


A Study on the Interactive Mechanism between Racism and Terrorism in Europe


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ABSTRACT

Given the growing racial and religious tensions in Europe and the frequent occurrences of terrorist activities, studying the correlation between the two can provide a theoretical basis for preventing terrorist activities. This study aims to explore the logical relationship and interaction mechanism between them. Taking the Paris terrorist attack in 2015 as an example, adopting the analytical dualism theory, this paper analyzes the mutual influence paths between racial discrimination and terrorist activities and discusses from cultural and structural perspectives the conditions under which racism becomes the hotbed for extremism, as well as the ways terrorist organizations manipulate racial issues to expand influence. The study concludes that racial divides in Europe provide a real basis for the spread of extremism, while extremist organizations also manipulate racial, customary, and religious emotions through online and offline means to expand influence, and the two reinforce each other. To thoroughly break this vicious cycle, positive multicultural identity needs to be promoted, structural discrimination between races needs to be eliminated at the social system level, and the independent thinking abilities and subjectivity of minority ethnic groups need to be enhanced to block the conduction of resentful emotions towards terrorism at its root.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2015, a terrorist attack targeting the Charlie Hebdo office in Paris, France, marked the first in a series of terrorist incidents that would subsequently afflict Europe (Savelkoul *et al.*, 2022). This event ushered in a new phase of terrorist threats for European nations, particularly France, characterized by evolving attack methodologies, diverse perpetrator backgrounds, increased frequency of incidents, and heightened threats from extremist organizations. In the years that followed, Europe experienced frequent terrorist attacks of various forms, with racial and religious factors playing significant roles. The escalating racial tensions in European societies, coupled with varying degrees of discrimination and marginalization faced by minority ethnic groups, led to a strong correlation between racism and terrorism during this period. This phenomenon has negatively impacted economic cooperation and cultural exchanges between China and Europe. This study uses France, a country frequently targeted by terrorism, as a focal point, examining the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks through the framework of analytical dualism theory. It analyzes and establishes an interactive mechanism model between racism in European society and terrorism in 21st century. The research dissects how racial discrimination leads to marginalization and the incubation of extremist ideologies and how extremism, in turn, exacerbates racial divisions through acts of terrorism. By analyzing the dynamic relationship between these phenomena, this study proposes policy recommendations to break this vicious cycle, aiming to promote stability and sustainable development in European society.



2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing research on the relationship between racism and terrorism in European society has thoroughly affirmed the significant role of racism in fostering terrorist behaviors and recognized the historical, social, and religious-cultural origins of racism. Racism is a prominent characteristic of the terrorist organization Islamic State (IS) at both organizational and behavioral levels (Song, 2017). The primary causes of modern international terrorist crimes include nationalism and racism, which are crucial sources of extreme actions (Liu, 2004). Terrorist acts result from the excessive spillover of nationalism and racism, with a combination of emotional factors, interest competition, and social structural factors collectively triggering specific extremist emotions and actions (Yan & Yan, 2014). The prevalent anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments in French society are catalysts for numerous extreme racial incidents stemming from both religious-cultural factors and France's colonial history (Wei, 2007).

While there are numerous discussions on the causes of racism in European society, existing research tends to focus on isolated aspects of the interactive mechanism between racism and terrorism. Explorations of their relationship often remain confined to a unidirectional perspective, lacking a comprehensive construction of the complete process chain of their interaction. Specifically, current analyses of particular stages in their interactive mechanism are rather generalized, failing to systematically consider the multiple influencing factors at each stage and overlooking the progressive evolution of each phase. For instance, Song and Wen (2019) interpret the reasons for European society's exclusion of European Muslim groups from multiple perspectives, identifying historical conflict memories and current terrorist attacks as historical and contemporary factors, while the politicization and instrumentalization of ethnic issues are political and media factors leading to the exclusion of European Muslim groups. This study only explores the stage of how racism leads to the marginalization of Muslim communities.

