Abstract

This article is about violence and the construction of hyper-masculinity among male left-wing activists in Denmark. It is based on qualitative empirical research among activists in the radical left-wing movement in Copenhagen conducted from 2001–2005. The aim has been to grasp the constructions of political identities and masculinities in the most radical and violent part of the movement. The analysis is twofold: the first part is on gender relations and debates about internal violence in the movement; the second part goes deeper into the construction of hyper-masculinity through narrative life-history interviews with leading activists about political upbringing, political values, gender equality, and confrontations with the police and the neo-Nazis. One of the main findings is that the construct of hyper-masculinity and violence is rooted in the political learning and development that has taken place in the organizations and movements in which activists have participated, in encounters with other violent men, and in the internal political culture within the movement where the norm becomes ‘machismo’, which implies dominance and oppression of women as well as men who cannot live up to the norms. The article emphasizes ambivalences in the male activists’ political identities: on the one hand supporting gender equality and feminism and on the other hand using violence as an essential part of political practice within the movement and sometimes suppressing women.

Key words

political violence, masculinity, left-wing movements, autonomous, political identities
Resistance and violence:
Constructions of masculinities in radical left-wing movements in Danmark

Ann-Dorte Christensen
adc@socsci.aau.dk

Introduction

This article about radical left-wing men in Denmark is inspired by three different sources. The first source is recent research on men and masculinity, which over the past 10 years has seen an increasing focus on extremist groups on the far right in the United States as well as in Europe and Scandinavia. For instance, Michael Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber have analysed the emergence of the White Supremacists in the United States, and Katrine Fangen and Jeppe Lyng have analysed neo-Nazi groups in Norway and Denmark (Fangen 1999, Ferber 1998, Kimmel 2005, Lyng 2007). The analyses show that despite enormous differences in values in the countries and in the social profile, the members of these radical right-wing groups also have quite a lot of common features. The members are primarily white men from the working class or lower middle class who feel emasculated in contemporary society. They are critical towards globalization and multiculturalism; they support traditional values and are very intolerant. They are homophobic, anti-feminist and against people from ethnic minority groups. Finally, they often use violence to express their values. At the other end of the political spectrum are the men in radical left-wing movements. Their political values contradict those of the right-wingers, and the two groups often clash in violent confrontations. However, very little analytical attention had been paid to men in radical left-wing movements.

This takes me to the second source, which is related to global development, where 9/11 and the subsequent discourse on terror concerning the West and the Rest have escalated confrontations worldwide. At the same time the combination of global economy and post-Cold War conflicts has given poverty and masculinity new meaning. Based primarily on investigations in Africa Jane Parpart has emphasized how many young unemployed men as global outsiders are a permanent source for recruitment to military and paramilitary groups (and to criminal violence in relation to the new conflicts) because this is a way for them to find themselves a living and to be socially recognized (Parpart 2008, 2010).
Intensified media coverage brings aggression, hatred and violent forms of expressions around the world into our living room. We see angry hyper-masculine men fighting each other in different hotspots like Iran, the Middle East and Afghanistan. These actions are associated with radical forms of expression regardless of whether the combatants are wearing US battle fatigues, a Hamas’ green headband, traditional Taliban dress or modern guerrilla clothing.

My third and maybe most important source is a research project about women’s political identities that was a part of the Danish Democracy and Power Study made for the Danish Government (Christensen 2003, 2006, 2008). As part of this project I interviewed a group of young women from the radical left-wing movement in Copenhagen in 2001–02. The purpose was to delve deeper into the young women’s political identities and find out why so many young women reject institutionalized forms of political participation (e.g. in political parties and trade organizations). Based on existing survey data I carried out in-depth narrative interviews that focused on the young women’s political socialization, experiences from radical left-wing movements (living as squatter in occupied buildings and other actions) as well as their attitudes towards politics and feminism.

It was a fairly specific and targeted research assignment, and the gender perspective was linked to the young women whereas the masculinity perspective was not the focal point here. The method was low structured qualitative interviews, which allowed new, unplanned topics to appear. In terms of the gender perspective I was surprised that the young women described the environment as very macho and dominated by hyper-masculinity and that violence played a big role – both in political actions and internally in the movement.

