

Radical Attitudes

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Like many other concepts in political science, the notion of radicalism harks back to the political conflicts of the late 18th and 19th century. Even then, its content was depended on the political context and far from well defined. Consequentially, being “radical” has meant different things to different people in different times and countries. Moreover, radicalism is closely related, if not identical to a number of (equally vague) concepts such as extremism, fundamentalism, and populism. As of today, there is no universally accepted definition of radicalism, and, by implication, radical attitudes

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There is, however, a core meaning of radicalism: radicals are willing to challenge the ground rules of politics to get to the root (Latin: radix) of what they perceive as the most pressing political problems. In any given context, radicals will confront the political establishment and will support policies whose implementation would trigger systemic change.

Radicalism in the 18th and 19th century

In the last third of the 18th century, a heterogeneous group of philosophers, writers and politicians began to campaign for a thorough reform of Britain's political system.

Amongst the goals of this movement were the abolition of the slave trade, a reform of the electoral laws and a better protection of citizens' rights. They soon gained support from the emerging middle and working classes. The parliamentarian Charles James Fox is often credited with coining the name for this new movement when he demanded a "radical reform" of the electoral system in 1797, and by 1819, the "radicals" had established themselves as a separate political force that inspired the Chartist movement and played an important role in both the creation of the Liberal and the Labour Party.

Similarly, after the restoration of the monarchy in 19th century France, supporters of republican principles called themselves "radicals". Over the last third of the century, they drifted to the left and were instrumental in the foundation of the country's first modern left-wing party, the "Republican, Radical and Radical-Socialist Party" in 1901.

In Germany, "radical" was initially a political label chosen by those liberals who, in the spirit of the French Revolution, demanded civil liberties, universal male suffrage and parliamentary representation. In the second half of the 19th centuries, this label was applied to those members of the workers' movement who favoured a revolutionary change of government (i.e. an end of the authoritarian monarchist regime). In a similar fashion, in many other European and Southern American countries "radicalism" became shorthand for a subtype of liberalism that could be located either to the left or to the right of the political centre. To the present day, "radical" parties exist in many countries including Argentina, Chile, Denmark, Ecuador, France, Italy, Paraguay, and Switzerland.

Most of them are today classified as either liberal or socialist/social-democratic.

Radicalism in the 20th century

The gradual spread of liberal democracy and its crisis during the interwar period changed the meaning of the concept. In the wake of the events in Germany, Italy, Russia, and many other European countries, radicalism became a collective term for the forces at the poles of the political spectrum that had formerly be known chiefly as “ultras” and threatened to overthrow liberal democracy: Communists on the on side, Fascists and National Socialists on the other. Consequentially, radicalism was transformed into a primarily spatial term (location on the left-right axis) with a connotation that was directly opposed to its original meaning. While the original radicals had been champions of freedom and democracy, the radicals of the 20th century were, by virtue of their ideological preferences, opposed to these values. Under the post-war consensus of the 1950s, this perspective on radicalism became dominant.

However, less than two decades after the end of the Second World War, Seymour Martin Lipset challenged the prevailing view of the connection between centrism and support for democracy. In his seminal study *Political Man* (1960), Lipset claimed that Fascism and National Socialism were neither left- nor right-wing ideologies. Rather, they constituted an “extremism of the centre”. While this statement is problematic if interpreted in purely sociological terms – Fascism and National Socialism appealed both to the middle and to the working classes – it reflects the ambiguous location of these regimes on the traditional Left-Right Spectrum. On the one hand, they violently suppressed the left-wing unions and parties. On the other hand, they were hardly champions of a free market

economy: Fascism and National Socialism insulated farmers and small businesses from competition, engaged in large-scale economic planning and raised government spending on welfare to unprecedented levels.

More generally, Lipset argued that attitudes towards the economy and attitudes towards democracy could vary independently. In his view, any position on the Left-Right spectrum – radical or centrist – can be combined with “the repression of difference and dissent, the closing down of the market place of ideas”. This “tendency to treat cleavage and ambivalence as illegitimate” is what Lipset called extremism.

Lipset fruitfully applied this concept to right-wing extremism in the United States. In his view, the insistence on free-market principles makes this particular breed of extremisms “right-wing”, whereas anti-semitism, homophobia, racism, religious intolerance and xenophobia are simply manifestations of the same underlying generic phenomenon.

Indeed, in separate work he convincingly demonstrated that these traits are also prevalent amongst members of the working class, whose criticism of free market principles marks them as left-wingers.

