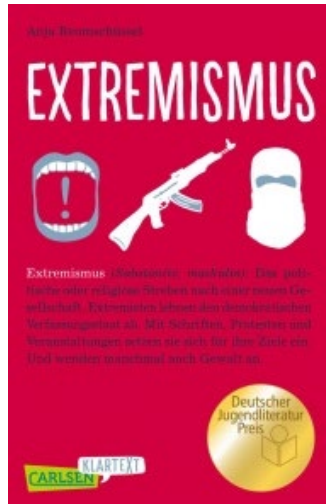


Anja Reumschüssel: EXTREMISM

Extremismus

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ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

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EXCERPT CHAPTER 2:

What is extremism?

Defining 'extremism'

So, what is extremism? If you imagine the political viewpoints of all the people in Germany represented by dots on a line, with the moderate viewpoints in the middle and the extreme opinions on either end, most of the dots would be concentrated to the left and right of the centre point. The dots get fewer and fewer the closer you get to each end of the line, meaning there are fewer people who hold extreme right or extreme left views. The idea of political opinions being either left or right originated with the French National Assembly following the French Revolution. In the National Assembly, the parties that sought political and social changes sat on the left, and the parties that wanted to keep society the way it was sat on the right (these parties were also known as conservative, from the Latin conservare = to conserve). Values that are considered 'left-wing' include social and political equality, solidarity with the most vulnerable and openness towards other cultures and religions. Values that are considered 'right-wing' include individual liberty, personal autonomy and an emphasis on one's own culture.

On the outermost edges of the political spectrum, you will find political viewpoints that are very left-wing (e.g. no one person should be allowed to own more than another) or very right-wing (e.g. only Germans who are not from an immigrant background should be allowed to live in Germany). The word 'extremism' derives from the Latin terms extremitas (the outermost point) and extremus (the outermost/the farthest away/the most dangerous).

Extremism refers to all the viewpoints on the outermost fringes of politics. It generally refers to such views or actions that oppose the democratic state, the rule of law and the constitution. This is considered a negative definition because it states what extremists are against and is therefore sometimes criticised by extremism experts. Tom Mannewitz, an extremism researcher at the University of Chemnitz, has come up with this supplementary definition: "Extremism refers to attempts within a democracy to move towards an autocracy or a dictatorship."

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People with extreme-right views might call for a state that only looks after citizens of its own ethnicity, because they believe that people of other ethnicities are less intelligent, less hard-working and more likely to be criminals, or simply that they should not have the right to be supported by a state to which they and their ancestors have not always belonged.

People with extreme-left views might call for a state in which all the resources (like factories, raw materials, and machines) belong to all the people, because they believe that if all the resources belong to one small group of citizens, it means that too many people are being exploited.

Religious extremists, most prominently Islamic extremists, aspire to a society in which everyone obeys the rules of their particular religion, either because they see themselves as defenders of God's will or because they believe that God will punish them otherwise.

Sometimes, one set of extreme views can exacerbate another set of extreme views. Xenophobic speeches, for instance, play into the hands of Islamic extremists. And the left-wing tendency to ignore integration issues among certain immigrant groups reinforces the extreme-right mindset.

'Radicalism' is often incorrectly used as a synonym for 'extremism'. Researchers are still debating how best to define the difference between these two terms. One thing is certain: people who are considered by others to be extremists would not describe themselves that way (or only very rarely). They prefer to see themselves as radicals, especially in the case of left-wing extremists and religious extremists. They want to make fundamental changes to society, from the roots up (radical derives from the Latin word *radix* = root). By this definition, a community of people who live on an isolated farm, produce all of their own food and clothing and do not send their children to school could be described as radical. The same goes for a vegan who calls for equal rights for people and animals and who won't fry vegetables in a pan that has previously been used for meat. Radicals do not necessarily attempt to undermine democracy. They often simply inhabit a niche within society, within which they can live a radically different life. Some of them use violence, others do not. Most of them,

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however, accept other ways of life and the social order within a democracy.

“Radicalism can certainly be compatible with democracy,” explains political scientist Mannewitz. “Extremists, on the other hand, fight against democracy. This requires a certain degree of radicalism, but also a threat towards liberty, equality and human rights. Not all radicals are extremists, but all extremists are radicals.”

The terms ‘extremist’ and ‘extreme’ are also sometimes used interchangeably. There is a difference, however: if something is extreme, it is something that would not be normal for most people. An extreme experience brings us to the limits of what we can tolerate. It could be a negative experience, such as a car accident or an illness, but it could also be a thrill-seeking experience, like hang gliding or deep-sea diving for the first time. It follows that extreme behaviour is behaviour that most people in a group or a society do not exhibit, and as such is not considered normal. An example of this would be people standing outside hospitals, demonstrating against abortion, being hostile towards women or doctors as they enter or even using violence in an attempt to keep them away from the clinic. Or parents who do not immunise their children because they do not trust the vaccines produced by the pharmaceutical industry. These viewpoints are not extremist, however, because those opposed to abortion or vaccinations, along with most other people with extreme viewpoints, are not calling for the abolition of democracy.

Besides, the perception of what is normal and what is not has changed throughout the course of history. For a long time, it was not considered normal for two men to kiss on the street or for a child to have two mothers (or two fathers) instead of a mother and a father, but most people no longer give this a second thought. Similarly, it was long considered extreme and radical to demand that women have the right to vote or that children should not be smacked.

Criticism of this definition

It should be clear by now how the term ‘extremism’ is used in this book. But experts often disagree on issues like this, which are of particular importance to politics and society. This definition of extremism, which is used in particular by the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, is controversial among political

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scientists, because it presupposes the existence of a democratic state that extremists can oppose. And it refers to such contradictory phenomena as the cult of the leader and the rejection of all leadership (more on this later). Nevertheless, it is the most frequently used definition in the political and social sciences.

But it is not just extremism researchers who disagree about how to define extremism. Whereas right-wing extremists tend to view the term 'extremist' as an accolade, most left-wing extremists reject it. They prefer to be called the 'radical left'. Because when they are referred to as 'extremists', they feel they are being placed on the same level as right-wing extremists and Islamic extremists. It is therefore important to emphasise that using the term 'extremist' to describe people with extreme left-wing or extreme right-wing views, all of which reject the democratic state, is not intended to be a value judgement or to imply that these people are the same. Somebody on the radical left who calls for a society without wealth or powerful people probably seems more likeable than someone on the radical right who promotes a society with a strong leader and obedient subjects. However, both are considered extremists in the political and academic discourse.

And, as different as the aims and viewpoints of these extremist tendencies are, and as much as they distance themselves from one another, they actually have a lot in common.

Is life in Germany so perfect that nothing needs to change? Or are the problems in our society so great that radical change is required? Most Germans will have opinions that sit somewhere in between these two extremes.

There are extremist views on many things, from political and religious questions to social issues. But when are we truly talking about extremism and when is it just a case of 'extreme opinions'? How does extremism come about and what dangers arise from it? And what can our society do to protect itself from extremism?

[...]

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