

# INTRODUCTION

## The Enigma of Extremism



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‘look on my works ye mighty and despair’  
—Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘Ozymandias’

The essays presented here discuss extremism, most specifically political extremism, with particular attention to the forces of socio-political oppression and violence that it effects. The focus is upon extremism as a dynamic in the crisis of state orders and the larger civilizational systems that form around state/imperial centres. The chapters concentrate on the contemporary historical moment and primarily upon extremist events in the Western hemisphere and its more immediate domains of influence.

The word *extremism* is broadly used to apply to actions and ideological programmes that are boundary breaking, that attack convention and rule, and which in some way or another defy the status quo. As a political phenomenon it is often associated with the marginalized, the suppressed, or populations in relatively distressed or weak socio-political situations. Extremism or extremist action is a power of the weak, but no less a force of the strong. Reference to action as being extremist is often used to legitimate action that is itself excessive and which mirrors or

exceeds the very extremism that the anti-extremist action of the powerful is designed to control or subdue. Extremism is commonly associated with resistance, rebellion and revolutionary action. The ideological commitment and degrees of closure in ideas behind such action and of that confronted, are dynamic in the generation of the extreme, and especially the violence of the situation. Such features as the foregoing, mean that the term *extremism* is most likely to be used in the context of state orders, and in the contested realms of the social worlds of their control.

Extremism is a difficult concept, and the chapters in this book shy away from a hard definition, although a few chapters directly confront some of the problematics in the usage of the word. But all the chapters by and large attend to events and processes that are obviously extreme in socially and politically destructive effect and all too often human annihilation. Social action that leads to self-annihilation and especially social annihilation and the killing of life should count as extreme. But such is an extreme of the extreme and much that may count as extremism or extreme in thought and action, as should be clear through the discussion of the chapters, is not filled with the kinds of negativity upon which the following essays concentrate. Extremism in its breaking of boundaries, its exceeding of conventions or limits of practice and thought can be creative, liberating and far from necessarily destructively negative.

Extremism often seems to marry destruction to generation. In this it might be seen to manifest a sacrificial dynamic that in many ways fits with Hubert and Mauss's (1964) classic discussion of ritual sacrifice. They concentrate their understanding on the contradictory, virtually imponderable, perhaps maddening intensity, of the life regenerative force of death-dealing action that is the enigma of sacrifice. Sacrifice works at socio-moral boundaries and

crosses them. It is an awesome practice, widely regarded as shocking, that in its taking of life renews life or restores life's circumstance. Many acts of political extremism, particularly those that intentionally involve the destruction of human life, quite explicitly manifest a sacrificial dimension, one that through their destruction of self and other gives birth and life to all that they may represent (see Bastin, Loperfido, and Wilson, this volume; Kapferer 1997). Such extremists in their action, moreover, sometimes assume a sacral virtual priestly quality as sacrificer and sacrificed.

Much action labelled as extremism, of course, does not have the taking of life as its key mechanism or prior intent, although the violence that comes to mark—and to a large degree define—action as extremist may be part of the expectation of the forces that action conceived as extreme brings or excites into conjunction. Thus events of protest, regardless of intent, can take on a sacrificial quality with protagonists presenting as transforming victims, who themselves manifest the inequities, prejudice, social restriction or rejection (forms of social death) associated with suppressive socio-moral orders and their political economic hierarchies. This is so with many features of contemporary acts of protest and resistance in the Western hemisphere and elsewhere.

One of the most powerful images of sacrifice in protest in the face of state extremism of recent times is that of the 'Tank Man' (also known as the Unknown Rebel) who offered himself as a willing victim before advancing tanks of the Chinese military who threatened to continue their violent quelling of protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square on June 5, 1989. The act halted the advance and was perhaps a major turning point in the history of state authoritarianism in China.