Lipset’s notion of extremism is so broad that it resonates with even more general concepts that were developed around the same time by psychologists such as Hans Jürgen Eysenck (“tough-mindedness”) and Milton Rokeach (“closed mindedness”, “dogmatism”) and refer to a tendency to unconditionally accept norms, prejudice and authorities. Like Lipset, Eysenck, Rokeach and many other scholars treat political preferences in general and political radicalism in particular as an essentially two-dimensional phenomenon. However, while Lipset argued that left-right ideology and support for democratic values and institutions can vary independently, other authors

disagree.

In work that is partly inspired by Lipset, Uwe Backes and Eckhard Jesse claim that there is a U-shaped link between ideological radicalism and anti-democratic extremism. While they acknowledge that radicalism and extremism are conceptually different, they argue that radical ideological positions have implications that render them incompatible with liberal democracy as defined by the core values of the French revolution: liberty, equality, fraternity. According to Backes and Jesse, left-wing radicalism (Communism) overemphasises equality to the detriment of freedom whereas traditional European right-wing radicalism (Fascism) as well as American right-wing radicalism disregards equality in favour of either fraternity or liberty. In Backes' and Jesse's view, centrism is conducive to liberal democracy while radicalism is a necessary and sufficient condition for extremism. In a sense, the 20th century view of radicalism has come full circle in their work, which has influenced many European scholars directly or indirectly. However, empirical evidence for the U-shaped link between radical ideological positions and opposition to liberal democracy is sparse.

Measurement issues

If radicalism is interpreted in a purely spatial sense, it simply refers to the endpoints of the ideological spectrum. The most common instrument in this context is the general left-right scale that has been employed in countless comparative and single-country studies. Since the left-right scale is still interpreted chiefly in economic terms, other, more specific scales which refer to the appropriate degree of government intervention in the economy, state control of prices and wages, or the importance of trade unions have also

been used. On the other hand, more inclusive attempts at measuring radicalism include preferences on the “postmaterialist” issues such as the environment, minority rights, and direct democracy.

Logical implications of extreme positions notwithstanding, most researchers would, however, agree that a position at the endpoints of any policy scale is in itself of little importance because people frequently hold inconsistent and contradictory attitudes.

Therefore, a number of items and scales have been proposed to directly capture support for liberal democracy.

Arguably, the most influential amongst these were developed by Herbert McClosky in his work on democratic values. In his 1964 article, McClosky distinguishes between three sub-dimensions of democratic values: respect for the “rules of the game” on the one hand and support for freedom of expression as well as support for political, economic, social and ethnic equality on the other. McClosky's first dimension primarily refers to formal compliance. As long as a majority of citizens has internalised these rules, they will support democratic institutions even if their grasp of the underlying principles is patchy. His second and third dimension, however, refer precisely to these principles.

A model (liberal) democrat should subscribe to both the principles and rules, whereas an anti-democrat would despise both. Real-world citizens usually find themselves somewhere in between those two poles: they agree with the rules and abstract principles, but sometimes struggle with their application. Some items on McClosky's scale were specifically designed to capture these conflicts. For instance, 90 per cent of his respondents believed in “free speech for all no matter what their views might be”, yet 50 per cent agreed that books containing “wrong political views” did not deserve to be

published and 25 per cent were ready to suspend due process for “dangerous enemies like the Communists”.

To the present day, McClosky's work has a tremendous impact on the field, but there are some basic problems with his and all subsequent attempts to measure support for democratic values. First, the items inevitably reflect the political and historical context for which they were devised. For McClosky and many of his successors, Communism was the main threat to liberal democracy. With the advent of new ideological challenges such as Islamism and Right-Wing Populism, this is obviously not longer true. Second, the rules and sometimes even the principles that constitute liberal democracy are bound to change gradually over time. Political behaviours and issues from the New Politics agenda that were considered “radical” in the 1960s – minority rights, the environment, sit-ins and human chains etc. – are now well within the political mainstream. Therefore, finding items that work well in all countries at all times is conceptually and empirically next to impossible. Third, even if these attitudinal scales generate measurements that are valid across time and space, they lack a natural cut-off point. At best, they are able to identify the most radical persons in society. However, where the boundary lies between democrats and radicals is an entirely different question.

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See also Communism, Democracy, Theory of, Democracy, Types, Fascism, Fundamentalism, Ideology, Islamist Movements, Left-Right Spectrum, Liberalism, Peasants' Movements, Political Attitudes, Populism, Postmaterialism

Further Readings

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