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2022

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/569184

Backström, J, Creutz, K & Pyrhönen, N 2022, Making Enemies : Reactive Dynamics of Discursive Polarization. in K Pettersson & E Nortio (eds), The Far-Right Discourse of Multiculturalism in Intergroup Interactions : A Critical Discursive Perspective. Palgrave Studies in Discursive Psychology, Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 139-162. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89066-7_6

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Making enemies: Reactive dynamics of discursive polarization

Joel Backström, Karin Creutz and Niko Pyrhönen

Both in social science and in popular discourse, socio-cultural and political polarization is seen as one of today's great societal problems – with debates on immigration and multiculturalism often given as paradigm examples (Kivisto & Wahlbeck, 2013; Nortio et al., 2020; Faist, 2013; Crepaz, 2006). Our chapter outlines certain closely related aspects of the dynamics of polarization, presented as conceptual elements of a holistic and relational approach to polarization. We use vignettes from previous research related to immigration and right-wing nationalism to illustrate our suggestions and show their applicability to the empirical field this book focuses on. The aspects we point to can, however, be found to varying degrees in polarized social/discursive conflict generally. While our focus is theoretical rather than empirical, we do not offer a new model of polarization. Our aim is modest: to bring out certain aspects of how the discourse of the parties involved in polarized social constellations tends to be affected by the dynamics of polarization. Specifically, we focus on the ways in which discourse in polarized settings tends to become deadlocked, mutually hostile and in other ways limited and distorted in its communicative function. These are some of the features that make polarization into a societal *problem*, in a way that even steep differences of opinion or conflicts of various kinds as such need not be.

Our starting point is that polarization can be seen as a relational, historically evolving process, with analysis focused on the back-and-forth movement of action and reaction between the parties involved (comprising not only polar 'extremes', but various 'moderate' positions, social, state and other actors affected by and affecting socio-political polarization, etc.). On one level, this is a trivial observation, and the necessity of studying conflict holistically needs no stressing in discursive psychology, with its focus on speech as performative interaction in a social setting (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The point is easily forgotten, however, in the context of politically, socially, morally and emotionally charged topics (Hammack, 2006). While much recent research has explicitly focused on the reciprocal dynamics of polarization and radicalization (see references below), these dynamics may still risk being overlooked, put aside or downplayed for various reasons in the academic study of right-wing nationalism – in a way, furthermore, that itself illustrates the very aspects of polarized conflict we analyse.

This risk is discussed in Section One, where we also introduce a central paradox of the dynamics whose aspects and ramifications the article as a whole explores, namely, the way in which the parties to polarized conflict help make each other into what they oppose. Section Two discusses the multidimensional complexity of processes of socio-political polarization and relates polarization to positional identity-negotiation on the collective level. Section Three focuses on a part-logic of polarization whereby the issues the conflict is ostensibly about tend to become overlaid by the parties' preoccupation with each other and the conflict itself. We also discuss possible attractions of making enemies, and the tendency of parties to see the conflict in terms of unidirectional reactivity, where their own actions are mere reactions to what the other side started. Section Four shows how this tendency to other one's opponents may paradoxically result in the parties of conflict becoming ever more indistinguishable, with the discourse of these 'doubles' (Girard, 2016, 25) becoming a constant doubletalk, in a precise sense we explain. We also outline two further discursive part-logics,

which we call the logic of shibboleths and taboos, and the logic of pollution and paranoid extension (cf. Douglas, 1966). Most seriously, where an attitude of enmity takes over, it ultimately tends to make people lose trust in discourse as such, feeling that it is 'impossible' to speak with or understand their opponents. In the Conclusion, we address concerns about relativism actualized in our discussion, and suggest, as others have done before us (e.g. Haraway, 1988), that as researchers in fraught fields, we may need to work on self-reflection and self-transformation as much as on purely 'intellectual' tasks.

Throughout the chapter, our illustrations will primarily concern not the discourse *of* right-wing nationalists, but the discourses of their various opponents *about* them, directed both at them and at those perceived as being associated with or promoting, perhaps unwittingly, their agenda.[1] This is because, while nationalist discourses have been extensively researched, those of their opponents, including within the academic field, have been largely ignored (with some exceptions, e.g., Sakki & Pettersson, 2018; Venäläinen & Menard, this volume; Seikkula 2021). An adequate grasp of the dynamics involved in polarization cannot be arrived at by one-sided focus on only one of the parties involved.