Extremism, and particularly political extremism, is primarily a matter born of state systems and the societies

or larger civilizational complexes that have states at their centre. It strikes at the *raison d'être* of states, including states that in themselves are the domains of the extreme of power. Political extremism, or social action given political significance as extreme, is often defined as that which threatens state authority, its social institutional orders and its ideological hegemony, frequently the socio-moralities that are the ground of state legitimacy before its citizens. In these senses extremism has everything to do with the state as a system in virtual perpetual crisis, whose vital concern is that of control and order. Understood this way, extremism in the extent, spread and intensity of its realization can be grasped as an index of the degree of crisis confronting the state and the societies of its control.

State systems are virtually by definition highly vulnerable. The archaeological and historical record is clear concerning their fragility in establishment (Scott 2017) and global history is in many senses marked and littered by the evidence of the rise and fall of state orders and their civilizational complexes. This is so to the extent that it could be said that a fear of vulnerability to collapse and paranoia of threat from a multiplicity of sources constitutes the commanding unconscious of state orders, and their process, to be matched perhaps by the hubris of their agents or leaders.

State complexes are expansionist or so in potential, generally as a function of their capacity to war and to trade. Expansion is integral to their formation and to their stability as well as fragility. These aspects and what may be understood as the degree of state vulnerability is connected to the principles of their political economies (including hegemonic ideologies) and their emergent contradictions that place limits on expansion and may impel retraction and collapse. Expansion itself, or over-expansion, is often a response to growing contradictions and

conflicts born of expansion, especially within the larger civilizational or markedly socially and culturally differentiated and heterogeneous complexes that result from the expansion (e.g. see Friedman 1994, Sahllins 2004). It is the very heterogeneity of such state-civilizational systems that constitute major fault lines: spaces of fissure for the manifestation and recognition of a state-threatening extremism and especially that which attacks the ideological (that is often present as the civilizational socio-moral values of state order) as well as key structural points of weakness.

Much of the above is thoroughly evident in imperializing state systems, ancient and contemporary, who are most threatened at their perimeters by groups or socio-political entities that have not been assimilated or co-opted into the state order, or fully embraced by what could be termed its civilizational hegemonic material, social, and ideological processes. It is in relation to those at the edge of the expanding state dominion that concepts or terms that carry the ring of the extreme (and a sense of the crisis of control) such as barbarian, savage, and the exoticism of Othering (as in the critique of colonialist anthropology) are commonly in use.

The foregoing underlines a general point. The extreme or extremism is defined and recognized as such in its threat to the hegemonic structures including the socio-moral values crucial to state-civilizational legitimacy and order. This is so, furthermore, because such structures and values are more than superstructural but vitally integral to the reproduction and continuity of such systems whether at their centre or their periphery. It might follow from this that what counts as extremism is likely to be apparent and excited at the vulnerable and weakening points of state systems, at critical moments of contraction, expansion, reformation or transformation: in other words it is the limiting and weakening points of such systems that

are critical spaces for the extreme. So much international politics might be regarded as a discourse of the extreme and possibly no more so than now when the crises that are arguably endemic to state-civilizational systems are being revealed in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The empirical and ethnographic materials that constitute the basis for the analysis of extremism in the book concentrate on relevant events in the Western hemisphere and in erstwhile dependent areas of Western imperial expansion that have immediate significance for the West in this era of globalization. The limitation of the Western focus underlines this short volume as a prolegomenon to more comprehensive work in which the comparative strengths of an anthropological approach can be given greater rein.

A crucial question that demands pursuit comparatively (a methodological orientation central to the research project of anthropology) concerns the extent to which the perspectives in this volume are—in the main—Western problems influenced in their definition, recognition, and reaction by ideological and structural forces that may have particular intensity in American and European contexts. Extremism may be an issue as it is addressed here that is highly relative to the Western hemisphere. What is understood to be distinctly ‘Western’ is deeply problematic given the global interconnections in many directions of considerable historical depth that preceded the emergence of ‘the West’ before the current era of globalization and the hybridities of practice and value that are a contemporary feature. Nonetheless, the matter of ideological (cultural) and social inflections concerning the matter of extremism remains an issue, perhaps all the more so because of recent globalization.

