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Ronald Wintrobe  
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PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

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[More information](#)

## ONE

## The Problem of Extremism

## 1.1 Introduction

Extremist movements often appear mysterious, frightening, and irrational. Extremists like Osama bin Laden are said to be different from us: they are twisted, deviant, fanatical, or simply “evil.” One reason, of course, is the extraordinary destruction of which they are sometimes capable, as symbolized by the events of 9/11. Another reason is the apparently single-minded passion of their leaders. And while the leaders of these movements often appear dogmatic, perhaps even more frightening is the oft-observed fanatical loyalty of their followers.

But extremism is not new. While the means of terror used by Al Qaeda were never used before, in many respects the phenomena associated with 9/11 are not new at all. Europe in particular has a long history of extremism. Perhaps the first modern example of extremism in power was the “Terror” (the word was invented then) associated with the Jacobin ascendancy during the French Revolution. In the twentieth century, extremist movements continued to take power in Europe with the rise of fascism in Italy, Nazism in Germany, and communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. More recently, extremist groups in Europe have remained much smaller and have never risen to power but have been important and destructive. Movements included those involving the Red Brigades on the left and Propaganda Due on the right in Italy in the 1970s, the Baader-Meinhof Gang of the 1970s in Germany, and the antiimmigration National Front of Le Pen in France, which continues today.

North America has also had its share of extremist activity – for example, the Ku Klux Klan, the John Birch Society, the Weathermen, McCarthyism, and the right-wing militias in the United States and the Front de Liberation de Quebec in Canada. Of course, at one time the label “extremist” was often

Cambridge University Press

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Ronald Wintrobe

Excerpt

[More information](#)

attached to people in the (now entirely mainstream) civil rights, women's, and gay and lesbian movements in the United States. Fringe movements continue to be important there; for example, in late 2004 the American National Rifle Association successfully opposed extending the ban on assault weapons such as AK-47s and Uzi submachine guns, thus making it easier to purchase them and leading its opponents to suggest that the group's initials actually stand for "No Rational Argument."

In other countries, anticolonialism was an important source of extremism in the twentieth century. Even Nelson Mandela, head of the group "Spirit of the Nation" in his early days, planned and participated in violent activities, although the group did not cause any deaths. However, extremism is not necessarily violent: the classic example of a nonviolent extremist is Gandhi, who invented the idea of nonviolence as a force with his concept of *satyagraha*. Recently, Mark Juergensmeyer has suggested in his book *Gandhi's Way* (1992) that Gandhi's methods have a place in resolving many important conflicts in the world today.

At the other (philosophical) end of the violent-nonviolent spectrum in anticolonialism there is possibly Franz Fanon, whose book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) developed a psychology of extremism, centered on the pleasure and rejuvenation to be experienced in the struggle for a just cause. Only by a process of violent overthrow, he argued, was it possible for the colonized person to develop for the first time as an individual and to get rid of colonialism and domination.

The Middle East has been an important source of extremism since the Second World War. This includes the activities of the Jewish Irgun against the British, the Hezbollah in Lebanon (which invented modern suicide bombing as a terrorist tactic), and the activities of Palestinian organizations like Hamas as well as Jewish extremists associated with the fundamentalists in the settler movement.

The first point about this list of examples is that extremists are not all bad people; the list includes heroes as well as demons. Indeed, extremists are often both, though in the eyes of different people.

