

## Towards Academic Consensus Definitions of Radicalism and Extremism

by Astrid Bötticher

### Abstract

*Radicalism and extremism are frequently (mis-)used concepts. The meaning of these terms is vague and the boundaries between them and between either of these terms and mainstream political thoughts and practices are unclear. While there are no legal definitions of extremism or radicalism in most countries, there are nevertheless many governmental programs that deal with [Countering] Violent Extremism (CVE) and [De-]Radicalisation since both imply a turn to a specific form of political violence: terrorism. This Research Note presents the outcome of terminological and conceptual analyses of definitions of extremism and radicalism as utilised (mainly, but not exclusively) in Germany. The objective was to develop academic consensus definitions of these terms comparable to the approach developed by Alex P. Schmid for reaching an Academic Consensus Definition of Terrorism.[1]*

**Keywords:** Extremism, Radicalism, Terrorism, Radicalisation, Germany

### Introduction

In a recent doctoral dissertation, the author of this Research Note surveyed and synthesized the German discussion on extremism and radicalism.[2] Utilising Reinhart Koselleck's approach of conceptual history[3], it could be demonstrated that, in terms of histories of ideas, radicalism and extremism stem from different socio-political (party) movements.[4] In addition to the study of the historical evolution of the use of these two terms, a second methodology was utilized – Giovanni Sartoris' method of concept analysis.[5] This part of the analysis was based on a collection of definitions from various sources such as schoolbooks, lexica, and compendia. In addition, definitions from several academic disciplines (political science, sociology, criminology, historical studies, jurisprudence) were collected for both radicalism and extremism. This enabled the identification of definitional elements which were categorised in matrices. The ordering of definitional elements and the analysis of their structural properties allowed the author to obtain a picture of extremism and radicalism within the (social) sciences. In addition, definitions from state security-related institutions in Germany were also included in the analysis.

### Towards a Consensus Definition of Extremism

While radicalism as a term has been around since at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century, extremism is of more modern origin. In Germany, it entered the authoritative "Duden" dictionary only in 1942. The postwar "Verfassungsschutz" (the Office for the Protection of the Constitution - the German domestic intelligence service), began using the term extremism in 1974.[6] In the late seventies, the term was first introduced as a scientific concept by Manfred Funke[7], followed by others in the 1980s. For most of them, the term denoted a fundamental opposition to core values of the West German constitution, as reflected in a number of verdicts of the federal constitutional court since the 1950s against the (Sozialistische Reichspartei Deutschlands) SRP, a successor party of the Hitler era National Socialists, and against a Moscow-directed Communist party. Extremism as a concept, however, never fully escaped the political debate in Germany, postponing the emergence of a more neutral social science conceptualisation.

In the Anglo-Saxon world, the discussion on extremism dates back to the First World War. [8] The precursor term of extremism, "extremite", was already used by Bishop Stephen Gardiner in 1546 to describe his enemies.[9] William Safire named Joseph Worcester's dictionary from 1846 as an early source. However, it is widely held that US Senator Daniel Webster popularized the term; he used it to describe the most violent

proponents in the (anti-)slavery debate at the time of the American civil war.[10] The term experienced a revival a century later in the 1960s, with John L. Carpenter, Edgar Metzler, Walter B. Mead, Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab among others using it.[11] At that time, empirical approaches were developed for better conceptualisations. In the 1990s, Manus Midlarsky finally elaborated a seminal theoretical framework based on ideology, narration and group-think.[12] With roots in empirical, inductive research and with the objective to explain descriptively how political extremism emerges - why and how individuals and groups of people become violent, and what ingredients are needed to lead them to political violence - Midlarsky's magisterial work has no intellectual counterpart in the German academic discussion.

While some authors use the term 'non-violent extremism' for Islamist fundamentalists who are not active jihadists, holding extremist views without the political will to translate thoughts into action might be more a question of circumstances and opportunities than principles.

With regard to 'extremism', the following consensus definition,[13] derived on the basis of two distinct analytical methodologies developed by R. Koselleck and G. Sartori, is proposed:

*Extremism characterises an ideological position embraced by those anti-establishment movements, which understand politics as struggle for supremacy rather than as peaceful competition between parties with different interests seeking popular support for advancing the common good. Extremism exists at the periphery of societies and seeks to conquer its center by creating fear of enemies within and outside society. They divide fellow citizens and foreigners into friends and foes, with no room for diversity of opinions and alternative life-styles. Extremism is, due to its dogmatism, intolerant and unwilling to compromise. Extremists, viewing politics as a zero-sum game, tend - circumstances permitting - to engage in aggressive militancy, including criminal acts and mass violence in their fanatical will for gaining and holding political power. Where extremists gain state power, they tend to destroy social diversity and seek to bring about a comprehensive homogenisation of society, based on an often faith-based ideology with apocalyptic traits. At the societal level, extremist movements are authoritarian, and, if in power, extremist rulers tends to become totalitarian. Extremists glorify violence as a conflict resolution mechanism and are opposed to the constitutional state, majority-based democracy, the rule of law, and human rights for all.*