Some brief hesitant suggestions relating to extremism as a particular Western problematic follows.

Extending from the earlier argument, the situation for extremism and its dimensions as reflecting a crisis of control, may be effected in what some commentators identify to be a decline in the power of Western state orders as a function of insurmountable contradictions in their political economies exacerbated especially by neo-liberal policies. Unemployment has soared, class and ethnic-cum-racial cleavages have widened, fuelling populism, which virtually by definition is a domain of extremism, challenging state authority (as events in Europe and the Americas indicate).

Democratic and associated values have been integral to the political-economic formations of state orders in the Western hemisphere, vital to their hegemonic orders, and active in extremist dissent. Contesting values of the democratic frame the politics of conflict and opposition. Furthermore, a propensity towards extremism may receive impetus in the strong state/society dualism that is a factor in giving rise to the dominance of democratic value, and the way it is turned in challenge or support of ruling authorities. The periods glossed as the Renaissance and Enlightenment are those during which democratic values assume a commanding place, coinciding with the rise of European and American nation-state orders and the capitalist processes at their heart. The course of much current political discourse was largely set in what Eric Hobsbawm calls *The Age of Revolution* (1789–1848).

The singular major defining events are the American, French and Russian revolutions, fuelled especially by Enlightenment philosophical and scientific thought in the wake of major European wars over religion and imperial expansion. The egalitarian anti-hierarchical/oppressive energy of the revolutionary period that was grounded in and expanded from Enlightenment ideas, sharpened an already state/society dualism into greater dialectical tension.

Jean Jacques Rousseau's famous clarion cry 'Man is born free but he is everywhere in chains' expresses a major perspective within dualist thinking that conceives the state, as par excellence the organization of power, to be the thorough contradiction of freedom and its potential within the society. This is so at their extremes that in Rousseau's understanding are emergent in their dialectical tension, as it may be overcome through the dialectic. Thus the extreme of state power, reached in the institutions, for example, of kingship and dictatorship, results in the oppression of society and the extinction of its freedoms in slavery, where the autonomy of individuals is lost. Rousseau's resolution is in the submission or suppression of the state tension to the free democratic participation of individuals in society in what otherwise is reserved as state practice. Rousseau's orientation within Western dualism, which places state and society into problematic relation, of course, is only one perspective emergent in dualist thinking in political philosophy and its post-revolutionary history, which refracts numerous contesting directions on the ground, in the domain of European and American politics. The directions stretch from the extreme far left to the extreme far right—a very Western idiom and still in currency, if weakening, but constituting a scale, constantly changing and relative, for the placing of political ideas and practices and their identification or not as being extreme.

Rousseau's orientation and arguably much Western political philosophy ingrains an individualist value emphasis (see e.g. Dumont 1992; Taylor 1989) even in ideologies that quite explicitly attack individualist thought and practice, to some extent a legacy of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Individualist value assumptions are integral to some of the difficulties in Rousseau's arguments and are certainly manifest in his critics and those who take a different course, but nonetheless within



dualism. A major argument is that individualist value excited in the circumstances of the dynamics of capitalism have shifted the axis of dualist contradiction from that of state versus society to that of both state and society as being different modalities of threat to the individual and vice versa. In this the individual becomes the ground of absolute freedom possibly intensifying all the more the Western hemisphere as a plane of extremism.

The threat to autonomy of action and decision underpins political discourse in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary dualism of state versus society and is exacerbated in associated democratic values of egalitarianism and freedom. Egalitarianism attacks the loss of autonomy in hierarchy and freedom achieves its absolute definition in absolute autonomy. The matter of autonomy and its loss, the submission of the will to another, is a continually immanent contradiction to which Western revolutionary and post-revolutionary orders may be particularly prone and vulnerable.