The second point is that there is a certain sense in which all these groups appear to be part of the same phenomenon. Hannah Arendt (1951, 1973) pointed out that Soviet communism and Nazi fascism were similar in so many respects that they could be called by the same name: "totalitarian." Clifford Geertz (2003) refers to the "totalitarian" nature of Islamic fundamentalist organizations, and Christopher Hitchens calls the contemporary Islamic terrorists "Islamofascists." Of course, not all of the movements listed fit these labels. However, there is no entry for "extremism" in the *Oxford Companion to the Politics of the World* (Krieger 1993). Nor is there an entry for

Cambridge University Press

0521859646 - Rational Extremism: The Political Economy of Radicalism

Ronald Wintrobe

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

“radicalism.” Of course, there are entries for communism, anti-Semitism, fascism, and so on. This reflects the fact that, while there is lots of work on individual extremist movements, there is little or none on the problem in general. Yet, when one listens to or reads about extremists even with completely opposite points of view, they often seem to be, at one level, basically the same. For example, the Jewish fundamentalists in Israel and the extremists of Hamas have nothing whatsoever in common except:

- Both are against any compromise with the other side.
- Both want the entire land of Palestine for their group.
- Both are entirely sure of their position.
- Both advocate and sometimes use violence to achieve their ends.
- Both are nationalistic.
- Both are intolerant of dissent within their group.
- Both demonize the other side, so that the members of Hamas, as viewed by the Israeli fundamentalists, sometimes sound exactly like the Israeli fundamentalists as viewed by Hamas.

To pursue the last point, one common element in extremism is that it either arises in response to, or spawns an enemy that is fundamentally opposed to it. Thus the threat from the left in Europe in the late 1960s spawned the rise of the extreme right in the 1990s (Kitschelt 1997). Sometimes there is even a sense in which the opposite ends of the spectrum seem to be collaborating, if only implicitly. After all, they typically do have one objective in common – both wish to undermine the center. The 1970s in Italy was known as “the years of lead” because so many violent incidents occurred there, on both the right and the left. After every major terrorist incident, the question always seemed to be, Was the extreme right or the extreme left responsible?<sup>1</sup> And many on the extreme right and left in Italy were pleased at the incident that culminated the period – the kidnapping and murder of Italy’s leading politician, Aldo Moro, in 1978. This destroyed

<sup>1</sup> The period of terror in Italy began with the bombing of the Piazza Fontana in 1969. Sixteen people died, and eighty-eight were wounded. The police immediately arrested an anarchist named Giuseppe Pinelli. Three days later, while in police custody, Penelli mysteriously died. His death was later ruled “accidental,” but the explanations given by the police were so incredible and contradictory that few people believed them. Later, the playwright Dario Fo wrote a farce about the whole affair called *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (2003). Initially the act was attributed to the left. No one was ever convicted of the Piazza Fontana bombing, but it’s now accepted that it was actually the work of neofascists on the right, rather than extremists on the left (Ginsborg 2003). It was part of the so-called Strategy of Tension. This is a term coined to describe a devious plan of the right: to plant bombs and then blame the carnage on the left. The point was to sow panic and build support for a hard-line authoritarian regime, which would then put a stop to the violence.

Cambridge University Press

0521859646 - Rational Extremism: The Political Economy of Radicalism

Ronald Wintrobe

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the “historic compromise” whereby the Communist left and the Christian Democratic right would both move to the center (Drake 1995) and the Communist Party would formally enter the government. This would have been the first time in history that communism would take power via the democratic process instead of a revolution. People on both extremes hated the idea, the extreme right because they hated the idea of Communists in power, and the extreme left because it would destroy its hopes for a genuine Marxist revolution. Indeed, it was difficult to figure out which group killed him, and a succession of trials was held to uncover the truth, aspects of which are still not certain. In the same way, elements in both Hamas and the Jewish extremist groups were pleased when the Oslo peace process was torpedoed by the murder of Israel’s Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

The starting point of this book is that the similarities among extremist movements make it worthwhile to investigate them as a single phenomenon. So the problem to which this book is addressed is the problem of the origins, behavior, consequences, and (where desirable) control of extremism.

The simplest way to think of an extremist is someone whose views are outside the mainstream on some issue or dimension. In the twentieth century, extremists were typically persons on the extreme right or the extreme left. But the dimension could also be nationalism, religion, security, or any other politically important dimension.

