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A Gestalt perspective on Manichaean worldviews and individuals' engagement in violence: the case of the Italian far left

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Besides socio-political and economic factors, extant research contends that Manichaean worldviews, characterized by mutually exclusive dichotomies such as 'good-bad', are the main driver influencing individuals' decision to use violence against others. Furthermore, extant scholarship identifies ideologies, populism, and conspiracy theories as the three originators of Manichaean worldviews. However, the findings from my research, carried out between 2018 and 2023, challenge these arguments. Using narrative analysis, this article examines personal stories of a group of Italian former far-left militants, who participated in the violent campaign of the so-called 'Years of Lead'. Far-left and far-right ideologies strongly influenced Italian socio-political movements of the time. Thus, this paper explores whether Manichaean perspectives informing far-left militants' decision to resort to violence originated from far-left ideologies or whether they existed independently of these ideologies. I develop this analysis through the lens of Gestalt psychology, which considers human behavior as resulting from how our minds understand the relation between components of our surrounding environment. While confirming relations between Manichaean worldviews and violence, this paper finds that Manichaean perspectives result from human cognitive processes and are then rigidified by ideological narratives. This work provides important insight to better understand radicalization and engagement in violence, and to develop appropriate responses to prevent it.

KEYWORDS

engagement in violence, Manichaean worldviews, Gestalt psychology, narrative analysis, Italian far left

Introduction

Since 9/11, questions on how and why some people would engage in violence to pursue their goals and address their grievances have regained particular interest (e.g., Ferguson and McAuley, 2020, p. 1; Ajil, 2022). Research on this subject has identified a multiplicity of aspects explaining engagement in violence ranging from material factors, such as seizure of opportunities and/or lack thereof (e.g., Collier et al., 2009), and social factors, such as economic and socio-political discriminations (e.g., Cederman et al., 2011; Della Porta, 2013; Ajil, 2022), to emotional and psychological elements, such as social and ethnic identity and feelings of uncertainty (e.g., Mitton, 2015; Hogg, 2016; Altier et al., 2022). Furthermore, engaging with theories and approaches in psychology and psychiatry, scholarship has increasingly developed mechanisms, models, and theories to further understand processes of (de-)radicalization, engagement in violence, and disengagement thereof (e.g., McCauley and Moskalenko, 2017; Leone et al., 2018; Meloy, 2018b; Khalil et al., 2019; Altier et al., 2021; Thielmann and Hilbig, 2023). This latter body of research is of particular interest to the current article.

Particularly, these studies emphasize radical and ideological beliefs (e.g., McCauley and Moskalenko, 2011; Altier et al., 2021) as factors significantly contributing to violent extremism and (re-) engagement in violence. Among these, a conspicuous and increasing number of studies has been focusing on tracing violent extremism online, as well as explaining online pathways of radicalization and engagement in violence (e.g., Scrivens et al., 2020; Helm et al., 2024). In this scholarship, there is general agreement that individuals' decision to engage in political violence is dependent on progressively interpreting the socio-political environment through ideological lenses, albeit combined with other factors (e.g., Della Porta, 2013; Piazza, 2023a). Particularly, ideologies would be characterized by Manichaean worldviews – mutually exclusive dichotomies, such as 'friend-enemy', 'good-bad', 'right-wrong', and 'heroes-villains' – which ultimately aim to distinguish between an absolute 'good' and an absolute 'bad/evil' (e.g., Rosenberg, 2015). According to these studies (e.g., Della Porta, 2013; Moskalenko and McCauley, 2020; Piazza, 2023b), stressing and exacerbating the us-vs-them perspective, employing these dualistic lenses to make sense of the society and the surrounding environment, more broadly, has been found to be a causing factor for engagement in violence.

Recently, these studies have also been echoed by other research in political psychology (e.g., Leone et al., 2018; Thielmann and Hilbig, 2023), which has investigated how and to what extent populism and conspiracy theories can create the socio-political conditions for political violence to erupt. For example, analogously to the ideological argument, Thielmann and Hilbig (2023, 1–3, 12–13) maintain that both populism and conspiracy theories offer and are grounded on dualistic and Manichaean worldviews. Moreover, they have also found that individuals characterized by general distrust in society and political elites are more likely to support populist parties/movements and to believe in conspiracy theories (Thielmann and Hilbig, 2023). Similarly, researching which personality characteristics would be more prone to believe and support conspiracy theories and narratives, Leone et al. (2018) reached similar conclusions.

However, this research, which investigated how violence becomes an option in individuals' behavior repertoire, confirmed extant studies' findings only partly. While it supports the causal relation between Manichaean worldviews and engagement in political violence, it did not confirm extant literature's (e.g., McCauley and Moskalenko, 2011; Della Porta, 2013; Oliver and Wood, 2014; Leone et al., 2018; Piazza, 2023b; Thielmann and Hilbig, 2023) claims of the origins of Manichaean worldviews derive exclusively from ideologies, populism, and conspiracy theories. On the contrary, it found that Manichean worldviews originate from human psychological processes aiming at interpreting the (socio-political) environment so to better navigate it and that these are eventually rigidified into ideological models.

Extant scholarship does not question from where ideologies, populism, and conspiracy theories take their Manichaean interpretations of society and the world. This is an important gap, which needs to be investigated to expand our understanding of how and why some people would engage in political violence; why some individuals might find ideological, populist, and conspiratorial narratives convincing; and how and why some individuals might see violence as possible, viable, and, at times, even necessary option. In fact, the aforementioned studies suggest that the use of ideological, populist, and conspiratorial narratives also serve the purpose of mobilizing citizens to promote specific socio-political agendas (e.g., Ajil, 2022). This implies that ideological, populist, and conspiratorial narratives appeal to particular interpretations of the world – i.e., Manichaean – which citizens hold, and which therefore are already present in society. Extant scholarship has overlooked this consideration, which suggests instead that we should investigate beyond the scope of ideologies, populism, and conspiracy theories to better understand from where Manichaean interpretations of the world and individuals' potential resulting choice of using violence originate.

