

# **POLITICAL VOICES AND EVERYDAY CHOICES: AESTHETIC MODES OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM**

**Frédéric Nadeau,**  
Institut national de la recherche scientifique  
[frederick.nadeau@ucs.inrs.ca](mailto:frederick.nadeau@ucs.inrs.ca)

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Modernity as a historical condition is characterised by a certain range of political institutions, at the centre of which we find the ‘nation-state’ (Giddens 1998, 94). Indeed, we have reached a point where it is now difficult to think outside its underlying matrix: the world as we know it is a world of nation-states (Beck and Sznaider 2006). However, in the last few decades, the processes we group under the umbrella term of “globalization” have had a tremendously negative impact on the legitimacy and authority of the nation-state (Bauman 2001; Beck and Beck-Greinsheim 2001), as well as major cultural consequences (Appadurai 1996; Castells 2000). One such consequence has been the emergence of new actors on the public social and political scenes, coming from outside of officially recognised political and corporate systems, such as professional organizations, citizens’ issue-centred initiatives and social movements, and individuals (Bakardjieva 2009, 94), as well as a restructuring of the ways citizens interact with political institutions, often prompting more “cultural” forms of activism (*e.g.* Burk 2015; Murphy and O’Driscoll 2015). However, another consequence has been a distancing from institutional state politics and other publicly

visible forms of contentious politics, toward modes of political engagement that are increasingly deployed in the private sphere and day-to-day life. For Giddens (1991), life politics “concerns political issues which flow from processes of self-actualization in post-traditional contexts, where globalizing influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realization influence global strategies” (1991, 214). It is a politics of life decisions; which in turn affect self-identity. Detached from traditional scripts, individuals must now reflexively craft their own lives in a world characterised by risk and insecurity. They must become “designers, jugglers, and stage director of their own biography, identity, social networks, commitment and convictions” (Beck 1997, 95).

Researchers have analysed how these phenomena are empirically reflected in the way contemporary citizens — especially young people —engage politically. The work of Harris and her colleagues (2010), for example, illustrates a clear turn toward forms of DIY politics (Bennett 2012, 20) and “ordinary” civic practices — *i.e.* forms of political engagement where civic actors use everyday and individual activities to participate and create change in their local environments — in a context where individuals feel increasingly excluded, or marginalised from formal political arenas. In trying to pin down what she calls “subactivism”, Bakardjieva (2009) speaks of “small-scale, often individual decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both), and remain submerged in everyday life” (Bakardjieva 2009, 96). In this perspective, Boudreau (2017) thus compels us, as social scientists, to start looking for politics in different places and to be sensitive to emerging, unusual political forms. These can “range from simple curiosity about different worlds to articulated political opinions, from art production to street demonstrations, from dumpster diving to skateboarding, from poetic manifestos to critical

journalism, from an act of assertion imposing your undesired presence near the subway station to growing kale on the sidewalk” (Boudreau and Rondeau forthcoming, 18).

What characterises these emerging modes of political engagement is that they do not emanate from organizations; they do not have leaders; they do not formulate clear and specific demands; and, most importantly, they do not take the state as their main interlocutor (Boudreau 2017). Boudreau and Rondeau define these modes of political engagement as *aesthetics* — from the Greek *aisthetikos*, which denotes “communication or perception with the senses”. They argue that if modernity tends to associate politics with a deliberative process of rational argumentation to reach a consensual common good (Habermas 1984), the aesthetic mode of political action is concerned with lower registers of experience than the conscious and reflective register of ideas, doctrines, and interests. It is through the expression of feelings (suffering, disrespect, indignation, anger, or fear) and their public justifications that a public cause is created in today’s world. Emotions, memories, infra-sensible experiences, habits, and everyday gestures cannot always be articulated at the level of language, yet they play a role in shaping our experience within the world. In this sense, aesthetic political actions correspond to what Connolly (1999, 27) identifies as, “visceral modes of appraisal”.

This type of micropolitics focuses on “the practices of everyday life and includes radical changes in lifestyle, speech, bodies, sexuality, communication, and everything else in between that provides the preconditions for a new society” (Best and Kellner, 1991, 116). According to Bennett and Shapiro (2002, 5), “the aim is to encourage a more intentional project of reforming, refining, intensifying, or disciplining the emotions, aesthetic impulses, urges, and moods that enter into

one's (...) ideological commitments and policy preferences". In this perspective, political engagement is experienced first and foremost as an embodied relationship to the Self and translates into the adoption of a certain discipline or lifestyle. This is not completely estranged from the Aristotelian conception of virtue, which is only attainable through an active self-cultivation. In contemporary societies, political engagement is increasingly conceived of and enacted as an "art of existence" – or, in other words, a "technique of the Self" – defined by Foucault as, "reflexive and voluntary practices by which men [sic] not only set themselves rules of conduct, but seek to transform themselves, in their most singular being, and make their life into an *œuvre* that carries certain values and meets certain stylistic criteria" (1984, 10-11).

This is what I mean when I speak of the "aestheticization of everyday life" as a mode of political engagement. I want to pinpoint emerging modes of political engagement that often remain invisible to traditional approaches in political science and social movements studies, and that are primarily oriented toward an ethical work on the Self as a way to act on society, in a context where formal democratic institutions are either inaccessible or openly contested. These aesthetic modes of political engagement are less about formulating demands to the state or trying to persuade others to adhere to our views through rational argumentation. Rather, they are about adopting a certain lifestyle and enacting, through everyday embodied practices, the world one would like to live in. In this sense, it is familiar with a "prefigurative" conception of politics that considers that the ontological divide between theory and practice — one of the most traditional dichotomies of Western political-philosophical thought — must be overcome (White and al. 2016). This type of prefigurative outlook, often associated with anarchist movements, posits that "the means of (...) politics need to be aligned with its ends" (Frenzel 2014, 905), and that it is only in the ongoing

enactment of our actual daily performance that social change can be called into being (Sealey-Huggins 2016).

