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On Extremism

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"On Extremism"

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Introduction

To describe something as a form of extremism, whether it is an idea, opinion, behavior, taste, or temperament, means—if we adhere to its literal meaning as a qualifier and a state—an idea or behavior taken to its utmost limit. Extremism is the affirmation of one aspect of a composite phenomenon at the expense of its others. The active subject to which the word is appended, can apply to an individual or a group, which can be 'extreme' in its violence or its non-violence, in its intolerance or its tolerance, in its moderation or centrism. This last juxtaposition reveals the sterility of the word, even as a term of art, let alone as a useful concept for the analysis of social phenomena.

In our time, not a day passes without seeing or hearing the words 'extremism' or 'extremists.' Whether used to describe political positions and opinions, or styles and methods of political action, at every point it connotes stereotypes and a host of pre-conceptions, half-truths, and assumptions concerning groups of people branded as extreme.

By the same token, violent acts these days tend to be deemed acts of "terrorism" if those who carry them out are characterized as extremists. In turn, 'extremist' might almost be a definition for terrorism: in this era terrorism as an act of violence is undertaken by extremists, even if it is directed against soldiers or occupying forces. Indeed, the very same act (killing of civilians, destruction of property with the intent to terrorize) is not considered terrorism if it is perpetrated by individuals who are not labeled as extremist, or without ties to so-called extremist groups. This process of labeling and association has numerous ramifications. One particularly significant outcome is that it becomes difficult to brand states as extremist. By definition states are not extremist, rather it is the state that applies the term to others. In this sense, terrorism is a political act of violence undertaken by an extremist person or group; the extremist then is not a state, inferring it is not possible for a state to be terrorist.

In the past, extremism was applied to the right in the phrase "the extreme right" during the interwar period amid the rise of fascism, Nazism, and other nationalist movements, and to the "extreme left" in the 1960s and 1970s, and to national movements against colonialism viewed as extremist in comparison with those who cooperated with colonial forces (termed moderates). Today, however, 'extremist' evokes mostly the image of Jihadi Islamists, even if the term is not used in specific conjunction with Islam.

This begs the questions: Can the word extremism be useful in understanding those labeled as such? Is it an analytical concept? Does it lend itself to understanding their practices either in essence or in nature? Or is the term a relative category that doesn't explain much?

Definitions and Usages of 'Extremism'

Today the concept of extremism is set against that of moderation, centrism, or the mainstream. This categorization places the phenomenon outside any social or political consensus, and outside what is understood as socially or politically acceptable. Indeed, it is set at the furthest reach of acceptability. Are there elements in common between 'extremists' in general, which might make this term a concept of use for categorizing the ideas of groups or political movements (their aims and methods)? Or is it a word, or even a term, in a shaky relationship with its concept? Is it, perhaps, the expression of a negative stance adopted by those in power so as to exclude other groups?

History has proven this latter position untenable. From the struggle against racism by the civil rights movement in America and the African National Congress in South Africa; to the fight against occupation by the PLO, African liberation movements, and the Vietcong; to the struggle against dictatorship and oppression in general, with groups like Nicaragua's Sandinistas; all these once marginalized groups were at a time considered extremist.

Extremists were once labeled as such simply by virtue of their violent methods of political action (particularly the targeting of civilians). Refusing to use the term whenever civilians were targeted by air bombardment or other means by states that adopt liberal democratic systems, however, meant that the term lost part of its meaning: violent methods could no longer on their own constitute extremism. Indeed, extreme violence such as killing civilians and terrorizing the innocent—are extremist or terrorist. When states used these tactics in Vietnam, Iraq, Gaza, Lebanon and Chechnya, as part of a plan to terrorize or as a response to operations undertaken resistance movements, these tactics were publically sanctioned. Instead, extremism is now used to describe political groups and the nature of the conflict that these groups (be they organizations, movements, parties) are engaged in—in particular conflicts with a state actor. This is also problematic.

Saint Augustine, in his 5th century *The City of God*, uses a dialogue between Alexander the Great and a pirate as an allegory to draw a comparison between someone who occupies and plunders lands and is called an emperor, because he does so with a large fleet, and someone who raids other ships using a small ship, and is called a pirate.¹ Augustine goes on in the section to stress the similarity between kings and robbers in two respects: not only are kingdoms without justice like gangs of robbers, but so too are robbers themselves like little kingdoms, since they are bound together by a pact, led by a ruler, and the spoils are distributed according to certain rules. For entities to become kingdoms therefore, does not necessarily mean that they have dispensed with the greed that bound them into gangs. In fact moral rule is the exception, but rule means that impunity is granted², which is what turns robbers into kingdoms.

After setting out this similarity, Augustine goes on to detail the story of the pirate and Alexander: "For when that king had asked the man what he meant by keeping hostile possession of the sea, he answered with bold pride, 'The same as you mean by seizing the whole earth; but because I do it with a petty ship, I am called a robber, while you who do it with a great fleet are styled emperor.'"³

It is the state, able to bomb from the air that categorizes others as terrorist and extremist. Excluded from the semantic field of extremism (and its artifact, terrorism), then, are the armies that carry out large-scale destruction and mass killings of civilians on the pretext that they are not targeting civilians, but rather the enemy living amongst civilians (who are used as human shields). It is only extremists and terrorists who can be said simply to target civilians. In fact, states that bomb civilian centers today are aware of the presence of these civilians, making their death an inevitability, and not simply a possibility. This necessarily weakens the force of the argument that civilians are not being targeted. More tellingly, it has been shown that random bombing employed by state actors is usually "targeted," since it is also intended as a response to 'extremist' operations targeting civilians with the objective of punishing what is termed the "social incubator" for the group. The very idea of making a group, its members, or its constituency "pay" a price for membership is to terrorize (the literal definition of terrorism). Instilling terror is the intended act, and as such civilians are the targets, meaning states engage in acts of terrorism, and exhibit extreme behavior.

¹ Noam Chomsky used this dialogue to describe the difference between terrorism and the practices of the United States in the title of his book, *Pirates and Emperors*.

