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Identity, violence, and the struggle for recognition: a philosophical analysis

This study analyzes nationalism, terrorism, and far-right movements in Europe through the cases of Spain, the United Kingdom, and France. The central argument is that these phenomena cannot be reduced to structural explanations based solely on economic inequalities, unemployment, migration, or political crises. Rather, they are grounded in ontological insecurity, the struggle for recognition, and the search for existential meaning. Drawing on Hegel's dialectic of recognition, Sartre's phenomenology of the Other, Arendt's critique of violence, and Schmitt's definition of the political, the study reveals connections between these problems and identity construction, othering practices, the legitimacy of violence, and crises of political representation. The analysis examines three cases: ethnic nationalism and terrorist organizations under state repression; ethno-religious conflicts shaped by sectarian and colonial histories; and the rise of far-right populist movements exploiting economic and cultural anxieties. Findings show that groups perceiving their identity as denied may embrace radical ideologies and violence to assert existence and demand recognition. When states accommodate difference through mutual recognition, extremism declines. The study concludes that overcoming these crises requires moving from adversarial othering to an ethic of mutual recognition, prioritizing deliberative power over violence, and addressing the existential insecurities underlying political radicalization.

Keywords: Recognition, dialectic of recognition, ontological insecurity, the Other, phenomenology, intersubjectivity, political theology, existentialism, political philosophy, identity, violence

Introduction

The military and political defeat of totalitarian ideologies in the twentieth century initially raised expectations that Europe would evolve towards a more libertarian, egalitarian, and humanist future. However, these hopes soon gave way to new conflicts, new axes of enmity, and new mechanisms of exclusion [1]. Migrant workers invited to rebuild post-war economies became scapegoats during the economic crises of the 1970s, and the attacks of 11 September 2001 further fueled Islamophobic rhetoric, paving the way for far-right movements to gain political legitimacy [2]. This study argues that these phenomena cannot be reduced to purely structural factors such as unemployment or migration; rather, they are rooted in deeper philosophical foundations: ontological insecurity, the struggle for recognition, and the search for existential meaning [3].

The research systematically examines ethnic nationalism, terrorism, and far-right populism through a comparative philosophical lens, analyzing how identity construction, othering practices, the legitimization of violence, and crises of political representation are interconnected [4]. Drawing on Hegel's dialectic of recognition [1; 10], Sartre's phenomenology of the Other [5], Arendt's critique of violence [3; 4], and Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction [6], the study investigates the philosophical underpinnings of political radicalization [7]. The central hypothesis is that these movements represent collective reflections of «ontological haven»-seeking behavior, emerging from a failed or denied struggle for recognition [8]. The cases selected — Basque nationalism and ETA in Spain; the Northern Ireland conflict and the IRA in the United Kingdom; and the rise of the National Front (Rassemblement National) in France — offer distinct historical and political contexts yet share the common denominator of ontological insecurity and the demand for recognition.

Research methods

This research employs a qualitative, comparative case study design grounded in philosophical analysis. The universe comprises ethnic nationalist movements, terrorist organizations and far right populist parties

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that have emerged in Europe from the mid-20th century to the present. From this universe, three cases were selected through purposive (theoretical) sampling:

1. Spain — Basque nationalism and the terrorist organization ETA [4; 11].
2. The United Kingdom — the Northern Ireland problem and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) [9].
3. France — the far-right movement, particularly the National Front / Rassemblement National [2; 13].

These cases were chosen not for statistical representativeness but because they offer rich, contrasting contexts for a deep philosophical comparison of identity construction, the legitimacy of violence and political representation [10].

Data sources consist entirely of secondary materials: peer reviewed articles, books, official reports and historical analyses. The study relies on documentary analysis of existing literature, historical archives and political declarations. No primary fieldwork was conducted.

The analytical framework integrates four philosophical lenses:

- Hegel's dialectic of recognition [1; 8] — to examine how ethnic groups demand intersubjective validation and how denial of recognition fuels radicalization.
- Sartre's existentialist theory of the Other [5; 7] — to analyze the construction of immigrants and minorities as threatening «Others».
- Arendt's distinction between power and violence [3; 11] — to assess the instrumentalization of violence and its relation to political legitimacy.
- Schmitt's friend enemy distinction [6; 8] — to understand the politicization of identity and the extraordinary legitimization of enmity.

