

Extremism

“Political fringe” redirects here. For other political fringe groups, see [Political fringe movements](#).

“Extremists” redirects here. For the DC Comics supervillain team, see [Extremists \(comics\)](#).

“Extremist” redirects here. For the 1992 instrumental rock album, see [The Extremist](#). For the comic book series, see [The Extremist \(comics\)](#).

Extremism means, literally: *driving (something) to the limit, to the extreme*.

Nowadays, the term is mostly being used in a [political](#) or [religious](#) sense, for an [ideology](#) that is considered (by the speaker) to be far outside the (acceptable) [mainstream](#) attitudes of society. But extremism can, for example, also be meant in an economic sense.

The term “extremism” is usually meant [pejorative](#): to express (strong) disapproval, but it may also be meant in a more academic, purely descriptive, non-condemning sense.

Extremists are usually contrasted with [centrists](#) or [moderates](#). For example, in contemporary discussions in [Western countries](#) of [Islam](#) or of [Islamic political movements](#), the distinction between extremist (= 'bad') and moderate (= 'good') [Muslims](#) is typically stressed.

Political agendas perceived as extremist often include those from the [far left](#) or [far right](#), as well as [radicalism](#), [reactionism](#), [fundamentalism](#), and [fanaticism](#).

1 Problems with defining extremism

In different realms at different times were many different definitions of “extremism”. Dr. Peter T. Coleman and Dr. Andrea Bartoli give short observation of definitions:^[1]

2 Radicalism or extremism?

The terms extremism or extremist are almost always [exonymic](#)—i.e., applied by others to a group rather than by a group labeling itself. Rather than labeling themselves extremist, those labeled as such might describe themselves as, for example, [political radicals](#). There is no political party that calls itself “right-wing extremist” or “left-wing extremist”, and there is no sect of any religion that calls itself “extremist” or which calls its doctrine

“extremism”.

The term extremist is used to describe groups and individuals who have become [radicalized](#), in some way, even though the term radical originally meant *to go to the root of* a (social) problem. The term radical is one not normally regarded as [pejorative](#) (except perhaps in the United States of America) and, unlike extremist, is sometimes used by groups in their description of themselves.

The term extremist is often used with reference to those who use or advocate violence against the will of society at large, but it is also used by some to describe those who advocate or use violence to enforce the will of the social body, such as a government or majority constituency. Those described as extremist would in general not accept that what they practice or advocate constitutes violence and would instead speak in terms of acts of “resistance” or militant action or the use of force. The word violence cannot be regarded as value-neutral. Ideology and methodology often become inextricably linked under the single term extremism.

The notion that there is a philosophy which can be described as extremism is considered by some to be suspect. Within sociology, several academics who track (and are critical of) extreme right-wing groups have objected to the term extremist, which was popularized by centrist sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s. As Jerome Himmelstein states the case: “At best this characterization tells us nothing substantive about the people it labels; at worst it paints a false picture.” (Himmelstein, p. 7). The act of labeling a person, group or action as extremist is sometimes claimed to be a technique to further a political goal—especially by governments seeking to defend the status quo, or political centrists. In any event, the term extremist—like the word violence—cannot be regarded as value-neutral.

3 Theories of extremism

Laird Wilcox identifies 21 alleged traits of a “political extremist”, ranging from behaviour like “a tendency to character assassination”, over hateful behaviour like “name calling and labelling”, to general character traits like “a tendency to view opponents and critics as essentially evil”, “a tendency to substitute intimidation for argument” or “groupthink”.^[2]

Eric Hoffer and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. were two political writers during the mid-20th century who gave what pur-



Al-Qaeda fighters in Yemen, 2014

ported to be accounts of “political extremism”. Hoffer wrote books such as *The True Believer* and *The Passionate State of Mind* about the psychology and sociology of those who join “fanatical” mass movements. Schlesinger wrote books such as *The Vital Center*, championing a supposed “center” of politics within which “mainstream” political discourse takes place, and underscoring the alleged need for societies to draw definite lines regarding what falls outside of this acceptability.