In addition, the word “extremist” is also used to refer to a person or group that uses extremist *methods*, such as violence or terrorism, to achieve its goals. And extremism can refer to other things as well. For example, as we have suggested, extremists are typically against any compromise, they are entirely sure of their position, and they are intolerant of dissent within their group.

So persons or movements may be called extreme because their views are far out of the mainstream on some issue, or because they use violence to further their goals, or because they are rigid and intolerant of other points of view. A group can be extremist if it has only one of these features. Some movements – Al Qaeda is a good example – have all of them. Indeed, this is not surprising, because, as we will show, the latter two characteristics, the predilection for violence and the tendency toward rigidity and intolerance, can be derived from the first characteristic.

## 1.2 The Approach – Rationality

We will look at the phenomena of extremism from the point of view of modern political economy. This means that we will assume that extremist groups

Cambridge University Press

0521859646 - Rational Extremism: The Political Economy of Radicalism

Ronald Wintrobe

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Approach – Rationality*

7

and the individuals who join them are *rational*. That is, given their goals, they try to adopt the best means to achieve them. The idea that extremists are rational is not new. For example, a recent study of all suicide terrorist attacks worldwide from 1980 to 2001 showed that suicide attacks are typically organized in coherent campaigns that are started and stopped by the group's leadership, directed at targets that are thought to be vulnerable to this pressure, and always conducted for a specific purpose – that of gaining control over what the terrorists see as their national territory (Pape 2003). In a similar vein, Enders and Sandler (2003) provide some evidence that terrorists behave rationally when they select attacks, substituting less protected targets after protection has been increased at other targets. For example, the tightening of security measures at government embassies and government buildings provoked terrorists to turn to aircraft hijacking. When airports installed metal detectors, terrorists selected civilian targets that were less protected.<sup>2</sup>

With respect to terrorists, too often the media just report their actions, especially when they are violent and even repulsive. But the repulsiveness can be deliberately designed to frighten people and to provoke their governments into overreacting. The hope is this will backfire and ultimately advance the aims of the extremists. It's a kind of "judo politics."

Extremism often involves dissent and demonstrations against the existing situation. In a review of the early literature on political extremism, Knoke (1990) points out that psychological explanations often dominated discussions of extremism in the past. Thus, for example, it was often argued that individuals who experienced intolerable psychological stresses in their daily lives and joined in mob actions were accessing a safety valve that let off steam but accomplished little in the way of solving their problems. Accordingly, participants in extremist movements were often marginal to society or dispossessed by economic change.

Empirical evidence has now accumulated that contradicts these explanations, at least as applied to social movements in general. The evidence drawn from such classic social movements as the black civil rights movement in the U.S. South, the women's movement, Three Mile Island protests, poor peoples movements, and social protest under Weimar consistently suggests that collective actions generally attract participants of higher social economic status who are more integrated and better connected to societal institutions than are nonparticipants.

<sup>2</sup> More recently, of course, they have also found new ways to get at the old targets.

Cambridge University Press

0521859646 - Rational Extremism: The Political Economy of Radicalism

Ronald Wintrobe

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Instead, the modern approach tends to see social movements, including extremist movements, as the main vehicle for marginal and excluded people to gain access to and influence within an established political system. It follows that extremism can be modeled as a form of political competition.

I assume extremists are rational. This does not mean that they are necessarily selfish, cold, or that they calculate everything. It means only that, given their goals, they try to achieve them as fully as possible and this means choosing the best method to achieve them. Nor does it mean they are the same as you and I because their goals are different. For example, the goals of Al Qaeda are obviously not shared by most people in the West. But the point of the assumption of rationality is to understand their behavior, not to exonerate them or judge them. When we understand what they are about, we make them human and that enables us to put ourselves in their place. This helps us to understand why they do what they do and, where their actions are threatening and warrant measures to be taken against them, to combat them.