This means that topics like gender conflicts, violence and hyper-masculinity emerged from the empirical data. I incorporated gendered division of labour in the radical left-wing movements in my book for the Power and Democracy Study, but only sporadically touched upon the question of violence and masculinities (Christensen 2003).

However, I found the gender and masculinity perspective among the radical left-wingers so interesting that I chose to pursue it. I did so in 2003–2005 by gathering documents on the movement’s debates on violence; via additional life-history interviews with some of the leading male activists in the most violent parts of the movement’s activities; and by attending meetings and conducting informal interviews.

I learned that fieldwork in a radical left-wing movement is difficult, when I worked with the young women and became very dependent on gatekeepers. I later realized that access to the men in the more violent part of the movement was even more difficult because they have constituted themselves as a more closed ‘cell’ with a strong emphasis on safety. The confidence I had gained among some of the leading women in the movement meant, however, that I managed to gain interviews with some of the core activists.

I used different kinds of empirical data: internal documents (for instance the weekly pamphlet Slammt) with debates about gender, violence and arguments and ex-communi-
cation of some male members; Danish newspaper articles about demonstrations, actions, arrests, and some activist profiles; ethnographical studies, primarily attending meetings and conducting 10 informal interviews about gender relation among left-wingers in Aalborg and Copenhagen; 8 narrative interviews with leading activists. The data were collected from 2001–2005. The respondents are anonymised. All names used are pseudonyms, and in addition some biographical data are either swapped or omitted so individuals cannot be identified.

The empirical work was concentrated in two groups of activists in the radical left-wing movement: Antifascistisk aktion [Anti-Fascist Action] (AFA) and Feministisk koordinering [Feminist Coordination] (FC). I chose these groups for two main reasons. First, this was where I thought the trendsetting core activists would be gathered. (Most of the activists were persons who had been in the movements for years and therefore had participated in many of the central discussions.) Second, gender and gender conflicts had been a key demarcation line and conflict issue precisely between these two groups. Although I distinguish between the two groups, I also used the common denominator ‘radical left-wing movement’, which comprises a common resistance identity.

AFA was formed in 1992 by the most militant and elitist segment from the radical left-wing movement. Some of the activists felt a need to do more ‘serious’ and targeted political work. The group started out from a strictly anti-capitalist base that emphasized anti-racism and a critique of the neo liberal global economy. In actuality, however, AFA quickly turned its attention towards xenophobic forces and racism, especially the Danish neo-Nazis. The vast majority of active participants in AFA are men.

FC was formed in 1999 and has roots back to several other feminist groups in both the squatters’ movement and the autonomous environment. FC combines a radical left-wing stance and a radical feminist position. It emphasizes the relation between general social inequalities and women’s oppressed position. It has worked with, among other things, anti-racism, globalization and the fight against the EU. In terms of gender policy it has a strong positive identification with the left-leaning women’s liberation movement from the 1960s and 1970s represented by the Redstockings (Rødstrømpebevægelsen), but it is very critical of modern neo-feminism, which is seen as a project for elite women. FC has both collaborated with and strongly opposed the male dominance in AFA.

The overall purpose of this article is to highlight the construct of violence and masculinity in the radical left-wing movement. The article has three sections. The first section outlines the analytical framework and the context. The focal point is to frame and discuss the radical left-wing movement as a collective resistance identity. The second section analyses the gender relations and debates about internal violence in the movement. The third section looks more deeply at the AFA and the construction of hyper-masculinity through narrative life-history interviews with leading activists about political identities, resistance and violence.
Analytical framework and context

My approach to the radical left-wing movement is inspired by Castells’ notion of resistance identity. According to Castells, the resistance identity is one of the political identity positions in the information society. Castells defines resistance identities as counter-discourses to the dominant identity discourse, mainly among potentially marginalized and stigmatized groups in society. Castells describes this identity type as ’the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded’, and he assigns it a fairly large action and change potential (Castells 1998, 9). The radical left-wing groups in Denmark possess a similar resistance potential, but they deviate from Castells’ resistance identity in the sense that very few belong to marginalized and stigmatized groups. At the same time the resistance identity among Danish left-wingers is deeply rooted in a specific political culture and contentious performance. Charles Tilly has shown how repertoires emerge and change in political contexts and how they vary from weak to strong repertoires (Tilly 2008).

