

What is Political “Extremism”?

Guest post by Laird Wilcox. Originally published in The Voluntaryist, August 1987.

Roger Scruton, in the *Dictionary Of Political Thought* (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 views were shrill, uncompromising and distinctly authoritarian. 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, in our system. 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.

Another, perhaps more popular, definition of “extremism” is that it represents points of view we strongly disagree with, advocated by someone we dislike whose interests are contrary to our own!

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.

In point of fact, the terms “extremist” and “extremism” are often used thoughtlessly 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!

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 like to 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 that 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 other from hearing him out.

3. Irresponsible Sweeping Generalizations. Extremists tend to make sweeping claims or judgments 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 or most 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 occurrence 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.

5. Advocacy Of Double Standards. Extremists tend to judge themselves in terms of their intentions, which they tend to view generously, and others by their acts, which they tend to view very critically. They would like you to accept their assertions on faith but they demand proof for yours. They also tend to engage in “special pleading” on behalf of their group, because of some special status, past persecution or present disadvantage.

6. Extremists Tend To View Their Opponents And Critics As Essentially Evil. Their enemies hold opposing views because they are bad people, immoral, dishonest, unscrupulous, mean-spirited, cruel, etc., and not merely because they simply disagree, see the matter differently, have competing interests or are perhaps even mistaken!

7. Extremists Tend To Have A Manichean Worldview. That is, they tend to see the world in terms of absolutes of good and evil, for them or against them, with no middle ground or intermediate positions. All issues are ultimately moral issues of right and wrong. Their slogan tends to be “he who is not with me, is against me!”

8. Extremists Very Often Advocate Some Degree Of Censorship And Repression Of Their Opponents And Critics. This may range from an active campaign to keep them from media access and a public hearing, as in the case of blacklisting, banning, or “quarantining” dissident spokesmen, or actually lobbying for repressive legislation against speaking, teaching or instructing the “forbidden” information. They may attempt to keep certain books out of stores or off of library shelves or card catalogs, discourage advertising with threats of reprisals, keep spokesmen for offending views off the airwaves, or certain columnists out of newspapers. In each instance the goal is some kind of information control. Extremists would prefer that you only listen to them.

9. Extremists Tend To Identify Themselves In Terms Of Who Their Enemies Are, who they hate and who hates them! Accordingly, they often become emotionally bound to their enemies, who are often competing extremists on the opposite pole of the ideological spectrum. They tend to emulate their enemies in certain respects, adopting the same style and tactics to a certain degree. Even “anti-extremist” groups often exhibit extremist behavior in this regard!

10. Extremists Are Given To Arguments By Intimidation. That is, they frame their arguments in such a way as to intimidate others into accepting their premises and conclusions. To disagree with them, they imply, is to ally oneself with the devil or give aid and comfort to the “bad guys.” This ploy allows them to define the parameters of debate, cut off troublesome lines of argument, and keep their opponents on the defensive.

11. Wide Use Of Slogans, Buzzwords And Thought-Stopping Cliches. For many extremists simple slogans substitute for more complex abstractions in spite of a high level

of intelligence. Shortcuts in thinking and reasoning matters out seems to be necessary in order to appease their prejudices and to avoid troublesome facts and counter-arguments.

12. Doomsday Thinking. Extremists often predict dire or catastrophic consequences from a situation or from failure to follow a specific course, and they exhibit a kind of “crisis-mindedness.” It can be a Communist takeover, a Nazi revival, nuclear war, currency collapse, worldwide famine, drought, earthquakes, floods or the wrath of God. Whatever it is, it’s just around the corner unless we follow their program and listen to their special insights or the wisdom that only the enlightened have access to!

13. Extremists Often Claim Some Kind Of Moral Or Other Superiority Over Others. Most obvious are claims of general racial superiority — a master race, for example. Less obvious are claims of ennoblement because of alleged victimhood, a special relationship with God, membership in a special “elite” or revolutionary vanguard. They also take great offense when one is “insensitive” enough to dispute these claims or challenge their authority.

14. Extremists Tend To Believe That It’s OK To Do Bad Things In The Service Of A “Good” Cause. They may deliberately lie, distort, misquote, slander or libel their opponents and critics, or advocate censorship or repression in “special cases” involving their enemies. This is done with no remorse as long as it’s useful in defeating the Commies or Fascists (or whoever). Defeating an “enemy” becomes an all-encompassing goal to which other values are subordinate. With extremists, the ends often justify the means.

15. Extremists Tend To Place Great Value On Emotional Responses. They have a reverence for propaganda, which they may call education or consciousness-raising. Consequently, they tend to drape themselves and their cause in a flag of patriotism, a banner of righteousness or a shroud of victimhood. Their crusades against “enemies” may invoke images of the swastika, the hammer and sickle or some other symbol, as the case may be. In each instance the symbol represents an extremely odious concept in terms of their ideological premises. This ploy attempts to invoke an uncritical gut-level sympathy and acceptance of their position which discourages examination of their premises or the conclusions which they claim necessarily derive from them.

16. Some Extremists, Particularly Those Involved In “Cults” Or religious movements such as fundamental evangelical Christians, Zionists, members of the numerous new age groups and followers of certain “gurus,” claim some kind of supernatural, mystical or divinely-inspired rationale for their beliefs and actions. Their willingness to force their will on others, censor and silence opponents and critics, and in some cases actively persecute certain groups, is ordained by God! This is surprisingly effective because many people, when confronted by this kind of claim, are reluctant to challenge it because it represents “religious belief” or because of the sacred cow status of

some religions. Extremists traits tend to have three things in common:

1. They represent some attempt to distort reality for themselves and others.
2. They try to discourage critical examination of their beliefs, either by false logic, rhetorical trickery or some kind of intimidation.
3. They represent an attempt to act out private, personal grudges or rationalize the pursuit of special interests in the name of public welfare.

Remember, human beings are imperfect and fallible. Even a rational, honest, well-intentioned person may resort to some of these traits from time to time. Everyone has strong feelings about some issues and anyone can get excited and “blow off” once in awhile. We still retain our basic common sense, respect for facts and good will toward others. The difference between most of us and the bonafide extremist is that these traits are an habitual and established part of their repertoire. Extremists believe they’re doing the right thing when they act this way in the service of their cause.

The truth of a proposition cannot be inferred merely from the manner in which arguments in its behalf are presented, from the fact that its advocates censor and harass their opponents, or because they commit any other act or combination of acts suggested in this essay. Ultimately, the truth of any proposition rests on the evidence for it. To impeach a proposition merely because it is advocated by obvious “extremists” is to dismiss it *ad hominem*, that is, because of who proposes it. The fact is that extremists are sometimes right — sometimes very right — because they often deal with the gut issues, the controversial issues many people choose to avoid. So, before you perfunctorily write off somebody as an “extremist” and close your eyes and ears to his message, take a look at his evidence. It just might be that he’s on to something!