ARE WE ALL EXTREMISTS NOW?

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Agnieszka Pasieka

'But how numerous are those extremists?' I hear this question in my head, each word carefully enunciated, as if to prompt me to take the question seriously and, oftentimes, to recognize the implied authority of the person asking it (*I, a political scientist, can provide sophisticated data on the electoral outcomes of extreme-right parties, but I have no clue what these ethnographic vignettes of yours are proving*). In terms of 'popularity ,' this is question number two among those I am asked whenever I present findings from my ongoing project on transnational far-right youth activism.[1] No matter whether it is asked with fear (*Are they an actual threat?*), perplexity (*Why would anyone join them?*) or scepticism (*This must be a pretty marginal group?*), the question usually presumes I *can* and *should* provide the audience not only with exact numbers, but also with an assessment of the danger these numbers pose.

I do not know how numerous the youth communities I am studying are. In the course of my ethnographic research on far-right milieux in Italy, Poland and Hungary, I have been visiting different regional centres in which, as I have learnt, ten, thirty, or a hundred militants are active (and to make it clear: I study the movements and associations that are considered the key actors on the youth

far-right scene in the respective countries). 'People come and go ,' I hear constantly, 'we have ups and downs'. I am usually told that apart from the militants—'ever-presents' and those who can be counted on 'no matter what'—there are also dozens, or hundreds, of sympathizers who join specific events and can be called upon when necessary. And I also hear, repeatedly, whether in Hungary, Italy or Poland: 'it is not about the quantity but the quality: our aim is to grow new men'.[2] At the beginning of my research, I would assume that by giving such responses the movements' leaders were trying to get away without admitting to the declining interest and difficulties. Three years into the research, I recognize they have a point.

What is extremism? Can one measure it? Demarcate it from the 'centre'? Separate it from what is considered 'proper', 'normal', 'common'? Although we intuitively feel that the answer to this question is at best contextual, the terms 'extremism' and 'extremisms' have often been used in various comparative endeavours. Due to the so-called 'rise' or 'return' of the far right, the publications on right-wing extremism have been on the rise, too, usually bringing together accounts on extreme right-wing parties and subcultures in different national contexts. But even though the titles of such publications feature 'extremism', very few of them actually engage with the idea of 'extremism' or 'extreme', nor do they explain what the authors consider as such. Quite tellingly, authors often feel compelled to provide other qualifying statements— to distinguish between 'movements' and 'parties', for instance—but not to explain extremism. Perhaps the scholar who comes the closest to giving any definition of the term is the political scientist Cas Mudde, who suggests that right-wing extremism usually denotes whatever the person using the term considers to be the opposite of his views (Mudde 2000).

This sort of upfront criticism may sound unfair given that my own research and scholarship is burdened with terminological difficulties. When necessary, I use the term 'far right' to indicate a set of anti-egalitarian, anti-pluralist and exclusionary ideas, related to some form of identitarian politics—in the case of the communities I study, related to their conception of national, religious (Christian) and ethnocultural identities. Aware that it is *far* from perfect, I employ this term for comparative scopes in an attempt to draw a broader picture of the transnational right-wing youth scene. When possible, I try to engage with the emic categories used by my research participants. They tend to define themselves simply through the membership in a given movement ('I am a militant of X'), thereby emphasizing the uniqueness of their communities and the fact that their movements escape easy categorizations. This resistance to broader categories is likewise related to the variety of 'missions' they claim to put forward (from 'cultural education' and 'ethical upbringing', through social assistentionalism, to the dismantlement of economic-political systems) and, simultaneously, to the awareness that particular labelling has a strong impact on (potential) members and recipients of their activism. In turn, the term *far right* is frowned upon as not fitting the post-ideological landscape as well as neglecting the relevance of the left-wing agenda for the groups in question; *fascism* is rejected as anachronistic and wrongly presupposing nostalgic attitudes; finally, *extreme right* is rejected as the term political opponents employ to describe them.[3] Once again, they have a point here.

Drawing on my own research experience and even more so on its reception, in this short piece I would like to make three proposals regarding present-day extremism. The first is to see extremism as a result of the lack of political imagination; the second calls for recognizing

the extremism of the centre; and the third suggests ways in which this extremism of the middle renders numerous observers myopic. In making these proposals, what I aim to do is to give 'extremists' a face and voice. I evidently study them—so at least I am frequently told!—and thus I will hopefully be able to say a few words about them.

1.