1. From focusing on right-wing nationalism to analysing the *making* of enemies

In social scientific research, as in mainstream public debate, right-wing populism and far-right politics are often perceived as having introduced into a formerly relatively moderate politics and civil public debate a violently polarizing discursive style and a divisive us-against-them narrative based on a systematic 'othering' of both immigrants and 'the elite', both presented as threats against 'the people' the populists present themselves as defending (e.g., Pyrhönen, Beauvois & Pyysiäinen, this volume; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). Given this framing, research has tended to focus, on one hand, on analysing radical right activity, ideology and discourse itself and, on the other, on finding explanations (social, economic, psychological, etc.) for why people may be attracted to and taken in by that discourse, and on other factors – e.g., the rise of social media with its algorithmic 'filter bubbles' (Pariser, 2012) – that may contribute to its success (for a brief recent overview of the trends in the field, see Mudde, 2016).

These approaches have produced insightful analyses of right-wing nationalist discourse and factors attracting people to the radical right, but where the focus is mainly on one party to socio-political/cultural conflict (the populist right), the dynamics between the different parties to it and the wider social context may be obscured. The discursive subject-positions in a conflict can be properly understood only as historically elaborated and experienced in a context of mutual reactivity and oppositional self-definition (Davies & Harré, 1990; Drury & Reicher, 2000). Right-wing populism doesn't merely present itself as a protest and reaction against what is perceived as the 'mainstream', 'elite' or 'technocratic' position, it *is* such a reaction (this is in one sense obvious, as the general acceptance of terms such as 'countermedia' or 'protest parties' indicates). Just as right-wing populists

[1] We will not use a uniform terminology to refer to right-wing nationalist actors. There is significant terminological variation in the research literature regarding which terms are used - extreme right, radical right, far right, populist radical right, etc. - and how they are defined (for an overview, see Toscano, 2019). In this article, we discuss many different aspects of broad and fragmented political and societal fields, and will use different designations according to what we deem appropriate in the particular context.

react to what others have already done or been perceived as doing, there are reactions by others to the populist reaction, and so on, in an open-ended spiral of mutual reactivity, neither automatic nor determined in its direction. Such mutual reactivity has been studied under the rubric of 'cumulative extremism', 'reciprocal radicalization' and cognate terms (c.f. Busher & Macklin, 2015; Macklin & Busher 2015; Alimi et al. 2015). One relevant aspect of these dynamics are the everyday provocations or escalations of conflict that occur when, for example, people respond to (perceived) slights and injustices aimed at themselves or groups they identify with. This is part of everyday life and need not lead to polarization or to radicalisation in any general or problematic sense, but such "micro-radicalisations" tend to play a significant part in the "radicalisation journeys" of individuals who do become radicalised, and the everyday and more extreme cases of social conflict share common features (Bailey & Edwards, 2017).

An example where this mutual reactivity becomes visible is found in Sakki and Martikainen's (2020) analysis of a 2019 anti-immigration and anti-elite election campaign video by the populist Finns party (FP). Sakki and Martikainen find that in the comments generated by the video on youtube, "[i]ntriguingly, the populist message's opponents constructed the most overt hate speech", "dehumanizing the FP and its supporters" by labelling them as "fascists, racists, and uneducated (sometimes agrarian) idiots" (2020, 19; cf. the examples of such hate speech given on pp. 16-17). Sakki and Martikainen comment that this hate and scorn "may illustrate why opposition towards right-wing populism is often not very effective" and rightly insist that, given "current concern over the polarization of society and of politics […] studying populism and anti-populism together by focusing on their mutual discursive construction seems crucial" (2020, 19-20).

In terms of the dynamics of the situation, the hate and scorn of the FP's opponents appears not just as an ineffective means to fight polarization, but as a prime manifestation of it; that is, a response, a discursive move that itself actively drives polarization. As their hostility is likely to embitter FP supporters and drive them, and others, to become more opposed to 'mainstream society', the FP's opponents by their very *mode* of opposition help make their opponents into precisely what they claim to oppose (and so should certainly not want to further by their own actions). We do not offer this as simply a comment on the likely effects of various responses, but as part of a characterization of what polarization is, how it 'works'. 'Othering' is central to polarization, and it doesn't take place only on the level of one's (or the in-group's) 'internal' representations of the other. Rather, the parties tend actively to alienate each other through their way of concretely relating to them in speech and in other ways, driving them away, making them other. In a very real sense, then, people *make* their enemies. Research on cultural representations generally accepts that stereotypes manifest not merely as categories for depicting the social world, but as categories *for doing*, thereby embodying a distinct reifying and self-fulfilling capacity (Brubaker, 2002). This insight should also be foregrounded in research on polarization and on the discourses of and on right-wing nationalism.