In examining the process of mutual influence between the marginalization of ethnic minorities and terrorism, Yang (2023) points out that under the French republican model, the marginal status of Muslim ethnic groups in social, economic, employment, and political participation is increasingly solidified, leading to their resentment towards society and the development of anti-social ideologies, thus sowing the seeds for ethnic separatism and terrorism. In this study, the evolution from the marginalization of ethnic minorities to terrorist acts is not fully elucidated.

Therefore, this study deems it necessary to fully consider each link in the chain of interactive mechanisms between racism and terrorism in European society and to deeply analyze the complex influencing factors at each stage of the interaction process, aiming to construct a comprehensive and systematic framework of interactive mechanisms. Simultaneously, building upon existing partial research conclusions, this study uses the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks as a case study to analyze the logical chain of each stage through case analysis.

3. EUROPEAN RACISM IN THE FRAMEWORK OF ANALYTICAL DUALISM THEORY

In recent years, racism and extremist ideologies have become increasingly prevalent in European countries, particularly in France. Incidents of discrimination against ethnic minorities are frequent, and racial hate crimes continue to rise. Simultaneously, radical organizations and terrorist activities occur repeatedly, seriously threatening Europe's security and stability.

British sociologist Margaret Archer's analytical dualism theory posits that society has interacting cultural and structural dimensions, with individuals as subjects engaging in internal dialogue between these two and exhibiting agency. The cultural dimension includes various ideas, norms, and value systems, reflecting cognitive relationships, while the structural dimension primarily involves resource allocation and people's positioning within social structures, reflecting power relationships. Culture provides the cognitive basis and legitimacy for action, while structure shapes the scope and limitations of action. The two both constrain each other and achieve a bidirectional cycle, that is, a dual interactive mechanism of both upward conditioning and downward causation between culture and structure. Both culture and structure influence individual behavior but do not completely determine it (Archer, 1995).

Regarding the issue of racism in modern European society, at the cultural level, mainstream social ideas and norms construct stereotypes of certain ethnicities as inferior, providing a basis of legitimacy for discrimination against them. At the structural level, economic disparities and political power exclusion marginalize ethnic minorities, while the autonomy of ethnic minorities compels them to develop strong resentment. The cultural and structural levels mutually promote each other, jointly shaping and reinforcing stable forms of racism, with ethnic minorities both conforming to and adapting to their discriminated status, as well as attempting to manipulate, change, and resist the status quo.

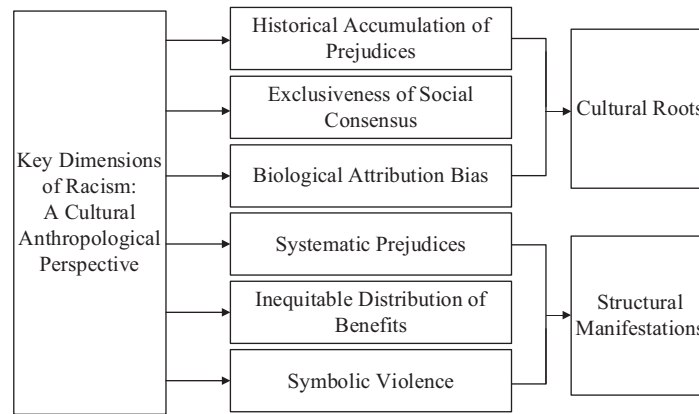


Fig. 1. Classification of racism dimensions.

Exploring the interactive mechanism between racism and terrorism in European society requires consideration of both cultural factors, such as ideology, and social realities, such as systemic discrimination, as well as the role played by human agency throughout the mechanism. Therefore, this study selects analytical dualism theory as its theoretical framework to comprehensively and systematically explore the interactive mechanism between racism and terrorism in European society.