In this paper, I present empirical data drawn from an ethnographic research project on processes of radicalization and engagement in right-wing extremism<sup>i</sup> in Quebec, Canada. The data collection spanned over a period of four years — from September 2013 to August 2017 — during which I conducted a series of participant observations at social and political events, organised by activists from three different groups (which will remain unnamed for ethical reasons), ranging from official meetings, concerts, marches, conferences, leafleting activities, food distributions, birthdays parties, informal gatherings, and evenings at the local pub. These observations were supplemented by the collection of ten “life history” interviews with activists from the three groups. The aim of the research was to focus on individuals within the movement and explore their pathways to political engagement in order to better understand the dynamics at work in processes of radicalization. As the title of John Horgan’s (2008) article suggests, I wanted to shift my attention from “profiles to pathways” and from “roots to routes.”

I chose here to focus my attention on two specific cases, exploring the life histories of Joan and Jim in order to understand their trajectory into political engagement and the way their experience is embedded in their everyday lives. Joan is a 20 year-old woman who lives in a Montreal suburb. She is completing a college degree in natural sciences and does not belong to any organised group. I first met her at a concert in June 2015, where we spent part of the evening outside the venue, smoking cigarettes and talking. we got along well, and although we never made plans to meet, we would often run into each other at this kind of social event. She agreed to take part in the interview

portion of my research, and we met in a Montreal café on August 25, 2016, where she told me about her personal history in a single three-hour-long session. Jim, for his part, is a 28 year-old man who lives in Quebec City. He studies social sciences at university level, and co-manages an organization whose primary activity is to hold monthly discussion circles (and conferences) where members of various groups converge to network, speak about current events, discuss their ongoing projects, and potentially develop collaborative actions. Two years into the fieldwork, these monthly reunions had become my main point of entry into the world of right-wing extremism in Quebec, and this is where I met most of the respondents that took part in the individual interviews. Since I was often among the first to arrive and the last to leave — because I strategically wanted to maximise the number of interactions with the activists — I had multiple occasions to discuss with Jim while helping him prepare the room before and after the events. He enthusiastically accepted my request for an interview, and so we met twice in July 2017, at his apartment: first for a two-hour-long session focusing on his personal history, and then a few days later for a three-hour-long interview, during which we addressed more specifically his political activities from the organizational perspective of the group he had helped establish. Both Joan and Jim explicitly supported the political ideology of national socialism and could therefore be considered “neo-nazis” (which was not the case for the majority of my respondents, many of whom vehemently rejected any references to national socialism and described themselves as nationalists, patriots, identitarians, or neo-fascists).

Although it might be a little unusual (but not unprecedented<sup>ii</sup>) for an academic paper to focus on such a limited number of cases, I chose to do so because I wanted the reader to dive deep into the personal lives of these activists, to whom we rarely have access in the literature. Through a

comprehensive and thick account of their respective pathway into extreme right politics, I wanted to expose all the complexities and the range of ambivalent emotions involved in what many would label a process of “radicalization”. These two cases were selected because they exemplify with clarity the “aestheticization of everyday life” as a mode of political engagement. However, I want to underscore that any one of the interviews I conducted could have been used to make a similar argument: although the pathways, turning points, justifications, and meanings attached to it may have varied, all my respondents experienced their political engagement primarily as a way of constructing themselves as political subjects in a context where they felt increasingly isolated, powerless, and disenchanted by politics and society in general. In the first section, I will show that both Joan and Jim were initially drawn to right-wing extremism not because they fundamentally believed in the ideas of national socialism, nor because they had a fundamentally racist ethos. Rather, I will argue that their engagement in right-wing extremism was essentially about (re)gaining a sense of control over their life in a world that seemed to elude and ignore them. We will see that in both cases, politics was first and foremost experienced as a set of practices meant to aestheticise everyday life (Section 2), and I will depict how this displacement corresponds to an attempt at re-enchanting the(ir) world (Section 3).

Although these conclusions are based on the observation of extreme right activists, I argue that they can extend to inform analyses of many other types of contemporary social movements (anarchists, environmentalists, feminists, vegans, etc.), who also use aesthetic mode of political action centred on lifestyle and prefigurative politics. This particular mode of political engagement often remains invisible to the analysis of social scientists, whose work focuses primarily on political “participation” within formal institutions — as opposed to political “engagement” (which refers

to more holistic interactions with one's environment) —, or on public and visible forms of political action and protest politics. The data I present here show that political engagement is also deployed in the private spheres of the everyday, often in silent ways, as a relationship to the Self.

More generally, I argue that aesthetic modes of political engagement force us to rethink our conception of what is "political", and to reconsider the way we apprehend received dichotomies, such as traditional and non-traditional; formal and informal; institutional and non-institutional; legal and illegal; individual and collective modes of engagements. The emergence of this type of movement in contemporary societies reveals an important paradigmatic shift, from a "modern" conception of politics - focused on rational debate, public space, consequentialism, search for consensus, liberal democracy etc. - and an "aesthetic" conception of politics, which makes use of affects and emotions, and is inscribed in the daily experiences of actors (see Boudreau 2017).

