EXTREMISM

J. M. BERGER

THE MIT PRESS ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE SERIES

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The MIT Press | Cambridge, Massachusetts | London, England

This book was set in Chaparral Pro by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited.
Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Berger, J. M. (John M.), 1967- author.
Title: Extremism / J. M. Berger.
Description: Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 2018. | Series: The MIT press essential knowledge series | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018007483 | ISBN 9780262535878 (pbk. : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Radicalism. | Political violence.
Classification: LCC HN49.R33 B464 2018 | DDC 303.48/4--dc23 LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018007483

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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SERIES FOREWORD

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Bruce Tidor
Professor of Biological Engineering and Computer Science
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, I am deeply indebted to many people who helped me along the way to this book. Most of the concepts discussed herein were developed with support and guidance from Alastair Reed, head of the Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications Project. I am grateful for his friendship and support.

The work of Haroro J. Ingram, published through the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague and the CTSC Project, was deeply influential on my own. I benefited greatly from our conversations and his feedback in general and on this manuscript. The direction of this work also was shaped by his critical contributions regarding messaging broadly and his development of crucial elements of theory regarding crisis and solution constructs. His publications, cited in the bibliography, are highly recommended as a companion to this book. The work of Michael Hogg on uncertainty and extremism, and the work of others building on his concepts, also influenced on this work in very important ways.

This book came about after I gave a lecture at a conference at the Paris Institute for Advanced Study (Paris IAS), where I met MIT Press editor Matthew Browne. Thanks are due to Itzhak Fried, who organized that fascinating event, and Jessica Stern, my friend and past collaborator,

who brokered my invitation and whose support in general has opened many doors for me. Thanks also to Anne-Marie Bono of the MIT Press, for guiding the process of publication and to my agent, Martha Kaplan. Thanks also to Maura Conway and Lisa McInerney of VOX-Pol for their support of this book and other generosities.

Finally, and most of all, this book and all my work in this field, and pretty much all of the good things in my life in general, would not be possible without the love and support I have received from my wife, Janet.

1

DELENDA EST

In a 1964 U.S. Supreme Court opinion attempting to define pornography for legal purposes, Justice Potter Stewart summed up the nebulous nature of the concept in seven now-infamous words. He couldn't offer a workable definition, he wrote, but "I know it when I see it."[1]

More than fifty years later, we find this test applied to one of the world's most pressing problems, a rising tide of extremist movements that are destabilizing civil societies around the globe. Virtually everyone acknowledges the severity of the threat, but extremism is still most often classified according to Stewart's criteria: we know it when we see it. And as with pornography, we do not all agree about what passes the test.

The dictionary definition is circular: *extremism* is "the quality or state of being extreme" or "the advocacy of extreme measures or views."[2] In academia and policy circles,

widely varying definitions have been proffered. Some are simplistic,[3] and others are frustratingly elaborate.[4] Many are specialized to one particular type of movement, such as jihadist terrorism.[5] Some are predicated on the use of violence.[6] Often, scholars define *extremism* relative to the "center" or "norms" of any given society.[7] In politics, extremism is an increasingly convenient insult—a way to characterize and condemn what "the other guys" believe.

The flaws in these definitions should be apparent. A circular definition ("extremists are extreme") is meaningless and highly vulnerable to abuse because it can apply to anyone whose views you disagree with. A definition that specifies a religious dimension excludes secular movements and vice versa. A definition predicated on violence excludes a world of movements that "we know when we see them," such as some segregationists, the alt-right, and at least some branches of the Muslim Brotherhood. A definition based on the norms or "center" of a society is especially perilous because it excludes successful and important historical extremist regimes, such as institutionalized racial slavery in America and Nazi Germany.

The answer to the question "What is extremism?" seems like it should be obvious, but it definitely isn't. And in a world where violent extremism is widely acknowledged as a defining challenge of our age, that failure of definition has huge real-world consequences.

In the United States, the term *extremist* is frequently hurled, shorn of context, across racial and partisan divides. Many in the wider West contend that the entire religion of Islam is inherently extreme, arguing for policies that range from the curtailment of civil rights to mass internment. Within Islam itself, furious debates rage about which sect, movement, or nation is normative and which is extremist.

These debates influence the study of extremism. There are perhaps three times as many academic studies referencing jihadism as there are referencing white nationalism.[8] Pseudo-intellectuals, some in positions of political power, have argued that white nationalism is far less important than jihadism, despite the fact that white nationalism has a far longer and more deadly history. And they have shaped policies accordingly.[9]

If you believe that only "the other guys" can produce extremists and that your own identity group cannot, you may be an extremist yourself. History provides ample evidence that extremism is part of the human condition and not the exclusive province of any single race, religion, or nation. Not all violence is extremism, nor are all of humanity's countless wars, conflicts, and atrocities. Many cases are ambiguous, but some clearly align with our modern understanding of the word.

