Political Extremism and Rationality

Political extremism is widely considered to be the product of irrational behavior. The distinguishing feature of this collection by well-known economists and political scientists from North America, Europe, and Australia is to propose a variety of explanations which all insist on the rationality of the phenomenon. Contributors use variants of this approach to shed light on subjects such as the conditions under which democratic parties take extremist positions, the relationship between extremism and conformism, the strategies adopted by revolutionary movements, and the reasons why extremism often leads to violence. The authors identify four core issues in the study of extremism: the nature (definition) of extremism and its origins in both democratic and authoritarian settings, the capacity of democratic political systems to accommodate extremist positions, the strategies (civil disobedience, assassination, lynching) chosen by extremist groups, and the circumstances under which extremism becomes a threat to democracy.

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Introduction

Political extremism is a complex and difficult subject. Indeed, the very concept "extremist" sometimes makes people uncomfortable. Is not extremism always relative to some set of values, whose rightness is open to debate? As citizens of democratic countries, we often find extremism inside our polities distressing. On the other hand, when extremism occurs in non-democratic settings it often appears to many of us as liberating. Thus, we are often forced to distinguish between the "decent" extremism of those "fighting for political liberation" and the "indecent political brutality" of domestic extremists. And even when we are sympathetic to the aims of the latter, we are often led to wonder why human rationality is unable to eliminate the social waste implicit in the violence and disruption often associated with extremist activities.

As is widely acknowledged, we owe our political liberties today to some extremists of the past and too much conformity is a danger to our intellectual life and to social progress. At the same time, the conformity often observed within extremist movements is sometimes even more remarkable and disconcerting than the conformity within the wider society to which such movements sometimes set themselves up in opposition. Thus, another contraposition is that, in some ways, extremism and conformity are opposites; in other ways they are simply different aspects of the same phenomenon.

Extremism might not appear to be an easy topic for a science like economics, built on individual rationality, "well-behaved" utility functions, and the invisible hand and welfare maximization. Corner solutions – often thought to be implicit in any extremist choice – are not easily handled by the standard marginal calculus. But the economic way of thinking has in recent years been extended to encompass "tipping," irreversibility, bandwagon effects, hysteresis and so forth. Extremism has also been much studied using other methodologies, and the Villa Colombella Group has always invited scholars from the various social

sciences to its conferences. Having reflected in previous books on nationalism and on the working of democratic decision-making, we thought that a reflection on the politics of extremism could usefully complement our understanding of the reality of political life in many countries. Therefore, we invited a number of scholars to France – in Vichy, evocatively – to formulate consistent explanations of what appears to be a pervasive yet heterogeneous phenomenon.

The initial questions we asked ourselves concerned a number of issues. First, among the many forms of extremism, we chose to concentrate on its political expression. As for the kind of political systems to be considered – democratic versus totalitarian settings – we thought of them as posing different challenges. The presence of at least some kinds of extremists inside a democratic polity can be particularly puzzling. Why is it that some people in democratic societies who can freely access information come to believe propositions that on standard canons of proof are simply not credible? How is it, for example, that a number of Americans, mostly members of paramilitary groups, would come to believe the view expounded in Mark Koernke's 1993 video, *America in Peril*, that "elements within the US government are working with foreign leaders to turn the United States into a dictatorship under the leadership of the United Nations" (Karl 1995, p. 69)?

Another set of questions pertained to the social and economic causes of extremism as well as to whether extremism is always or even typically destructive, or whether it can contribute positively to society, for example by posing the right questions, or by dampening what could otherwise be even more extreme reactions, or by stimulating positive kinds of change. We were also concerned with the relationship between extremism and democracy: does extremism pose a threat to the survival of democracy, and if so, how and under what circumstances? To what extent are the sources of extremism and related phenomena to be found in the failings of democracy to represent or accommodate "fringe" viewpoints?

Most of those questions did, as it turned out, play a large role in the contributions and in the discussion at the Seminar. But we got more, as the reader will discover in the following chapters. Before summarizing them, however, it may be worthwhile to make a few general remarks on some of the traits that characterize and differentiate the contributions. As well, it seems useful to elaborate on what appear to us, after the Seminar and after rereading the contributions, some of the core issues of political extremism.

