

28th Volume of the
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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EXTREMISM

Edited by Joseph P. Forgas



The enduring human evolutionary tendency to form and act upon extremist beliefs and engage in often violent inter-group confrontation is one of the most important, yet still poorly understood aspects of human symbolic consciousness, and the foundation of much inter-group violence throughout history. It is only in the last few hundred years, since the advent of the revolutionary cultural ideology of the Enlightenment, that this tendency has been brought under civilisational control, producing the most tolerant, successful and flourishing epoch of human history, as documented by Steve Pinker and others. However, there are now worrying signs that this period of relative peace and tolerance is under increasing challenge, both from increasing psychological and political extremism within our successful liberal democratic societies, and growing challenges by extremist totalitarian cultures from outside. It is thus particularly important at this time to try to understand

the evolutionary, cultural and psychological roots and origins of extremist thinking, and this is the objective of our volume. This book brings together leading international researchers who have done ground-breaking work on the origins, nature, characteristics and consequences of extremism. Contributors will discuss the evolutionary, historical, social, cultural and psychological roots of extremism, and the reasons for the recent breakdown in trust and tolerance in our societies that may represent a threat to the survival of the short-lived historical experiments with liberal democracy based on the Enlightenment values of rationalism, individualism, universal humanism, and tolerance that we are all the beneficiaries today.

In addition to writing an original chapter, contributors will also be invited to participate in a residential small group meeting in July 2026 where individual papers will be presented and discussed in detail. The final published papers will represent the results of several stages of collaborative discussion and revision, producing a coordinated and integrated approach to understanding extremism based on the meeting.

From an evolutionary perspective, the endemic human capacity for tribal extremism is one of the most fundamental features of the history of *Homo sapiens* that probably made successful group survival possible by creating strong in-group cohesion. Psychological extremism may seem dangerous and counterproductive today, but it is this capacity for blind extremism that probably made it possible for generations of our forebears to successfully fight for the survival of our group. The tendency for extremism seems a universal aspect of human psychology rather than simply an aberration, a common representational tendency that motivates in-group cohesion.

The universal tendency for early hunter gatherer societies to see outsiders as dangerous and form extremist ideas about them is one of the consequences of the unique human ability for *mentalising* – creating elaborate mental representations about the character, intentions, personality and likely behaviour of others. Once large-scale impersonal mass societies emerged following the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution in our more recent past, this tendency to form extremist ideas has been subdued by the emergence of new forms of social coordination and solidarity based on more impersonal forms of mutual interdependence and transactional trust. Humans have now become the dominant species on our planet largely because of our unique ability to organise ourselves ever-larger cohesive and cooperative groups where extremist ideologies and intergroup conflict have been kept under control.

The book will approach the question of extremism from a broad multidisciplinary perspective. Contributors will discuss the philosophical and epistemological foundation for analysing and understanding extremism and focus on the psychological mechanisms that underlie the human propensity for extremism. The growing importance of extremism in contemporary societies will receive special attention. Throughout human history otherwise successful civilisations have been shattered by a collapse of shared beliefs that previously sustained a community. Liberal democratic mass societies are based on rather tenuous and idealised Enlightenment assumptions about human nature and are especially vulnerable to the re-appearance of political and psychological extremism. Several contributors will also analyse the nature and psychological foundations of recent populist authoritarian movements and their consequences for promoting extremism and the breakdown of solidarity and trust.

The role of cognitive biases, affective states, mental heuristics, judgmental shortcuts and generally biased and superficial information processing in the formation and maintenance of extremism will also be discussed, and the cognitive processes involved in how false beliefs, conspiracy theories and fake news promote extremism will receive special attention. Because human cognition is characterised by some clearly identified shortcomings of rationality and inductive reasoning, the role of emotional and other sub-cortical influences and emotions on extremism will also receive special consideration.

All invited contributors are senior and highly recognised international researchers who in their various domains have made a significant contribution to our understanding of the psychology of extremism. They have been encouraged to adopt a broad integrative approach investigating the evolutionary, anthropological and psychological origins of extremism and the importance of maintaining solidarity and trust in the face of growing extremist challenges.

