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Radical climate movements—is the hype about “eco-terrorism” analogy, warning or propaganda?

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Is the hype about “ecoterrorism” analogy, warning or propaganda? In order to answer this question, we start by defining radicalization, terrorism, and civil disobedience to develop systematic categories which allow us to pursue two specific research goals: First, we analyse how the breadth of the German climate movement is represented in the media, how the issue of “terrorism” is taken up and with what consequences for the debate. Here we make a discursive argument. Secondly, we use the information provided by the media reports, triangulate it with primary data from the movements analysed and secondary data from academic publications in order to assess the validity of the accusation of terrorism. Here we make a factual argument about the current properties of the climate movement. Finally, we bring both arguments together and argue that even the more radical currents of climate activism should not be classified as terrorists. What we can see is that there has been an attempt to criminalize demands of the radical climate movement during which large parts of the German print media have become willing handmaidens in the delegitimization of more or less radical climate groups. More recently, very first signs of a backlash against the criminalization can be detected.

KEYWORDS

terror, civil disobedience, radicalization, climate movements, climate change, social movement activists

1 Introducing environmental movements: from politicization to radicalization

The recent growth of highly active climate movements in Western democracies (Fisher, 2024) represents a form of politicization where conflicts around “the climate” become more intense, get salience in public debate, and include ever more polarized actors (for politicization, see Schattschneider, 1960; Hutter and Grande, 2014; Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; Grande et al., 2019; for climate populism, see Marquardt and Lederer, 2022). Mainstream as well as more critical perspectives agree that such politicization can have the positive effect of setting up new agendas, opening up new debates, fostering deliberation, forcing a positioning of individuals as well as institutions, and thus could eventually lead to new and legitimate as well as effective collectively binding decisions (Zürn, 2019; Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2007). But what about the dark side of politicizing climate action? Do not we witness the emergence of new polarization, an intensification of conflicts or even a right-wing backlash that obstructs and delays effective climate politics (Conversi, 2024; Žuk, 2023)? Could politicization lead to radicalization, and if so, who is radicalizing how, and with what consequences?

Discussions about radicalization often focus solely on the actions of the climate movement, overlooking that there is also another side in this interplay (Staggenborg and Mayer, 2022).

This narrow perspective can obscure the broader dynamics involved and lead to a distorted understanding of how different forces interact. In the German context, the theme of the emergence of climate terrorists, or even a new “Green Army Faction” analogous to the Red Army Faction (RAF) of the 1970s, is a particularly prominent case where the label of “eco-terrorism” might represent such a form of discursive escalation from those who are particularly critical of climate activism in the first place. Already in 2019, commentators singled out individual aspects of environmental radicalization and placed them in a line of tradition with the RAF, like the former editor of the German newspaper taz, Erwin Jurtschitsch. He drew parallels between the two RAF terrorists Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof on the one hand and the Fridays for Future representatives Greta Thunberg and Luisa Neubauer on the other hand, as all these individuals were dominated by an “absolute claim to be on the right side and to condemn everyone who disagrees with them” (Jurtschitsch, 2019).¹ Similarly, political scientist Johannes Varwick claimed in December 2021 in the conservative German newspaper FAZ that Greta Thunberg’s “rage, her approach of spreading panic and thus putting the entire social class in the dock [...] are comparably radical” to Meinhof (Varwick, 2021). But what do these individual statements represent, and why do we witness such an increase in the “terrorism” label in relation to climate movements since 2019? Why is there such a hype about using the term “Green Army Faction” in particular and “eco-terrorists” more generally? In short, does the term serve as an analogy, a warning, or is it rather propaganda leading to outright criminalization?

Conceptually, we start by defining radicalization, terrorism, and civil disobedience to develop systematic categories which allow us to pursue two specific research goals: First, we analyse how the breadth of the German climate movement is represented in the media, how the issue of “terrorism” is taken up and with what consequences for the debate. Here, we make a discursive argument. Secondly, we use the information provided by the media reports, triangulate it with primary data from the movements analysed and secondary data from academic publications to assess the validity of the accusation of terrorism. This allows us to examine the hype about the “Green Army Faction” also on factual grounds, showing that even the more radical currents of climate activism should not be classified as terrorists. Finally, we argue that the progressing criminalization of climate activists has largely been discursively supported in the media. Counter-reactions mainly came from intellectuals and allied actors. That “Klimaterrorist” (climate terrorist) was chosen as the “Unwort des (2022)” (bad word of the year 2022) is a notable, even if mainly symbolic, attempt to express such disagreement.

Empirically, we focus on four climate movements, namely *Fridays for Future* (FFF), *Extinction Rebellion* (XR), *Letzte Generation* (*Last Generation*)², and *Ende Gelände* (*End of Terrain*) who take up environmental, most prominently climate issues, and who are of a more recent origin in contrast to more established groups like the

large environmental associations BUND³ or NABU⁴. Together, they represent the diverse spectrum of the newer climate movement confronted with the accusation of radicalization and show that the members of these groups set different priorities and use diverse methods. While FFF mobilized several 100,000 people for nationwide – and global – protests before the COVID-19 pandemic, XR relies more heavily on strong visual and emotional actions in public spaces. *Letzte Generation* takes a more confrontational approach, for example, when activists stick themselves to the streets or throw mashed potatoes at works of art. *Ende Gelände*, the oldest of these four groups, disrupts processes in coal-fired power plants and opencast mines. For example, in 2016, around 4,000 activists disrupted opencast mining in the Lausitz region of Brandenburg.

