emerged as an ultranationalist, anti-liberal, and anti-communist response to the crisis of the liberal state and the fear of Bolshevism (Mazower, 2020). According to Strayer (2015), movements such as Italian fascism and, above all, German National Socialism constructed an imaginary of national regeneration through organized violence, the cult of the charismatic leader, and the permanent mobilization of disciplined masses.

This radicalization was translated institutionally into the concentration of power in a single party, the elimination of opposition, and the total subordination of civil society to the state, configuring totalitarian regimes that aspired to control not only political life but also the cultural and moral sphere (Arendt, 1962). In this context, fascist ideology thus articulated an expansionist nationalism, biological racism, and militant anti-communism to justify wars of conquest and genocidal policies that devastated the European continent. Historically, this radical project also entailed a deliberate rupture with the European constitutional tradition and with any legal limit on the exercise of power.

In parallel, as Mazower (2020) argues, the revolutionary communism that consolidated in the Soviet Union gave rise to another form of ideological radicalization that also resulted in a totalitarian single-party state. Under the justification of building a classless society, European communist regimes

institutionalized the Party's monopoly over the state, a centrally planned economy, and the systematic repression of political, religious, and national dissidence.

In both the fascist and communist systems, a combination prevailed: a radical ideology, charismatic leadership (or leadership with charismatic pretensions), and an omnipresent security apparatus. This produced systems in which control over information, censorship, and massive state violence were ordinary instruments of government.

From the perspective of twentieth-century European history, according to Strayer (2015), fascism and communism generated human tragedies on an enormous scale—wars, deportations, political famines, and concentration camps—that marked the continent's collective memory. Both experiences demonstrated how ideologies of total social control can derive into extreme forms of domination, nullifying any political pluralism.

Faced with these historical realities, for the authors of this research, the processes of radicalization and political violence observed today in Europe and the United States do not mechanically reproduce those totalitarianisms. However, they do reactivate logics of extreme polarization, exclusion of the "Other," and delegitimization of democratic institutions that are disturbingly reminiscent of the 1930s. The rise of far-right parties, the strategic use of social resentment, the diffusion of conspiracy theories, and the normalization of xenophobic or ultranationalist discourses constitute, without a doubt, alarm signals regarding the gradual erosion of the rule of law and trust in democratic mechanisms.

As Lempinen (2024) reflects, it is unsurprising that historians and political scientists insist that structural conditions—economic crises, persistent

inequalities, cultural insecurity, and the accelerated transformation of media—are factors that, when combined with radical leadership, can reopen spaces for authoritarian projects. Consequently, the principal risk is not so much the literal restoration of fascism or communism, but rather the consolidation of fragile democracies that, from within, hollow out constitutional guarantees and checks on executive power in their authoritarian drifts.

As Wiersma (2009) argues, recent historiographical trends regarding fascism, communism, and radicalization in Europe have shifted from more structuralist visions toward approaches that integrate political culture, memory, and everyday experiences. In this epistemological context, current studies combine comparative regime analysis with research on concrete social actors, practices of violence, uses of law, and identity construction in totalitarian and post-totalitarian contexts.

At the same time, intense reflection has developed regarding the "politics of the past"—that is, how parties, states, and social movements utilize the memory of fascism and communism to legitimate positions in contemporary debates on Europe, democracy, and human rights. From our perspective, this historiographical renewal underscores the need to understand radicalization not only as a phenomenon of the twentieth century but as a persistent problem whose historical interpretation directly impacts present political responses.

3.2. Manifestations of ideological and legal radicalization in political discourse and institutions: the contemporary american case

According to Youngblood (2020), the United States is currently traversing a political juncture characterized by the intensification of affective polarization, the weakening of democratic institutions, and the consequent emergence of

discourses that openly question the foundations of the liberal democratic order. From a sociological perspective, these conditions configure a breeding ground conducive to radicalization processes, as the fragmentation of the social fabric, distrust toward traditional political elites, and generalized perception of grievance—particularly among segments of the white population experiencing status anxiety—generate the structural conditions for radicalized discourses to find receptivity and social legitimation.