² Augustine, *The City of God: Against the Pagans*, 9th edn. (Cambridge, NY, Melbourne: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013), Book IV, p. 147-8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

In contrast, there are political forces and individuals who support an idea that is considered extremist, but they do not employ violent means in their political activity. For example, some Salafi movements hold what are considered extreme ideas compared to a more mainstream Islam on the purely intellectual level. However, their methods are non-violent. The same is the case for most Communists nowadays, who do not use methods deemed extremist.

These initial definitions, however, are all relativist. Is it possible to go beyond this relativism when dealing with extremism and develop mechanisms that take into account the location, interests, and historical context of those who make this categorization?

Whether an attempt to answer this question proves fruitful is questionable. Perhaps it will be sufficient to deal with the content of the political idea that includes aims and methods deemed extremist for each case in isolation. This alone would preclude the need for using the term. Perhaps it would be enough for people to take positions on the values of any movement or its ideas, or to assess how realistic its aims are and how acceptable its methods at each stage, without the need for this sweeping category, and without the need for the distinction between moderates and extremists, which in itself has turned into an ideological weapon in conflicts.

Given contemporary power relations, the category of extremist might be classed as a justification for oppressive policies, or as laying the ground for them. Given this state of affairs, we might present a meaningful idea or at least benefit from the analysis of particular aims and means of groups glasses 'extreme,' by way of approaching an answer to the question, without necessarily reaching a conclusive answer.

As a starting point, it can be said that there is no objective scientific criterion for extremism. However, the term might be of value if it is dealt with from a moral perspective. This means making political judgments within the framework of practical reason and giving these judgments a moral dimension, so that the term can be in some way non-relativist. Universal moral criteria, if they exist, can provide moderation and extremism with a certain content, irrespective of who is acting in moderate or extreme ways. This is especially so in the case of existing labels of extremism, which tends to signify rather an abhorrence of the practices and ideas of an 'other.' It is rare, however, for this abhorrence to apply to 'our' ideas and practices. Only a moral stance can make 'us' subject to the same standard. The transcendent moral position—one that transcends circumstance and interest—is able to characterize the ideas of the side to which one belongs as extremist, and similarly the practices of one's own side, be it as

an individual or group. For this reason, an alternative definition for extremism is suggested that frees the term to some extent from this relativism, and gives it a certain epistemological value.

Radicalism and Extremism

Radicalism cannot be defined as a particular system of ideas and arguments. Rather, it describes ideas that clash with socially agreed upon practices supported by a general social consensus. Etymologically, radicalism derives from the Latin word *radix*, meaning root. The word was used in the 18th century to describe the supporters of the radical movement in the context of the debate over radical reform leading to universal suffrage.

The first person to use the word in this sense was Charles James Fox (this is of course impossible to prove, but usually depends on what is supposed to be the earliest text making use of the term). Fox was one of the Whigs in the British Parliament in 1797. The word was used with a positive connotation, and indeed he used it to describe himself. Fox, being one of the Whig figureheads of the concept of radicalism,⁴ demanded the prohibition of the slave trade, sympathy with American patriots in their fight against the government in London, solidarity with the aims of the French revolution, and a rejection of war against France. This was called radical. There is no doubt that what was deemed radical in the 18th century (the demand for universal suffrage) became a mainstream current, a matter of social consensus, and virtually axiomatic in the same country one hundred years later. However, the majority of this radical trend did not use radical means to achieve them by the standards of our age, and remained able to work for a radical objective using methods acceptable even then.

The word is used with positive connotations to describe the approach of groups that are not satisfied with the status quo and work to deal with the root of the issues. This was Marx's approach in *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*, where he stated that "being radical means taking hold of something by its roots."⁵ In other contexts, however, radicalism means adherence to foundations and first principles, or the congruence between theoretical principles and practical programs. The term may only

⁴ Leslie Mitchell, *Charles James Fox* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992).

⁵ Karl Marx, "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie," In: Marx-Engels, *Gesamtausgabe*, Abteilung (MEGA) I. Band 2, S. 177.

be used negatively when applied by a dissenting individual or group to their opponents, and only then becomes a synonym for extremism. In the *Cambridge Dictionary*, for example, radicalism is defined as a person having beliefs and opinions that the majority think are irrational and unacceptable. The *Oxford English Dictionary* goes further, giving the word's etymology and its many usages, showing it can variously mean fundamental, essential, profound, and in politics someone who "advocates radical reform [...] and holds more progressive ideas than reform via the democratic process. In the 19th century, it was used to designate the extreme branch of the Liberal party. Currently it commonly means someone who advocates any comprehensive political or social change, someone who belongs to the extremist branch of a party ... a member of the left or revolutionary wing."⁶

In 19th century France, the radical socialist party entered into conflict with the right under the Third Republic using non-violent, democratic means. From the Napoleonic Wars until 1848, it became difficult for political forces to designate themselves republican, so republicans called themselves radicals. Their most significant radical position was the demand for universal suffrage for men. In 1869 the faction that adopted the name "the Radicals" under the leadership of Georges Clemenceau, and the party saw itself as the fulfillment of the French Revolution. The members of this group went on to found the Radical Socialist Party which formed the basis for the left bloc during the Third Republic.

Clearly, then, radicalism is not just connected with a radical position, but also with a process of locating those described as radicals outside the social and political consensus in the context hegemonic ideas and values. What was deemed radical (in the sense of extremist and outside the mainstream) until the end of the 18th century is no longer viewed as such in our times; oftentimes it is viewed as mainstream.

During the interwar period of 1918 to 1939, Europe witnessed veritable volcanic eruptions of radicalism, with radical political parties created on both sides of the political spectrum for and against, variously: the outcome of the war, the rise of predatory capitalism and the financial crises, and the conclusion of large sectors of the social classes that the individualism produced by the capitalist system was a negative thing. Movements promising a world without exploitation, war, hunger, and poverty emerged. Others sought to rehabilitate the nation and nationalism as alternatives to the

⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, prepared by J. A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, Vol. XIII, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 92.

disassociating group. Forms of radicalism were also in this period corporatist, proposing alternatives in the form of totalitarian communist and fascist regimes, amongst others. The forms, formulations, ideas, and rites of radicalism did not just spread across Europe, but also in many other countries, including the Arab world, especially Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq.