Methodologically, we start our analysis with a deductive content analysis, which allows us to review German print media in a systematic and theory-driven way (Mayring, 2010). Our investigation period runs from November 2021, which was the start of a heated debate in the German media, until October 2023. To provide a representative perspective of newspaper discourse, we analyzed content from four leading German national newspapers. These were selected to cover a political spectrum from conservative (FAZ, Welt), to liberal (Der Spiegel), to left-alternative (taz), as discussed in classifications by Falck et al. (2020) and Meier (2024). From these sources, we identified 1,179 segments from 89 articles, reportages, interviews and commentaries (listed in Annex I). The articles were retrieved using key terms like “terrorism” and “civil disobedience” and we then coded the articles using QDA software (MAXQDA) via code categories according to our conceptual framework that we present in section two. These categories correspond to the criteria of disjoint, plausible, and exhaustive (Kuckartz, 2018) and were reviewed by several authors for intersubjective comprehensibility (Mayring, 2010). The categories, including all subcategories, can be found in Annex II. In analyzing the results, the frequency of codes, which can also be found in Annex II, served as an orientation point, allowing us to delve deeper into the content and interrelations of the categories and subcodes (Kuckartz, 2018). We finally triangulated the results with self-descriptions of the movements and academic sources.

2 Conceptualizing ecological radicalization, terrorism, and civil disobedience

To evaluate whether climate activism has become more radical and, if so, in which way, we have to employ definitions that allow us to embed singular events in a broader conceptual perspective. In the following, we provide a short overview of what “radicalization,” “terrorism,” and “civil disobedience” actually imply.

1 All quotes from German newspapers, representatives, websites or academics were translated by the authors.

2 The term *Letzte Generation* refers to the idea of being a member of the last generation before the earth’s climate system’s tipping points are reached and therefore the last generation to be able to change something.

3 Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland, German Association for Environment and Nature Conservation.

4 Naturschutzbund Deutschland, The Nature And Biodiversity Conservation Union.

2.1 Radicalization

Radicalization can be defined as an “increasing challenge to the legitimacy of a normative order and/or the increasing willingness to fight the institutional structure of this order” (Gaspar et al., 2021, 5). This definition is beneficial for our purpose, as it is analytically neutral, avoids normative claims, includes discursive and performative aspects, and is political in the sense that words and deeds challenge a specific order (*ibid.*). Most importantly, the definition does not predetermine the relationship between violence and radicalization. Many social movement studies have at least implicitly conceptualized radicalization as leading to violence (e.g., della Porta, 2018; Bosi and Malthaner, 2015). This was particularly strong when the connection of religious fundamentalism and terrorism was analyzed (Gaspar et al., 2021, 2f). However, the definition above allows the differentiation of radicalization without violence, into violence, and within violence and also includes the literal meaning of radicality as addressing the root of a problem (Ruser, 2020). Concerning violence, another important distinction in this context is between “armed” and “unarmed resistance,” which allows for conceptualizing sabotage or rioting as unarmed, distinct from attacks on opponents using potentially lethal weapons (Chenoweth, 2023).

Radicalization of environmental movements has been increasingly discussed in the social sciences. For example, Sovacool and Dunlap (2022) have compiled an extensive list that categorizes 20 direct action tactics of environmental and climate movements, including unauthorized protests, street blockades, eco-sabotage, and “climateging” (a blend of climate action and sabotage). A central issue in the debate about armed and unarmed forms of violent and non-violent action is whether attacks on property—a hallmark of environmental activism—should be categorized as violence, alongside attacks on individuals, or rather as sabotage against inanimate objects (Norman, 2024; Vanderheiden, 2005). Particularly, the book “How to blow up a pipeline” (Malm, 2021; see also the interview with Malm in the NY Times with Marchese, 2024) caused a massive debate in this direction (Malm, 2021; see also the interview with Malm in the NY Times with Marchese, 2024).

When it comes to the effectiveness of radicalization and violence, no final verdict can be given (Buzogány and Scherhauser, 2023; Anfinson, 2022), but two positions can be identified: On the one hand, more violent-prone elements can act as a radical flank to more moderate and predominantly non-violent parts of a movement (Chenoweth, 2023). However, such an effect is highly contingent on factors such as the scale of violence and the broader societal context. Thus, while radical actions can lead to repression and stigmatization, in other instances, they can also increase visibility and support, compelling elites to cooperate with more moderate factions of a movement (della Porta, 2018). On the other hand, different studies claim that peaceful and legal protests are more likely to garner support. In contrast, radicalization into violence may result in its decline, the division of a movement, and a rejection by the broader public (Rucht, 2023b, 16; Chenoweth and Cunningham, 2023). Currently, two specific forms of radicalization are discussed in connection to climate movements: terrorism and civil disobedience. We unpack each term in more detail.

2.2 Terrorism

Terrorism represents one potential but not inevitable outcome of radicalization (Gaspar et al., 2021). A brief look at the classics of

terrorism research shows that they have paid little attention to radical environmentalism. Political terrorism is a historically old phenomenon (Hof, 2022), but the concept did not enter the political vocabulary until the French Revolution. The *régime de la terreur* was initially understood positively (Hoffmann, 2006, 4), but today, the term has a negative connotation (Vanderheiden, 2005). Schmid collected more than 100 definitions, each emphasizing different aspects of terrorism (Schmid, 2004). However, consensus exists that it is a form of political violence to gain publicity (Hof, 2022, 17). Similarly, Hoffmann listed 22 aspects that recur in the various definitions. The five most frequent references are “violence” (83.5%), “political” (65%), “fear” (51%), “threat” (47%), and “psychological effects” (41.5%) (Hoffmann, 2006, 34). Terrorists are thus often perceived as “violent intellectuals” who pursue political goals in an organized form and, therefore, want to influence the public psychologically (Hoffmann, 2006, 38f). In short, and already formulated by Jenkins in 1974, “Terrorism is theater,” which uses violence to communicate internally and externally (Jenkins, 1974, 4). Thus, we must understand the organizational logic, the political goals, and the instruments of terrorism.

