



## Research Article

# RETHINKING THE UNTHINKABLE: MASS MEDIA RHETORIC OF WOMEN AND GIRLS JOINING ISIS/ISIL

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### ABSTRACT

In this preliminary analysis I consider the rhetoric used in online U.S. news media about the ever-increasing numbers of girls and women in the U.S. leaving to join the so called Islamic State. I argue that, through this rhetoric, online U.S. news media reports about girls and women joining IS divert readers' attention away from discussions about what leads girls and women to radicalization and mobilization, and draw readers' attention toward what is constructed as the U.S. government's necessary intervention to save, serve, and protect these U.S. girls and women who are presented as having little or no agency and as being incapable of saving or making decisions for and by themselves. The efficacy and pervasiveness of such rhetoric leads to collective failures to sufficiently examine possible factors, causes, and experiences of the U.S. girls and women that influence this group's radicalization and recruitment.

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## INTRODUCTION

“We must learn to connect the great decisions of popular political power with personal needs, those of individuals” (Marcus & Tarr, 1989, p. 215). These were among the last words of Hungarian Marxist aesthetician and literary critic Georg Lukács. In an interview just before his death, Lukács spoke of the need for a genuine general theory of society and its movement. He spoke of the importance of placing tactics before strategy, and practice above theory. To Lukács, the bureaucracy generated by Stalinism is “a tremendous evil,” and society is suffocated by it. “Everything becomes unreal, nominalistic,” Lukács said, “people see no design, no strategic aim, and do not move” (Marcus & Tarr, 1989, p. 215). In this paper I exemplify what is at stake when we fail to connect the great decisions of popular political power with personal needs. This is a preliminary analysis of the rhetoric used in online U.S. news media about the ever-increasing numbers of girls and women who are presented as having little or no agency and as being incapable of saving and/or making decisions for and by themselves). This finding

matters because the efficacy and pervasiveness of such rhetoric continues to lead to U.S. society's collective failure to sufficiently examine possible factors, causes, and/or experiences of the U.S. girls and women that influence their radicalization and recruitment. In this essay I illustrate what is at stake when we fail to connect the great decisions of popular political power (i.e., U.S. media's responses to the government's efforts to combat terrorism) with personal needs (i.e., accounts by these girls and women about what might be going on in their daily lives that could be contributing to their radicalization and recruitment). I describe unique characteristics of the discourse propagated through three online written U.S. news reports<sup>1</sup> about girls and women successfully recruited by ISIS/ISIL, and I offer a preliminary analysis of the internal workings of the discourse and its relation to its social environment. To make evaluative judgments of the quality and effects of the rhetoric used in these three artifacts, I rely on the system of criticism known as doing a symptomatic reading. Through this critique I offer a glimpse of what is occurring on a larger scale: the rhetorical work that is being done nationally and worldwide via news reports of women and girls radicalized and recruited into groups like ISIS/ISIL.

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<sup>1</sup>I focus on these three articles, in particular, because they were the top three “hits” generated from a search engine search of U.S. news. I conducted the search on February 5, 2015, and I searched for these words in this order: ISIS U.S. girl and women recruitment.

This is a symptomatic reading because I focus on the presence of ideology in the texts (Althusser, 1970; Thurston, 1993, p. 638). According to Marx (1927), a society's ideology is a set of illusions fostered by the dominant class in order to ensure social stability and its own continued dominance (p. 398-399). The discourse of the three U.S. news articles featured here illustrates the ideology of social democracy; it does this by conveying ideas about the state being needed to offer security and equality for its people as well as to actively reorder society. This ideology is evident in the discourse of the three texts that describe the women and girls joining ISIS. In the Wright piece (2014), for example, 29-year-old Heather Coffman is described as having been arrested and accused of lying to federal agents about her involvement with ISIS. She is constructed as "taking credit for attempting to recruit" her sister. Heather is quoted, "[my sister] know [*sic*] ISIS because I told her about them and got her into liking them lol." In this excerpt Heather is storied as a rebellious, nonchalant teenager who, almost sardonically, takes pleasure in getting her younger sibling in trouble. The surrounding language about the U.S. "federal officials," however, describes them as heroes who, after a great deal of trial and tribulation, effectively saved the country by bringing this "Virginia woman" to justice. For instance, the first sentence of the article reads, "After seven months of investigation and undercover work, federal officials have arrested a Virginia woman and accused her of lying to federal agents about involvement with the terrorist group ISIS." In contrast to how the federal officials are described as being deliverers of justice, Heather is presented as a girl laughing out loud ("lol") about her involvement with ISIS/ISIL. She is described as a girl admitting "my dad is a little angry because I got her into all this jihad stuff." Heather is presented in this instance as not taking terrorism seriously: she reports that she is in "a little" trouble with her father for having engaged in such behavior. While the federal agents call what she has recently been arrested for "[her] involvement with the terrorist group ISIS," Heather downplays it, referring to it as "all this jihad stuff." The rhetorical work of this excerpt informs newsreaders that Heather is in need of discipline, and her disciplinarians should rightfully, unquestionably be the incontrovertible, diligent members of the U.S. government. To tie this to Marx (1932), superstructure denotes the dominant ideology - the legal, religious and political systems - and ruling class interests determine this superstructure as well as the nature of the justifying ideology - i.e., what actions are feasible.

