THE ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY OF EXTREMISM

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ABSTRACT. Extremism does not have objective or universally accepted definitions. At the same time, 'extremism' can be functionally objective on all levels – individual, group, society, nation and global – to the extent that social actors in their cultural environment construct their enemies as such. The process of extremism functions as follows. It begins with the identification of the enemy. Thereafter, psychological attitudes which essentially function similarly in all of us are constructed negatively towards this enemy. Lastly, confrontations with extremists justify extremism within us since extreme situations call for extreme measures.

The effective use of this concept is Machiavellian in two significant respects. Firstly, in situations where effectiveness calls for extremism we should be capable of it. Secondly, although we may behave like our enemies there is nothing more useful than demonizing the enemy, and nothing is more necessary than maintaining a positive public image of a reasonable, good and moderate Self.

Key words: *ontology, epistemology, fanaticism, discourse analysis, representation of extremism, social construction.*

Societies have been fighting different kinds of religious, ideological, political, cultural, racial, ideational or behavioral extremism for centuries. To the 'free world', Soviet Communism represented extremism. For the Soviet Union, extremism could be seen in Mussolini's Fascism, Hitler's Nazism, an *ancient regime* of the Russian Orthodox Church and czarist absolutism, and Western democracy was perceived as a disguise for capitalist exploitation and the injustices of imperialism. In contemporary societies, religious fundamentalists can easily appear as extremists to liberals, defenders of multiculturalism can appear as extremists to nationalists, and 'all-permissive' sexual minorities can appear as extremists to Conservatives. In real life, what seems weird, deviant, negative and extreme for some can for others appear normal, authentic and self-evident.

This paper raises five ontological and four epistemological questions and dilemmas that should be considered and taken into account in an academic

analysis of extremism. The questions raised are accompanied by brief explanations and discussions.

The Ontology of Extremism

Firstly, *is the definition of extremism subjective, objective or both at the same time?* Is the definition of extremism necessarily dependent on the choice of approach and subjective experience of the definer? Is it possible to identify the essence of extremism objectively, independently of the observer and its subjective social, cultural and political context? Is extremism an essentially disputed concept which lacks universal, timeless and objective meaning,[1] but still retaining a socially shared and culturally common meaning which works in the daily lives of common members of society 'as if' it is objective?[2] If extremism cannot be defined objectively and universally, functioning 'as if' it is objective on a social level, can social groups and individuals then also have their own subjective definitions of extremism?

Most likely we all have a working definition of extremism that we use when the need arises. Its substantive content is not fixed in itself[3], it is dynamic and can change according to our social experiences. We know extremism when we see it, and we know extremists when we see them.

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[1] Following Andrew Heywood, the 'essentially contested concepts' – such as 'human rights', 'human dignity', 'democracy', 'equality of rights', 'justice', 'freedom' – do not have universal, timeless and objective meaning. Multiple versions of these concepts contest for their meaning, but this does not mean that these concepts are inefficient or futile. Instead, competing versions of the concepts may be equally valid. **Andrew Heywood.** Key Concepts in Politics. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000, p. 7. Their particular meaning is culture-specific, and is the object of social and political struggles at a global level as well as at lower levels – in a nation state, local communities, and civil associations. When we study the particular political phenomena and processes that these contested concepts refer to we need to take into account the *meanings* that the social actors attach to these concepts.

[2] In order to function effectively, the 'shared meanings' in social life do not need unambiguous, explicit and rational definitions. For example, society is considered to be 'just' and 'free' to the extent that the members of society believe their society to be such, not to the extent to which 'justice' and 'freedom' can be proven with clarity, evidence and the best rational argumentation available. Faith in 'justice' functions efficiently not based on rational persuasion, but on simplifying myths, beliefs and symbols. In a similar way, faith in liberal democracy is maintained by myths like 'all humans are born equal', 'equal opportunities to all', 'all citizens can voice their opinions', 'people have sovereign power'.

[3] Extremism can be conceptualized as a 'normatively dependent concept' which, according to Rainer Forst, obtains a certain content and specifiable limits only by "other normative resources that are not dependent in that same sense." **Rainer Forst.** The Limits of Toleration. – Constellations, 3/2004, p. 314. In this perspective, extremism does not gain any specific substantial meaning *before* we have identified to which sphere (political, economic, religious, art, etc.) and to what cause or issue (ideas or behaviors, liberties, rights, justice, violence, war) the concept is applied.

Our working definition of extremism can be as real for us as it is real at the societal and cultural level. We perceive who in our society "here and now" is considered to be an extremist. We may realistically consider the costs when our subjective definition of extremism does not conform to its respective 'social definition'. In the latter case, our deviant conception may exclude us from fellowship with the 'normal'. Thus, we may subjectively *share* the 'social definition' of extremism, *accommodate* it or consciously *deviate* from it.