The question of why people turn to terrorism is similarly contested. Despite all the differences in detail, analysts agree on two aspects: First, there is no single reason why some Russian intellectuals in the 19th century, some Italian, Spanish as well as German students in the 1960s, or some young Muslims today have become terrorists. Various causes, and political developments at the macro (structural), meso (societal) and micro (individual) level need to be considered (Barbato et al., 2016; della Porta, 2018). Second, there is no automatism as to why terrorist groups emerge and thus no identifiable and objectifiable tipping points, after which the step to violence becomes inevitable. In short, the history of terrorism remains contingent. However, radicalization into violence also does not happen by chance, and we can determine conducive factors which, in combination, provide a breeding ground for terrorist activity. There is, for example, some agreement that political and social contexts play a major role (Mandel, 2009, 101–103; Constanza, 2015, 4; Neumann, 2013, 880–884). On the one hand, the perceived legitimacy of the actions plays a role. Thus, all terrorist groups have always publically justified their actions as necessary steps to bring about a better future. On the other hand, there has always been some form of opposition that interacted with terrorists in the making and particularly state repression has had a decisive influence on the development of terrorist groups. Hence, we need to understand not only how specific actions are being legitimized and made compatible with the movements’ goals, but also what role outside triggers play, keeping in mind that terrorism always evolves in a social relationship. In short, radicalization into terrorism is hardly ever determined by endogenous factors alone but has to be understood in relational terms, taking the interplay of the characteristics and self-legitimation of the movement and the reaction and opportunities of the political system into account (della Porta, 2018). Moreover, relational dynamics also exist between social movements as they might outbid each other (*ibid.*, 465).

2.3 Civil disobedience

In contrast to terrorism, civil disobedience is classically defined as a morally justified rebellion against an injustice caused by the state, even if that state is built on the rule of law. For example, Henry David

Thoreau, who coined the term, wrote that if the law “is such that it takes you to do wrong to another, I say break the law!” (Thoreau, 2013, 27). The defining criteria and the legitimization of civil disobedience are contested in both the theoretical literature and in jurisprudence (Herbers, 2023). In the liberal theoretical tradition, the concept has been taken up *inter alia* by John Rawls, who defines it as “a public, nonviolent, conscientious yet political act contrary to law, usually done with the aim of bringing about a change in the law or policies of the government” (Rawls, 1999, 320). He emphasizes an underlying fundamental trust in law and justice, expressed in the fact that a penalty must be accepted for the morally required violation of the law. In a radical democratic conception, civil disobedience is understood as a democratic practice that expands the scope of participation and strengthens the right to collective self-determination (Celikates, 2016, 988f) or as an interpretation of the constitutions (Akbarian, 2023). In light of multiple deficits and power asymmetries in political representation and participation, it is a form of “democratic empowerment that aims for a more intensive and/or more extensive form of democratic self-determination” (Celikates, 2016, 989). In this sense, the demanded (sometimes radical) changes are indeed “inherent in the system” in that they call for a consistent realization of democratically anchored values (Celikates, 2023, 103). Civil disobedience always contains a confrontational element, although it is disputed whether this is always non-violent or whether violence against property (damage or sabotage) or the use of self-defense can be justified (Chenoweth, 2023). However, the spread of fear and terror through violence is neither the end nor the means of actions of civil disobedience. Furthermore, there is no evidence that even more radicalized forms of civil disobedience or sabotage slip into terrorism. Dieter Rucht surmises that “civil disobedience—properly understood—can build a firewall against [...] violent protest because it is [...] compatible with democracy” (Rucht, 2023a, 98). In short, specific forms of action and practices matter and in particular, the question of whether and how violence is justified must be answered if one wants to evaluate whether current environmental movements are on the verge of becoming terrorists.

2.4 Analytical categories

Taking together the above points from the literature on radicalization, terrorism, and civil disobedience does not allow us to identify specific independent variables that have to be in place for radicalization to evolve into one mode or another. However, it allows for the deduction of categories and specific questions that can structure the following analysis more systematically. We thus focus on the *organization structures* of the groups (Who is a leader and how is the group internally organized? From which milieu do the groups recruit?), the underlying *political goals* (Why is the group active and what are its objectives? Is it challenging the current normative order?), the group’s *practices and their legitimation* (Which actions are taken and what strategies are pursued to achieve a goal? Do we witness the use of (unarmed) violence and against whom or what? How are practices legitimized?), and the *external conditions* under which the group operates or against which the group is struggling (What is the movement against and what acts of repression does it face in doing so?).

3 Assessing climate radicalism

3.1 Organizational structures

The German print media we analyzed does not focus very strongly on the organizational structure of the four climate movements. We could identify only 16 text segments in all 89 articles that deal with the participants’ characteristics, milieu, age or gender. Similarly, the internal structure of the groups was also hardly dealt with. The general impression is that particularly FFF is an optimistic youth movement that is highly professional and represents a large part of the public making use of democratic means (Spiegel 18.11.2022/20.04.2023; taz 06.04.2023; Welt 28.09.2022; FAZ 26.07.2022, for example, stated that “FFF – those were still the nice pupils”). Many commentators have highlighted that FFF achieved something unprecedented with its massive demonstrations. However, they also suggest that the peak of this approach’s effectiveness may have passed (e.g., taz 26.09.2023; see also interview with scientist Simon Teune in the same article).

Regarding the internal structures, the movements studied describe themselves as having strong grassroots democratic traditions. They are minimally formalized institutionally, featuring decentralized structures that have nevertheless allowed them to build a semi-professionalized organization and external representation. For example, FFF is repeatedly represented by prominent personalities and official spokespersons. Still, there are no formalized hierarchies, although the discrepancy between grassroots and professional decision-making structures has been controversial since the beginning (Marquardt, 2020). XR describes itself as “radically democratic” and it is also a grassroots organization (Pfaff, 2020), as is *Ende Gelände*, which operates by consensus (Ende, 2020, 14ff). An exception is *Letzte Generation*, which explicitly distances itself from grassroots democratic ideas and is led relatively hierarchically by a “strategy team” (Kaufer and Albrecht, 2022). Its exceptionalism is also stressed, particularly by conservative newspapers criticizing the movement as an elite project that holds democratic ideals without being democratic (historian Nolte in Welt 28.12.2022). The fact that many of the most prominent members of this movement come from privileged households is acknowledged by the activists (activist Bonasera in Welt 28.04.2022) and is true for the whole climate movement (della Porta and Portos, 2023).