Empirical investigations such as that of Gaspar et al. (2020) have shown that endemic factors like poverty, the presence of organized hate groups, and the utilization of social networks as spaces for ideological recruitment significantly increase the probability of radicalization in specific regions of the country. This reveals that this symbolic phenomenon operates as a "complex social contagion" requiring multiple exposures and community reinforcement to consolidate over time and space.

In this context, Donald Trump's rhetoric constitutes a paradigmatic case of discursive radicalization whose hermeneutic analysis reveals deliberate strategies of dehumanization of the political adversary and implicit legitimation of violence. Expressions such as the characterization of his opponents as "vermin" who live "within the confines of our country" and must be "rooted out" (Trump, 2023, as cited in Soo and Ibssa, 2023, paras. 6–7), along with the assertion that undocumented immigrants are "poisoning the blood of our country" (Trump, 2023, as cited in Gibson, 2023, para. 1), deliberately evoke, in the logic of Arendt (1962), the vocabulary of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes—particularly the dehumanizing language employed by Hitler and Mussolini against minority groups.

Image 1. Donald J. Trump.



Source: The White House, 2025.

Indeed, according to Adetunji (2024), quantitative content analysis studies have documented that the proportion of violent vocabulary in Trump's speeches increased from approximately 0.6% in 2016 to 1.6% in 2024, surpassing the levels of any other analyzed U.S. presidential candidate and approaching the discursive patterns of authoritarian leaders such as Kim Jong Un and Fidel Castro. This increase in discursive violence does not respond to external events such as wars but rather concentrates on references to phenomena like crime, immigration, and

alleged internal threats, thereby constructing a "besieged nation" narrative that justifies exceptional responses at every turn.

From our perspective, the speech of January 6, 2021, represents the culmination of this discursive radicalization, where the performative dimension of political language translated into material violence against democratic institutions. Phrases such as "We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore" (Trump, 2021, as cited in Naylor, 2021, para. 5), pronounced before a crowd previously radicalized through months of electoral disinformation, illustrate what speech act theory terms *perlocutionary effects*—utterances that, beyond their literal meaning or ambiguity, produce significant consequences in the real world, as noted by Rozenshtein and Shugerman (2022).

Trump ordered the removal of barriers keeping the armed crowd at a distance and personally attempted to proceed to the Capitol with his followers. These actions constitute overt acts that, according to legal-constitutional analyses, resolve the interpretive ambiguities of his speech and evidence a manifest intent to provoke the violent interruption of the electoral certification process (Rozenshtein and Shugerman, 2022).

In this scenario of national tension, in which Trump lost the November 2020 elections to the Democratic candidate Joe Biden, legal radicalization manifests itself here in the instrumentalization of the legal framework to legitimate antidemocratic actions, pretending in the process that violence constituted a legitimate response to an alleged nonexistent electoral fraud.

For his part, Charlie Kirk, founder of Turning Point USA, represents, according to Cook (2025), a complementary modality of radicalization that

operates through the normalization of extremist ideas under the guise of rational, youthful debate.

During his lifetime, Kirk actively promoted the "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory, asserting without evidence that immigration policies seek to "diminish and decrease white demographics in America"—a discourse that has directly inspired perpetrators of white supremacist massacres in multiple countries. This situation of political radicalization and incitement to social violence escalated with Kirk's assassination on September 10, 2025, leading some political analysts to ask:

In the wake of the Charlie Kirk assassination, part of a distressing wave of political violence stalking this country, it would seem that the United States is coming apart at the seams, poised at the precipice of disintegration. So much hatred, so much anger, so much toxic rot, and so many, many guns. We are boiling a poisonous stew. Can anyone save us? Is there anyone or anything that can possibly cool us to a simmer, at least? At this time, it appears not—in fact, frighteningly, the rage that got us to this grim, spooky moment seems only to be spiraling. (Cook, 2025, para, 1)

According to a study by Hagler (2024), Kirk's rhetoric included assertions that prominent African American women lack the "brain processing power" to be considered credible and, furthermore, must have "stolen a white person's spot", while simultaneously characterizing Islam as "the sword the Left uses to slit the throat of America".

