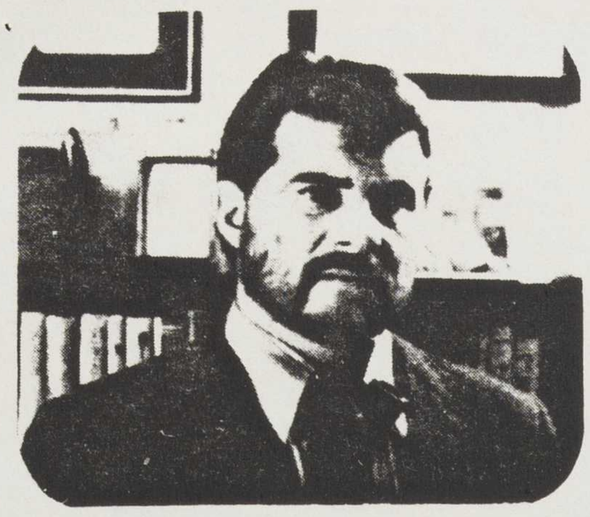

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What is Political Extremism?

By Laird Wilcox

Extremism Defined!
Content versus Style!
Problems of Objectivity!
Human Fallibility!
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The Common Thread!

Roger Scruton, in the **Dictionary Of Political Thought** (Hill & Wang, New York, 1982) defines "extremism" as:

"A vague term, which can mean:

1. Taking a political idea to its limits, regardless of 'unfortunate' repercussions, impracticalities, arguments and feelings to the contrary, and with the intention not only to confront, but also to eliminate opposition.
2. Intolerance towards all views other than one's own.
3. Adoption of means to political ends which show disregard for the life, liberty, and human rights of others."

This is a very fair definition and it reflects my experience that "extremism" is essentially more an issue of **style** than of **content.** In the twenty-five years that I have been investigating political groups of the left and right, I have found that many people can hold very radical or unorthodox political views and still present them in a reasonable, rational and non-dogmatic manner. On the other hand, I have met people whose style was shrill, uncompromising and distinctly authoritarian although their views were relatively conventional, or at least within the political mainstream. The latter demonstrated a starkly extremist mentality while the former demonstrated only ideological unorthodoxy, which is hardly to be feared in a free society such as our own.

I don't mean to imply that content is entirely irrelevant. People who tend to adopt the extremist style most often champion causes and adopt ideologies that are essentially "fringe" positions on the political spectrum. Advocacy of "fringe" positions, however, gives our society the variety and vitality it needs to function as an open democracy, to discuss and debate all aspects of an issue and to deal with problems we may otherwise have a tendency to ignore. I think this is the proper role of radical movements, left and right. The extremist style is another issue altogether, however, in that it seriously hampers our understanding of important issues, it muddies the waters of discourse with invective, fanaticism and hatred, and it impairs our ability to make intelligent, well-informed choices based on a comprehensive survey of all the facts and all points of view.

Another, perhaps more popular, definition of "extremism" is that it represents points of view we strongly disagree with, advocated by someone we dislike intensely, whose interests are contrary to our own!! In point of fact, political ideologues often attempt definitions of extremism which specifically condemn the views of their opponents and critics while leaving their own relatively untouched, or which are otherwise biased toward certain views but not others. To be fair, a definition must be equally applicable across the entire political spectrum.

The terms "extremist" and "extremism" are often used irresponsibly as **epithets**, "devilwords" to curse or condemn opponents and critics with! I find, however, that the extremist style is not the monopoly of any sector of the political spectrum. It is just as common on the "left" as it is on the "right," and sometimes it shows up in the political "center" as well. Other belief systems, such as religions, often adopt an extremist style, too.

TRAITS OF "EXTREMISTS":

In analyzing the rhetoric and literature of several hundred "fringe" and militant "special interest" groups I have identified several specific traits that tend to represent the extremist style. I would caution you with the admonition, however, that we are all fallible and anyone, without bad intentions, may resort to some of these devices from time to time. But with bonafide extremists these lapses are not occasional and the following traits are an habitual and established part of their repertoire. The late Robert Kennedy, in **The Pursuit Of Justice** (1964), 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."

1. **Character Assassination.** Extremists often attack the character of an opponent or critic rather than deal with the facts and issues he raises or debate the points of his arguments. They will question his motives, qualifications, past associations, values, personality, mental health and so on as a diversion from the issues under consideration.

2. **Name calling and labeling.** Extremists are quick to resort to epithets (racist, subversive, pervert, hatemonger, nut, crackpot, degenerate, Un-American, Anti-Semite, Red, Commie, Nazi, Kook, etc.) to label and condemn an opponent in order to divert attention from his arguments and to discourage others from hearing him out.

3. **Irresponsible sweeping generalizations.** Extremists tend to make sweeping claims or judgements on little or no evidence, and they have a tendency to confuse similarity with sameness. That is, they assume that because two (or more) things are alike in **some** respects they must be alike in **all** respects! Analogy is a treacherous form of logic and its potential for distortion and false conclusions even when the premises are basically correct is enormous.

4. **Inadequate proof for assertions.** Extremists tend to be very fuzzy on what constitutes proof for their assertions. They also tend to get caught up in logical fallacies, such as **post hoc ergo propter hoc** (assuming that a prior event explains a subsequent occurance simply because of their "before" and "after" relationship). They tend to project "wished for" conclusions and to exaggerate the significance of information which confirms their prejudices and to derogate or ignore information which contradicts them.