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## **Extremist Adversaries of Democracy**

Olof Petersson

### Abstract

The development of international relations towards “complex interdependence” has profoundly transformed the situation of Sweden. National security policy has become much more complex. The goals of Swedish national security have now been extended to include the ability to uphold democracy, rule of law and human rights and freedoms. As a consequence, an effective defense of the democratic state must be based on an accurate assessment of the adversaries of democracy. Current and potential threats towards the democratic system are often described in terms of “extremism”. Common definitions of extremism are, however, less helpful as they build on circular reasoning: an extremist movement is defined as an anti-democratic movement. This chapter explores an alternative way of defining the concept of extremism. The exploration shows that ideological extremism, defined as the polarity of political cleavages and conflicts, is a powerful explanation of anti-democratic ideas and actions. A deeper knowledge about the extremist adversaries of democracy can also increase our understanding of the nature of a democratic society. Ideological extremism is the antithesis of toleration and mutual understanding.

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### **The Study of Power and Democracy**

Is society moving closer toward the Swedish democratic ideal, or away from it? This was one of the general questions posed in the official instructions formulated to guide the Study of Power and Democracy in Sweden. The Swedish Government took the initiative to establish this special commission of inquiry and financed its research program, which began in 1985 and ended in 1990. The study concluded with a discussion of the fundamental problem of democracy, i.e., how to reconcile individual freedom with collective order, in a period characterized by individualization and internationalization (Maktutredningen, 1990; Petersson, 1991).

Bengt Sundelius made an important contribution to the Study of Power and Democracy. He participated in a volume on power and internationalization with a chapter addressing a central question: how does the conflict-generating interdependence of international relations affect a small, open polity such as Sweden?

Bengt Sundelius not only gave a succinct overview of the ongoing transformation of the international system at that particular time period. He also developed a conceptual framework which served as a fruitful tool to understand the changing interplay between domestic politics and international relations. Fundamental to his interpretation was the assumption that interdependence and anarchy should not be viewed as end-points on a singular scale but rather be conceptualized as complementary elements which together constitute the international environment of today (Sundelius, 1990).

At the time of writing this chapter in the late 1980s the predominant mood was quite optimistic. The internationalization of Swedish society was seen a process leading to increased openness and more free trade, thus bringing prosperity and new possibilities for business and households. Bengt Sundelius formulated a balanced view of the internationalization process that also emphasized the adverse effects of the ongoing transformation process. Complex interdependence could lead to incomprehensible events and a political dynamic where the established tools of the policy process did no longer fit.

Bengt Sundelius ended his analysis with an important question: Where are the conditions formed for the Swedish autonomous democracy in a world of borderless power?

### **The Changing Conception of National Security**

The development of international relations towards “complex interdependence” has profoundly transformed the situation of Sweden. National security policy has become much more complex. The goals of Swedish national security have now been extended to include the protection of life and health, ensuring the functioning of society, and the protection of the basic values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights. Swedish security policy aims at preserving trust in the democratic model of society (Swedish Government, 2006).

Several public agencies at the central, regional and local levels are responsible for crisis management and the protection of the different functions of society. The Swedish structure for civil emergency planning is coordinated by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, MSB), which holds a mandate for an encompassing approach to emergency management. Bengt Sundelius has made important contributions to the management of civil emergency planning by building up a strong research base and providing strategic advice to the director-general of the public agency.

One key theme often stressed by Bengt Sundelius is that it is an obligation of good governance to prepare for the unthinkable and to allocate the necessary resources to minimize the impact of catastrophic events on people and society. The protection of democratic institutions is of central importance for an open society and is an area where political scientists bear a special responsibility. The roads of Bengt Sundelius and myself crossed again when I was commissioned by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency to write a report on the defense of Swedish democracy (Pettersson, 2014). This report was later supplemented with a special study of the adversaries of democracy (Pettersson, 2015).

## Identifying Threats to the Democratic Order

Defining who is an adversary of democracy is just as important as it is difficult. On the one hand the definition can be too narrow, only focusing upon recent and spectacular phenomena. On the other hand the definition can be too broad, classifying all deviant opinions as “undemocratic”. It is difficult to draw a line between the legitimate and necessary criticism which is a crucial part of the democratic process and the external attacks which have the purpose to damage democratic institutions and ultimately to replace the open and democratic society with another form of governance.