Regarding the degree of organization, completely different perceptions are visible. MP Alexander Dobrindt of the Bavarian conservative party CSU acknowledges that the climate movement is highly strategic and well organized (interview in Spiegel 18.11.2022). An argument that legitimizes criminal repression as “organized” groups are much easier to prohibit. In contrast, the climate activist Tazio Müller argues that the climate movement is “completely uncoordinated” (interview in Spiegel 21.11.2021), which might also be understood as an argument that delegitimizes the ongoing criminalization and most likely Müller also considers the whole climate movement as diverse. *Letzte Generation* stands out in the newspapers as a group coordinated by a small number of people, who are described as highly efficient (Spiegel 18.08.2023). The demonstrations and illegal actions like stopping road traffic were performed with a high degree of organizational detail and a sophisticated division of labor where specific members were ready to commit illegal acts (Spiegel 18.08.2023). Finally, the high level of media competence and organizational skills of particularly *Letzte*

Generation are highlighted, as well as the fact that the movement made a strong public appearance with only 800 active members (Spiegel 20.04.2023).

There is a debate as to whether *Letzte Generation* is the natural successor to both XR and FFF. The taz, for example, rather sees it as a different group that will not lead to the dissolution of FFF (taz 26.09.2023). In another article, the cultural background of FFF and *Letzte Generation* was judged to have the same “bourgeois” roots (Spiegel 20.04.2023). Focusing on the socio-cultural milieu, little is known, and it seems that the stereotype that members of these groups are mainly young people needs to be questioned, as even at FFF demonstrations in 2023, half of the participants were older than 35 years. This represents a significant shift from March 2019, when over half of the participants were under 18, and indicates a change in the age composition of those mobilized by FFF. While the core organized group may still be younger, the broader support base now includes a wider range of ages (Haunss et al., 2023). International comparative studies on the FFF demonstrators paint a relatively homogeneous picture of the socio-cultural composition with a high proportion of girls and women (de Moor et al., 2020). This rather strong trend is also being used by right-wing populist actors, who portray themselves as defenders of the ordinary people (Žuk and Žuk, 2024). XR even discusses this as a problem, criticizing its own composition as predominantly “white, young and academic” and problematizing the underrepresentation of “people with a direct migration or refugee background” (Pfaff, 2020). *Ende Gelände* also reflects on its own positionality and organizational structural racism to promote more diversity among its participants. The taz (20.04.2023) discussed to what extent *Letzte Generation* is getting close to a sect, but stated that, although there is some individual apocalyptic thinking, the movement itself is way more open.

3.2 Political goals

The goals of the four activist groups were only discussed to a certain extent in the newspapers under investigation, as evidenced by 65 segments addressing them. A significant focus was placed on the ideas articulated by the movements themselves. All activists share the objective of mitigating anthropogenic climate change and, if possible, achieving the 1.5°C target set by the Paris Agreement. To this end, they argue that both the German government and society should make effective contributions, although the demands differ from group to group (taz 24.04.2023; Spiegel 18.08.2023). While FFF initially propagated the paradigm of ecological modernization and relied on many technological or market-based instruments, in recent years, more disruptive strategies with the goal of “system change” have been propagated (Marquardt and Schoppek, 2024). Early on, FFF urged Germany to accelerate its coal phase-out by 2030 and end subsidies for fossil fuels (Spiegel 03.03.2023). Similarly, *Letzte Generation* initially called for a law against food waste and decarbonizing food production. XR and *Letzte Generation* propagated the establishment of a citizens’ assembly (Spiegel 26.01.2021/26.11.2021). Later, a speed limit on German highways and the introduction of cheap public transportation were added (taz 25.04.2023; 26.09.2023). An implicit objective of all climate activism, as highlighted by the newspapers, is mass mobilization (Spiegel 18.08.2023; FAZ 26.07.2022). Whereas FFF can be said to have temporarily achieved this quite successfully, other

groups like XR or *Letzte Generation* clearly have failed to become a mass movement in the perception of the activists as well as the media under investigation (taz 06.05.2023; Spiegel 18.08.2023; Müller in an interview with Spiegel 19.10.2023). In 2023, the Spiegel speculated that *Letzte Generation’s* road blockades in Bavaria – a state with a conservative government – were an attempt to create such a strong backlash that would then lead to mass mobilization. Bavaria was even perceived as the Alabama of today and compared to important protest events during the US civil rights movement (Spiegel 18.08.2023).

In only seven segments, it was reported that the groups aim for system change or that business as usual is no alternative. Such demands were hardly ever taken up as a serious argument (e.g., taz 06.05.2023; Spiegel 19.10.2023). However, when activists themselves were interviewed, a different perspective emerged, emphasizing system change and a critique of green capitalist practices (e.g., Tadzio Müller in Spiegel 11.12.2022). The groups themselves asked for democratization (e.g., youth participation or inclusion of marginalized groups), solidarity-based economics (including postcapitalist ideas, degrowth, sufficiency), and sustainable human-environment relations (Marquardt and Schoppek, 2024). *Ende Gelände*, whose goals were not reported on in the media under investigation, claims on its website to campaign for global climate justice and “against the social and ecological consequences of fossil capitalism and neocolonialism” (Gelände, 2022). Accordingly, the movement calls for more far-reaching changes than introducing individual policy measures. They argue that the structural causes of climate injustice are located in a capitalist, racist, patriarchal social system and must be overcome.