To sum up, extremism does not have a universal, objective and undisputed definition. Competing definitions of extremism may, however, be equally valid and 'functionally objective' on all levels of culture (society, group and individual). The 'social definitions' of extremism do not rule out (deviating and conforming) subjective definitions of extremism by social actors and individuals. Correspondingly, definitions of extremism are social and individual, essentially subjective and contested. Their effectiveness depends on 'functional objectivity' (to the extent that they are considered as self-evident descriptions of reality).

Secondly, *what difference does it make when extremism is defined qualitatively (by degree) or quantitatively (by kind)*? From a quantitative perspective, extremism rears its head when something which is normal and healthy in moderate proportions becomes excessive. It is like self-centeredness and nutrition. Both are necessities of life which are natural and healthy to a moderate degree. Its non-existence or lack and its excess or surplus are *both* pathological and deadly. The only healthy way is moderation between both quantitative extremes (absence and excess). Both become consequentially problematic when, instead of being an invigorating way of life, they become mortifying obsessions. Over-eating can be as dangerous as strict fasting and excessive altruism as damaging as an absolute lack of empathy.[4]

From a qualitative perspective, extremism differs from non-extremism in a mutually exclusive way. Extremism is like 'evil' or 'darkness' which manifests itself only and always when 'good' and 'light' is absent. There is no 'good' in 'evil', and where there evil is there is no 'good'. The only colors are black and white - intermediate and overlapping grey zones are missing, varying shades of grey are not taken into account. With extremists the community of the 'good' makes no compromises and signs no secret pacts.

Thirdly, *what difference does it make when the defining opposite of extremism is perceived to be the socio-cultural mainstream, the operative social belief system or moderation?* This is not an exhaustive list of the possible opposites of extremism. Three examples of opposites are sufficient in

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[4] For the ways in which excessive egoism and altruism can become pathological and deadly, see **Emile Durkheim.** Suicide. – Readings from Emile Durkheim. Kenneth Thompson (ed.) New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 81–105.

order to demonstrate that the nature of extremism also depends on the choice of its defined opposite.

When extremism is contrasted with the socio-cultural mainstream it is the opposite of what is considered to be *ordinary, common* and *prevalent*. In this way, extremism best characterizes those groups and individuals who are perceived to differ *qualitatively* from the social and cultural mainstream by virtue of their worldviews, beliefs, and lifestyles. The deviant minority culture, group or individual is perceived not to 'live', 'think', 'behave', 'consume', 'entertain itself' like 'us all' ('us' can refer symbolically to a culture or group). The related evaluative, emotional and psychological perceptions are strongly qualitative, although these emotions can also emerge *by degree* – groups, individuals and cultures are considered *qualitatively* different to the degree (quantitative aspect) that their ideas and practices *are perceived* (qualitatively) to *deviate* from what is generally accepted within a group or society.

The ideas and practices of the deviant groups do not conform to generally accepted norms. In order to function effectively, however, the deviant groups need an intra-group conformity to their norms. Let us suppose that, in a culture with liberalized sexual mores, a certain segregated religious group practices pre-marital sexual abstinence and considers all extra-marital sexual relations to be unambiguously illegitimate. From the perspective of the dominant social culture, that religious group can reasonably be assumed to consist of moral radicals who follow rigorous, extreme and out-dated – if not gender-discriminative – moral norms. From the perspective of this religious group, however, any culturally 'normal' person can be defined as 'extreme' and 'abnormal' based on intra-group norms and conformity.

One of the problems with any definition of extremism based on opposition to the socio-cultural mainstream is that some of 'today's extremists' will be 'mainstream heroes tomorrow'. As the beliefs and behavior of the social mainstream vary cross-culturally and are subject to change, these definitions of extremism depend strongly on culture, time and context. Many great leaders of religious, cultural and political change – such as Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King – were considered in their own time and socio-cultural environment as troublemakers who threatened the existing public order. The cultural progress of human society, to paraphrase the renowned observation of John Stuart Mill (*On Liberty,* 1859), has been dependent on extremists who, due to their strength of personality, have been capable of differing from the social mainstream and questioning established traditions and conventions.

Extremism can also be defined as the opposite of that which functions as the normative truth of society. From this perspective, extremism is defined *qualitatively* but the emphasis is more cross-cultural than intra-cultural. For example, in the Soviet Union capitalism was frowned upon significantly

more 'as an idea' than as a 'practice'. The leaders of the Soviet Union, most importantly Lenin and Stalin, believed strongly in industrialization, in economic growth, 'in capitalism without the capitalist class', in capitalist modes of raising worker motivation (higher wages, not contribution to some form of socialist 'common good' served as an incentive for the workers).[5] Capitalism 'as an idea' was stigmatized because it contrasted with Communism 'as an idea' and was one of the defining opposites of the socially-shared description of reality.[6]

Similarly, the social belief systems of contemporary European societies are founded on liberalism, individualism and secularism. Minority cultures with strong kinship bonds, religious values, communitarian organization and patriarchal traditions can therefore function for European social mainstreams as symbolic representatives of a social 'untruth' because, within these communities, the kind of individual autonomy and freedom considered fundamental for human happiness and just social order is perceived to be lacking.