Consider first the matter of defining extremism. The definitions used by most authors are, it would appear, influenced by the cultural traditions from which they emerged as well as by the cases of extremism that were prominent in the authors' mind. Though no more than a *curiosum*

but one that illustrates the impact of cultural backgrounds, we note that in defining extremism the French, German, and Italian dictionaries emphasize the radicalism of ideas while the English dictionaries stress the violence of the instruments that are adopted.

If the definition of extremism is one of the core issues to which the chapters that follow draw attention, we must acknowledge that little consensus was reached on the topic. What is extremism? What are the kinds of behavior which it is appropriate to consider extremist, that is, what is the domain of extremism? The definitions used in this book portray extremism variously in terms of

1. location at a corner rather than in the interior on some dimension of an individual's preferences. Sometimes, relatedly, extremism is defined as a move away from the center towards the extreme rather than an equilibrium position;
2. a characteristic of the way beliefs are held rather than their location along some dimension; for example, if they are held rigidly or the person holding them displays a small capacity or willingness to compromise;
3. a shrinking of the range, or a limitation of the number of options and choices which are considered;
4. the salience or importance of a belief or set of beliefs; that is, an extremist is someone who is fixated on some idea or belief;
5. the means used; for example, a political extremist is one who resorts to terror or violence to further political ends.

Some will find this diversity more inviting than disconcerting. Others may wish to note that the definitions are not mutually exclusive. One possible synthesis of the various approaches is that, rather than alternative definitions, the different concepts may be thought of as representing different dimensions along which it is possible to be more or less extreme. Combining the different dimensions into a single concept, one might say that a movement in any of these directions would constitute an increase in extremism. Thus, in this way of thinking, a person is more extreme, the further away her views are from the mainstream or center view, the less willing she is to compromise about them, the fewer alternatives to them she is willing to contemplate, the more salient they are to her, and the more willing she is to use violent methods in support of those views. Of course, not all would agree with this synthesis, and in any case a person can be more or less extreme in each of these five senses as well.

A second core issue is the origins of extremism. Are the origins of extremism primarily due to the activities of extremist leaders, to the psychological propensities of followers, to the workings of the political system, or to economic and social change? The chapters in Part I focus

more on the first and second of these possibilities. Parts II and III look at the workings of, respectively, democratic and non-democratic systems in terms of stimulating or dampening extremism. The chapters in Part II in particular show how extremism can be stimulated, quite easily, it would appear, by political party competition, a somewhat surprising finding for those who are used to the focus on convergence and the median voter model in standard public choice.

A third core issue is the capacity of the political system to accommodate extremist pressures. Why do some societies appear to be capable of absorbing extremist groups better than others? Both Parts II and III address this question. Democracy appears to be less of an antidote, and more of a stimulus, to extremism than we had thought previously. Even in non-democratic environments, it appears that fundamentalism and extremism can both be stimulated by political competition.

A fourth core issue is the nature of the strategies adopted by extremist groups: why are different strategies (civil disobedience, assassination, lynching) chosen by different groups under different circumstances? Part of the answer to this question is that it depends on the environment in which the extremist group is operating. Many of the chapters in Part II, for example those by Glazer, Hochman, and Salmon focus on the strategies adopted by political parties in an environment of electoral competition. Here, the question is: what makes political parties choose an extremist strategy over a more centrist one? Other chapters focus on different environments. For example, Ferrero looks at the strategies adopted by revolutionary movements along their life cycle, Ortona at mass ethnic violence, and Giuriato and Molinari at the strategies adopted by religious leaders, such as the fundamentalists of Islam, who pursue political objectives.

Finally, there is the question of the limits of the rational choice approach. For example, as Hardin points out, no theory successfully explains why some extremists are willing to commit suicide for a cause. Indeed, some people have wondered whether the subject is even "suitable" for scientific investigation. We believe that the conflicts in places like Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, and a number of African countries and the importance of extremist phenomena in even the securest of democracies are too significant to be ignored by social scientists who, we also believe, are capable of investigating the origins and dynamics of these problems and of proposing solutions when warranted. We think that this volume demonstrates that the rational choice approach has much to contribute.

