

COGNITIVE CONCEPTS APPLIED TO EXTREMIST IDEOLOGY A SUGGESTED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Extremism is a universal social illness; which is likely to have plagued human society since its inception. While in recent years the focus in the Western media and certain academic circles has been on its resurgence in Arab and/or Moslem societies, historical and contemporary evidence reveals that extremism transcends cultural, religious or ethnic particularities. In this article, we argue that common psychological processes are at play in the formation of extreme attitudes and beliefs in individuals, whether the context is religious, racial, ethnic, national, regional, tribal, etc. Trying to understand the common psychological and mental framework of an extremist are seldom attempted for fear of being perceived as "justifying" his (or-less likely-her) actions or even condoning his cause. We attempt to explore the cognitive psychological makeup of a prototypical, archetypal or stereotypical extremist and examine the issue of early learning, through education or indoctrination, in the formation of radical views. We use the discourse of current public figures known for their radical rhetoric to exemplify the errors of logic (cognitive distortions) that accompany most if not all forms of prejudices from racism to religious intolerance. We also discuss the possibility of later modification, through natural and interventional processes, of extremist ideology and behavior.

LINGUISTIC OVERVIEW

The discourse on extremism [Arabic: التطرف والتعصب] includes a number of words, sometimes interchangeably, to describe attitudes or actions that are perceived as at odds with mainstream values: fundamentalism, radicalism, racism, xenophobia, terrorism, etc. These terms, except possibly for radicalism, which was adopted by a number of political formations in the 20th Century (The French Radical Party or 'Parti Radical') carry an intrinsic negative connotation in modern language.

In *Islamic Fundamentalism*, Youssef Choueiri (1990) acknowledged that Fundamentalism is a vague term with a Protestant origin, referring to the "literal yet creative interpretation of the Bible." Choueiri redefined fundamentalism to indicate "a certain intellectual stance that claims to derive political principles from a timeless, divine text." Indeed, while the word Fundamental refers to 'the most important or basics part of a subject or activity' (Collins essential English dictionary 2006) the term fundamentalist is virtually unheard of by 1950 and emerges in the United states in the second part of the 20th century (from Wikipedia, reference needed). Fanatic derives from the Latin word, fanaticus: inspired by a deity, frenzied, or marked by excessive enthusiasm and often intense uncritical devotion. Extreme: Existing in a very high degree; going to great or exaggerated lengths: Synonymous with "Radical." Radical from Latin radic-, radix root: of, relating to, or growing from the root of a plant; of or relating to the origin, marked by a

considerable departure from the usual or traditional; tending or disposed to make extreme changes in existing views, habits, conditions, or institutions; relating to, or constituting a political group associated with views, practices, and policies of extreme change; advocating extreme measures to retain or restore a political state of affairs (e.g. the radical right).

Xenophobia is derived from the Greek words *xeno* (foreigner or stranger) and *phobia* (fear, panic). Although it literally means fear of strangers and could have easily joined other phobias (Agoraphobia, Arachnophobia) in Psychiatric classification, it instead became synonymous to hate of foreigners or strangers; it is common for fear and hate to walk hand in hand and the original linguistic relation link to other terms that carry a pathological meaning is significant beyond coincidence.

A COMMON PATHWAY TO EXTREMISM

A number of factors act in combination to generate a set of extremist beliefs and attitudes. Some of these are external and other internal. Our focus is on the common pathway that these factors lead to. The common path (the proximate cause) is a rigid cognitive style characterized by lack of choice. Although the extremist thinks that his thoughts, words and actions are an exercise in free choice, in reality his conclusions are the result of firmly established mental processes that have been shaping since birth through years of overt and subtle indoctrination. It is widely recognized that core beliefs are established within the early years of life through a combination of emotional and factual experiences. On this point, Cognitive Psychologists and Psychoanalysts agree, regardless of whether the process happens unconsciously or at a more accessible level.

The formation of the extremist will most probably involve interplay between his genetic make-up, his early experience and the environment. Following the Second World War, a number of US psychologists attempted to explain the passivity if not the collusion of a number of ordinary Germans and lower ranking military with the well know events that scarred that period. They concluded that certain personality types were more prone to extremist views (or following orders with extreme consequences). In that way the Germans were not unique and, common sense, in the absence of verifiable scientific evidence, would dictate that every society contains among its midst individuals with the potential for extremist attitudes given the correct indoctrination and the suitable circumstances. In order to establish their identity, humans are naturally directed towards in-group/out-group discrimination. Extremists in a way only take this normal social phenomenon to its extreme conclusion partly because of the rigid cognitive framework through which they operate.