I am also inspired by the social constructivist approach to social movements where the concept of framing thematizes how processes of common understanding are created primarily on the micro-level but also on the meso-level (Olesen 2005, Snow and Benford 1992). Additionally, I find the political process perspective useful, because it underlines the relationship between political opportunity structure, motivation and the creation of different kinds of political identities. For instance Koopman operates with the resistance identity concept, which he divides into instrumental, sub-cultural and countercultural movements. In that perspective, the left-wing radicals comprise both countercultural aspects that focus on conflicts and sub-cultural aspects that focus on the identity forming processes (Koopman 1995, Tilly 2002).

Basically social movement must be understood in the relationship between collective involvement and individual experiences (della Porta and Diani 2006). In this article I use political identities as the key concept in order to underline the elements of political learning and political socialization within the social movement praxis. I define political identities as individuals and social groups’ attitudes and practices towards communities, political institutions and values plus the way they perceive their own role in and affiliation to these elements. The objective of analyses of political identities is to understand the processes where attitudes and values are constructed and changed in relation to individuals’ everyday life, life course, political experiences and political practice. I emphasize the relationship between political identities and the notion of belonging and accentuate that political identities contain both an individual dimension (process of becoming) and a collective dimension (process of belonging) (Christensen and Rasmussen 2009, see also Hall 1991, 1996). Likewise, I stress that individuals and groups in their political identity work indicate both identification and dis-identification with other groups as a key element in defining their own belonging (Skeggs 1997). At the collective level this implies that iden-
ties may be exclusive to other forms of identifications. This means that collective identities cannot occur in the absence of a 'we', which includes on the one hand a positive identification of those participating in a certain group and on the other hand a negative identification of those excluded and opposed (della Porta and Diani 2006, 94, see also Yuval-Davis 2006).²

Context: A common resistance identity?

The present radical left-wing movement in Denmark started in 1981 with the so-called squatters’ movement (BZ-bevegelsen). The movement represented a change in the Danish movement culture because the movement developed a more militant repertoire, inspired by for instance autonomous groups in Germany. The squatters’ movement occupied houses and carried out political actions expressing their views on anti-racism, the environment and global issues (Karpantchof and Mikkelsen 2002).

From the end of the 1980s, the movement experienced a decline, occupying houses vanished as an organizational rallying point and the squatters’ movement broke into autonomous groups. Compared to the squatters, the autonomous groups related more to international events, and they were more willing to make alliances with other protest groups in connection with some of the 1990s’ social conflicts on anti-racism and the political right turn. The Danish autonomous movement gained strength when new activists joined after the dramatic events on 18 May 1993, when police and protesters clashed violently on Nørrebro in Copenhagen after the referendum on the Maastricht Treaty. From approximately 1995 onwards the collective movement was replaced by more loosely organized groups and networks, which I call radical left-wings. AFA and FC has been among the central groups here.

But even though – as we will see later – the two groups’ political identities differ significantly, there are great similarities, which make it relevant to talk about a shared resistance identity. It is first and foremost rooted in common basic attitudes towards democracy, public institutions and societal authorities. It is obvious that this resistance identity has been constructed over many years’ political practice in the radical left-wing environment, but for many of the respondents also through strong family ties to, for example, the communist movement. This upbringing has contributed to a dichotomous understanding of society, where political identities are constructed on a split between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and the state is seen as a clear defender of the rulers’ interests. This dichotomy has probably strengthened the shared resistance identity because the sense of ‘who we are’ has been amplified by a fairly clear understanding of ‘who the others are’.

If you go deeper into these young people’s political socialization and upbringing it seems as if their cultural independence from their parents plays a great role. For instance some of the young children of communists relate to how difficult it was to break with
their parents’ expectations that they join the communist youth organizations. However, although we are talking about conflicts and breaks with the communist tradition, the upbringing in this environment was not only a negative, but also a positive identification in the youngsters’ political identity formation. For instance one of the activists in AFA mentions as one of his greatest strength a political upbringing in a communist milieu and his affiliation to the working class (not the middle-class where many of the other activists came from).