A scientific understanding of the dynamics of polarization and the discourses surrounding multiculturalism and immigration needs to engage not just with populism, but also, as De Cleen and colleagues underline, with "the rhetoric *about* populism, a largely ignored area of critical research"; we need to pay "systematic attention to anti-populism and 'populist hype', and reflect upon academia's own relation to populism and anti-populism" (2018, abstract). Similarly, Stavrakakis and his associates stress that "a comprehensive theory of populism must be able to account for the

complex choreography between populism and anti-populism in a rigorous way", and argue for "studying anti-populism together with populism, focusing on their mutual constitution and reproduction […] because populist discourses never operate in a vacuum and need to be situated within the context of political antagonism" (Stavrakakis et al, 2018, 5-6). They also underline the importance of being sensitive to the violence often present (not just in populist but) in anti-populist discourses (cf. Stavrakakis, 2018, 50 ff.). In the research we have quoted, Stavrakakis and colleagues employ left-wing populism (SYRIZA in Greece) as their main example, and endeavour to analytically distance 'populism' from 'nationalism' (Stavrakakis et al, 2017). The methodological points they raise, however, are equally relevant for studying right-wing populism and the far right. To the extent that holistic approaches are lacking, with the far right analysed in isolation and implicitly designated as 'the problem', scholars in the field may be perceived as having entered the socio-political conflict as parties to it. And, as we will explain, a central aspect of the dynamics of polarized conflict is precisely the tendency to see 'the other side' as the problem; *they* are to blame for the conflict, while problems on the political side one identifies with are easily overlooked.

2. Flocking to the poles

A standard distinction in social psychology and political science is between 'ideological' polarization, denoting growing inter-party distance on policy issues, and 'affective' polarization, denoting identity-based inter-party animus (e.g, Iyengar et al, 2012). Our concern here is not with 'ideological' polarization as such. While distance in opinions may make political and other cooperation more difficult by making it harder to arrive at compromises, for example, it is not a social and political problem in the same sense as 'affective' polarization. The latter strains relations and deadlocks discussion between people in society in a way mere disagreements over intellectual or practical issues cannot. Hence, empirical studies showing (Lönnqvist et al, 2020), or again contesting (Fornaro, 2021), growing 'ideological' polarization in particular issue-terms, do not by themselves settle questions regarding polarization in the 'affective' sense. That people disagree is not a problem in itself, for disagreement and even conflicts can often be dealt with in constructive ways – just as, correlatively, 'affective' polarization can increase while divisions in issues terms shrink; a phenomenon dubbed 'false polarization', as people overestimate their 'objective' ideological differences (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). However, 'false' polarization is a marked aspect of *actual* polarization in the socially problematic sense we focus on, where the problem is the hostile, 'othering', tendentially misrepresenting way those who disagree, or find themselves in conflict, may come to *relate to each other* (cf. Chambers et al, 2006; Mason, 2018).

The aim of this chapter is to bring out certain dynamic aspects of such conflictual relating, as it tends to manifest in the discourse of the parties involved in polarized settings. We approach polarization not as a clearly delimited phenomenon; rather, we use 'polarization' to indicate a complicated and variable intergroup and interpersonal dynamics. Polarization involves affective charges, but as our discussion attempts to show, the discursive and other behaviour of the parties, their thinking and existential demeanour are also in play, all intertwined, and the affects involved get their character from their place in these dynamics. Furthermore, polarizing dynamics are set going within historically formed, widely ramified networks of social, cultural, economic, institutional, political and geopolitical forces and tendencies. Particular issues and debates – communism, say, or immigration, racism, gender-roles, vaccines, climate change, or COVID19 restrictions – become 'sites' of polarization, or

again lose their polarizing potential, at different times and places, largely as a function of the hard-to-survey interplay of such forces.[2] Our focus here is not, however, on an analysis of these aspects; rather, we highlight certain discursive-relational aspects that tend to come into play when a polarizing dynamics gets going, whatever the specific issues or 'markers' around which it arises, or to which it has become attached.