Image 2. Charles James Kirk.



Source: (Advocate, 2025).

From a hermeneutic reading, these utterances operate through a strategy of victimhood inversion, wherein the heterosexual white male is constructed as a victim of inclusion policies, thereby legitimating resentments that can be channeled into dynamics of political violence. Kirk's organization maintains surveillance lists of professors and educational administrators considered ideological adversaries, configuring practices of institutionalized intimidation that erode spaces of democratic deliberation (Cook, 2025).

Table 1. Comparative analysis of the discursive strategies of ideological and legal radicalization and political violence in Donald Trump and Charlie Kirk.

Analytical dimension	Donald Trump	Charlie Kirk
Dehumanization strategy.	He characterizes opponents as "vermin" and immigrants as	Denies intellectual abilities to prominent African-American women. It

Analytical dimension	Donald Trump	Charlie Kirk
	agents who "poison the blood" of the country.	characterizes Islam as a lethal weapon against America.
Narrative of the existential threat.	It constructs the "threat from within" as more dangerous than external adversaries such as China or Russia.	It promotes the "Great Replacement" theory as a deliberate conspiracy against the white population.
Legitimization of violence.	Documented increase in violent vocabulary from 0.6% to 1.6% in their speeches; defense of violence in political dynamics (Adetunji, 2024).	Glorification of white right-wing extremists as heroes; promotion of hyper-masculine rhetoric of defiance and social revolution (Cook, 2025).
Legal radicalization.	It threatens to instrumentalize the Justice Department against political adversaries. Questioning of the electoral process of November 2020, where he loses the presidential elections.	Statement that "America is not a democracy". Opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Hagler, 2024).
Recruitment mechanism.	Mass rallies as spaces for collective radicalization; use of social networks to amplify the message of political and ideological radicalization.	University campuses as spaces for youth recruitment; Image of normality for extremist ideas.
Documented impact.	Increase in hate crimes after rallies and social media posts; assault on the Capitol (Adetunji, 2024).	Inspiration of white supremacist violence. Watchlists of Educators Considered Progressive Adversaries (Cook, 2025).

Source: prepared by the authors (2025).

Simplifying for expository purposes, the comparative reading of Analytical Table 1 reveals convergent and complementary patterns in the discursive strategies

of Trump and Kirk. Far from constituting isolated expressions of individual radicalism, these strategies configure a mutually reinforcing communicative ecosystem where ideological radicalization, legal radicalization, and political violence systematically feed back into one another.

In this vein, as Kleinfeld (2023) argues, Trump operates from the summit of institutional power, legitimating through his presidential authority discourses that in other contexts would be marginal. Meanwhile, Kirk functions as a transmission belt toward youth audiences, translating extremism into accessible and apparently respectable cultural codes and signs. For the authors of this research, both figures share the construction of victimhood narratives in which historically privileged groups are represented as existentially threatened, thereby justifying exceptional responses that include violence.

In the current American context, legal radicalization emerges as a particularly worrying dimension, as both actors explicitly question the foundations of the liberal democratic order—from the electoral process to the Civil Rights Act. This questioning prepares the cultural ground for institutional transformations that would erode the constitutional protections of minorities and dissidents.

From the interpretive coordinates of Gibbons (2006), our hermeneutic analysis confirms that contemporary political violence in the United States is not the product of isolated individuals but rather the historical expression of social processes of systemic radicalization. In these processes, political discourse operates as a vector of legitimation, mobilization, and, finally, materialization of political and social violence.

3.3. Interactions between ideological and normative radicalization, security policies, and legal frameworks in democratic defense against political violence in the European Union

Since the classic study by Rooduijn et al. (2017), it can be affirmed that the contemporary European political landscape exhibits a proliferation of radicalized movements spanning the ideological spectrum from the far right to the radical populist left, configuring a scenario in which liberal democracies face unprecedented challenges to their institutional stability.