### **Towards a Consensus Definition of Radicalism**

As noted earlier, radicalism as a term is older than extremism and has, in the course of more than two hundred years, undergone changes of meaning. The term was originally used in medicine and came to describe a political attitude in the late 1790s. The concept spread from a then-progressive post-1688 Glorious Revolution England to the Enlightenment in 18<sup>th</sup> century France, reaching Germany only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In terms of content, it generally became a marker of enlightened, liberal to left-wing political tenets, opposing reactionary political establishments. Radicalism became a political doctrine inspiring republican and national movements committed to individual and collective freedom and emancipation, directed against the monarchic and aristocratic post-1815 status quo. At that time, radicalism was mostly anti-clerical, anti-monarchist and definitely pro-democracy. Some of its demands (like female suffrage) have become mainstream ideas and were realised in most parts of the world during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Political opponents often sought to portray radicalism as a revolutionary, mainly left-wing, - and lately religious - subversive force. However, historically, in terms of political parties embracing its tenets, radicalism is more closely linked to a progressive reformism than to utopian extremism, whose glorification of mass violence radicals generally rejected.

On the basis of the findings derived from the use of the two methodologies (Koselleck's and Sartori's), a short academic consensus definition of radicalism[14] can be suggested along these lines:

*Radicalism refers to a political doctrine embraced by socio-political movements favouring both*

*individual and collective freedom, and emancipation from the rule of authoritarian regimes and hierarchically-structured societies. In that sense radicalism, advocating sweeping political change, represents a form of hostility against the status quo and its establishment. Often, its initial milieu is found among the sons and daughters of a bourgeois elite, young people who identify with, and seek to improve, the social conditions of larger sections of the population. Historically, radical political parties were key drivers in the progress towards greater democracy in a number of states. Radicalism as an ideological mindset tends to be very critical of the existing status quo, pursuing the objective of restructuring and/or overthrowing outdated political structures. By their opponents, radicals are often portrayed as violent; but this is only partly correct, as radicalism tends to be associated historically more with a progressive reformism than with utopian extremism, whose glorification of violence it rejects. Radicalism is emancipatory and does not seek to subjugate people and enforce conformity like extremism does. Radical narratives contain utopian ideological elements, but they do not glorify a distant past. Although unwilling to compromise their ideals, radicals are open to rational arguments as to the means to achieve their goals. Unlike extremists, radicals are not necessarily extreme in their choice of means to achieve their goals. Unlike extremists who reject the extremist label, radicals also self-define themselves as radicals.*

### **Key Distinctions between Radicalism and Extremism**

Radicalism and extremism both refer to socio-political forces that exist at the edges of liberal-democratic societies. Several elements can help us distinguish one from the other:

1. Radical movements tend to use political violence pragmatically and on a selective basis, while extremist movements consider violence against their enemies as a legitimate form of political action and tend to embrace extreme forms of mass violence as part of their political credo.
2. Both ‘-isms’ contain a narrative reference to what lies beyond the present. In the case of extremism, there is a strong palingenetic element; radicalism looks more at a golden future for all rather than seeking to restore an allegedly golden past for adherents of its own creed.
3. Extremism is, by its very nature, anti-democratic; it seeks to abolish constitutional democracy and the rule of law. Radicalism is emancipatory and not *per se* anti-democratic. Extremist movements cannot be integrated into liberal-democratic societies due to their intolerance towards ideologies other than their own. Democracies can live with radicals but not with uncompromising, aggressive extremist militants.
4. Extremists openly confront the notion of universal human rights and those institutions that serve to uphold them for all. Radicalism is not opposed to equal human rights; historically, progressive radicals have sought to extend human rights to the underprivileged.
5. Extremists want to close the open marketplace of ideas. Radicals, while advocating a path of action that differs greatly from the continuation of the status quo, do not seek to close open societies and destroy diversity in society the way extremists do. Contrary to radicalism, extremism is extreme in both its goals and the choice of means to reach them.
6. Radicalism stands in rebellious opposition against the establishment; extremism, on the other hand, is directed not only against the establishment but against all those who do not embrace its dogmatic recipe for a transformation of society.
7. When numerically weak, radicals can withdraw from mainstream society into a form of intransigent isolationism / niche culture, co-existing with plural societies and not continuously seeking a direct confrontation with mainstream society. On the other hand, extremists engage in provocative and aggressive interventions against the established order.

8. Extremism is characterized by a particularistic morality valid only for its own members. Radicalism is oriented more towards a universal morality.
9. The concept of extremism is closely linked to authoritarian dictatorships and totalitarianism. Historically, radicalism has been more egalitarian and less elitist while extremists are supremacists opposed to the sovereignty of common people.
10. Radicalism draws strongly on the political legacy of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, with its ideas of human progress and its faith in the power of reason. Extremism, on the other hand, is linked to an irrational, usually religious and fanatical belief system, that claims a monopoly of truth on the basis of which it seeks to transform society according to its retrograde vision.