The chapters will also explore many specific questions in contemporary social life where extremism is of focal interest, highlighting the applied implications of this line of research. Topics covered will include political polarisation, the role of the internet and AI in promoting extremism and the role of the media in creating and reinforcing extremist echo chambers that promote animosity. These issues are of particular relevance at this time marked by a high degree of insecurity and the growth of cultural and psychological extremism and a tendency for polarization in our societies.

The book is written in an accessible and engaging format, and should be of interest to students, researchers and practitioners as a textbook or reference book in social science fields, as well as to a broad spectrum of intelligent lay audience seeking to understand one of the most intriguing issues that shapes human social life.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

The book is organized into three parts, discussing (1) the nature and origins of extremism, (2) cognitive and affective influences on extremism, and (3) the social, cultural, political and civilizational aspects of extremism.

PART 1. THE NATURE AND ORIGINS OF EXTREMISM

Forgas, Joseph Paul (University of New South Wales). The evolutionary origins of extremism and its psychological characteristics.

This introductory chapter will survey historical and philosophical approaches to extremism, and evolutionary theories that explain the development of extremism as an important adaptive resource that supports sophisticated group cooperation and survival will be considered. Consciousness, and especially the unique human ability for mentalising – symbolically representing, predicting and evaluating the thoughts and likely behaviours of others – is a crucial prerequisite for the operation of extremism, and the chapter will survey the most important recent developments in the psychological literature relevant to understanding extremism.

Ebner, Julia (Oxford University): Leader-Follower Dynamics in Violent Regimes: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Social Psychology of Cumulative Radicalisation.

This chapter develops a theory of cumulative radicalisation and the psychological and cognitive processes underlying civilian participation in state-backed extremism. Drawing on empirical research in evolutionary anthropology and social psychology, the top-down and bottom-up pathways to cumulative radicalization are analysed as a process of identity fusion. Research shows that identity fusion motivates extreme forms of pro-group violence as a result of leader-follower dynamics in diverse geographic and cultural contexts. This work aims to deepen our understanding of the psychological processes that draw civilians into escalating violence.

Moskalenko, Sophia and Arie Kruglanski: Extreme Disconnect: Extremism-Social Connectedness Continuum Theory

The authors develop an *Extremism-Social Connectedness Continuum Theory*, suggesting that social connectedness and extremism operate in reciprocal tension: social relationships require time, energy, and adherence to shared norms, while contemporary extremism demands singular devotion to one overriding goal. Across diverse samples, in contemporary societies alienation correlates positively with radicalism, and the causality of this relationship seems bidirectional. Experimental studies confirm that social exclusion or rejection increase extremism. Studies indicate that extremism promotes isolation. Integrating motivational, evolutionary, and communitarian perspectives, the chapter situates modern extremism along a continuum from socially embedded to socially detached states. Interventions fostering belonging, mentorship, and moral community may effectively mitigate extremist trajectories by restoring social interdependence.

Crano, William, Anjewierden B. J and Gaffney, A M (Claremont Graduate University): The Fathers of Extremism: How they succeed or fail

This chapter discusses how extremism often gives rise to intense and radicalized responses to societal conditions. The chapter discusses how leaders' persuasive appeals and communication style are often common in provoking extremism across time and context. The chapter examines leadership behavior, persuasive methods, and the role of extremist leaders' strategies that encourage anger and grievance to promote violence. The importance of leadership in successful extremist movements is discussed illuminating features of leaders that have some commonality across issues.

Ginges, Jeremy (LSE, UK): The social psychology of extreme violence

Although a prohibition against harming the innocent is a central moral precept across many cultures, yet non-combatants are commonly targeted by extremist state and non-state actors. Is such extremism a result of the suppression of moral concern (dehumanisation), or the activation of moral concern to defend sacred values)? The chapter argues that these processes are complementary as perpetrator groups typically construct narratives that describe target groups as being both less than human (suppressing moral concern about harm) and as malevolent threats to the ingroup (activating moral mandates for violence). This duality is reflected in empirical data which shows that support for violence against civilians in active conflict is predicted by measures of dehumanization and devaluation of human life, as well as by perceptions of the target group as an existential threat motivated by hate.