In terms of methods, two chapters develop the argument in terms of game, but in all chapters empirical testing is confined to historical or contemporary examples. In part, this no doubt reflects the under-

developed nature of the theory, although one nice feature of many of the chapters is their focus on relating their theories to real-world illustrations and examples of extremism. The reader will find references, for example, to totalitarianism in the former USSR and China, to the dictatorial regime of Vichy, to ethnic hatred in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina, to the historical divisions in Northern Ireland, and to political oppression by the Iranian Ayatollahs, the Khmer Rouge, and the Taliban. The reader will also discover that extremist groups and extremist political behavior appear not only in socially precarious situations and in human societies which look primitive to our progress-centric eyes, but also in culturally and democratically developed settings. Indeed, extremism as it occurs in many contemporary democracies is discussed in a number of chapters (an admittedly not all-inclusive list of extremist movements is presented in the third chapter by Breton and Dalmazzone, encompassing 26 groups, half of which are in Western countries).

The chapters are assembled in three parts. Part I deals with the origins of extremism, and the vexed relationship between extremism and conformist behavior. The five chapters of Part II are all concerned with the way extremism affects and is molded by the workings of democratic politics. Part III is devoted to non-democratic settings.

In the first chapter, Russell Hardin reinterprets Jeremy Bentham's fanaticism as a group-based phenomenon. Virtually all individual knowledge comes from society, but most of that knowledge comes from groups that are open and inclusive. Instead, fanaticism requires an exclusionary group because it needs isolation to protect spurious beliefs from critical challenges. Two main factors are behind the formation and stability of those exclusive groups: a perverse working of incentives and the impact of interests on motivations. With a normal distribution of preferences, most citizens tend to believe that they are well served by median policies, whilst those in the tails of the distribution who find themselves permanent losers hive off into groups whose intent is to oppose normal politics. The tendency to interact with those who share the same beliefs makes the extremists leave moderate groups and the moderates leave the extremist groups. The second factor is the nexus between knowledge and interests which strengthens fanatical attitudes, since it requires coordination on a limited set of views, and coordination brings power, often to a small leadership within the group. Finally, it is especially through gaining control of a state that a fanatical group can defeat contrary views and thereby maintain the crippled epistemology of its followers. Here, Hardin mentions the Islamic political leaders who blocked the open discussion that would moderate religious extremism by undercutting its epistemology.

Ronald Wintrobe shows that extremism can often be interpreted as part of a process of rent seeking in which leaders seek to arouse the passions of their followers. Leaders do this when the groups their followers belong to are excluded from the distribution of rents implicit in the kind of long-term political contracts that politicians find most convenient and typically impose. The rationality of passion is that it demonstrates that outsiders are not willing to live with this situation (being excluded). According to Wintrobe, for this kind of "extremist rent seeking" to emerge, one must observe (1) an actual or perceived asymmetry in the distribution of rents, (2) political leadership to act on this, (3) conformity, and (4) the presence of a social hole or gap in trust between the center and the potential extremist movement. Given the presence of those four elements, the leadership of those who are not allowed to bid (the "outsiders") may seek either to bridge the gap or social hole between the potentially extremist group and the centrist majority, or to mobilize or inflame the passions of the group in an extremist fashion. The key point is that extremism requires mobilization whereas compromise does not. It follows that the greater the control a leader has over his followers, the more likely an extremist action is to be chosen. Some other implications of this approach are that extremism is more likely when some exogenous change deepens the social hole or trust gap; when there is an increase in conformity at the center; and when there is an increase in the perception of dominance or exploitation.

In the third chapter, Albert Breton and Silvana Dalmazzone focus on a particular dimension of extremism, namely the intolerance, the unwillingness to compromise, and the rejection of evidence contradicting one's beliefs that are often associated with the phenomenon and are incompatible with the dialectic of an open civil society. They look at the forces, within a social environment, that can contribute to the development of these attitudes. They then examine mechanisms that help reinforce and diffuse extreme positions and beliefs. Because extremism mostly becomes a socially relevant phenomenon when extremists are mobilized into groups, the authors examine the role of political entrepreneurs and leaders in the formation of these groups and in the emergence and manifestations of political extremism. Breton and Dalmazzone propose a hypothesis based on motives such as signaling and destabilization to account for the fact that extremist groups often engage in different activities such as terrorism, violence, hatred, and the promotion of resentment. It is shown that the behavior of extremist groupings in the pursuit of their objectives can be interpreted as making a rational use of the scarce resources at their disposal.