One of the most instructive exercises for anyone who wants to learn about the perception of right-wing extremism is a look at the book covers and photos that are supposed to illustrate the arguments offered in publications on the subject. Roughly speaking, they fall into one of three categories. The first, and perhaps the most common one includes well-known images of shaven heads, tattooed bodies, fists and raised arms, obligatorily accompanied by expressions of angry, hateful shouts; the 'Neo-Nazi rally' category. The second group constitutes images featuring elderly men dressed in ivy caps and cheap jackets, accompanied by women wearing old-fashioned coats and clutching rosaries. You may spot a cross in the background and a banner with an aborted foetus or a picture of the 'natural family'. Depending on the context discussed, they represent 'rednecks', 'Eastern Europeans' and 'transformation losers', held responsible for the election of right-wing populist governments and traditionalist policies. This is category number two: the 'backward crowd'. The third group includes images featuring politicians, usually labelled right-wing populists, whose sketched portraits or photos feature an obligatory grimace and discontent. Whether it is Trump, Le Pen, Orbán or Kaczyński, their representations rank somewhere between

mad men and bullies (and differ substantially from those of, say, the elegant Macron and smiling Trudeau).

What such illustrations—or rather, to be more precise, the choice behind their selection—clearly establish is the relationship between 'extremism' and unreasonable, ignorant, dogmatic, deviant beliefs and attitudes. They suggest the ways in which extremists do not belong (to the rest of society); occupy some sorts of margins; do not want to or are unable to 'catch up' with what is considered modern, appropriate and normal; and represent evils of some kind. The violence is that of one sort and relates to physical aggression and threats. Aspects of scorning and shaming, described by Pierre Bourdieu as crucial for establishing what counts as 'correct'/'proper' (Bourdieu 1971), are also clearly detectable. Although in theory the three categories differ, what connects them in practice is the fact that all these groups are assigned the very same 'marginal place', which is understood literally and metaphorically.

What occurs here resembles somewhat the above case of publications that talk about extremism without explaining what is meant by it. Here, the images selected often seem to only partly correspond with the very evidence presented in articles and monographs, leaving open the question of who an extremist actually is. For despite the persistent implication that 'right-wing extremist' indicates a person radically different from and alien to the society, the evidence points to the contrary. A growing number of sociological and anthropological works studying the milieux dubbed 'right-wing extremists' talk about middle-class, established citizens; about people with a dense network of social ties who by no means feel excluded; about students, intellectuals, and entrepreneurs actively engaging in far-right causes; and last but not least, about people whose ideas are far from traditionalist or patriarchal.

Yet the crux of the matter is that the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of extremism has much deeper causes and, while necessary, the act of presenting data on educated, middle-class, 'respectable' members/supporters of the 'extreme right' does not get to the core of the problem. The problem with the representation and understanding of extremism does not consist in providing 'correct' demographic data, but in altering the very way we conceive of the relationship between extremism and the magical 'rest' of society. I believe that trying to rethink this *way* is a useful exercise, even if it does not necessarily need to lead to the perception of the category of extremism as analytically helpful. In an attempt to understand this dynamic, I find Susan Harding's reflections on the construction of religious fundamentalism (extremely!) helpful. In Harding's widely quoted article on 'repugnant others', she points out that challenging our way of thinking about religious fundamentalists is not contingent upon us saying that 'they are really in many ways modern', criticizing popular images and stereotypes, or simply 'revising', yet continuously reproducing, the modernist tale of fundamentalism. As she emphasizes, 'The point is precisely to problematize that apparatus [of thought], its representations, and its constitutive power as a hegemonic discourse which directly defines and dialogically generates its "other" … ' (Harding 1991: 391–392).

In the case of 'extreme-right' actors (some of whom actually blend with the category of religious fundamentalists), an equivalent to Harding's 'modern' is the idea of 'normality' and 'normal'. As I remarked above, the socially established representation of the extreme right tends to equal something deviant, aberrant, anomalous—'abnormal' and thereby extreme. Of course, numerous far-right actors employ the very same notion; 'normal'

lends itself as synonymic to various adjectives denoting the desired state of society (traditional, natural, hierarchical, etc.). However, the point I wish to make here—and throughout this contribution—relates to non-far-right discourses which, to use Harding's expression, define and generate 'the Other' (the 'extreme'). I leave aside the question of 'Othering' performed by the far right not because I do not find it relevant, but because this problem is, in many ways, so much more transparent; it is the 'centre' that demands more scrutiny.

