



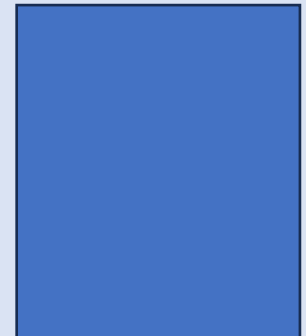
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Transforming Education, Transforming Lives



ECAY6006 The Politics of Activism

Theme 5: Activism or Extremism (Additional Theme)

Definitions of Activism (revisited)

- In philosophical terms it has been argued that it is;
- ‘The doctrine that action rather than theory is needed at some political juncture’;
- ‘an activist is therefore one who works to make change happen’. (Blackburn, 2016, no page)
- In the field of Social Work, it is defined as;
- ‘Taking collective action in attempting to bring about change as an alternative to seeking change through elected representatives’ (Harris & White, 2018, no page)

Definition of Extremism (Legal)

- Extremism is the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance that aims to:
- negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others; or
- undermine, overturn or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or
- intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve the results [above].
- They then go on to describe behaviours that 'are indicative of the kind of promotion or advancement which may be relevant to the definition, and are an important guide to its application.
- We will look at these examples on the source webpage now.

[Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government](#) (2024)

Definition of Extremism (Academic)

- Theorists, such as Astrid Böttcher (2017) have argued that any definition of extremism is problematic
- She argues that this is because the phrase is often confused with **radicalism** by politicians in order to **label** those they disagree with
- But also, because the nature of 'centrist' politics is changing with the growth of populist and more extreme leaders.
- She goes on to argue that there is a danger that 'all forms of **radical** rebellion – even legitimate resistance against corrupt and violent authoritarian regimes - are disqualified as illegitimate extremism' (Ibid. p.76)

Definition of Extremism (Academic)

- She goes on to outline what could define 'extremist' rather than 'radical' behaviour as follows;
- 'Radical movements tend to use political violence pragmatically and on a selective basis, while extremist movements consider violence against their enemies as a legitimate form of political action in all cases'
- 'Extremism is, by its very nature, anti-democratic; it seeks to abolish constitutional democracy and the rule of law'.
- 'Extremist movements cannot be integrated into liberal-democratic societies due to their intolerance towards ideologies other than their own'.

Böttcher, 2017, pp. 75-6)

Definition of Extremism (Academic)

- And continues;
- ‘Extremists openly confront the notion of **universal human rights and those institutions that serve to uphold them** for all. Radicalism is not opposed to equal human rights; historically, **progressive radicals** have sought to extend human rights to the underprivileged’.
- ‘Extremists wants to close the open marketplace of ideas’.
- Extremism, is directed not only against the **establishment** but against all those who do not embrace its dogmatic recipe for a transformation of society.

Böttcher, 2017, pp. 75-6)

Characteristics

Characteristics of Activism

- **Peaceful Protests**
- **Advocacy and Lobbying**
- **Community Organizing**
- **Use of Social Media for Awareness Raising**

Characteristics of Extremism

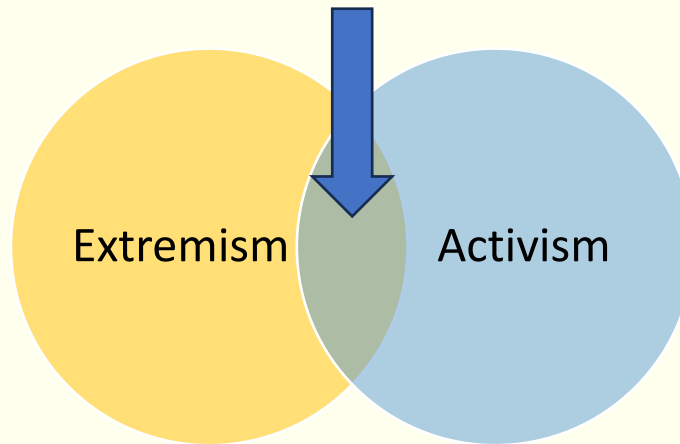
- **Violence and Intimidation**
- **Incitement to violence or hatred**
- **Use of Social Media for Radicalization and Propaganda**

However, is it as simple as this?