Extremism as the opposite of (emotional and behavioral) moderation manifests itself *quantitatively* – normal, healthy and common ideas and behaviors become extreme when they occur in excessive quantities or intensities. As a rule, behaviors are different from ideas and convictions as – in contrast to self-centeredness and nourishment – the *lack* of ideas or the absence of convictions of any intensity is not considered extreme. Ideas and convictions are considered extreme in one direction only, i.e., only when in excess. Yet, regarding behavior and attitudes, the (emotional and psychological) *capabilities* which are negative in excessive proportions are also problematic when lacking.

Imagine an individual who is incapable of being aggressive, arrogant, selfish and intolerant. When this person finds himself in an environment of rivalry or enmity, the absence of such psychological resources (of self-defense, self-expression and self-affirmation) will also undermine his self-confidence, self-esteem and self-identity. An excessive amount of aggression, ego-centrism, arrogance and intolerance or the presence of such attitudes in the emotional environment of friendship and collaboration are quite reasonably considered dysfunctional. Correspondingly, the quantitative moderation is qualified also by the nature of the environment in which one finds oneself.

In a similar way, patriotism (the 'love of one's fatherland', a psychological attachment to a country or a nation) and ethnocentrism (including a distrust of foreigners) are normal to a moderate degree. When these preferential emotional and psychological attitudes towards one's own political society

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[5] See **Alfred B. Jr. Evans.** Soviet Marxism-Leninism: The Decline of an Ideology. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1993, pp. 1–5, 17–26, 193–205, 211–223.

[6] The other main defining opposites of Soviet Communism were Fascism, Christianity, Absolutist Monarchy, and Liberal Democracy.

become extreme and aggressive, this excessive feeling of superiority is con-sidered chauvinist, and excessively negative feeling against foreigners is called xenophobia. The point at which ethnocentrism becomes xenophobia is vague and up for debate, but the general pattern still applies. The absence of positively-biased feelings regarding one's country, nation or ethnic commu-nity is just as dysfunctional as is an excess thereof.

Similarly, the intent of groups and individuals to voice their opinions, to be of different mind and opinion, to protest, even to harbor discontent and hatred and brood revenge, in themselves are not sufficient reasons why ter-rorists should be condemned. Individuals and groups may protest against policies, values and norms that they consider unjust. Terrorists simply go too far when using violence against civilians as a weapon of choice.

Fourthly, *what effect does the variation of context have on the essential content of extremism?* The specification of context is important because in different spheres of human action – religious, political, economic, military, artistic, cultural, educational – the definition of 'good' is dependent on the particularities of the professional sphere. Concomitantly, professions do not only have different conceptions of normality, undue excess and extremism, they also have varying professional reasons why behaviors and attitudes that are considered abnormal, extreme, abusive, discriminate or pathological in everyday life become normal for a professionally-defined period, reason and goal. Thus, a dentist may cause pain and drill your teeth in a way that no common man ever legitimately can.

The military is the ultimate sphere where attitudes and behaviors ordinar-ily considered most abnormal and extreme are 'normalized' for *professional* reasons. The soldier measures up to his profession, when he is physically, psychologically, emotionally and morally capable of doing things that no-one can legitimately do in civilian life – to harm, capture and kill.

The definitions of normality and extremist deviances also vary in dif-ferent forms of human interaction. A father may treat his children in a way in which a teacher cannot treat his students. Similarly, citizens are not expected to accept the laws of government with the same attitude as soldiers who are expected to follow the commands of their officers. A person may move towards extremism simply by behaving professionally outside that behavior's professional sphere – for example, when he behaves like a lieu-tenant general among friends and relatives. The same thing happens when his behavior deviates from his proper social 'role' (when students teach the teacher in the classroom and teenagers do "the parenting").

Fifthly, *what is the essential relationship between extremist ideas and extremist acts?* Are some beliefs and ideas also deplorable in cases where no extremist act has been committed? The ideas related to ideological racism and holocaust denial are deplorable today as ideas, but both of these ideas have a significant empirical history as their background.