Data were analyzed through thematic interpretation and comparative conceptual analysis, tracing how each case exemplifies or challenges the philosophical categories [7; 9]. The analysis proceeds iteratively, moving between empirical historical narratives and theoretical constructs to test the hypothesis that ontological insecurity and misrecognition are the common ground of these three phenomena [8; 4].

Discussion and Results

The analysis yields distinct yet converging findings across the three cases.

1. **Ethnic Nationalism and the Struggle for Recognition: The Basque Case (Spain)** – The abolition of traditional legal systems in the nineteenth century and repressive assimilationist policies — including the prohibition of the Basque language (Euskara), symbols, and public cultural expression — created a deep sense of ontological insecurity among the Basque community [4; 11]. Early nationalist thinkers such as Sabino Arana articulated ethnic nationalism initially as cultural preservation, but under Francisco Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975), systematic state repression transformed this cultural movement into radical separatism [4; 5]. The terrorist organization ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna), founded in 1959, evolved from reactive strategies under the authoritarian regime — targeting police and state officials — to strategies of indiscriminate violence after democratization, including bombings and assassinations of local politicians and civilians [11]. Despite the Statute of Autonomy of 1979, which granted significant self-government, ETA continued its campaign, citing the exclusion of territorial claims (full independence) and the denial of full recognition [12]. The murder of local politicians and civilians ultimately turned public opinion against ETA, and the global anti-terrorism framework after 2001 restricted their operations, leading to a definitive ceasefire in 2011 and eventual disarmament in 2017 [13]. Success relied on people-oriented policies, cultural recognition (e.g., Basque-language media and education), and international cooperation rather than purely military measures [4; 10]. This case demonstrates Hegel's insight that the denial of recognition generates a dialectical response of radical self-assertion [1; 12], and Arendt's warning that violence cannot produce legitimate power [3; 20] as ETA's violence eroded its own social base.

2. **Ethno-Religious Conflict and the Question of Legitimate Violence: The Northern Ireland Case (United Kingdom)** – The Northern Ireland conflict, known as «The Troubles» (late 1960s–1998), is rooted in centuries of sectarian division between the Protestant unionist/loyalist majority, who identify as British, and the Catholic nationalist/republican minority, who identify as Irish [10; 12]. The partition of Ireland in 1921 created a statelet where Catholics faced systematic discrimination in housing, employment, and political representation, fostering a deep sense of ontological insecurity and grievance [9; 12]. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) emerged as the armed wing of the republican movement, initially defending Catholic communities during the civil rights protests of the late 1960s, but later engaging in a prolonged campaign of bombings and shootings targeting British state forces, economic targets, and, at times, Protestant civilians [14]. Traumatic events — such as Bloody Sunday (1972), where British paratroopers killed 14 unarmed Catholic civilians —

became powerful symbols of state violence, eroding trust in British institutions and legitimizing retaliatory violence in the eyes of many nationalists [9; 16]. Here, Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction [6; 8] is starkly evident: republican communities coded the British state and unionist rivals as existential enemies, and violence was framed as a «sacred» duty of national liberation. However, the Good Friday Agreement (1998) represents a Hegelian moment of mutual recognition [1; 9]: the British and Irish states acknowledged nationalist identity, agreed to power-sharing institutions, and committed to the principle of consent, while the IRA accepted that violence could not achieve its goals and decommissioned its weapons [14; 16]. The peace process demonstrates that resolution is possible when parties move from violent imposition to mutual recognition, echoing Arendt's emphasis on deliberative power (consensus) over violence [3; 21]. Unlike the Basque case, where autonomy was granted within a unitary state, Northern Ireland's solution involved cross-border institutions and a constitutional principle that acknowledged both British and Irish identities [10; 16].