In polarized conflict, people form and are drawn into parties; they flock around opposing poles – and here, while one may metaphorically think of electric or magnetic poles, totem poles are actual symbolic instances of the specifically social 'attraction' in question. The mere forming of associations or parties of people drawn together by common interests or aspirations does not imply polarization in the relevant sense, which is linked to the appearance of dislike and hostility between members of the different parties, and the pressuring of people to 'choose sides' (Mason, 2018). In the social logic relevant in this context, the hostility and the pressuring are two sides of the same development. Where the members of group A dislike and are hostile towards the members of B, any individual who doesn't univocally distance themselves from the B-people will, even if that individual isn't a member or close associate of B, tend to be regarded with suspicion or outright hostility by the A-members. Individuals experience pressure from friends and acquaintances to choose their ('our') side, or else risk, more or less, losing their friendship, favour and respect. As the anti-racist anthem *Racist Friend* puts it, "If you have a racist friend / Now is the time, now is the time /For your friendship to end" – adding, "And if your friends are racists, don't pretend to be my friend" (Special AKA, 1983).

This illustrates how polarization in the relevant sense is centrally related to a positional process of collective and individual identity-negotiation. As theorists of 'affective' or 'social' polarization emphasise, in polarized settings, "our conflicts are largely over who we think we are" (Mason, 2018, 4). This means that the issues and opinions involved are not treated as questions on which people can legitimately disagree and which can be debated in a dispassionate (or passionate, but lucid) manner. Instead, they tend, or at least threaten, to raise the question 'Who are you? Are you one of us or not? Are you with us or with them?' in a way where (as the anthem pithily brings out) more or less of one's self-conception, one's sense of self-worth, and of one's social future, comes to depend on the answer. As we will try to explain, this intertwinement of the issues with identitarian questions and anxieties tends to manifest in various discursive patterns or part-logics that distort and deadlock polarized discourse in various ways. Combined, their effect tends to be that, the further polarization progresses, the harder it becomes to talk about the things themselves that the conflict – say, between those who welcome and those who oppose immigration – is supposedly about.

Before we go on to describe some of these patterns or aspects of polarized discourse, we should emphasize that our claim is not that polarization is driven by some kind of monolithic 'Logic' that inevitably leads to a particular result, some total deadlock of communication. On the contrary, polarizing developments may sometimes change or reverse quite rapidly, as circumstances change, new conflicts arise, new alliances are formed, etc. (cf. Macklin & Busher, 2015). Furthermore, polarization arises in contexts involving other individuals, groups and actors besides the parties polarized as opponents. For instance, both right-wing nationalist activists and their anti-racist

[2] The complex historicity of processes of polarization is emphasized, e.g., in Pacewicz, 2016. This complexity does not diminish the importance in polarization of deliberate actions and agendas on the part of influential individuals and groups; see, e.g., Rosenfeld, 2017.

opponents are related to the police and other state actors – often, on both sides, in more or less hostile or suspicious ways – and this may variously affect what transpires between the parties (Busher & Macklin, 2015, 896). Also, polarization is never the only thing going on in society, or between particular groups or individuals, and so a certain pattern or part-logic may be countered by some other event or development in their relationship. Polarization may be marked in one context or situation and quite absent in another, even if the same people are involved and even where there is, on the whole, a marked 'sorting' or 'alignment' of social identities. This is not to deny, however, that where polarization is intense it can become hard for people to relate to those they regard as 'enemies' without the enmity somehow colouring their relationship across contexts.

3. The attractions of conflict and the sense that 'they're to blame'

One central part-logic of polarization is illustrated in Seikkula's (2019) research on the mobilization narratives of self-identified antiracist actors in Finland. In these narratives, Seikkula says, there is a focus "on the conflict between racist perpetrators and white antiracists", which "results in people who experience racism becoming sidelined" (2019, 1015). As an illustration, she quotes the story of Pasi, whose activism started when he witnessed some Somali girls being harassed by white Finnish adult men carrying 'Defence League'-insignia: "And I Googled what is Defence League and there, it opened that kind of world – there's all that disgusting racist scum – and I got worried about what is gonna happen to this country – [I thought] if there's even a little I can do to stop these types of ideas from spreading, which made me start …". As Seikkula notes, in Pasi's story, "the attacked children remain minor characters, as the focus is on confronting 'racists', instead of seeking solidarity with people who experience racism, for example", and Pasi himself later explains that he "became very invested in activities that call out and mock the far right". (2019, 1012.) In Seikkula's words, as the confrontation with the racist enemy "becomes its central tenet, antiracism focuses on defending the border between extreme and ordinary whiteness", i.e., between 'the racists' and other white Finns, while "the agency and views of 'immigrants' become sidelined" (2019, 1013).

