

# Meaning and Forms of Political Extremism in Past and Present

*Uwe Backes<sup>1</sup>*

This article was written as a part of the Research project *Political Parties and Representation of Interests in Contemporary European Democracies* (code MSM0021622407).

*Abstract: The article seeks to contribute to the conceptualisation of political extremism and to lay a foundation for further theoretical studies which are explanatory in nature. A sketch of the history of the concepts follows a discussion of structural characteristics and then a typological examination of forms of extremism, particularly those of the 20th and 21st century.*

*Key words: Anarcho-communism, Autocracy, Constitutionalism, Democracy, Extremism, Fundamentalism, Marxism-Leninism, National Socialism, Non-democratic actors, Political extremism*

In the western tradition, the concept of political extremism is closely connected to the exploration of non-democratic actors. The value commitment of the concept, the attitude of rejection it expresses and its not infrequent polemical utilization in political debates have caused numerous controversies and motivated plenty of fundamental criticism (Backes, Jesse 2005). This article reconstructs the roots and turns of the history of the relevant ideas and demonstrates the close interconnections with the constitutional tradition of the Occident. A sketch of the history of the concepts follows a discussion of structural characteristics. A discussion of the possibilities and problems inherent in finding a scientifically adequate definition is followed by a typological examination of forms of extremism, particularly those of the 20th and 21st century. This article primarily seeks to contribute to the clarification of the problem and to lay a foundation for further theoretical studies which are explanatory in nature.

## 1. History of terms

The idea of the political extreme is rooted in the ancient Greek ethics of moderation. In every action situation there is a midpoint (mesotes) between the too-great (hyperbole) and the too-little (elleipsis), a distinction between the excessive and the moderate (Backes 2006). An elaborate system of terminological categories is found in the middle and the late writings of Plato.

---

<sup>1</sup> Author works at the Hannah Arendt Institute for Research on Totalitarianism at the Technical University of Dresden, 010 62 Dresden; e-mail: [backes@mail.zih.tu-dresden.de](mailto:backes@mail.zih.tu-dresden.de).

Plato connected the ethics of moderation to constitutional doctrine. His continuum of governmental form spanned the extremes of despoteia/tyrannis and anomia/lawless democracy (in the sense of mob rule). Oligarchy, basileia (kingdom), aristocracy and legal democracy were located between the extremes. The mean (meson), guaranteeing both moderation (metrion) and virtue (arete), was reached through the mixture (meikte) and balancing of constitutional elements which, taken by themselves, would be harmful (kakon) and extreme (akron). The ontological phenomenological dimension of the differentiation of the forms of government was connected in this way to the normative axiological dimension of the mesotes doctrine (Aalders 1968; Krämer 1959; Nippel 1980).

Aristotle freed the Platonic terms from their theological, ontological framework, embedded them in a comprehensive scientific system and gave them a politically realistic calibre. In his *Nichomachian Ethics* he established virtue or moral competence (arete) as the midpoint (meson) or centre (mesotes) between the too-great (hyperbole) and the too-little (elleipsis), which were meant to be the farthest ends or extremes (akron, eschaton) of an action continuum. In his *Politics* he brought the ethical mesotes doctrine together with the concept of the mixed constitution. The interests of the upper and the lower classes were to be balanced in a society carried by the middle classes (mesoi) and to be balanced by means of an artful composition of politically institutional organizational elements from different constitutional forms. Under the condition of the humanly possible, Aristotle recommended "politeia", a mixture of "oligarchic" and "democratic" elements, as the relatively best form of government, in which the maxim of avoiding extremes was to lead to a constitution at the same time it guaranteed stability in such matters as the liberty of citizens.

Aristotelianism, with the connection it draws between the ethical mesotes doctrine and the theory of mixed political constitution, has shaped the history of the political idea of the constitutional state –not least due to the mediation of scholasticism and humanism (Riklin 2006; Sternberger 1984). The republicanism of the northern Italian city-states and later the United States of America was able to connect to this as much as the monarchic constitutionalism of Great Britain. The extremes were the carriers of aberrant human behaviour as well as the maxims and social forces they were based upon. Extremes stood for depluralization and the concentration on violence; the mean stood for pluralism and the control of violence. Two major forms of the extreme were to be differentiated: depluralization and the unleashing of violence could be caused by the despotic tyranny of an individual just as much as through the anarchic rioting of the masses. Already Plato had based his two-dimensional concept on these two types

of extremes. Aristotle took up this differentiation. The rulership of the Jacobines during the French Revolution was not the only later event to document its continued relevance.

The ontologically axiological two-dimensionality of the Platonic-Aristotelian mesotes and mixed constitutional doctrine offered logical possibilities for connection to the new political taxonomy which developed in the aftermath of the French Revolution. It kept its differentiation of “extreme” and “reasonable”/“midpoint” forms and connected these with the new terms “right” and “left”, based upon the parliamentary seating plan. Now, so to speak, the two traditional extremes obtained their seat at the wings of the political continuum. With the expansion of the right-left differentiation, the old terms were also transported further, even though they frequently severed the connection to the mixed constitutional discourse, which partially lost its importance as the central medium of constitutionalist exegesis during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The “ism” “extremism” found entry into the political language in numerous ways, without at first establishing itself in its own enduring terminological category. This applies to its appearance during the age of religious wars (Stephen Gardiner, bishop of Winchester characterized the partisans of a radical reformation as the “new scoole of extremites” [Gardiner 1546]) as well as to its introduction into the terminology of the German “Vormärz” (the liberal philosopher Wilhelm Traugott Krug introduced the term “Extremisten” as a synonym for “Ultraisten” [Krug 1838]). In both cases, these were times of political polarization, in which traditional words and expressions did not seem to suffice to describe a phenomenon perceived as an existential danger. This also applied to the Russian Revolution of 1917, which was the cause for the term “extremism” establishing itself permanently – at first in the western states – in the political language. In France and England, “extremism” became a catch-phrase which initially expressed fear of the looming separate peace more than fear of the consequences of the political radicalism of the Bosheviks. For a time, “extremism” remained limited to the “extreme left” yet was extended to the new formation of the “extreme right” – fascism – after the “March on Rome”.

In this fashion, the term regained the comparative perspective of the Platonic-Aristotelian categories. Spiritual isomorphies of the extremes had already been worked out by liberal observers such as Madame de Staël and Benjamin Constant during the first few years following the French Revolution (Backes 2006: 106). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it had become customary to parallel the extremes of the political spectrum from the vantage point of constitutionalism and, aside from the obvious differences, to work out the analogies and structural similarities. Again

and again, controversies were sparked by the comparative dimension inseparably connected to the term extremism when it was introduced into scientific discussion in the 1920s.