So, back to the question of 'normality': what has been noticeable in recent discussions on the rise of right-wing populism was precisely the idea of 'lost normality' accompanied by the simultaneous conviction that after four or five years of right-wing populist rule, the situation will 'go back to normal'. The socio-political contexts in which right-wing populist parties obtained power or in which they have been gradually getting more support are too varied to allow for generalizations about the causes of their success (the agenda of these parties is also context-specific). Yet what is quite common for these cases is *their opponents*' attachment to the idea of 'regaining normality', without making an attempt to entertain different socio-economic scenarios. Although I am hesitant to use the term 'neoliberalism', it can be briefly stated that the 'normality' often constitutes a variation of it.[4] As early as 2000, Gáspár Miklós Tamás in his essay entitled 'On Post-Fascism' warned against the decline of 'critical culture' in favour of 'apologetic culture' and 'highbrow despair', stating that: 'The mere idea of radical change (utopia and critique) has been dropped from the rhetorical vocabulary, and the political horizon is now filled by what is there, by what is given, which is capitalism . . . What is the point of theoretical anti-capitalism, if political anti-capitalism cannot be taken seriously?' (Tamás 2000).

What I find most convincing in Tamás's essay is the emphasis on idea of *change,* which does not need to translate specifically as an alternative to capitalism but which indicates a willingness to engage with different ways of thinking (even, or maybe especially those, one deeply disagrees with) and to consider change possible. This deliberate lack of engagement and political imagination, often connected with 'highbrow despair', is what produces particular representations of extremism.

To illustrate this issue, I would like to use evidence from my Italian case study. For a few years, I have been attending a far-right summer festival organized in northern Italy, featuring discussions, concerts, and sessions devoted to summarizing the old and planning new activities. The festival has been growing rapidly, transforming from a local event into a nationwide one. As a consequence, it has been gradually attracting more attention from the mass media. During the last edition, one journalist, upon arriving at the site with a camera operator, glanced at the venue and said to her co-workers: '*Ragazzi, ma qui non abbiamo niente*' (Guys, we have nothing to report on here). Evidently, walking through the venue, which resembled a scout camp rather than a neo-Nazi gathering, she did not find the material for the video she had hoped to make. Had she stayed at the event, she could have listened, among others, to a rather complex and well-argued lecture on the advantages of the federalist system for healthcare or the protests against Milan's mayor's decision to raise the price of the ticket for public transport, as inconsistent with environmental policies. To be sure, she would also have had the opportunity to listen to much more 'conventionally' far-right subjects, including critique of the EU, favourable statements on Putin's Russia, and 'illegal immigration'.

The far-right youth I got to know spend a good deal of time discussing politics and the economy. In proposing answers to the socio-economic problems their societies are facing, they present their own arguments as concrete solutions as opposed to the abstractions served by the ruling politicians, and themselves as the voices of 'common sense'. A similar event in Poland would likely feature a discussion on the interwar ideas on social economy and a strong critique of liberal democracy. The Hungarian one could even include a discussion on the advantages of the monarchy. In citing these examples, of course, I do not mean to evaluate them or assess their potential; it is plausible that many of those engaged in discussions are aware of their utopian dimension. What is important about them is the way in which they reflect the inadequacy of the language and categories continuously used by 'mainstream' political actors. And, as remarked above, both critique and utopia are necessary for conceiving of change—of *rethinking the normal* rather than establishing what counts as 'extreme'.

2.

Shortly before the summer event in Italy, I attended a far-right music festival organized by the Hungarian movement, which hosted a representation of their Polish counterpart and ally. It was not the first time I had met with either of them and the group leaders know me quite well by now. When queuing for food with a few Polish activists, I was approached by the Hungarian organizer and his colleague, holding a camera in his hand. They were documenting the festival and decided to include in it the anthropologist who had been following it for a few years.

'This is Aga', my Hungarian interlocutor said in English, looking into the camera, 'she is a researcher and a lefty, but whenever she comes here she suffers because deep inside she knows we are right. Aga, how do you deal with this Stockholm syndrome?' he asked, laughing. I was so surprised at them approaching me with a camera that I did not even manage to formulate a proper response before I was presented with a new set of questions: 'So Aga, tell us, who is responsible for this hot weather and climate change?' (the weather was truly unbearable, with temperatures around 40°C and an invasion of mosquitos). We went back and forth, me naming all the culprits and my interlocutor shaking his head, acting as if he were a disappointed teacher or father. 'Oh come on, say it', he uttered eventually, pointing with his index finger at his face and drawing the shape of a hooked nose in the air, 'Of course it's THEM'.