This is true for instance for the left-wing’s criticism of capitalism, the state and the power apparatus of the ruling class. This group of young people is a good example of Ulrich Beck’s ‘freedom children’, where distancing oneself from the formalism and closed nature of existing organizations (on the right as well as on the left) becomes a key element in creating one’s own alternative (Beck 1998).

The radical left-wings do not see themselves as an integrated part of overall society, for example the nation state, and they do not place great significance on citizens’ rights or obligations. Their political identity is based on an alternative – more situated – conception of democracy. The sense of belonging to overall society is very weak or even absent; instead they emphasize concrete political practice, typically rooted either in a local area or in global hotspots. The militant actions and the absence of dialogue with political institutions mean that this form of resistance identity in several ways breaks with the content in the collective political identities, which have typically developed in the Danish political culture based on the interaction between movement politics ‘from below’ and representative politics ‘from above’ (Siim 2000).

If we look at the more specific profile of AFA, it is important to emphasize that this part of the movement was created in a particular historical period in the early 1990s that is characterized by the left-wing losing ground: for example, the Berlin Wall collapses and it is a period of demobilization. At the same time many of the young people’s parents – owing to their affiliation to the communist movements – are experiencing deep personal and political crises. Furthermore the Danish public and Danish policy become more and more critical of immigration and especially legislation for immigrant groups in Denmark (Andreassen 2005, Siim 2007). And finally, this is amplified by one event: the office of the Danish division of the Socialist Workers Party (Internationale socialister) in Copenhagen is bombed in 1992. The attack takes place right next to Ungdomshuset (a gathering place for young people) and generally intensifies the hatred towards the right-wing, which was thought to be behind the attack (Karpantschof and Lindblom 2009).

For some of the radical left-wingers, these events increase the desire to start what they call a ‘more serious’ organization. The outcome is:

- New enemies – neo-Nazis instead of politicians and the police
- More closed ‘cells’ – more security

©Universitetsforlaget | 157
More research and inquiries – ‘where are the Nazis?’

Violence is no longer associated with the police, but rather the neo-Nazis

Demonstrations are replaced by small actions and ‘man-to-man’ combat.

These changes are reflected in the interviews, for instance in these statements from the young male activists:

We no longer wanted to be autonomous. We were tired of that la-la – everything’s gonna be fine! In that way AFA represented a new style: We work, we work really hard and completely seriously. We set goals and we fulfil them. And we don’t have time for nor do we want to bullshit around. (Poul)

The only thing that can keep Nazis away or down is people organizing. Wherever they appear, it is our job to help the locals organized against them. They are the ones who have to say, ‘We don’t want it’. (Jens)

The strategy is to chase the Nazis out of Nørrebro – scare them good and chase them away. And later, in smaller groups […] pick them up, beat them up and chase them away. And it developed into these secret groups of people who said, ‘We don’t mind getting into fights’. And some of them were very macho and really obsessed with violence. In my opinion this is where things got out of hand. (Poul)

Gender relations and violence

It is well known that there may be a contradiction between the ideals of liberty and (gender) equality and the political praxis in radical left-wing movements. (See for instance Bjarke Oxlund’s article about left-wing student politicians in South Africa in this special issue). This applies not least in relation to gender equality. In an analysis of African National Congress (ANC) and the Rape Trial in 2006 against the current President of South Africa Jacob Zuma, Raymond Suttner emphasizes that ANC to a high degree has been based on a continuation of the warrior tradition of resistance, which includes the readiness to use violence (if necessary), to die and the capacity to wound or kill (Suttner 2009, 231). At the same time this warrior tradition is not only based on heroic acts in relation to interpretation of what is expected of a ‘Zulu man’, but also on abuse, rape and power over women.

Another contemporary strong social movement has to a certain degree endeavoured to overcome these contradictions between ideals and reality. Thus the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in their vision for radical democratic citizenship for instance has tried to integrate the gender equality perspective. These efforts have strengthened the
gender equality, and Zapatistas Revolutionary Women have stated equal rights and women’s rights to participate. Among other things this has provided new space, given voice and empowerment to indigenous women. But on the other hand many grassroots activists have been astonished by the reluctance of the male ‘compañeros’ among the Zapatistas’ responses to these issues. And many resourceful women felt alone in their struggle for recognition (Harvey 1998, see also Castillo 2002).