Seymour Martin Lipset argued that besides the extremism of the left and right there is also an *extremism of the center*, and that it actually formed the base of fascism.^[3]

Joining extremist groups has been seen to arise from beliefs about the acceptability of aggression towards the group’s target. For example, in Pakistan, beliefs about the acceptability of aggression against Jews were shown to predict who would join an extremist anti-Semitic group.^[4] Cultural differences in acceptability about aggression towards certain groups may explain extremism towards certain targets, and as these beliefs can be easily changed through intervention, this may offer a way in which extremism can be discouraged.^[4]

“Extremism” is not a stand-alone characteristic. The attitude or behavior of an “extremist” may be represented as part of a spectrum which ranges from mild interest through “obsession” to “fanaticism” and “extremism”. The alleged similarity between the “extreme left” and “extreme right”, or perhaps between different religious “zealots”, may mean only that all these are “unacceptable” from the standpoint of a supposed mainstream or majority.

Economist Ronald Wintrobe^[5] argues that many extremist movements, even though having completely different ideologies share a common set of characteristics. As an example, he lists the following common characteristics between “Jewish fundamentalists” and “the extremists of Hamas”:^[6]

- Both are against any compromise with the other side.
- Both are entirely sure of their position.
- Both advocate and sometimes use vio-

lence to achieve their ends.

- Both are nationalistic.
- Both are intolerant of dissent within their group.
- Both demonize the other side

3.1 Psychological

Among the explanations for extremism is one that views it as a plague.^[1] Arno Gruen said, “The lack of identity associated with extremists is the result of self-destructive self-hatred that leads to feelings of revenge toward life itself, and a compulsion to kill one’s own humanness.” Thus extremism is seen as not a tactic, nor an ideology, but as a pathological illness which feeds on the destruction of life.^[1] Dr. Kathleen Taylor believes Muslim fundamentalism is a mental illness and that is “curable.”^[7]

Another view is that extremism is an emotional outlet for severe feelings stemming from “persistent experiences of oppression, insecurity, humiliation, resentment, loss, and rage” which are presumed to “lead individuals and groups to adopt conflict engagement strategies which “fit” or feel consistent with these experiences”.^[1]

Extremism is however seen by other researchers as a “rational strategy in a game over power”.^[1] See for instance the works of Eli Berman.

4 Uses of the term in “mainstream” politics

Barry Goldwater said, “*Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice; moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue*” at the 1964 Republican Convention in a sentence attributed to his speechwriter Karl Hess.

Robert F. Kennedy said, “*What is objectionable, what is dangerous about extremists is not that they are extreme but that they are intolerant. The evil is not what they say about their cause, but what they say about their opponents.*”

Since the 1990s, in United States politics the term *Sister Souljah moment* has been used to describe a politician’s public repudiation of an allegedly extremist person or group, statement, or position which might otherwise be associated with his own party.

In Russia laws prohibiting “extremist” content are used to suppress the freedom of speech through very broad and flexible interpretation.^[8] Publications classified as “extremist” and thus prosecuted included protests against the court rulings in Bolotnaya Square case (“calling for illegal action”), criticism of overspending of local governor (“insult of the authorities”), publishing a poem in support of Ukraine (“inciting hatred”),^{[9][10]} an open letter against a war in Chechnya by a writer Polina Zherebcova^[11] and the whole Jehovah’s Witnesses movement in Russia.^[12]

Main articles: Freedom of press in Russia and Internet censorship in Russia

5 Other terms

The term "subversive" was often used interchangeably, in the United States at least, with "extremist" during the Cold War period, although the two words are not synonymous.