We will foreground an aspect of the dynamics of this situation that Seikkula, in accordance with her adoption of a 'critical whiteness studies'-perspective (2019, 1003-4), doesn't focus on. This aspect is announced in her general observation that "antiracism is dependent on what one interviewee called 'a concrete opposing side'"; thus, one young activist explains, "what makes it [participation in antiracist activism] easier, is that there's that setting, that there are concrete enemies that aren't just abstract structures" (2019, 1012-13). While both racists and antiracists in this case are white and may, as Seikkula suggests, be invested in keeping 'white-normativity' intact, we propose that antiracists may also have an independent investment in maintaining the conflict with, and the attendant derogation of, the 'racists'.

In the antiracist perspective Seikkula describes, the concern for the well-being and fair treatment of immigrants and for the future of the country appears intertwined and overlaid with a concern about or fascination with those (the racist 'enemy') perceived as threatening immigrants and the country. One aspect of the dynamics of polarization can, we suggest, be characterized as an intensification of such preoccupation of the parties with their opponents, that is, with the conflict itself. At its most extreme, this can lead to a situation where the contested 'object' – the values, issues, aims and structures that the conflict is ostensibly about – may, as Girard says, effectively have "dropped from view" and "[o]nly the antagonists remain" (2016, 25). That is, the opponents may become so

invested in fighting each other and in defining themselves in opposition to each other, that what they are supposedly fighting over effectively becomes a secondary consideration. Their actions become geared towards achieving aims related to the conflict itself – scoring points against the opponent, provoking and humiliating them, searching out opportunities for being provoked and feeling aggrieved by their actions, etc. – even when this may impede the process of finding the most effective ways to achieve the aims they officially fight for. This is a familiar kind of development, signalled for instance when it is said that some issue has become a matter of prestige, or has become 'personal' or 'politicized' in a pejorative sense.

To the extent that this dynamics comes to dominate, the result in discursive terms is that debates between opponents that are presented and thought of as driven by 'objective' disagreement over particular issues – for instance, refugee and integration policies, or the character of cultural differences – actually become ruled more by an urge to disagree and to distance oneself from the opponent, to claim a difference from them and to make them look bad, etc. Facts and arguments about the issues are then reduced to instruments strategically employed for these ends, rather than being used to the end, still 'officially' proclaimed, of understanding the issues. We will discuss various aspects of this instrumentalization and communicative distortion of polarized discourse below.

The fascination with the opponent, and with maintaining and even intensifying the conflict with them, may not only be more or less divorced from, but can be clearly detrimental to the objectives the parties present themselves as pursuing. Despite these and other 'objective' drawbacks of various kinds, conflict and polarization may appear attractive insofar as they offer opportunities for collective self-definition and self-justification through oppositional gestures, where 'we' define and distinguish ourselves favourably from our opponents and enemies (cf. Tajfel & Turner, 1979). While in one sense, 'we' do not wish for 'them' to treat us or those we care about badly, in another sense, the worse they treat us, the better we may appear by contrast. In positional identitarian games, while one way of being 'good' is to be stronger, more powerful than the opponent, another is to be (perceived as) the innocent victim of unjust attack. In the struggle over identity, the moral high ground is a central arena. Pasi's reaction to the harassment he witnessed can be seen in this light.

Many other aspects may also be relevant. For instance, a wish to derogate and humiliate the 'racists' is evident in Seikkula's material. Although racists were sometimes "depicted as potentially influential and thus dangerous, as well as privileged members of society", more typical in antiracist discussions were "marginalising descriptions of 'racists' […] both interviews and demonstration speeches refer to 'tragicomic' and 'drunken' individuals, or 'feeble-minded losers who have low self-esteem'". In the online group Seikkula followed, for example, "anti-immigration debaters' bad spelling was framed as an indicator of their lacking education or cognitive skills, and was constantly made fun of". (2019, 1010-11; cf. Tervo, 2015, for an example of how this kind of defamation can be found acceptable in respectable media.) Considerations of this kind may, in part, help illuminate the social dynamics noted above, by which the parties in polarized conflicts tend by their actions to *make* (turn others into) enemies. Even if one does not consciously want to have enemies, one may nonetheless, without realising it or wanting to admit it, be drawn by the identitarian, moralistic and other advantages that *making enemies* offers.