## 2. Structural Characteristics

Whoever recalls the history of the terminology of the political “extreme” and of “extremism” is able to name an entire array of structural characteristics. “Extreme” and “extremism” determine something which is the *farthest out*. There is nothing beyond the extreme; extremes cannot be increased, they embody something which cannot be surpassed or exceeded. Saying “A is more extreme than B” or “C is the most extreme value” thus contradicts the logic of the term.

Extremes can be conceived spatially as the ends of a distance but may be pictured equally well as the boundary of a circular surface or even as the surface of a sphere. Under a one-, two- or three-dimensional conceptualization, a midpoint may be established lying equidistant to the extreme points. Ergo, the principle of equidistance is inherent in the picture of the midpoint and the extremes.

The extremes of a distance are the points farthest removed from each other. The relationship of the two extremes to each other as well as to the midpoint of the extremes may be thought of as different. The extremes then form the antitheses; at the same time the midpoint finds itself in an antithetical relationship. Nonetheless, one of the antithetical relationships is expressed in a more pronounced fashion. In the Aristotelian tradition, the midpoint is at the same time a point of balance between the too-great and the too-little. Here, traits, which are fully expressed at the extremes, come to the fore in a milder form. The midpoint, often the metaphor for equilibrium and scales, embodies the principle of *moderation*. In the doctrine of virtues, the midpoint stands for morally appropriate behaviour that neither exaggerates nor understates; it neither extends far beyond that which is imperative nor remains far behind. Virtuous behaviour is the condition for a telos, which the individual is capable of reaching, both with and within the society of the state: a moderate and virtuous life allows for eudemony, the unfolding of human happiness.

In politics, Aristotle transferred the image of the midpoint and the extremes to the doctrine of the forms of government. The midpoint corresponds to *politeia*, which, according to the experience gained from the condition of the humanly possible, is the best constitution. It creates a solid foundation for successfully striving for virtue and bliss. It mixes the fundamental principles and components of various forms of government, especially oligarchy and democracy,

in such a way that the middle levels dominate, the confluence of a multitude of social forces is enabled, the exchange of interests is institutionally coordinated, and power is effectively controlled.

With his description and recommendation of *politeia*, the mixed constitution, Aristotle, in his further critical development of Plato's late work, measurably contributed to the founding of the constitutional state tradition of the occident. The image of the midpoint and the extremes was closely connected to it for centuries. The extremes corresponded to negative constitutional terms such as "tyrannis" and "despoteia", which have a pejorative connotation and express a defence mechanism, as the quintessence of that which is to be absolutely rejected (Mandt 2003; Turchetti 2001).

Negative constitutional terms generally are borrowed terms, meaning that they serve as labels for political opinions, forms of action and actors from whom one disassociates oneself most carefully. These, therefore, also always constitute a means employed in political argumentation, in particular aggressive vocabulary, which, in the framework of a "naming" strategy (Adler 1978) serve for the derogative characterization of political opponents. They are stigma words (Hermanns 1982), used to mark the boundaries of political legitimacy, to judge others unworthy and to designate dangers. The flaunting of the extreme is a part of normalization discourse (Link 2006), in which the majority society permanently reflects its normality and middle. In normalization discourses, cultural power struggles find their expression in severe criticism of unpopular opponents. The values of the minimal political consensus mandated by the system are not always actually injured.

The use of the stigma word "extremism" on the part of a political majority culture creates what Reinhard Koselleck called an "asymmetric" language situation (Koselleck 1979: 211-259). The labelled cannot accept the label they are addressed with, distance themselves from the borrowed term, doubt the load bearing capacity of its content, stress its denunciatory character and deny its scientific causality. Now and then, there are even legal battles fought over the use of political stigma words. For instance, the French Front National (FN) of the national populist Jean-Marie Le Pen brought a lawsuit against its classification by the press as "extreme right", since the expression suggests violence (Canu 1997: 32).

In contrast, as in the case of the FN, those negatively labelled occasionally choose another strategy turning the meaning of the label in the opposite direction. A negative borrowed term then becomes a positive self-designation. Another language strategy of the stigmatized consists in turning the tables on the labellers by using the negative borrowed term on them. With

this in mind, the term “extremism of the middle” is sometimes courted (Kraushaar 2005). However, the strategy of the restoration of symmetry in the language situation has an opportunity for success only when the labelled or the labellers have societal power of definition at their disposal.

The history of the terminology of the “extremes” and of “extremism” proves their variability and dependency on context, which in the most far-reaching case can lead as far as the expression of a “golden middle” which had previously been fought as an extreme. The contents connected to the image of the midpoint and the extremes have been frequently subject to change; for that reason alone, may encompass contradictory ideas and worldviews, since political opponents sometimes make use of the term coined for them, filling it with different meaning.

In the Aristotelian tradition, enormously effective for the historical shaping of the constitutional state, the image of the midpoint and the extremes, however, does not express such a change of will. The quintessence of the extreme arises from a consensus over that which is to be absolutely rejected. The consensus in the negation narrows the spectrum of possibilities of choice thought to be legitimate, and yet allows for numerous paths to approach an aim that is considered good. The content of the consensus over the absolutely to be rejected can be reduced to four points: 1) *Pluralism* instead of monism: The state unites a number of people and human groups whose interests and world views are different, yet, nevertheless, at the same time legitimate. It cannot, either in its institutional design or in its communication and decision-making processes, be formed solely based upon the maxims of a single individual or group. 2) *Orientation toward a common good* instead of an egoistical execution of interests: a legitimate order must be obliged to the idea of a “bonum commune”. Under the condition of a plurality of equals, different interests and worldviews are to be taken into consideration. A “bonum commune” as thus understood does not, therefore, contain a comprehensive a priori common good (Sutor). 3) *Rule of Law* instead of arbitrary rule: A political order must be comprised of rules which are to be adhered to by everyone, including those ruling at the moment. Without a system for the control of power (division of power, limitation of power, distribution of competencies) this cannot be guaranteed on a permanent basis. And, finally, 4) *Self-determination* instead of outside determination: decisions are only acceptable when there exists at least a fair possibility for participating in the decision-making process. The political system must make participation in power possible, meaning there must be processes intended for the controlled execution of conflicts and a formation of the will and decision-making process organized under plurality conditions, according to the respective resulting majorities.