It was not the first time that the stereotypical image of Jews would come up in the conversations. I have attended numerous events in which the idea of the world Jewish lobby or the image of Israel as the chief enemy were taken quite seriously, leading to offensive commentaries and slogans. But I have also been present at numerous conversations in which the activists, sometimes from the same country, sometimes from different ones, would engage in *supposedly* antisemitic conversation to make fun of the stereotypical claims that are often described as 'far-right talk', as their way of thinking. In a similar vein, Hungarian activists would present the *supposedly* serious account of their country's mythic origins and the antiquity of the old-Hungarian script they actually promoted during the festival in question, to conclude with a wink and a chuckle: 'So truly authentic'.

The argument I want to make here is not easy due to the weight of antisemitic discourses in the past and today.

I by no means want to diminish their importance. It is also not easy, because one needs to distinguish here between the different types of actors involved in production and dissemination of certain discourses, the leaders quite aware of the 'authentic' value of the national script and the audience who is the target of that discourse, and of nationalist branding more broadly. At any rate, one of the most interesting features of my work was observing my research participants being at times 'damn serious' about performed identities and tasks and at times very ironic about them, demonstrating a distance to themselves and sometimes even a willingness to engage in self-parody. This is an aspect I am still trying to 'work through' in analysing my data, to move beyond a simple statement that makes the far-right activists I am studying into full-fledged, complex individuals.

Here, I would like to use it to make a somewhat reverse argument. If the lack of capacity for irony and self-distance is what makes an extremist, then, yes, surely, there are many of them among the so-called far right (politicians, ideologues, militants alike). What also follows from this, however, is the recognition of the extremism of the centre.[5] The link between the limits of the political imagination mentioned above and the lack of irony and self-distance is no doubt one of the defining features of present-day extremism. In a recent piece, the political scientist Martin Plax elaborated on the problem of the lack of irony in contemporary societies as sustaining extremism, and more specifically the inclination towards what he calls 'idealistic extremism' (Plax 2013).

This sort of extremism leaves no place for contradictions, incongruities, and self-doubt, assuming instead a position of a moral authority. Worth discussing in this context are recent debates on whether the current moment ought to be considered a 'replay of the 1930s', marked by the rise of

authoritarian, extreme-right regimes. The analogies offered
are often framed as warnings, as a call not to commit the
very same mistakes as our predecessors when ignoring
the danger of totalitarian ideologies.[6] As such, they may
be said to comply with Plax's observations on 'idealistic
extremism', which sustains the belief that learning from
the past is possible, assuming the past to be coherent (Plax
2013: 202). For they are often framed as much more than
a scholarly and political project, as a sort of a moral battle
fought between the defenders of liberalism and its—real or
purported—annihilators. What accompanies this view is a
contempt of anyone underestimating it, often linked with
ignorance when it comes to the reason why some (perhaps
many?) people think differently.

On the one hand, then, the extremism of the centre
manifests itself in this sort of moralizing and/or high-
brow despair, and, on the other hand, in the assumption
that any 'intelligent/reasonable/normal' person could
not conceivably support certain ideas and is on the good
side (this way of thinking is dominant at many scholarly
conferences, where certain views are simply taken for
granted). Ironically or not, this sort of self-image cannot
but mirror the vision it purportedly fights against.

3.

At the very same Hungarian festival, I had the chance
to talk at length to one of the former leaders of the Pol-
ish movement. He told me, among other things, about
frequent attempts to delegalize his movement. Since
his association does not have a headquarters, all the
correspondence used to be sent to his private address.
One day, he found in the mailbox a letter from the court
stating that a Polish left-wing movement had demanded

the delegalization of the right-wing one on the basis that the latter promoted totalitarian ideology. My interlocutor crossed out the name of his movement, replacing it with the name of the left-wing one, replaced 'promotion of fascism' with 'promotion of communism,' and headed to the post office.[7] The letter exchange did not lead then to any further legal action against either of the movements involved. Having reported that episode to me, my interlocutor concluded: 'You know, we sometimes feel as Jews did in that joke from the 1930s: Two Jews meet and one tells the other: "Reading contemporary newspapers makes me feel good: they say we own all the shops and businesses and rule in the town." I feel the same when I read articles on us'.