Therefore, this article presents the findings of my research, which investigated the following question: How does violence become an option in people's behavior repertoire? Taking a psychological perspective, this study investigates this question from the lens of Gestalt psychology, examining the Italian case of far-left violence, which occurred between 1969 and the late 1980s during the so-called 'Years of Lead'. Gestalt psychology focuses on explaining human behavior more broadly, rather than violent behavior only, and for this reason, it offers important insights to better comprehend the phenomena of radicalization and political violence. Regarding the case study, situated during the Cold War, the Italian 'Years of Lead' were particularly ideologically-laden, so much so that ideology and the influence of the ideological conflict between the US and the USSR have been identified as two of the key factors explaining engagement in, and the onset and escalation of, political violence (e.g., Ventrone, 2012; Balestracci, 2013; Della Porta, 2013, 2, 204–622). This very characteristic makes this a good case to investigate how violence becomes an option in individuals' behavior repertoire and whether Manichaean views can be exclusively ascribed to ideologies. This article challenges extant scholarship's assumptions on the origins of Manichaean worldviews. Specifically, using narrative analysis, which looks at how speakers tell and explain their stories (e.g., Andrews, 2007; Kohler Riessm, 2012; Graef and da Silva, 2019), it examines personal accounts of a group of former far-left militants, focusing on their decision-making process regarding their engagement in violence.

Particularly, this work builds on research examining relations between inter-personal/−group interactions and political violence (e.g., Rosenberg, 2015; Kleinewiese, 2022; Shafieioun and Haq, 2023). This research choice stems from considering Manichaean worldviews and violence, firstly as concerning a specific way of understanding and performing relations between people and, by extension between groups of people (e.g., Mancini, 2017, 2021). Therefore, alongside with Portinaro (2009, 35), this article considers violence as the means whereby one tries to impose themselves and/or their opinion on others, which is a particular kind of interpersonal/intergroup relations. This helps broaden our perspective on political violence, which is normally understood through the lenses of its political aims. In fact, political violence is here understood as "those repertoires of collective action that involve great physical force and cause damage to an adversary – [to people or property] – to achieve political aims" (Della Porta, 2013, 6). However, by only focusing on the political motives behind acts of violence, we would not be able to establish whether the Manichaean logic behind political violence only exists within political and ideological narratives. On the contrary, as ultimately political violence aims at changing, through force and imposition, the socio-political and economic structures of the society/community where acts of political violence occur, considering a definition of violence explaining broader interpersonal/intergroup relational practices, will allow for this study's research aims to be investigated, shedding more light on the phenomenon of political violence itself [see also da Silva (2019)].

Furthermore, this article also builds on and dialogs with research on political violence taking a psychological approach. In addition to previously mentioned studies in psychology, other works include those by Volkan (2001, 2019), who explores the employment of Manichaean lenses in ethnic/identitarian conflicts/political violence [see also Volkan and Harris (1995)]; by Meloy (2018b, 2018a) and Rahman (2018). Meloy's and Rahman's studies are of particular interest, especially their work on extreme overvalued beliefs [see also Rahman et al. (2020) and Meloy and Rahman (2021)]. These are defined as beliefs "shared by others in a person's cultural, religious, or subcultural group" (Rahman, 2018, 2) and are found to be oftentimes drivers for violent behavior (Meloy, 2018b; Rahman, 2018). From this concept, Meloy and his colleagues developed a risk assessment instrument called TRAP-18 (*Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol*), aimed at threat assessment of potential individual terrorists. Key for this study is that TRAP-18 is also based on Gestalt principles according to which our mind processes "bits of detail into meaningful patters" (Meloy, 2018b, 484) from which human behavior originates (e.g., Asch, 1952; King et al., 1994).

However, focusing on threat assessment and on identifying potential individual terrorists directs attention to particular characteristics of individuals, abstracting radicalization, (violent) extremism, and engagement in violence from the context where they originate and happen. Instead, the current paper encourages to reconsider these phenomena, seeing them as resulting from mutually constituted and daily interpersonal and social relational dynamics involving all of us members of society. Therefore, the kind of involvement assumed and encouraged in this research consists of reflecting upon our behavioral practices and assumptions behind such practices, at the individual as well as societal level, which contribute to creating an environment where beliefs potentially leading to the rise of political violence take shape and grow. It is for this reason that Gestalt psychology is the appropriate theoretical framework for the purpose of this work. This psychological perspective allowed me to examine speakers' personal stories on their radicalization process and decision to engage in violence from a more comprehensive angle instead of only considering the ideological narratives to which speakers referred. Therefore, through this study, I suggest that Manichaean worldviews originate from human cognitive processes aiming at interpreting the (socio-political) environment to better navigate it. These are then rigidified by ideologies and their narratives but are not directly produced by them.

This article proceeds as follows. Firstly, it provides a brief and not-at-all exhaustive summary of the Italian 'Years of Lead' to allow all readers to follow this analysis. This section will also explain why this case is relevant for the purpose of this paper and for the study of radicalization and political violence more broadly. Secondly, the paper moves to further detail its theoretical framework: Gestalt psychology. Thirdly, it illustrates and explains the sources examined and the methodological approach. Finally, this paper moves on to the analysis, which will be ensued by a discussion of the findings and conclusions. In this part, it will discuss how this paper expands our understanding of individuals' decision-making regarding engagement in violence, and how it contributes to developing more appropriate ways to defuse violent extremism.

The Italian 'Years of Lead'

Between 1969 and the mid-1980s circa, Italy faced a dramatic outbreak of political violence, known as 'Years of Lead'. Violence came from both far-right and far-left non-state armed organizations, who ultimately aimed to subvert Italy's political system (e.g., Cento Bull, 2007; Della Porta, 2013; Ceci, 2018, 316; Fumian and Ventrone, 2018). According to the Italian Ministry of the Interior, between 1969 and 1987, 14,591 actions of political violence from both the far right and the far left were reported (Ventrone, 2012, XIV). These killed 491 people and wounded 1,181, and "many thousands of people had been detained, arrested, and tried" (Ventrone, 2012). Also, a large number of people participated in protests, strikes, and other forms of dissension (e.g., Ventrone, 2012; Balestracci, 2013). The 'Years of Lead' were preceded by social, political, and cultural unrest, which started soon after the end of WWII through to the 1960s with the students' and workers' movements (e.g., Weinberg, 1995; Gotor, 2019, 181, 228–238). It has been calculated that during the 'Years of Lead', there were around two hundreds active armed organizations, having different size and longevity (e.g., Faranda, 2017; Zavoli, 2017). Also, actors such as the US and the USSR, Italian and foreign secret services, such as the Israeli Mossad and the former Czecho-Slovakia's intelligence, some parts of Italian state institutions, the Italian freemasons in its P2 Lodge, and other non-state actors, such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Mafia clans, and the German Red Army Faction (*Rote Armee Fraktion*, RAF) were involved in different degrees and ways (e.g., Della Porta, 2013; Zavoli, 2017; Calogero, 2018, 2019).

There are two key reasons for this case selection. Firstly, as shown in this section, ideologies and their Manichaean narratives characterized the 'Years of Lead'. This is why prior literature on this case identifies ideologies as one of the crucial factors to understand engagement in and escalation of violence (Della Porta, 2013). As this study challenges the argument ascribing the origins of Manichaean worldviews to ideologies, I needed to identify a case characterized by ideological divides and the Italian 'Years of Lead' well fits this criterium.