## **2. IT'S NOT (only) IDEOLOGY...**

Much of the literature on radicalization and right-wing extremism has shown that adherence to a given ideology is seldom a motive in the initial decision of joining a movement (Blee 1996; Crettiez and al. 2017; Kimmel 2018; Klandermans and Mayer 2006; Shapira 2013). Rather, feelings of inequity and injustice, and a very acute sense of marginalization and humiliation often serve as driving forces (Alonso and al. 2008, 9). If racist ideologies or xenophobic attitudes do play an important role, it usually appears later in the process of engagement; it is *learned* through action and socialization within the movement, and, above all, it is constantly transforming as activists integrate new ideas and abandon others.



At first, Joan was mainly attracted by the violent, “counter-cultural” aspect of political engagement in right-wing extremism. As a victim of bullying in high school, she became a punk during her final year so that people would leave her alone: *“That’s why I became punk, basically. It’s because I did not want people to approach me. I chose this movement because I thought it was cool: hating everyone, violence... I could just take a step forward and scare people away, so they wouldn’t want to mess with me anymore.”*<sup>iii</sup>

About a year later, she discovered the so-called “skinhead scene,” wherein people were talking a lot about national socialism. Afraid she would appear ignorant, Joan started to read abundantly about it – and the more she read, the more her perceptions changed:

*“You know, when you’re not a very... bright person, when you’re ignorant, you imagine things in your head and you start seeing the world through these distorted ideas. Well, that’s what happened to me. (...) I was becoming like... you know, like the Americans who have their... you know, the cliché of the racist biker. I was heading in that direction. I was becoming a cliché! You know, it was not... It was just hatred. (...) And basically, it was when I wanted to replace this hate with something more logical that I started to really dig into it, read about what it was, and I discovered that it’s about becoming a better person. I saw that it was not what I thought it was: it is not hatred; it’s really about being, “an elite to yourself,” and getting better as a person. And then it started ringing bells with what I wanted to improve inside of me; and it was awesome!”*

In the case of Jim, he was first drawn to political engagement for humanitarian reasons: he wanted to, *“help the poor, distribute medicines, and free oppressed peoples from evil dictators.”* He saw himself as a knight of democracy and a standard bearer of “Canadian values” like international cooperation and charity. However, his numerous engagements in NGOs led him to develop a critical vision of Canada, the, *“self-alleged human rights champion who also sells weapons to repressive regimes and plunders resources from Latin American and African countries.”* He

realised how, in the end, money controls everything and how governments are often themselves powerless in the face of larger financial interests. Drastically disillusioned with democracy, he developed a strong anti-liberal stance. This was a major turning point in his trajectory; trying to make sense of it all, Jim spent almost all of his free time compulsively reading books and watching Youtube videos, whereafter he came to envision the world in terms of the *deep state*:

*“The deep state, that is: a kind of transnational globalist oligarchic power; a system of occult networks, made up of powerful, politically-involved men, leaders of transnational corporations, who exercise power behind the scene by pulling strings and using politics as a puppet show to maintain the illusion of a real democracy. This system is supported by the medias, property of these oligarchs, who use it for legitimizing the puppet show in which we are offered an illusionary left-right divide. They give us two packages from which we are forced to choose, while in reality, they are the same. For example, one year, we might be sick of the government; we replace it by a left-wing government. They pass marxist policies: gay marriage, surrogate motherhood, and eventually artificial uterus, like in Brave New World. They’re giving us that kind of stuff. And then, you’re like: “Wait! They’re going too far. I will vote for the right-wing party next time.” And then we vote for the right-wing party, and they give us big transnational treaties that destroy national sovereignty, etc. etc. The globalist oligarchs at the top are always winners in that game. Whether we vote for the left or the right, we are advancing their agenda. That’s what I gradually discovered as I became interested in “secret societies”: this kind of “deep state” reality.”*

From there, Jim came to think that the only way to counteract the deep state was to become a nationalist:

*“At one point, I realised that the only way to oppose the globalist project – which involves the dissolution of borders and the dissolution of national identities, with the objective of centralizing power on an international level and subverting democracy – the only thing that could be opposed to that was necessarily nationalism. Because who can regulate the conduct of transnational corporations, who can legislate on this if not a sovereign state? Who can dictate how these transnational companies must behave? This is where I realised I had to become a nationalist. It was very reactionary.”*

Here, we clearly see the strategic calculation behind Jim's decision: he does not become a nationalist because he fundamentally loves his country or thinks it is superior, but because he believes the nation-state is the only thing that can act as a bulwark against the excesses of neoliberalism. At first, even immigration is not a relevant issue for him:

*"Like [this other right-wing group], they were really focused on immigration. And I didn't really get it. I was like: 'meh... you know... immigration, immigrants... Seriously, I don't care.' And Islam, I didn't care too much either. For me, it was the 'deep state' that needed to be exposed and destroyed. My goal was to expose and destroy those bastards who hide in secrecy, pull the strings of politics, throw nations against each other in foolish and irrational conflicts, and displace entire populations without giving a damn about the well being of humanity."*

As this section illustrates, engagement in right-wing extremism does not emerge from a firm adherence to a given set of political ideas or because of a fundamentally racist ethos. It grows out of a series of events and experiences in actors' daily lives, and most importantly — as we will see in the next section — it translates mainly as an ethical work on the self to construct themselves as political subjects. If Jim's first steps into right-wing politics indeed appears to be more cognitive and reflective than that of Joan, the next section shows how it rapidly became much more than ideology. Just as anarchism is "as much a posture, an attitude, a frame of mind, and a spirit, as it is a doctrine" (White and al. 2016, 6), so appears to be the case for engagement in right-wing extremism. As Alonso and colleagues (2008) argued, "the reason why many right-wing and skinhead youths joined racist groups was not because they were particularly endeared to racist ideologies but rather because of the attraction that stems from the fulfilment of a number of social and psychological needs such as identity, community protection or simply excitement." (Alonso and al. 2008, 15). Therefore, in order to better grasp how and why people like Joan and Jim might

engage in right-wing extremism, we need to pay attention to the complex ways in which their political engagement is entangled with day-to-day issues.