There is a link between autonomy and authoritarianism, perhaps a dialectical tension, that becomes exposed in dynamics of egalitarianizing socio-political formations. Any assertion of authority over another has the potential to become an authoritarian hierarchical move. The Terror of the French Revolution is a case in point, the revolution collapsing in a chaos of the assertion of individual autonomy against any attempt, usually of authority, at subordination or control. Hegel referred to the Terror as 'the night of the world', a collapsing of the dialectic against itself, born of impossible contradictions at root. The extremism of the Terror was generated from the emergent contradictions immanent at its ideological roots exploding its ideals and bringing down the republican house of cards.

The extremism of greatest fear in the Western hemisphere is that of totalitarian authoritarianism of particular

relevance to state systems. This is directly related to a radical loss of individual and social autonomy, the transfer of individual and social will to the all-encompassing order of the state (Arendt 1951). Totalitarian authoritarian formations are by no means limited to the West, although Arendt argues that their European establishment in Stalinism and Nazism bears relation to their opposition to the European nation-state system, as well as the realization of potential in radical social disconnection, and what she examines as existential loneliness. There is a strong suggestion in her argument that the circumstances of socio-political fragmentation and forces of individualist isolation provide fertile ground for the totalitarian authoritarianism of post-revolutionary Western experience. The value of autonomy—particularly vital in realities of egalitarian individualism and where notions of freedom are equated with autonomous individual potency—may not only excite processes of resistance associated with extremism, but also a tension to authoritarianism, a characteristic of those at the centre of totalitarian regimes and, too, of the cultic both religious and political orders that are extreme standing against controlling political orders and their socio-moral legitimacy. Norman Cohn has argued that extremism of a totalizing and ultimately totalitarian authoritarian kind are among the ‘inner demons’ of the Western hemisphere.

The shadow that is cast over the contributions, forming much of the background to their discourse on extremism, relates to the recent historical experiences of totalitarian authoritarianism (ranging from Fascism, to Stalinism, and most disastrously Nazism) in the West. It is such possibility and the grounds of its birth in the circumstances of imperialism, the growth of capitalism, nationalism, class inequalities, racism, and so on that underpins the critiques of the essays here.

## The Essays

Many of the contributions presented here focus on extremism as a product of the contradictions implicit in the political economies of state systems. They thereby disclose an—otherwise hidden—mutually constitutive relation between the state-civilisational complexes and the extreme.

Kajsa Ekholm Friedman and Jonathan Friedman—for example—explicitly frame their analysis within the context of civilizational decline/contraction. They compare the current global situation to witchcraft epidemics in West Africa in the nineteenth century, where heterodirection, and the breakdown of customary institutions of social control, brought about social disintegration, what Andrew Wilson (this volume) would call ‘apocalypticism’, and the widespread perception of society being penetrated by alien, malevolent forces. With a pessimistic and polemical understanding of hegemonic decline, they also read extremism as a systemic phenomenon, affecting first and foremost the established society. Here the decline of rationalism produces ‘the incapacity of people to understand their own critical predicament, one that leads them to find magical solutions and objects of fear and hate rather than grasping the mechanisms that have brought them to the brink of disaster’.

Pasieka’s analysis uses her multi-sited ethnography with far right milieux in Italy, Hungary and Poland to show how what is commonly categorised as extremism, foreshadows in fact a much larger, and much deeper, ‘extremism of the centre’. Crucially, she grounds in ethnography her understanding of the othering processes operated by mainstream society, exposing the ways in which the transformative impetus, and the heretical critique expressed by these radical formations, becomes

essentialized as ‘extremist’. She claims the main extremism lays in the implicitly repressive and totalitarian attitudes of late capitalist orders, which reject critical stances and erase alternative narratives. In doing so, she argues for the need to rethink and scrutinize ‘the normal’, instead of establishing the extreme.

