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# **e-*Extrem*e**

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## Book Reviews

### **Political Extremes: A Conceptual History from Antiquity to the Present**

By Uwe Backes (London: Routledge, 2010), 298 p., ISBN 978-0415473521

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The concept of extremism has come widely into use in the twentieth century. It has acquired exceptional political importance as a battle term used to stigmatize a confusing variety of politicians, parties or movements as anti-democratic. Conceptual clarification of a term that has acquired so much weight in struggles for political legitimacy is evidently not only of academic interest. Yet, surprisingly few scholars have focused on extremism as a generic political term. The German political scientist Uwe Backes is a notable exception. His latest book *Political extremes: A conceptual history from antiquity to the present* is the culmination of more than twenty years of extensive research.

In many respects, his conceptual history of extremism is an outstanding work. The book is not only ambitious in its time-span, but Backes also has explored a vast wilderness of literature, magazines and newspapers in some ten languages. His pioneering work implied raking through many (undigitized) political publications and digging up interesting historical trajectories of the term. The main part of his research is devoted to the twentieth century, but Backes also discovered fertile ground beyond modern history. In his former work, he had presented extremism as a modern term with a history not going further back than German liberalism between the revolutions of 1830 and 1848. In this book, however, the author follows a more ancient track leading him far back in time to the concept of 'extremes' in the work of Aristotle and the ancient doctrine of the mixed constitution. This new perspective adds much to our understanding of the concept of extremism.

The idea of extremes is central to Aristotle's ethics of moderation and his political ideal of a mixed constitution. Aristotle connected his ethical doctrine with the political ideal of the *politeia*, a mixed constitutional government that combined the rule of the many (democracy) and the few (oligarchy). The Aristotelian doctrine lingers on in modern democratic thought, but has been adapted to fit the emergence of political parties and the coming into use of a left-right topography after the French Revolution. Backes describes the history of this complex doctrine from Antiquity to the nineteenth century in not more than two chapters, and it is clear that more work is still to be done to bridge the gap between the classical and modern ideas.

Backes' approach is firmly rooted in the historical tradition of the German volumes 'Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe' inaugurated by Brunner, Konze and Koselleck. This approach characteristically focuses on the historical lineage of a basic concept rather than on the development of political discourses or on the history of ideas in historical context. In the main part of the book Backes does not narrowly follow this approach, but keeps an open eye to the complexity of the vocabulary in which the term 'extremism' is embedded. In the part about the doctrine of the mixed constitution, however, the focus on terminology leaves little room for the complex terminology of the doctrine as a whole.

The focus of the book is on the 'age of extremes'. The concept of extremism, which had already been in use in the USA during the Civil War, found far-reaching application after 1917 as a pejorative term for the political project of the Bolsheviks. While the term was spread through the English, French, German and Italian press, it was almost exclusively applied to the extreme left. After the March on Rome it was extended to include the extreme right. The term was not only used as a liberal stigma term for those who questioned the

constitutional consensus, but the extreme right took it up as honorary nickname and identified itself as an extreme in a positive sense. The National Socialists saw themselves as representing the extreme virtuous and courageous part of mankind fighting against the extreme evil part. Hitler's hate for the bourgeoisie found its expression in the hate for the moderate class that would subjugate to the winner rather than put up resistance. With National Socialism the extremist as saviour had arrived on the political stage.

After 1945, extremism became of academic interest in the USA and scientific debates spread from there to Western Europe. In Western Germany it found its way in the terminology of 'militant democracy'. The American constitutional law only acknowledges extremism as 'a clear and present danger', restricting it to attempts of a violent elimination of the constitutional order. The Germans took another path by including endeavours hostile to the constitution, independent of their relevance for criminal law. Backes builds on this German tradition in his last chapter, in which he provides a typology and definition of extremism. His typology makes clear that violence is not necessarily a defining characteristic of political extremism. As he points out, the political behaviour of the NSDAP in the beginning of the 1930s shows that extremist ideology and the practice of violence do not necessarily go hand in hand.

Outlining the scientific discussion in the second half of the twentieth century, Backes describes the subjugation of extremism to the dominating discourse of totalitarianism by philosophers like Hannah Arendt; the contrast set up between pluralism and extremism by social scientists like Shils and Lipset; the distinction between radicalism and extremism made by social scientists like Klingemann/Pappi, Kaase and Mudde; and the efforts to distinguish left from rightwing extremism by law philosopher Bobbio. This chapter provides the groundwork for a final attempt by the author to classify the heterogeneous extremism terms and to provide a definition. The historical overview has made clear that the classical principles of government by law and government for the common good have remained essential throughout time to prevent excesses of power. In addition to these classical values, modern democratic thought has turned the spotlights on the principles of pluralism and self-determination.

In the last chapter, the author also outlines an interesting typology based on the important observation that extremism has two forms: it can take an anti-democratic and an anti-constitutional form. The former undermines civil equality, the latter civil liberty. Communist and anarchist movements can be radically egalitarian and democratic, but become extremist when they oppose the constitutional state. On the other hand, there are movements that are anti-egalitarian, but respect the constitutional state. These movements endorse the principle of slavery, apartheid, or ethnic discrimination on a constitutional basis. The most extreme forms of extremism combine both dimensions. National Socialists, for instance, combined national racism with the totalitarian state. Overall, this last chapter is essential reading for anyone trying to get a theoretical grip on the phenomenon of political extremism. Backes has written a book that is not only politically highly relevant, but also sheds new light on the subject. Detailed historical work, an original historical perspective and a sophisticated theoretical overview makes this book essential reading for scholars of varying disciplinary background.