The diversity and ubiquity of the problem can be seen in a review of historical outbreaks of significant violence driven by ideological belief. The examples that follow were

selected based in significant part on the author's previous study, which has followed the availability of translated texts describing articulated ideologies. There are many more relevant cases from all parts of the world, and this chapter should be understood as illustrative rather than comprehensive. Some readers may take issue with some of the examples cited in this chapter. To a certain extent, that's the point of this exercise. But the chapters that follow offer a definition of extremism that transcends the cultural norms of a given moment in history.

As you read this brief tour through history, consider some of the following questions: Is extremism concerned with the supremacy of one's own group, or is it defined by hatred of the "other"? Do extremists emerge on the scene suddenly, or do they evolve from mainstream movements? Are they found only on the margins of society? Is violence a necessary component of extremism? How do extremists decide on their beliefs? Are they rational? How can we define extremism objectively when so many possible variations exist?

The First Extremists?

While the annals of the ancient world are full of violence, the social context and ideological justifications that survive are often incomplete. One of the earliest examples

of a social trend that resembles extremism as we know it today can be found in the Roman war on Carthage in the second century BCE, which has been described by Yale scholar Ben Kiernan as "the first genocide."[10]

Carthage, located in modern-day Tunisia, was the capital of one of ancient Rome's regional competitors. After three devastating wars, Rome captured the city and disarmed the citizenry. Yet some Roman politicians argued that the threat posed by Carthage was so dire that it could not be addressed simply by conquest.

A Roman senator known as Cato the Elder was famously reported to conclude every speech he gave to the Senate with the phrase "Carthago delenda est" ("Carthage must be destroyed"), no matter what the subject of the speech happened to be. Cato was an early populist-nationalist. He was a paleo-conservative even relative to the standards of the day—militaristic, misogynistic, and racist,[11] comparing the perceived decadence of his contemporaneous society to a mythical golden age of days past. He believed that Carthage represented a threat to the existence of Rome and the purity of its culture. Because of this, victory was not enough: "Carthago delenda est."

The Third Punic War began with Carthage almost immediately surrendering to Rome and disarming. Unsatisfied with the terms of that surrender, Rome demanded that the Carthaginians abandon the city, which the Senate had already decided to destroy. When the residents

refused to leave, Rome launched a siege that ended with Carthage razed to the ground. The decision to continue past the Carthaginian surrender and the rhetoric of Cato frame the destruction of Carthage squarely as a recognizable example of extremism. It is estimated that 150,000 or more died when the city fell.[12]

Carthage is arguably the earliest well-documented historical example of genocide and nationalist violent extremism. There are reports of more ancient events—such as the Trojan War or scriptural accounts that purport to describe Israel's extermination of the Amelekites. Although these events are not as well documented as the destruction of Carthage, they suggest that a concept of extremism likely existed even earlier in history.[13]

After Carthage, historical records became more robust, and other examples quickly emerged. One identity movement founded during the early first century CE was known as the Zealots. Much has been written about the sect, although some of that scholarship is colored by Christian interpretations of the group.[14]

One of many anti-Roman groups, the Zealots asserted a unique Jewish identity for occupied Judea and condemned both the Roman invaders and the Jews who cooperated in governing under Roman rule. Its founder condemned Jewish collaborators as cowards and appeared to endorse a theocratic government ruled by priests or a priest-king. Adherents also believed in "zeal," the root of

the movement's name, meaning a militant enforcement of its views through violence. They battled the provisional government in Jerusalem.[15]

A group within or related to the Zealots, the Sicarii, were said to go further, believing "there should be no lordship of man over man, that God is the only ruler" and killing a Jewish high priest in 65 CE for acceding to Roman rule. The Sicarii were known for carrying out assassinations, property destruction, and theft. According to Josephus, a Jewish-born Roman historian, they "mingled themselves among the multitude, and concealed daggers under their garments," attacking without warning to strike terror in both Roman and Jewish targets. They became known as perpetrators of atrocities. According to Josephus, the Sicarii committed mass suicide rather than surrender to a siege on their mountain redoubt of Masada in 74 CE,[16] although historians have many questions about the veracity of this account.[17]

The Dark and Middle Ages

In 657 CE, the then-young religion of Islam experienced one of its first major schisms with the rebellion of a sect known to its enemies the Kharijites or Khawarij (from the Arabic word for *seceding*).[18] Adherents referred to themselves as As-Shurah, or "the sellers," in reference to

a Quranic verse about selling life in the temporal world in exchange for eternal life in paradise.[19]

The Kharijites broke with the Islamic caliphate in a dispute over succession. The movement was concerned with restoring the practice of Islam as they imagined it to have been two generations previously. The caliph of the day, Ali, brutally crushed the Kharijite rebellion and was subsequently assassinated by one of the sect's adherents.