After the war, other forms of radicalism developed. These were linked to the Cold War and a clash with totalitarian regimes, as well as with neo-liberal ideas that were extremist in their support of the free market and individual liberty. In parallel, the new, post-materialist left emerged, influenced by the ideas of psychoanalysis and existentialism, among others.

With the eruption of the conflict against colonialism and colonial practices, radical currents opposed to colonialism and racism emerged. These frequently emphasized difference and identity more than equality and independence, a trend that was also seen in radical feminist movements, which emphasized difference rather than equality.

At the end of the last century, two radical movements appeared on the scene: Jihadist Islamist fundamentalists and neo-conservatives in the West. Both these movements advocated plans to get back to basics, and were characterized by an inability to formulate compromise solutions. The neo-conservatives are trying to go back to the foundations of Western liberalism, of the capitalist system, and of the Enlightenment, which views the Western democratic system as suitable for all humanity, and as basically inherent to Western society. They do this without taking account historical and social circumstances. Some fundamentalist Islamic trends also seek a return to what they postulate are the foundations and principles of Islam. This idea of Islam is retrofitted onto a composite reality, and not only this, the past they postulate from their position in the present is designed specifically to confront a contemporary reality that they reject. They lack the ability to strike a compromise with the self and the other. Other Islamic fundamentalists, known as fundamentalist reformists, look back to origins in an effort to transcend tradition and produce a mechanism by which to accommodate the realities of a modern world with Islamic civilization and modernity.

Political radicalism on its own, without connection to any specific political or ideological current, signifies political orientations that attempt to radically change society and its system of values. In this case, it is the goals of a movement that are radical. Historically, however, movements with radical goals have often (though not always) resorted to radical methods and actions. This is for two reasons:

1. The political culture that accepts radical thinking tends to allow for the consideration of violent means to affect radical ideologies.
2. The rejection of radical change, either by state or other dominant forces, means radical movements must pursue adjustment and accommodation, retreat or withdrawal, or, for those who fail to adopt these: confrontation.

Radical movements that learn to take into account the existing political and social reality are often better at avoiding outright confrontation and develop different methods to affect change. These same methods, however, force radical groups to change their goals. This comes either as an objective pre-condition for political engagement, or because the means of change often affect the ends, with a change in one causing a reformulation of the other (at least for the second generation who support those ends).

If political radicalism means that a political movement is attempting to change the system and its prevailing values in a radical fashion, then what is radical—once again—are the goals of the movement. Movements that can be described as politically radical adopt different methods to reach this radical goal. While the radicalism of the goal may lead to a withdrawal from political action, or restriction to intellectual, literary, or other forms, it might lead to the search for acceptable methods and their adoption. The label of extremist is usually applied to those unable to build a bridge between a radical goal and the status quo, and so resort to violent methods.

There are cases where the term radical is applied to a particular idea. For example radical democracy, which affirms the sovereignty of the people as opposed to direct democracy, linking political and societal democracy;⁷ there is also the radical left, which insists on the principle of equality and the outright rejection of the market economy. Ideas like radical enlightenment have taken the appeal to reason to its furthest possible conclusions, and describe trends in European philosophy that rebelled against authority, tradition, and revealed religion at the end of the seventeenth

⁷ See for example: C. Douglas Lummis, *Radical Democracy* (Ithaca & London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996), pp. 24-27. The emphasis here is on a return to the roots of democracy as governance by the people. The closer power is to the hands of the people, the idea suggests, the closer democracy is to its original principles. The author put radical democracy alongside liberal democracy, Christian democracy, popular democracy, and socialist democracy as terms in prevalent use. See also: *Radical Democracy*, David Trend (ed.), (NY& London, 1996), which makes a series of attempts to investigate the democratic idea and its traditions on a theoretical basis of popular, participatory democracy, including in modern society and in grassroots groups. The author puts these in contrast with liberal democracy, which emphasizes the private sphere, individual liberties, pluralism, and difference.

century.⁸ There is also the historiography of the radical reform movements in Protestantism, in the form of dozens of groups, sects, and churches which split from the Protestant Reformation movement after the 16th century, and which are united by the baptism of adults (not children), seeing baptism as a contract between adult believers and not a physical matter carried out at birth. The creation of these radical groups came in both violent and non-violent forms. While each had its own means of achieving an aim, the aim was nonetheless the same: all were trying to return to a perceived original principle of Christianity without the mediation of institutional churches and their priesthood and theology.⁹

Radicals in these examples are those who bring composite social and political issues back to fundamental principles, and take positions towards these complex issues based upon those values. They view the developments to core ideas as a deviation, and a sacrifice of their essence. This sort of radical is distinguished from others in the same intellectual or political camp by the fact that they take the core idea of the shared politics to its furthest conclusions, and call things by their names without equivocation.

Rationalism itself can become radical if it deals with itself as a system of absolute truths. Even rationalism, in the sense of only accepting demonstrable statements that fit within a logically coherent system, may form a suitable context for a rationally justified extremism. This is indeed what happened during the French Revolution when a kind of religion of rationalism, the worship of the "supreme being," was born and saw the conversion of cathedrals and churches into places of worship for it. A similar case was the scientific atheism that took over education in the former Soviet Union, or in the passing of laws to combat religion as was the case in communist Albania. The examples abound. Dealing with rationalism as a closed system leads to its interpretation as an absolute system. On this basis, exclusionary positions are established that reject any other opinion as being irrational and unscientific. Through history, major movements have developed that seek to impose their ideas on others based on claims of scientific theory, as in the case of the communist movement that saw its thinking as science, and Nazism which also considered racial theory scientific. In both cases, science was used as the justification to re-engineer and redesign society.

⁸ See: Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), p. 502

⁹ George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Truman Star Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 1289-90. See also: Michael Mullet, *Radical Religious Movements in Early Modern Europe* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1980).