Secondly, the Italian case has been investigated from a variety of theoretical perspectives, such as historical (e.g., Gotor, 2019), socio-economic (Rovati, 1984; Balestracci, 2013), and sociological (Tarrow, 1989; Bosi and Della Porta, 2012; Della Porta, 2013) – and mostly from a comparative point of view (Del Vecchio, 2018). To my knowledge, psychology has never been employed and there is minimal interpretivist-qualitative work on this case. By developing a narrative analysis informed by Gestalt psychology, this article also contributes to filling this gap.

Materials and methods

Gestalt psychology and violence

Scholars in psychology or drawing on psychological schools tend to agree that people's decision-making processes and behavioral choices, also violent choices, happen within and hinge on particular cognitive frameworks and beliefs (e.g., Welch Larson, 1994; Sclavi, 2003, 23–31; Meloy, 2018b; Rahman et al., 2020). Cognitive frameworks allow us to make sense of our surroundings, helping us navigate them (Sclavi, 2003). Particularly, Gestalt psychology argues that human minds make sense of external stimuli, firstly, by selecting those it deems key to understand the surrounding environment and, secondly, by organizing these stimuli in meaningful patterns (*Gestalten*) (e.g., Henle, 1979; Sclavi, 2003; Meloy, 2018b). Patterns are created by relating stimuli to one another and this is key for this study. As aforementioned, prior literature overlooked the potential impact daily interpersonal and intergroup relations can have on individuals' decision on engaging in violence. The way whereby interpersonal/intergroups relations are implemented hinges on how individuals understand them. Therefore, taking a Gestalt perspective allows for investigating the extent to which Manichaean worldviews, which is a particular way of interpreting relations between some entities inhabiting the (socio-political) environment, effectively originate from ideological, populist, and conspiratorial narratives, as suggested in prior literature (e.g., Thielmann and Hilbig, 2023; Piazza, 2023a; Della Porta, 2013; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2011), or whether it is a way of making sense of interpersonal/intergroup relations resulting from human cognitive processes independently of ideologies, populism, and conspiracy theories.

Gestalt psychology developed in contrast to traditional behavioral psychology, which limits the notion of behavior to "directly observable body activities" performed as a reaction to the environmental stimuli (Popescu, 2014, 443). Such an understanding excludes "states of consciousness, thoughts, feelings, representations and other internal activities" (Popescu, 2014), which proponents of Gestalt psychology considered necessary to better understand human behavior (Yang and Yuan, 2022, 3; Sclavi, 2003; Henle, 1979). For this reason, this article contends that Gestalt psychology provides a more comprehensive analytical approach to study and better understand human behavior and, more specifically, individuals' decision-making process regarding engagement in political violence. This is because irrespective of the social milieu and the narratives individuals are exposed to, Gestalt psychology considers how the human mind relates elements of the surrounding (socio-political) environment to one another, selecting those considered key and organizing them into meaningful systems or patterns (Greenwood, 2020; Sclavi, 2003). These Gestalten provide individuals with behavioral guidelines because they draw on them to understand and navigate their surroundings, and, thus, make decisions (Sclavi, 2003; King et al., 1994; Henle, 1979). The difference between Gestalten lies in which elements the human mind has selected as crucial to understand the surrounding environment and which ones the human mind "left in the background" (Sclavi, 2003, 25–27) as secondary (see scenarios 1 and 2 below). It goes without saying that this is an unconscious process, or, at least, it is unconscious for the most part.

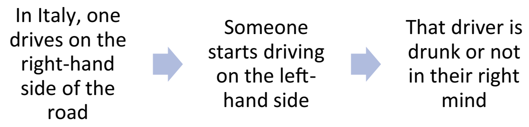
From this perspective, Manichaean worldviews are one possible 'Gestalt'. This Gestalt assumes the existence of 'good entities' and 'bad entities' in the (socio-political) environment and it also explains how these two major categories of entities relate to one another. Against this backdrop, the choice of engaging in violence can derive from two, but not necessarily divergent, routes. Firstly, violence can be a behavioral option because it is already envisaged in the Gestalt of reference as one and/or the only relational option between entities identified as 'good' and entities identified as 'bad' in the (socio-political) environment (Sclavi, 2003, 15–16, 25–29).

Secondly, violence can also arise from the interaction of different and/or opposing views stemming from the same way of relating entities of the environment to one another and, therefore, from the same Gestalt (Sclavi, 2003, 15–16, 25–28). This is because within one Gestalt, opinions can differ and even be opposed to one another (Sclavi, 2003). However, the logic formulating these opinions is the same; they stem from the same way of seeing the elements of the (socio-political) environment interacting together (Sclavi, 2003). This can create an impasse between two or more parties having different opinions, as one Gestalt can only provide conflicting parties with so many solutions to resolve their clash (Greenberg and Webster, 1982; Sclavi, 2003; Gaynier, 2005). This makes the conflicting parties clash indefinitely, in a zero-sum game, resulting in seeing the use of force to impose one's own perspective over others' as the only means to overcome the impasse (Sclavi, 2003).

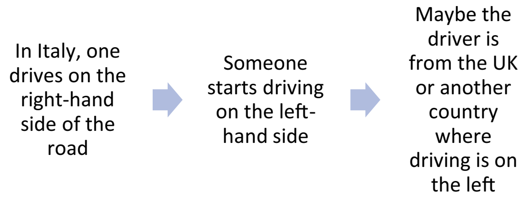
These two routes explaining violent behavior might not necessarily be mutually exclusive, as the second can be understood in light of the first. Put differently, considering the use of violence as the only means whereby overcoming an impasse can be how the Gestalt of reference of the conflicting parties understands and explains relations between some of the entities of the (socio-political) environment and some of the components of such entities in particular circumstances. It is from this understanding that human behavior stems.

Therefore, using Gestalt psychology as analytical lens to examine Italian former far-left militants' accounts on their decision-making process regarding engagement in violence serves the purpose of tracing, firstly, how speakers interpreted the relation and interaction between the entities of the (socio-political) environment before these were filtered through ideological narratives of the time; secondly, of tracing how that affected their decision-making process regarding engagement in violence; and, thirdly, of tracing whether their interpretation of their surroundings resulted from referring to far-left ideologies or whether it was pre-existent their adherence to them. To this end, examining how speakers tell and explain their stories is key and for this reason, I use narrative analysis to which this article now turns.