Radical right-wing populist parties have consolidated significant electoral positions in France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and Hungary, articulating nationalist, anti-immigration, Eurosceptic, and Islamophobic discourses that question the foundations of the European integration project and, simultaneously, criticize the values of cultural diversity it entails.

Simultaneously, radical left-wing parties such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and *La France Insoumise* in France, among others, have channeled popular discontent toward anti-establishment narratives. Although divergent in their objectives, these narratives share with the radical right a fierce critique of ruling elites and the institutional architecture of the European Union. As might be assumed *a priori*, these radicalization dynamics interact in complex ways with European security policies, generating tensions between the necessity of protecting the democratic order and the risk of eroding fundamental civil liberties in the name of extremism prevention (Rooduijn et al., 2017).

Image 3. Marion Anne Perrine Le Pen.



Source: Wright (2022).

Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Rally (*Rassemblement National*), represents the paradigmatic case of right-wing ideological radicalization in the European context. According to Farand (2018), her discourse articulates a narrative of existential threat wherein France is besieged by two "totalitarianisms": on the one hand, economic globalization, and on the other, Islamic fundamentalism. Following this thread, in her 2017 presidential campaign launch speech, Le Pen asserted:

Financial globalization and Islamist globalization help each other. "These two ideologies want to bring France to its knees," and she added that "we do not want to live under the yoke of the threat of Islamic fundamentalism," characterizing Islamists as "wolves in a henhouse" who "establish themselves in certain neighborhoods and vulnerable minds". (Le Pen, 2017, as cited in Farand, 2018, paras. 4-5)

In Vermersch (2022) research, Le Pen's rhetoric is dehumanizing and constructs the Muslim immigrant as an ontological enemy of French identity, thereby legitimating exclusionary policies under the mantle of republican defense. At the same time, Vermersch (2022) has documented that, contrary to the demonization narrative promoted by Le Pen to distance herself from her father, her rhetoric has not moderated but rather has undergone notable radicalization where economic themes have ceded space to increasingly marked identity narratives.

In Seitz (2020) thesis, hermeneutic analysis of Le Pen's discourses reveals scapegoating discursive strategies that constitute three concrete enemies —elites, globalists, and immigrants— as responsible for France's ills. In 2010, she compared Muslims praying in the streets to Nazi occupation, declaring: "There is much talk of World War II and of occupation, so let us talk about occupation, because that is what is happening here. There are no tanks, no soldiers, but it is still an occupation" (Le Pen, 2010, as cited in Seitz, 2020, p. 26). This deliberate equation of Islam with Nazism constitutes, without a doubt, an implicit legal radicalization that prepares the ground for policies of exception against Muslim populations.

Le Pen has promised to close "places of Islamic preaching" and expel "preachers of hate," transforming the French national border into a symbol of state security and employing the pretense of threat to argue that open borders contribute to criminal and terrorist activities (Le Pen, 2015, as cited in BBC News, 2015). In this manner, her discourse constitutes her followers as "always French patriots," proposing a reconstitution of French national identity grounded in far-right ideals and revolutionary rhetoric (Seitz, 2020).

For his part, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of *La France Insoumise*, embodies a different modality of populist radicalization from the left side of the political spectrum. In Marlière's (2018) words, his discourse constructs an antagonistic dichotomy between "the people" and "the oligarchy," abandoning the traditional language of Marxist class struggle in favor of a broad-reaching populist strategy. In 2010, Mélenchon declared: "People are disgusted with elites. Do they deserve something better? Let them all go! I am appealing to the energy of the many against the arrogance of the privileged classes. Am I a populist? Yes, I am!" (Mélenchon, 2010, as cited in Marlière, 2018, p. 15)

Image 4. Jean-Luc Mélenchon.



Source: (Mélenchon, 2024).

