

# Sociological concepts and the rise of extremism



This essay will attempt to demonstrate how sociological concepts can be used to explain the rise of extremist groups. There are many publications and research papers into the various dimensions of extremism, addressing causation, the process of radicalisation, and consequences. These studies use varying definitions, approaches, epistemologies and theoretical concepts to address the issue of extremism. From this collection of differing studies, two approaches will be examined in this essay to use as examples of how sociology has added to the accumulated knowledge in this area. Conflict theory, or more specifically Collins' work (1975) on interaction rituals, will be outlined to illustrate how groups form – both those groups in the mainstream and outside it – as well as addressing the way in which these groups can turn violent. Social Movement Theory will provide the second example, looking closely at Framing Theory as a means of understanding the process of radicalisation of individuals into an extremist group. It is important, however, to firstly define what the term 'extremism' actually means.

Extremism as a concept is not the easiest to define. It is a subjective term, in that, what is considered extreme by one group or society, may not be considered so by another (Wintrobe, 2006). However, an extremist is generally viewed as 'someone whose views are outside the mainstream on some issue or dimension' (Wintrobe, 2006: 6). Extremists are often people on the extreme left or the extreme right of the political spectrum, or hold radical views in relation to nationalism, religion or any other politically important dimension (Wintrobe, 2006). According to Scruton, political extremism refers to:

...taking a political idea to its limits, regardless of unfortunate repercussions, impracticalities, arguments, and feelings to the contrary, and with the intention not only to confront, but to eliminate opposition...Intolerance towards all views other than one's own (1982: 164).

Martin (2013: 10-11) explains how both the 'content' of a person's beliefs and the 'style' in which one expresses them are the basic elements for defining extremism. Wilcox summed this up by explaining that style is more important than content when it comes to extremism, as many people can hold views that would be considered radical or unorthodox yet still entertain them in a reasonable, rational manner. In contrast, there are other people who have views a lot closer to the political mainstream but present them in a 'shrill, uncompromising, bullying, and distinctly authoritarian manner' (Wilcox, 1996: 54). As well as those with extremist views, the term 'extremist' can also refer to a person or group that uses extremist methods, for example resorting to violence or terrorism to achieve its goals (Wintrobe, 2006). It worth noting not all extremists are violent or terrorists. However, Martin (2013) argues that behind every act of terrorist violence is a deeply held belief system, which at its core is extremist and characterised by intolerance. In light of this, one must question how is it that these groups form and garner support when their views are so far outside the mainstream?

Conflict theory can provide a useful theoretical approach that can help to gain insight into how different groups develop, how they grow, and how some groups can turn violent. Conflict theory developed, at least in part, as a

<https://assignbuster.com/sociological-concepts-and-the-rise-of-extremism/>

reaction against structural functionalism, and has many influences such as Marxism, Weberian theory and Simmel's work on social conflict (Ritzer, 2008: 264). Elements of conflict theory can be used to explain the formation of groups – for example, extremist groups – as well as the reasons why these groups can turn violent. This theoretical approach seeks to explain scientifically, the general delineations of conflict in society; that is, how conflict starts and varies, and the effect of conflict. At the core of conflict theory are the unequal distribution of power and scarce resources. Where power is situated and who uses it – or does not – are fundamental (Allan, 2006). Randal Collins work on conflict theory 'represents the most systematic effort undertaken to scientifically explain conflict' (Allan, 2006: 233). In his book *Conflict Society*, Collins (1975) advocates forcefully for a sociology grounded in face-to-face interaction. He argues that micro level encounters among individuals ultimately create and sustain macro-level phenomenon. Or, as Turner (2013: 239) describes it, 'large and long-term social structures are built from interaction rituals that have been strung together over time'.

More recently, Collins has refined and extended his original hypothesis of interaction rituals and used this newer view to develop an explanation of interpersonal violence (Turner, 2013). Turner (2013) explains Collins' analytical scheme as such: as interaction rituals unfold they build up emotional energy, which acts as the driving force of interaction. Social solidarity increases when positive emotional energy builds up across chains on interaction rituals, leading to the production and reproduction of social structures. The more ecological barriers exist to separate persons from

others, the more the individuals will feel co-present; and the more individuals are engaged in common actions or tasks, the more likely they are to have a mutual focus of attention. This makes them more likely to emit stereotypical greeting rituals which generate positive emotions and begin to shape a shared mood, ' which, in turn increases the common mutual focus of attention' (Turner, 2013: 250). Individuals fall into ' rhythmic synchronisation' as interactions progress, which makes them more likely to become emotionally involved in the group (Turner, 2013: 252). As positive emotions are stimulated, the level of group solidarity increases, likewise, the greater the sense of solidarity the more positive emotions are evoked in subsequent interactions. As the level of solidarity increases, they become more likely to have a need to symbolise the group somehow, for example through words, physical objects or certain behaviours. According to Turner:

As these chains of interaction continue, members develop particularistic capital, or experiences only shared among group members, and this capital can be used in subsequent interactions to reinforce group symbols and the sense of solidarity (2013: 252).