Are the contemporary mass media indeed misrepresenting the strength of the 'extreme right'? A look at any press title clearly indicates that the number of acts of—physical *and* verbal—violence against immigrants, people of colour, and sexual minorities has risen in many countries around the globe and that the perpetrators often claim to be inspired by far-right rhetoric. Police raids on organizations' headquarters and private homes in search of Nazi/fascist publications and symbols have also frequently been reported. These reports included both accounts of the arrests of potential perpetrators of violence and evidence of rather ridiculous debates on whether a cake with a swastika constitutes a public threat. Brought together, all these accounts shed light on the peculiar perception and representation of the danger posed by the extreme right, as well as the possibility of eradicating it.

First, the fact that delegalizing an organization, i.e. sending it to the underground, is considered a way of 'solving' the problem, i.e. pretending it does not exist, is but one example of the myopia caused by the extremism of the centre.[8] The delegalization in this context

demonstrates 'idealistic extremism' which simply does not allow for the manifestations of certain ideas/beliefs. Second, numerous scholars have proven symbols and objects (from statues and tombs, through flags, to elements of clothing) to be very powerful agents (often 'on their own') and one ought not to disregard their use and presence. Yet the way they appear in the discussions on the extreme right simply leads to removing from the centre of attention what is actually at stake, where the strength of the contemporary far right lies. This argument may sound quite banal to scholarly ears, yet it is necessary to repeat it to understand the broader societal context as a producer of extremism. This is a context which in recent years has been fed with two kind of narratives offered by observers of the 'extreme-right' scene: those stating 'I saw a man with 88 tattooed on his neck and realized the situation's seriousness' and those saying 'I saw many middle-class people joining the anti-immigrant rally and realized the situation's seriousness'. These two seemingly different narratives, in which the latter is supposed to constitute the corrective of the former ('it's not only the unemployed working class; socially established people join too!'), only end up reinforcing the long-established take on right-wing extremism. This is because a better understanding is not to be reached by providing 'more accurate' demographic data, but, as I have been suggesting throughout this piece, in rethinking the way we conceive of the relationship between extremism and 'healthy' society.

This myopia is well exemplified by the Italian journalist mentioned earlier, who arrives at the location of a far-right festival and comments: 'We have nothing to report on here'. No Nazi-era publications (perhaps hidden somewhere), no white supremacist slogans, no burning of the Israeli flag. Instead, dozens or hundreds of young people socializing, talking and listening: about the threats of

globalization, about how to procure a better future for all of them, about the need to make children, about making their country's economy stronger and more competitive, about sensible environmental policies. Apart from that, planning of new undertakings, ranging between assisting the poor inhabitants of the major Italian cities and organizing humanitarian missions for persecuted Christians around the world. The fact that all of these undertakings are implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) linked with the defence of the white race, autochthonous Europeans, Christian heritage, and heterosexual normativity, and that the way this discourse-cum-activism is construed makes far-right activism powerful and consequential, continue to escape attention. No matter if the blindness to this problem results from the lack of 'familiar' indicators or it is the blindness caused by the very refusal to engage with the demands and modes of actions offered, its source is the extremism of the centre: the aborted political imagination, lack of self-criticism, and highbrow despair. Ultimately, the extremism of the centre is an admission of defeat.

'But how numerous are those extremists?' Quite numerous, it seems.

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Notes

1. Question number one being the perpetual 'But how can you talk to them?'
2. Various declinations of such drives towards palingenesis and political renewal within a nationalistic ideological frame have been identified by Roger Griffin as one of the defining features of 'fascism' (1991: 38–44). Material from the contributions to our volume seems to indicate that a perceived obsolescence of state orders and the emergence of vitalistic, palingenetic, 'extremist' ideologies, are part of a relational dynamic between the 'centre' and its political margins (see Ifeka, this volume).
3. The contexts I am studying differ from the German one, in which the distinction between 'extreme' and 'radical' right has legal ramifications.
4. This is certainly true for many post-communist countries, such as Poland, where the support of the right-wing populist party Law and Justice should be seen, at least in part, as a consequence of nearly a decade of rule by the centrist Civic Platform, dominated by a discourse of Polish economic success and characterized by an arrogant approach and considerable ignorance of the everyday realities of most Polish citizens.
5. 'Extremism of the center' was the expression used by Seymour Martin Lipset. I do not draw here on his work.
6. See, e.g. J. Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York: Random House, 2018); T. Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017).
7. He was referring here to the Polish constitution from 1997, which mentions both fascism and communism as totalitarian threats (Art. 13 reads: 'Political parties and other organizations whose programmes are based upon totalitarian methods and the modes of activity of nazism, fascism and communism . . . shall be prohibited').
8. For an example of this outcome, see Loperfido's chapter in this volume.

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