When evaluating the objectives, some positive connotations, mainly in the left-leaning and liberal press, were that ‘business as usual’ is not a good alternative (taz 09.01.2024) or that the movements would lead to more climate justice (Spiegel 14.11.2022) and that change needs time and patience (Spiegel 18.08.2023). Furthermore, the fluidity of the process was described and the need for any form of disruption was highlighted (taz 26.11.2022 “we need the agitation”). However, the overall assessment was that none of the movements were very strategic (e.g., taz 20.04.2023/06.05.2023; Spiegel 19.10.2023; FAZ 06.06.2023), a criticism that also academic observers have raised in particular with regard to *Letzte Generation* (Rucht, 2023b, 9, 21). In some instances, the problem was highlighted that it was unclear if and how the movements want to escalate in case their initial actions do not lead to change (taz 25.04.2023; Spiegel 18.08.2023). Furthermore, the movements were described as unambitious and as apolitical (Spiegel 23.01.2023). Various commentators criticized the call for citizens’ assemblies as either naïve (taz 20.04.2023; Spiegel 20.04.2023) or as undermining democratic representation (FAZ 08.03.2023), although few went as far as to argue that this leads to a form of eco-dictatorship (Die Welt 11.11.2022; CSU MP Alexander Dobrindt in Der Spiegel 18.11.2022). Others were rather surprised by how modest the claim for a citizens’ assembly is (Der Spiegel 23.01.2023; 20.04.2023).

3.3 Practices and their legitimation

The discussion of what the activists do and whether it should be perceived as legitimate has been intensively discussed across the four newspapers. In no other code category did we identify more segments (380). Across the interviews with activists and all commentators, a consensus has emerged that the demonstrations of

FFF might have been massive but ineffective; thus “other peaceful ways” had to be found (activist Bonasera in Welt 28.04.2022). There is thus a strong agreement that with the founding of particularly *Letzte Generation*, a more radical activism has become visible (FAZ, 26.07.2022/25.09.2022).

Letzte Generation mainly engaged in road blockades and later targeted symbols of a bourgeois society, like paintings in museums. No segment could be found that justified or defended the attack on art objects, except that climate change itself poses a far more radical threat (taz 16.11.2022). The most modest lament has been that it might be counterproductive (taz 29.07.2023), that food waste is far worse than throwing food at art (taz 16.11.2022) or that getting rid of the color at the Brandenburg Gate is time-intensive (Spiegel 22.09.2023). In other instances, it was simply classified as “vandalism” (Spiegel 15.10.2022/19.10.2023; FAZ, 08.03.2022), as constituting a form of “violence” (Spiegel 04.11.2022), as leading to a backlash of ordinary citizens (FAZ, 28.09.2023) or as being ineffective (so chancellor Scholz quoted in Welt 07.01.2022).

Regarding road blockades, newspaper articles agreed that they created significant attention (Welt 11.11.2022) and disrupted daily routines (taz, 25.04.2022). They were described in much – almost voyeuristic – detail (e.g., Spiegel 07.02.2024). The assessment was, however, often rather negative. Commentators, particularly in the more conservative press, stated that blockades are undemocratic (FAZ, 02.12.2021/27.09.2023), morally wrong as they cause high costs for innocent people (Welt 28.04.2022), that they create “unjustifiable risks” (Welt 11.11.2022), lead to escalation, and the evolution of a radical flank (Welt 11.11.2022) or at least to a form of illusory self-empowerment (*ibid.*/FAZ 26.07.2022). In more left-leaning and liberal newspapers, they were described as “ineffective” and as “instances of despair” (taz, 19.10.2023; Spiegel 11.11.2022) or as diverting attention from the real problems (taz 06.05.2023).

It was particularly the road blockades that led to the defamation of the activists as terrorists (“traffic terrorists” was a telling term by one commentator in Welt 11.11.2022) or in a more mildly form as opposing the lifestyle of the majority population (Welt 26.08.2022). Also, the argument that we are witnessing a form of self-defense against the climate crisis was often described as not convincing and as an excuse for the use of violence (FAZ, 18.10.2020; a defense of the argument was brought up in FAZ, 18.11.2022). Even more critical were perspectives on the use of unarmed violence against persons by unidentified climate activists from various backgrounds. Such cases occurred in the forest of Dannenroth (FAZ 18.10.2020) or in Lützerath, where protests against coal extraction repeatedly escalated, with Molotov Cocktails and stones being thrown at police forces (Spiegel 11.01.2023; FAZ 07.11.2022).

The often critical coverage was accompanied by various instances of verbal criminalization of climate activism, with an explicit link being made between road blockades and terrorist activities. Some, like right-wing extremist AfD MPs Stephan Brandner or Thomas Seitz, stated that we witness a new and “green RAF” (FAZ, 11.11.2022). Conservative politicians also picked up the topos. The MP Middelberg from the conservative party CDU stated that the intelligence services should observe whoever propagates sabotage (interview in Welt 24.11.2021). CSU General Secretary Martin Huber argued that *Letzte Generation* creates a “permanent state of breaking the law” (Spiegel 01.02.2024). The CSU member Alexander Dobrindt was closest to the AfD by declaring that a “green RAF” has to be avoided (interview in

Spiegel 18.09.2022; Welt 07.11.2022). The federal transport minister Volker Wissing from the liberal party FDP stated that acts of sabotage are a “form of terror” (Spiegel 22.09.2023). MP Michael Roth from the Social Democrats SPD compared *Letzte Generation* to the Taliban (Spiegel 18.08.2023). Finally, there were also journalists in the conservative papers who evaluated road blockades as terrorist acts that include an “element of martyrdom” (Welt 14.07.2023) or that brought up a slippery road argument that it is only “logical” that radicalization into violence follows from blockades (FAZ 20.02.2022/26.07.2022/19.12.2022).

However, in many instances, the claim of witnessing a new “Green Army Faction” was denied by politicians (Green MP Trittin in Spiegel 12.01.2023) and even in more conservative papers (e.g., Welt 11.11.2022; FAZ 27.09.2023). This has also happened through official channels; for example, the government’s speaker stated that we do not witness acts of terrorism (Welt 07.09.2022). Instead, the connection with radicalized movements of the 1980s (e.g., *Earth First*) was stressed (Welt 28.09.2022), or it was pointed out that there are no charismatic leaders that could convincingly turn the activist groups into terrorist cells (Welt 28.09.2022). In another instance, Tadzio Müller, a spokesman and author within the climate justice movement, was described as a potential leader (FAZ 20.02.2022). However this seems to be a great exaggeration of his actual standing within the movement. One article also claimed that the climate movements have learned from the failures of the RAF and, thus, will not mimic their actions (taz 23.09.2022). Finally, some stated that the most significant danger is not that violence against innocent people will happen, but rather the risk of self-inflicted violence by the climate activists themselves, whether due to bad luck or acts of self-victimization (e.g., Spiegel 24.05.2023 warns of the danger of “self-immolation”).