Activism or Extremism

- There is a point where the activities/actions of activists are no longer legal
- The legality of activities is defined by Governments (and therefore by a party with a political ideology of its own (see Theme 3))
- We will explore this a little further



When Activism Becomes Illegal

- The Crown Prosecution Service (2024) have produced guidance for acts undertaken by activists that are liable to prosecution
- The guidance, entitled, *Offences During Protests, Demonstrations or Campaigns* states that ‘the right to protest is protected by Law’
- But they go on to say that ‘this is not an absolute right, and the behaviour of protestors may give rise to a number of criminal offences’. We will look at the examples given in a moment

Who are the [Crown Prosecution Service](#) (CPS)

Offences During Protests, Demonstrations or Campaigns

- A prosecution for offences committed during a public protest is more likely to be required where:
- violent acts were committed that caused injury or it is reasonable to believe they **could have caused** injury
- the suspect took a leading role in, and/or encouraged others to commit, violent acts
- the suspect was in possession of a weapon at the time of the offence
- the suspect took steps to **conceal their identity**
- the level of **disruption caused to the public or businesses merits a prosecution, even if in the course of peaceful protest**

([CPS, 2024](#))

Offences During Protests, Demonstrations or Campaigns (continued)

- A prosecution for offences committed during a public protest is more likely to be required where:
- significant damage was caused to property
- the suspect has a previous history of causing violence, damage, disruption, obstruction or making threats at public protests, or commits the offence in breach of a direction e.g. to leave by the police
- threats were made against an individual or business that caused, were intended to cause, or it is reasonable to believe could have caused alarm, fear or distress.

(CPS, 2024)

Activist or Extremist?



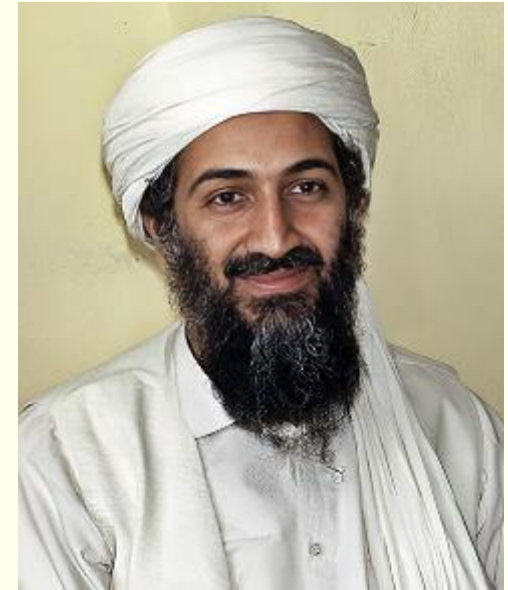
(Das, K., 2024)

- Began the 'Fridays for Future' school strikes
- Has addressed UN Conferences
- Nominated for Nobel Peace prize



(Weinberg, P., 1994)

- advocated for peaceful resistance
- later endorsed armed struggle.
- 27 years in prison
- First black President of South Africa



(Mir, H., 1998)

- founder of the organization al-Qaeda
- Claimed responsibility for the 9-11 attacks on U.S.
- called for **jihad** against the U.S. and its allies

Discussion Point



Is it ever right to take extreme action?

If it is, when and why?

Can you think of positive examples from history?

Activist or Extremist?

- The case of Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC) raises an interesting point
- The ANC was formed to oppose white rule in South Africa
- As **apartheid** was introduced it formed its military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), in 1961 to carry out armed resistance
- As the apartheid regime began to come under increasing international pressure, they released Mandela who became President in 1994

Based on April *et al.* (2012)

Activist or Extremist?

- The same pattern is seen in Northern Irish politics
- Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness were both prominent Republican (Sinn Fein) politicians
- It was thought that Sinn Fein was the political arm of the Irish Republican Army (IRA)
- The IRA was responsible for many deaths by bombing, shooting and 'punishment executions'
- For this reason, Adams and McGuinness were banned from speaking to the media in 1988
- However, they were both key players in the Good Friday peace agreement in 1998

Activist or Extremist?

- Both of these cases show the **subjective** nature of attitudes to extremism and radical activism
- As the attitudes to apartheid around the world changed the South African government was pressurised to change its views
- As British government's attitudes to the conflict in Northern Ireland changed, so did attitudes towards Sinn Fein
- This dynamic was summed up by the novelist Gerald Seymore who wrote in 1975 "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter".

Activist or Extremist?

- The above examples show how **extremist** organisations can become part of the '**mainstream**'
- However, there is also an opposite dynamic, where **activists** can become **extremists**
- We have seen that some of the actions of **activists** can break the law, but this does not make them **extremist**
- [Let us remind ourselves of the distinction](#)
- Once an individual or group chooses the course of violence against their 'opponents' they can be seen to have 'crossed the line' to extremism