The assumption that extremists are rational means it is important to understand the goals of the extremist movement in question. Although these movements differ wildly, they often have one thing in common – a particular structure of “all or nothing” or indivisibility or utopianism. Yet, although the nature of the goals of extremist groups plays an important role in determining the choice of extremist methods by group leaders, “the cause” of extremist groups is not necessarily “the cause” of the extremism of their *members*.<sup>3</sup> We look at what makes people join (or support) extremist groups; why extremist groups sometimes adopt beliefs that, to an outsider, are patently false; and what conditions are conducive to the flourishing of extremism and terrorism, especially suicide terrorism.

The rational approach to political behavior is associated with public choice theory. In that theory, extremism has an obvious interpretation because the central question in public choice theory is whether there is “convergence” of the political parties at the median in left-right space.<sup>4</sup> Extremism would mean that a group would locate toward one of the extremes of left or right. However, there is no real theory of extremism in the standard model because either there is convergence at the median or, as a result of the well-known Arrow problem, there is simply no equilibrium and “anything can happen.” In Wittman-Hibbs-Alesina-Alesina-Rosenthal models, in which

<sup>3</sup> Any more than the goals of a firm (profits, say) or a government (reelection) explain the actions of individual subordinates within that firm or government bureau.

<sup>4</sup> The standard survey of public choice theory is Mueller (2003).

Cambridge University Press

0521859646 - Rational Extremism: The Political Economy of Radicalism

Ronald Wintrobe

Excerpt

[More information](#)

parties are, in part, ideologically motivated, convergence is not complete, and the parties may become polarized to a greater or lesser degree, but again there is no real theory of extremist behavior.

One reason for this state of affairs is that extremism is a complex phenomenon that typically involves more than the simple left-right dimension. For example, extremism is often associated with other phenomena, including utopianism, nationalism, revolutionary activity, *jihad* (struggle), or terrorism. To understand these aspects of extremism, I provide chapters on each of these subjects. Each chapter is illustrated with a detailed example or with several examples: utopianism with communism, the Palestinian conflict, and Islam; nationalism with the rise of Slobodan Milosevic; revolution with the great French Revolution; and *jihad* and terrorism with contemporary Islamic Radicalism.

Another reason that extremism is difficult to understand, which is implicit in each of the phenomena just mentioned, is that there is something left out of the standard rational choice picture. Perhaps the simplest way to describe what is left out is to begin by observing that, in the traditional rational choice approach, there are only two kinds of actors – individuals and the state. Here, we change this to include groups and social interactions. People have a preference for social interaction or for solidarity, or they prefer to live in societies with larger stocks of social capital, or they wish to be members of groups. The next section expands on this idea.

### 1.3 Rationality with a Twist: The Importance of Groups and Solidarity

Solidarity denotes “unity” or “oneness of purpose.” Sometimes solidarity is motivated by empathy or identification,<sup>5</sup> as when we feel for others who have experienced a misfortune that could have happened to us, and we may contribute time or money to help them.

The desire for group identification seems to be a fundamental characteristic of human beings (D. Brown 1991). This preference has been demonstrated in very simple experiments, such as one in which people were sorted by their teacher into groups with brown eyes and those with blue eyes, and the individuals within each group immediately began distinguishing between “insiders” and “outsiders,” based on eye color.<sup>6</sup> The nature of the

<sup>5</sup> “What did the Dalai Lama say to the hot dog vendor? Make me ONE with Everything” (joke told by Anthony Downs in his Presidential Address to the Public Choice Society).

<sup>6</sup> Huddy (2003), reviews these experiments and subsequent work.



Cambridge University Press

0521859646 - Rational Extremism: The Political Economy of Radicalism

Ronald Wintrobe

Excerpt

[More information](#)

group with which one identifies appears to be subject to wide variation and can include the family, the workplace, religion, political party, sporting clubs, ethnicity, and the nation-state.

However, working against solidarity within any group is the well-known “free-rider” problem: even though individuals within the group are better off when the group prospers as a whole, any individual can always gain through the pursuit of individual advantage even when that conflicts with the interests of the group. In biology, this destroys the possibility of group selection (Williams 1966). In society, the pursuit of individual advantage can have the same destructive effect on solidarity within groups. But groups find ways to deal with the free-rider problem, and an interesting literature has developed on this point, which we review in the next chapter.