Many observers stressed that, so far, all acts of sabotage took great care not to physically hurt anybody (taz 03.02.2022/06.05.2023; Spiegel 09.11.2022/ 20.04.2023/ 24.04.2023/ 24.04.2023; FAZ 25.09.2022; Welt 11.11.2022 speaks of “Mahatma Gandhi instead of Che Guevara”). This caution was repeatedly stressed as the “red line” where terrorism would begin (e.g., CSU MP Andrea Lindholz in Welt, 07.11.2022; FAZ 18.10.2020). This has also been the official position of the movements, as all have explicitly distanced themselves from violence against persons (e.g., [Gelände, 2022](#)). Whether non-armed sabotage and civil disobedience are legitimate has been a different question. The majority of articles conclude that in the eyes of most activists, sabotage is a legitimate form of resistance (e.g., taz 30.11.2021) (similarly, [Rucht, 2023b](#) states that 50% of all FFF demonstrators perceive sabotage as legitimate). A few segments noted that sabotage could effectively bring about change, with one instance praising the direct focus on companies (taz 19.10.2023). Most of the time, however, it was stressed that sabotage and civil disobedience would lead nowhere (taz 23.09.2023/FAZ 26.07.2022/ 28.09.2023) and only contribute to an “apocalyptic” *Zeitgeist* (FAZ, 27.09.2023; Welt 11.11.2022/28.12.2022) (for an academic perspective on this trend, see [Rothe, 2020](#)).

Civil disobedience was the term most often used to describe the current practices (42 times), and a sophisticated discussion, particularly in the FAZ, has started on the historical background, legal implications and whether these acts constitute a form of coercion (“Nötigung”). The discussion also addresses the costs that civil disobedience entails for participants and the challenges of recruiting activists (e.g., FAZ 02.12.2021/19.12.2022/06.06.2023/

26.07.2022/ 27.09.2023/28.09.2023). In interviews with social scientists, it was perceived as evident that we are witnessing a new dimension of civil disobedience (e.g., Rucht in taz, 20.04.2023), that might lead to radicalization into non-armed sabotage but not terrorism (again Rucht in FAZ, 20.02.2022) (see also Celikates, 2022; Mullis, 2023).

3.4 External conditions

The importance of external conditions, including a focus on repressive actions, was frequently discussed (299 segments) across all four media. For example, the newspapers often reported that the disillusionment of activists with current climate politics is the starting point of all climate movements (Spiegel 02.11.2022/18.08.2023; taz 26.11.2022; FAZ 18.11.2022). Luisa Neubauer from FFF was quoted criticizing the “disastrous climate balance” of the German government (interview in Spiegel 14.11.2022), also echoing Greta Thunberg’s famous “blah blah blah” critique of COP 26 results in Glasgow. Commentators further assessed the current government’s strategy as too technocratic and ineffective (taz 06.05.2023), ignoring Germany’s obligations under the Paris Agreement (taz 26.09.2023). Official climate politics have been seen as facilitating global warming, with at least one instance even describing them as “radical” (taz 26.11.2022). A theme mentioned in only one segment was that climate movements are a form of generational conflict (Welt 28.09.2022).

Most newspaper articles reported in much detail on the direct reactions to road blockades. Car drivers were reported not only to verbally abuse the protesters as “undemocratic,” “terrorists,” or even as “vermin” but also to drag them away from the street and to threaten them physically (Spiegel 24.04.2023/25.04.2023/18.08.2023; FAZ 20.02.2022/25.05.2023; taz 25.04.2023). In a few instances, drivers even used their vehicles in ways that injured people (Spiegel 18.08.2023; taz 25.04.2023). One article counted 142 episodes of violence against climate activists which the police was investigating in summer 2023 (taz 29.07.2023). Instances of police violence were not a major issue in the newspapers, with only one reported instance where a police officer threatened an activist (taz 25.04.2023). This differed from other instances, e.g., the anti-coal protests in Lützerath where various sources spoke of police officers beating up peaceful activists who were sitting on the street (Spiegel 12.01.2023).

Reactions from politicians were also an important theme, as many called for tougher legal action. For example, members of the CSU proposed stricter laws and harsher punishments (e.g., Alexander Dobrindt in an interview Spiegel 07.11.2022), stating that if the government does not become active, we will fall into “anarchy” and thus “red lines” have to be drawn (CSU minister of interior of Bavaria Hermann in interview Spiegel 09.11.2022). An early official reaction came in 2018 when the intelligence service of the State of Berlin categorized *Ende Gelände* as an extremist organization warranting observation (FAZ 21.05.2020). This escalated in 2022 when the Bavarian government declared *Letzte Generation* a “criminal organization,” leading to the preemptive imprisonment of various activists (Spiegel 08.12.2022) and, in 2023, the shutdown of the group’s website, which commentators evaluated as a form of censorship (Spiegel 24.05.2023). By mid 2023, 2,000 legal proceedings and 500 fines had been issued against individual members of *Letzte Generation* (FAZ 25.05.2023).