As with many historical movements, views of the Kharijites are colored by the passage of time and the well-known effect of history being written by the victors. For instance, Irenaeus, one of the Fathers of the Church, was for many years the primary authority on the Gnostic sect of early Christianity. But the discovery of a cache of well-preserved original Gnostic texts in 1945 revealed that his descriptions of the sect were often and significantly inaccurate.[20] Histories of heresy are written by the orthodox victors.[21]

Thus, the Kharijites have become associated with violent extremism thanks to the work of mainstream Islamic historians over many years, but it is not entirely clear how much of its reputation is grounded in reality. Nelly Lahoud, a scholar of political Islam, writes that the notoriety of the Kharijites grew in direct proportion to the fame and status of Ali. Additionally, Muslim scholars have in recent years come to rely on the term as a pejorative to condemn jihadist terrorism, further coloring views of the group.[22]

With that caveat in place, the understanding of the Kharijites as extremists may have some basis. Like the Zealots, the Kharijites are remembered for their zeal, both in their stringent practice of Islam and the use of political violence in its defense. Most accounts agree that they were hardcore fundamentalists looking back to a golden age of Islam, albeit one that had barely passed in their lifetimes. Their commitment was so focused that it was said they could seduce even their enemies to become adherents.

Kharijites were said to evaluate other Muslims for purity and correct belief, killing those who failed to meet their definition of Islam. They were reputed to have brutally killed Muslims who failed the test, along with their families, including women and fetuses cut from the womb.[23] They may have believed that any sin rendered the sinner an apostate from Islam.[24]

The wars between (and within) Christianity and Islam during the Middle Ages are too vast to explore in detail here. But one particularly memorable case of heresy-hunting took place in the thirteenth century Roman Catholic Church. The Cathars were a Christian religious sect based in the south of France whose beliefs were wildly different from the orthodoxy of Rome. Its practices were also notably different, with unique sacraments and a commitment to living modestly, in contrast to some Catholic clerics of the day.

A succession of popes sent emissaries and messages to urge repentance in increasingly dire terms. Some of these entreaties reportedly met with violent responses. Finally, Pope Innocent III called a crusade, offering the forgiveness of all sins for those who would "tear up the unserviceable roots from the vineyard of the Lord" and calling on Christian men "kindled with the zeal of orthodox faith to avenge just blood—which does not cease to cry out from earth to heaven, until the Lord of Vengeance shall descend from heaven to earth to confound both subverted and subvertors."[25]

The toll was staggering, resulting in widespread torture and the massacre of likely hundreds of thousands of Cathars until the religion and its supporters had been eradicated. The conflict between the Catholic Church and the Cathars also led directly to the establishment of one of the most horrific institutions in history, the Inquisition.[26]

The New World

Starting in the sixteenth century, Spanish conquistadors sought to colonize the Americas through a program that may have started as military conquest but soon escalated into racial extremism. They perpetrated the most horrific genocide in human history, resulting in the extermination

of whole societies of indigenous peoples in the Americas. The actions of the conquistadors left as many as 70 million dead through a combination of intentional massacres, the effects of enslavement, and the introduction of deadly diseases.[27]

The line between war and extremism is often muddy, but the conquistadors executed their campaign in reprehensible excess and with the support of a legitimizing ideology. Spanish philosopher Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda wrote that the indigenous people of the Americas were "half-men" or "homunculi," who possessed "barely the vestiges of humanity" and deserved only conquest and enslavement.[28] Later colonizers of the New World and Australia also relied on various ideological justifications for their acts, although these were often a thinly veiled excuse to indulge a cruel and epic greed.[29]

Slavery, broadly, had been a part of warfare and conquest for millennia, as well as being a criminal punishment or a mandated satisfaction of debt in some cultures. Hereditary or chattel slavery—the concept that a slave's descendants must also be slaves—was less common, but it became a growing force after the fifteenth century as a series of papal proclamations helped legitimize the practice in conjunction with the colonization of the Americas and the concurrent rise of the African slave trade. During the course of these debates, a variety of conflicting religious views (both Catholic and Protestant) emerged as

to whether indigenous peoples and other nonwhite races could be considered human and whether their enslavement was justified regardless. The institution—and its racialization—grew despite these ambiguities and shifting views.[30]