It is also important to keep the historical perspective in mind. Democracy is an historical exception. Traditional forms of governance, patriarchy, theocracy, feudalism, monarchy, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, military dictatorship, and other forms of elite rule have dominated the history of human societies. Even today only a minority of the world’s population lives in societies which meet the basic requirements of freedom and fair elections (Freedom House, 2015).

Comparing democracies and non-democratic alternatives poses several methodological caveats. One common fallacy is the Nirvana approach which involves comparing the actual working of a particular system with the ideal vision of another system (Demsetz, 1969). It would, for instance, be misleading to compare the grey everyday life of a parliamentary system with any glorious utopia of an enlightened ruler. It would be equally misleading to compare the realities of a dictatorship with a model of perfect democracy.

The arguments against democracy have been classified in different ways. While some thinkers argue that democracy is not feasible, others believe that democracy is not desirable (Spitz, 1965). Anti-democratic philosophers also claim that democratic reform leads to unintended effects (the perversity thesis), that democratic reform is meaningless (the futility thesis), or even that democratic reform is adventurous (the jeopardy thesis) (Hirschman, 1991; Femia, 2001).

Common for most known forms of anti-democratic thinking is some form of extremism. The concept of extremism is indispensable for the understanding the adversaries of democracy even though the concept lends itself to different interpretations. The

conceptual history of extremism is long and complex (Backes, 2010). In its official German conception an extremist is by definition identical with an enemy of the democratic constitutional order. Extremism has also been used as a label in authoritarian regimes, such as today's Russia, in order to silence critical voices.

However, any analytically fruitful definition of extremism must leave the link between extremism and anti-democratic opinion open to empirical investigation. Thus, attitude towards the democratic system should not be included in the definition of extremism. Instead, political extremism should be defined in relation to political ideologies in three important ways. First, one or several ideological dimensions should be isolated so that each can be empirically studied properly. Second, each pole of these ideological dimensions should be identified with a particular form of ideological extremism. Third, proponents of these extreme ideologies should be investigated according to their views on democracy. This is the approach followed in this study.

### **Adversaries of Democracy**

The political landscape is crisscrossed by several different conflict dimensions. The ideological conflicts of European politics are the results of the power struggles of previous time periods. Two major events have been crucial in the formation of the ideological plate tectonics of the European political landscape: the national revolution and the industrial revolution. The creation of modern nation states led to two types of conflicts. One was the political center trying to dominate over the periphery. The other was the struggle between the state and the church. The industrial revolution led to two other conflicts. One was the cleavage between the modernizing classes in the cities and the farming population in the countryside. The other was the class conflict between labor and capital (Flora, 1999).

With four conflict dimensions there are theoretically eight different forms of ideological extremism. It is an empirical fact that all these eight varieties of ideological extremism can be found in European politics. The relative strength of these eight forms of extremism has varied across time and place. However, none of them can be neglected in the search for links between extremism and anti-democratic thinking in the contemporary world.

These eight varieties of ideological extremism will be discussed in the following order: left-wing extremism vs. right-wing extremism (the industrial revolution: the conflict between labor and capital); technocratic elitism vs. green extremism (the industrial revolution: the urban–rural conflict); authoritarian secularism vs. theocracy (the national revolution: the conflict between state and church); centralism vs. anarchy (the national revolution: the center–periphery dimension).

### **Left-wing extremism**

During the period of communist rule in Eastern Europe Marxist-Leninist ideologues made great efforts to prove the supremacy of the Soviet form of governance. According to the official view the Soviet Union was both a dictatorship and a democracy. The October revolution led to the dictatorship of the proletariat. The state machinery was used to suppress the class enemies of the proletariat. The proletarian state was seen as the highest form of democracy; it was argued that bourgeois democracy was only the cover for the capitalist class oppression over the proletariat. The Soviet Union was considered as the ultimate democracy since the state was used to promote the real, objective interests of workers and peasants. The abolishment of private ownership gave room for “real” political rights and equal citizen rights. But these rights were only for the proletariat, not for the class enemy. A free press would only give the capitalists an instrument for the indoctrination of the people.