Scenario 1


In Italy, one drives on the right-hand side of the road
Someone starts driving on the left-hand side
That driver is drunk or not in their right mind

Scenario 2


In Italy, one drives on the right-hand side of the road
Someone starts driving on the left-hand side
Maybe the driver is from the UK or another country where driving is on the left

Narrative analysis

To examine speakers' accounts, this paper employed narrative analysis. Interpretive methods are increasingly used in different ways to gather more nuanced data (e.g., Spector-Mersel, 2010; Bolton, 2021; Flack and Ferguson, 2021; Markiewicz and Sharvit, 2021). Interpretive research is in fact interested in context-specific meaning, in understanding how concepts and/or theories are used, and in what they mean in the examined case (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, 18, 23). This is because stories and narratives are more than a "temporally ordered sequence of events" (Braid, 1996, 8); they are themselves "selected, interpreted, or organized [by the narrator] in a way that transforms the sequence into a coherent and meaningful whole" (Braid, 1996). For this very reason, narrative analysis is the most appropriate methodological approach for this current work, which employs Gestalt psychology as its theoretical lens. Both narrative analysis and Gestalt psychology look at people's sensemaking and how this process happens.

More specifically, Sarbin (1986b) argues that to make sense of what surrounds them, human beings need to create stories, namely, to construct narratives, which provide them with meanings. As previously explained, a given Gestalt is a specific way of meaningfully connecting and relating entities of the (socio-political) environment and the components of such entities with one another. Organizing entities of the (socio-political) environment and the components of such entities into meaningful configurations or patterns means to create a story, a plot in which relations between entities and components of such entities are clearly spelled out, and in which each component and each entity have a meaning and a role (Sarbin, 1986a, 1986b). Consequently, narrative analysis is a suitable method to examine how speakers narrate and explain their decision-making process regarding using violence against others. It helps investigate, firstly, the relation between Manichaean perspectives and choice of violence, and, secondly, to what extent the origins of Manichaean worldviews can be ascribed to ideologies, populism, and/or conspiracy theories, as suggested in prior literature.

Finally, in terms of data analysis, as pre-empted in the previous section, this paper triangulated accounts examined in this study with others, which were not included due to differences in focus. I also consulted a variety of secondary literature on the Italian 'Years of Lead' to gather different perspectives on and explanations of the case, as well as decrease to the minimum the risk that my bias and previous knowledge on the topic could compromise the current analysis. Consulting and examining this variety of sources aimed at helping and strengthening the interpretive endeavor of this current study, making a coherent sense out of speakers' accounts. Additionally, as per interpretive-research standards, speakers' accounts were repeatedly studied "until no new insights arise … provid[ing] a robust, contextualized 'thick' analysis of the evidence" (Markiewicz and Sharvit, 2021, 119).

Data collection

This paper examines secondary data, specifically personal accounts of a group of former far-left militants. There is plenty of accessible sources on Italy's far left and on former far-left militants' personal stories on their radicalization processes and engagement in violence; on their life as militants of dissenting social movements first and, subsequently, clandestine armed organizations; and on the details of specific attacks in which they participated. These sources consist of video-recorded and/or written interviews and autobiographical stories. Particularly, this paper analyzes autobiographical written sources and video-recorded interviews, which came out in 2015, after some reconciliation processes between a group of former far-left militants and a group of victims of the 'Years of Lead', for a total of around 70 people.[1] This number also includes families from both the group of former perpetrators and the group of victims. For the sake of precision, victims participating in these reconciliation processes were victims of far-left and far-right violence. As these sources were published and have been released after the official end of these reconciliation processes, this paper refers to them as post-reconciliation sources. This is to differentiate them from other secondary sources, which date to a time before the beginning of these reconciliation processes, and which this analysis defines as pre-reconciliation sources. These also consist of video-recorded interviews and written (auto) biographical material.

The reconciliation processes considered in this study, started in the late 2009 and officially ended in 2015 (Bertagna et al., 2015a, 31–46). In 2015, a two-volume book collecting participants' (excerpts of) letters and contributions was published. This two-volume book presents new data concerning the time of political violence and former militants' stories vis-à-vis how they chose to commit to violent political means. Previous studies on the Italian 'Years of Lead' could not examine this data for chronological reasons. Examining post-reconciliation sources allows for tracing and analyzing former militants' personal development as human beings, who make sense of their own life stories and their life choices (da Silva et al., 2020; Kohler Riessm, 2012). This is important because it helps reveal the reasoning behind speakers' decision-making process vis-à-vis becoming committed militants and vis-à-vis their choice to use violence against other individuals, as well as from where that reasoning originate.

In the two-volume book, as per participants' request, only twelve former far-left militants are identifiable; others remained anonymized, making it difficult to identify the exact number of far-left militants contributing to the reconciliation processes and the subsequent post-reconciliation book (Bertagna et al., 2015a, 25–26). The identifiable former far-left militants are Maurizio Azzollini, Ernesto Balducchi, Franco Bonisoli, Maria Campione, Andrea Coi, Adriana Faranda, Enrico Fenzi, Mario Ferrandi, Alberto Franceschini, Grazia Grena, Valerio Morucci, and Roberto Vho. These twelve former far-left militants belonged to four different far-left armed organizations: Red Brigades (*Brigate Rosse, BR*), Front Line (*Prima Linea, PL*), Armed Proletariats for Communism (*Proletari Armati per il Comunismo, PAC*), and the Walter Alasia Column (*Colonna Walter Alasia*).

Regarding the selection of excerpts to include and examine in this paper, part of the selection process hinged upon the content of these sources. Interviews and other autobiographical material, both post- and pre- reconciliation processes, cover aspects concerning militants' life which are not directly related to the focus and remit of this paper. Therefore, in this analysis, I only considered and reported extracts and quotes relevant to investigating this paper's research question. This paper features extracts from four different former far-left militants. To avoid confirmation bias, the approach taken was to repeatedly examine excerpts and quotes, consulting other accounts, which were not included in the analysis for space reasons and for difference in focus, as well as previous studies on the Italian 'Years of Lead'. The relevance of this form of data triangulation lies in considering different perspectives whereby counterbalancing my potential biases given by my studies, my personal experience, and opinions, as well as speakers' biases. On this latter point, as one can see from the list of the twelve identifiable former far-left militants, they belonged to four different far-left armed organizations, which presented some differentiation in reasoning, aims, and strategies.

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[1] It also needs to be specified that a very small number of former far-right militants – around five or seven – participated in these reconciliation processes (Bertagna et al., 2015a, 2015b).