The chapters of Part II discuss how extremism emerges in democratic settings, for the most part, somewhat surprisingly, as a result of the workings of ordinary democratic party competition. For example, in Chapter 4, by Pierre Salmon, extremism is engendered by the ordinary working of a representative democracy, when a number of single issues are packaged together in an electorally profitable way by some politicians. Salmon draws a distinction between views and their saliency for the view-holders. The former feature captures the conventional spatial notion of centrist versus extreme views, the latter the weight that a voter assigns to her preference. A high saliency is identified as "monomania." This gives four polar combinations: the traditional moderate voter (characterized by a moderately held centrist position), the truly extremist voter now redefined as monomaniacal extremist (strongly held extreme position), the inconsequential extremist (moderately held extreme position), and the monomaniacal centrist, who strongly holds a centrist position. The distinction is used to explain how political leaders can arrange coalitions of voters of a rather odd nature. True extremists of completely different natures can be combined together. Or an extremist coalition can win the support of monomaniacal centrists, as happened with early Nazis' electoral success. That occurrence illustrates another implication of the suggested taxonomy. Even if voters' preferences in terms of ideas remain relatively stable in time, it is of consequence that the saliency of the issues involved may change with the ups and downs of the economic situation, the occurrence of transitory emergency, or in a context of reassessment of past behaviors.

In Chapter 5, Geoffrey Brennan starts by restating the standard normative appraisal of the superiority of centrist outcomes once given a distribution of the ideal points of a group of people and the convexity of their preferences. Then he asks which institutional arrangements promote centrism and with which sources of extremism those arrangements have to deal. When the median voter theorem applies, the presence of extremist preferences may not be a problem: the electoral competition would achieve a centrist outcome whatever the variance of the individual ideal points. However, the literature discusses a number of reasons that can vitiate that convergence. Some examples include the possibility of global cycling, the threat of entry of third parties, and uncertainty on where the median preference lies. These appear to make the outcome dependent on institutional "details," and candidates' stances become less instrumental than otherwise. It can happen that the presence of political rents and the candidates' search for an ideological identity combine with the presence of expressive voting, where citizens – differently from consumers in the market – care for self-identification, public-regardingness, moral values and the like. It is therefore the combination of

those motivations on the side of voters and the rational behavior of political agents that may bring about policy outcomes more extreme than the nature of expressive preferences might lead one to think.

In Chapter 6, Amihai Glazer starts with the observation that in the history of the U.S. presidential elections most third parties have taken extreme positions rather than positions between those of the major parties, a fact that would seem to confine them to political irrelevance. Glazer shows that when parties choose their platform, they are concerned not only with positions, but also with the choice of which voters to campaign among. For that purpose a Small party may prefer the immunity from attack that Big parties grant to small-size parties only. A Small party does better when its position reduces a Big party's incentive to campaign in its direction, and when its extreme position reduces the effects of any such campaigning. Therefore, a Small party may choose an extreme position to reduce the effectiveness of campaigns against it, and to induce a Big party to campaign against another Big party, rather than against itself. If campaigning by that Big party against the Small party is particularly effective, this may drive the Small party even further to the extreme.

In Chapter 7, Gianluigi Galeotti looks at the virtues of extremism and considers not the extremism of bizarre minorities, but the circumstances in which popularly supported leaders behave in an uncompromising way. He starts by making a distinction between extremism of goals (interests) and extremism of methods (political actions). This provides four combinations: one "normal politics" case made of accepted goals and accepted methods; one "pure extremism" case of controversial goals and unaccepted methods, and two mixed cases (extremist goals pursued by accepted actions, and vice versa). Galeotti looks at the dynamics of movement among those cases, and he examines the circumstances in which political leaders face a limited set of choices. This can happen at the early stages of democratic evolution, where people can be rallied only in terms of radical signals; when representative democracy is unable to settle radical conflicts and falls in a decisional deadlock; when de-franchised groups pursuing their political empowerment are pushed towards extremist actions because of a combination of internal factors and external pressures (manufactured extremism).

In the last chapter of Part II, Harold Hochman justifies his attempt at a "non-radical deconstruction" of political extremism by the observation that the concept is exceedingly relativistic and in need of some contextual bounds prior to positive analysis. Adopting a public choice perspective, he discusses the relevance of extremist positions to political outcomes, particularly in democratic systems. Hochman raises many issues (political extremism as an artifact of collective choice; the distinction between

extremes and politically relevant extremes; the role of a common enemy in reconciling opposite extremists) and puts a number of critical questions: can bounded rationality explain political extremist behavior? What is the place of political extremes in a participatory democracy? What is the influence exerted by electoral systems? His attempt to deconstruct the notion of political extremism is based on its relevance to political outcomes, as driven by the logic of the median voter model, in both static and dynamic settings. Among other questions, the chapter considers the circumstances in which such extremes are likely to fade away or to endorse terrorism.