The Thin Line: When Activism Turns to Extremism

- One example is the **Weather Underground Organization (WUO)**, also known as the Weather Underground.
- Initially formed in 1969 as a faction of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the group aimed to protest against the Vietnam War and fight for civil rights
- However, over time, their methods became increasingly violent.
- The Weather Underground conducted a series of **bombings** targeting government buildings, including the U.S. Capitol and the Pentagon.
- Their actions were intended to protest against U.S. policies, but they were classified as a domestic terrorist group by the FBI.
- [Evading the FBI: The Weather Underground Organization - Yale University Press](#) (Eckstein, 2016)
- [Full article: A Bloodless Guerrilla Warfare: Why U.S. White Leftists Renounced Violence Against People During the 1970s](#) (Falciola, 2016)

The Thin Line: When Activism Turns to Extremism: From Flowers to Bombs



The Thin Line: When Activism Turns to Extremism

- Other examples of activism becoming extremism are the Earth Liberation Front (E.L.F.) and the Animal Liberation Front (A.L.F.) in the U.S.A. (although the A.L.F. was begun in the UK)
- The E.L.F. has been involved in numerous acts of arson and vandalism. One of their most infamous actions was the 1998 arson attack on the Vail Ski Resort in Colorado, causing \$12 million in damages. ([Federal Bureau of Investigation](#), 2006)
- The A.L.F. has engaged in various illegal activities, including the release of animals from laboratories and farms, and the destruction of property used in animal testing ([Federal Bureau of Investigation](#), 2002)

The Thin Line: When Activism Turns to Extremism

- A report, by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2013, p.8), indicated that ,between 1995 and 2010, there were a total of 239 arsons and bombings committed by animal rights or environmental rights extremists’;
- ‘with 54.8% associated with environmental rights extremism and 45.2% with animal rights extremism’ (ibid).
- The same report goes on to state that ‘Domestic terrorism attacks outnumber international ones seven to one in the United States’ (ibid p.16)

The Thin Line: When Activism Turns to Extremism

- Another area where we can see the journey from activism to extremism in the reproductive rights 'debate' in the U.S.
- There are growing incidents of armed protestors attending anti-abortion events (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) cited in [Bergengruen](#), V, 2022)
- There have also been examples of murders committed by anti-abortionists such as the case of Dr. David Gunn who was shot and killed by anti-abortion activist Michael Griffin on March 10, 1993
- In response, President Clinton stated 'The violence against clinics must stop. As a nation committed to rule of law, we cannot allow violent vigilantes to restrict the rights of American women'.

Factors Contributing to the Shift

- **Ideological Commitment:** Some activists may develop a deep commitment to their cause, leading them to adopt more extreme measures if they feel that **peaceful** methods are ineffective.
- **Social Factors:** Personal experiences, social isolation, or a sense of injustice can drive individuals towards radicalization.
- **Psychological Factors:** Cognitive traits such as impulsivity and sensation-seeking also play a role.

Based on [Inguanzo et al \(2022\)](#) and [Zmigrod & Goldenberg \(2020\)](#)

Factors Contributing to the Shift

- **Group Dynamics:** Being part of a tightly-knit group can amplify radical beliefs, especially if the group reinforces a narrative of victimization or oppression.
- **Influence of Social Media:** Online platforms can exacerbate existing sentiments by creating *echo chambers* where extreme views are validated and amplified.
- **Perceived Lack of Alternatives:** When activists believe that all other avenues for change are blocked or ineffective, they might resort to extreme actions as a last resort

Based on [Inguanzo et al \(2022\)](#) and [Zmigrod & Goldenberg \(2020\)](#)

Positive Impacts of Activism?

- In Theme 2 we looked at examples of activism that had brought about changes in society
- These are **generally** considered to be positive changes such as;
- Universal Suffrage – [votes for all](#)?
- Worker's Rights – Trade Unionism
- Women's Rights – Suffragettes, #Me Too
- Racial and Ethnic Minority Rights – Civil Rights, BLM
- Others include, Disability Rights, LGBTQI+ Rights etc.
- However, it should be noted that some people see these changes as negative and have become **reactionary activists** to oppose these changes

Negative Impacts of Extremism

- We have seen that extremists can undertake violent acts that can lead to the loss of property and of life
- The Anti Defamation League (2024, no page) report that ‘In 2023, domestic extremists killed at least 17 people in the U.S., in seven separate incidents’.
- However, damage and death are not the only objectives of extremists

Negative Impacts of Extremism

- The UK Government states the objectives of extremism can include:
- the radicalisation [and recruitment] of individuals,
- denying people their full rights and opportunities, the suppression of freedom of expression,
- incitement to hatred,
- eroding our democratic institutions, social capital and cohesion, and;
- can lead to acts of **terrorism**.

[Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government](#) (2024, no page)

Extremism not Terrorism

- It is important to note that the Government makes a clear distinction between extremism and terrorism
- They state that ‘Most extremist materials and activities are **not illegal** and do not meet a **terrorism** or national security threshold’.
- ‘Islamist and Neo-Nazi groups in Britain, some of which have not been proscribed, are operating lawfully but are seeking to replace our democracy with an Islamist and Nazi society respectively’.

[Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government](#) (2024, no page)

Green Extremism

- We have already noted that we can see both activism (and extremism) on both the **right** and **left** of the political spectrum
- And that activists (and extremists) can be **progressive** or **reactionary**
- This can be seen in the area of green/environmental activism and extremism
- Shanaah, S. *et al* (2023) have undertaken a survey of the ideological stances of what they call environmental extremists

Green Extremism

- Shanaah, S. *et al* (2023) point out that there are strong links between left-wing politics and radical environmental ideology (e.g. Arne Naess & Deep Ecology)
- They also point out that 'Although they never harmed a human being, both Greenpeace and XR appeared in the UK counter-terrorism police material as examples of extremist organizations in 2020' (ibid. no page)
- However, they also identify a different trend that they call 'ecofascism' (ibid)

Green Extremism

- According to Shanaah, S. *et al* (2023) ecofascism can trace its roots back to German Romanticism and **nationalism**
- In this ideology, there is a strong link between the concepts of 'country' and 'nationality' summarised in the Nazi slogan "Blut und Boden" [blood and soil] (United States National Holocaust Memorial Museum, No Date)
- It argues that protection of the 'national' environment is part of the protection of the 'national' identity

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Green Extremism

- They go on to point out that whilst this was a marginal position until recently;
- ‘with increasing anxieties about the state of the ecosystem in the general population, combining environmental concerns with the traditional tropes of the far-right such as authoritarianism, illiberalism and anti-immigration becomes an attractive position’ Shanaah, S. et al (2023)
- In their research they point out that those attracted by this ideology tend to be ‘positively correlated with male sex, British identity, ethnocentrism, social dominance orientation, right-wing authoritarianism, political right and conservative leaning’

Countering Extremism

- Official responses to extremism include;
- The *Public Order Act* (2023) was passed in response to the actions of various activist groups
- It created the following offences;
- **Locking-on:** which criminalises the act of individuals attaching themselves to others, objects, or buildings to cause disruption. This offence carries a maximum penalty of six months' imprisonment, an unlimited fine, or both.
- **Going Equipped to Lock-on:** which criminalises carrying equipment intended for locking-on, with an unlimited fine as the penalty.

Countering Extremism

- Official responses to extremism include;
- The *Public Order Act* (2023) was passed in response to the actions of various activist groups
- It created the following offences;
- **Obstructing Major Transport Works:** Which targets actions that obstruct or interfere with the construction or maintenance of major transport projects, such as HS2. This offence also carries a maximum penalty of six months' imprisonment, an unlimited fine, or both.
- **Interfering with Key National Infrastructure:** Which criminalises actions that prevent or significantly delay the operation of key infrastructure, including airports, railways, and oil and gas facilities. This offence carries a maximum penalty of 12 months' imprisonment, an unlimited fine, or both

Countering Extremism

- Official responses to extremism include;
- The CPS (2024) guidance *Offences during Protests, Demonstrations or Campaigns*
- This outlines what **actions** should be considered when deciding if a person should be prosecuted for extremist behaviour
- In doing so it takes into account the changes brought about by the *Public Order Act (2023)*

Countering Extremism

- Official responses to extremism include;
- The *Prevent Duty* (Home Office 2024)
- The Prevent Duty is a key part of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy, known as CONTEST. It aims to stop people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. Here are the main objectives:
- **Respond to the Ideological Challenge:** Address the ideological aspects of terrorism and counter the narratives promoted by terrorist groups.

Countering Extremism

- Official responses to extremism include;
- The *Prevent Duty* (Home Office 2024)
- **Prevent People from Being Drawn into Terrorism:** Identify and support individuals at risk of radicalization, providing them with appropriate advice and support.
- **Work with Sectors and Institutions:** Collaborate with various sectors, such as education, health, and local authorities, to address risks of radicalization within these environments.

Countering Extremism

- The Prevent strategy emphasizes the importance of community engagement and aims to tackle all forms of terrorism, including the extreme right-wing.
- It also focuses on **non-violent extremism** that creates an environment conducive to terrorism

Any thoughts?

Activism / Extremism / Terrorism

- So, we have seen that there is a continuum that leads from activism, through extremism, to terrorism
- In many cases the **illegality** of actions depends on the decisions of the Government in control
- We have also seen that some extremists/terrorists can become accepted by the 'mainstream'
- The University has a '[Prevent Duty Policy](#)' which means that we need to notify the University of any guest speakers we invite

Activism / Extremism / Terrorism

Activist / Extremist / Terrorist

What is the difference?

Take a moment to consider this question.

Discuss with the group.

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