The harsh backlash against climate activists led to reactions from civil society. Solidarity with activists grew in the media and among intellectuals, scientists, and artists after the harsh reactions of the Bavarian government (Spiegel 18.08.2023; taz 24.04.2023). Even the president of the federal domestic intelligence services, Thomas Haldenwang, along with various lawyers and state attorneys, stated that the comparison to the RAF is unjustified (taz 20.04.2023; Spiegel 07.11.2022/ 24.05.2023; FAZ 06.06.2023). Arguments in defense of the activists were that they symbolize the despair of a whole generation (Spiegel 25.08.2023/ 23.01.2023), that they do not threaten democratic politics (Spiegel 25.04.2023), and that the government’s reactions were disproportionate (Spiegel 31.05.2023). Very often, the argument was also brought forward that we might be witnessing a spiraling effect (Spiegel 25.05.2023/18.08.2023; sociologist Teune in an interview with Spiegel 10.11.2022; taz 23.09.2022/25.04.2023; FAZ 25.04.2022). Similarly, columnist Sascha Lobo declared that we are witnessing the radicalization of the state, not of demonstrators (Spiegel 24.05.2023). Maybe the most extreme viewpoint came from Tazio Müller, who argued in an interview that possible violent and even terrorist actions by climate activists would be a reaction to increasingly repressive state structures (interview in Spiegel 21.11.2021).

4 Discussion

We have been witnessing a double and interlinked form of radicalization among activists and those who react to them. For many climate activists, civil disobedience and, to some extent, sabotage are becoming socially acceptable or even necessary. These actions are being practiced and normatively legitimized. Climate activism is thus resorting to traditions in conformity with predecessor German environmental movements (Ruser, 2020). However, there are noticeable shifts towards radicalization in goals and practices, moving from FFF to *Letzte Generation*, *Ende Gelände*, and partly XR. Members of these latter groups, many of whom previously participated in FFF, perceive the climate crisis as so dramatic that they are willing to engage in property damage as a form of protest. Consequently, observers have reason to warn of a potential radicalization into (unarmed) violence, though it is debatable whether sabotage should be considered violence in the first place.

Considering the definitions discussed earlier, particularly the emphasis on the spread of fear as a defining characteristic of terrorism, it is important to evaluate whether the actions of these groups truly align with what constitutes terrorism. The described trends have not led to violence against persons, and the intention to spread fear or terror as a means to an end is absent. Thus, the analogy between the RAF and the “Green Army Faction” does not stand up to critical examination. The label is misleading in light of organizational structures, goals, practices, and external conditions: First, the organization of the various groups is less hierarchical and less homogeneous than the RAF ever was (for details on the RAF’s internal organization, see Terhoeven, 2017). Even if individual leaders of the climate movement, such as Roger Hallem from XR, see themselves as avant-garde, they either do not demand unconditional allegiance or are not taken seriously. Moreover, the organizational characteristics show a stark contrast between a terrorist group like the RAF with the four environmental movements analyzed.

Second, the goals differ. Whereas the RAF, in all its stages, had a clear enemy image in the capitalist-imperialist system, aiming to overcome it and introduce a form of socialism, climate activism is characterized by significant heterogeneity. The “system” is only in rudimentary form described as a unitary enemy to be destroyed. Although the topos of system change has gained popularity, it has led to a differentiated and complex examination of the mechanisms of capitalist socialization rather than a call for violent revolution. Besides, calls for strong and effective state-action through science- and evidence-based policy-making rather than an attempt to overthrow the state characterize the diverse climate movement.

Thirdly, the most significant difference lies in the level of practices and their legitimation. Terrorist groups like the RAF committed political violence ranging from sabotage to personal assassinations. Initially, symbols of capitalism like the KdW in Berlin were damaged by causing explosions. Over time, violence against people and the murder of officials of the German state was not only accepted but an end in itself. Very early on, the RAF sealed itself off from any criticism, and both self-victimization in the form of hunger strikes or later suicides and a complete disregard for the victims took place (Terhoeven, 2017). In sharp contrast, none of the environmental groups under consideration legitimizes violence against people in any form or seeks to spread fear and terror (see also Celikates, 2023, 104). There is also a clear framing that they do not consider themselves to be using terrorist means. Finally, the groups are open to criticism and willing to learn from societal responses. For example, *Letzte Generation* stopped executing specific forms of road blockades.

Fourthly, external factors for radicalization are increasingly perceived and described as a problem, but they do not take the form of “catalyst events” (Silke, 2003, 41). Again, when considering the RAF, we have to recall that low trust in the state was a constant feature of the student movement of the 1970s and intensified with the advent of the Grand Coalition (Moghadam, 2012, 158). This led to disillusionment with formal interest representation, seen in their self-description as an extra-parliamentary opposition (APO) (Schmidt-Petersen, 2018, 350). In addition, the high propensity of law enforcement agencies to use violence against demonstrations and the presence of former police and military personnel from Nazi Germany in key policing positions deepened mistrust in state institutions (Moghadam, 2012, 158; Schmidt-Petersen, 2018, 350). The lack of coming to terms with the past thus represented a breeding ground for the RAF (Terhoeven, 2017, 8f). The assassinations of Benno Ohnesorg (1967) and Rudi Dutschke (1968/1979) permanently radicalized parts of the APO (Moghadam, 2012, 158). Gudrun Ensslin, co-founder of the RAF stated in reaction to the death of Ohnesorg: “This fascist state is out to kill us all. We must organize resistance. Violence can only be answered with violence. This is the generation of Auschwitz—you cannot argue with them” (quoted in Aust, 2020, 60). Although individual members of the climate movements have shown a high level of frustration, we do not witness a systematic decoupling from the German state in the sense that the foundation of the political system are being questioned. Members of *Letzte Generation* and various members of FFF even founded a party and tried to enter the European Parliament, although unsuccessfully.

So, if we are not witnessing the emergence of a new “German autumn” and no “Green Army Faction” is on the horizon, why has this topic become so prevalent in many of the articles analyzed, and why have politicians picked it up so much? Why has there been such a

hype? We argue that this is part of a broader trend where ecological movements are being discredited and labelled as terrorists and in some cases – like Poland under the PiS government – the situation was much more confrontational (Žuk, 2023; Žuk and Žuk, 2024).