This interaction ritual theory can explain how groups, including extremist groups form and grow. However, Collins goes further to explain how these groups can cross the line into violent behaviour. He explains how violence is not easy for people as it ' goes against the natural propensity of humans to fall into the phases of interaction rituals that arouse positive emotions' (Turner, 2013: 254). Most potentially violent situations actually fail to become violent in the end; posturing and threats of violent are more common. Indeed, Collins provides an important explanation of how

<https://assignbuster.com/sociological-concepts-and-the-rise-of-extremism/>

individuals as a group overcome this propensity to avoid violence and get involved in collective violent behaviour. For this to happen, interaction rituals are actually used as a force to mobilise individuals to commit violent acts:

...the stages of the ritual are unleashed so that individuals gain positive emotional entrainment, effervescence, positive emotional energy, solidarity, group symbols, and particularized culture by engaging in concerted violence against another group' (Turner, 2013).

Turk (2008) provides a good example of this when he outlines Islamic fundamentalism, which appears to rely on radicalisation through education consisting of religious indoctrination. According to Turk, potential recruits to Islamic extremist groups are sought in Madrassas across the world, through drilling in the most extreme interpretations of Sunni theology, which emphasises the duty of Muslims to engage in Jihad (holy war) against all enemies of true Islam. He notes that The Taliban are a product of this group formation within Madrassas (Turk, 2008).

Another theoretical framework which can be applied to the understanding of radicalisation and violent extremism is Social Movements Theory (SMT). SMT began in the 1940s with the idea that movements arose as a result of 'irrational processes of collective behaviour occurring under strained environmental conditions' (Strain Theory), producing a mass feeling of discontent (Borum, 2011: 17). According to this theory, individuals would join a movement because of a passive submission to these overwhelming social forces. However, contemporary SMT has shown that more rational and

strategic processes are operating than the SMT understanding of the 1940s (Borum, 2011).

The primary task of any organisation or social movement is its own survival. Therefore, to grow it must form mobilization potential; form and motivate recruitment networks; arouse motivation to participate; and remove barriers to participation (Borum, 2011). Members of the movement operate as ‘rational prospectors’ when they seek to recruit others. So that they are efficient and effective, they look to identify those most likely to agree to act effectively to further the cause. To them, the recruitment process has two stages. Firstly, the ‘rational prospectors’ use information to find likely targets and secondly, once located, recruiters offer information on participatory opportunities, as well as deploying incentives to persuade recruits to say ‘yes’ (Borum, 2001: 17).

According to Borum (2011: 17):

The strength of social bonds and relationships are central to both tasks, and understanding relationships among potential prospects is therefore, critical to understanding recruitment networks.

A more recent development in this area comes from Framing Theory, which focuses on how meanings are constructed, produced and disseminated by movements and social collectives (Borum, 2011). Unlike the structural theories which focus on socio-demographics and their effect on radicalisation, Framing Theory focuses on the process of radicalisation. Based on the work of Erving Goffman, the concept of a ‘frame’ ‘refers to an individual’s worldview or “schemata of interpretation”, consisting of values

<https://assignbuster.com/sociological-concepts-and-the-rise-of-extremism/>

(notions about right and wrong) and beliefs (assumptions about the world, attributes of things, and mechanisms of causation). This scheme helps an individual make sense of and organize his or her experience, and guide his or her action' (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008: 6). The success of a movement therefore, is related to its ability to create and disseminate frames which will attract devotees, Central to its success in mobilising participants, is whether the movement's version of ' reality' resonates with potential supporters or whether they can manipulate the values and beliefs of potential supporters to a smaller or larger extent (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2011). Using this theory then, how is it that activists evolve into terrorists?:

Framing Theory would emphasize how social and intersubjective processes create the motivation. In other words, Framing Theory would seek to explain violent radicalisation and terrorism through the distinct constructed reality, shared by members of violent groups – a constructed reality or world view, which frames problems as not just misfortunes, but injustices, attributes responsibility for these “ injustices”, and constructs an argument for the efficacy and/or moral justification of using violence against civilians to right the perceived wrong' (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2011: 9).