After the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union only a few communist-style states remain, for example China, Cuba and North Korea. In the democratic countries only small fringe groups would identify themselves as communist. But there are also groups which are based on a more or less pronounced Marxist doctrine. They often define themselves as opponents to institutions and political decisions which are seen as threats against peace, equality and justice. These groups often carry names starting with “anti”, such as anti-nuclear, anti-fascism, anti-racism, anti-globalization, anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, anti-militarism, and anti-Semitism. Militant varieties of these movements are sometimes found in groupings defining themselves as “autonomous”. The autonomous movement differs profoundly from the organization model of communist parties. The Leninist party model was based on a centralized communist party controlling a cadre of highly disciplined party members organized in cells. The autonomous activists are organized in loose, network-like, structures.

Autonomous actions, sometimes violent and sometime part of larger campaigns, are often directed against private companies and public agencies which, according to their view, threaten the rights of minorities and oppressed people.

### **Right-wing extremism**

Both Italian fascism and German National Socialism rejected the principle of equality, which is one of the basic tenets of democratic thought. A democratic society would certainly recognize that individuals are different in many respects but will always claim that all individuals are equal when it comes to basic human rights and the right to participate in the collective decision-making process. Fascism and Nazism take the opposite view, claiming the right of the strong to dominate over the weak. Consequently, fascism and Nazism do not recognize all rights and freedoms enshrined in democratic constitutions and international conventions. Anti-Semitism opposes the rights of Jews to practice their religion and exercise their rights as citizens. Human rights protecting ethnic groups also run against the right-wing credo of the inherent inequality between racial groups and different cultures.

The expression “right-wing extremism” today includes neo-Fascist, neo-Nazi and ultranationalist groups. The common theme for these groups is the belief in the importance of ethnic differences and a rejection of the equality principle of democracy. They want to strengthen “the nation”, which is conceived in terms of ethnic homogeneity.

### **Technocratic elitism**

The technocratic challenge against democracy is centered on the knowledge argument. If the political process is regarded as a problem-solving mechanism, technocrats argue that scientific research and rational reasoning should guide political decision-making. Technocrats are critical of both citizens and politicians.

According to technocrats the great masses have a limited capability of understanding complex reasoning and making rational decisions. The general public is seen as receptive to prejudice, religious superstition, and partisan propaganda. Technocrats are also critical of elected politicians, who are seen as driven by self-interest as well as by lobbyists and special-interest groups. Democratic institutions are consequently looked upon in a

negative way because they are regarded as unfit to formulate the general or public interest.

The best example of technocratic government in today's world is Singapore. The country is in effect run by a small elite recruited on the basis of their expertise and leadership skills. Since its independence Singapore has been governed by one single party. Due to restrictions in the freedom of expression in the country Singapore lacks an efficient opposition party and cannot be described as a fully developed democracy.

### **Green extremism**

Extreme environmentalism is critical to the democratic process because nature, it is argued, represents a higher value than the social organization of humans. There are several varieties of green extremism. The romantic view of nature as a supreme essence means that the individual rights and freedoms of democracy are regarded as secondary. German national socialism developed a cult of nation, soil, and nature, leading to the persecution of individuals and groups seen as threats against Germanic unity.

The militant extremism of environmentalism and the animal rights movement is directed against political decision-makers among others. Democratic legislation is not accepted when judged to be in contradiction to ecological principles and the rights of animals.

The alarming threat of global warming has made some environmentalists more adamant. Just as a war might lead to the temporary suspension of some democratic procedures the exceptional situation of the climate crises should, according to them, motivate similar restrictions in the democratic process. The underlying assumption is that environmental experts are better suited to make the necessary decisions than democratically elected politicians.

### **Authoritarian secularism**

After the French revolution radical Jacobins tried to create a new society without religion. Churches were closed, Christian symbols were removed or destroyed and priests were forbidden to spread the word of the Bible. This radical experiment only lasted a few years

but there have also been later attempts to stop religious practice with methods that are not compatible with democratic principles.