As Marlière (2018) argues, the explicit assumption of populism marks a rupture with the collectivist traditions of the French left. Mélenchon proposes a "citizen revolution through the ballot box" and, consequently, has promoted the creation of a Sixth Republic that breaks with the oligarchic institutions of the Fifth

Republic. His rhetoric employs a sense of urgency, anti-elitism, and emotional mobilization characteristic of populism, though from an inclusive perspective that seeks to integrate Muslim minorities into "the people" rather than exclude them.

For authors such as Gaudino (2024), analysis of Mélenchon's discourse on Islam reveals a predominant strategy of "desecuritization" that rejects the construction of Muslims as a threat to French national security. In 2014, Mélenchon asserted: "Yesterday they blamed the Jews, today the Muslims. The objective is simple: divide the people and divert their attention so that the oligarchy can continue enriching itself" (Mélenchon, 2014, as cited in Gaudino, 2024, p. 6). This narrative displaces the threat to national security from Islam toward financial capitalism, with particular emphasis on economic inequality and right-wing extremism.

However, for the authors of this research, hermeneutic analysis also reveals significant ambivalences: Mélenchon maintains a strong attachment to French *laïcité* that limits his defense of Muslim religious freedoms, particularly regarding the Islamic veil, which he has characterized as a sign of "servitude" incompatible with republican values.

This is a secular position that generates tensions between his inclusive rhetoric and his political praxis, revealing that his desecuritization of Islam is more "managerial"—replacing one threat with another—than "transformative," in the sense of fully recognizing the religious rights of Muslim minorities in France.

Table 2. Comparative analysis of ideological, legal radicalization and political violence in Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

Analytical dimension	Marine Le Pen (Rassemblement National)	Jean-Luc Mélenchon (La France Insoumise)
Enemy Building.	Immigrants, Muslims, Globalist Elites and the European Union as Existential Threats to French Identity (Farand, 2018).	Financial oligarchy, corrupt political elites and neoliberal capitalism as oppressors of the people (Marlière, 2018).
Discursive strategy.	Securitization of Islam and Dehumanization of the Migrant; Rhetoric of Invasion and Occupation of France (BBC News, 2015).	De-securitization of Islam and consequent inclusion of minorities in the category of "people"; radical anti-elitism (Gaudino, 2024).
Ideological radicalization.	Ethnocultural nationalism; exclusionary nativism; Structural Islamophobia (Seitz, 2020).	Left-wing populism; Jacobin republicanism; Inclusive civic patriotism (Marlière, 2018).
Legal radicalization.	Proposals to restrict citizenship, close mosques, expel "propagators of hate" (Farand, 2018).	Proposal of the Sixth Republic; questioning of European treaties; possible exit from the European Union (Marlière, 2018).
Relationship with political violence.	Rhetoric that legitimizes exclusion and institutionalized discrimination; Hate Crimes Inspiration.	Rhetoric of confrontation with elites; Street mobilization and tensions with law enforcement.
Position on laïcité.	Instrumentalization of secularism to exclude Islamic religious practices from the public space.	Strict defense of laïcité that limits recognition of Muslim religious freedoms.
Impact on human rights.	Erosion of the rights of migrants, Muslims and ethnic minorities in general (Passuello, 2024).	Defense of social rights, but ambivalence about religious rights of Muslim minorities.

Source: prepared by the authors (2025), based on the sources consulted.

The comparative reading of Analytical Table 2 enables understanding that, despite occupying opposite positions on the ideological spectrum, both Le Pen and Mélenchon share populist discursive structures that divide the political field into two antagonistic and irreconcilable blocs, although the contents of these dichotomies differ substantially.

Whereas Le Pen constructs the boundary between "authentic French people" and "foreign invaders" through an ethnocultural exclusionary logic, Mélenchon traces the line between "the people" and "the oligarchy" in socioeconomic terms that, at least rhetorically, include minorities within the popular field. However, both question the legitimacy of existing democratic institutions and propose radical transformations of the constitutional order —Le Pen through policies of exclusion and national retrenchment, Mélenchon through a republican refoundation—.