Influenced by various factors, racism has a long history in European society. As a socio-cultural phenomenon involving racial relations, racism is an important research area in anthropology. This study has reviewed cultural anthropologists' classifications of different dimensions of racism, including its causes and manifestations, summarizing the following six dimensions: historical accumulation of discrimination (Fredrickson, 2015), exclusivity of social identity (Tajfel, 1981), systemic discrimination, unequal distribution of benefits (Feagin & Ducey, 2018), symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2018), and biological attribution tendencies (Little & Sussman, 2010). These six dimensions are interconnected and mutually constraining, outwardly manifesting racism. Within the framework of analytical dualism theory, this study categorizes these into structural and cultural levels (see Fig. 1 for the detailed classification), helping to explain the origins of racism and the reasons for its derivation into other social problems.

3.1. Cultural Roots

3.1.1. Accumulation of Historical Discrimination

The racism present in European society can be traced back to racial prejudices formed during the colonial era and the impact of slave trade history on racial relations. From the 15th century onwards, with the development of capitalism, Europe engaged in large-scale colonial expansion, establishing vast colonies in Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean, subjecting colonized peoples to discriminatory, exploitative, and enslaving rule (Daughton, 2006). As the bourgeoisie developed and matured, a "white supremacist" racial identity gradually formed, with bourgeois economic interests and ideologies serving the bourgeoisie dominating (Zheng & Zhang, 2019). "Racist theories" born at the beginning of the anti-slave trade struggle attempted to legitimize the slave trade by arguing that black people were an inferior race to white people, claiming that "Africans' brain capacity and appearance are closer to that of apes, with poor intelligence" (Gao, 1995), pushing racial prejudices to extremes.

3.1.2. Exclusivity of Social Identity

In terms of cultural identity, European racial prejudices against colonized peoples were ubiquitous. Colonizers viewed Africans as lacking civilization and education, possessing "primitive cultures" such as polygamy; North American Indians and Vietnamese were seen as "savages" lacking scientific culture, who should be replaced by superior European culture (Fogarty, 2008). The slave system destroyed black cultural identity, with slaves' cultural expressions, such as music and literature, also facing discrimination (Xia, 2011). Anti-Semitism, a typical representation of racism in European society, can be traced back to religious discrimination in the Middle Ages. The Christian church was hostile towards Judaism, viewing Jews as heretics (Xu, 1995), laying the foundation for anti-Semitism.

3.1.3. Biological Attribution Tendencies

Racists often use biological attributions to justify their discriminatory behavior towards different ethnic minorities. North Africans are often viewed as having violent tendencies due to their different skin color; sub-Saharan Africans, with their robust physiques, are considered more suitable for physical labor. Additionally, racist groups perceive Asians, belonging to the "yellow race," as intelligent but

socially inept, with inherent cultural barriers; Jewish groups have faced genetic discrimination, and their unique religious customs and business traditions have also led to xenophobic sentiments in mainstream society.

3.2. Structural Manifestations

3.2.1. Systemic Discrimination and Unequal Distribution of Benefits

The historical accumulation of racism continues to influence and manifest in various social subsystems of contemporary European society, existing in the form of systemic discrimination and unequal distribution of benefits. According to the latest data from the French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights, in 2021, France officially recorded about 12,500 crimes of a “racist, xenophobic, or anti-religious nature,” an increase of 13% in crimes and offenses and 26% in fines compared to 2019 ([National Consultative Commission on Human Rights, 2021](#)). In employment, education, healthcare, and other fields, African and Arab groups still face systemic racial discrimination in Europe.

3.2.2. Symbolic Violence

To this day, mainstream European media often negatively portrays ethnic minorities. Politicians’ xenophobic rhetoric and racist symbols in public spaces all reinforce public racial prejudices ([European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2022](#)), constituting an omnipresent symbolic violence that affects public attitudes. Meanwhile, racism and police brutality are largely covered up by the media ([Beaman, 2021](#)), with symbolic violence maintaining racism at the ideological level.