The rhetoric of Wright's article (2014) exemplifies the dominant ideology to be that of social democracy. The ruling class in this example could be considered the group of people who wield the most power (the U.S. government), and the U.S. government officials' interest is determining the nature of the justifying ideology: social democracy. This unfolds through the U.S. government's determining what actions - the U.S. government's imperative to defend the country by combatting terrorists, and thus saving the nation, for example - are feasible. This is accomplished through their being framed in news stories, like that of Heather, as the necessary, conscientious heroes, the righters of wrong, and the disciplinarians of those who have been duped, victimized, and/or coerced into such involvement. Ideology is a projection of the class-consciousness of the ruling class (Lukács, 1962). In these three articles, the ruling class members are those with political power, those literally labeled "the authorities": the U.S. federal

officials, agents, and law enforcement personnel. Ideology justifies a society by convincing the members of that society that what benefits one class of individuals benefits everyone. These three texts illustrate the ideology of social democracy by way of the language used to refer to the women and girls in contrast with the language used to refer to "the authorities." The choice-making ability of these U.S. girls and women who joined ISIS/ISIL is supplanted by discourse that functions by reinforcing the legitimacy of the "undercover agents" (used seven times in Wright, 2014), "FBI" (used six times in Wright, 2014), "investigators" (used six times in Wright, 2014), and "federal officials" (used once in Wright, 2014). This rhetorical work is done through constructions of these unnamed government workers as successfully "tracking" (Masi, 2014), "building their cases" (Wright, 2014), "posing" undercover (Wright, 2014) and "assisting with bringing the individuals back" (Masi, 2014). Such descriptions of the officials as active and agentic are put in stark contrast with the descriptions of the girls and women as passive, helpless, and uncritical. In the CBS News January 12, 2015 article, for example, the girls and women are described as "easy prey for radical Islamic groups," "[incapable of going] to the original sources," "[incapable of] read[ing] Arabic," "[not knowing] to say, 'No,'" and incapable of "put[ing] up a fight when someone says, 'Oh, yes, this is permitted in the Quran.'" These women and girls are discursively presented to news readers as helpless, unable to self-educate, incapable of speaking up for themselves and their views, not able to resist, not capable of deciding for themselves what choices to make, and uncritical. Concurrently, the "officials" are nameless, faceless, and authorized through their "official" membership: "the FBI" and "law enforcement officials" (Masi, 2014) and as "federal officials," "authorities," "the FBI," "the United State District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia," "investigators," "leading investigators," "FBI agents," and "undercover agents" (Wright, 2014). In the articles' discourse, the girls and women are rhetorically constructed as being unable to think, rationalize, and act for themselves, while the U.S. government is rhetorically constructed as being capable of and authorized to intervene to think, rationalize, and act for the girls and women, as well as being unequivocally expected to do so. Social democracy ideology is, thus, represented in this way: this rhetoric serves to persuade U.S. society that what benefits the class of individuals that is the girls and women (the U.S. government intervening to recover these girls and women from terrorist recruitment, for the nation), benefits everyone (the rest of the U.S. and world). Through the U.S. government being rhetorically constructed as existing to actively reorder society through such intervention, social democracy ideology (the State as existing and being needed to actively reorder society) is reinforced, while the agency and choice-making capabilities of the U.S. girls and women being recruited into ISIS/ISIL are annulled.

In this preliminary symptomatic reading I addressed characteristics of the discourse being propagated through online U.S. news coverage of U.S. girls' and women's radicalization and recruitment into ISIS/ISIL. To evaluate the internal workings of the discourse, I focused on the manifestations of ideology of social democracy in the texts. I argued that the discourse being propagated through online news coverage of ISIS/ISIL recruitment of girls and women diverts readers' attention away from particular aspects of the actual radicalization and mobilization processes - such

as, for instance, what communication is involved in girls and women joining groups like ISIS/ISIL – and focuses audience members' attention on the constructed necessity of the U.S. government's intervening to heroically save those women and girls who are constructed as incapable of saving themselves.

Individuals can only think the thoughts that are thinkable in their society (Marx, 1927, p. 399). Yet thinking our thinkable thoughts is possible and imperative because we are capable of influencing our "culture industry" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). To achieve this, scholars must engage in interrogations of rhetorical work such as that being done by society's media responses to issues like the radicalization and recruitment of women and girls into violent groups like ISIS/ISIL. In addition to focusing on the symptoms of women and girls' radicalization and recruitment into terrorist groups, future scholarship must address the signs, i.e. the possible causes and communication involved in the phenomenon. Future studies must focus on the factors - particularly how the women and girl recruits story those factors - that contribute to their radicalization and recruitment. In addition, future scholarly projects should examine how various forms of mass media contend with gender, agency, and choice in relation to girls and women's joining groups like ISIS/ISIL.

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