There are two main aspects regarding extremist texts. Firstly, independently of interpreters, the texts themselves do not carry authoritative meaning. For instance, the Christian Bible is believed to carry a message that is either directly or indirectly in accordance with tolerance, democracy, human rights and gender equality. The actual text, however, does not include any references to these ideas. The literal message of the Bible is illiberal and strongly advocates slavery, capital punishment and patriarchy. The text of the Bible has been the same for more than seventeen centuries. It has not changed. The message and meaning of the text, however, have significantly altered because of the changes in values, perceptions and preferences of those reading it.

Secondly, when any text is defined and denounced as being extremist the definition of extremism is inevitably dependent on the cultural particulars and on the perspective of a specific social actor. For example, when Ayatollah Khomeini denounced Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* the text itself could hardly contain any extremist messages for non-Muslims or have any extremist consequences in non-Islamic cultures. Additionally, when Ayatollah Khomeini issued his fatwa he was a social actor whose cultural and political authority were dependent on an authoritative interpretation of a religious tradition that was directly disputed and questioned by Salman Rushdie's work.

The Old Testament of the Christian Bible includes hundreds of examples of divinely-legitimized violence which by contemporary standards would be considered crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and genocide, yet these passages can often be more effective and functional than the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament which denounces all physical violence. For example, in pre-combat religious services soldiers can be inspired by the image of Joshua and Caleb conquering the Promised Land. In pre-battle situations the message of the Sermon on the Mount would be out of place. Correspondingly, it is not their objective content that makes these texts functional but the extent to which they undermine or support the aspirations and causes of groups and societies.

The Epistemology of Extremism

Firstly, *why is the same type of commitment selectively categorized as extremist and non-extremist?* For example, a commitment to non-violent conflict resolution in the Sudan, or to gender equality in the Congo, can be as uncompromising and principled an objective as that of any religious fundamentalist or ideological terrorist. The devotion and commitment of the young Martin Luther King to reforming the cultural norms of his society did not differ in intensity from that of later fundamentalists and were just as much at

odds with the operative cultural values of the day. Fundamentalists are easily labeled as extremists, yet Martin Luther King is hardly, if at all, described as one. Can it then be that we who evaluate Martin Luther King positively *today* – his aspirations and legacy – also describe his strong devotion and commitment in positive terms? Similarly, when we do not support fundamentalist aspirations and values we are inclined to use negative concepts in the 'analyses' of fundamentalism.

To illustrate this point, let us reflect for a moment on the use of the concept 'fanaticism' that is closely related to 'extremism'. Both 'fanaticism' and 'extremism' refer *primarily to a nature of commitment* (intense commitment and strong convictions related to a certain cause) *not to the substantive content of the cause or goal of the commitment.* In a literal sense, 'extremism' itself carries the meaning of 'pushing to the limit' or 'being at the edge'; 'fanaticism' refers to extraordinary devotion.

Most of the possible meanings of 'fanaticism' overlap with the above-mentioned definitions of 'extremism'. Unlike 'extremism', however, 'fanaticism' is more often used in a positive sense, especially outside the political and religious sphere. We can all be 'fanatics' ('fans') of a certain style of music or literature, entertainment, hobby or sport. Ardent 'fans' of Britney Spears or Elvis Presley are not customarily called 'extremists'. Fans of a football club can engage in significant street violence and the devoted members of a racist group may never enact their violent ideas, yet the latter will be called 'extremists', and the former not. Why?

The use of the label of 'extremism' is not the outcome of the amount of actual violence perpetrated or the *nature of commitment*, but arises simply because we evaluate football positively and racism negatively. We use *negative concepts* for actors who engage in causes that we evaluate negatively in the first place.

We may also have negative feelings towards fans of an opposing football team or towards those who prefer kinds of music and entertainment that we dislike. Our 'opponents' can actually be as devoted to their preferences as we are to ours. But we do not call them 'extremists'.

One of the reasons why we mostly hear this discourse about extremism in the sphere of politics – and in situations where religion mixes with politics or politics mixes with religion – may be that our 'opponents' are more easily defined as enemies in politics – especially in global and national politics – than in sports or entertainment. In politics, hundreds of millions of Europeans can share the feeling of threat, a common understanding of the enemy, and thus can be united against a common enemy. In the sphere of entertainment, the preferences of these same Europeans are enormously diverse, divergent, contradictory and disintegrated. Anyone who tries to define all the myriad opponents of his preferred football and basketball clubs, actors, artists, singers and producers as enemies will soon find they

have not only multiple enemies but may also end up with no friends or allies at all since our multiple preferences do not mutually overlap.

Thus, we tend to use positive concepts (such as enthusiastic, committed, resolved, purposeful) for phenomena, persons and groups that we like and reserve negative concepts for those we dislike, yet the terms we use actually describe the same kinds of attitudes and the same intensity of conviction in both cases. If so, then the 'goodness' and 'normality' of groups and individuals depend on those who define them as such.

