

## Book Reviews

**J.M. Berger, *Extremism*** [The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series] (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 216 pp., US \$ 15.95 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-0-2625-3587-8.

Reviewed by Daniela Scerri

J.M. Berger is a prolific writer, publishing in both scholarly and journalistic media. *Extremism* is one of his latest scholarly writings. The book provides a concise introduction about what extremism is, how extremist groups form and develop, how extremist narratives and ideologies are constructed, and why extremist groups become violent, including the intricacies of how in-groups and out-groups develop and how extremism is sustained.

In chapter one, Berger addresses the definitional problem of extremism, highlighting the conflation that exists with aspects of both radicalisation and terrorism. In his view, “*defining extremism is not a casual matter*” (p.21). Using chronological examples of events from history that could be labelled ‘extremist’, he takes us back to the city of Carthage in the second century BC, to the apocalyptic Jihad of Al Qaeda, America’s new “alt-right,” and the anti-Semitic conspiracy tract “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion”. In doing so, Berger highlights the many old and modern faces of extremism. In the second chapter Berger questions what extremism is, and in simple terms, offers three insights; “*Extremism is rarely simple. Extremism is not the province of any single race, religion, or political school. Extremism can be profoundly consequential in societies*” (p.23).

What is particularly distinctive in *Extremism* is that Berger does not focus on one ideological or religious frame but uses various examples of extremism from history across the entire social spectrum. Throughout, he applies the social identity approach of Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner to illustrate how people categorize themselves and others as members of competing social groups. Using this theory, Berger develops his central argument and explains in detail the inter-group dynamics of in-groups and out-groups—“*us versus them*” (p.24) and what occurs when extremism escalates.

Subtly, Berger revisits the definitional problem of extremism, violent extremism, and radicalisation, highlighting differences. Whilst disentangling terrorism from extremism, stating that extremism is a belief system, he goes on to develop his own working definition of extremism; “*Extremism refers to the belief that an in-group’s success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group. The hostile action must be part of the in-group’s definition of success. Hostile acts can range from verbal attacks and diminishment to discriminatory behavior, violence, and even genocide*” (p.44). According to Berger, both structure and content of extremist ideologies are key.

Chapter three examines how identity movements define and sub-divide in-groups and out-groups. Establishing a collective identity made up of beliefs, traits and practices are central in defining the in-group. Berger points out how a hostile attitude towards the out-group is “*defined through a narrative process of identity construction that parallels the construction of the in-group definition*” (p.57). Rigid boundaries are set up between in-groups and out-groups, “*almost universally framed by the belief of its own purity...*” (p.64).

In chapter four, Berger provides the reader with a detailed analysis of crises and solutions that drive violence and other hostile interactions amongst collectives. The most common crisis narratives used by extremists, include impurity, conspiracy, dystopia, existential threat, apocalypse and triumphalism. Being outside ordinary politics, extremist groups only seek to resolve conflicts through “*crisis-solution constructs*” (p.99) leading to the use of hostile actions. Terrorism is only one possible tactic available to extremists.

Chapter five is dedicated to the concept of radicalisation. Berger views the “*process of adoption*” [of an ideology as] “*more instructive than the contents of the ideology.*” (p.119) Grievances are described as “*common elements in extremist arguments and rationalizations*” (p. 127). Using the Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh and modern-day jihadist foreign fighters as examples, Berger indicates that there are two potential cross-ideological drivers of radicalisation. These are, “*the effects of categorisation and learning bias, and the effects of disruptions to the status quo*” (p.132). According to Berger, one very effective strategy adopted to cope with uncertainty is

---

a group identity that is distinctive and clearly defined. Moreover, extremist ideologies work when they provide *entitativity*, which is defined as “*the property of a group, resting on clear boundaries and internal homogeneity, social interaction, clear internal structure, common goals and common fate*” (p. 139).

In his concluding remarks, Berger reminds us that extremism is not a new phenomenon. Countering it is no easy feat but without clear definitions, solutions remain elusive. Therefore, more efforts need to be made to understand what is meant not only by extremism, but also by radicalisation and other muddled concepts.

Elegantly written, the book provides a lucid discussion of a contested concept, with illustrating examples from right-wing, left-wing, and religious terrorism. For anyone new to the extremism landscape, it is an excellent introductory text to better understand political extremism. John M. Berger is a publisher at Intelwire.com, as well as co-author of the critically acclaimed volume *ISIS: The State of Terror* with Jessica Stern (New York: Harper-Collins, 2015).

**About the Reviewer:** Daniela Scerri is a postgraduate research student at the School of Law, Royal Holloway, University of London, UK.