6 See also

- Consequentialism
- Domestic Extremism Lexicon
- False consensus effect
- Political extremism in Japan
- Political extremism in Switzerland
- Sikh extremism
- Islamic extremism
- Jewish extremism
 - Israeli settler violence#Settler extremism
 - Zionist extremism
- Cumulative extremism
- Terrorism
- Vigilantism

7 References

- [1] Dr. Peter T. Coleman and Dr. Andrea Bartoli: Addressing Extremism, pp. 3–4
- [2] "Laird Wilcox on Extremist Traits". Lairdwilcox.com. Retrieved 2013-09-08.
- [3] G. M. Tamás: On Post-Fascism, *Boston Review*, summer 2000
- [4] Amjad, N., & Wood, A. M. (2009). Identifying and changing the normative beliefs about aggression which lead young Muslim adults to join extremist anti-Semitic groups in Pakistan. *Aggressive Behavior*, 35, 514-519
- [5] "Economics at Western". Economics.uwo.ca. Retrieved 2013-09-08.
- [6] Wintrobe (2006), p. 5

[7] Bruxelles, Simon de (2013-05-30). "Science 'may one day cure Islamic radicals'". *The Times (London)* (London). Retrieved 2013-05-31.

[8] Paul Goble (2015-03-29). "FSB Increasingly Involved in Misuse of 'Anti-Extremism' Laws, SOVA Says". *The Interpreter Magazine*. Retrieved 2015-04-01.

[9] "Examples of forbidden content". Zapretno.info. 2014. Retrieved 2014-10-29.

[10] Neef, Christian; Schepp, Matthias (2014-04-22). "The Propaganda War: Opposition Sings Kremlin Tune on Ukraine". *Spiegel Online*. Retrieved 2015-06-10.

[11] "<https://meduza.io/news/2015/07/08/otkrytoe-pismo-hodorkovskomu-o-voyne-v-chechne-priznali-ekstremistski>". *meduza.io*. Retrieved 2015-07-08.

[12] "Russian Appellate Court Decision Reverses Ban of JW.ORG Website". Retrieved 2015-08-20.

7.1 Cited publications

- George, John and Laird Wilcox. *Nazis, Communists, Klansmen, and Others on the Fringe: Political Extremism in America* Prometheus Books, 1992. (ISBN 0-87975-680-2)
- Himmelstein, Jerome L. *All But Sleeping with the Enemy: Studying the Radical Right Up Close* ASA, San Francisco: 1988
- Hoffer, Eric. *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*. Various editions, first published 1951.
- Schlesinger, Arthur. *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom*. Various editions, first published 1949.
- Wilcox, Laird. "What Is Political Extremism", retrieved from *The Voluntarist* newsletter #27, 1987
- Ronald Wintrobe (2006). *Rational extremism: the political economy of radicalism*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-0-521-85964-6.

7.2 Further reading

- Nawaz, Maajid. *Radical: My Journey out of Islamist Extremism* (Lyons Press, 2013)
- Bibi van Ginkel, *Engaging Civil Society in Countering Violent Extremism* (ICCT – The Hague, 2012)

8 External links

- America's Homegrown Extremists – slideshow by *Life magazine*

- [Political Islam: Religious or Extremist?](#) from the Dean Peter Krogh Foreign Affairs Digital Archives
- [The M and S Collection at the Library of Congress](#) contains materials on Extremist Movements.