In a Danish and Scandinavian context it is well documented that one of the main arguments for autonomous feminist organization within left-wing movements has been based on a critique of male dominance and gender discrimination within gender mixed movements. In Denmark the influential radical left-wing feminist movement in the late 1960s and the 1970s (The Red Stockings, in Danish: Rødstrømpebevægelsen) is a well-known example of this. Many of the radical feminists in this movement had previously been part of other movements (for instance the Students Movement). From their point of view, for too long had they made ‘tea for revolution’ without finding support for integrating feminist perspectives in left-wing demands for social change and equality (Christensen et al. 2004, Dahlerup 1986).

The autonomous feminist organization in today’s radical left-wing movements, have many common features with the Redstockings. Today the women also oppose male dominance in the movement and are dissatisfied that their feminist visions have not been integrated in the anti-fascist struggle. In meetings I have experienced the women’s dilemma between on the one hand insisting that they are able to participate as well as men in radical political actions but on the other hand formulating resistance to machismo and violent men.

Political activities among the autonomous may soon be ‘macho’ and with a political behaviour far from what girls are brought up to do […] It is political strategies, which we think is important. But the question has been to find three guys who wanted to go out into the street and not ask girls or women who were also there. (Sophie)

One aspect is the use of violence in political action – another aspect is the several examples of internal violence in which men in the movement have been violent towards girlfriends or wives. The same is true of left-wing radicals in Sweden (AFA-Sweden 2001). This has led to intense debates including various procedures (mass meetings, panel debates, flyers and information) where the community has discussed the specific cases in full disclosure. The consequences of violent behaviour have been quarantine and exclusion/outing from the community (often for several years). The exclusion has been extensive – not only exclusion from actions and demonstrations, but also from bars, cafes, parks, playgrounds, etc. For instance a flyer handed out at a meeting in 1996 named an
'outed perpetrator' together with address and a description of a presumed violent incident. It further stated:

We will ensure that she regains her basic rights. Therefore, our requirements are that he immediately and forever abstains from any contact with his ex-girlfriend.

– He never goes to see her either physically, in writing or by telephone.

– That he immediately and in any circumstances leave any private or public spaces where she is present or arrives at.

Flyers, signed 'Feminist Guardian Angels', highlight that if demands are not met, the text will be printed as a poster and put up all over Copenhagen.

From reading the internal magazines and pamphlets and from meetings and interviews I know that these internal cases of violence have been extensive, have created conflicts, and have had great personal cost, both for the men and for the women involved (see Slamm nr. 191/95 and Slamm nr. 197–199/95).

The internal violence cases raise a number of issues concerning gender relations in radical movements. First, it is thought provoking that these forms of oppression of women still take place and apparently to such a large extent that it has a significant influence on the movement. Second, the establishment of the internal justice and ex-communication of suspected perpetrators reflects the importance and the extensive implications of the cases within the movement. In the radical left-wing movement politics is not something you do in your spare time; it is an integrated part of all life areas. Therefore outing/exclusion from all aspects of the community is indeed a harsh sentence. 'It is social isolation that is lethal in the long run’, says Sandra.

It is a crucial question whether there is a connection between political and private violence. But unfortunately it is very difficult to persuade the young men to talk about the internal violent cases. Therefore it has not been possible for me to delve more deeply into this issue.

AFA: Gender profile

When AFA was formed in 1992 a few women participated, and some tried to establish an AFA women’s group. But it quickly turned out that women found it much more difficult than men to participate in violent clashes between the right and left-wing groups.

However, it is important to emphasize that gender equality is an important ideal for the men in the radical left-wing environment. The radical left-wing movement has confronted them with feminist demands, and gender equality has been a topic of hot de-
bate in everyday social relations (e.g. in the occupied houses), in cultural forms of expression and in political actions. Like other men in the radical left-wing environment, AFA men are aware of gender equality. Several of them have participated in ‘The Boy’s Group against Sexism’; they all regret that they did not succeed in keeping the women in the movement, and they acknowledge that the macho profile repulses many women. All of them are deeply affected by the examples of internal assault cases (but at the same time they don’t want to talk about them).