To think of a rationalism that is immune to this kind of 'rational' extremism (or rational irrationality) is to understand the idea as a set of open critical methods that help us to solve problems.¹⁰ The position more inclined to rationalism is the position open to critique. Monopolization of absolute truth, whether in rational or irrational guise, leads to extremism in the sense of intolerance and rejection of the opinion of the other. The insistence that a system of a number of scientific, religious, or other principles valid for solving all problems leads to the creation of problems that arise from attempts to impose these principles.

The Issue of Pluralism

Here we reach the position that assesses extremism from a democratic perspective, and categorizes it as the rejection of pluralism and tolerance. According to Powell, the extremist political party represents the demand for radical change in society in one of two directions: towards a vision of the future held by this party, or reversion to an ideal past. In general, these demands are at odds with the existing consensus.¹¹ According to Lipset and Raab, extremism is the unitary position against pluralism. It is the suppression of difference and deviation, the closure of the marketplace of ideas, and the view that differences, dualities, and gaps are illegitimate.¹²

This is the extremist position from the viewpoint of liberal democratic theoreticians. It is graduated. There are forms of extremism that co-exist with the present pluralist reality, either because they are unable to impose their ideas or because they are persuaded that although their opinion is the truth, they accept the right of other views to express themselves, even if mistaken. It is difficult to identify the case theoretically. Do those deemed extremist accept pluralism until they are able to overthrow it, or until it withers as a result of their practices without giving up their ideology? This is a practical issue that requires observation and inference and is not solvable by theoretical deductions alone.

¹⁰ John Wettersten, "The Rationality of Extremists: A Talmonist Insight We Need to Respond to," *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy*, 26:1 (2012), at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2011.634528>.

¹¹ Powell B. G. J., "Extremist parties and political turmoil: two puzzles," *Am. J. Polit. Sci.* (1986), 30: 357-78, p. 359.

¹² Lipset S.M. & Raab E., *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America 1790 – 1970* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 6.

When extremism (in its sense as an inability to create compromise solutions) is adopted by balanced political forces it can in some cases lead to civil war. For example, French politicians were unable to reach a settlement or compromise over Algeria, an impasse that led to the failure of any workable plan, leading France to the verge of civil war. A similar inability to make compromises also led to the American occupation of Iraq, and prevailed in Lebanon during the civil strife of the 1970s and 1980s. To extrapolate, extremists can be defined as those who reject settlements that might enable coexistence, and are aware that such a rejection may lead to civil war. The Iraqi political leadership is undoubtedly an example of this.

Not all extremists are so single minded, however, and a distinction can be made between this and extremism not opposed to pluralism. In this case, defenders of a position would do their utmost to preserve a specific position, but do so without muzzling others and without monopolizing the truth.¹³ In this case, an extreme position can accept the rules of pluralism and see tolerance for the expression of other opinions as preferable to their suppression.

In Europe and elsewhere, the new extreme right wing parties stress an ethnic nationalism derived from the myths of the past. For the most part, their political programs concentrated on the need to strengthen the nation by affirming its ethnic homogeneity and a return to traditional values. Here, individual rights are generally deemed secondary to the aims of the nation.¹⁴ While action is generally taken in the framework of the democratic system, these parties often threaten to take measures against 'foreigners' when they reach power, which—being contrary to official and social institutional mechanisms that would prevent them from implementing a large part of their ideas should they come to power—can only be accommodated by existing on the fringes of the pluralist system. Other parties simply reject the democratic process and abandon legitimate political activity.

Key, however, is the necessity to differentiate extremist positions opposed to or accepting of pluralism. On its own, the word 'extremism' is unable to identify where a group or individual falls in this category. As such, the word in its current usage blurs the boundaries between phenomena more than it helps clarify them.¹⁵

¹³ S. J. Hartenberg, "Extremism and Tolerance in Politics," *Ethics*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (Jul., 1967), p. 302.

¹⁴ Jens Rydgren, "The Sociology of the Radical Right," *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 33 (2007), p. 242.

¹⁵ In Arabic, there is not term for 'radicalism.' Extremism, *tatarruf*, has negative connotations, and is used to categorize that which is unacceptable, outside the consensus, or even irrational. The term is used in

There seem, today, to be two central meanings for extremism. The first is represented by the inability to build bridges with the status quo. These bridges are called settlements, compromise solutions, or a willingness to live with the contradictions that exist in society. The second meaning refers to the impossibility of breaking down the goals of a group or political movement into stages or parts. This does not imply that the responsibility to break down goals or aims falls only on the group deemed extremist. All too often society fails to make the bridge, being too quick to label as extremist, fanatical, or irrational a group with whom it is impossible to negotiate. What lies behind this designation is awareness that the given group is dangerous, or an influential opponent. Since negotiations imply compromise for the dominant group as well as the 'extremists,' they must accordingly be deprived of legitimacy so negotiations become impossible.

The above categorizations have no absolute moral dimension. They locate extremism in relativist or essentialist terms. The only moral elements here are the motivations for categorizing the 'other' as evil, and the choice to categorize that 'other' as extremist. However, as US Senator Barry Goldwater told the Republican Party Congress on July 16, 1964 after his views were called extreme: "extremism in defense of liberty is no vice ... and that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue."¹⁶ At the time, Goldwater was considered an extremist in his affirmation of conservative economics, states' rights and his isolationist foreign policy stance on world affairs. In this case, relativism causes the moral dimension to get lost. It gets lost in the repeated statements of two conflicting sides. Those accused of extremism may take pride in their righteousness, while accusing the forces that brand them as such as being forces of evil.

The terms extremism and extremist can also be applied to rivals within the same camp. For example, within a national or socio-political movement (left wing, socialist, or

opposition to centrism, moderation, the mainstream or the hegemonic status quo. In the case of 'radicalism,' Arab discourse has simply Arabized the Latin etymology of word's root, giving it a parallel meaning with the English term, with connotations of 'root' or 'branch' due to its Arabic associations. The mainstream (usually hegemonic in approach), does not usually distinguish between radicalism and extremism. It sees it as natural to view all those who reject or challenge the status quo as radical, as extremists. In all cases, these individuals or groups are excluded from the normal, the acceptable, and the agreed upon, which is also usually deemed rational. Here, the word extremism is examined without taking a position on whether or not opponents are radical, since the two terms bear essentially the same meaning.