### **3. GAINING CONTROL OVER ONE'S OWN LIFE AND BUILDING POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY**

When we look at Joan and Jim's pathways into right-wing extremism, many motives for their engagement are profoundly entangled with everyday life issues. As Boudreau (2017, 86) argues, "what pushes us to act politically is more a force of impulsion grounded in everyday life and not merely a force of antagonism (against the "dominant," be it capitalism, the boss, the polluter, the patriarch, etc.)." In this perspective, political engagement is seen as operating at various scales and following different logics of action: some forms of political engagement are loud and visible, but other are silent, hesitant, and unfulfilled, taking the form of, "small encroachments to the ordinary" (Bayat, 2004, 81), with intentions that are often very modestly political. This holds not only for right-wing extremism, but for a wide variety of political engagements in contemporary societies, not all of which are "radical". Bakardjieva (2009), for example, defines "subactivism" as "small-scale, often individual decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and remain submerged in everyday life". These types of actions are located in the private sphere or the small social world, blending ethics and politics, or oscillating around that fuzzy boundary where one merges into the other. According to her, "it's not about political power in the strict sense, but about personal empowerment, seen as the power of the subject to be the person they want to be, in accordance with their moral and political standards" (Bakardjieva 2009, 96). Analysing the "felt politics of charity" Allahyari (2001) explored this process of self-betterment amongst volunteers in charity organizations, which she refers to as "moral selving": "the work of

creating oneself as a more virtuous, and often spiritual, person” (2001, 195). In this section, we will see how Joan and Jim’s engagement in right-wing extremism reflects this general shift toward modes of political engagement that are shying away from state-related contentious politics, to enter an aesthetic regime of political action, where political engagement is experienced first and foremost as an “art of existence”; an embodied relationship to the Self that translates into the adoption of a certain discipline or lifestyle.

As we have seen, Joan was first attracted to right-wing extremism and the skinhead sub-culture because of its violent image, conveyed through popular culture (especially movies such as American History X, Romper Stomper, and Kriegerin). She thought that by appropriating its codes and attitudes, she could break free from her bullies and gain confidence in herself; Joan wanted to stop being a passive and dominated object, and wanted instead to construct herself as a subject endowed with agency. But as she got familiar with the skinhead sub-culture, Joan started noticing flagrant contradictions between what her new friends were doing and what she thought national socialism was about. She realised that skinheads do not live in accordance with the principles they claim to defend. This is firstly because of their lifestyle, which lacks discipline and righteousness: *"When you think about it ... They're angry with everything, but what do they do? They hang out with their friends, get drunk, and try to pick up chicks. You know... what is this? What the hell do you think you're doing?"* Secondly, this is also because of the way she was being treated as a woman. When I asked her how she experienced her condition as a woman in the movement, she replied, *"Not very good. Really not good, in fact! That's why I like national socialism so much. Because the skinheads... When you are a girl, the only way you're allowed to be there, it's either you go out with one of the guy, or you're a tomboy, or you suck everyone's dick. It's the only use*

*for a girl in there. That's why I find it sad. You're not ... You're nothing.*" On the other hand, Joan believes that in national socialism and Nordic mythology – which, for her, are intrinsically linked – women are recognised and celebrated in their own right:

*"Women were just so important to them. In America, it's not the same thing. Women are useless. Just take Christianity ... the holidays... they've all been changed from paganism. Take Christmas for example: in Norse mythology, it was called "Mother's Night". It coincided with the solstice, the rebirth of the sun. And the mother was represented because she was giving birth to the world. SHE was the one who made the people eternal. You know... basically, it was us, women, who supported the people, and who gave birth to all that was happening. The Norse, and after them the national socialists, they really saw the importance of that. That's what I like about it. Today, Christianity has changed that. They came up with Santa Claus, who is a man, when it's supposed to be a celebration of femininity. They have completely erased the importance and centrality of women."*

Feeling excluded and objectified, Joan moved away from the skinhead scene and, in a somewhat paradoxical way, it was from this moment onwards that she became more seriously engaged as a national socialist, meaning she started translating into concrete action what she was reading about in her books. Inspired by what she retained of the national socialist ideology – for instance, the idea of the “complete” person, both an intellectual and an athlete, always in control of her emotions, and perfectly moral – she decided to take her life into her own hands. Joan started exercising, quit using drugs, learned to cook healthy meals, and went back to school. For her, politics was first and foremost synonymous with the adoption of a certain lifestyle and a certain outlook on life and society. Her political engagement thus provided a master frame within which she could shape her daily life. Through her political engagement, she regained confidence in herself: it gave meaning to her actions and specified her place in the world. She knew why she was making all the effort she was making, and it gave her reason to persevere when she wanted to give up:

*“You know, when I read my “SS Notebooks,” it inspires me so much. Like when I’m not feeling well, it warms me up inside and makes me feel so much better. It tells me “why are you so shy? Why do you even think about these things? You have to be strong and proud, and go further in life! You must be an elite to yourself! THAT’s what the notebooks are all about.”*

In short, Joan wanted to emancipate herself as a woman and as a person. Her political engagement, which involves the observance of a disciplined lifestyle, now allows her to gain confidence and construct an image of herself as a subject that is no longer passive: a subject that not only endures, but that can have agency and exert control over her own life.