In this socio-discursive context, legal radicalization operates differentially: in Le Pen's case, through the instrumentalization of the legal framework to legitimate discrimination against Muslim populations; in Mélenchon's case, through the questioning of European treaties and the institutional architecture of the Fifth Republic. In any scenario, these dynamics pose complex challenges for the European Union's legal frameworks for democratic defense, which must balance the protection of political freedom of expression with the prevention of discourses that erode the foundations of the rule of law and the dignity of vulnerable minorities in the twenty-first century.

4. Comparative and critical analysis of findings: structural conditions of radicalization in the american and european contexts

For the authors of this research, all evidence suggests that the United States of America faces a crisis of political legitimacy rooted in profound economic transformations that have generated what some scholars term the emergence of the "precariat" class (Cooley et al., 2024). Accelerated deindustrialization since the 1970s, systematic employment precarization, and the exponential concentration of wealth—where the wealth ratio between high-income and low-income families shifted from 28:1 in 1983 to 75:1 in 2016—have created conditions of profound social insecurity among broad segments of the population, particularly among working-class white men (Cooley et al., 2024).

What distinguishes the American experience is the racial particularity of this precarity: although economic inequality has affected multiple population segments, white men experience their relative poverty as an unexpected descent from their historical racial status, generating a psychosocial phenomenon wherein status comparison operates in racial rather than purely economic terms (Youngblood, 2020).

Therefore, it is not irrational to suppose that this phenomenon has created the political space conducive to the emergence of leaders such as Trump and Kirk, who discursively capture this anxiety of loss through the promise of "recovering" a disappeared America, legitimating discourses of racial exclusion and political violence as instruments of social vindication.

As Torres-Vega et al. (2021) indicate, economic precarization in the United States is accompanied by institutional weakening of traditional political

mediations, which translates into: weakened labor unions, political parties captured by financial elites, and radical disconnection between democratic discourse and concrete material reality. Indeed, the cited research by Torres-Vega et al. (2021) on the threat perceived through economic crisis and low socioeconomic status demonstrates that these conditions produce a "dangerous worldview" and low perception of sociopolitical control, which in turn generate authoritarian dispositions regardless of the subject's ideological positioning.

Precisely in this scenario, Trump and Kirk operate within this ecosystem of vulnerability through the offer of "Manichaeian certainties"—the identification of clearly delineated enemies (foreigners, cosmopolitan elites, minorities) as supposed bearers of national degradation—that provide their followers both an explanation for their suffering and a renewed sense of political agency through participation in radical and neoconservative movements of national restoration.

The discursive and legal radicalization of both actors thus reflects, for the authors of this research, not so much a coherent ideology but rather systematic exploitation of the structural fractures (material and symbolic) of the contemporary American political order, in the present era.

For its part, the European Union presents a divergent, though complementary, set of conditions that have generated the emergence of radicalized leaders from both the right and the left. Unlike the United States, where inequality operates primarily in racial terms, in Europe radicalization articulated itself initially around the experience of what might be termed "truncated globalization"—that is, national elites that, while preaching the benefits of free trade and European integration, simultaneously imposed austerity policies that

generated massive unemployment, precarization of youth employment, and the collapse of public services— (Bonansinga, 2022).

In addition to all the foregoing, the 2008 financial crisis, as Charalambous (2022) explains, and its consequences of European austerity, produced a particular phenomenon that cannot be omitted from the analysis: whereas in the United States anger was channeled toward radical right formations through narratives of racialized national restoration, in Europe radicalized formations emerged simultaneously from both the radical right (*Front National*, *Rassemblement National*) and the radical left (*Syriza*, *Podemos*, *La France Insoumise*) that, despite their marked ideological differences, shared a frontal attack on political elites and the supranational architecture of the European Union in general.

It is our assessment that hermeneutic analysis of European conditions reveals radicalization operating through a double movement of "nationalization of the social and socialization of the national". In Marine Le Pen's case, the experience of economic precarity is capitalized upon, but it is recoded through the prism of national identity, supposedly threatened by immigrants and the Islamization of Europe. This offers a promise of national restoration that maintains intact the capitalist structure while seeking to discipline migratory and cultural flows (Seitz, 2020).