### 3. Definitions

As the history of terminology shows, those who want to speak of “extremes” and “extremism” which in the framework of a scientific terminology must de-contextualize the terms to a certain degree to free them from their changing historical contents – unless relativity has been established as the central content. This would, however, contradict the tradition of the history of terminology as opposing poles of a political “middle”, which causes the spread of violence and the social balancing of interests through the “mixture” of constitutional elements. Most of the key terms of the historical political language are used in different contexts, monopolized by diverse political directions and instrumentalized for political arguments. Nonetheless, hardly anyone would come to the conclusion that the word “democracy” should be abandoned just because it has a great deal of historic terminological meaning. If new terms had to be invented for all the words misused, this would – for the uninitiated – result in a puzzling artificial language which would serve more as a barrier to communication than a means of communication. Therefore, one cannot forego defining terms of colourful, sparkling, historically political content in such a way that popular understanding is taken into account as much as possible, but which simultaneously achieves high selectivity.

In light of the outstanding importance of the Aristotelian heritage concerning the history of occidental constitutionalism, designating “extremism” as the *antithesis of the constitutional state* seems to suggest itself. A dichotomy, extremism/constitutional state, completes the terminological pair of autocracy/constitutional state which Karl Loewenstein developed in his constitutional doctrine (Loewenstein 1969: 26-29). The central criterion of differentiation formulates a question referring to the division and the control of power. According to this, extremism would be the – voluntary and involuntary – *striving for “autocracy”* (or “dictatorship”) in the sense of the concentration and lack of control of governmental authority.

But the constitutional state and extremism cannot be determined only on the basis of the institutional structure of the state; it also depends upon the structure and organization of the power process. The well-known minimal definition of the constitutional state by Robert A. Dahl establishes it as “polyarchy”, a system in which a competition for influence, power and positions is carried out by peaceful means (Dahl 1971: 5). Such a system assumes the existence of several competing parties and interest groups (pluralism, the legitimacy of political opposition, institutional mechanisms for regulating the interaction between majorities and minorities – like elections and parliaments) and the validity of an array of fundamental vested rights of citizens

against the infringement of rights by governmental authority, as well as for participation in political matters (such as freedom of opinion, freedom of unification, and freedom of association). Without a functioning, power-controlling institutional structure, there is no formation of the will and decision-making process, and competition cannot be engaged in peacefully. Extremism thus aims at "*monism*" and "*monocracy*" in the sense of the enforcement of a bundled claim to power which – if at all possible – eliminates any competition, does not tolerate variety and opposition, seeks to render it harmless at the very least, stops political change, obstructs and suppresses the autonomous commitment of groups and individuals, at least when this stands in the way of the ambitions of the rulers (Shils 1996: 227; Lipset, Raab 1978: 6). The idea of the citizen, therefore, belongs to the world of the constitutional state. Apart from the mighty, there are only subordinates (underlings) in the sphere of activity of political extremes.

Extremism as the antithesis of the constitutional state can be more closely determined beyond the institutional and procedural political level by the structure of the societal communication process. Whereas the constitutional state corresponds to the "forum type" in which questions of state are consequently included among public matters to be discussed in an exchange of differing opinions in a "marketplace of political ideas", in debate and discussion, argumentatively, discursively, transparently, accessible and visible to everyone, "*extremism aims at the 'palace type'*" (Finer 1999: 1567), in which shunning publicity in matters of state is the rule, entitlement to have one's say and discussion are undesirable, and the ruling strategy depends upon the most careful preservation of the "*arcana imperii*", accessible only to select circles behind the unbugged walls of the control centre.

The tendency of the extremists toward the "palace", on the other hand, may be traced to commonalities in their mental morphology. The push toward monocracy/power concentration and monism is called forth through an exclusive *demand for truth-, interpretation and organization* which pleads "higher insights", "incontestable authorities" and/or knowledge of the "laws of history" (historicism; Popper 1960), immunizes itself toward criticism and therefore leans toward dogmatism. The insight and interpretation monopoly forbids the acceptance of competing designs and gives grounds for the "impossibility of coexistence" (Lübbe 1987: 286). The plurality of opinions, interests and life designs, in this light, prevents the absolutely-to-be-striven-for unity, concord and harmony. Extremist ideologies develop a political power uniformity program. Whatever does not agree with one's own political design is interpreted away, declared illegitimate and exterminated if necessary. Extremist ideologies unpack a bipolar, Manichaeian world view which assigns the spiritually deviant to the "kingdom of evil" and thus justifies a clear friend-foe



differentiation. In the realm of social psychology, such thinking may be interpreted as a consequence of intolerance of ambiguity (Reis 1997), the refusal to accept the heterogeneity and ambiguity of the world, the complexity of life circumstances and the conflicting nature of society as facts and to constructively put these into practice.

With their striving for the concentration of power, monistic standardization and the conclusion of the formation of opinion- and decision-making processes, extremisms not only undermine the *liberty of the citizens*: they also undermine the *equality of citizens* in the sense of ancient Greek *isonomy* and *isogory*, meaning equality under the law, the right to equality and the right to free speech and stating one's position on matters concerning the general public. Accordingly, extremism aims – at least in its effect (not necessarily in its intentions) – at the *hierarchization* of those governing and the governed, the rulers and those ruled over, political “initiates” and the ignorant.

#### 4. Forms of political extremism

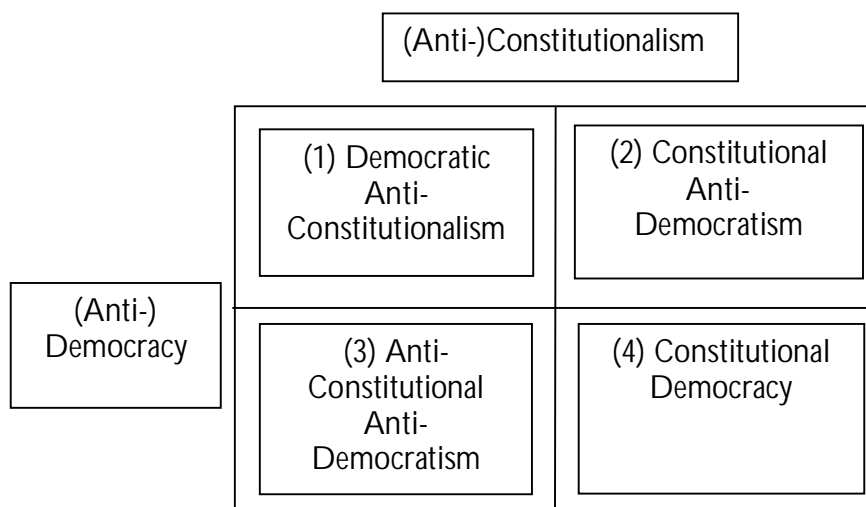
From the different aspects of a definition for the term “extremism”, orienting itself as the antithesis to constitutional democracy, criteria for a sensible organization of the realm of definitions may be established. A first possibility for this type results from the interpretation of the modern constitutional state as *regimen mixtum*. The “extreme democratic” thrusting element which strives for total equality among citizens and the permanent and direct civil execution of power is limited to the elementary rights of liberty on account of “monarchic” and “aristocratic” checks and balances, for instance in the interests of a quick governmental decision, qualified discussion in parliaments or judicial protection from infringement upon one's rights by the people's will onto the elementary rights of liberty. In particular, the mixed constitution creates the equilibrium between civil liberties and civil equality.