The question of gender equality and sexism seems to constitute ambivalences in the political identity of the male AFA activists: on the one hand they support gender equality and lament the male-dominated and macho image; on the other hand it seems as if they are not able to break this male domination, which they legitimize and reproduce through their increasing focus on the fight with the Nazis.

In the next section I will go deeper into the question of relations between violence and the construction of masculinities in AFA: How do they talk about violence; how do they justify violence; how do they experience the use of violence?

Political learning and encounters with authorities

As mentioned before many of the young people in the radical left-wing movement have parents who have been politically active on the left-wing. Political meetings, demonstrations, actions and not least discussions about politics have been a central part of their childhood. The young people became politically active early on; many moved away from home and into an occupied house at the age of 13 or 14. The majority left school early to become fulltime activists (many of them later completed higher educations; others make a living as professionals in the alternative environment, for example as media workers, printers, or self-defence instructors).

Men and women, from the age of 14 to 16 years old, had been arrested and been in confrontations with the police. It is my impression, though, that the arrests have been more extensive and to a higher extent have led to custody for the men than for the women. It is also my impression that the young men, from starting out as teenagers, have had more confrontations with the police than have the young women.

Poul talks about his first confrontations with the police at the age of 14 or 15:

Well, in the beginning we were pacifists. Me too, very much! My mom really made sure that I took that with me. The enemy is not the police […] For a long time I argued against fighting with the police. But it was difficult because we were doing something really Gandhi-inspired, like sitting down and shouting ‘No Violence – Solidarity’. And we really got beaten up! So we ran. I was totally shocked […] Everybody got scared, people really panicked, ran away.
Sune talks about his shock when as a 13-year-old he participated in an action that was met with teargas. What stands out most in his mind, however, is when he was taken into custody at age 16. Not so much the discomfort at being locked up, but more the interrogations, where he felt that authorities in the shape of grown up men exercised psychological torture and ‘rode him’. They kept insisting that Sune had not told the truth and that they did not believe him. The worst thing was that they kept telling him that he would never get out again.

Sune also experienced humiliations in connection with body searches and repeated taunts from the officers about his looks, hair colour, etc. Not only the ‘prisoner’/’prison guard’ hierarchy, but also the fact that he was a 16-year-old child/adolescent confronted with an adult intensified the feeling of humiliation, threats and distrust.

Confrontations with neo-Nazis

As well as the confrontations with the police there were the confrontations with the neo-Nazis. Below, a respondent talks about how scared they were. In one of the first actions against a Nazi house, Tobias was 16 years old, and some of the Nazis wore masks and black jackets with swastikas. They shot at the activists’ bus and shattered the rear window. He experienced the situation as very frightening. Poul and Tobias also say that they are more scared of the Nazis than of the police.

I am much more scared of getting my ass kicked than of going to prison for example. Many people say the opposite. They would rather take a beating and so on than go to prison. (Poul)

The police can beat you up, pack you up and throw you in a cell, but they don’t disable you […] But with the neo-Nazis it becomes creepy in a whole different way, because then we may be talking knives or gas pistols or something else. So that has always scared me more than the police. (Tobias)

One thing is the fear the young men experience in connection with violence; another is how they experience having to be violent themselves.

The most important criterion of success has been to scare the neo-Nazis; chase them away and especially go after the leaders.

Because precisely in the macho culture and the Nazi culture there are some icons. That’s what draws the boys who are attracted by what they look up to. If they suddenly come home all black and blue then maybe it’s not that cool after all. (Jens)
It has been difficult for Jens and the other AFA men to accustom themselves to use physical violence against others. So even if they legitimize the violence politically because they see it as a necessary element in the fight against the Nazis, at the same time they pay attention to the consequences of violence both to themselves and to their fellow activists. Still, Sune says that for him it is more unpleasant to hit others than to be hit by others. He also finds it alarming that some activists in the environment have become so used to violence that they have turned criminal.