Women, Blacks, Aboriginals, Indians, peasants and workers have all historically been considered to be inferior in nature, being described in such terms as violent, greedy, envious, dissatisfied, ignorant or irrational. Today such classifications sound discriminatory and lacking in sufficient evidence, but derogatory concepts for classifying particular types of people are still used. For example, the (religious and/or ideological) representatives of international terrorism are often depicted as 'hating' Western values and freedoms, as being 'aggressive' and 'violent'. But can the representatives of international terrorism be considered the type of people who are *qualitatively different from all the rest of humanity?* If they are quantitatively different, does the evidence show that they use more violence than is being used against them? Or are they *qualitatively* different from those who *lead the fight against them?* Or is this confrontation *constructed* 'as if' it is between qualitatively different opponents? The latter case seems most likely because both parties perceive their cause to be legitimate and both justify the use of violence by invoking the right to self-defense. Extraordinary commitment and motivation do not only characterize those active in the global terrorism network. Self-confidence, resolve, courage, confidence in the justness of the cause, the readiness to use extraordinary measures and an uncompromising determination to enforce its will over the enemy until the enemy is eradicated from all corners of the world are all qualities that have also been expressed in the *fight against terrorism.*[7]

The qualitative difference – both use violence and are willing to enforce its will over the enemy – does not unambiguously distinguish between pro-terror forces and the coalition against terrorism. The context of war, however, differs explicitly from the atmosphere that friends enjoy during a Friday night feast. Enemies do not relate to each other in the same way friends or rivals do. They do not apply the same standards of evaluation for themselves and the enemy. Correspondingly, our attitudes differ according to the specific environment in which our social interactions take place.

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[7]   According to Douglas Pratt, the commitment to the fight against terror during the presidency of George W. Bush corresponded to all the general characteristics of fanaticism. **Douglas Pratt.** Religion and Terrorism: Christian Fundamentalism and Extremism. – Terrorism and Political Violence, 3/2010, p. 439.

In a similar way, when we publicly discuss appropriate attitudes and behavior regarding the intolerant – how intolerant can we legitimately be against the intolerant? – we also assume that our behavior towards others depends on the way others behave towards us. To be tolerant with the tolerant seems appropriate. To be tolerant with the intolerant and to remain a non-violent pacifist when faced with a violent terrorist seems inappropriate. If intolerance is a functionally effective way of reacting to the intolerant, should we also be extremist against the extremists? Looking back to post-9/11 reactions to international terrorism, this question does not sound purely rhetorical.

By now we know that, when dealing with terrorists and with those who take hostages and present political demands to the United States, the American administration refuses to communicate with them. They were prepared to talk and negotiate with the leader of North Korea, but for the leader of al-Qaeda they conducted a hunt to the death. Not because of what al-Qaeda is or strives for, but primarily because al-Qaeda is the present enemy.[8] Thus, it is hotly disputed whether we can talk about extremists or extremism before first identifying who the enemy is. We know that one man's hero (freedom-fighter) is another man's extremist (terrorist). Today's ally may be tomorrow's enemy.

Therefore, people cannot be objectively classified as extremists in the same way that they can be classified by gender or skin color. Yet the capabilities, skills and character traits of an extremist may be stronger in some individuals than in others. If we imagine a continuum of character traits and skills that differentiate between the common man and extremists then it seems obvious that those who hold professional positions of leadership are closer to extremism since they need to be rigorous, authoritarian and enforce discipline if need be. The skills required of a leader differ significantly from those expected of followers. A leader's commitment and belief in the mission and vision of an organization is not only expected to be significantly stronger, but his confidence is also expected to spill over to his followers. Accordingly, in managing organizations and enterprises, the character traits and attitudes usually evaluated negatively in common human interaction may be considered positive attributes of leadership. The risk-taking entrepreneur

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[8]   Shadia Drury argues that Al Qaeda is defined by the notion of 'terrorism' instead of 'freedom fighter' not because of the violence it has promoted or the goals it has, but primarily because it has been defined as the enemy. **Shadia Drury.** Terrorism: From Samson to Atta. Arab Studies Quarterly, 1&2/2003, pp. 1-12. This observation gives vital analytical insight into the ways in which an enemy is constructed and depicted discursively. In empirical reality, Al Qaeda *has become* the enemy and *has acted* like the enemy, and the relationship between Western states and Al Qaeda takes place in an environment of enmity and war. Consequently, in this environment of war it is customary for both sides to paint confrontation as a cosmic war between good and evil.

is evaluated positively for being a go-getter, his self-centered ambition for personal material gain and courage are judged by different standards from those applied to general laborers or common people. Additionally, followers would stop being 'good followers', and subjects 'good subjects' if they acquired the kind of ambition and self-centeredness required of a successful businessman or the ability to enforce discipline on others required of an efficient manager.