Secular authoritarianism has one major claim against democracy: the people can vote the wrong way. There is an obvious dilemma if the state wants to defend itself against a certain religion and the majority of voters support political parties promoting this religion. There have been cases where elections have been annulled with the argument to save democracy.

In previous centuries secular authoritarianism has primarily been a part of European states struggling against the influence of the Catholic Church. During the last century most examples of authoritarian tendencies have been found in countries where the state has been engaged in a battle against the influence of Islam. Kemal Atatürk's modernization of Turkey is another example of secular authoritarianism. Other examples are Algeria, Tunisia, and the Shah's Iran.

### **Theocracy**

Theocracy is opposed to the very core of democracy, namely the principle of popular sovereignty. According to democrats political power emanates from the people.

According to theocrats political power is derived from God, Allah or some other supreme spiritual power. Theocrats are opposed to freedom of speech, religious freedom and the freedom to organize as long as these freedoms are used in a way considered to be in conflict with religious principles.

“Democracy is based on the idea that the people are the source of authority, including the legislative authority, through the selection of representatives. ... This is the essence of impiety, polytheism, and falseness because it contradicts the fundamentals of the religion, including the worship of one God,” said militant Islamist Abu Musar al-Zarqawi in a radio interview 2005. He continued: “Democracy is based on the freedom to form groups and political parties, etc. regardless of the beliefs, thoughts, and moral standards of these groups. And this is not permissible under the Sharia”. And: “Democracy is premised upon the acceptance of the opinion of the majority, and adoption of the wish of the many,

even if the majority agrees to falsehood and open impiety. This is a wicked premise that must be rejected in its entirety” (al-Zarqawi, quoted in Allen, 2008: 145 ff).

Today only one state in the Christian world can be described as a theocracy, the Holy See or the Vatican. Contemporary Iran has strong theocratic elements, since The Guardian Council, consisting of Islamic experts, control the ultimate legislative power. An extreme example of theocracy is the Islamic State and its self-proclaimed Caliphate.

### **Centralism**

The state organized as a strict pyramid with the top controlling lower levels was a model developed by the French Jacobins. Since then the centralized state model has been applied by rulers of different ideological creeds, from the communist left to the authoritarian right. Extreme centralism sooner or later runs into conflict with democratic ideas such as pluralism, local self-government, and federalism. The main argument of centralism is that democracy needs a strong state in order to channel and implement the will of the people. Freedom of organization, decentralization, and local self-government are, therefore, seen as obstacles for the centrally organized state administration.

The Leninist organizational model dominated Eastern Europe until the end of the 1980s. Putin’s Russia might have some traits in common with the Soviet state but Putin’s model of governance is also influenced by an older Tsarist conception of politicians and public officials as the carriers of the supreme interest of the state. Related varieties of Hegelian state idealism were common in the pre-democratic regimes of nineteenth century Europe.

### **Anarchism**

In the history of political ideas anarchism is the opposite of state centralism. The ideal of anarchism is a free society without ruler (*an anarchos*). Such a society would lack a state; instead it would be founded on free associations and voluntary agreements. Some anarchists would argue for a more collective model of society, others would stress the individualist element. While anarchists accept the general idea of popular government they reject institutions such as political parties, representative government, and state bureaucracy. Strict anarchists would boycott general elections as a protest. Anarchists are also skeptical to the majority principle, since this means that the minority has to obey the

will of the majority. Any state is rejected, even democratic states, and citizens are entitled to disobey laws that they disagree with. Anarchist objections to the idea of private property also lead to a negative view of property rights.

Some militant and violent anarchist groups have chosen international summit meetings as their main political target. To anarchists these meetings represent the global power of big business, large banks and the states of the rich world.

### **Eight varieties of political extremism**

The enemies of democracy are not united behind any one particular ideology. On the contrary, anti-democrats are often political opponents who might disagree on almost all political issues except the rejection of democracy as form of government. The anti-democratic credo can be formulated in the following way: “Extremists of all the world, unite!”. This overview of the extreme poles of four political conflict dimensions shows that all the eight specified ideological positions are all connected with anti-democratic ideas. The question is what general conclusions can be drawn from this observation.