For example, PL was founded in 1976 in opposition to the BR, as despite both being Marxist-Leninist, some militants disagreed with BR's organizational and strategic developments (e.g., Segio, 1990). Relatedly, although there are at least six former members of the BR among these twelve identifiable former militants, they joined the organization at different stages throughout the time the BR operated. This means that each of these former BR presents a degree of variation in rationale, ideas, and strategic preferences, which were also dependent on the contextual changes in both domestic and international politics. Still on this point, militants such as Adriana Faranda and Valerio Morucci, who joined the BR at a similar time, came from other far-left (armed) organizations. This also demonstrates nuances among those militants who were part of the same organization at the same time. Lastly, each of these identifiable former militants, as well those who decided to remain anonymous, had different roles within their armed organization: some had leading roles, such as Alberto Franceschini; others had more intelligence-gathering roles, such as Adriana Faranda and Enrico Fenzi; others took part in violent actions, such as Franco Bonisoli. These differences add further variation in the sample.

Finally, speakers' accounts are all in Italian, and, as I am Italian native speaker, I translated former far-left militants' stories into English.

Narratives of radicalization

Franco Bonisoli is a former BR from Reggio Emilia, an industrial city in one of the mostly Communist Italian regions, known as *'red-regions'*, and where the BR were founded. Bonisoli's family was also communist and during WWII, his father was arrested and sent to a work camp in Germany. Therefore, one would assume that Bonisoli's Manichaean approach to interpret the (socio-political) environment was due to his family's ideological links to Communism, as well as his region and town of origin. However, Bonisoli (2018a, 2018b) has been one of the most explicit in indicating daily interpersonal relations as one of the key factors affecting his interpretation of how society worked and eventually, his and others' decision to join an armed organization and engage in violence. Particularly, he emphasizes how interpersonal/intergroup interactions were already based on mutually exclusive dichotomies. According to him, and echoed by other participants in the 2009–2015 reconciliation processes (e.g., Faranda, 2017; Bertagna et al., 2015a, 99), these led people and groups of people to progressively distance themselves from one another, fueling and strengthening friend-enemy and good-bad dynamics. Below is an excerpt from Bonisoli's (2018a) long interview where this element surfaces rather explicitly:

> […] There was a great restlessness, a blocked society – politically blocked in between two parties – there was the Cold War in the world, and society was blocked also in the daily life, in your family. You had a role, you had to study, find a job, and that is all, you had to become a good consumer, measure your capability of human growth according to how many things you could buy; basically, the city of wealth. Thus, this time of restlessness started, and I lived this period of restlessness and the wish of modifying, of breaking these frames of mind and build a better world and start dreaming of a better world […]. I lived this experience already when I was at school, in the Students' Movement […]. Already in middle school, we wished of breaking the inflexibility and we began to ask for the assembly. What did it mean, the assembly? It was a way to say: 'we start to be able to officially and straightforwardly say what we think'. In actual fact, we did not have much to say, but the idea of being able to be protagonists was important […]. [I]t was about being acknowledged because one of the things from which we suffered the most was to not be heard by the adults: 'I listen to you if you stay within a frame of mind, outside of it, I will not'. I think this is something still present today […].

In the initial part of this excerpt, there is a clear reference to the ideological conflict of the time, Capitalism vs. Communism, concerning both international and Italy's domestic politics. Yet, in the final sentences, Bonisoli expands the scope of his account on what led to his engagement in violence. He explains that perceiving the adults as not listening to the then young generation was a significant issue, which contributed to leading students to ask for being able to hold assemblies despite not having much to discuss. For them, demanding to hold assemblies at that young age meant to be *'acknowledged'* by the adults, and thus to be *'officially'* taken into consideration. This highlights a conflictual juxtaposition between two groups or categories, 'the adults' and 'the youth', in which the latter strives to be accepted by the first. This is interesting because it moves the debate on Manichaean worldviews and their origins from a mere ideological sphere to a broader one concerning daily life. This is well shown in the very last sentence of the excerpt, where the former BR militant states that he can trace similar relational dynamics in contemporary times as well. Bonisoli explains that adults' listening was conditional, and it depended on whether youth's demands, ideas, and opinions fitted within a specific and accepted *'frame of mind'*. One could also refer to this 'frame of mind' as *Gestalt*, namely the *meaningful pattern* of reference. Here, a form of Manichaean approach is identifiable. Remaining within the accepted frameworks meant to be considered 'good', accepted, and worth being listened to. On the contrary, not fitting the accepted frameworks meant to be seen as 'not good enough' or even 'bad', thus someone who was not worth being listened to. In this example, Bonisoli does not refer to the ideological clash between Capitalism and Communism. Certainly, the ideological conflict contributed to delineating the profile of the groups which eventually clashed and fought against one another, but it did not create *ex novo* the conflictual dynamics between the 'adults' and the 'youth', which the speaker refers to and which already features a Manichaean approach.

A statement from another and anonymous far-left militant further shows this point:

> Back then, engaging in politics, if it was done in the most serious and radical way, the most consequential and logical way, inevitably meant to engage in utterly inimical relations. […] We asked for instance to have a departmental library to facilitate studying: it is not an alibi, but we did find ourselves facing walls, an absurd, stupid way of understanding power relations. And so, fight after fight, in a continuous process sliding down to progressive radicalization, a process, which is typical of the logic of assemblies' discussions, started to take place: those who won were those who always and inevitably succeeded in making a bigger hole in a smaller one […]. It was clear that if in the mid-1970s some from the Red Brigades had said, 'Well, let us quit, let us see, let us find a different way of relating to some (political) forces', they would have been judged as filthy traitors, expelled […].
>
> (Bertagna, Ceretti and Mazzucato, 2015a, 109–110)

According to the anonymous former far-left militant, politics was understood under a friend-enemy framework, in which only the strongest can win. This means that whoever wanted to do politics and/or become a politician, had to engage in friendly relations with those identified as (political) friends and allies, and in inimical relations with those from the opposed (political) sides. In this regard, to better understand former militants' statements, it is useful to keep in mind that far-left and far-right armed organizations presented themselves as political alternatives to the then political parties. In this quote, the anonymous far-left militant adds an important aspect. This Manichaean way of understanding politics implies that those engaging in it implicitly and somewhat unconsciously accepted the idea that these inimical relations could escalate to the point of using violence against one another. Moreover, from this rationale, it follows that given the friend-enemy paradigm, proposing a non-conflictual relation with (political) counterparts would have been interpreted as a form of betrayal toward one's own (political) side. This is an element that other former far-left militants mentioned in pre- and post-reconciliation interviews. For instance, in a 1990 interview, when asked about what determined BR's turn to violence, another former BR militant, Bonavita (1990), stated the following:

> "Unilaterally exiting the BR was a death sentence […] I do not think that there is a turning point. The BR we know for the blood spilt and their violence were already there in the original project" (Bonavita, 1990).