¹⁶ Hartenberg, p. 297.

liberal), or within the framework of a religious movement. Within these groups there are those who describe themselves as moderate and put distance between their position and one labeled extremist it by its opponents. This gives the center legitimacy, and makes it possible for them to work within a negotiation process. In this case, moderate factions risk being viewed as illegitimate by their support base, because they are unable to challenge an opponent to which a support base is hostile, such as occupation forces, hegemonic authority, etc. An important dialectic develops whereby the moderates benefit from the actions of the extremists. Their credit with the opponent goes up and it becomes in the opponent's interest to empower them by offering some concessions to weaken the popularity of the extremists.¹⁷

Such concessions serve to empower moderates by crediting them with solving concrete problems for people and not being content with slogans. This process is generally accompanied by the marginalization of political issues in the lives of people, and a concentration on problems of day-to-day life. This is clearly what happened with the Black Panthers in the United States in their dialectical relationship with the civil rights movement.¹⁸ Likewise, Hamas operations at the end of the First Intifada were a major reason for then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to recognize the PLO, an action theretofore taboo in Israeli politics (in exchange for a list of conditions that caused the PLO to lose its identity in the end). This is one of the reasons that extremism can be a "rational" choice for the oppressed (in the sense of the rationality of the means to achieve the goal).

To go beyond the extremist/moderate paradigm, it becomes possible to understand extremism as the presence of an aim that can be implemented either all at once or not at all. For the extreme, there is no transitional phase. Indeed, any phase would mean the extreme position would fall within the status quo. Hence, any step to achieve an extreme position implies a negation of the status quo, which is often action taken in a violent form. Looking at it from another angle, however, keepers of the status quo can be given some of the responsibility for extreme positions if no room is given for criticism. Likewise, the nature of extreme goals must take equal responsibility.

This is not a normative value judgment, but a less relativist definition at least. In this sense, an anti-democratic fascist is an extremist. Equally, the democratic position against a totalitarian regime is extremist because it negates the status quo and because

¹⁷ Lewis M. Killian, "The Significance of Extremism in the Black Revolution," *Social Problems*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer, 1972), p. 42.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

there are no transitional periods towards democracy under totalitarianism, unless its stops being totalitarianism.

The major question facing contemporary societies is: how do groups of people go so far as to sever links with the status quo and confront it using violent methods? Investigating extreme ideas themselves will not produce a fruitful answer. The problem is not with the goal or the idea per se. Others who adopt the same idea may deem it utopian and not possible to implement in the real world and so do not to take practical steps beyond education. Others still may adopt an extreme position without even being politically active, or view their position as an ultimate aim and an ideal. Not all those who believe in the same goal try to implement wholesale or using violence. And not all those who try to affirm a position with violence will resort to the indiscriminate killing of civilians. In turn, not all those who indiscriminately kill civilians are willing to carry out a suicide bombing. And so on. None of these acts can be inferred from an extreme idea itself, and there is no direct relation between the idea, any idea, and action, any action.

Reasons for action can be irrational, emotional, or existential, and interact with specific social circumstances, the environment, ones upbringing, etc. The effect of all these on the will is more important than the effect of any idea on practice. This is nothing new. Two hundred and fifty years ago David Hume theorized that reason was a slave of the emotions when the issue is one of an act of will.

Psycho-Social Dimensions

Let us take a look at the tight-knit group as an alternative to the kinship group, an association that has come apart as with the individualism and loss of meaning associated with modern society. Absorption into an alternative grouping thus gives meaning, and in this case is the impetus for adopting extremist thinking. Identification with the group disables defenses against the commission of extremist acts. Individuals do not become part of an extremist group just because they believe in its ideas, but in the search for social cohesion and solidarity.

This works in reverse as well, in the sense that those who join such movements usually believe in their ideas, even if the idea was not the motive for joining. The defining feature of these movements is thus solidarity and internal cohesion. These perform a social function whereby the group becomes a fraternal microcosm with a shared belief in 'extremist' ideas. This is particularly the case when groups categorize themselves as

"brotherhoods" in belief, or small movements that follow a defined way of life. What is interesting in these cases is the nature of the socio-political system that drives the individual to seek out new groups, more so than the nature of the thinking the groups adopt. Indeed, it is the case that a person goes to the group and adopts its thinking, he or she might not have an idea and then join the group that believes in it.

If it is not possible to categorize the objectives or goals of a group as a priori rational or irrational, than describing the working methods of these groups as irrational is incorrect. What can be deemed rational or irrational are the means a group uses to reach its goal. In this sense, the methods of extremists are rational methods to obtain their goal. What can be categorized as "extremist" in a specific socio-historical context is a group's goal when it falls outside the consensus. Accordingly, "extremist" methods are revolutionary, insurrectionary, or violent. Conflict with opponents of this ultimate goal is inevitable.¹⁹

It seems that among all the features of terrorist movements in our times, including 'extremist' aims and methods, what most attracts attention is the often-suicidal nature of violence. To prevailing Western rationalism this is incomprehensible, in the sense that contemporary Western man cannot imagine himself capable of it. It is not the killing of civilians that appears illogical per se, but the sacrifice of the self.²⁰ Though self-sacrifice should be familiar to nationalist movements as well to the armies of democratic states that demand sacrifice for the sake of the nation or in defense of democracy as a virtue, the Western man elects not to see the acts in these terms.

In 'extremist' movements, a distinction must be made between the motives of leadership and those of the followers. Followers seek solidarity and belonging. In cases of suicide attacks this goes as far as the self being subsumed within, by, and for the group. In addition to identification with the group and the renouncing of personal autonomy in exchange for belonging, the expectation is that the act will benefit the ultimate goal of the group.

This also further consolidates the group. Solidarity leads to a strengthening of vengeful feelings when a friend, comrade, or relative dies. The ability to carry out an act of revenge with the backing of the group drives and justifies this. At times, then, the motive behind a suicide attack is shock at the death of a friend or relative killed by an

¹⁹ Ronald Wintrobe, "Extremism, suicide terror, and authoritarianism," *Public Choice* (2006), Vol. 128, No.1/2, p. 170.