The first possible objection concerns the choice of conflict dimensions. An analysis based on a different set of ideological conflicts might have given different conclusions. While this cannot be excluded, it is nevertheless possible to maintain that the four dimensions identified in this study belong to the most central ones in modern politics. The left-right dimension covers the conflicts over the distribution of resources and the relationship between individuals and collectives. The growth/environment dimension involves the conflict between technology and nature. The third dimension focuses on the role of religion in society. The tension between centralism and decentralism, the fourth dimension, represents conflicts over the distribution of political power in a society. These four ideological dimensions represent the most important conflicts in political life.

Another objection is that anti-democratic positions can be motivated on other grounds than political extremism. However, the anti-democratic ideas and movements identified in this chapter largely overlap with previous inventories of anti-democratic thinking. Democracy has been rejected by ideologies such as elite theory, anarchism, aristocrats, and anti-humanists, all of which can be regarded as extremists in one sense or another.

Furthermore, it is possible to imagine an objection to the link between extremism and anti-democratic ideas because the centrist positions on the four ideological scales have not been discussed or analyzed. But it is difficult, if not impossible, to find anti-democratic attitudes based on centrist arguments. Proponents of a mixed economy and distribution politics, that is positions between the extreme left and the extreme right, generally argue for political reforms within the democratic system. Likewise, efforts to combine technology and environmental demands, such as the development of green technology, are also a regular feature of democratic political life. Religious tolerance and religious freedom is a basic feature of the rights and freedom in a democratic and pluralist society. Democracies also struggle with the problem of combining centralist and decentralist demands in the design of political institutions. The democratic decision-making process is in fact an institutionalized method for handling various value conflicts and ideological tensions.

It is time to draw a general conclusion. Anti-democratic ideas are connected with political extremism. Democracy is associated with political moderation.

### **Political Extremism**

Extremism in itself is not a threat to democracy. In most fields of human life extremism can be something to strive for. Performances in areas such as sports, science, artistic creation and technical innovation humans try to reach the new, the unsurpassed and the hitherto unknown – that is, the extreme. The threat to democracy comes from a very special form of extremism: *political* extremism. To be politically extreme is to consider oneself in the possession of the truth about the only way to organize a society. A political ideology is not only a set of abstract ideas but also a call for political action. Political extremists want to push their own ideals upon other people and will use force if necessary.

A democrat might also carry strong conviction and be driven by a desire to convince others. But in contrast to an extremist a democrat also respects and tolerates individuals who think differently. Therefore, the logic of democracy and the logic of extremism differ in several important ways.

Extremist political thinking can be captured by the concept of “monism”. All political attitudes are subsumed under one single belief system that is based on absolute, simple and total values. Difficult and complex questions are given simple answers. Social phenomena, which in reality are caused by a multitude of factors and circumstances, are reduced to one single interpretation and one single cause. Extremists have answers to all questions.

The worldview of extremism often contains strong elements of conspiracy theories. Conspiracies can take magic proportions. The enemies are seen as equipped with supernatural powers and the ability to control the world, whether they are identified as the Jews, the international capital or the free masons. There are several variations on the conspiracy theme.

Extremist ideologies also need scapegoats. The usual reasoning in terms of “us” and “them” is taken a further step when the individuals and groups forming the outgroup are attacked because they are accused of causing the evils of the world. Well-known examples include the persecution of Jews, immigrants and other minorities.

Democrats differ from extremists in one fundamental way. Democrats recognize that social problems as a rule have complex roots and that any possible solution would demand deliberation and compromises between different values and interests. This is why political opponents should be regarded with respect and as potential allies. The Enlightenment brought religious toleration to Europe and the rest of the world. Democracy is a way of life based on political toleration.

Knowledge is one the most important defense mechanisms in democratic societies. Extremists and dictators have a crucial disadvantage in this respect. Ideological monism and the lack of free expression is an obstacle to knowledge-seeking and constructive debate. The advantage of democracy is the ability to freely collect and analyze facts and to openly discuss conclusions and choices.

The free formation of knowledge is a large threat to the enemies of democracy. This is why extremists often attack educational institutions and media outlets. Democracy can

prevail if it learns how to cultivate the culture of discovery, critical reasoning, and the open society (Popper, 1992: 157 f).

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