4. CASE ANALYSIS

On November 13, 2015, eight gunmen separately attacked multiple nightlife venues in Paris, including the Stade de France in the northern suburbs, launching large-scale shootings and suicide bombing terrorist attacks. The attacks resulted in 130 deaths and over 300 injuries. On November 14, the extremist organization “Islamic State” claimed responsibility for the series of attacks. The same day, French President François Hollande declared a state of emergency nationwide ([November 2015 Paris Attacks, 2024](#)). This series of terrorist attacks in Paris was one of the most severe terrorist incidents in French history, unprecedented in scale and brutality ([Yahoo News, 2015](#)). It made the French public and government truly realize the severity of the global terrorist threat from Middle Eastern extremist organizations. Therefore, this study selects this terrorist attack case for analysis.

4.1. Marginalization of Ethnic Minorities Leads to Resentment

In the Paris terrorist attack case, a witness in the Bataclan theater claimed that the gunmen shouted, “This is all because of President Hollande’s persecution of Muslims around the world” ([November 2015 Paris Attacks, 2024](#)). Under the cyclic effects of cultural and structural levels, the historical accumulation and current predicaments of racism in European society have led to unequal treatment of ethnic minorities in various fields, gradually pushing them to marginal positions. In the aforementioned case, most of the attackers were French citizens or long-term residents, many belonging to Arab or African Muslim communities with immigrant backgrounds. They were mostly in marginalized social positions, with low education levels and unstable employment.

At the cultural level, marginalization caused by differences in ideology, group identity, and values has damaged the sense of identity and belonging of ethnic minorities, generating feelings of exclusion from mainstream society. [Guo \(2010\)](#) discussed the generational differences and social integration of European Muslims in the “headscarf incident,” arguing that the religious beliefs and values of ethnic minorities, to some extent, hinder mainstream society’s acceptance of them, making it difficult for Muslim immigrant groups to fully integrate into mainstream society.

At the structural level, ethnic minorities are at a disadvantage in terms of economic status, political rights, and social class. Long-term disadvantages in employment, housing, education, and other aspects, as well as severe social exclusion, have increased the dissatisfaction of ethnic minorities with the status quo. For instance, Arab Muslim immigrants mostly engage in low-income manufacturing and service industries, facing housing, work, and educational opportunity shortages, and are relatively indifferent to political participation. The isolated living environment from mainstream society also makes them lose hope for improvement opportunities, more easily leading to resentment towards the current situation.

Within the framework of analytical dualism theory, individuals are both products influenced by social structures and cultural emotions, as well as active participants and changers ([Archer, 1995](#)). Ethnic minorities are constrained by social structures and influenced by internal and external cultural identities and collective emotions. When facing the dual cultural and structural barriers constructed

by racism, as subjects retain a certain degree of agency, ethnic minorities express their dissatisfaction through resentment, which is also passed down and accumulated through generations in the long-term process of social marginalization.

4.2. *Resentment Develops into Extreme Ideologies Through Propagation*

Existing research shows that extreme ideologies are currently spreading through multiple channels in Muslim and other ethnic minority communities. At the cultural level, factors such as religious beliefs, language customs, etc., provide a cultural basis for the spread of extreme ideologies among ethnic minorities. Meanwhile, emerging communication media support the structural level by changing the propagation patterns of extreme ideologies.

At the cultural level, extremists manipulate traditional cultural concepts such as ethnic protection to spread ideologies and disseminate anti-Western and other xenophobic extremist ideas, leveraging common religious beliefs, language customs, and cultural traditions. Some scholars point out that extreme ideologies exploit the resentment of ethnic minorities for incitement and provide a new extreme sense of identity (Post, 2015), attracting ethnic minorities to join extremist ranks.

At the structural level, changes in communication channels have updated the propagation patterns of extreme ideologies. The internet and social media are major channels for spreading extreme ideologies among ethnic minority communities in Europe. Lieberman points out that various extremist organizations extensively use platforms like Facebook and Twitter to spread extreme speech, which has a wide reach and easily influences teenagers (Lieberman, 2017). Through data modeling, Youngblood found that both social media use and group membership enhanced the spread of extremist ideologies, indicating that virtual and physical organizations remain the main recruitment tools for far-right movements (Youngblood, 2020).