In the colonial Americas, Virginia passed a law legalizing hereditary slavery, and other colonies soon followed, embedding the practice deeply in the economy and culture of the nascent United States. Disagreements over the morality of slavery slowly grew into a force strong enough to break a nation. The rise of the abolitionist movement in the early nineteenth century and its attacks on the legitimacy of what was called the "peculiar institution" led to the crystallization and codification of extremist proslavery ideologies.[31]

"Can these two distinct races of people now living together as master and servant, be ever separated?" asked the proslavery writer Thomas Roderick Dew. "Can the black be sent back to his African home, or will the day ever arrive when he can be liberated from his thralldom, and mount upwards in the scale of civilization and rights, to an equality with the white?"[32]

In order to preserve slavery, extensive ideological justifications were advanced. Southern intellectuals leapt to the task, citing sources both biblical and "scientific." They also drew on historical precedent, citing past civilizations that had thrived on the institution (often eliding the

distinction between nonhereditary slavery and its hereditary, racialized offshoot).[33]

No one really knows how many slaves were held in captivity in the United States and elsewhere over the duration of the practice. Likely a minimum of 10 million African slaves were trafficked to the Americas, and at the conclusion of the Civil War, nearly 4 million slaves were freed in the United States alone. The total human cost of the African slave trade and the succeeding generations of hereditary slavery certainly run into the tens of millions, one of the gravest shames in the history of humanity and one of extremism's greatest triumphs.[34]

The Twentieth Century and Beyond

The origins of anti-Semitic extremism, in its religious aspect, can be traced back millennia (see chapter 3), but in France and Germany during the late nineteenth century, it evolved into an ideology that viewed Jewish identity not just as religious but also as racial. Anti-Semitic beliefs took hold with special ferocity in Germany, where decades of war and social upheaval created conditions ideal for the persecution of a minority that could blamed for loss and uncertainty.[35]

A confluence of events, anchored by German nationalism and virulent anti-Semitism, led ultimately to the depredations of the Nazi regime, which killed 6 million

Jews and at least 12 million others between 1933 and 1945 through campaigns of genocide, the horrors of concentration camps, programs of mass starvation, and other atrocities outside of the wartime death toll, which added tens of millions more on all sides.[36]

Even in defeat, elements of the poisonous Nazi ideology live on today in hundreds of successor movements around the world that are dedicated not just to German racial purity and nationalism but to a broad spectrum of white supremacist beliefs, from the United States to Greece, Russia to Australia. The influence of Nazism endures today not only among relatively small groups of direct adherents but in broader international and political dynamics,[37] including a host of politically corrosive conspiracists who endlessly recycle anti-Semitic tropes using euphemisms such as "globalist."[38]

The twentieth century was rife with extremism—the anarchist assassination of U.S. President William McKinley in 1901, the Serbian nationalist assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 (one of the events that helped trigger World War I), the Stalinist massacres of the 1930s, and the slaughter of as many as a million Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994.[39] There have been many more—too many to describe fully in a single chapter or even a single volume.

In the winter of 1979, a series of events rocked the Muslim world, setting the stage for the extremist scourge

that dominates most discussion of the topic today—the jihadist movement. Iranian revolutionaries overthrew their nation's secular government and established an extreme theocracy, setting the stage for the later emergence of the formidable Shia jihadist movement Hezbollah and a host of other Shia sectarian militias. Soon after, in Saudi Arabia, a band of apocalyptic extremists laid siege to the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the holiest site in Islam, in a terrorist attack that left hundreds dead and paralyzed the country for weeks.

Perhaps most fatefully, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan at the end of 1979, triggering a decades-long sequence of events that has shaped much of the twenty-first century. In response to the invasion of a Muslim country, hundreds and then thousands of foreign fighters made their way to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets as mujahideen, warriors in defense of their coreligionists. In the United States, the mujahideen were seen at first as freedom fighters. Their leaders were invited to the United States to meet with American politicians. They received overt praise from the State Department and covert support from the Central Intelligence Agency. The head of the foreign fighter battalions, Abdullah Azzam, traveled to the United States repeatedly, openly recruiting American Muslims to join the battle.[40]

As the nearly decade-long war began to wind down with the Soviets in retreat, veterans of the foreign fighter