Like Joan, Jim too felt powerless. After an initial phase of enthusiasm where he would speak with everyone about his new discoveries and the necessity of opposing the “deep state,” some friends started to think he was a little intense – prompting them to distance themselves from him. He then felt increasingly isolated. For Jim, the enemy was too strong and the citizens were too numb: he *“no longer believe[d] in the possibility of a collective awakening.”* This disillusionment with politics triggered a series of existential crises that made him question his identity and his place in the world. With nothing left to lose, he made contact with a Kurdish militia and planned to travel to Iraq to fight alongside them:

*“Because it is an oppressed minority, fighting against something that looks like absolute evil: the Islamic State (ISIS). I had an enemy who represented absolute evil; I had an oppressed people; I had the opportunity to give myself body and soul in a fight, until I lose myself, and it did not bother me; I had the warrior element that was met... Originally, I wanted to be a Blue Beret...”*

When I expressed my surprise, during the interview, that he would be willing to join an essentially radical left, and mostly muslim militia, Jim justified his decision by underlining that he was mostly attracted by their more traditionalist approach to culture and society:

*“That’s one of the things that bothered me: they are communists. But they do allow the co-existence of Christians, Yizidis, Zoroastrians and moderate Muslims. They allow their co-existence; they have a common culture, very family-oriented, very close to what Quebec was at other times. It's very ... You know, the gays, forget about it over there: it's the family, it's ... how could I phrase it... Women are quite free, but it's patriarchal. You get married, over there. You find yourself a woman, you get married, you have children ... There is something of the Ancien Régime which I liked and to which I could have adhered. I could have married a Christian Kurd.”*

Everything was (secretly) arranged: his bags were packed, and he was ready to leave. However, a few weeks before his departure, illness struck. The diagnosis was brutal: mononucleosis. Bedridden for months, all of Jim’s plans suddenly fell apart. He was completely defeated and began a troubled period of partying, sex, drug, and alcohol, while trying to maintain the aura of the perfect Christian (Evangelical) son in front of his parents and community. This lasted for six years:

*“I was not the Marquis de Sade, but I was living a double life. Until one day, I got exhausted from this fight and felt like I was really in ... incongruity? Or rather, at some point, I realised that my life was not up to the ideal I was aspiring to. My ideal is to be married... with a woman... to be faithful, only her, no pornography... just a real human sexuality with someone I love... To have children — minimum three, because otherwise it is an individual for an individual, and I consider procreation as a national and patriotic duty that I will have to fulfill eventually. It's really Cartesian, but... And in my ideal world, you have to be an athlete, a warrior, and an intellectual. Or at least, I think everyone should tend to that.”*

Like Joan, Jim aspired to find a state of moral and physical perfection, but remained largely dominated by his bodily passions. He felt guilty about his lifestyle and lack of personal discipline,



and was inhabited by a profound sense of powerlessness and unfulfillment. He was looking for something to help him turn his life around, to help him regain control over himself.

His first steps out of his situation of moral fatigue and emotional vulnerability happened when he discovered, largely by chance, a group of activists that shared similar interests and convictions as him. On their Facebook page, they were sharing news articles about global politics, immigration, identity, and nationalism. Ideologically, they described themselves as neither left nor right, but they clearly espoused similar discourses as movements generally identified with the “New Right” (Bar-On 2014) or European neo-fascist movements (Froio and Gattinara 2016). In addition, they produced their own “educational” content on issues like health, training and nutrition, family and sexuality, and morality and religion, and they even organised self-defence classes. In other words, they were providing practical guidelines and opportunities to transpose a moral and political ideal into concrete daily actions. The leaders of the group, many of whom had previous military experience, were strong masculine figures: they were virils and they could fight, but they were also “intellectuals” who were interested in discussing philosophy and theology. Jim was strongly attracted to the group and badly wanted to become part of it. He thought it would be the perfect environment to meet like-minded people, get motivated, feel useful, and eventually succeed in his objective of becoming a “better,” morally perfect person. He wanted to join not only because of ideological reasons, but because of the lifestyle, the self-image, and the confidence that he imagined his participation would bring.

Thus, Jim eventually joined the group and through his engagement, finally came out of what he calls his “*undiagnosed depression*” mostly by actively putting into practice a daily discipline that

was in line with his political ideas: he quit using drugs and went back to the gym to correspond to the image of the physically fit citizen of national-socialism; he stopped using Tinder<sup>iv</sup> and reduced his alcohol consumption in order to avoid promiscuity and immorality; and he enrolled at a university to pursue further education. Through his participation in the group, he was also introduced to a community of Catholic traditionalists. Jim had always been very religious, but as we have seen, he had largely abandoned the church, and his newly acquired political ideas had left him under the impression that modern Christianity was corrupted by liberalism, human rights ideology, and Freemasonry. However, the small religious community to which he was introduced offered a very orthodox interpretation of Catholicism, with doctrinal positions far more conservative than the official positions of the Roman Catholic church, and miles away from the Protestant ethic he was socialised into. Their discourses blended religion with ethnicity, history, and nationalism. It thus provided an interpretative framework within which Jim could perfectly fit his political views: he was not just fighting a temporal fight against materialistic forces – he was serving God and his actions were inscribed within a larger transcendental scheme. This gave a brand new momentum to his political engagement: mass became part of his weekly routine, and he started spending many of his Saturday afternoons doing different types of community work either alone or with members of another far-right group.