In a new millennium and in the golden age of communication and access to information one would have expected extremism

to start a gradual decline. Unfortunately judging by the state of affairs over the past nine years, extremism is on the rise and defining a number of conflicts and confrontations around the globe.

THE EARLY YEARS

By the time most children reach the age of abstract reasoning (consensus is that it starts around age 12), they typically would have gone through as many years of education but also indoctrination. The process of indoctrination may be given more subtle names as well: acculturation, socialization, assimilation, tutoring, rearing, upbringing. Parents may be the ones with the responsibility for the process but they are by no means its only agents. Laying down the ground principles through which the future adult will relate to the world does not exclusively take place within officially recognized educational frameworks. In fact, schools—and parents—are facing tough competition from other sources of education as varied and as big as life itself. If parents have control over TV hours, they have little control over content. To get their children “socialized” beyond the class room, parents depend on extracurricular activities, some are school based, some not. Growing access to the Internet and mobile phones at an early age has more recently added another dimension to be reckoned with.

In most cases, the default intention is to reproduce the established cultural, social and religious template proper to the family or the broader social group within the child's mind allowing only for minor variations. The latter is being taught by often well intentioned tutors what typically he or she has no choice at this level of maturity but to accept as fact. This includes the or she parents faith, but also views on what is right and wrong, true or false, good or bad etc. By the time the child reaches an age allowing him more independent reasoning, it is difficult to undo these effects and introduce him to flexibility of thought and open mindedness. While we are describing the traditional approach to education, more sophisticated and liberal systems remain the exception rather than the norm for the majority of children across the globe, including in the Western world.

Cognitive principles applied to extremist attitudes

Cognitive Therapy, also known as CBT when combined with behavioral approaches rely on the assumption that feelings, thoughts and behavior are interconnected elements that define our self perception and our interaction with our social environment. Thoughts, being the most accessible of these elements, are the target of the therapy. Cognitive distortions, which are in fact errors in logic that may lead to false conclusions and erroneous beliefs, are also challenged and rectified. We will cover the most common of these distortions and illustrate those using speeches and declarations from a number of public figures broadly considered to hold extremist views, even within their own community.

1. “EITHER-OR” FALLACIES

The prototypical extremist is very comfortable with dichotomous thinking, also known as ‘Black and White thinking’, ‘all or nothing thinking’ or the ‘either-or fallacy’—If you are not a friend then you must be a foe- He finds shades of grey meaningless and compromises threatening.

Example: “*What this is coming down to is who runs the country. It's us against them. It's the good guys versus the bad guys. It's the God-fearing people against the pagans, and some of the pagans are going to church.*” (Terry, 1992).

2. OVERGENERALIZATIONS

This is connected to the either/or fallacy mentioned above. The extremist believes that since some members of a certain group have certain characteristics then they must all have that characteristic. This applies both to his in-group and the out-group.

Example: “A Jew cannot look a Muslim in the eye or pass him knowing they have oppressed a Muslim or some other Jew had oppressed a Muslim elsewhere.” (Abu Hamza, n.d.)

Example: “If you don't want a Christian nation, then go to one of the many nations that are heathen already, rather than perverting ours. You're welcome to come, but leave your religions, your bibles, all your other things back where you came from. Islam and America are opposites. They hate us. They want to kill us. I'm not anti-Jewish or anti-Catholic. I'm anti-Islam because that religion right there is anti-American.” (Fugate, 2002).

3. EMOTIONAL REASONING

The extremist establishes his stance based on his likes and dislikes as opposed to a dispassionate weighing of pros and cons. ‘Hate’ as an extreme emotional state features prominently extremists’ discourse. This works very well as a recruiting strategy since the ‘heart’ is much more accessible than the ‘mind’ at any stage of maturity.

Example: “Every Muslim, the minute he can start differentiating, carries hate towards Americans, Jews, and Christians; this is part of our ideology. Ever since I can recall I felt at war with the Americans and had feelings of animosity and hate toward them.” (Osama Bin Laden, 1998).

Example: “I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over you. I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is good... Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a biblical duty; we are called on by God to conquer this country. We don't want equal time. We don't want pluralism.” (Terry, 1993).