In the Paris terrorist attack case, the gunmen shouted “Allahu Akbar” and “This is for Syria” in Arabic (November 2015 Paris Attacks, 2024), while the internet was a key communication channel among the attackers (France 24, 2015). Ethnic minorities, long marginalized, have accumulated strong resentment both in reality and psychologically. Meanwhile, extreme ideologies spread among ethnic minorities through the internet and offline infiltration. In this context, extreme ideologies gain propagation effects by manipulating this resentment among ethnic minorities, transforming it into extremism in action.

4.3. *Mutual Influence Between Extreme Ideologies and Terrorist Actions*

The extreme ideologies widely spreading among marginalized ethnic minority groups in Europe can be summarized as emphasizing ethnic and religious superiority and opposing Western secular values and modernization. At the cultural level, these values strengthen hatred and opposition, providing a so-called “legitimate” basis for violent acts to “defend the faith”; they also inspire internal motivations for extreme actions by portraying a persecuted image. Meanwhile, international advocacy against terrorist attacks provides “evidence” for extreme ideologies, seemingly confirming their narratives and uniting more ethnic minorities under this confrontational ideology.

At the structural level, an important structural factor in the spread of these extreme ideologies is the marginalized state of ethnic minorities. Their marginal position in the social structure leads to psychological resentment, providing a basis for the spread of extreme ideologies. At the same time, terrorist attacks strengthen the isolation of these marginalized ethnic minorities, and the violence of symbols reinforces the disadvantaged position of ethnic minorities in the social structure, consolidating the mass base for the spread of extreme ideologies.

In this vicious cycle of cultural and structural interaction, extreme ideologies and terrorist actions mutually promote each other, jointly pushing the marginal state of European ethnic minorities in a more dangerous direction. This interaction was particularly evident in the Paris terrorist attack case. On the one hand, extreme ideologies influenced and drove this terrorist attack. During the attack, the perpetrators claimed to be waging “jihad,” their language and behavior revealing that they had fully accepted the ideological indoctrination from extremist organizations like the Islamic State. On the other hand, this terrorist attack, in turn, enhanced the influence of extreme ideologies like those of the Islamic State. The attack caused great shock to French society, creating panic among the public and further tensing racial relations. These consequences created conditions for extremist organizations like the Islamic State to further spread their ideologies.

Through this case, we can clearly see that a mutually reinforcing cycle mechanism has formed between extreme ideologies and terrorist actions. Extreme ideologies provide an ideological basis and incite hatred, promoting the occurrence of attacks, while attacks further spread extreme ideologies. The two are interdependent and mutually causal, forming a vicious cycle system that continues to give rise to new extremist violence.