#### **4. POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AS THE AESTHETICIZATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE: A QUEST FOR RE-ENCHANTMENT**

As many authors has pointed out, this shift toward a more “personalised” politics (Bennett 2012) is often prompted by the impression of being excluded or marginalised from formal democratic institutions (Bang 2004; Harris and Roose 2014). In their research on Australian youths, Harris

and her colleagues (2010) have noted how young people today often feel “disenchanted with political structures that are unresponsive to their needs and interests”, and how this prompts “participatory practices that are not oriented towards spectacular anti-state activism or cultural politics but take the form of informal, individualised and everyday activities” (2010, 10). Crettiez and colleagues (2017) also observed that for both jihadists and nationalist activists, this “denial of recognition” — defined as the feeling that oneself or one's group is being denied by others the capacity to act autonomously to shape society, hence, more generally, the feeling of not having one’s intrinsic value recognised — might serve as a powerful driver toward engagement in radical (and often violent) political movements.

When we analyse the trajectories of Joan and Jim, we see that they did not become politically engaged because they believed in national socialism as an ideology; rather, their engagement was about (re)gaining a sense of control over their life in a world that seemed to elude and ignore them. Joan was bullied and felt helpless in the face of her tormentors. During the interview, she highlighted how she felt she was not taken seriously by her teachers – and by adults, in general – when she tried to speak out about her situation, as they would either take an opposing stance against her or do nothing to remedy the situation, a pattern also identified by Mattsson and Johansson (2018). Joan also criticised the fact that other people at her school could wear clothes decorated with communist symbols like hammers and sickles to express their belonging and political preferences, while she could not do the same without fear for her physical security and her future employability. In brief, she spoke of a profound feeling of injustice and marginalization.

Comparably, Jim felt helpless in the face of what he identified as a hyper-powerful global elite who managed to deceive the entire population – except for himself and a handful of other “*wiser than average*” people. He felt that he was being “*hunted down*” by “*the system*” that sought to silence people like him. On many occasions during the interview, he evoked his fear that people around him would start to question his mental health and label him as being “*crazy*” because of his conspiracism views – when ironically to Jim, he was, in fact, the one that was seeing reality as it really was. This was the moment he chose to withdraw from everything (his social life, job, family, etc.) and planned to go fight – and eventually die – alongside the Kurds.

In the case of both Jim and Joan, it was ultimately the feelings of helplessness and marginalization that led them to a state of emotional vulnerability; for both our protagonists, engagement in right-wing extremism provided a sense of empowerment in a context where they felt excluded and powerless. In a related vein, Pilkington (2016) showed how English Defence League (EDL) members in the United Kingdom also strongly feel that they are the victims of marginalizing practices, both by Muslims, who look down on them as “infidels” (or, in other words, as morally inferior people), and by the government, which sides with minorities and tries to silence the EDL through accusations of racism (see also Busher 2016). Anger — amplified by the conviction that this phenomenon goes unrecognised by the media — is framed within a discourse of injustice. For activists, participation in the EDL movement becomes a site to resist the self-perception that they are “second-class” citizens. Even though they are aware that their protests will most likely remain politically insignificant, the idea is simply to be there physically and to stand “loud and proud”, as the title of Pilkington’s book suggests. Activism in the EDL is a response to a perceived, “politics

of silencing” and yields a form of “embodied agency” that defies the impression of “social weightlessness” through the practice of being seen and being heard (Pilkington 2016, 203).

Similarly, for Joan and Jim, political engagement is about overcoming an impression of such “social weightlessness.” However, in their case, it does not take the form of collective action in a public space, as with the EDL; they experience their political engagement as something more aesthetic, as a conflictual relationship with themselves – for instance, their morality and daily actions – rather than with the state. I do not imply that these emerging aesthetic modes of political engagement are devoid of collective dimensions and become strictly individual. For both respondents, there is a strong sense of belonging to a larger movement and, in Jim’s case, his engagement also translated into participation in an organised group, whose mission is to develop a network of activists and organizations with similar political views. Therefore, it is important to note that aesthetic logics of action more often than not overlap with more rational and consequentialist logics of action. Nevertheless, even in the case of Jim, the initial driver for his political engagement was, as he puts it, a desire to become a “better person”.

This type of engagement corresponds to what Foucault (1984) described as the art of existence (or the techniques of the Self). In *History of Sexuality*, he refers to the concept of *enkrateia*, defined as, “the active form of self-control, the everyday resistance and struggle of the individual to maintain its dominance in the realm of desires and pleasures” (1984, 87-8). The Greek ideal of a good, moral, and decent life, was essentially based on the idea of temperance and self-control in all spheres of life: food and alcohol, sexuality, politics, and so on. But this temperance had to be fought for, if it was to reflect the virtue of the person: if you were never tempted in something,

then there was no merit in your abstinence from it in the first place. According to this perspective, then, the individual who seeks to live up to a certain moral ideal would deliberately choose to impose certain restrictions on himself, and would take pleasure and pride in his moderate lifestyle. “The battle to be fought, the victory to be won, and the defeat he is likely to suffer”, says Foucault, “are processes and events that take place between an individual and himself. The adversaries he must fight in order to live a moral life are not simply in him or near him: they are him” (1984, 91).