In Germany, we have witnessed that the early articles of 2019–2020 the analogy to the RAF was no more than a hook for individual articles to raise attention and maybe warn against radicalization into violence. During the period we covered, the question of whether a “Green Army Faction” is emerging became synonymous with the debate over the legitimacy of radical climate protest. The rhetorical battle over who can and should be labeled a terrorist and why became part of the transformational conflict permeating society. What began as a warning or reflection on the potential consequences of inadequate climate policy evolved into a struggle for interpretive sovereignty, in which the primary goal often was to criminalize, discredit, and delegitimize climate activists (see also, Mullis, 2023; Celikates, 2023). This follows a well-known pattern in which environmental activism involving acts of sabotage or disruption is equated with terrorism (Sumner and Weidman, 2013). Such stigmatization can lead to various forms of suppression, surveillance, infiltration, and the prosecution of activists, often resulting in penalties that severely limit capacities to participate in political activism (Vanderheiden, 2005; Sumner and Weidman, 2013; Smith, 2008). This trend raises serious concerns about fundamental civil rights. It carries the risk of creating conditions that could eventually lead to the radicalization of marginalized activists into armed violence due to perceived injustice and desperation (Spadaro, 2020). Luckily, such radicalization due to repression has not happened so far. On the contrary, all movements have repeatedly stated that radicalization into armed forms of violence is not an option.

We even see some instances of de-escalation as shown by the strategic shift of *Letzte Generation*. Besides, public attention for climate protests has waned since 2022. This is partially due to other events like the Russian aggression in Ukraine or the war in Gaza gaining the media and the public’s attention. However, it is also a result of the aforementioned criticisms of the terrorist analogy and the various forms of solidarity from different corners. One illustrative public counterposition (raised above) was the choice of the term “Klimaterroristen (“climate terrorists”) as the “Unwort des (2022)” (“bad word of the year 2022”). Criticizing the use of this term, the jury highlighted the problematic equation of “non-violent forms of protest” with the “systematic exercise and spreading of fear and terror through radical physical violence,” as implied in terrorism (Unwort des, 2022). It further argued that this term criminalizes activists, pushes their “justified substantive demands” and the “global threat posed by climate change” in the background, while “legal possibilities for action against civil society actors” to the foreground (Unwort des, 2022) (Spiegel 10.01.2023). FFF activist Luisa Neubauer commented on this on Deutschlandfunk radio: “Here, people who are committed to protecting the climate and livelihoods are deliberately and strategically criminalized. The choice as 2022’s “Unwort” should give all those involved a lot to think about in terms of how they talk about climate-minded people and those who cause the climate dangers” (Deutschlandfunk, 2023).

The hype around the “Green Army Faction” might have subsided, but it remains to be seen what long-term effects these shifts will have on the various climate movements. What began as a warning was instrumentalized as propaganda and later increasingly rejected as an

analogy. However, in the end, deeds—not words alone—will be necessary to prevent both radicalization into violence and a further radicalization of climate change and its accompanying violent consequences.

5 Conclusion: quo vadis (radical) climate movements?

Our theoretical conceptualization has highlighted the distinctions between the concepts of radicalization, terrorism, and civil disobedience within the context of climate movements. We found these terms to be conflated or used interchangeably in media coverage. While radicalization is characterized by an increasing willingness to challenge and disrupt existing institutional structures, terrorism is distinct in its intent to spread fear and use violence as a means of achieving political goals. In contrast, civil disobedience, though confrontational, fundamentally relies on non-violent actions within a democratic framework. The comparison with the RAF and the concerns about a ‘Green Army Faction’ reveal significant differences in organizational structures, goals, and practices, suggesting that while radicalization within environmental movements might be witnessed, it does not equate to terrorism. The emphasis on fear and violence, which is central to terrorism, is largely absent from these movements, even as they adopt more radical forms of protest. Additionally, our analysis shows that external factors play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of these movements.

What follows from these observations for politicisation and policy-making? On the one hand, we have to understand climate and environmental issues not purely as technical or economic but political and societal problems that merit politicization. However, it would be naïve to believe that politicization *per se* will bring the solution. On the contrary, politicization, especially by reactionary groups, can lead to a clear rejection of progressive climate and environmental policies (Marquardt and Lederer, 2022; Marquardt et al., 2022b). It is therefore necessary to discuss politicization and radicalization openly, both within the groups and in the ranks of (social) science, because transformative changes need to happen now, not in twenty or thirty years. Radical demands are thus more than justified both science-based and from a justice perspective that recognizes future generations and those differently impacted across the globe.

On the other hand, it can be seen that increasingly radicalizing groups marginalize themselves and, at some point, are virtually unable to generate any impetus. This highlights a “need for a social sounding board” (Rucht, 2023a, 98). Climate and environmental movements must be careful that their activities do not serve an end in themselves, ultimately slipping into political theater. For this reason, alliances should be sought with progressive, moderate forces. A productive tension between movements that build up social pressure and segments of the population that absorb it and channel it into institutional reform is most likely to succeed (Rucht, 2023a, 98; Celikates, 2023, 106). Radical climate movements that are completely uncompromising in their choice of means, refusing to allow any debate about alternatives within their ranks or claiming that their path is the only viable one, are likely to fail in winning over other social forces. From this perspective, the complete disengagement of core or strategic teams, acting as the supposedly leading avant-garde, appears problematic. However, meaningful

change also requires taking a firm stance at critical moments to avoid getting lost in the nitty-gritty of incremental reforms. Different strategies and perspectives can—and must—complement each other in this context (Schoppek and Krams, 2021; Marquardt et al., 2022a).

Radicalization is rarely purely endogenous but is slowed down or intensified by external factors. State institutions, therefore, have a great responsibility to ensure that spirals of escalation are broken in good time and that spaces are created for communication and conflict resolution. Higher penalties or preventive imprisonment, as we are currently seeing, are counter-intuitive, and political authorities of all kinds should start to accept that business as usual is not an option.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

ML: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. VL: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JM: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. TR: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2024.1421523/full#supplementary-material>

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