Certainly, the BR being a far-left organization referring to far-left ideologies, it can be plausibly argued that the choice of turning to violence and to become increasingly more violent was determined by the far-left ideologies and their Manichaean narratives to which the BR referred. Yet, if one considers the anonymous speaker's extract on how politics was understood to be and on the conflictual Manichaean dynamics between students and university staff/teachers, the argument that Manichaean worldviews stem exclusively from ideologies becomes weaker [see also (Ferrandi, 2020)].

Therefore, while both Bonisoli's and the anonymous speaker's quotes confirm that there is strong correlation between interpreting the (socio-political) environment from Manichaean lenses and engagement in violence, their statements cast doubt on the ideological origins of Manichaean worldviews. In fact, in the anonymous extract, the former far-left militant does not limit the conflictual and Manichaean understanding of politics and of interpersonal/intergroup relations to former far-left armed organizations' ideological interpretation of them. By reporting the example of daily interactions between university students and university staff, the anonymous speaker extends this Manichaean and conflictual understanding and practice of interpersonal/intergroup interactions to people's everyday life.

A recent post-reconciliation interview to another former BR, Adriana Faranda (2017), echoes the anonymous' quote just examined. Below are two excerpts from this recent interview in which these considerations emerge clearly:

> […] We did not invent Manichaeism. We still live in a quite Manichaean culture, meaning that we have crusades against the evil ones; we have lists of horrible states. We are always on the side of the good ones. Therefore, I believe that overcoming this culture, this binary and clear-cut division of the things in this world means to begin to prevent the world from always being divided and human beings from being divided from one another […].
>
> […] I started to think that I made a mistake, that I made a mistake in choosing and accepting war to qualitatively change the world, because war, violence, and the armed confrontation between enemies do not allow you, in my opinion, to build anything. You destroy, that is all, you do not build. And it is these very instruments that do not allow you to change qualitatively. For instance, the quality of interpersonal relations. A better world is made of qualitatively different relations, of [qualitatively different] interpersonal relations. If you consider violence as clear separation, or as the main instrument whereby changing things, how can you have qualitatively better inter-personal relations? […].

In this part of her post-reconciliation interview, Adriana Faranda makes it explicit that from her point of view, such a Manichaean understanding of society was not created from scratch by the BR or the leftist movements – or even the far-right movements for that matter. Rather, from her experience, the idea that 'good entities/people' and 'bad entities/people' inhabit the (socio-political) environment existed regardless of the far-left ideologies to which they adhered [see also Bertagna et al. (2015a, 120)and Post (2023)]. Ideologies helped, and help, its adherents to empirically distinguish which entities and people are 'good' and which ones are 'bad', but the idea that there are 'good entities/people' and 'bad entities/people' in the world and that it is possible to clear-cut distinguish between them is already present in individuals' understanding of the (socio-political) environment.

Furthermore, in the second part of the quote, Faranda mentions the reason behind choosing to engage in far-left violence. It is here that we find reference to interpersonal/intergroup relations again. Her aim was to change the world for the better and she concludes that for the world to be a better place to live, the tenets on which interpersonal relations are developed, have to change. Considering both parts of the quote, Faranda suggests that interpersonal/intergroup relations are fundamentally based on a Manichaean sensemaking of the surrounding environment and that only overcoming this dichotomous approach will reduce the likelihood of violence. It is important to note that the former far-left militant talks about a divisive and binary culture as the source of her commitment to violent political means. Without delving into debates on what the concept of 'culture' means, which is beyond the remit of this study, Faranda clearly extends the use of these dualistic lenses beyond socio-political movements and armed organizations of the time, whose political agenda and actions were undoubtedly informed by their ideologies of reference: differentiating between 'friends' and 'enemies', or 'good people' and 'bad people', characterized society's interpersonal/intergroup interactions more broadly. This very consideration is further visible in another part of Faranda's interview, which I report below:

> […] In 1968, I got overwhelmed by that desire of transformation, [desire] of struggle, by the movements that wanted to really change everything. I was overwhelmed because I came from a quite protective family, and they always kind of protected me from the reality of the world. And suddenly I found out about universities, struggles, I found out about rebellions, about factories, I found out about work accidents, I discovered a world that was unknown to me. As a result, I started to feel an initial desire for rebellion and then, gradually, it got mixed up with an actual desire of revolutionizing everything, with the strategy of tension and, therefore, the existence of a counterpart that we thought could not be faced without using violence. […].

In this excerpt, Faranda is reporting on how she ended up joining the BR. In this particular quote, there are two interrelated aspects which are crucial for this paper. Firstly, Faranda is implicitly telling about the existence of a Manichaean view of the (socio-political) world outside an ideological environment. In this part of Faranda's accounts, there is no reference to a possible ideological framework informing Faranda's family's background. In the quote above, Faranda says that her family brought her up in a protective way, shielding her from what could be referred to as 'the dark side' of the world. Faranda uses the word 'reality', implying that the 'real' (socio-political) environment is understood to present both 'good things/people' and 'bad things/people', and that what her family had shown – or chose to show – her was only or mainly the first. Faranda explains that the fact that her family protected her from the negative side of the (socio-political) world is why she felt 'overwhelmed' when she arrived in Rome and found out about universities, struggles, rebellions, factories, and work accidents: these seem to be things that she did not expect to find.

Secondly, in this part of her interview, we can identify two different approaches stemming from the same way of making sense of the (socio-political) environment: both Faranda's family and Faranda herself assume that it is possible to empirically distinguish between 'good entities/people' and 'bad entities/people'. However, they differ in how to deal with entities/people identified as 'bad'. According to Faranda's story, her family's choice was to keep what they considered 'bad' away from her, as though it did not exist or was not that relevant for her life. On the contrary, when Faranda realized that 'bad entities/people' existed and that they were relevant for her and people's lives, she made a different choice. Thus, we can see how their Gestalt, their way of understanding how the entities of the (socio-political) environment relate to one another, was not questioned. Faranda challenged the way to handle the issues, choosing to directly face through violence what (or whom) she and her companions identified as 'their counterpart'. On this point, one could again argue that opting for engaging in violence was consequential to adhering to leftist ideologies, which envisaged the use of violence, thus confirming what prior literature contends. While this is certainly correct, like the previous quotes, Faranda's words suggest that Manichaean worldviews, which facilitate individuals' process to engagement in violence, are not a prerogative of ideologies but can also be found outside ideological milieus. These considerations do not exclude the role of ideological narratives in shaping and fomenting a (socio-political) environment prone to violence. Rather, they push to also look outside ideologies and ideological narratives to further understand from where violence originates; which reasons lie behind some people's choice to engage in violence; and whether the factors identified as facilitating and/or determining engagement in violence are limited to the dimensions where they have been identified or whether they also exist outside these dimensions. This has important academic and policy implications, which are discussed in the next and final section.