Focusing on a different area, Caroline Ifeka also addresses the ‘extremism of the centre’. She fathoms the brutal confrontations between Nigerian state troops and Boko Haram soldiers in the lake Chad region, where she describes the progressive emersion and final establishment of a new elite, of which she traces the generative process back to the early times of decolonization. She shows how ‘the oil boom’ triggered a plethora of virulent transformations of intra-social relations, and led to a transition from an early dynamic of social reciprocity between elites and patronage groups, to the interconnection of local elites with foreign corporate capital, and a subsequent disconnection of the former from local populations. She illustrates how all the above engendered acute changes in class structure, and a general polarisation of society between affluent ‘state classes’ and a sphere of lumpenized, uprooted individuals. This is the social context within which Boko Haram’s extremism seems to emerge, as a product of processes of capital extraction, implying social disintegrational effects. She concludes that extremism of the margins and the extremism of the state are one.

Similarly, my own contribution interprets cosmological laceration—and ensuing extremism—as a result of processes of disjuncture and re-articulation between the spheres of political and capital reproduction. Focusing on Spontaneismo, a little known neo-fascist movement of the Italian late 70s, I show how its constitution was at the core of a strange inversion in the ideological configuration of

Italian neo-fascism. A political sphere that was regarded as 'conservatism' became suddenly recategorized as 'extremism' in the mainstream perception. To explain that, I focus on the transformations of state systems during the crisis US political hegemony, to illuminate—locally—the progressive dynamics of disruption of social cohesion. All the above becomes the context of generalized social disorder, a nearly apocalyptic scenario in which new, totalitarian and eschatological understandings of the world are generated, re-shuffling political alignments and producing powerful ideologies of total destruction.

Some of our interventions (Bastin, Roland and Bruce Kapferer) put the stress on current transformations of both technology and capitalism, and signal the progressive encompassment of established political structures and institutions by expanding corporate power. Bastin in particular describes the emersion and proliferation of repressive apparatuses of digitalized surveillance and control, as vectors of a general process of devolution of governance from states' to corporate orders. He sees the above as the process through which extremism and capitalism support each other in the creation of an apocalyptic eschatology that allows for the fulfilment of the totalizing attitudes of current corporate power. The impact of such processes on local societies is described as one of intense fragmentation, individualization, and alienation. Here, the emerging figure of the 'suicide bomber' seems to attempt to reconstitute cosmological integrity, by re-uniting within himself the two poles of a cosmological disjuncture: the archetypal figures of the perpetrator, as well as the victim.

Andrew Wilson's work on white suprematism and the transnational extreme right focuses here on dynamics of ideology formation that are specific to 'the margin'. He describes these 'cultural hinterlands of modern

societies', as a social space endowed with great associative power, where political thinking commingles with religion, conspiracy theory can merge into millennialism, xenophobia and apocalyptic beliefs melt together in a dramatically violent representation of the cosmos. These lateral associations make Wilson talk of these marginal ideologies as 'the expression of unconscious political formations', whose symbolic production seems indeed to function in ways similar to dreamwork. In this context, the marginal critique emergent through current processes of state disintegration seems to take the shape of a resurgence of what was previously repressed as a transgressive, unbridled, violent, and yet imaginative force. Wilson shows how these drives coalesce into the mythical project of a virtual white nation, which the practitioners of 'improvisational millennialism' expect to see raise, after the apocalypse they are calling for (and acting on behalf of).

Finally, building on the Marxist concept of capital's creative destruction, Roland and Bruce Kapferer see extremism as integral to the current transmutation of capital, from one historical form, into a new one. The current Covid-19 situation, they note, has exponentially increased the digitalisation of social interactions, giving state-like proportions to the power of the so called 'com multinationals'. The ensuing disruption of the nation state as the main arena of capital reproduction, becomes here a path-breaking development for both the eruption of extremism, and the substantial transmutation of existing formations of capitalism. Rather than the re-enactment of a fascist past, the key figure of Trump is here understood as an agent of chaos, a future oriented rupturing force, ushering us into a new era of even more pervasive and totalitarian domination of globalized corporate forces. Rather than an antagonist, or the saviour from the totalitarian reality

Trump's presidency represented to many, Joe Biden may very well embody the new—even more authoritarian—power of the corporate state, presenting perhaps less visible, yet equally effective, extremist features of its own.

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