The Islamic State, which is discussed at length in the chapters that follow, represented an evolution of al Qaeda's ideology. It was more violent and against a much wider variety of targets. Where al Qaeda tried (selectively and with mixed results) to minimize Sunni Muslim casualties in its attacks, Islamic State massacred Sunnis by the hundreds. Where al Qaeda put less emphasis on the divide between the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam, Islamic State calculated its attacks to widen it, making Shia Muslims its archenemy, above all others, even the hated Americans and Jews.[44]

As jihadist movements proliferated and diversified, the issue of understanding extremism became more contentious, contested, and confusing. In Syria, Bashar al-Assad's regime brutally slaughters civilians by the thousands and justifies the carnage by claiming it is fighting extremists.[45] Within the Syrian opposition itself, fractious infighting revolves around the question of which rebels are the noble opposition and which are jihadist extremists.[46] And even the true jihadists in Syria are splintered into more and less radical camps, constantly accusing each other of extremism while exonerating themselves.[47] Jihadist rebels define their extremism against each other and against Islamic State, which is a deadly enemy to most of them, despite great similarities in their ideologies.[48]

The complexity of extremism now bedevils all discussions, exacerbated by an all-too-human tendency to

describe any political difference in the extremist frame. Reasonable critiques of Israeli policies toward Palestinians sometimes veer into anti-Semitic tropes. Meanwhile, an internationally designated terrorist group, Hamas, controls significant swaths of Palestinian territories, participating in governance even while splitting internally into more and less extreme factions.[49]

The rising alt-right movement in the United States predicates bigotry against Muslims on the assertion that Islam itself is fundamentally extremist, and the high frequency of terrorist attacks by Islamic State throws fuel on that fire. In the view of the alt-right, every Muslim is a potential terrorist and an active cultural infiltrator seeking to establish Islamic religious rule in the United States.[50]

In Myanmar, Buddhists have been swept up in this cycle, practicing discrimination or worse against members of its Muslim Rohingya minority for decades before opening a new campaign of ethnic cleansing that is tilting rapidly toward genocide at the time of this writing. Like anti-Muslim extremists in other countries, radical Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu says his victims are the real extremists. "You can be full of kindness and love, but you cannot sleep next to a mad dog," Wirathu has said, seeking to reconcile traditional Buddhist teaching with his campaign of hate and fearmongering.[51]

If there is any lesson to learn from these modern and historical examples, it is this: defining extremism is not

a casual matter. “I know it when I see it” is not an acceptable standard when lives are at stake. It is not enough for a world where the course of history has repeatedly changed as a result of extremist violence.

So how do we begin? How can we understand extremism outside of the realm of a single ideological strain? How can we separate our conversations about extremism from ordinary political disagreements? How can a better understanding of extremism reduce its terrible cost in human lives? This book attempts to answer these questions.

2

WHAT IS EXTREMISM?

Famed political theorist Hannah Arendt argued ideologies were modern inventions that began to manifest a significant political impact only with the arrival of figures like Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin.[1] But that assertion (made in the context of totalitarianism) is belied by the history reviewed in the previous chapter. While far from complete, this review of identifiably extremist belief illustrates the daunting scope of a problem that has plagued humanity since almost the beginning of recorded history.

The objective study of extremism leads quickly to three crucial truths:

- Extremism is rarely simple.
- Extremism is not the province of any single race, religion, or political school.
- Extremism can be profoundly consequential in societies.

in which an individual decides that he or she is part of an in-group. Categorization has psychological consequences that shape how people and groups view themselves and others, which are discussed in the pages that follow.

Often, in-groups are perceived to have more legitimacy than out-groups. In this context, **legitimacy** can be defined as the belief that an identity collective has a right to exist and may be rightfully defined, maintained, and protected. The word has many dimensions in everyday use, most of which are not relevant to extremism. As we shall see, the quest for legitimacy is a key element in many extremist movements.

All extremist groups (and many nonextremist groups) have some sort of ideology. As with the word *extremist*, there are many definitions of ideology, and some are quite complex. These more expansive definitions may be necessary to encompass nonextremist political and religious groups.[3] In the context of this book, however, an **extremist ideology** is a collection of texts that describe who is part of the in-group, who is part of an out-group, and how the in-group should interact with the out-group. Ideological texts can include a wide range of media types, including books, images, lectures, videos, and even conversations.

Many scholars prefer to define *ideology* chiefly in terms of ideas and concepts.[4] I find this unnecessarily amorphous. Ideas and concepts are contained in texts, and a movement cannot adopt an ideology unless and until it