3. Far-right populism and the National Front (France) — The third case examines the far-right tradition rooted in counter-revolutionary politics and colonial conflicts (particularly the Algerian War), which gained modern momentum in the late twentieth century [15]. The National Front (Front National), founded in 1972 and later rebranded as Rassemblement National (2018), achieved its electoral breakthrough in the 1980s under Jean-Marie Le Pen, exploiting economic crisis, rising unemployment, and anti-immigrant sentiment [2; 14]. The party positioned itself as the «representative of the excluded» — the unemployed, the working class, and those alienated by globalization and European integration [16]. From the 2010s onward, under Marine Le Pen, the party pursued a «de-demonization» (dédiabolisation) strategy, softening overt racism and anti-Semitism while maintaining anti-EU, anti-immigrant, and anti-Islamic platforms [17]. The party consistently constructs immigrants, particularly from North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, and Muslims as existential threats to French national identity, secularism (laïcité), and security [5; 13]. In presidential elections (2017 and 2022), its candidate reached the second round with significant percentages, demonstrating the party's enduring appeal and normalization in French political life [17; 19]. The rise of far-right populism reflects a deep crisis of representative democracy, where traditional parties (the Socialists and the Republicans) have failed to respond adequately to globalization, migration, and economic anxieties [16; 18]. Sartre's analysis of the gaze and objectification [5; 7] is particularly illuminating here: immigrants and Muslims are constructed as the «Other» whose very existence threatens the «authentic» French national self. Unlike the first two cases, the far right does not seek territorial separation but political power within the state; yet its logic is similar — it frames the denial of recognition (of the «true» French identity) as an existential threat, justifying exclusion and, implicitly, legitimizing hostility [15; 18]. This case reveals that ontological insecurity can also be channeled into majoritarian populism, not only minority separatism, and that the struggle for recognition can take exclusionary forms that deny recognition to others [8; 13].

The three cases, despite their historical and contextual differences, share a common philosophical core: each is a manifestation of ontological insecurity born from a perceived or real denial of recognition [1; 4].

In the Basque case (Spain), the Hegelian struggle for recognition was initially channeled through cultural and political demands [1; 5]. However, the state's systematic denial of minority identity under Franco and the incomplete recognition after democratization radicalized that struggle, leading to the instrumentalization of violence [4; 11]. In Arendt's terms, terrorism arose precisely where power (communicative consensus) had collapsed; violence became a substitute for politics [3; 36]. Yet, as Arendt warns, violence cannot produce power — it only breeds more violence and ultimately isolates the perpetrator [3; 35]. The loss of social legitimacy and eventual disarmament confirm that violence, once separated from recognition, becomes self-defeating [13; 14]. The state's success lay in reestablishing recognition (autonomy, language rights, cultural institutions) while maintaining security measures, thus undermining the terrorist's narrative of existential threat [4; 10]. This case affirms Taylor's argument [7; 25] that misrecognition can inflict real harm and that genuine recognition requires institutional accommodation, not mere tolerance.

In the Northern Ireland case (UK), the intersection of ethnic and religious identity created a dual consciousness: a community simultaneously holding British citizenship while identifying as oppressed Irish nationalists [10; 12]. Traumatic events such as Bloody Sunday became symbols of state violence, eroding trust and legitimizing retaliatory violence [9; 16]. Here, Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction [6; 8] is evident: republican communities coded the British state and rival unionist communities as enemies, and violence became a «sacred» duty. The Good Friday Agreement, however, represents a Hegelian moment of recognition [1; 10]: the state acknowledged nationalist identity and agreed to power-sharing, while the armed organization accepted that violence could not achieve its goals [14; 16]. The peace process demonstrates that resolution is possible when parties move from violent imposition to mutual recognition, echoing Arendt's emphasis

on power (consensus) over violence [3; 16]. This case also illustrates the double standards in Western responses: while European states often frame nationalist movements in the Global South as «freedom struggles,» they treat similar movements within Europe as threats to territorial integrity [9; 12] — a point that problematizes the universalist claims of Western liberal democracies and points to the power politics behind recognition [6; 8].

In the French far-right case, unlike the first two, we do not encounter separatist terrorism but rather a populist movement that channels ontological insecurity into exclusionary majoritarian politics [16; 18]. Sartre's analysis of the gaze and objectification [5; 7] is particularly illuminating: immigrants and Muslims are constructed as the «Other» whose very existence threatens the «authentic» national self. The far-right's discourse transforms economic anxieties (deindustrialization, unemployment) and cultural fears (Islam, multiculturalism) into a moral panic, offering a scapegoat and a simplistic solution — exclusion and repatriation [2; 13]. This case shows that ontological insecurity is not confined to minority groups; the «forgotten» working class and those alienated by globalization also experience a crisis of meaning and identity [8; 18]. However, unlike the nationalist and ethno-religious cases, the far right does not seek territory but political power; yet its logic is similar: it frames the denial of recognition (of the «true» national identity) as an existential threat, justifying exclusion and, implicitly, legitimizing hostility [15; 18]. This raises a crucial philosophical question: Can a struggle for recognition be ethically legitimate if it denies recognition to others? From a Hegelian perspective, genuine recognition must be mutual and universalizable [1; 9]; the far right's demand for recognition is self-contradictory because it constructs others as unworthy of recognition.