Analysis and conclusion

Studies in Gestalt psychology posit that to make sense of and navigate the surrounding environment, human beings' cognitive process organizes the entities of the environment in meaningful configurations, namely Gestalten (Sclavi, 2003; King et al., 1994; Henle, 1979). To this end, by filtering the too many stimuli coming from the environment, human cognitive processes seek to make sense of the entities inhabiting it and the relations between them. This means that once entities are organized into a meaningful configuration, individuals will behave or try to behave accordingly, as the Gestalt of reference provides them with guidelines on how to interact with themselves and others.

From this perspective, Manichaean worldviews are *one* way of meaningfully organizing entities of the (socio-political) environment, which assumes the existence of 'good entities' and 'bad entities' and which advises on the behavior to take when relating to and interacting with them. As seen, the analysis showed that engaging in violence correlates with adopting Manichaean lenses to interpret the (socio-political) environment. Nevertheless, contrary to what prior literature has argued, the quotes also reveal that the origins of Manichaean perspectives cannot be ascribed, or exclusively ascribed, to ideologies and ideological narratives. Quotes indicate that individuals (learn to) apply Manichaean lenses also outside an ideologically laden environment. Additionally, excerpts examined seem to also suggest that the use of Manichaean perspectives is pre-existent speakers' adherence to leftist ideologies and armed organizations. In fact, all four speakers refer to Manichaean juxtapositions being observed, experienced, employed, and reproduced in different contexts of their daily life, which were not necessarily ideologically driven and which speakers present as elements contributing to their decision to engage in violence. This very aspect makes it difficult to conclude that the parenthood of Manichaean worldviews can be ascribed to ideologies and their narratives. One can rightly argue that the accepted models and frameworks can very well be shaped by different (ideological) understandings of how to differentiate good from bad. However, this still shows that the idea that there is a difference between 'good' and 'bad' at a metaphysical level and that it is possible to empirically distinguish between what and who is 'good' from what and who is 'bad' in a clear-cut fashion, pre-exists ideologies. The latter becomes the means whereby differentiating between what/who is good from what/who is bad.

For example, Bonisoli talked about the juxtaposition between the youth and the adults, in his quote exemplified as 'students' and 'teachers', respectively. Despite not being fully explicit, the final part of his quote can be understood within a 'good-bad' dichotomous framework. For the youth to be deemed as 'good students', or 'good people' more generally, their ideas and behavior had to fit what Bonisoli calls 'specific frame of mind'. This 'frame of mind' was the exemplification of how to distinguish between what was 'good' from what was 'bad' – a Manichaean approach. Consequently, anything and anyone falling outside that interpretive framework was seen negatively and considered not worthy to be listened to, unless these adapted to the accepted 'frame of mind'. The example that Bonisoli reports cannot be explained as the result of applying Manichaean perspectives stemming from ideologies. The conflictual interaction between students and teachers, or between 'the youth' and 'the adults', cannot be understood solely through ideological frameworks, even if individuals from both groups might have been familiar with the ideologies of the time and even if some of them might have also adhered to one of those ideologies.

A similar example can be found in the anonymous quote, where the speaker reports the conflictual interactions between university students and university staff. In this instance, which in a way echoes Bonavita's statement, the anonymous far-left militant explains that the reason behind this conflictual approach originated from what politics was understood to be about: it was about cooperating with 'friends' and about fighting against 'enemies'. In this instance, the speaker does not talk about how far-left or far-right ideologies conceived politics and the resulting interpersonal/intergroup interactions. The speaker discusses how politics and interpersonal/intergroup interactions were performed, and therefore conceived, in society more broadly. The fact that each person involved in those conflictual interactions might have been politically close to one of the political extremes of the time is not sufficient to ascribe the parenthood of Manichaean perspectives to ideologies. Otherwise, it would imply that every person involved in disputes between students and school, or university staff would be ideologically driven. While I am not altogether against this line of argument in principle, we need to have stronger and clearer evidence to make this claim and sustain it. As research stands now, this is not the case. Faranda's quotes demonstrate my point even more clearly.

In these, the former BR, firstly, stresses that such a Manichaean way of interpreting the (socio-political) environment did not result from their organization and their ideology of adherence. She maintains that, if anything, their Manichaean interpretive framework, which distinguished between the 'good proletariat' and the 'bad/evil bourgeoisie', was consequential of a more general Manichaean interpretive framework characterizing their society as a whole and which assumed the possibility of clearly distinguishing between 'good entities/people' and 'bad entities/people' in the empirical world. From this perspective, leftist ideologies provided former militants with a target group to blame and hit to fix what they thought did not work. These ideologies did not provide them with the notion that the socio-political environment is made of 'good entities' and 'bad entities', and that the latter is the cause of ugliness in the world. Speakers already operated on the assumption that there exist 'good entities' and 'bad entities', and that the latter causes world's ugliness. Leftist ideologies of the time gave them the opportunity to clearly and empirically identify who and what was part of the category of the 'bad entities', which had to be attacked and, possibly, eliminated to make the world a better place (e.g., Bonisoli, 2018a; Faranda, 2017; Ferrandi, 1990). This is even clearer in the last extract examined in the previous section, where Faranda mentions how her family brought her up. In this, a Manichaean assumption regarding the entities of the socio-political world is identifiable and there is no reference to ideological narratives by which Faranda's family might have been influenced.

While confirming the relevance of applying Manichaean worldviews to make sense of the socio-political world, the results of this study place the origins of individuals' violent choice within a tension characterizing their broader and not necessarily ideologically driven societal context. As seen, this tension is already Manichaean and, in different ways, it tries to contain and even eliminate what and whom it considers 'bad', either by excluding them or by assimilating them, thus forcing a change in perspective and behavior. The first approach is well visible in Faranda's quote on how her family brought her up; the second approach can be well identified in Bonisoli's experience as a young student interacting with the 'world of adults'. From an academic perspective, this provides us with different pathways for further research.

A first research avenue would be to investigate the generalizability of these findings. Does this concern only militants of far-left movements or do we find similar insights into the experience of militants of the far right and fundamentalist religious groups? Furthermore, we need more research on why this tension would at times spark a violent reaction. Through Gestalt psychology postulations, we can argue that one of the reasons why reactions are sometimes violent can lie in the assumption that the entities of the socio-political world identified as good and those identified as bad can only interact through violence, in its different forms, insofar as they are incompatible and thus, they cannot exist together. Yet, while providing further insights on human behavior and from where the choice of committing to violent political means can stem, this still does not explain how and why individuals would reach such a conclusion, neither does it tell us which other elements impact the shaping of such an understanding.