4. MENTAL FILTER & DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE

Regularly, extremists select from a conversation or an interaction what is consistent with their preconceived views and reinforces their already established beliefs while discarding what is not. Alternative explanations and outcomes are consciously or subconsciously dismissed or ignored. There seems to be a deep seated mistrust of anything positive by “the other.” An extreme mindset is threatened and thrown out of balance by a change in circumstances and a new narrative that is at odds with their negative stance of the other.

Example: “Obama is like a wolf with claws deep in your flesh and asking you to give up your defense because he wants peace with you.” “Obama ” is only a blood-spiller of Muslims like his predecessor, (George W.) Bush.” (Al-Zawahiri, 2009)

5. “SHOULD/MUST” FALLACIES

Extremists speak in terms of rules and principles that imply absolute truth without the need for justification. To emphasize their points of view, their discourse is punctuated with “should,” “must,” “have to,” or “ought to” statements.

“We must use the doctrine of religious liberty to gain independence for Christian schools until we train up a generation of people who know that there is no religious neutrality, no neutral law, no neutral education, and no neutral civil government. Then they will be getting busy in constructing a

Bible-based social, political and religious order which finally denies the religious liberty of the enemies of God." (North, 1982)

The long-term goal of Christians in politics should be to gain exclusive control over the franchise. Those who refuse to submit publicly to the eternal sanctions of God by submitting to His Church's public marks of the covenant - baptism and holy communion - must be denied citizenship, just as they were in ancient Israel. (North, 1989)

To push the enemy - the greatest kufr - out of the country is a prime duty. No other duty after Belief is more important than [this] duty. Utmost effort should be made to prepare and instigate the umma [community of Muslims] against the enemy, the American-Israeli alliance - occupying the country of the two Holy Places... (Bin Laden, 1996).

6. PERSONALIZATION, MISATTRIBUTION & PARANOIA

The perception of threat as personal, imminent and existential is common to extremists. Misattribution and misappraisal of reality border on paranoia. Phrases such as "my people" and "my culture" are common.

Example: *"I send recordings to Cairo in which I call upon my people to attack tourists."* (Abdul-Rahman, n.d.).

Example: *"The Muslims refuse our culture and try to impose their culture on us. I reject them, and this is not only my duty toward my culture-it is toward my values, my principles, my civilization."* (Oriana Fallaci, 2001)

7. LABELING AND MISLABELING

Common to extremists everywhere is the tendency to reduce complex identities to labels that suit their purposes. In the following declaration, the 'Unbeliever' label includes billions of individuals who share no common characteristics except for Omar Bakri's perception of them. Any attempts at refining the classification would add layers that the extremist is actively seeking to avoid.

We don't make a distinction between civilians and non-civilians, innocents and non-innocents. Only between Muslims and unbelievers. And the life of an unbeliever has no value. It has no sanctity. Omar Muhammad Bakri, 2004)

8. JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

Extremist rhetoric usually avoids justifying attitudes or providing rational constructs for recalcitrant beliefs. Instead of rational reasoning, extremists' rhetoric relies on readily packaged conclusions or headings are reinforced as absolute undeniable truths.

"Christianity offers the only viable, reasonable, definitive answer to the questions of 'Where did I come from?' 'Why am I here?' 'Where am I going?' 'Does life have any meaningful purpose?' Only Christianity offers a way to understand that physical and moral border. Only Christianity offers a comprehensive worldview that covers all areas of life and thought, every aspect of creation. Only Christianity offers a way to live in response to the realities that we find in this world -- only Christianity." (DeLay, 2002).

Such rhetoric leaves little room for skepticism, dissenting views or dialectical argumentation to the opposite. This cognitive distortion is closely tied to the "either/or" fallacy and dichotomous thinking.

9. MAGNIFICATION AND MINIMIZATION

Exaggerating, catastrophizing, magnifying and minimizing (as convenient) are very common qualities of irrational minds.

This is not only a quality of extreme minds but also found in our daily lives and styles of thinking and relating. Here is an example of how the mundane and pervasive sexual desire is turned into an existential fight against the other.

"I send recordings to Cairo in which I call upon my people to attack tourists. I explain to them that we must stop tourism to Egypt. Tourism is a plague. [Western] women come dressed in provocative clothing in order to arouse the believers. Tourists use drugs; they party all night in the clubs and casinos, and feel up the belly dancers. And our people [the Egyptians] their eyes are popping out from envy in trying to imitate the infidel tourists." (Abdul-Rahman, n.d.).