## Conclusion

Attempting to re-define essentially contested and frequently (ab-)used and fuzzy concepts like radicalism and extremism from an academic perspective - that is without any political definition- may look like an exercise in futility. Both radicalism and extremism are situated at some distance from the middle ground - politically moderate, mainstream positions in democratic societies. The centrist position in the political playing field might, however, be shifting too which makes the exercise of defining the radicalist and extremist outliers more difficult. What has emerged from this definitional exploration is that radicalism can be situated at the edges of the democratic consensus while extremism lies outside. Although the meanings of these two contested concepts may at times overlap to a certain extent, they should not be equated. Confronted with radicalism, democratic political systems have shown an ability to absorb radical demands by way of arriving at reasonable compromises. Confronted with extremism, democratic systems and plural societies cannot compromise with dogmatic demands based on faith-based ideological constructs that have no sound basis in social realities.

The links between radicalism and terrorism are much weaker than those between extremism and terrorism. In that sense, the use of the term 'radicalisation' to denote a turn towards a specific form of political violence, namely terrorism, is unfortunate - but probably nevertheless irreversible in the current public political discourse. The danger is that all forms of radical rebellion - even legitimate resistance against corrupt and violent authoritarian regimes - are disqualified as illegitimate extremism. This has the dangerous potential effect of driving pro-democracy radicals into the arms of anti-democratic extremists. Many threatened authoritarian regimes tend to favour the equation of radicalism with extremism, as it allows them to claim that the only choice in the current geo-political situation is the one between the relative stability only they can supposedly offer and violent extremism in the form of jihadist terrorism.

**About the Author:** *Astrid Bötticher, Ph.D., is a political scientist teaching at the University of Applied Sciences in Berlin. She co-authored 'Extremismus – Theorien, Konzepte, Formen' with Miroslav Mares (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2012) and is the author of the doctoral dissertation Radikalismus und Extremismus. Konzeptualisierung und Differenzierung zweier umstrittener Begriffe in der deutschen Diskussion. Leiden: ISGA, 2017. Her thesis work was supervised by Alex P. Schmid.*

## Notes

[1] Alex P. Schmid. The Revised Academic Consensus Definition of Terrorism (2011). *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 6, Issue 2 (2012); URL: <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/schmid-terrorism-definition/html>. - For background, see: Alex P. Schmid (Ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* New York and London: Routledge, 2011, pp. 86 - 87; Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman. *Political Terrorism. A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literatures*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2005, p. 28.

[2] Astrid Bötticher: *Radikalismus und Extremismus: Konzeptualisierung und Differenzierung zweier umstrittener Begriffe in der deutschen Diskussion*. Thesis, University of Leiden, 2017; URL: <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/49257/FullText.pdf?sequence=1>.

[3] Reinhart Koselleck. *Sozialgeschichte und Begriffsgeschichte*. In: R. Koselleck (Ed.), *Begriffsgeschichten. Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen*

und sozialen Sprache. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2010, pp. 9 - 31.

[4] This was already noted earlier by Alex P. Schmid in his Research Paper *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation - A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*. The Hague: ICCT, March 2013; URL:

<https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013.pdf> . See also: Alex P. Schmid. Non-violent and Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the same Coin? The Hague: ICCT, 2014; URL: <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Violent-Non-Violent-Extremism-May-2014.pdf> .

[5] Giovanni Sartori. Guidelines for Concept Analysis. In: G. Sartori (Ed.). *Social Science Concepts. A Systematic Analysis*. Beverly Hills and London: Sage, 1984, pp.15 - 85.

[6] Verfassungsschutzbericht 1974. Bonn: Bundesminister des Innern, 1975.

[7] Manfred Funke (Ed.). *Extremismus im demokratischen Rechtsstaat – Ausgewählte Texte und Materialien zur aktuellen Diskussion*. Bonn: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 1978.

[8] R.G. Pradhan: Extremism in India. In: *The New Statesman*, Vol. II, No. 46. 21.February.1914. pp. 617ff.

[9] William Safire: On Language - What's an Extremist? *New York Times*. 14 January 1996; URL:<http://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/14/magazine/on-language-what-s-an-extremist.html>).

[10] William Safire, op. cit.

[11] John L. Carpenter: *Extremism U.S.A. - The Facts behind Americas Radical Political Movements*. Phoenix: Associated Professional Services,1964; Edgar Metzler: *Let's talk about extremism*. Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1968; Walter B. Mead: *Extremism and Cognition - Styles of Irresponsibility in American Society*. Kendall/Hunt Pub. Co: Dubuque, 1971; Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab: *The Politics of Unreason - Right Wing Extremism in America 1790-1970*. New York: Harper & Row, 1970. See also: *Extremist Book Collection (Collection 552)*. Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

[12] Manus Midlarsky: *Origins of Political Extremism - Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

[13] For a longer version of my proposed consensus definition of extremism, see: Astrid Bötticher. *Radicalism and Extremism – Conceptualisation and Differentiation of two Controversial Terms in the German Debate* (written in German, with English summary). Leiden: ISGA, 2017 (422 pp.), p. 340; available at [URL:https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/49257/FullText.pdf?sequence=1](https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/49257/FullText.pdf?sequence=1)

[14] For a longer version of my proposed consensus definition of radicalism, see: Astrid Bötticher. *Radikalismus und Extremismus*, op. cit., pp.335 - 336.