The warning against the extreme democracy of a mob of people stirred up by demagogues has been a permanent *topos* of the history of ideas since Plato and Aristotle. The modern constitutional state is in need of the monarchic and aristocratic counterbalance no less than was the ancient state. For within that state, the principle of equality, in contrast to the older constitutionalism, gained validity even more strongly in the aftermath of the revolutions in America and France. The group with full citizenship expanded step-by-step to include all adult citizens. The ethos of the fundamental equality of human beings, having sprung from ancient sources (especially the stoa), channeled by Christianity, humanism and the Enlightenment, has gradually overcome the natural categorical inequality of women, slaves and strangers, basing the

constitutional state on a broad foundation of the people. The democratic constitutional state forms a tense synthesis of monarchic, aristocratic and democratic elements. It has, therefore, often been described as a *complexio oppositorum*. Alois Riklin – in a critical connection to Dolf Sternberger – has called attention anew to the importance of the tradition of the mixed constitution for the unfolding of occidental constitutionalism (Riklin 2006: 401-423).

Insight into the mixed nature of the constitutional state makes it possible to differentiate forms of political extremism according to the thrust of their respective main directions. Is the democratic element being over-extended to a degree that would endanger civil liberties? Or is the liberty of certain citizens to be held high at the expense of civil equality? According to the dimensions of civil equality and civil liberty, one may distinguish an *anti-democratic* from an *anti-constitutional* thrust. The former undermines civil equality – for instance in the form of the axiom of fundamental human equality – which in the form of the idea of human rights, constitutes the ethical foundation of the constitutional state of the present. The latter aims at the power-controlled set of regulations which is to ensure civil liberty. Carl J. Friedrich has described the creation of the modern constitutional state as a process of the merging of democracy (in the sense of equality and the people's sovereignty) and constitutionalism (a plurality-ensuring, power-controlled institutional structure) (Friedrich 1950). However, for an analytical differentiation, there arises a problem with respect to the definition of extremism. Is the combination of anti-constitutionalism and anti-democratism a necessary requirement when speaking of extremism? Or would one of the two dimensions suffice? Theoretically, the two dimensions can be combined into four typical ideal forms (see Figure 1):

Figure 1. (Anti-)Democracy and (Anti-)Constitutionalism Combined.



The three first types: democratic anti-constitutionalism, constitutional anti-democratism and anti-constitutional anti-democratism (or rather anti-democratic anti-constitutionalism) negate basic principles of the constitutional state; in this sense, type four, democratic constitutionalism, constitutes the antithesis of the other three (Backes 2000: 46). The first form stands for an ideology/movement which answers the ethos of fundamental equality of human beings, rejecting, however, the power-controlling design of the constitutional state. This might apply to all the communist and anarchist doctrines in as far as one were to take seriously their radically egalitarian manner of seeing themselves. The second form would apply to Aristotle's *politeia*, a constitutional state on the basis of slavery – a pattern which is still found in many of the North-American republics of the founding days and marked the domestic policy arguments of the USA until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Regarding the present, one might think of the followers of Apartheid on a constitutional basis (as in the former South Africa). The third form is found in Hitler's and the other leading national socialists' world view: radical negation of the ethos of the fundamental equality of human beings in favour of national racism connected to the propagation of the totalitarian leader state, which eliminates the system assuring civil liberty in a process of "Gleichschaltung" (forcing into line).

If one were to reserve the term "extremism" for the combination of both dimensions, one would exempt ideologies/movements which aim at the elimination of the constitutional state or the exclusion of parts of the population from assuring essential basic rights. For a historical view of the hatching of democratic constitutional states (the process of democratizing the constitutional state) and their political antipodes, it is most important to separate both dimensions. Their differentiation is also of great importance for the analysis of the present. Yet it would contradict the current understanding to the greatest possible extent if one were to reserve the term "extremism" for the combination of enmity with democracy *and* constitutionalism.

However, a definition of extremism which calls only for one of the two dimensions has its price: in the strictest sense, as soon as only one of the two dimensions is available, it no longer has anything to do with an exclusively antithetical relationship, so that anti-democratism is connected to constitutional orientations or – in the reverse – anti-constitutionalism to democratic values. If such ideological relationships pass themselves off as "extremism", the definition no longer incorporates the idea of the farthest-reaching or unsurpassable. Moreover, the respective conviction systems on the "freedom axis" between the assumed midpoint and the extremes move a bit closer toward the direction of the middle. In this way, a political space is created in which

one must differentiate between “extreme” and “more extreme” (or “softer” and “harder”) forms —actually a *contradictio in adjecto*.