Joan and Jim conceive of their political engagement primarily in terms of a relationship to the body and a set of daily practices. Politics is, in many respects, an art of existence. Joan employs an interesting formula when she says that for her, engagement in national socialism is essentially about becoming “*an elite to yourself*.” Jim likewise shares a similar conception when he argues that “*everyone should strive to become an athlete, a warrior, and an intellectual*” or, in other terms, to achieve physical, intellectual, and moral perfection (the warrior symbolizing the “moral” element of the triptych because of its association with the romantic ethos of courage, honour, and sacrifice). For both Joan and Jim, the bulk of their political engagement aims to make their daily life correspond to a certain image of the “good life.” It takes the form of going the gym more regularly, cooking their own healthy meals, dressing and trimming their hair a certain way, going back to school, reading books, staying informed on current affairs, and so on. For Joan, her engagement also took the form of moving away from the skinhead scene and reconnecting with her sister (because family values are important). For Jim, it also materialised in his weekly attendance of church services. For both respondents, then, the main driver of political engagement is this idea of self-refinement and self-perfectibility. It is almost only incidental that they also want

to, “change the world” and have an impact on society. When I asked Jim what he was getting from his political engagement, he responded with:

*“The feeling of accomplishment. I feel that I am working on something bigger than myself, but which allows me to fulfill and accomplish myself at the same time. I construct myself while working for something bigger than myself. That's what motivates me.*

*What it represents for me is the possibility of working (physically, socially, ideologically) in favour of my ideals; to steer my life in the direction of my values and convictions. I live in “congruence”. In psychological theories, we are happy to the extent that we live in congruence with our ideals, and fulfill ourselves and fulfill our ideals, and all that. So we can say that I reach congruence this way. It's like ... I live in conformity with what I believe in.”*

What we observe through the individual stories of Joan and Jim is the politicization of the intimate. For them, political engagement is not synonymous with street protest, electoral participation, or petitions; it's not even so much collective in nature. Rather, it is mainly about self-realization: gaining confidence, developing a sense of purpose, having moral guidelines, belonging to a community, and even just getting a thrill from their participation in a “controversial movement.” As Pisoiu (2015) noted, the counter-cultural dimensions of engagement in right-wing extremism become strikingly evident when we do fieldwork and come in close contact with right-wing extremists. Like the punks, hippies, and many more before them, right-wing extremism today is also much about subverting the system of institutions and values inherited from past generations. Ring-wing extremists are well aware that their discourses and behaviours cause discomfort among the general population – and as Joan notes, this is precisely the point:

*“It's not a good attitude, I'll admit to it. But I just find it kind of funny. I think it's funny the way people react to that [i.e. the way I look and the symbols I wear on my clothes]. That's what amuses me; I like it when people ... I like that they look at me all puzzled, you know! Haha! If you're “normal,” people... they don't look at you, You are nothing.*

*But here, you shock them a little, you provoke a little discomfort, and you make them question themselves in their heads.”*

Joan consciously wishes to provoke; there is an element of pleasure at play, as well as an element of asserting her own political subjectivity. When she says, “*if you are normal, (...) you are nothing*”, she is constructing herself as a subject endowed with agency. What we see is that for both respondents, political engagement is largely put in action through the aestheticization of everyday life: Joan and Jim’s way of engaging politically is by modelling their everyday actions and disciplining their bodies in order to (try to) live a life according to a romanticised ideal they have gradually come to incorporate as they were getting familiar with the national socialist ideology. Important personal decisions such as getting married and having children – but also everyday, banal choices such as buying local products, going to the gym, and even refraining from watching pornography – are infused with strong political meaning.

## CONCLUSION

The dynamics I discussed in this paper are far from exclusive to the specific Québécois context and have been observed throughout an array of contexts on an international level by other researchers that have adopted an ethnographic standpoint sensitive to the everyday reality of actors engaged in right-wing extremism. In Germany, Shoshan (2008) demonstrates how extreme rightists construct a definition of their political identity that is deeply rooted in the quotidian experiences of the multi-ethnic city, and the sensualities that characterise their shifting urban landscape. For these young Germans, “the geography of alterity gains life through the sights, sounds and smells that permeate the city and that become attached to tangible sites in the physical landscape” (2008, 383). Through his analysis, he thus shows how, on a day-to-day basis, “ultra-



nationalists *live out* rather than resolve the contradictions of a bigoted politics” (2008, 379; emphasis added). For Fangen (1999), studying Norwegian neo-nazis, this type of engagement can be interpreted as a response to feelings of social exclusion and marginalization that translate into a quest for belonging in which political engagement helps actors to gain self-confidence and better social skills. In the United States, Blee (1996, 689) underlined how engagement in right-wing extremism may operate as a process of self-transformation, resembling a dynamic of conversion (to religion, feminism, or sobriety), and that for the women who engage in right-wing extremism, their engagement may act as a way to regain a sense of control over their own lives. In Sweden, Teitelbaum has observed how, in a context where openly anti-democratic, anti-liberal, and ultranationalist forces have been relegated to the utmost margins of society (see Griffin 2006), many Swedish ethno-nationalists retreat from standard forms of activism on the basis that current political battles are irrelevant. Instead, they resort to a non-interventionist and passive strategy he calls *apolitea*, which assumes that “modernist sociopolitical orders shackling the anti-liberal cause will soon collapse from their own shortcomings, and that the task for nationalists is thus to privately identify and nourish resources as they await the arrival of a new era with new possibilities” (Teitelbaum 2017, 161). Therefore, although the limited number of cases presented in this paper may constitute a limit to the generalization of my results, a comparison with other contexts around the world allows me to strengthen the argument I am trying to make. For Joan and Jim, political engagement is about constructing themselves as political subjects in a context where they feel increasingly isolated, powerless, and disenchanted by politics and society in general. There is a clear continuity between their everyday lives and their political engagement and, in this perspective, it is characteristic of what multiple authors (Bang 2004; Bennett 2012; Boudreau 2017; Harris and Rosse 2014; Lichterman 1996) have identified as emerging logics of political