The chapters of Part III model three instances of the origins of anti-democratic, revolutionary or non-democratic extremism. As might be expected, we are talking about what we might say are extreme forms of extremism.

Chapter 9 deals with the life cycle of extremist political organizations. There, Mario Ferrero distinguishes new political organizations from successful (mature) and declining ones. For an emergent organization, the choice of a future-oriented platform both enhances potential support and reduces the supply of labor to the organization. By balancing out those two effects, it has to find an equilibrium level of extremism, given market parameters. The organization is interpreted as a volunteer enterprise whose members engage in unpaid work in the expectation of future returns, and for reasons of incentives and asymmetric information it typically takes the form of a producer cooperative. As happens with those organizations, an increase in expected revenues decreases the optimal membership and increases actual employment. The radicalization of successful revolutions is then explained by the fact that the adoption of more extreme policies drives many members to exit "voluntarily," thus leaving the remaining ones with a higher expected income. As for senile organizations, they try to buy time by adopting more extreme policies that appeal to younger militants. The model is illustrated by the discussion of the vicissitudes of a number of totalitarian regimes.

Luisa Giuriato and Maria Cristina Molinari examine extremism in the Arab countries where fundamentalist movements of Islamic revival have recently spread. According to the authors, fundamentalism and extremism are not synonyms: the outbreak of violence featuring the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in some countries is a strategy of political struggle "adopted" when democratic compromises are not found expedient. The confrontation between the Islamic movements and the incumbent governments is modeled as an incomplete information game, in line with the literature on the escalation of conflicts. Popular support and the level of radicalism are the key variables that influence extremist reactions and

the probability of a civil war. Extremism is not the only possible outcome: weak support to the Islamic groups and a low level of radicalism lead to the maintenance of the status quo; moderate radicalism and the possibility of positive gains for all make a compromise solution convenient. The results of the game are then used to interpret the extremism of a number of countries. The situation of Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia corresponds to the status quo outcome: authoritarian and relatively popular regimes manage to exclude the Islamic movement from the political competition without triggering any extremist reaction. In Lebanon and Turkey, a compromise outcome prevails, with widespread secular attitudes helping the Islamic political integration. Extremism and violence, however, ravage Algeria and, to a smaller extent, Egypt, where strong authoritarian governments do not accept the political integration of the Islamic opposition.

In the last chapter, Guido Ortona purports to provide a theoretical interpretation of generalized violence that is applicable both to settings in which the level of xenophobia is low and to settings in which it is high. For that purpose, he combines what he calls an economic interpretation of nationalism and xenophobia (in which some ethnic elite stand to gain from the presence or increased relevance of "ethnic" capital) with assumptions pertaining to the theory of social conventions. This leads him to claim that mass ethnic violence may develop among fully rational subjects – without appealing to any ancestral feature of mass psychology – when five conditions hold: (a) an initial divide of the population along ethnic or other lines not easily absorbed by market forces; (b) the collapse of the state (private violence is not sanctioned); (c) a first-shot advantage in case of aggression (making rational a preemptive attack, in the presence of what Ortona defines as "a mass greed for self-defence"); (d) the presence of agitators (individuals who do not play the ethnic game but who gain when those who do, the members of the ethnic groups, are assaulted); and (e) an expected payoff for these agitators greater than a threshold level.

We hope that this book provides a useful systematic starting point for understanding a very complex phenomenon in rational choice terms. And we also think the study of extremism reflects back on our understanding of democracy itself. On that account, it is easy to agree with Geoffrey Brennan's observation that "public choice theorists have interpreted the requirements of rationality in the political arena too simple-mindedly . . . the theory paints a picture of democracy that is much less accommodating to extremism and eccentricity in political outcomes than democracy actually is, and that the logic of rational actor analysis . . . faithfully applied, admits." Finally, despite the diversity of the approaches taken

in the chapters that follow, we do hope the reader discerns a fundamental unity in the concept of rational political extremism: a counterintuitive, thought-provoking idea which has implications of great intellectual and practical interest and at the same time is simple and understandable.

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