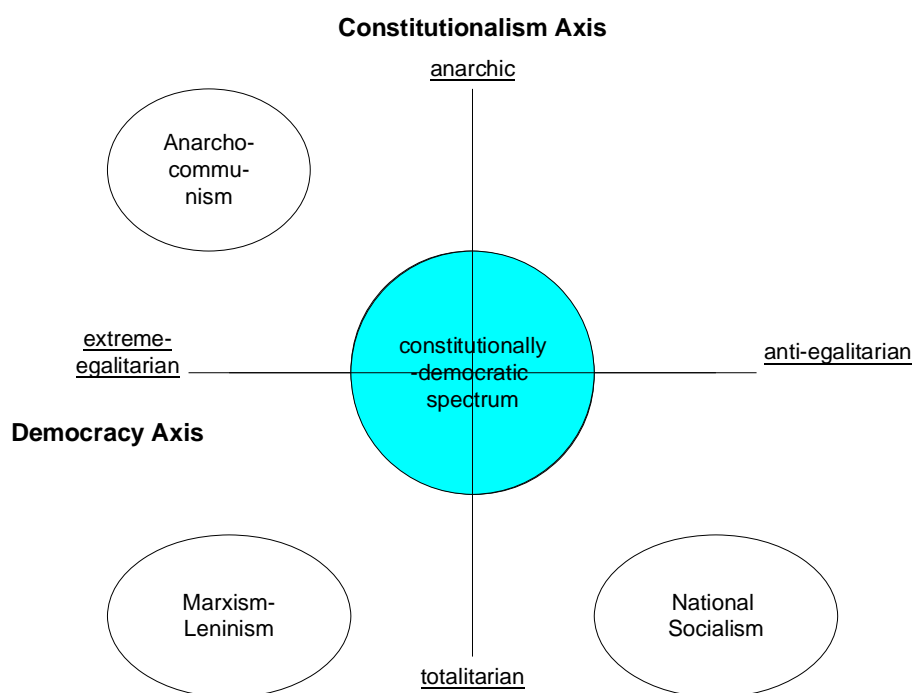
Still, whoever holds fast to the definition of extremism of only one of the aforementioned two dimensions must be aware of the problematic situation and pay his dues to it when it comes to the analysis of political ideologies. What is more, the dimensions of “anti-democratism” and “anti-constitutionalism” may be further subdivided. By doing so, “anti-constitutionalism” gives rise to further partial domains like anti-parliamentarism, anti-liberalism (in the sense of the restriction and the suspension of liberal rights) or anti-pluralism (such as anti-party affect and interest-group prudishness). In anti-democratism, one would, for instance, have to differentiate between anti-egalitarianism with regard to individual liberties (e.g., discrimination against minorities) and the relationship to the people’s sovereignty. A definition of extremism should, in any case, be drawn up in such a way that the negation of at least one dimension is required, without which a democratic constitutional state would not be worth the name. This includes the ethos of the fundamental equality of human beings as a basic value, along with the political pluralism of parties and associations, the thereby-connected autonomy of civil commitment, the legitimacy of political opposition, the periodic conducting of elections (in which the traditional principles of democratic voting law exist), as well as a number of indispensable basic rights (such as freedom of opinion, freedom of association and freedom of assembly) and their guarantee through a power-balancing institutional structure (legitimacy of government, parliamentary control, an independent judiciary).

Differentiating between the two dimensions, anti-democratism and anti-constitutionalism, has a great deal in common with Norberto Bobbio’s two-dimensional subdivision of the political realm. The differentiation between extremism/autocracy and the constitutional state orients itself with respect to the principle of (individual) freedom whereas that between “right” and “left” orients itself with respect to the principle of equality. Both dimensions are not thought to be parallel but rather axes crossing each other (Bobbio 1996: 72). Accordingly, aside from a temperate constitutional state oriented right and left, there is also an extreme autocratic right and left which favours autocratic leadership forms.

Bobbio’s two-dimensional division of the political realm may be connected to the above-introduced dimensions of “anti-democratism” and “anti-constitutionalism”. In this way, a spiritual, politically traditional connection comes to the fore, and the “axis of freedom” with a catalogue of values and institutional processing regulations experiences concretization. As shown in Figure 2, the political realm may be grasped two-dimensionally by differentiating

between a constitutionalism and a democracy axis. The extreme poles of constitutionalism are termed “anarchic” and “totalitarian”. “Anarchic” anti-constitutionalism negates every form of national order whereas the “totalitarian” pole develops a claim to omnipotence which penetrates all societal realms, disintegrating the separation of the public and the private realm. The extreme poles of the axis of democracy are called “extreme-egalitarian” and “anti-egalitarian”. Here, “democracy” primarily describes the equality dimension. Following Bobbio’s plausible classification on the equality axis, it is identical with the traditional right-left dimension.

Figure 2. Forms of political extremism in a two-dimensional political space (anti-democratism/anti-constitutionalism).

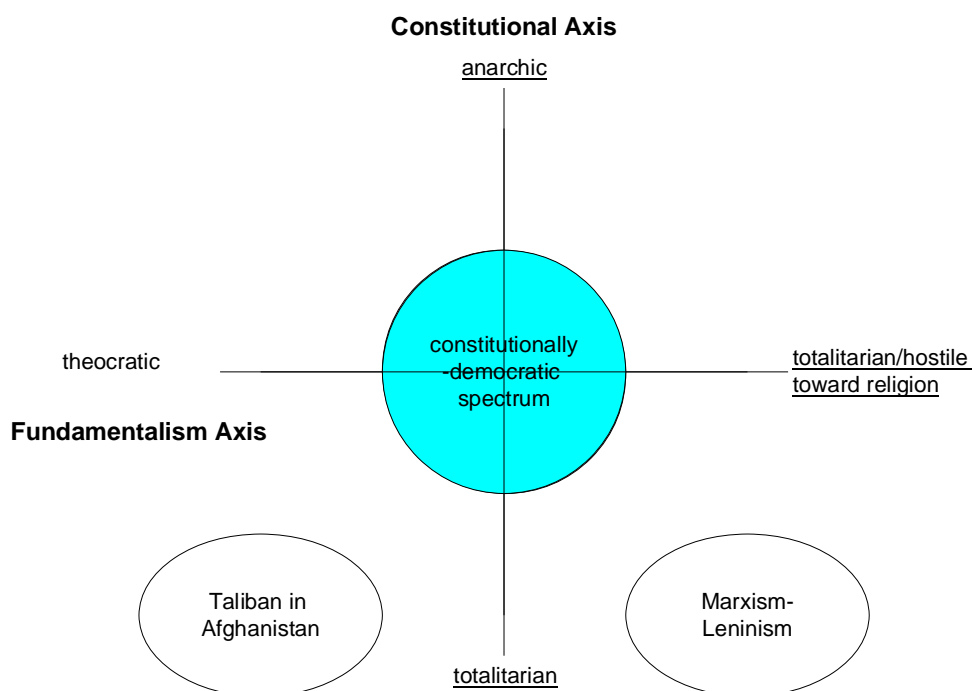


On the constitutionalism axis, the focus is on the control of power and assurance of plurality speak to civil liberty, whereas on the democracy axis, the subject is the relationship to the principles of civil equality and the sovereignty of the people. The extreme right and left, tending toward autocratic solutions, are similar in their anti-constitutionalism but differ in their classification on the democracy axis. According to its way of seeing itself, Marxism-Leninism may be described after this scheme as “democratic anti-constitutionalism” and national socialism as “anti-democratic anti-constitutionalism”. Nevertheless, these are only rough classifications. The different ideological variants (Leninism and Stalinism distinguish themselves from each other just as Hitler’s and Rosenberg’s national socialism does) would have to be described more exactly and

individually, whereby the terminological clusters “anti-democratism” and “anti-constitutionalism” would be broken down into their individual components in the manner already described. In this depiction, anarchism takes up its own individual position. As anarcho-communism it connects an “extreme-egalitarian” view, with an anarchic-subversive orientation. Besides, there is no lack of ideological connection between anti-egalitarianism and anarchism; only practically speaking has it remained almost meaningless, therefore not having found acceptance in the diagram.