As mentioned above, extremist attitudes take on the most positive meanings in places where the fight with extremists takes place most directly. More than in any other profession, soldiers active in military conflict have to master the skills and attitudes that characterize the extremist. Any soldier incapable of going beyond moderation cannot be effective in a combat situation.[9]

Secondly, *can extremism be considered to be a general human psychological character trait and emotional skill that potentially exists in all of us?* What if extremism is like ambition, courage and fear? To a certain extent, some courage, ambition and fear should exist in every person. Individuals can also be bold and ambitious selectively – a self-confident lawyer may feel uncomfortable on the dance floor or a skillful organizational manager might fear commitment to a close relationship. Additionally, in our daily conversations we rhetorically refer to some individuals 'as if' they *are* ambitious, bold or cowardly people. Such conversations can be simultaneously metaphorical and real – we know that these labels do not comprehensively describe these people but, perhaps depending on the specific topic of conversation, these concepts do describe to a significant extent what *we* consider these respective people *to be*.

If this is indeed the case, then our discourse need not demonstrate the general qualitative or quantitative differences extremism/extremists exhibit. It suffices that we know in what respects the related groups or individuals are considered to be extremists, by whom and from which perspective.

In addition, there are situations that *require* extremist measures. All people possess the survival instinct. In the event of aggression, individuals and societies have not only the right but also the duty to defend themselves. The legitimacy of measures taken in self-defense are directly dependent upon the degree and intensity of the perceived danger. It is usually inappropriate to physically attack those who harm our self-esteem emotionally and

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[9] Barry Paskins contrasts extremism with moderation and argues that moderation is a very questionable guideline in any form of human relations. Moderation is particularly ineffective in military conflict where moral attitudes normally considered as extreme and fanatical, such as "courage, resolution, determination, decisiveness, ruthlessness" take on a positive meaning. **Barrie Paskins.** Fanaticism in the Modern Era. – Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age. Matthew Hughes, Gaynor Johnson (eds.) London: Frank Cass, 2004, p. 8.

verbally. In times of war, the use of physical violence against your enemy is legitimate. Thus, the legitimacy of extreme actions and measures depends on the extremeness of the situation. Irrespective of whether it be an individual, group, society or state which feels the urgent need for self-defense against external aggression, the situation itself justifies such forms of intolerance, hatred, aggression, fanaticism and violence that would not be considered legitimate or appropriate under ordinary circumstances.

From this perspective, we cannot appropriately deem groups or individuals to be 'good' or 'bad' when evaluating situations in which they have demonstrated anger, intolerance, aggression or fanaticism without any knowledge of the specific reasons why. Negative feelings (fear, hatred, anger) are as much a part of human existence as positive ones. By this token, the capacity for negative feelings in extreme situations, and for taking extreme measures when our existence is threatened, is perfectly healthy and normal.

Alas, all parties in human conflicts do not evaluate conflict situations objectively. As injustice and oppression in human interaction function emotionally (not rationally) and are perceived and interpreted subjectively (not objectively) – and given also the presence of injustice – the status of victimhood and the justification of the ways and means of resistance are contested.

Let us consider the hypothetical case of school violence. Let us suppose that there is one victim and several (direct or indirect) aggressors (as is most often the case). The victim has sustained substantial verbal and emotional abuse, and some physical violence. What can the victim do? Firstly, he can internally reinterpret the whole situation and give his suffering a positive spin. For example, he could meditate over selected verses from the Sermon on the Mount.[10] Most likely, however, this strategy will be of no help in ending the violence. The victim did not start the violence and can hardly end it by meditating. Secondly, if he does not believe in the message of Jesus Christ he may instead rely on rational argumentation and try to persuade the perpetrator(s) of this violence to accept their (objective) responsibility for the negative actions and resulting suffering. If the perpetrators perceive accurately what they are doing – and, as rational persons, they could – the realisation of their responsibility and guilt should lead them to repentance

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[10] The Sermon on the Mount helps to give meaning to suffering primarily in two ways. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King were encouraged to take the stand of *non-violent resistance*. In this perspective, the injustice experienced is wrong in principle and cannot be passively accepted. The other perspective glorifies suffering and encourages the passive acceptance of it especially in passages which speak about the blessedness of the meek and the persecuted and encourage us to love our enemies. In the latter perspective, the focus is exclusively on how well a blessed person *reacts*. The external suffering cannot be changed, eliminated or avoided. The external suffering is considered a constant.

and abandonment of violence because power in interpersonal relations has always functioned more emotionally than rationally[11]. It is not very likely, however, that those who dominate and discriminate would voluntarily give up their privileges simply because of rational argument. Thereafter the victim can use some other 'decent' and 'civilized' forms of self-expression. He can jump and dance, he may sing John Lennon's "Imagine", but to no avail. Instead, any emotional change from the previous submissive acceptance of violence can be interpreted by the public and perpetrators as a rebellion against the role and status of victim. Any emotional change within the victim can redefine the whole situation and thus threaten the *status quo* of this relationship. If the victim changes his emotional stance and the perpetrators do not increase the violence against him, they can try to discourage him simply by ridiculing the behavioral and attitudinal change within the victim.