action in contemporary western societies, which are less centred on public claim-making or on promoting a given set of ideologies, but rather, are oriented toward the “aestheticization” of everyday life, where the subject’s body becomes the main locus of politics.

In this perspective, engagement in right wing extremism could be compared to other contemporary forms of “prefigurative” political engagement, which are also less about debating arguments than about embodying the changes that one would like to see in society (see Frank 2003; Sealey-Huggins 2016; White and al. 2016). “The personal is political”, as once wrote Hanisch (1969). We could take veganism, for example, which is characterised by the implementation, in a person’s daily life, of a set of moral and political convictions. Giroux (2017) argues that by adopting a certain set of behaviours, vegans foreshadow the society they envision for the future. Veganism, as a daily practice, thus appears simultaneously as the practical result of a moral and political disposition, *and* a tool for the transformation of empirical social conditions. In a different register, discussing how the virtue of modesty is enacted in the everyday life of Muslim women from the mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood (2005) underlines that for a majority of her respondents, bodily behaviour is at the core of the proper realization of the norm: “the veil both expresses “true modesty” and is the means through which modesty is acquired. [These women] draw an ineluctable relationship between the norm (modesty) and the bodily form it takes (the veil)” (Mahmood 2005, 23). Jim expresses something similar when he says that the main benefit he gets from his political engagement is the feeling that: “ *I am working on something bigger than myself, but which allows me to fulfill and accomplish myself at the same time*”. He communicates a desire for a “better” society composed of more moral and wholesome individuals — the athlete, warrior, intellectual triptych —, and his engagement, which mainly takes the form of daily, bodily routines (refraining

from drinking alcohol or from engaging in casual sex, going to the gym, etc.) is both the practical result of his political aspirations and the tool for constructing this envisioned society.

This is not to say that other logics of action have ceased to exist: other regimes of engagement – utilitarian, consequentialist, etc.– continue to overlap with the aesthetic logic of action. However, we do observe that in a context where citizens feel increasingly disconnected from political elites, and from democracy in general, political engagement is shifting away from public claim-making to focus on the intimate and the ethics of the Self. The individual routes I have analysed here illustrate this process in which political engagement is increasingly oriented toward the “aestheticization of everyday life”, with the individual's body as the main locus of politics. This type of engagement differs substantially from more visible, coordinated actions such as street protests or partisan politics. To this point, the framework of aesthetic politics does not necessarily allow one to explain the differences between ideological preferences. For example, why did Joan chose to become a skinhead rather than a vegan or a feminist? What made her want to become this particular kind of subject? Is the type of agency offered by extreme right activism the same as that of other forms of aesthetic engagement? As Schafer and al. (2013: 175) have noted, engagement in a radical movement is sometimes “much more a product of who you know rather than what you believe”. Could it thus simply be a matter of “chance”? In this light, the framework of aesthetic politics needs to be developed further. But as I have argued, it is clearly representative of a larger trend of political movements acting through emerging logics of action. On the Left, as well as on the Right — and everywhere in between — there is a general feeling of contempt and distrust toward political institutions, and it might not be exaggerated to talk about a “crisis” of modern representative democracy. People want to take back the power, and this is mainly happening outside of traditional institutional politics.

**Frédéric Nadeau,**  
Institut national de la recherche scientifique  
[nadeau.anthropo@gmail.com](mailto:nadeau.anthropo@gmail.com)

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<sup>i</sup> For a discussion on my definition of right-wing extremism, see Nadeau and Helly (2016). In short, I use a two-fold, relational and situational definition: first, it is “right-wing” because it is fundamentally anti-equalitarian and develops around an ideal of social Darwinism, beneficial competition, and meritocracy. And second, it is “extreme” because it goes against generally accepted social norms — most notably the ideals of modern liberal democracy such as deliberation, compromise, the search for consensus, the protection of minorities, etc.) — and because of its propensity toward violence.

<sup>ii</sup> Hamm (2004) for example, contrasts the life histories of two neonazis in his discussion on 'apocalyptic violence' and terrorist subcultures, while Auyero (2003), in his book *Contentious Lives*, explores at length the experiences of two women in Argentinian uprisings while discussing the impacts of these protests in their lives. Another example is Fangen (1999), whose account of activist's entry in the Norwegian radical nationalist subculture relies on a selection of four life histories. Like these authors, my work is based on a larger set of interviews and observations — I conducted ten formal interviews and interacted personally with well over a hundred activists during my four years of fieldwork — but I chose to limit the number of cases presented in this paper

<sup>iii</sup> All excerpts from interviews were translated from French by the author. All quotations from books and articles in French were also translated by the author.

<sup>iv</sup> Tinder is a dating application for mobile devices such as phones and tablets launched in 2012. It is often viewed in popular culture as a casual sex, or “hookup” application (see Lefebvre 2017).