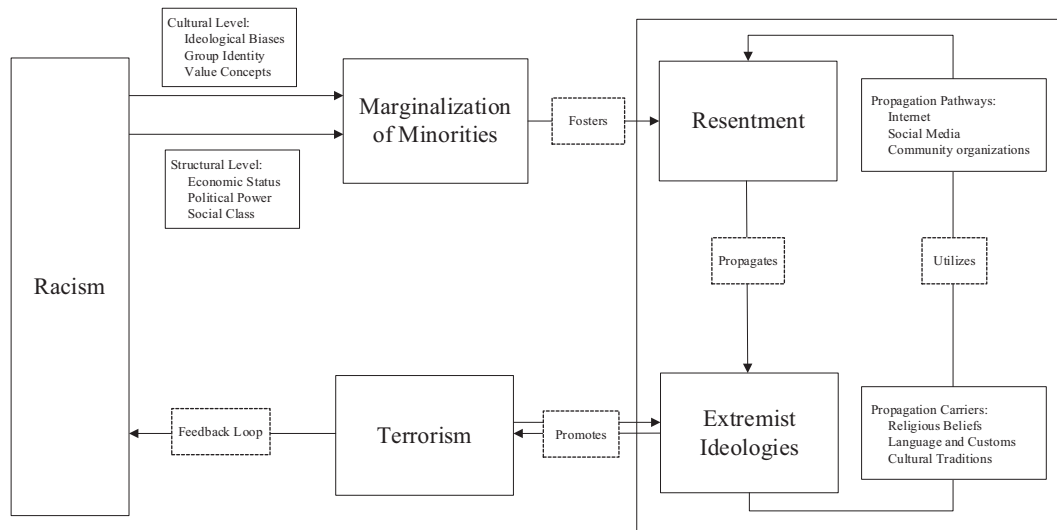


Fig. 2. The interaction mechanism between racism and terrorism.

4.4. The Feedback Effect of Terrorism on Racism

Extreme ideologies rooted in racism ultimately escalate into acts of terrorism, causing significant disruption to European societies. As the final critical link in this pathway, terrorism not only incites extreme ideologies but also directly deepens racial prejudices within European society.

In the case of the Paris terrorist attacks, the brutal massacre, which lasted for over four hours, had a profound impact on the French public. Public fear and racial bias began to spread, with emerging rhetoric equating terrorists with the Muslim communities within the country. This led to a strong resurgence of nationalist sentiments and an unusually high level of xenophobia among the population. These shifts in cultural values further widened the identity gap between minority groups and mainstream society.

On the structural level, certain politicians from exclusionary parties, in an attempt to deflect criticism and gain public support, accused the government of being too lenient with immigration policies. This contributed to the discrimination and hostility towards minority groups within mainstream society (Inhae, 2016), further diminishing the status of minorities in the social hierarchy.

These actions not only provided fertile ground for the new spread of extreme ideologies but also continued to widen the identity gap between different ethnic groups. Rational public discourse was increasingly replaced by emotional racial biases, further exacerbating pre-existing ethnic divisions. Consequently, a vicious cycle of mutual reinforcement between racism and terrorism was established.

5. INTERACTION MECHANISM MODEL BETWEEN RACISM AND TERRORISM AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

The terrorist attack serves as a typical case of the mutual reinforcement between racism and extremism. To thoroughly analyze the dynamic interaction mechanism between the two, this study constructs a model of the interaction mechanism between racism and terrorism in the context of the French terrorist attack, as shown in Fig. 2.

The study posits that racism leads to the marginalization of minority ethnic groups, placing them in a disadvantaged position in political, economic, cultural, and social cognitive aspects. Under the dual influence of cultural and structural factors, minority groups develop resentment due to racial discrimination, which, combined with their marginalized status, provides a social foundation for the emergence of extremist ideologies. Utilizing emerging media platforms such as the internet and social media, along with traditional grassroots organizations, extremist groups exploit the marginalized position of minorities, transforming long-standing resentful emotions into extremist ideologies. Once these ideologies are formed, they become intertwined with terrorist activities, each exacerbating the other. Extremist ideologies provide ideological support and legitimacy for terrorist actions, while the actual acts of terrorism, in turn, intensify these extremist beliefs, leading to an escalating cycle. Finally, the feedback effect of terrorist activities further aggravates racial prejudices in mainstream society, subjecting minority groups to even more severe discrimination and oppression, thus perpetuating the vicious cycle.

The current interaction mechanism between racism and terrorism in European society involves various factors across different levels, forming a complex and interdependent transmission system. This implies that addressing the current predicament requires careful consideration of both cultural

and structural factors, as well as recognition of the role of individuals—particularly minority groups—within this mechanism. Humans are the subjects that connect structure and culture, enabling their interaction. They are both products of society and participants in social change. Human agency is crucial in adjusting the relationship between structure and culture. Considering the role of cultural and structural factors in each link of the aforementioned model and fully acknowledging the subjective agency of minority groups, this study proposes the following policy recommendations to help break the interaction mechanism between racism and terrorism.

