

Looking for extremism

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The Oxford English Dictionary defines extremism as, “the holding of extreme political or religious views; fanaticism: the dangers of religious extremism”.

No definition of extremism is ever sufficient to describe the complexity of something that may be associated with religion, nihilism, a political agenda backed by force, terrorism, an autocratic group, or a monolithic, singular political idea. And yet something barely definable has imposed itself on the consciousness of the international community. Extremism has become something that, particularly since post Iraq, has been used to encapsulate traditional perceptions of terrorism, the views of non-violent street demagogues, forces of insurgency, and right-wing football hooligans. To identify the ‘causes’ of extremism is therefore difficult.

Extremism may indeed have no cause, and it may be a challenge to ever understand its root causes fully. Similarly, what ‘makes an extremist’ is equally difficult to decipher. If one uses the socio-economic argument – that of inequality – then shouldn’t the Central African Republic – the poorest country in the world using the GDP per capita based (PPP) measurement – have a monopoly on extremists? And are all extremists created equal? Can we compare a leader within the so-called Islamic State to a young IRA recruit from 1984, or to a street preacher calling for members of the British Armed services to be killed wherever they exist – in the UK or without?

A further difficulty is that by seeking to understand what ‘makes an extremist’, we excuse what they are, and excuse what they stand for (or at least what they say they stand for). Hitler was, by any measurement, an extremist. Should we analyse what made him the mass murderer he became (of course, some have).

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A more subtle difficulty caused by the belief that the origins of an extremist may be uncovered, is that this promotes the idea that someone may be either prevented from becoming an extremist or, depending on your point of view, may be assessed as having the potential of *becoming* one. On 3 November 2015, Muslim organisations and civil rights groups in the United States criticised a new FBI interactive website created to prevent violence in schools, saying its focus on Islam was tantamount to racial and religious profiling. "Don't Be a Puppet" is an interactive video game-like website designed for use by teachers and students. The site consists of a series of games and tips to teach the user how to identify someone prone to recruitment for violent attacks. Needless to say, Rights groups have stated that the Islam-focused interactive website designed for schools amounts to racial and religious profiling.

What all extremist groups do seem to share in common is a singular view of the world, one where black and white prevails and causes are absolute. In this sense they might be differentiated with terrorist groups that have a more sophisticated political cause, but one which they fight for through physical attacks – attacks that, in themselves, are used to promote fear. Such singular, politically unequivocal groups, in basic terms, tend to either attract individuals with similar outlooks or mould individuals 'at-risk' to develop similar outlooks. The individuals and the group are self-contained, and essentially lock themselves away from outside contact. As Kathleen Taylor states in *Brainwashing: The Science of thought control*,

"A lack of feedback from the external world not only makes it difficult for group members to track drift in their moral norms, but also increases their sense of threat: as any child knows, the void of a room in darkness is much easier to populate with horrors than the same room with the light on and all its contents visible."

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Extremists, and extremist groups, have a problem with the world which they seek to rectify. The nature of the problem is usually seen in warped, one dimensional terms, and the solution is viewed in simple terms and remedial action is seen as essential in a set, short period of time. There is no criticality of thought involved in constructing and maintaining this problem-solution paradigm, and in that sense the belief may fall anywhere on the extremism spectrum in terms of issue and potency: from IS' desire to aggressively install a brutal 'caliphate', through to the right-wing, white-power activist in Western Europe who sees any weakening of the supposed Aryan bloodline as a failure brought about through the growth of multicultural societies. A perceived injustice, for the individual and the group, is a strong sustenance for extremism. For the group, it acts as an attractor for vulnerable individuals who feel shunned by their community, society or country; for the individual, and given the right contextual cocktail, it acts as a propellant pushing them towards such groups.

The London Metropolitan Police, as part of their 'SAFE' programme, state that people get involved in terrorism or violent extremism for the following reasons:

"...a lack of identity or belonging; insecurity; defending their culture, way of life or beliefs; they may be pressured, or bullied into it; they may have been radicalised by violent extremist groups; they may want retaliation. Those who encourage or get others to commit acts of violent extremism often target vulnerable people who are led into believing that violence or criminality can earn respect, riches or even glory."

What is certain is that there is no single path to extremism. At the international scale, conflicts, post-imperial fractures, autocratic regimes and poverty may

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all play a role in providing terrain ripe for the extremist to flourish, but this is not a given. Similarly, someone peripheralized – or sees themselves as having been peripheralized – from their community in a city in the UK or France, does not mean that every person in a similar context will start down that path.

Maajid Nawaz, an active member of an extremist Islamist organisation for 13 years, and who now works for a London-based think tank, identifies four main factors that attract people towards extremist ideologies, factors that apply across the board, and are not restricted merely to Islamist extremism:

- Grievances and lack of an outlet to express them– whether real or perceived – are essential in pushing the potential extremists to seek out alternative sub-cultures and narratives. For the purposes of understanding what motivates an individual, the mere perception of a grievance suffices here.
- Secondly, an identity crisis is also an important factor in creating the desire to seek out a sub-culture. This pushes the individual to reject the identity, country and people of their land of birth, instead adopting a form of recalibrated transnational camaraderie with other disenchanted like-minds.
- Into the confusion steps a charismatic recruiter, usually someone who can provide a sense of safety and security for the person experiencing a level of disillusionment from the mainstream.
- Finally, this recruiter is usually adept at spinning an ideological narrative, helping to them make sense of the world and its ills with a catch all explanation.

In an article written for NATO, Nawaz continues by stating that,

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“These four factors, in any order, interplay with one another to send someone down the path of extremism. Human beings are not like water, they do not all boil at 100 degrees Celsius, therefore trying to find one reason that would push someone to extremism is as unhelpful as profiling a terrorist based on their ethnicity, gender or looks. It simply does not work. Anyone from any background can become an extremist, often there are high numbers of converts and people with higher than average levels of education who are attracted to such outsider narratives.”

Extremists are not all the same, nor do they ‘become’ extremists by following a set path. However, what sets them apart is a contumacious and prejudiced view of the world, a world that has ‘gone wrong’ and that needs rectifying. Thus a cycle of extremism is born, as the recruited become the recruiters – the message is spread and the extremist group’s tendrils grow. In the same way that people from every walk of life killed as part of the Nazi repression machine or the Hutu death squads in Rwanda, so too anyone is open and vulnerable to extremism. However, in a stable societal context, some people are just more susceptible than others.