Religious political fundamentalism, which has gained political importance at the edges of all world religions, in particular in the Islamic cultural circle during the last few decades, nevertheless clearly shows that the two dimensions, anti-constitutionalism and anti-democratism, in no way suffice to adequately comprehend the spectrum of political extremisms on the level of their own ideological and programmatic self-knowledge. The relationship to the egalitarian principle is obvious, and therefore classification on the equality axis is not crucial for these forms. Another line of conflict, namely that determined by the question regarding the relationship between religion and the state, appears to be more important. To explain these facts more clearly, one may think of the political sphere as being two-dimensional, whereby the democracy axis is replaced by an axis of religion (see Figure 3).

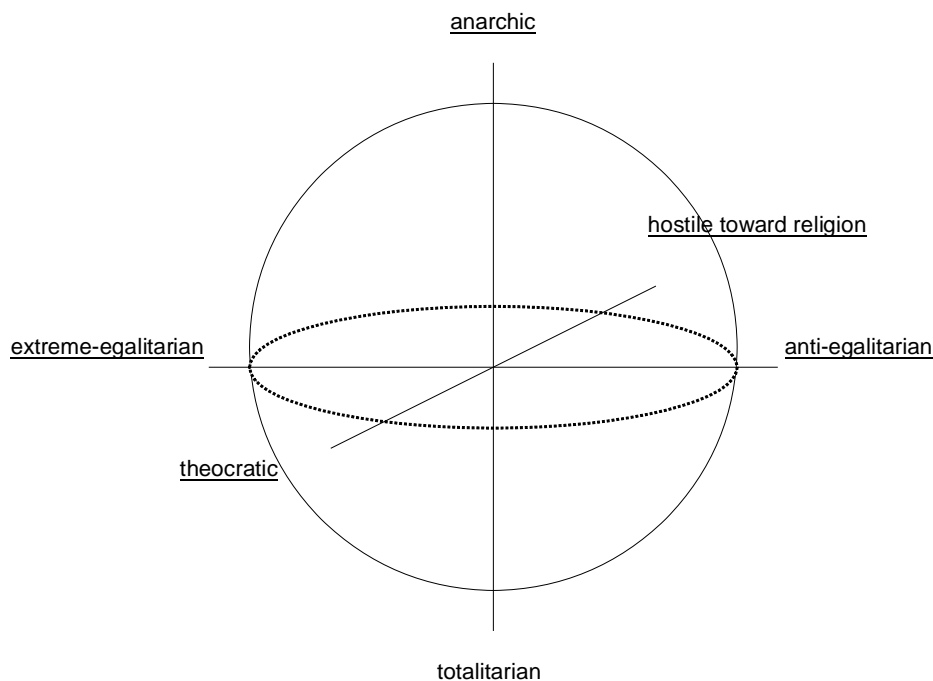
Figure 3. Forms of political extremism in the two-dimensional political sphere (constitutionalism-/fundamentalism axis).



The extreme poles of this axis may be labelled enmity toward religion, and theocracy. As far as enmity toward religion is concerned, this would address ideologies which condemn every form of belief in a hereafter as an intellectual attack on reason and meet the followers of such a belief with intolerance. An example for the connection of enmity toward religion and totalitarian anti-constitutionalism is found in Lenin's and Stalin's communism, with its systematic killing of priests, the destruction or desecration of churches, the "movement of the godless" and other excesses. Characteristically, enmity toward religion springs from a state ideology which, like the state religion of theocracy, claims absoluteness (of superior rationality). Here, too, extremes meet. The essential difference lies in the radical worldliness of the enmity-toward-religion ideology, standing in sharp contrast to the otherworldliness of a fundamentalist political theology. Rulership-wise, theocracy may approach enmity-of-religion totalitarianism in the same measure in which the claim of God's reign on Earth is faithfully put into effect. The reign of the Taliban in Afghanistan comes close to this relationship.

To explain the independence of the three dimensions of political extremism in the spiritual political realm, a three-dimensional depiction with a constitutionalism, a democracy and a fundamentalism axis suggests itself (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Forms of political extremism in the three-dimensional sphere.



The more unconditionally certain organizations, in their ideological programmatic self-interpretation, strive toward the extreme poles in their spiritual-political realm, the more pronounced their tendency may be – by summoning every possible means – to impose their proposed absolute aims in their claim of exclusive truth, interpretation and design. The conviction of the superiority of their own insight and prognostic capability, in combination with the claim of preventing a catastrophe and “putting the world to rights again” and/or creating a new world, leads from intellectual self-empowerment to action. Their grandiose aims, seen as sacrosanct, allow for the use of violence and, in the extreme case, even mass murder as legitimate. Nevertheless, it would be inappropriate to see the use of violence or illegal methods as defining characteristics of political extremism. The question of the use of violence and the breaking of norms may – independent of the respective ideological programmatic orientation – be answered differently from the perspective of different strategic considerations. The political behaviour of the NSDAP at the beginning of the 1930s shows that extremist ideology and the practice of violence do not necessarily go hand-in-hand. Their legal tactics took advantage of the widespread relativistic understanding of democracy in the Weimar state. Thus, Goebbels (1935: 71) could announce frankly: “We are entering the Reichstag to supply ourselves from the arsenal of democracy with their own weapons. We are becoming representatives of the Reichstag to immobilize Weimar convictions with their own support. If democracy is so stupid as to give us free tickets and diets for this bad turn, it is its own business. To us, every legal means is welcome to revolutionize today’s conditions.”

The moulding of ideology does not allow for any compelling logic with respect to strategic behaviour. Can one, then, in a stringent manner, make any assumptions from the ideological programmatic structure about the type of autocracy which is to be expected after a power takeover? Here, one must exercise caution as the processes of the transformation and the establishment of autocracy depend, to a large degree, on the respective political conditions of power, the institutional requirements and socio-economic conditions, as well as the cultural framework. At the same time, one can deduce basic political intentions and forms of legitimation from the ideology of a political movement that give a direction to the moulding of the to be expected regime. Therefore, the communist education dictatorship in the ideology of Marxism-Leninism is structured in the same way as the charismatic leader dictatorship in the doctrines of fascism and national socialism. In a similar way, one can assume theocratic traits for establishing a successful autocracy in political religious fundamentalism.



Can evidence also be found to answer the question about the “authoritarian” or “totalitarian” moulding of autocracy? From the degree of moulding and the configuration of the structural characteristics of extremist ideologies, conclusions should be possible about the degree of depluralization to be expected and “thorough domination” of a society. The experience of the totalitarian regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century suggests that a utopian piety heightens the probability of totalitarian rulership practice, since the utopia is able to deliver a foundation for the justification of a rigorous transformation, “Gleichschaltung” (forcing into line) and “cleansing” of society.