All three cases confirm the hypothesis that ontological insecurity and the failure of recognition are the common denominators [8; 9]. When groups — ethnic minorities, nationalist communities, or the «forgotten» working class — feel their identity, culture, or existence is denied, they resort to radical means, either violent separatism or populist exclusion [10; 13]. Conversely, when states and societies acknowledge and accommodate difference, the appeal of violence and extremism wanes [4; 10]. The persistence of far-right populism in France, however, suggests that the crisis of recognition remains unresolved at the level of the national majority, feeding a cycle of othering and political instability [16; 19]. This points to a broader crisis of liberal democracy itself: when representative institutions fail to address existential and cultural anxieties, they create a vacuum that populist and extremist forces fill [18].

Importantly, the study also reveals the double standards in Western responses: while European states often frame nationalist movements in the Global South as «freedom struggles,» they treat similar movements within Europe as threats to territorial integrity [9; 12]. This inconsistency undermines the universalist claims of Western liberal democracies and points to the power politics behind recognition, as Schmitt would argue [6; 8] — the sovereign is he who decides on the exception, including who counts as a friend and who as an enemy.

Conclusion

This comparative philosophical analysis has demonstrated that ethnic nationalism, terrorism, and far-right populism in Europe are not merely products of economic deprivation or political malfunction but are deeply intertwined with ontological insecurity and the struggle for recognition. The cases examined, each distinct, converge on a common logic: when individuals and collectives perceive their identity as threatened or denied, they may embrace radical ideologies and, in some instances, violence as a means of asserting existence and demanding recognition [5; 9].

Key conclusions are:

1. Recognition is foundational. Hegel's dialectic [1; 12] shows that identity formation is intersubjective; when the demand for recognition is systematically rejected, the subject may turn to violent self-assertion. ETA and the IRA both emerged from long histories of denial, and their radicalization was fueled by state repression [4; 12]. Conversely, when recognition is granted (autonomy, language rights, power sharing), the ground for violence shrinks [12; 16]. The Basque Statute of Autonomy and the Good Friday Agreement are empirical testaments to this principle.
2. Violence is self-defeating. Arendt's insight [3; 8] that violence cannot generate power is empirically supported. ETA and the IRA both lost public support as their violence became indiscriminate and divorced from political goals [13; 15]. The peace processes in Spain and Northern Ireland show that sustainable solutions require negotiation and consensus, not military victory [19]. Violence may force attention, but it cannot build legitimacy or lasting political order.

3. Far right populism exploits ontological insecurity in a different but parallel way. In France, the National Front transforms economic and cultural anxieties into a politics of enmity, constructing immigrants and Muslims as existential threats. This is a pathological response to the crisis of modernity and the erosion of traditional identities, offering a false sense of security through exclusion [16; 17]. Unlike separatist movements, however, the far right operates within the state and seeks to capture it, turning the struggle for recognition into a struggle for dominance.

4. A philosophical turn in policy is needed. Overcoming these crises requires more than economic or institutional reforms. It demands a fundamental rethinking of how we understand self and Other — moving from Sartre's adversarial gaze [5; 7] to a Hegelian ethic of mutual recognition [1; 13], and from Arendt's warning against violence [3; 25] to the prioritization of deliberative power [6; 8]. This means that policy-makers must engage not only with material grievances but also with symbolic, cultural, and existential dimensions of conflict.

5. The double standard of recognition must be confronted. The study raises an ethical provocation: if similar movements had emerged outside Europe, would they have been treated with the same procedural respect? This question exposes the double standards inherent in international politics and calls for a more consistent application of recognition principles globally [9; 12]. The philosophical approach adopted here offers a robust lens for understanding the deep roots of political violence and extremism, reminding us that the real battle is not over territory or resources, but over the meaning of human existence and the recognition of our shared humanity [8; 9].