First, promoting multicultural identity is the fundamental methodological approach to resolving the long-standing issues of racism and terrorism in European society. Minority groups often find it difficult to integrate into mainstream society due to their unique religious beliefs, languages, and customs. The lack of mutual recognition and understanding between different cultures ultimately manifests as behavioral differences, leading to social instability. Therefore, cross-cultural exchange activities should be encouraged, providing opportunities for people from different backgrounds to understand each other, thereby reducing misunderstandings and stereotypes and enhancing social cohesion. Multicultural education should be promoted, introducing courses on diverse cultures, religions, history, and society in schools to cultivate open-mindedness and tolerance, thereby reducing racial prejudice and discrimination. At the same time, attention should be paid to constructing social symbols of racial equality. According to the concept of the “pseudo-environment,” the primary activity of the media is to represent reality, shaping a “symbolic reality” that influences people’s perceptions of the real world (Lippmann, 2017). The media should take on a responsible role, avoiding the amplification of fear, hatred, and prejudice and instead providing objective and comprehensive coverage of the voices and stories of different ethnic groups.

Second, it is essential to systematically examine the existence of racial discrimination within the social structure and make improvements from various aspects. Politically, the representation of minority groups should be increased, eliminating implicit discrimination in policies and laws and enhancing their political participation. Economically, the fairness of employment opportunities for minority groups should be emphasized, eliminating the racial glass ceiling. In terms of social status, different cultures should be respected, and stereotypical thinking in mainstream society should be changed to provide equal public services to different ethnic groups. Structural racial discrimination in the fields of justice, education, healthcare, and housing also needs to be scrutinized. Only when mainstream consciousness forms values of racial equality and inclusion can the operations of various social systems truly achieve equality and justice. This requires continuous examination and reflection, along with pushing for institutional progress.

Third, to sever the transmission of resentment into extremist ideologies, it is crucial to enhance the independent thinking abilities and agency of minority individuals, preventing them from being manipulated by extremist rhetoric. This requires a concerted effort from families, schools, and society. Family and school education should encourage independent thinking and cultivate the ability to analyze and process information. Media and online platforms need to provide positive content, strengthen the scrutiny of extremist ideologies, and cut off their channels of dissemination. Minority groups should also be encouraged to develop a sense of identity and participation. Positive interactions between youth from different ethnic backgrounds can help them distance themselves from hateful emotions, fostering rational and tolerant personal qualities. If all sectors are committed to nurturing the independent personalities and agency of minority youth, they will be less susceptible to exploitation by extremist ideologies, thereby blocking the transmission of resentment into extremism from the outset.

6. CONCLUSION

Since the Charlie Hebdo attack, European society has faced an increasing threat of terrorism from Middle Eastern extremist organizations, while internal racial relations have become increasingly tense and complex. This study aims to explore the intrinsic connections and interaction mechanisms between the two through case analysis and pathway mapping.

The research analyzes the cultural roots and structural manifestations of racism in European society and its severe impact on minority groups. Racial divides lead to the marginalization of minorities, which in turn fosters strong resentment. Extremist ideologies, leveraging internet social platforms and infiltrating traditional grassroots organizations, exploit these resentful emotions to propagate themselves, eventually driving terrorist activities. These terrorist actions not only reinforce extremist ideologies but also have a feedback effect on racist ideologies, further exacerbating racial divides in European society. By mapping out the transmission pathways and analyzing specific cases, the study establishes a model of the mutually reinforcing and cyclical interaction between racism, extremism, and terrorism.

In reality, the dynamic mechanism of racism and extremism is influenced by many other factors. However, due to space limitations, this paper does not delve into these aspects. Future research could examine other factors involved in this mechanism while also leveraging the strengths of disciplines such as education, media studies, and psychology to address the challenges posed by the mutual reinforcement of racism and extremism.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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