PART 2. COGNITIVE AND AFFECTIVE INFLUENCES ON EXTREMISM

Dunning, David (University of Michigan): The Dunning-Kruger Effect in Extremist Belief and Reasoning.

The Dunning-Kruger Effect helps to explain extremist beliefs when people who lack expertise and act out of ignorance and error still maintain their extremist convictions. Although the Dunning-Kruger framework is a purely cognitive one, it does offer an explanation as to why extremist ideas are especially difficult to modify. Current features of social media and artificial intelligence may further fuel extremism, by providing details to non-experts supporting false and extremist beliefs. In a society where roughly half of respondents believe in the haunting of ghosts and the power of psychic healing, there is much room for extremist views to flourish among those without expertise.

Sloman Steve (Brown University): The Cost of Conviction: How Sacred Value Frames Lead Us Astray

The chapter looks at how commitments to moral conviction and sacred values may lead people astray when making difficult choices, often resulting in extremism. Instead of framing issues consequentially in terms of their utility and outcomes, absolute moral values often offer simplicity and communicative ease when making complex decisions. The chapter reports studies showing that, relative to consequentialist / pragmatic frames, sacred value frames reduce people's willingness to compromise, making them more prone to extremist beliefs.

Cooper, Joel (Princeton University): The Extremism Cycle: False beliefs, social identity and cognitive dissonance. The polarization of political and social attitudes has become a significant threat to society. Compromise has become rare, not only between political parties but also among social groups. Extremism occurs because people mistake social communications for facts, and generate and spread misinformation that caters to people's need for group membership and acceptance. To disagree is to risk expulsion. As beliefs become more extreme, they begin to challenge the boundaries of reality and rational thinking, setting up the inconsistency that arouses cognitive dissonance. Dissonance exacerbates the rush to extremism as people seek to reduce the conflict between socially constructed beliefs and reality. The chapter will conclude with some recommendations to break the extremism cycle.

van Prooijen, Jan-Willem (University of Amsterdam): How Conspiracy Theories Increase Political Extremism

What psychological processes connect conspiracy theories to political extremism? Conspiracy theories reinforce a worldview inherent in politically extreme movements, where the radical ingroup is portrayed as heroes fighting a diabolical enemy outgroup. Conspiracy theories specifically make perceivers' own group seem morally superior, and also provide an excuse for failure. Conspiracy theories demonize other groups such as societal elites, mutinationals, foreign governments, or minority groups contributing to at least three expressions of political extremism: (1) rejecting rules and regulations, (2) rejection of representative democracy, and (3) increasing the likelihood of violent action (e.g., Putin's bizarre beliefs that the Ukrainian government is a regime of Nazis committing genocide on Russian minorities).

Krueger, J (Brown University): Accentuation theory revisited: Tajfel's legacy for the study of extremism.

Tajfel's accentuation theory, eventually superseded by social-identity theory, has major implications for our understanding of the social psychology of extremism. The chapter traces the history of these models focusing on social identity and the psychology of inter-group relations in explaining the psychology of extremism, describing recent efforts to revise accentuation theory and expand it. The chapter will survey key findings as well as illustrative quantitative evidence showing that accentuation theory remains an essential perspective to understand the psychology of extremism.

PART 3. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON EXTREMISM

Cichochka, Alexandra (University of Kent): Collective narcissism as a threat to democracy and social cohesion

Collective narcissism and a belief in national exceptionalism can be linked to extremism by exploiting frustrated psychological needs, as people high in collective narcissism compensate for personal shortcomings by an excessive focus on the illusory virtues of their ingroup. Collective narcissism is associated not only with extremism and intergroup animosity but also support for decisions that harm other group members. Collective narcissism also predicts greater support for populist and extremist politicians and social movements. We argue that collective narcissism benefits neither out-group nor in-group members and instead it serves to manage the psychological needs of the individual at the cost of falsifying reality.