This story is hypothetical and could continue or end in different ways. But it helps to understand that neither the perpetrators nor the victim perceive the situation objectively or rationally. If the victim has emotionally cast off the role of victim, if his self-expression no longer manifests a victim mentality, this behavioral change is often in itself *interpreted* as being emotionally or physically aggressive *by public and perpetrators alike*. Protests in the form of rebellion of the poor, a peasant's revolution, worker's strikes, protests of underpaid workers, demonstrations of cultural and sexual minorities, etc., have all often been interpreted as expressions of negative attitudes or character traits. The poor are represented as innately envious while the pursuit of profit is the virtue of the rich, the powerless are seen as violent by nature, the strong as defenseless and the weak as oppressive.

Objectively, there are situations where extreme reactions are appropriate. Human interaction, however, is interpreted subjectively from multiple perspectives. Consequently, resisting or rebelling against the *status quo*, even when subjectively perceived to be oppressive and unjust, may invite the labels and accusations of extremism.

Thirdly, *an epistemological difficulty also arises due to significant changes in the objects that the term extremism has been referring to*. Some centuries ago, Republicans and Democrats were extremists due to their belief in equality at birth. Today it would be abnormal to argue that humans are born unequal. This, however, was a self-evident truth not only for monarchists and absolutists but also for their loyal subjects. Today, the fundamental 'good' in our social status is based on the ideals of human rights and personal freedom. Centuries ago our forefathers did not believe in human rights

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[11] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann pointedly expressed the common wisdom that "He who has the bigger stick has the better chance of imposing his definitions of reality." **Berger, Luckmann** 1991, p. 127.

and did not 'know' how to feel 'relatively deprived' by the lack of citizens' rights.

How can we effectively make sense of the dynamic variation and mutation of those values and beliefs on which the working definitions of extremism have been normatively dependent? A particular difficulty arises in the Western world where it has become an unwritten rule to believe that bad and evil things – be they slavery, serfdom, theocracy, caesaropapism, clericalism, Communism, racialism, genocide, absolutism, fascism, patriarchy, to name but a few – all happened in the past. This kind of constructionist representation of the past can be functionally effective in the present.[12] The more we condemn the social and ideological order of the past – and when we condemn we are accustomed to condemning holistically and absolutely[13] – the more granted and self-evident becomes the inherent goodness of the present liberal, democratic society (the latter functions also holistically, society "as it is" is today better than ever before). While this kind of attitude is functional for us today, paradoxically *we thereby do condemn as evil or bad* also many beliefs and ideas which our forefathers believed to be 'normal' and 'good'.

From a larger perspective, our present conceptions of 'good' are related to our own time and space. In our social environment these conceptions are not functionally relativist, they are *real*. It is therefore easy to fail to recognize how these conceptions have continuously been changed, revised and amended. For example, in Soviet society unemployment was considered to be 'an unnecessary evil'. All adults had to be gainfully employed. *Any* level of unemployment was a problem that had to be eradicated. The presence of *any* unemployment was considered to be an evil curable by human efforts. In contemporary free market societies unemployment is like the slavery of past societies. There were better and worse slave masters, and there are better and worse places to be unemployed. Slavery in itself was a natural – although usually a minor – part of the system of economic production. Similarly, unemployment is in itself an inseparable part of the functioning of a free market. The total elimination of unemployment – which in Soviet societies was unambiguously a virtue – has become *a negative deed* for the economic system. Those inspired to eliminate unemployment once were heroes but today can be considered to be extremists.

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[12] I call it 'construction of the past' because the related holistic negative representations of past social orders are not only upheld as ideas, these images are also 'kept alive' and socially reproduced by public rituals where, for example, the atrocities and crimes against humanity of Nazism and Communism are continuously remembered.

[13] For example, Nazism and Communism are condemned as 'failed ideas' *in toto*. Retrospectively, Communists are not praised for spreading mass education and ensuring medical care for all, or Nazis for economic efficiency.