Basically, the young men experience confrontations with Nazis as completely different from street fights against the police, who after all wear shields and helmets. In fights with the Nazis they had to get used to ‘hit first’.

Once one of the leaders from the Nazi party suddenly appeared in the street. I got out and said: ‘scram’. And then he left. But then I also hit him […] I found it really hard because he hadn’t done anything first. If he had hit me, I don’t think I would have had a problem hitting back. (Poul)

Violence is a really ugly thing and I’m not proud of the times I have done it. But sometimes I felt it was politically necessary, or I felt threatened […] some Nazis got on the train and wanted to beat me up, then you have to hit back. But violence is really intense and it should never become a normal everyday thing. (Tobias)

Internal analysis

Tobias simultaneously says that it is a problem that the violent actions are never discussed properly in the AFA.

If you have been out there beating somebody on the head with an iron pipe, then I need to talk to somebody about it. Yeah, to have a good cry and be able to say, ‘Shit, it is crazy that you can put yourself in that kind of situation’. But there was never room for that, and it has never been done. And then you become – and that goes for me too – really loud-mouthed and say, ‘they got their asses kicked’ […] It becomes a superficial way of relating because we never talk things through. It probably isn’t cool to say that I thought that was really creepy. Because you want to be accepted and participate next time.

Other young men in AFA experience this lack of collective analysis in the environment as well; both in relation to violent actions and unpleasant experiences with interrogations and arrests. For instance, Sune has never talked with anybody else in AFA about the hu-
miliations he experienced while he was in custody. If he has discussed it with anyone, it was with friends outside AFA. The same pattern applies to the other respondents.

The young men thus call for a collective discussion of the violent behaviour, a discussion of what makes the individual male exercise violence and what it means to be subjected to physical violence in the fights against the Nazis or the psychological violence in connection with imprisonment and interrogations. That has not taken place. Instead, the dominant norm has been to be tough, which does not leave much room for insecurity, fear and vulnerability.

This ‘machismo’ and exaggerated hyper-masculinity becomes the central element in the construction of a collective political identity. It is rooted not only internally in AFA, but also in the negative image of the enemy and political practice in relation to the neo-Nazis and violent confrontations with the police. The pronounced polarization between the neo-Nazis on the one side and the left-wing radicals in AFA on the other is thus based on mutual hatred, but also on shared symbolic marking of a specific masculinity as part of the competition to occupy the most hyper-masculine positions.

In that sense AFA can be interpreted as a local setting in which a hegemonic masculinity emerges that is closely related to hyper-masculinity, dominance and violence (Connell 1995). This masculinity is not common to the radical left-wing environment in general.

There is no doubt that this hyper-masculine position oppresses the women and men in the group who cannot live up to it. However, it also appears that there are strong elements of self-oppression in the men involved. The reason is that the expression and the violent behaviour give rise to fear and remorse for the individual participant, just as they increase the likelihood that those who carry these representations will be met with threats and violence.

**Masculinity, body and authority**

Despite their common experiences with violence against the Nazis and the lack of discussion of these experiences, the respondents’ positions in the group and their chances of conquering these positions have been very different.

At one pole we have an activist, who says that he has never thought of himself as an ‘alpha male’, and that he has had problems with self-confidence and self-worth, for instance in relation to the women in the movement. He feels that three or four of the loudest young men who were among the front leaders ‘belittled’ him at meetings. For example, when he argued for more structure at the meetings, he was ridiculed with statements like ‘Oh no, another Sieg Heil from you’ – a metaphor for the Nazis, the archenemy.

At the other end we have an activist who acknowledges that he had been one of the loudmouths who have dominated other activists. Thinking back, he finds it unpleasant that so many people in the environment have been afraid of him. Today he has realized
that he had been ‘incredibly arrogant and dismissive and an asshole towards some people’ and yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, he cannot understand why no one did much about telling him.