²⁰ Ibid.

enemy. Through revenge action, the group furthers its goals and finds meaning in death at the same time.

This form of terrorism cannot be overcome by means of war and violence. Other more effective means might include the separation out of what appear to be the monolithic objectives of extreme movements, so that individuals can be supplied with partial achievements at least.²¹ This, in essence, would lead to a renunciation of direct action to reach 'extremist' aims that are monolithic; focusing instead on those that can be reached in stages.

This is one reason why democracies witness fewer individuals seeking groups to protect them. The democratic system is supposed to protect the individual as such, and should simultaneously allow for the existence of various kinds of voluntary and involuntary solidarity groups to which the individual may turn to seek action within the system. This to some degree mitigates the possibility of monolithic positions, encouraging step-by-step action. Nevertheless, there are exceptions. Under totalitarian regime, action within the system remains possible if the system makes attempts to grant the individual an alternative meaning and an alternative group in the form of the state, the nation, the party, etc. Overarching security control also prevents the existence of alternative groups.

In contrast, the worn-out authoritarian regime crushes an individual's existing affiliations and does not protect the citizen as individual with rights, nor does it allow for voluntary associations. This means there is no chance for the individual to belong to an alternative group through which to express dissent. Authoritarian regimes, and not democracies or totalitarian regimes, are the most likely to force the flight to closed extremist groups as an alternative association. Authoritarian régimes are thus the most likely to produce dispirited individuals and alternative communities or refuge-groups that resort to terrorist means including suicide attacks.

It can thus be said that democracy (which doesn't mean weak state or chaos) is, in the long term, one of the ways to solve the problem of terrorism and the suicidal character²². Democracy does not make the problem disappear but can contain it within a limited narrow sphere that appears a deviation from the general social, intellectual, behavioral, and moral consensus.

²¹ Ibid., p. 177.

²² Wintrobe, p. 169.

There is another level of discourse, which seeks to understand the reasons why individuals are drawn to groups with extreme positions. Lipset sees democracy as linked to composite rationalism. He writes that extremism spreads where educational levels are low and an irrational culture is widespread. Accordingly, in his view, the poor classes are more vulnerable to extremist thinking and less able to comprehend democratic thinking and practice.²³ This logic underpins many intellectual currents that consider the poor and ordinary to be vulnerable to the propaganda of totalitarian, fascist, and other parties. The explanation here is that for the poor, extremism is the product of the disintegration of the relationships between individuals that existed in traditional communities, the social uprooting of the individual, and the anxiety arising from the loss of meaning for existence. Accordingly, once involved in a group these members are also vulnerable to the patriarchy of the leader. These theories have been used to understand the way in which the Nazi movement in Germany and Italy attracted the poor and abject classes. They have been applied subsequently to many states in the developing world, particularly in the case of the attraction of the poor classes in Latin American and Arab states towards extreme nationalist movements, the extreme left, or extreme religious movements. When these assumptions have been tested, however, they have been proven wrong in several instances.

In fact, those drawn to movements with extreme positions are mostly from the middle classes and, in particular, the educated. The poor may be attracted to these movements if they provide alternative networks of social services that are not provided by the state. The matter is linked to forms of socialization and exposure to different ideas.²⁴ Social disintegration, the loss of an objective, and the search for a replacement to the disintegrated family, are not just the province of the poor.

How, then to answer often asked-questions concerning what drives young people, including the educated and well to do, to embrace radical thought and at times extreme movements. This question becomes urgent with the realization that those who carry out terrorist attacks are often educated or belong to a family that is not poor, and that those who join extremist movements are mostly not from the abject poor. These cases show the falsity of the theory that the source of extremism and the terrorism associated with it is deprivation, despair, and a sense of frustration. It indicates that deprivation, despair, and frustration are not necessarily material nor restricted to the poor,

²³ Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man*, Chap 4 (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1963).

²⁴ Alejandro Portes, "Political Primitivism, Differential Socialization, and Lower-Class Leftist Radicalism," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 36, No. 5 (Oct., 1971), pp. 832-3.

particularly when related to issues like individual and collective identity and the meaning of life.

Literature looking at why such tactics are attractive for, in particular, extreme left wing movements and young people in rich states, and the well-off classes in particular has existed since the Second World War with a second wave in the 1960s. In these studies it was reasoned that modernity brings many benefits, but at the same time undermines the psychological bases for human existence, particularly with regard to meaning within the group, family, nation, and religion. The loss of meaning arising from the crisis of these collective entities mostly led to the loss of a goal/meaning in life and the search for it in smaller fraternal corporatist groups bound together by a higher goal, or mobilized in the service of an objective beyond the prevalent conditions of life. Extremist groups in this case fill the vacuum in the human soul.

The issue here is connected to filling the psychological and spiritual vacuum arising from the processes of modernity and the loss of an aim and meaning in life. This arises from the disintegration of the kinship group or from rapid, catastrophic, and un-absorbable changes accompanied by the shattering of all that is customary and familiar. This allows for the formation of new fraternal support networks that attempt to go beyond the disintegration of the old and largely defunct one. Also relevant is the increasing gap between the basic principles underlying the existing socio-political system and its prevalent practices, in what can be termed hypocrisy and public lying. These cases are not specific to modern structures. Collapse can happen to "organic" groups in traditional societies. At all times, when a particular political regime's behavior loses contact with the basic principles people have been brought up to see as the source of the regime's legitimacy, alternative associations may be sought.

There are cases when political forces succeed in providing a sense of meaning and belonging to larger groups such as the nation or class. This is the case with totalitarian regimes in general, where populist ideology grants "happiness" in larger groups that serve a higher goal than the individual's own existence and the conditions of his material production.²⁵ Some major totalitarian movements have even tried to propose their own aesthetics, modes of literary criticism, ethics, and historiography. However, not all such movements succeed in achieving control over state and society. Many were content to grant meaning by means of faith in a higher shared goal that transcends a

²⁵ Herbert A. Kampf, "On the appeals of extremism to the youth of affluent, democratic societies," *Terrorism*, Vol. 4,1-4, (1980), pp. 164, 166, 172, 174, at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10576108008435489>.

dislocated human reality lacking meaning. This was done by means of granting belonging within the same small group. The same could be achieved through solidarity, mostly through identification with the leader of a group, as charismatic bearers of a message, vision, and will for change.