Forgas, J. P. (University of New South Wales): The role of propaganda in promoting ideological extremism and autocracy

In autocratic societies, government propaganda plays a critical role in promoting ideological extremism and intolerance. This chapter explores the role of cultural and historical vulnerabilities in the generation and maintenance of extremist political beliefs, and the rise of illiberal autocracy. Data will be presented from representative national surveys and empirical analyses of linguistic representations from written historical documents to explore the origins and consequences of extremist beliefs. The chapter will conclude with a review of the implications of this analysis for (a) the empirical measurement of extremism, and (b) the prospects of linking populist beliefs to cultural and historical extremism.

Roozenbeck, Jon, van der Linden Sander & Lavie-Driver, Neil (Cambridge University): The efficacy and effectiveness of counter-extremism interventions

Preventing violent extremism using individual-focused programmes is highly important, yet the factors that make such interventions successful in practice remain poorly understood. The chapter lays out a series of key challenges in the translation from *efficacy* (successful lab studies) to *effectiveness* (real-world intervention impact). These include poor understanding of why individuals might *reject* an intervention, the presence of testing effects, small effects and low replicability and an underappreciation of unintended consequences. The chapter proposes a series of recommendations for researchers and practitioners seeking to maximise the beneficial impacts of their interventions.

Hirschberger, Gilad Romi Josepf-Benyamini, Sivan Hirsch-Hofler (Reichman University, Israel): Signals of Peace, Echoes of Violence: Distinguishing Visionary from Blind Extremism

Violent conflicts often generate competing moral visions. The chapter integrates psychological theory on extremism with longitudinal evidence from the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Quarterly surveys of Israelis and Palestinians find that attitudes do not merely mirror events, they anticipate them. Among Palestinians, support for violent resistance predicted later increases in terror attacks. Among Jewish Israelis, support for peace negotiations preceded higher casualty rates and provoked extremist backlash. These patterns reveal two psychological pathways of extremism. *Blind fanaticism* rooted in group survival motives transforms fear into aggression and sustains cycles of violence. *Visionary extremism*, by contrast, emerges from moral conviction and persists

despite physical threat. Recognizing how societies oscillate between these motives may help identify moments when radical idealism can guide collective transformation rather than ignite renewed conflict.

Jussim, Lee et al (Rutgers University): Anti-Bigotry Extremism and A Possible Antidote

Anti-bigotry rhetoric may become so extreme that it provokes reactive extremism, for example, when it condemns capitalism, merit, and objectivity. The chapter reports two experiments on the effects of anti-bigotry extremist rhetoric. When people read an extreme anti-racist essay based on Ibram Kendi and Robin DiAngelo declaring that capitalism, merit and objectivity are all racist, it produced a *hostile attribution bias* of racism on how an innocuous admission interview was interpreted. In Study Two (N=3355, national sample) reading an anti-semitism essay claiming that there has been an “explosion” of anti-semitism in America, equating anti-Zionism with anti-semitism resulted in elevated feelings of anger and fifteen times as many anti-semitic comments than a neutral essay. Extreme accusations of bigotry may produce counterproductive effects, increasing rather than decreasing extremism.

ABOUT THE EDITOR



Joseph Forgas BA PhD DSc (Oxford) AM is the Scientia Professor of Social Psychology at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. Born and raised in Hungary, he left as a refugee at the age of 22 and settled in Australia. He received a DPhil and also a DSc degree from the University of Oxford and has been elected Fellow of the Australian Academy of Social Sciences and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He was awarded the Order of Australia in recognition for his scientific and social contribution, and also received the APS Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award, the Alexander von Humboldt Research Prize (Germany) and a Rockefeller Fellowship. His research has focussed on the influence of cognitive and emotional factors on social behaviour and judgments. He has published more than 30 books, and over 300 articles and book chapters, and he is a frequent contributor to the media including the *The Spectator*, *Quillette*, *The Conversation* and various on-line publications on the role of social psychology in understanding contemporary social and political issues. He started the Sydney Symposium of Social Psychology Series in 1998 and successfully organised 26 small group meetings and published a series of books based on the Symposia.