Almost all the other cognitive distortions can be subheadings under this general heading of exaggeration. The quotation above has almost all the cognitive distortions previously mentioned. The use of the expression "my people" by sheikh Abdul-Rahman is typical of intolerant minds (and grandiose minds). "Tourism is a plague" is a gross exaggeration and discounts the many positives of tourists, including the badly needed financial return. There is a childish simplicity, ignorance, and may be a sign of low intelligence in the statement "tourists use drugs."

Here is another example of blowing reality out of proportion to an apocalyptic dimension: *"Europe is no longer Europe, it is Eurabia, a colony of Islam, where the Islamic invasion does not proceed only in a physical sense, but also in a mental and cultural sense."* (Oriana Fallaci n.d.)

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

It would be naïve to expect that human civilization will soon achieve tolerance and moderation by a sudden exercise of rational thinking. Grievances, conflicts, xenophobia and intolerant extremism won't disappear overnight. While political, socio-economical and sometimes military solutions might have a role in dealing with extremism and its consequences, the contribution of the psychological and educational dimensions to the solution are often neglected. It is unfortunate that future generations are indoctrinated with intolerance and hate not only in the "backward" countries but also in the "first world" countries as well.

The psychological elements that breed extremist intolerant views may also be part of the solution. This can be achieved mostly through prevention and—to a lesser degree—treatment. Prevention is a long term but very effective strategy, mainly through adopting an educational approach that emphasizes the development of critical and independent thought in children. Curricula and teaching methods in the Arab world emphasized for decades memorizing as learning tool (and in religious education emphasized blind obedience and submission to absolute concepts). The adoption of alternative teaching methods and curricula require a liberal attitude but not necessarily one that contradicts the basic foundations of non-Western social structures.

Early adolescence is the stage at which children start grasping abstract concepts and this period may be a prime time to start teaching them the skills of critical thinking and how to apply those skills to the texts they read, the speeches they hear and the movies they watch. This can only be done by educators at ease with the concept of critical thinking and the challenges it proposes to dogmas of all sorts. Education does not only involve the formal education received in schools, community colleges, and universities; informal educations takes place within extended families, through the television and cinema, through the internet, and other multimedia, as well as in the mosques,

churches, synagogues and temples. The education of Imams is very important since the pulpit continues to play a role in radicalizing youth. It is not enough to have a high school graduate go through a short training to become an Imam. One may argue that future Imams should at least hold a bachelor's degree including courses in psychology, which may equip them better to positively influence future generations and relate to the complexities of modern life.

In terms of those who already hold extremist views, the issue is more complex and open for debate. While some in the field of behavior (and thought) modification may feel it is a hopeless pursuit to change those over the age of 30 or even 20, there are optimists who feel that there is room to undo indoctrination. Saudi Arabia is already adopting a "rehabilitation" approach to its imprisoned Moslem extremists/Jihadists, although little is known of its theoretical basis and its level of success.

In addition to a modern educational system, a holistic and multidisciplinary approach to the problem of established extremism involves finding practical solutions to the political and economical conditions that have fuelled it for centuries.

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البقاء لله وحده

إننا لله وإنا إليه راجعون

بلغنا بمزيد الحزن والأسى (في فترة متزامنة) نبأ نعي ثلاثة من أبرز وجه الإختصاص في الوطن العربي:

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استشاري الطب النفسي -العضو المؤسس للجمعية الجزائرية للطب النفسي بالممارسة الحرة

د. محمد ابراهيم سحلول

استاذ الطب النفسي بجامعة الزقازيق مصر-الاستشاري السابق بمستشفى الامل بدبي

في هذا الظرف الأليم لا يسعني إلا أن أتقدم باسمي و باسم كافة أعضاء الهيئة العلمية الإستشارية لـ"شبكة العلوم النفسية العربية"، بخالص التعازي و المواسات إلى أسرهم الكريمة و إلى كافة أخصائيي العلوم النفسية، سائلا الله العلي القدير أن يتغمدهم برحمته الواسعة و أن يسكنهم فراديس جناته وأن يرزق أهلهم وذويهم و الأسرة العلمنفسية المصرية والعربية و الطبنفسية المصرية و الجزائرية والعربية هميل الصبر و السلوان و إننا لله و إننا إليه راجعون.

" يا أيها النفس المطمئنة إرجعي إلى ربك راضية مرضية فأدخلني في عبادي و أدخلني جنتي"

د. جمال التركي