Morality and Truth

Not just any person is drawn into extremist movements that offer extreme radical solutions. Some people are attracted before others. Some are enthused because of the media *spectacle* produced by a totalitarian regime, or attracted when their instincts and fears are addressed, making them coherent through the inherent rhetoric of totalitarian discourse. However, it is also true that there are people with a psychological propensity towards these ideas from the outset, or with what may be called “radical psychological constitution”. They show strong repulsion at the gap between word and deed that may push those with sensitive feelings, particularly young people, into extremism. They are also affected by a lack of role models, moral relativism in the dealings of the dominant circles in society, and the quest for an absolute frame of reference to rely on.

Take for example someone who grew up in the United States with the democratic ideas of the founding fathers and the Declaration of Independence in the context of the hegemony of a religious culture. In time, a critical mind might discover the gap between the democratic idea of human freedom and Christian values on one hand, and the idea of slavery in the nineteenth century on the other. That individual might also see the gap between the idea of the right of people to self-determination and the practices of the Western states in the colonies, or between the barbaric practices of slavery and the values of Christianity that affirm the equality of people. If this meets with a “radical psychological constitution” we find the justification not just for rising up against slavery and the use of violence, but a justification based on the religious idea of purification and salvation through the ultimate self-sacrifice, as exemplified by Jesus. This was the model for John Brown, who began his violent struggle against the system of slave owning in North America outside the law before the Civil War, and whose violence was a prelude to it.²⁶

²⁶ Ted A. Smith, *Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2014), pp. 39, 42-3.

Consider also someone who grew up under occupation and sectarian discrimination with the idea that Islam is a way of life and form of government, and as such provides legitimacy to – for example—the regimes in Saudi Arabia or Iran. Then they discover that the rulers of these nations are deviating from the principles of Islam in their opulent personal lives, in the administration of the state, and in their dealing with Western states.

Other examples abound. Of the essence here is not the difference that drives people towards extremism. Rather, it is the presence of individuals with the willingness to return to fundamental principles and enter into conflict with the status quo, and at the same time to enter groups that provide a sanctuary and an identity. This becomes a psychological profile when an individual cannot see positions co-exist with contradictions or in any degree of nuance. For this individual, not only must there be complete coherence between word and deed, but there is also a polarization between for and against, black or white. This psyche cannot tolerate nuance in the struggle against injustice, leading to disaster irrespective of motivations, since life itself is complex and full of contradictions.

At times, scientific knowledge and methods are applied in a mold that rejects everything which cannot be cast in the form of scientific formulae. Ideologies that claim to be scientific are thus particularly attractive, but more important than this is the need of individuals to fill the mental and spiritual vacuum left in the modern world.²⁷

It is customary for extremists to view the contradictions of life as hypocrisy. There is a difference, however, between rejecting hypocrisy where word and deed conflict, and being unable to cope with life and its contradictions. This insistence on cohesion of word and deed in the acts of extremists is seen by some as 'integrity,' which is attractive for young people, especially those who reject complexity, putting it down to distortion, hypocrisy, and lies. This can devolve into violence when individuals are unable to accept compromise solutions or to co-exist in a complex society.

In this sense, extremism is to look at the heart of things and do what should be done according to words and texts, without taking moral or other considerations into account. This also applies to the choice of methods used in service of the goal. A key feature of the extremist position, which might also be pragmatic, is its admission of the

²⁷ Kampf, p. 172.

truth without euphemism or equivocation. This is how extremist positions seem in a certain sense to be without contradiction and not hypocritical; another reason such groups appeal to young people searching for truth. Repulsed by the contradictions of mainstream society, extremist positions offer integrity, speak the truth, and reject hypocrisy.

For example, Zionism split over compromise solutions with the British and the international community as a means to establish the Jewish state. There were forces within the Zionist movement that held firm to the idea of the “whole land of Israel,” known academically as Revisionist Zionism. This segment did not agree to give up arms after the Nakba and the establishment of the Jewish state. This divergence in Zionist thought, between hypocrisy and extremism, was apparent from the beginnings of the movement, as when Jabotinsky rejected Zionism’s marketing of itself as not being anti-Arab, and its promotion of the idea that the existence of a Jewish state might be of benefit to Arab cultural and economic progress. This was for the mainstream movement an attempt to make the truth palatable, but for Jabotinsky meant only hypocrisy. In an article he penned in 1923, “The Ethics of the Iron Wall,” Jabotinsky wrote that the Arabs were a nation like other nations and that Zionism would appropriate their land and they would resist. It was Zionism’s right, he said, to impose its aim by force, even if its imposition on the Arabs might seem an injustice. From the Zionist perspective the aim was just. If it was obvious that the Arabs would resist it, then it also had to be obvious that Zionism would impose its ideology by force, which did not lessen its justness.²⁸

This candor aimed to change status quo completely. It also replaced questions of humanist morality with the belief that morality was instead the achievement of the Zionist goal. Here we reach the crux of the issue: every definition of extremism that lacks a moral dimension is a relativist definition unconnected to a group’s aim and the means. Instead, this definition is related to the position of ‘extremist’ in the existing socio-political system.

Judging extremism in general is to take a principled perspective on a phenomena or idea that contradicts and seeks to negate the status quo. This is not sufficient however. Extremism identifies a position in contradiction to the status quo and takes this position as far as it will go without heeding the principles of justice or human rights. That is the

²⁸ Zeev Jabotinsky, “The Ethics of the Iron Wall,” *Razviet*, (Nov. 11, 1923), at: http://www.jabotinsky.org/multimedia/upl_doc/doc_191207_181762.pdf.

extremism of an idea, be it religious, nationalist, class-based, capitalist, or socialist; it is taking the absolute to a degree that elevates and sanctifies it above ethical factors. Accordingly, extreme positions grant the self the right to go beyond moral judgements and to view them as secondary. The absolute nature of the goal takes the place of morality.