Although Critical Theory and Social Movements Theory provide useful frameworks for examining the reasons why extremist groups form and grow, it is important to note that they are only two of a number of theoretical approaches within sociology that can be used to conceptualise this phenomenon. Other approaches include, but are in no way limited to, Gurr's (1970) publication *Why Men Rebel*, in which he outlines his hypothesis that it is feelings of deprivation and frustration that motivate an individual to



engage in collective action; Veugelers research into the rise of right wing extremist groups in France, to test Postmaterialist Theorists assertion that ‘ conflict over non-economic values are transforming the political sociology of advanced industrial societies’ (2000: 19); and a study by Gelfand and LaFree (2013) examining cultural factors and their relationship to prevalence and severity of extremist violence. The study of extremism crosses not only within-discipline parameters, but has been widely studied across other disciplines as well such as international relations, politics and psychology. For these reasons, Cable et al feel that (1988: 966):

Rather than seek some single model of activist recruitment and commitment, consisting of structural and/or social psychology variables...analysts should assume that there are multiple models and then get on with the more useful work of specifying the conditions under which one or more is appropriate.

This essay has outlined some ways in which sociological concepts can be used to explain the rise of extremist groups. Extremist groups were taken to mean groups which have views that are considered outside the mainstream of society on particular issues or dimensions. There are many sociological concepts which have been applied to the study of extremism. However, this essay looked at two examples; Conflict Theory, namely Collin’s (1975) work on interaction rituals and violence, and Social Movements Theory. Collin’s research has shown how groups form and are given symbolic meaning, which in turn strengthens the group (1975). In applying this to extremism, it sheds some light on how groups of individuals with extremist views become bound together, as well as explaining how these groups can become violent

<https://assignbuster.com/sociological-concepts-and-the-rise-of-extremism/>

despite the human propensity to avoid violence. Social Movements Theory was used as an example to illustrate how extremist movements grow, as well as outlining the process of radicalisation. In order for movements to survive, they must form mobilisation potential and recruitment networks, motivate participation, and remove any barriers to participation. The strength of social bonds and relationships within the group is key. The process of radicalisation is explained through the 'constructed reality' or world-view shared by members of extremist groups which, justifies the use of violence as a means to right a perceived wrong. Although these frameworks are useful for examining extremism, they only provide a marginal assessment of the sociological work that has been undertaken on the rise of extremist groups to date.

### **Bibliography:**

Allan, K. (2006). Conflict and Critical Theories. Retrieved from [http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/13636\\_Chapter7.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/13636_Chapter7.pdf) (Accessed 16/09/2015).

Cable, S., Walsh, E. J. and Warland, R. H. (1988) 'Differential Paths to Political Activism: Comparisons of Four Mobilization Processes after the Three Mile Island Accident'. *Social Forces* 66 (4), pp. 951-969.

Collins, R. (1975) *Conflict Sociology: Towards an Explanatory Science*. New York: Academic Press.

Dalgaard-Nielsen, A. (2008) 'Studying Violent Radicalization in Europe I: The Potential Contribution of Social Movement Theory', Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Copenhagen. Retrieved from: <http://www.readbag.com/diis-dk-graphics-publications-wp2008-wp08-2-studying-violent-https://assignbuster.com/sociological-concepts-and-the-rise-of-extremism/>

radicalization-in-europe-i-the-potential-contribution-of-social-movement-theory(Accessed 15/09/2015).

Gelfand, M. and LaFree, G. (2013) ' Culture and Extremism'. *Journal of Social Issues* 69(3), pp. 495-517.

Gurr, T. R (1970) *Why Men Rebel*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Martin, G. (2013) *Understanding Terrorism: Challenges, Perspectives, and Issues* (4th Ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Ritzer, G. (2008) *Sociological Theory* (7th Ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Sruton, R (1982) *A Dictionary of Political Thought*. New York: Hill & Wang.

Turk, A. T. (2008) ' The Sociology of Terrorism' in Matson, R. (Ed.) *The Spirit of Sociology: A Reader*. Boston: Pearson.

Turner, J. H. (2013) *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Veugelers, J. W. P. (2000) ' Right-Wing Extremism in Contemporary France: A " Silent Counterrevolution"?''. *The Sociological Quarterly* 41(1), pp. 19-40.

Wintrobe, R. (2006) *Rational Extremism: The Political Economy of Radicalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wilcox, Laird (1996) ' What is extremism? Style and Tactics Matter More than Goals' in George, J. and Wilcox, L (Eds.) *American Extremists: Militias, Supremacists, Klansmen, Communists, & Others*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus.

<https://assignbuster.com/sociological-concepts-and-the-rise-of-extremism/>