The stories about dominance in the environment show that violence is not only associated with physical violence, but that strong elements of emotional violence and oppression are part of the collective social conventions and interactions. These social conventions probably strengthened the hegemony of the hyper-masculine profile and its oppression of other masculinities. Clearly there is also a contrast between, on the one side, the collective, aggressive and confrontational masculinities and, on the other side, the vulnerability and feelings formulated individually by the participating men. Owing to the lack of collective discussions about these feelings, the contrasts remain as ambivalences in the individual male activist’s identity work. The positioning of the hyper-masculinities constitutes a central part of the collective identity formation, where the left-wing radical men in AFA – just like the right-wing radical men they oppose – construct a political identity in which violence plays a decisive role: physically in aggressive and confrontational body language; mentally via dominance and oppression of the men who have difficulty living up to the macho ideals.

Conclusion

If we return to the research on right-wing radical masculinities, which was one source of inspiration for this article, the young radical left-wing men clearly come from a different social and political background than other researchers typically find. Unlike the radical right-wing men, they do not have problems with globalization and the dramatic changes in men’s conditions in the family, at work and in politics. In other words, their hyper-masculinity is not constructed as a reaction to the cultural consequences of global development, emasculation or loss of status. Their project is not, like that of the right-wing radicals, about returning to their right masculinity or reconstructing white masculinity (Ferrer 2000, Kimmel 2005).

Rather the opposite seems to be true for the male left-wing radicals: They sympathize with feminism and gender equality; they actively support ethnic minorities; they behave as reflective and resourceful young men who have made deliberate choices to lead a politically active life, which for many of them is a continuation of their parents’ political lives. They rarely reject education and careers, but rather actively choose the life of fulltime activists.

In other words, it is difficult to explain the violent behaviour based on the young men’s structural positioning or individual upbringing. Rather it appears that the construction of hyper-masculinity and violence is rooted in the political learning and development that has taken place in the organizations and movements in which these men participated.
This includes encounters with other violent men: on the one hand the police who according to the young activists responded to non-violent actions with violence, and humiliated the young men when they were 15- or 16-year-old children; on the other hand the neo-Nazis as the enemy whose violent hyper-masculinity is despised yet is met with the same type of violence. At the same time it seems as if the movement’s internal political culture and the social conventions in the environment leave no room for weakness – the norm becomes ‘machismo’, which implies dominance and oppression of the men who cannot live up to the norms as well as of the women who are part of the AFA men’s social or political network.

Perspectives

My analysis is based on a study of the construction of masculinities among left-wing radical men, with special emphasis on their encounters/confrontations with right-wing radicals. As stated in the beginning of the article, we witness similar situations in hotspots around the world. My point here is that the development of hyper-masculinity can be rooted in global and social structures, in individual life histories or circumstances, but it can also be rooted in the political culture and in the specific construction of political identities in organizations and movements. My case is based on a small group in a radical left-wing youth movement in Copenhagen, Denmark. The case cannot be generalized to other areas, but it does raise relevant questions about the development of hyper-masculinities in organizations in relation to military, police or in social movements, whether they right- or left-wing. For instance: how is masculinity constructed and do certain masculinities dominate others? Is there room for vulnerability and weakness? Does physical and psychological violence have a self-reinforcing effect? How do confrontations, for example in a war, affect the individual male and the development of masculinities? Which concepts of gender equality are held and practised in the movement?

Notes

1 The notion hyper-masculinity refers to a very expressive, strongly embodied and exaggerated construction of masculinity that sometimes can be expressed in terms of aggressive and violent behaviour towards women and other men (Jensen 2005, Ward 2005, Welsh 1997).
2 The understanding of political identities was development during my project for the Danish Democracy and Power Study (Christensen 2003). There, I placed more emphasis on political learning and on the construction of individual political identities than I do here. My position is inspired by Charles Tilly’s argumentation for the concept of political identity in relation to contentious performances, however, with the one important difference: that Tilly does not to the same degree link the collective actor level to either the private sphere or individual biographies (Tilly 2002, 2008).
References


Ann-Dorte Christensen is a Professor of Sociology at the Department for Sociology, Social Work and Organisation at Aalborg University. Her main research areas are gender, intersectionality, citizenship, social movements, everyday life, identity and belonging. She is currently the project leader of two research projects: INTERLOC: Gender, class and ethnicity. Intersectionality and local citizenship (2008–2012) and MARS: Masculinity, risk, and security (2010–2013).