Relatedly, from the quotes examined, it seems that language, namely how individuals communicate with one another, is also an important aspect affecting people's sensemaking of the socio-political environment and their consequential behavior. There is extensive scholarship, particularly in psychology, philosophy, and linguistics/literature, studying language and its role in constructing particular socio-political structures, including environments more or less prone to violence or peace (e.g., Goodman, 1978; Gilligan, 2001; Rosenberg, 2015). Nevertheless, the use of these studies in research on radicalization and political violence is rather inconsistent and often limited to those that can be adapted to quantitative research approaches. Therefore, further research on radicalization and political violence should also investigate how and to what extent language contributes to constructing a socio-political environment on Manichaean perspectives and a socio-political environment more prone to violence, more broadly. To this end, it is also necessary to investigate how and to what extent language affects individuals and their behavioral choices, shedding light on how the aforementioned tensions between who/what is accepted and who/what is not, can escalate to a point of rupture: political violence.

Moreover, this will also provide important insights into what constitutes a (more) peaceful socio-political environment and a (more) peaceful society. This is so for two main reasons. Firstly, as seen, a given Gestalt of reference is not the only way whereby the surrounding environment can be meaningfully interpreted, but there can be many Gestalten, depending on which aspects human cognitive processes select as key and are meaningfully organized to interpret the surroundings (e.g., Sclavi, 2003, 2008). This means that Manichaean worldviews and the violent behavioral option stemming from them, are only one way through which looking at the socio-political environment. This suggests that de-escalation of violence, as well as development of agendas to prevent violence, and build and sustain long-term peace, can be obtained by training our mind with recognizing our Gestalt of reference and reorganizing environmental stimuli into different ones. This implies that to a certain degree, approaches aimed at addressing radicalization and political violence require a broader societal effort, which does not necessarily concern policymakers as such. By this I mean that as members of society interacting with one another daily, there is an element of individuals' personal reflection on how their way of relating to neighbors, colleagues, as well as family and friends can impact these people's subsequent behavior [see, e.g., Rosenberg, 2015]. This leads me to the second area for further research.

Nowadays, we have been observing a surge of populist rhetoric and populist parties, as well as a return to nationalistic narratives, whose political discourses have also been found connected to shaping a society more prone to political violence (e.g., Gaudette et al., 2021; Thielmann and Hilbig, 2023). Like far-left ideologies, scholarship underlines how both populist and far-right narratives offer a Manichaean understanding of the socio-political world, giving violence a prominent role (e.g., Camon, 2022; Piazza and Van Doren, 2023; Helm et al., 2024). Other works, such as Achen and Bartels (2016), have pointed to social identities and partisan loyalties as explanatory factors [see also Gaudette et al., 2021]. However, if we consider the results of the current analysis, these explanations fall short of illustrating how some individuals find these populist and nationalistic narratives convincing to the point of leading some to engage in acts of political violence.

For example, why have parties such as the Italian 5 Star Movement or the Spanish Podemos gained so much support from their respective citizens in the last decade? And can these arguments satisfactorily explain why violent riots erupted after the Southport stabbing in the UK, at the end of July 2024?

If one considers the findings of this study, the answer to these questions would see these arguments as only partly explanatory. This is because they dismiss and/or do not take into account how individuals' daily interactions with one another impact both individuals' sensemaking of the socio-political world and thus, their finding one political discourse/narrative more convincing than others. As seen from the analysis, these daily inclusion–exclusion dynamics appear already based on Manichaean approaches. Thus, further investigating individuals' daily-life experience before they embrace populist and/or far-right narratives will provide better understanding of how and why these rhetorics seem to find wide support.

Lastly, these considerations lead to spending a few words on the role of policymakers in designing approaches aimed at addressing and preventing radicalization and political violence. As previously suggested, one starting point would be to focus on language, which appears to impact individuals' behavior and how they react to socio-political tensions. Thus, at the state level, policymakers might find it useful to (re)consider some of the ways they frame, or not frame at all, issues that might be of concern to part of the citizens whom they represent [see, e.g., Floyd (2024)]. Such a (re)assessment of the language employed can be done in collaboration with academics, researching the possible relations between language and the rise of political violence, thus enhancing cooperation between academia and practitioners/policymakers' world. The latter would also include the media because regardless of whether it is considered as an agenda-setter or governments' propaganda tool, through their use of language, it does have a degree of impact on framing and constructing specific issues.

In conclusion, two key and connected takeaways are to highlight. Firstly, to better understand individuals' decision-making process regarding engagement in political violence, we need to consider how people learn to make sense of and navigate their surrounding environment more broadly, instead of limiting our scope within the diktats and narratives of ideologies. Ideologies help us identify the target of violence and, potentially, the kind of socio-political agenda behind a particular organization or movement. Yet, ideologies do not really help us understand why the relation between specific actors is understood and explained as inimical and conflictual, in the first place, and why these conflictual dynamics can end when one of the sides involved prevail over all others. This can be appreciated only if we look at how individuals (learn to) make sense of interactions between entities in the (socio-political) environment, and therefore between people, in their daily life.

Secondly and relatedly, for this very question, Gestalt psychology provides us with an interesting and useful key of interpretation. Human behavior is consequential to how people's cognitive process filters the too numerous stimuli stemming from the surrounding environment, ultimately making sense of them and the world which people inhabit. Seeing dynamics between specific actors as inimical and/or inevitably conflictual depends on understanding some entities as only conflicting with one another. In this sense, violence is and will be an option in individuals' behavior repertoire so long as violence is part of individuals' sensemaking of the environment around them and, more specifically, of their sensemaking of the interactions between some entities in the environment. These findings suggest that the phenomenon of violence should be considered as connected to individuals' daily life. In this sense, this study adds more understanding to the suffix '*isation*' of the term 'radicalization' and how some people might move from having 'radical' beliefs, which per se do not necessarily involve political violence, to engaging in political violence. Dismissing people's daily life or considering it only partially linked to political violence and the choice thereof fails to properly grasp., examine, understand, and explain the very decision-making process leading some people to commit to violent political means.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Written informed consent was not obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article because the data examined is already publicly available. Individuals are recognizable to the extent that they are already recognizable in this public data. Some of the speakers are anonymized because they are already anonymized in the public data examined for this study.

Author contributions

GG: Writing – original draft.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares 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.2025.1432824/full#supplementary-material

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