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, for his part, locates the source of precarity in neoliberal policies driven by French and European elites, offering a "republican refoundation" that would seek to unravel both economic domination and the alleged supranational tyranny of Brussels (Marlière, 2018).

What is significant is that both political actors question the existing institutional ordering, though from different angles. Le Pen seeks to restore national sovereignty against "immigrant invasion" and cosmopolitan elites, while Mélenchon seeks, in his own manner, a democratic refoundation with a new civic morality that would recover popular control over institutions captured by financial oligarchy.

The legal dimension of radicalization in Europe thus acquires particular and differentiating characteristics. Whereas in the United States radicality operates through the threat of direct violence sustained in presidential power, in Europe it expresses itself through the promise of institutional transformation that would erode the foundations of the supranational rule of law inherent to the European Union as a geopolitical bloc.

Table 3. Comparison of the radicalization process in the U.S. and the European Union.

Aspect	United States	European Union
Economic cause.	Racial inequality perceived as extreme by white Americans.	Austerity after the 2008 financial crisis. High levels of unemployment.
Radical vector.	Ethnocultural National Restoration in Trump/Kirk's Speech.	Identity nationalism + economic anti-elitism.
Discourse.	Manichaeen: Clear Internal Enemies in Migrants, Vulnerable Groups, and Opponents of President Trump.	Multiple: divergences on the origin of the crisis.
Legal radicalization.	Direct institutional violence promoted by the executive branch.	Constitutional reform; questioning the supranational foundations of the European Union.
Type of political violence.	Direct, immediate electoral threat.	Potentially institutional, gradual erosion of the rule of law.

Aspect	United States	European Union
Legitimation.	Restoring White Socio-Racial Status.	Recovery of national sovereignty in Le Pen or popular democracy in Jean-Luc Mélenchon.
Threat to the established order.	Electoral collapse and immediate coup d'état.	Institutional dismantling from within.

Source: prepared by the authors (2025).

The radicalized leaders (Trump, Kirk, Le Pen, Mélenchon) are simultaneously symptoms and agents of their own political crisis. In this manner, they are the contemporary architects of the symptoms, not the causes, of institutional deterioration produced at once by economic precarity and social radicalization, yet they are also agents who actively accelerate this deterioration through the normalization of political violence and the erosion of liberal democratic norms.

The crucial difference is that in the United States the threat appears immediately existential given its status as the world's foremost power—direct violence, questioning of the electoral process—whereas in Europe it operates through gradual institutional erosion from within. In any case, both contexts, with their political protagonists, reveal that liberal democracy faces a threshold of collapse closer than optimistic analyses suggest, where the question is no longer whether democracy will persist but rather under what authoritarian or post-capitalist forms the current political order will reemerge.

Conclusion

In current circumstances where the human rights paradigm appears to lose ground before the model of national security, the phenomenon of ideological

radicalization, legal radicalization, and contemporary political violence, in its comparative manifestation between the United States and the European Union, exposes risks of systemic magnitude for the integrity of contemporary democratic orders whose generalization requires careful reflection.

The pretension of extrapolating radicalization patterns identified in these specific contexts toward other latitudes or undemocratic political regimes—to put it mildly—entails the epistemological danger of universalizing the particular, forgetting that historical trajectories, institutional configurations, colonial legacies, and political imaginaries shape in irreversibly differentiated ways the manner in which radicalization phenomena acquire social corporeality and concrete political effects.

For the authors of this article, it is undeniable that the acceleration of radicalization processes in both contexts, mediated by digital technologies, intensified migratory flows, and crises of institutional legitimacy, points toward structural trends that transcend national borders and that, should circumstances align, could reproduce themselves in other democracies facing similar fragilities—particularly in contexts of high economic inequality, social polarization, and weakening of political institutions.

Well into digital society, the generalization of these risks becomes even more complicated when we recognize that radicalization operates through dynamics that mutually reinforce one another and express themselves in discourses that legitimate violence, in institutions captured by radicalized actors that end up channeling public resources toward selective repression, and in vulnerable populations that, confronted with such a scenario, experience

cumulative erosions of their trust in the state's capacity to protect their fundamental rights.