Even so, conflict typically does not appear as primarily, or even at all attractive, but rather as forced on one by the other side's actions. In polarized human conflict, from family quarrels to wars, people

tend not to see themselves as *initiating* the conflict. In their own view, they have rather responded to the others' transgression (Backström, 2007, 200-205). This is one of those bits of common knowledge (indeed, it may seem trivial to note it) whose unsettlingly radical implications for the intractability of human conflict and its analysis are seldom considered in earnest. How is it to be understood? One aspect of the matter is that the affective responses that typically fuel, or present the 'subjective' motivational side of, polarizing conflict – envy or hatred, for example – tend to be misrecognized by those in their grip (Backström 2019, 602). They are misrecognized in ways that blind one to the character of one's own responses and the way they are perceived by others. One tendency that may characterize the interaction in polarized conflict, is for the parties involved to become ever more ruled by such misrecognized responses. Where this tendency appears, the conflict seems to the parties to be caused by the other party having somehow unacceptably endangered something they want to protect or promoted something objectionable, and opposed parties take the others' actions to necessitate, or at least legitimize their own oppositional responses. In this sense, the parties may claim, and more or less sincerely feel, that the others started it, or at least are the ones now fuelling it, and so they do not feel responsible for maintaining the conflict; rather, they feel that *they cannot accept what the others did*, and so may feel that they 'must' retaliate.[3]

4. Doubles and double-talk

Where this sense of one's own side being essentially reactive, simply responding to the other side's provocations and transgressions, come to dominate the situation, the paradoxical consequence is that, while the parties to the conflict regard themselves as increasingly *unlike* each other, through their actions they actually make themselves ever more indistinguishable, turning themselves into each other's "doubles", in Girard's phrase (2016, 25). This logic can be exemplified by the simple and paradigmatically reciprocal response, "They struck us, so we strike back". 'We' think this shows the absolute difference between ourselves and the others – *they* attacked, whereas *we* simply defended ourselves – but the effect is that we both behave the same: they hit us, and we hit them, and so the fight goes on. This is a caricature designed to bring out a particular relational dynamics that may be involved in polarization. In actual cases of societal polarization, the situation is much more complex, of course; there are not just two parties, but many actors interacting in complex ways, and the whole social field may become saturated with identity-political contestation. Even if one focuses on contestations between two opposed groups (e.g., racist and antiracist activists), the simple 'tit-for-tat' form of escalation may be quite rare (Macklin & Busher, 2015).

The 'logic of doubles' - one of many part-logics that may be at play in polarization - is illustrated for example in the depictions offered by Seikkula's antiracist interviewees of "'an avalanche of racist scum', or the rise of 'Nazism, just like in [the] 1930s'", of a sudden "natural-disaster-like change", with a "repeated concern" raised in the interviews being "'where is this going to lead to', or 'what is going to happen to this country'" (2019, 1009). The way in which the 'antiracists' here portray and relate to the 'racists' is a mirror-image of the right-wing nationalist, 'racist' narrative's image of the 'hordes of immigrants suddenly flooding Finland', let in by the foolishly unsuspecting or cynically traitorous 'hospitality' of the 'elites' and the 'toletards' (cf. the FP campaign video analyzed in Sakki and

[3] The complex dynamics of conflict involve power-differentials, opportunity structures, etc. that typically differ for different parties. Here, we do not discuss these aspects, however, but focus on how parties may come to interpret and respond to the conflict in the terms indicated in the text.

Martikainen, 2020). Here, both nationalists and antiracists see each other as a massive horde of dangerous and disgusting enemies ('scum') threatening to destroy the country, and both indulge in violently hateful derogation of the enemy. If the destructiveness of racism lies primarily in its dehumanizing attitude to the racialized other, 'antiracism', in the aspect it shows here, is just as dehumanizing. In this instance, the 'antiracist' has become the racist's double (we don't suggest this is true of antiracism generally).

The discourse of enemy 'doubles' can, quite properly, be characterised as essentially double-talk, defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "language that has no real meaning or has more than one meaning and is intended to hide the truth". The more dominant the logic of doubles becomes, the more the parties to the conflict start sounding the same and saying the same things, using the same words to accuse each other of the same filings and crimes. But when uttered by the different parties, these words tend not to refer to the same, but to the opposite objects and events in the real world. This is because, the further a conflict is polarized, the less it matters to the parties *what* is done or suffered, while *who* does or suffers it, 'us' or 'them', 'friend' or 'enemy', becomes all-important (a classic depiction is Orwell, 1945).

The logic of doubles is also at work in *the tendency of polarized debates to become meta-debates about the debate itself*. Here, a kind of deceptive reflexivity is involved, which, while evincing a certain sense of the deadlock of conflict, still does nothing to break it. In this, quite widespread discursive mode, the interlocutors deplore the deterioration of the 'climate of discussion' through polarization, but rather than leading to genuine discussions about the questions that apparently divide people, the debate remains stuck at the meta-level, where the mutual distrust and scapegoating of polarized conflict is now continued in terms of blaming the other side for making honest debate impossible. The issues themselves are not spoken of, rather, the opponents now use *speaking of the speaking* as a weapon against each other. A caricature to illustrate this dynamics (bracketing the multiplicity, complexities, nuances and contradictions of actual disagreements and positions): in a debate on challenges related to immigration, the 'nationalist' side says we should speak about these challenges, but the discussion is tabooed by the antiracists, while the antiracists agree we should speak about them – but we cannot, since discussion is misused by the nationalists as an instrument of stigmatisation.