In historical reality, some extremisms defy clear classification, since they practice political mimicry, cover up their true intentions with guarded diction and respectable behaviour, and deny any connection with historically known forms. Furthermore, there are parties found in many European democracies which present an ambiguous appearance, since they – as in the case of some of the post-communist parties – undergo an acculturation processes, accommodate different trends with partially contradictory orientations and – figuratively speaking – stand with one foot in the extremist and the other foot in the constitutionally democratic spectrum. Also, at the right as well as the left edge of party systems, there are intellectual grey areas between radical, yet still system-conforming criticism of the status quo, and declared enmity toward the system. Populist parties, often containing unusual mixtures of “left” and “right” ideological elements, often show a diffuse programmatic appearance (Decker 2004; Hartleb 2004; Meny, Surel 2002; Thieme 2005). In such cases, it seems advisable to practice caution in dealing with the extremism concept, if it is not to be watered down. Instead, one may speak of “extreme tendencies”. Also, the concept introduced into the Anglo-Saxon discussion of “system loyalty”, “semi-loyalty”, and “illoyalty” seems suitable for a more discriminating understanding of the transitional realm between a clear orientation on the fundamental values and rules of democratic constitutional states and their unequivocal negation.

## 5. Outlook

A definition of extremism in the sense of the rejection of basic values and rules of the game in the democratic constitutional state in no way amounts to the same thing as seeing extremism as a consequence of negations and reactions. A look at history tells us that constitutional states came into existence only several thousand years after the first high cultures had come into being at the shores of the large rivers Euphrates, Tigris and Nile. Someone thinking along the lines of the concentration of powers, monism and monocracy may thus claim “older rights” and, in addition, point to the world-wide dominance of non-constitutional forms

of state over the period of many centuries. Therefore, it was not at all absurd when one of the most extravagant intellectual endeavours in the age of the radical revolutionary changes in America and France sought to establish proof of the “natural state” of founding-father patrimonialism and the merely residual importance of republicanism (Haller).

The autocracies are older than the constitutional states, and have accompanied their development and sustained themselves on a global scale until well into the present, regardless of all the waves of democratization (Huntington 1993). Thereby, the ideocracies or worldview dictatorships, with their totalitarian traits, form rather an exception, whereas those forms which at many points correspond to the Aristotelian description of tyrannies to a large degree make up the majority. Among the present-day autocracies there are not only a few which – like the theocratic system in Iran or so-called “sultanism” (Chehabi, Linz 1998) – partially carry archaic traits. Now that the most beautiful dreams of the flowering transitology of the nineties have dissipated, comparative system research has, in addition, adopted new “hybrid” regimes, which connect the typical characteristics of autocracy to those of the constitutional state (Diamond 2002; Bendel, Croissant, Rüb 2002).

Aside from vital autocracies there is no lack of intellectual trends which de-legitimize the constitutional state and point in adventurous new directions. This is why radical globalization critics, in their leanings toward Marx and Lenin, see the expansion of liberal democracy and market economy as theoretical imperialism (Hardt, Negri 2003). Anarchism, historically not burdened by oppressive regimes, is developing new attractiveness (Chomsky 2005). Leading thinkers of a so-called “new right” are unmasking fascism, communism and liberalism as equally totalitarian (Benoist 1998). The populist “Zeitgeist” offers manifold combinations of “left” and “right” in a twilight zone between constitutional democracy and extremism (Mudde 2007: 31). And now that the “third universal theory”, introduced by Muammar Al-Gaddafi in the 1980s, has mercifully disappeared into oblivion, the “milestones” of the Egyptian Muslim brother Sayyid Qutb are being viewed as a political revelation in Islamistic circles. Islamism is obstructing liberal development using both terrorist and non-terrorist variants. The religion factor has unexpectedly furthered the formation of political ideologies in other cultural circles as well aiming at “integral” rulership methods that force back every other design claim as illegitimate.

It would hardly be meaningful if one were to restrict the term in such a way that extremism were to be seen as a reaction to 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarianism. A world-historical view may, for good reasons, reach the final conclusion that autocratic systems and extremist efforts aimed at establishing them are just as strongly anthropologically anchored as those trains of

thought and worldview is that further constitutionally democratic solutions. The tendency popular in old consolidated democracies (such as Great Britain) to see extremisms as marginal minorities (the lunatic fringe) may be correct for some bizarre species; nevertheless, altogether, this shows a certain arrogance which dissipates quickly as soon as one calls forth the memory of the historical political conditionality of the “experiment of freedom” (Kielmansegg 1988).

However, to take seriously the challenges of political extremism in the future does not mean one should make a case for alarmism and exorcism. If a certain justification may be ascribed to the formulation the “extremism of the middle” which is frequently used in polemical contexts, it is in vain that the political middle – in the sense of the system-carrying trends of democratic constitutional states – and extremisms (as long as they are not completely marginal) mostly stand in an interrelationship to each other. Based upon experience, in a certain way they belong to the “normal household” of open societies. The success of particular forms of extremism often points to weaknesses and oversights by the political majority culture. Criticism from an extremist vantage point may frequently be exaggerated but sometimes also contains a grain of truth. Extremism – like prison – is in some respects a mirror image of social development, and allows for conclusions about the condition of the majority society. The mesotes doctrine permits the insight that the midpoint contains something of the extremes. They over-expand those principles which, in temperate and balanced form, are of use. Above all, political extremisms that act within the framework of legality may, in such a way – like poisons that, in small doses, develop healing effects – give an impetus to course corrections, point to neglected problem areas and, lastly – aside from their disintegrating effects – bring about integrative effects. The friends of the constitutional state should therefore refrain from a Manichaean crusade mentality, which, due to the resolution of mercilessly combating extremism has led to the behavioural patterns of the antipodes. For a middle which wishes to push its aims to their final conclusion, itself becomes extreme.

## Literature

Aalders, G.J.D. (1968): *Die Theorie der gemischten Verfassung im Altertum*, Amsterdam, Hakkert.

Adler, Max K. (1978): *Naming and Addressing. A Sociolinguistic Study*, Hamburg, Buske.

Backes, Uwe – Eckhard Jesse (2005, eds.): *Vergleichende Extremismusforschung*, Baden-Baden, Nomos.

Backes, Uwe (2000): *Liberalismus und Demokratie – Antinomie und Synthese. Zum Wechselverhältnis zweier politischer Strömungen im Vormärz*, Düsseldorf, Droste.