What emerges from this reflection is that, without a doubt, political radicalization is not a discrete event but a systemic process whose territorial and symbolic extension from advanced contexts toward others of the Global South depends less on the inevitability of a single model than on the presence of analogous structural conditions, among which stand out, for example: severe political fragmentation, delegitimization of traditional elites, capture of media by polarized actors, and fundamentally, the incapacity of institutional frameworks that constitute the rule of law to process recurring social conflicts through peaceful democratic channels.

Now, when we approach the consequences that ideological radicalization, legal radicalization, and contemporary political violence generate on the effective enjoyment of human rights in vulnerable populations, abstraction yields before the concrete experience of structural suffering of persons and communities alike.

Migrants in the American context, particularly those traversing the southern border, confront a control apparatus whose repressive practices have radicalized in consonance with the radicalization of dominant political discourses. In this context, the criminalization of the migrant is not merely a collateral effect but a logical consequence of interpretive frameworks that construct him or her as an existential enemy of the American nation while simultaneously denying their human dignity.

In a scenario of mounting violence, the LGBTQ+ community, both in the United States and in the European Union, experiences heightened vulnerability

when radicalized actors, electoral victors, accede to state institutions and utilize their power to erode legal protection devices conquered decades ago. In Europe, the ascendance of far-right movements has generated political spaces of greater hostility toward diverse sexo-gender identities, while in the United States, the intensification of trans-phobic rhetoric in circles of power of the MAGA movement has legitimated institutionalized discrimination in healthcare, education, and employment (Isacson, 2025).

In sum, ethnic and racial minorities, the poor, as well as persons with chronic illnesses or disabilities occupy particularly exposed places in this map of vulnerabilities, amplified by political radicalization that in many respects recalls fascism.

If this research has demonstrated anything repeatedly, it is that radicalization dynamics are nourished by unjust horizontalities—that is, by the perception that certain groups enjoy privileges denied to others, generating social resentments that can be instrumentalized by radicalized actors promising to "recover" supposed lost status through the re-subordination of even more marginalized groups.

Although typically rendered invisible in their suffering, persons with disabilities or chronic illnesses find themselves particularly exposed, not only to direct political violence but also to the erosion of social protection systems, access to healthcare, and basic services when radicalized governments prioritize austerity rhetoric or the supposed defense of majorities against "special privileges" of the most vulnerable minorities.

For these reasons, as Dixson (2024) demonstrates, migrants of Latin American origin in the United States face, on the one hand, sustained rhetorical

violence and, on the other, institutional deployments that deliberately fracture families, limit access to education, and generate climates of fear that erode the exercise of civil, political, and social rights.

Considering that the results of this analysis project toward architects of public policy and researchers committed to the defense of the rule of law, recommendations emerge that seek to reverse current trajectories of radicalization and democratic fragility. First, it is imperative in today's world that democratic institutions construct solid mechanisms for the protection of human rights that operate in counter-cyclical fashion—that is, that strengthen themselves precisely when political pressures seek to weaken them. This implies constitutional safeguards, autonomous human rights bodies, and guaranteed financing for institutions that protect minorities.

Second, future research agendas require deepening how legal radicalization—understood as the transformation of legal frameworks to legitimate violations of fundamental rights—operates in dynamic interaction with forces of ideological radicalization, allowing political violence to acquire the appearance of legality and supposed legitimacy in social representations.

Third, the implementation of public policy must prioritize redistributive policies addressing the horizontal inequalities that sustain radicalization, recognizing that the absence of equitable distribution of goods of value—those tangible and intangible things important to community life—services, and rights commonly constitute the humus from which radicalized demands emerge.

Finally, the role of organized civil society, community networks, and alternative public spaces must be strengthened to counteract radicalized narratives

through practices of coexistence, recognition of diverse dignities, and the construction of alternative political horizons where difference and conflict are processed without recourse to material or symbolic violence.

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