People feel pressured to engage in propagandistic double-talk insofar as, in polarized situations, questioning 'our' position tends to be immediately interpreted as defection to the 'enemy camp'. Stigmatization (frowning, shaming, defamation, etc.) and ostracism of the 'traitor' are the main instruments of this process of collective pressuring (REF; politics of shaming). As for *when and where* the pressure is applied, one can distinguish two discursive part-logics or aspects of the dynamics of discursive hegemonization at play. We call them *the logic of shibboleths and taboos*, and *the logic of pollution and paranoid extension* – with no suggestion that these are the only or most important ones. The first is the more basic of the two; it designates the way certain views and words are *pre*scribed, turned into shibboleths, their ritual repetition marking one's belonging with 'us', while others are *pro*scribed, tabooed, one's belonging made conditional on ritually avoiding or denouncing them. By 'the logic of pollution and paranoid extension' we mean the tendency, *given* this ritualized setting of polarized conflict, of ever more views, words and objects to be drawn into the conflict, to be ritualized as either to be repeated or avoided. This happens insofar as, when a particular object

(word, view, etc.) is declared taboo, everything that is, or is perceived to be, somehow in contact with or related to it risks becoming 'polluted' and tabooed too – which again pushes the process further. This is one aspect of the logic of the taboo: one must not touch the object, nor anyone who or anything that has touched it (cf. Douglas, 1966, 32-35).

In polarized conflict, the tabooed 'object' from contact with which other things in turn become polluted and taboo, is not an *object* at all, but the human beings one has made one's enemies (there may have been objects of contestation initially, but they become less important as the conflict becomes further polarized, according to the dynamics described above). As Girard notes, the one designates an enemy by the community may effectively become "the pillar of that community insofar as everyone and everything ultimately revolve around him", with the "polemical dynamism" of the community's attitudes "feed[ing] on what it rejects [...] obsessed with the other against which it reacts" (1992, 35; 42). Thus, for the antiracist, the racist may come to stand at the centre of everything; from the figure of the racist pollution spreads all around. Hence, while *you* may not be racist, "if *your friends* are racists, don't pretend to be my friend". By this logic of pollution, ever further elements – people, words, views, places, statues, gestures, books, music, etc. – may be drawn into the conflict in a way that appears random if looked at from the point of view of these elements themselves. However, while there is nothing intrinsically connecting them, they are "organized in a most consistent pattern"; namely, by contact with the tabooed 'other' (Girard, 1992, 30). Thus, a newspaper may be viewed as acceptable by an antiracist, until they allow a 'racist' to write one column, after which the whole paper 'must' be boycotted because it has become polluted by contact with the racist. At the extreme of polarization, just about anything may be perceived as a sign of belonging either to 'us' or to 'them'. In this paranoid mindset, nothing is innocent, a cigar is *never* just a cigar, and it becomes impossible to talk about any topic dispassionately; whatever one says is taken as a move, witting or unwitting, in the game of conflict (Finlay 2007; Alexander, Kivisto, and Sciortino 2020).

To treat others as enemies – to take an *attitude* of enmity to them, as opposed to simply being formally designated as 'enemies' by governments at war, say – has even deeper implications for how one relates to language, insofar as enemies tend to lose trust in discourse as such, feeling it is 'impossible' to speak with or to understand the other side. "Friendship has to end", because the antiracist (in this mode) feels one cannot talk to racists; rejection of the other is the only option and violence is 'the only language they understand'. In this way, discourse ceases to be a mode of contact and communication between the parties in polarized conflict and becomes a mere instrument for 'us' to talk *about* (not *to*) them. All 'we' say basically aims to confirm that 'they' indeed cannot be spoken to. Whether in actual wars or in the symbolic, discursive wars of polarized social debates, propaganda never says anything good about the enemy, even just a simple human word, but endlessly illustrates the impossibility of trusting them or addressing them as equal interlocutors.