Backes, Uwe (2006): *Politische Extreme. Eine Wort- und Begriffsgeschichte von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Bendel, Petra – Croissant, Aurel – Rüb, Friedbert W. (2002, eds.): *Zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur. Zur Konzeption und*

- Empirie demokratischer Grauzonen*, Opladen, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaft.
- Benoist, Alain de (1998): *Communisme et nazisme. 25 réflexions sur le totalitarisme au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle (1917–1989)*, Paris, Labyrithe.
- Bobbio, Norberto (1996): *Left and Right. The Significance of a Political Distinction*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Canu, Isabelle (1997): *Der Schutz der Demokratie in Deutschland und Frankreich. Ein Vergleich des Umgangs mit politischem Extremismus vor dem Hintergrund der europäischen Integration*, Opladen, Leske & Budrich.
- Chehabi, H.E. – Linz, Juan J. (1998, eds.): *Sultanistic Regimes*, Baltimore – London, John Hopkins University Press.
- Chomsky, Noam (2005): Powers and Prospects: Reflections on Human Nature and the Social Order, in: Festenstein, Matthew – Kenny, Michael (eds.): *Political Ideologies. A Reader and Guide*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 375-379.
- Dahl, Robert A. (1971): *Polyarchy. Participation and Opposition*, New Haven – London, Fishman.
- Decker, Frank (2004): *Der neue Rechtspopulismus*, Second edition, Opladen, Leske & Budrich.
- Diamond, Larry (2002): Thinking about Hybrid Regimes, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. XIII, pp. 21-35.
- Finer, Samuel E. (1999): *The History of Government. From the Earliest Times*, Vol. III: Empires, Monarchies, and the Modern State, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Friedrich, Carl J. (1950): *Constitutional Government and Democracy. Theory and Practice in Europe and America*, Boston, Ginn.
- Gardiner, Stephen (1546): *A Declaration of such true articles as G. Joye hath gone about to confute as false*, London.
- Goebbels, Joseph (1935): Was wollen wir im Reichstag (April 30, 1928), in: Goebbels, Joseph: *Der Angriff. Aufsätze aus der Kampfzeit*, Second edition, München, Eher, pp. 71-73.
- Haller, Carl Ludwig von (1820–1825): *Restauration der Staats-Wissenschaft*, Vol. VI, Second edition, Winterthur, Steiner.
- Hardt, Michael – Negri, Antonio (2003): *Empire. Die neue Weltordnung*, Frankfurt a.M. – New York, Campus.
- Hartleb, Florian (2004): *Rechts- und Linkspopulismus. Eine Fallstudie anhand von Schill-Partei und PDS*, Wiesbaden, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Hermanns, Fritz (1982): Brisante Wörter. Zur lexikographischen Bedeutung parteisprachlicher Wörter und Wendungen in Wörterbüchern der deutschen Gegenwartssprache, in: Wiegand, Herbert Ernst (ed.): *Studien zur neuhochdeutschen Lexikographie II*, Hildesheim, Olms, pp. 87-108.
- Huntington, Samuel P. (1993): *The Third Wave. Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Second edition, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press.
- Kielmansegg, Peter Graf (1988): *Das Experiment der Freiheit. Zur gegenwärtigen Lage des demokratischen Verfassungsstaates*, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta.
- Koselleck, Reinhart (1979): *Vergangene Zukunft*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp.
- Kraushaar, Wolfgang (2005): Extremismus der Mitte. Zur Logik einer Paradoxie, in: Fuest, Leonhard – Löffler, Jörg (eds.): *Diskurse des Extremen. Über Extremismus und Radikalität in Theorie, Literatur und Medien*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, pp. 13-22.
- Krug, Wilhelm Traugott (1838): *Allgemeines Handwörterbuch der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, 2. verbesserte und vermehrte Auflage, Band 5 als Supplement, Erste Abtheilung, Leipzig, Brockhaus, p. 394.
- Krämer, Hans Joachim (1959): *Arete bei Platon und Aristotle. Zum Wesen und zur Geschichte der platonischen Ontologie*, Heidelberg, Winter.
- Link, Jürgen (2006): *Versuch über den Normalismus. Wie Normalität produziert wird*, Third edition, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

- Lipset, Seymour M. – Raab, Earl (1978): *The Politics of Unreason. Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790–1977*, Second edition, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Loewenstein, Karl (1969): *Verfassungslehre*, Second edition, Tübingen, Mohr.
- Lübbe, Hermann (1987): Heilsmythen nach der Aufklärung. Geschichtsphilosophie als Selbstermächtigungsideologie, in: Taubes, Jacob (ed.): *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie*, Vol. III: Theokratie, München, Schöningh & Fink, pp. 279-292.
- Mandt, Hella (2003): Das klassische Verständnis: Tyrannis und Despotie, in: Maier, Hans (ed.): *Totalitarismus und Politische Religionen. Konzepte des Diktaturvergleichs*, Vol. III: Deutungsgeschichte und Theorie, Paderborn, Schöningh, pp. 29-106.
- Mény, Yves – Surel, Yves (2002): *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, Basingstoke, Palgrave.
- Mudde, Cas (2007): *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Nippel, Wilfried (1980): *Mischverfassungstheorie und Verfassungsrealität in Antike und früher Neuzeit*, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta.
- Popper, Karl R. (1960): *The Poverty of Historicism*, London, Routledge.
- Reis, Jack (1997): *Ambiguitätstoleranz. Beiträge zur Entwicklung der Persönlichkeitskonstruktion*, Heidelberg, Asanger.
- Riklin, Alois (2006): *Machtteilung. Geschichte der Mischverfassung*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Shils, Edward A. (1996): *The Torment of Secrecy. The Background and Consequences of American Security Policies*, New edition, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Sternberger, Dolf (1984): Die neue Politie. Vorschläge zur Revision der Lehre vom Verfassungsstaat, *Jahrbuch des Öffentlichen Rechts der Gegenwart*, Vol. XXXIII, pp. 1-40.
- Sutor, Bernhard (1996): Traditionelles Gemeinwohl und liberale politische Theorie, in: Ballestrem, Karl Graf – Ottmann, Henning (eds.): *Theorie und Praxis. Festschrift für Nikolaus Lobkowitz zum 65. Geburtstag*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, pp. 155-177.
- Thieme, Tom (2005): Extremismus zwischen Fundamentalismus, Rechts- und Linksextremismus, in: Backes, Uwe – Jesse, Eckhard (eds.): *Jahrbuch Extremismus & Demokratie*, Vol. XVII, Baden-Baden, Nomos, pp. 53-72.
- Turchetti, Mario (2001): *Tyrannie et tyrannicide de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, Paris, Puf.