Finally, this study invites further research into how deliberative democratic innovations — such as citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, and intercultural dialogues — might institutionalize recognition and reduce ontological insecurity before it escalates into violence or extremism. The philosophical framework developed here can also be extended to other regions and conflicts, offering a humanistic and critical perspective on the most pressing political challenges of our time.

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Бірегейлік, зорлық-зомбылық және мойындау үшін күрес: философиялық талдау

Зерттеуде Еуропадағы ұлтшылдық, терроризм және оңшыл радикалдык қозғалыстар Испания, Ұлыбритания және Франция мысалдарында талданды. Негізгі тезис мынада: бұл құбылыстарды тек экономикалық теңсіздікке, жұмыссыздыққа, көші-қонға немесе саяси дағдарыстарға негізделген құрылымдық түсіндірулерге ғана жатқызуға болмайды. Керісінше, олар онтологиялық қорғансыздыққа, мойындау үшін күреске және экзистенциалдық мәнді іздеуге негізделген. Зерттеу Гегельдің мойындау диалектикасына, Сартрдың Басқа феноменологиясына, Аренттін зорлық-зомбылық сынына және Шмиттін саяси ұғымына сүйене отырып, бұл мәселелердің бірегейлікті қалыптастырумен, өзгешелендіру тәжірибелерімен, зорлық-зомбылықтың заңдылығымен және саяси өкілдік дағдарыстарымен байланысын ашады. Талдау үш жағдайды қамтиды: мемлекеттік репрессия жағдайындағы этникалық ұлтшылдық пен террористік ұйымдар; сектанттық және отарлық тарихпен қалыптасқан этно-діни қақтығыстар; сондай-ақ экономикалық және мәдени алаңдаушылықтарды пайдаланатын оңшыл радикалды популистік қозғалыстардың күшеюі. Нәтижелер көрсеткендей, өз бірегейлігін жоққа шығарылған деп қабылдайтын топтар радикалды идеологияларды және өз болмысын бекіту мен мойындауды талап ету үшін зорлық-зомбылықты қабылдауы мүмкін. Мемлекеттер айырмашылықтарды өзара мойындау арқылы ескергенде, экстремизм тартымдылығын жоғалтады. Зерттеудің қорытындысы бойынша, осы дағдарыстарды еңсеру үшін басқаны жау ретінде қарастырудан өзара мойындау этикасына көшу, зорлық-зомбылықтан гөрі делиберативтік билікке басымдық беру және саяси радикалданудың негізінде жатқан экзистенциалдық алаңдаушылықты жою қажет.

Кілт сөздер: мойындау, мойындау диалектикасы, онтологиялық қорғансыздық, басқа, феноменология, интерсубъективтілік, саяси теология, экзистенциализм, саяси философия, бірегейлік, зорлық-зомбылық.

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Идентичность, насилие и борьба за признание: философский анализ

В исследовании анализируются национализм, терроризм и праворадикальные движения в Европе на примерах Испании, Великобритании и Франции. Центральный тезис заключается в том, что эти явления не могут быть сведены к структурным объяснениям, основанным исключительно на экономическом неравенстве, безработице, миграции или политических кризисах. Напротив, они укоренены в онтологической незащищённости, борьбе за признание и поиске экзистенциального смысла. Опираясь на гегелевскую диалектику признания, феноменологию Другого Сартра, критику насилия Арентд и определение политического Шмитта, исследование раскрывает связи между этими проблемами и конструированием идентичности, практиками инаковости, легитимностью насилия и кризисами политического представительства. Анализ охватывает три случая: этнический национализм и террористические организации в условиях государственных репрессий; этнорелигиозные конфликты, обусловленные сектантской и колониальной историей; и рост праворадикальных популистских движений, эксплуатирующих экономические и культурные тревоги. Результаты показывают, что группы, воспринимающие свою идентичность как отрицаемую, могут принимать радикальные идеологии и прибегать к насилию для утверждения своего существования и требования признания. Когда государства признают различия через взаимное признание, привлекательность экстремизма ослабевает. В заключении делается вывод о том, что преодоление этих кризисов требует перехода от враждебного восприятия Другого к этике взаимного признания, приоритета делиберативной власти над насилием и устранения экзистенциальных тревог, лежащих в основе политической радикализации.

Ключевые слова: признание, диалектика признания, онтологическая незащищённость, другой, феноменология, интерсубъективность, политическая теология, экзистенциализм, политическая философия, идентичность, насилие.

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