Solidarity may also be motivated by pure self-interest. For example, if a person’s rewards are greater if he remains with a group, solidarity with the group may be a totally self-interested choice. Business firms, unions, armies, political parties, and other organizations often find it in their interest to structure incentives within their organization to reward loyalty, and so employees and participants may choose solidarity with others in the organization without any motivation other than their own welfare.

Whatever the motivation,<sup>7</sup> the more solidarity there is among the members of a group, the more they are capable of making exchanges with one another, or cooperating as a group toward some common goal. For this reason, solidarity is like social capital or trust and is often classed with it. These concepts are closely related to each other (I provide precise definitions of them in the next chapter).

What is the connection between solidarity and extremism? Extremism is normally seen as the essence of individualism, but political extremism in some ways is actually its opposite. Thus the conformity often observed *within* extremist movements is remarkable, and often greater and more disconcerting than the conformity within the wider society to which such movements set themselves up in opposition.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in some ways, conformity and extremism are opposites; in other ways, they are simply different aspects of the same phenomenon.

<sup>7</sup> It would be interesting to find evidence or to design an experiment that would distinguish the two motivations.

<sup>8</sup> To see this point in the context of spatial models, observe that a person whose preferences are located near the center of the political distribution usually has the option of shifting his allegiance to a party on either the right or left and thus retains his individualism. But a person at the extreme tends to be stuck with the extremist group, the more so the more extreme he gets.

The connection between extremism and group solidarity can be seen in many extremist groups. It is no accident that “organic” or “group” concepts are typically more central to the extremist vision, as was the case with fascism (the word itself indicates the strength of a group compared to the assorted individuals within it), Nazism, and, of course, communism. Other, lesser-known movements such as the radical Hindus in the 1920s or the Japanese Tokkotai (Special Attack Forces or kamikazes) have a similar structure (Buruma and Margalit 2004). Even right-wing militants who celebrate “individualism” and independence from the state exhibit a remarkable internal conformity, as shown in the classic study of right-wing American extremism by Lipset and Rabb (1978). Ba’athism, the ideology of the Syrian and former Iraqi governments, is, according to Buruma and Margalit, a “synthesis, forged in the 1930s and 1940s, of fascism and romantic nostalgia for an ‘organic’ community of Arabs” One of its key thinkers, Sati’ Husri, used the idea of *asabiyya*, or Arab blood solidarity, developed in the fourteenth century by Ibn Khaldun, and this is still the official ideology of Ba’athists today (Buruma and Margalit 2004, pp. 145–146).

It has been observed that Islam is the most communitarian of the three monotheisms (Black 2001, p. 309). Radical Islam is based on the idea that the world is in a state of *jahiliyya* (barbarism or idolatry), which emerges from the West. So the conflict between radical Islam and the West is not just religious but is about fundamentally different kinds of community, between that based on individuals, pursuing their own interests, and the idea of a community based on pure faith (Buruma and Margalit 2004, p. 119).

To anticipate some of our conclusions, the role of social capital or solidarity in society can be summed up as follows. On the one hand, membership in a cohesive group or life in a community with abundant social capital is to many people a deep source of satisfaction. Social capital is said to contribute to happiness not only because of the pleasures of living in a society where people are more cohesive, but also because of its many indirect benefits, including lower crime rates, more education, and faster economic development.

On the other hand, an important implication of the standard economic approach to social capital is that behavior can be highly unstable when the stock of social capital is large (as we will see in more detail in Chapter 2). Further, as the rest of this book is devoted to showing, there is a deep connection between social capital or solidarity and all of the manifestations of extremism just discussed: terrorism (particularly suicide terrorism), nationalism, revolutionary activity, and *jihad*. The result is that the world is a more unstable, violent, and extremist place than would be