Fourthly, *can extremism also be analyzed 'within the observer', within the analyst? Should we analyze the extremism contained in the act of studying extremism?* To some degree, the academic arguments depend on the ideological preferences of the scholars concerned. For example, evaluations of the legitimacy of religious argumentation in the public sphere are often dependent on subjective religious or ideological preferences. Additionally, we are all influenced consciously or subconsciously by our cultural environment and geopolitical position on the world map. Correspondingly, we as scholars know without any solid evidence or rational argumentation that non-European immigration into Europe *is* a valid and important research topic; whereas the validity of European emigration to any other part of the world is, as a research topic, scarcely important. Thus, we are already subjectively biased and culturally influenced to some extent. Our perception of the world, especially when we understand it in terms of 'good' and 'bad' (the discourse about extremism is part of it), cannot be objective.

It could be speculated that extremism within the scholar becomes explicit to the extent that one can sense one's own normative and subjective, religious or ideological preferences that are not supported by evidence or facts. That could be said to be extremist because it is opposed to what is customarily considered as 'normal' academic research. The abovementioned subjective preferences, however, may not be considered extremist if they conform to widespread perceptions.

Additionally, in social and humanitarian sciences many social facts cannot be explained or interpreted consensually. Thus, scholars lack consensus on whether modernization – especially late modernization – is accompanied by secularization, or whether global conflicts are based on clashes of civilizations.

As extremism cannot be defined objectively and without the subjective perspective of any particular observer, extremism within the scholar cannot be unambiguously identified either. A similar "rule of thumb" helps to determine the chances of being labeled as an extremist in social and political as well as in academic interaction. As long as we do not question prevalent understandings and shared cultural beliefs, the chances of us being labeled as extremists are low. The more we question established understandings and the present state of affairs – it does not make much difference if we question the universality and objectivity of the present order by postmodern approaches, or if we identify something positive in the Christian-feudal, Fascist or Communist societies – the more our analyses and argumentation will be deemed to be extremist. The 'extremist' appearance of our argumentation will not be dependent on its rational and logical content or the adequacy of the evidence provided. In every effectively functioning society, the society itself – its present order, values, beliefs and state of affairs – is considered self-evidently 'good', without doubt and without question. Correspondingly, even rational,

accurate and logical common-sense appraisals of the state of affairs are more likely to be labeled as extremist than irrational, deficient and illogical praise thereof.

Conclusions

There is nothing objective and timeless that can be defined as extremist as a behavior, goal, value or ideal. Extremism as a concept and phenomenon functions in human interaction as follows. Firstly, enemies are identified. Thereafter, psychological attitudes – which essentially function similarly in all of us – are formed negatively towards these enemies. In this way the willingness of self-sacrifice for the sake of our country or for the values of our civilization are described by terms like 'patriotism', 'obligation' and 'commitment', as metaphorical heroic deeds before our ancestors and future generations. We define any similar attitude we observe in our enemies as blind faith, manipulation and extremism. We are resolved and determined, whilst our enemies are brainwashed. We are afraid, threatened and bring justice to our enemies, whereas our enemies hate us and all our values. We use violence in self-defense, our enemies seek to kill the innocent. We have good intentions even when our policies have negative results. The feelings and attitudes within us and our enemies are the same, it is only the labels that are different.

This ambiguity characterizes not only extremism but also the use of violence, coercion, and war. Taken over a longer historical perspective, the use of violence and the occurrence of wars cannot be considered as objectively negative phenomena. The nature of the results of war and violence have been dependent on the parties involved. Humanity has so far been managing *better* with the temporary use of such instruments of power. Most certainly, the use of violent means will also fulfill significant positive roles in the future.

Since extreme circumstances and situations require extreme measures and attitudes, the concept of extremism itself is Machiavellian in its use in two significant respects.

Firstly, in cases where extremism produces effective results, not only does extremism lose its negative connotations but this situation also *requires* the *capability* (Machiavellian *virtu*) of being extreme. Secondly, one needs to be capable of extremism, if need be, yet there is nothing more useful than demonizing the enemy, and nothing is more necessary than maintaining a positive public image of a reasonable, good and moderate Self. Societies have been standing up to various enemies throughout history – Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, Muslims, Jews, Americans, Arabs, heretics, the working class, peasants, Capitalists, Communists, Fascists, Multiculturalists, Secularists, Racists, to name but a few. Political enemies

have changed – some have died, some have been born, others have been resurrected from the past. Our demons have always been around, however. Why? Because demons fulfill a positive social function. A common enemy and a shared fear unite us. Without such enemies society would quickly disintegrate because, as noted by Eric Hoffer, unless we are united by a common fear we tend to keep ourselves to ourselves and end up becoming rivals and competitors with each other.[14]

In our daily lives we should carefully consider whether the type of environment we are in is neutral or hostile, friendly or competitive, full of struggle or of war, and should modify our attitudes accordingly. All these types of environments exist in interpersonal, intergroup, social and political relations. If we do not recognize them for what they are we may suffer. If others misperceive their environment, they may suffer too.

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[14] **Eric Hoffer.** The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements. New York: Harper & Row, 2010, p. 93.