9 Text and image sources, contributors, and licenses

9.1 Text

- **Extremism** *Source:* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extremism?oldid=687409474> *Contributors:* The Anome, Stevertigo, Liftarn, Ronz, Vzbs34, Andres, Evercat, GCarty, Optim, Pollinator, Sam Spade, Meelar, Kd4ttc, Wereon, Lupo, David Gerard, Captain-c, DocWatson42, Nikodemos, Isam, Cloud200, Macrakis, Mporch, Antandrus, Loremaster, Cberlet, Ukexpat, Random account 47, Shiftchange, N328KF, Rich Farmbrough, Dbachmann, AzaToth, Lectorar, Max rspct, VoluntarySlave, Markaci, Dismas, 790, Lawrence King, Descendall, BD2412, Rjwilmsi, Tim!, Brucelee, Feydey, Yamamoto Ichiro, Titoxd, FlaBot, Astatine, Ewlyahoocom, Bgwhite, YurikBot, Wavelength, Stephenb, NawlinWiki, MichTheWeird, Thiseye, Moe Epsilon, Epipelagic, Deville, The Fish, JQF, JLaTondre, Greatal386, SmackBot, David Kernow, Carl.bunderson, VJ Emsi, Jprg1966, Baa, Paulfp, Arsonal, FenristheWolf, RolandR, RandomP, Derek R Bullamore, BullRangifer, Will Beback, Lambiam, Acebrock, Josh a z, Woer\$, Rofl, MightyWarrior, CmdrObot, Tim Long, NickW557, Neelix, Whereizben, Gregbard, Shanoman, Gogo Dodo, Click23, Epbr123, Craggyisland, Sobreira, Bobblehead, James086, Peter Gulutzan, Dgies, Escarbot, Hires an editor, RobotG, Fayenatic london, Alphachimpbot, JAnDbot, Retroviser, Yahel Guhan, Magioladitis, StormCommander, Matt57, Elkost, Malaseb, 2812, Cometstyles, Corriebertus, Vqwj, Poulton-enwiki, Hersfold, Fences and windows, TXiKiBoT, Mr10123, Kyle Fortman, Falcon8765, SieBot, Errruringer, Hiddenfromview, TubularWorld, ClueBot, Laudak, Redthoreau, Joking99, SteelMariner, Imp of the Perverse, Left justified, Addbot, Download, Profitoftruth85, Fadeem, Numbo3-bot, Czar Brodie, Jarble, Legobot, Luckas-bot, Yobot, THEN WHO WAS PHONE?, Vini 17bot5, Renaissance, AnomieBOT, MaterialsScientist, Kalamkaar, ArthurBot, MacintoshWriter, Marshallsumter, Obersachsebot, Xqbot, NSK Nikolaos S. Karastathis, DocPsych, Toby72, D'ohBot, HamburgerRadio, TobeBot, Juhko, John of Reading, WikiOutsiders10, Almagor35, RememberingLife, Alexander Roumega, AvicBot, ZéroBot, Michael Essmeyer, Tijfo098, Ace of Raves, Teapeat, ClueBot NG, Gaioa, Helpful Pixie Bot, Calidum, BG19bot, Amp71, AdventurousSquirrel, Mia229, LoneWolf1992, Suraj.xtremist, Frosty, Lemnaminor, Pokechu22, Sternjon, Jim Carter, Ephemerratta, Scruff19, ChamithN, DirkvVeldhuizen, Mr Gennaio, Frankwaytrue, Jenniohra and Anonymous: 146

9.2 Images

- **File:AQAP_fighters,_Yemen,_2014.jpg** *Source:* https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/b/b4/AQAP_fighters%2C_Yemen%2C_2014.jpg *License:* Fair use *Contributors:*
This picture was taken from a video clip. It has been used free online by several media outlets. Here's one of the sources: [1] *Original artist:* ?
- **File:Question_book-new.svg** *Source:* https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/9/99/Question_book-new.svg *License:* Cc-by-sa-3.0 *Contributors:*
Created from scratch in Adobe Illustrator. Based on Image:Question book.png created by User:Equazcion *Original artist:* Tkgd2007
- **File:Wikiquote-logo.svg** *Source:* <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fa/Wikiquote-logo.svg> *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* ? *Original artist:* ?
- **File:Wiktionary-logo-en.svg** *Source:* <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f8/Wiktionary-logo-en.svg> *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* Vector version of Image:Wiktionary-logo-en.png. *Original artist:* Vectorized by Fvasconcellos (talk · contribs), based on original logo tossed together by Brion Vibber

9.3 Content license

- Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0