Propaganda can, but need not, present the enemy as evil; the average out-partisan, the 'foot soldiers', may also be presented as victims of the propaganda of their own side. Either way, talking to 'them' is presented as pointless both in practice and in principle, as 'they' only parrot their party line without the capacity to form opinions of their own. This is illustrated in extreme form in the discourse of *and* on conspiracy theory, in the 'fake news' rhetoric and in the mutual distrust and derogation between mainstream and countermedia (Ylä-Anttila, 2018; Finlayson, 2020). Consumers

of the latter tend to think (again, we are purposely simplifying real-world complexities to illustrate the logic at issue) that the mainstream public have been brainwashed by a globalist ideology, which makes all the news they believe 'fake' – not necessarily in details, but in basic intent, in terms of the grand narrative promoted. The mainstream public, for its part, tends to regard these claims as proof that those who make them have fallen for a delusional conspiratorial worldview and are thus incapable of serious thinking and undeserving of serious response. Correlatively, both sides present themselves as independent or at least critical thinkers, whether this critical attitude is symbolised by 'taking the red pill' or (on the other side) by placing inordinate hopes in 'fact-checking' and technocratic demands for 'listening to the science' (Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook, 2017; Duijn et al., 2020).

This is yet another illustration of the logic of doubles. Not only are the two sides' views of the other mirror images of each other, but through their enforcement of partisan conformity, presented (again, more or less sincerely) as motivated by the need to make no concessions to the other side's propaganda, both sides unwittingly tend to turn themselves into precisely the ideologically blinkered 'parrots' they accuse the others of being. This is unavoidable, insofar as the double-talk of propaganda not only misrepresents and refuses to address the enemy, but erodes the communicative, sense-making potential of discourse for the propagandists themselves. 'We' may be formally communicating to each other about 'them', but insofar as we talk propagandistically, with the aim of confirming that 'they cannot be talked to or understood', 'we' also really cannot talk to or understand ourselves, for we then cannot talk truthfully – with more than an appearance of sense – to each other about them, or about our own role in the conflict.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we will briefly address a concern about relativism that our article may provoke. It may seem that the upshot of our discussion is that all parties to polarized conflict are the same and equally responsible for the conflict – or, alternatively, that there is no way to tell who is responsible for what or what the truth is about the issues the parties (ostensibly) disagree over. This would be a misunderstanding, however. We have pointed to certain *tendencies* that may be found in polarized conflict, including the tendency for the parties to become each other's 'doubles'. This licences no blanket claims about the allocation of responsibility or anything else in particular cases. As for the difficulty of judging and understanding particular cases, we stress that there is no Archimedean point from which one could determine 'what the facts really are' or 'which side is right'. Even where the facts – who did and said what; what the likely economic or other consequences of various policies are, etc. – can be non-contentiously determined (as often, alas, they cannot), what one makes of the facts, how one sees their significance, depends on one's perspective, and which perspective one should take cannot be 'determined' in the way facts (sometimes) can. This does not mean, however, that 'all the parties are right from their perspective'. That is an empty statement; it only repeats that the parties see or present things as they do, and apparently believe they are right against others.

We would stress two prerequisites for approximating an adequate, and potentially constructively transformative understanding of situations of polarized conflict. First, as researchers we need to take seriously the experiences/perceptions of polarization of all conflict parties and listen to what those involved say about it. Conflict cannot be understood without understanding the parties' perspectives on it, however confused, exaggerated, self-serving, etc. these may appear to us, and may sometimes

be. After all, parties act on their perceptions of the situation, not on our or some other observer's view of it. Secondly, we need to also study the whole situation/dynamics of polarization dispassionately, without ourselves tacitly identifying with some party to it, thus effectively entering the conflict rather than analysing it. The task is to disentangle *ourselves* from the partisan spirit that polarized conflict lives from and feeds upon, with its tendency to misrepresent the other and ourselves in our relation to each other and the common world. In this sense, the task is to work on ourselves as much as to try to see the situation more clearly, one through the other. As we suggest elsewhere (Aldrin Salskov, Backström & Creutz, this volume), to seriously undertake this work may imply entering into 'engaged dialogues' with others, including those one may, wittingly or unwittingly, have made one's enemies.

In this article, we have not discussed the urgent and complex questions regarding effective political, legal and other strategies to lessen polarization and curb intolerance, hate-speech, racism and other pernicious phenomena. Our simple point here would be that these questions can themselves be discussed in a fair and constructive way only where our own thinking is not ruled by polarized, us-and-them logic. To the extent that it is, what we say about these questions too will be drawn into the realm of 'double speak', we will fail to address those we are ostensibly addressing, and the strategies we adopt risk fueling what they should curb or replacing one form of violence by another.

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