It might be said that this is what defines politics in general for Machiavelli and others. There is a difference, however, between morality and politics, which Machiavelli also saw. However, the analysis above makes Machiavelli an 'extremist,' insofar as he represents a case of the separation between morality and politics in his elevation of power over any moral consideration and his complete minimization of moral factors in the conflict over power. Likewise, those who continue his path in theories of the state, who view the state as the objective embodiment of public morality, are likewise extreme. The difference between extremism in formal politics and the extremism of movements and ideologies lies in the fact that rulers do not uphold an idea but power itself, above any moral factor.

This is exactly what rulers do, which, in my view, makes them more or less extremists, despite the ever-present distinction between politics and morality.

Religion, too, is different to morality. This difference may be one of degree or even one of contradiction. The degree I am talking about is when no significance is given to moral values and norms, and morality taken into account on the level of word or deed is considered hypocrisy and an infringement on the absolute truth of a religion. From this perspective, religion does not obey morality and has no moral function. Rather, the implementation of the interpretations of a defined religious group and behavior derived from these interpretations takes the place of morality. The idea becomes paramount, even if carrying out its goals means trampling on morality, using lies, theft, and the killing of innocents, and everything else that is forbidden by the moral dimension of religion. Here it is not enough to make a separation between politics and morality, or religion and morality, but a new moral prism, guided by the supreme goal, is relied upon.

A new theoretical definition of an extremist is thus: Someone who elevates an idea, even if it is religious, above any moral standards; and who does not take morality into account when deriving specific practices from the contradiction observed between an idea and reality.

Ibn Taymiyyah is often invoked as an example to justify takfiri fatwas and revolts against a ruler in our era. There is a historical evaluation that sees it as difficult to consider the fatwas of Ibn Taymiyyah as having been extremist in his own age. Viewed as extremist today, the fatwas were rallying cries to mobilize people at a time of war, and can be seen today by centrists as akin to mobilizing for war against the “enemies of the nation.” In his case the mobilization was for holy war against the Moguls when they invaded Syria, and *takfir* (apostatization) in that context was akin to treason. Ibn Taymiyyah was an extremist in the sense that he rejected any contradiction of Muslim reality with Islamic law. He was generally cautious about declaring Muslims apostates, even though he laid the foundations for declaring a Muslim ruler an apostate and permitting revolt against him in the context of preserving the unity of the Umma from the Moguls.²⁹ Ibn Taymiyyah’s pragmatism is evident in his rationalization that Joseph’s service for the Pharaoh was in the service of a just cause, that is, he was willing to understand the circumstances of Muslims in a non-Muslim society and seek compromise solutions.

The logic of his fatwas is connected in the end to the unity of the nation as an Islamic nation. In our age that seems a highly extremist idea, particularly after the establishment of states and the change to the concept of nation and citizenry. Ibn Taymiyyah’s terminology today is used to justify revolt against the state as a whole and against loyalty to the nation, and not the ruler alone. Is, then, the extremism of Ibn Taymiyyah’s ideas something relative? Yes, it seems that his extremism, as shown in the brief exposition above, is relative from the perspective of our times, but it becomes extremist by definition when we take one important factor into account: for him, morality is subject to these precepts and what they entail is justified for him, even if it means murder—the murder of infidels. There is no external moral standard to act as a guide. This common factor of the absence of moral standards, above the idea of what he considers to be religious duties and commandments, is what enables us to judge Ibn Taymiyyah an extremist in a way that goes beyond relativism in time and space.

²⁹ Yahya Michot, *Muslims Under Non-Muslim Rule* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2006). This book is of particular interest as an example of research that sets Ibn Taymiyyah in his historical context, particularly the fatwa of Mardin, which refuses to divide the world into *dar al-harb* and *dar-al-salaam*. This affirms Ibn Taymiyyah’s position calling for jihad against the foreign invader while rejecting internal strife. He does not seem extremist, but might from the perspective of those who use him to justify acts of violence in our age, where he is seen as the faqih who legitimates terrorism, particularly in English writing following 9/11. See: Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, Anthony Roberts (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002); and Malise Ruthven, *A Fury for God: The Islamist Attack on America* (London: Granta Books, 2002).

To clarify: It is possible that the idea, in the name of which moral standards are marginalized and transcended, may in itself be a moral one. Moral puritanism drives itself to marginalize morality when it imposes itself in the process of resolving what it views as a complete contradiction between moral thinking and an immoral reality.

Key in the problem of the relativist process is that, moderation as a non-relativist term goes beyond self-description when demeaning the opponent. It is the control of human behavior (political and otherwise) by means of moral standards in order to create a certain degree of balance between practical necessity and moral standards, however much political considerations are subject to practical pressures. Policies vary according to the extent to which moral standards are taken into account in this interaction between human activity in itself (to obtain a specific goal) and morality in itself. Subjecting morality to an idea superior to it, to the extent of viewing all that serves this idea as a good so long as it serves the goal and performs the role of morality, may provide man with an alternative to morality to an extent that disables his moral conscience.

This subservience produces the phenomenon that deserves to be called extremism. Ibn Taymiyyah belongs to a form of legal thinking that sees no moral standards on whose basis to judge actions, but only divine laws. He sees that there is always some principle of divine law from which to derive what needs to be done, and to which morality is subservient. There are other forms of popular, institutionalized, and even fundamentalist religiosity whose understanding of religion starts from a moral perspective, or at least grant moral decisions greater autonomy.

The extremist political goal is one that denies the reality that contradicts its central idea. For adherents to these ideas, extreme views pose an alternative to morality and represent the supreme principle. It is from this principle from which morality is derived or to which it is completely subservient, so that moral choice enjoys no autonomy from the political goal.

Where other categorizations start from the condemnation or distortion of the opponent or his position in contrast with what is called, at a specific historical period, moderation. The definition developed here does not give amnesty to states, and is not limited to the exclusion of a specific movement, idea, or ideology that lays down its own instrumentalist, or relativist term for extremism. The sole non-relativist definition for extremism is in cases where the goal is absolute, beyond moral standards that are

relativist by comparison, and where morality is missing in the relationship between ends and means. I see no other universal categorization for the phenomenon.