

Slicing the Gordian Knot of Political Extremism: Issues and Potential Solutions Regarding Its Conceptualization and Terminology

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Abstract

The main goal of the present work is to highlight the problems surrounding the current definition of political extremism and the misuse of this and other related terms like radicalism and radicalization. It is argued that these issues generate confusion and obscure research efforts regarding these phenomena. We identify four major problems regarding the terminology used to describe the phenomenon of political extremism: a polysemy problem, an inadequate equivalence between the terms extremism and radicalism, uncertainty about the role of violence in defining political extremism, and the fact that the term ‘radicalization’ is more closely associated with extremists rather than radicals. We describe how these problems affect both research on extremism and hinder its application and we propose potential solutions for such issues.

Keywords

extremism, ideology, radicalism, radicalization, terminology

Resumen

El objetivo principal del presente trabajo es resaltar los problemas en torno a la definición actual de extremismo político y el uso indebido de este y otros términos relacionados como radicalismo y radicalización. Se argumenta que estos problemas generan confusión y oscurecen los esfuerzos de investigación sobre estos fenómenos. Identificamos cuatro problemas principales respecto a la terminología utilizada para describir el fenómeno del extremismo político: un problema de polisemia, una equivalencia inadecuada entre los términos extremismo y radicalismo, incertidumbre sobre el papel de la violencia en la definición del extremismo político, y el hecho de que el término ‘radicalización’ está más estrechamente asociado con los extremistas en lugar de con los radicales. Describimos cómo estos problemas afectan tanto la investigación sobre el extremismo como dificultan su aplicación y proponemos posibles soluciones para tales cuestiones.

Palabras Clave

extremismo, ideología, radicalismo, radicalización, terminología



“The difference between the right word and the almost right word
is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.”
Mark Twain

The study of political extremism occupies a special place in Social Psychology research. In the first half of the 20th century, extremism manifested mainly as support for fascist movements throughout Europe, culminating in WWII and the Holocaust. The rise of fascism caused many academics like Kurt Lewin or Theodor Adorno to flee Europe towards the United States, in what would later turn out to be a decisive step in the foundation of modern Psychological Science and, in the case of Lewin, the start of modern Social Psychology. More importantly, the terrible events of WWII and the Holocaust attracted academic interest as social scientists felt the need to seek an explanation for such atrocities.

Several theories were then created that attempted to explain what led people to support and get involved in these acts. The Theory of Authoritarian Personality (Adorno et al., 1950), the study of dogmatism (Rokeach, 1960) and Eysenck's Psychology of Politics (1954) are notable early attempts to explain the motives underlying political extremism. These seminal studies were the initial spark to a tremendous research effort that has continued over the years, be it with reformulations of the aforementioned theories (see Altemeyer, 1981; Duckitt, 2009; Shearman & Levine, 2006) or with new models (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011; McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2017; Moghaddam, 2005).

The great amount of attention that this subject has commanded makes it difficult to summarize all the insightful research that has been undertaken in the past few decades. Yet among the most influential psychosocial explanations of extremism, we can highlight theories like Right Wing Authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 2007), the Significance Quest Theory (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011), the study of the role of the uncertainty of identity and need to belong (Doosje et al., 2016; Hogg, 2015), the role of the need for cognitive closure (Webber et al., 2018), the role of worldviews (Duckitt & Fisher, 2003) or the motivational imbalance theory (Kruglanski et al., 2021). Some of these motivations have also been included in 'procedural' models that explain how people become extremists (McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2017; Moghaddam, 2005). This already rich knowledge about psychological motives and mechanisms behind political extremism keeps growing, many questions are still unsolved and more empirical research and theoretical integration are still needed. However, the study of extremism today faces a series of challenges derived from a terminological confusion that hinders researchers and laypeople alike. Currently, a uniform definition of extremism is lacking in the literature, and the term tends to appear entangled with other concepts like radicalism or endowed with different meanings, turning it polysemic. These terminological issues obstruct research by encumbering the review of the literature by scholars, interfering with the construction of clear and concise research designs and instruments, handicapping the ability to make causal claims and even affecting consensus in peer-review processes.

The main goal of this article is to highlight the issues in the definition of political extremism and the problems that they cause, as well as to suggest a series of potential solutions, reflecting and rethinking some key aspects in the terminology of extremism and related constructs. Overall, we identify four main issues around the conceptualization of political extremism: 1) extremism is currently polysemic and should have an exclusive definition; 2) extremism and radicalism are sometimes used as synonyms when they should be different concepts; 3) definitions of political extremism are not clear concerning whether violent tendencies are a necessary part of this phenomenon; and 4) the term radicalization describes the process by which people turn into extremists, not radicals.

The Problems Regarding the Terminology of Political Extremism

The Problem of Polysemy

In the specialized literature, it is common to define extremism as an ideological view encompassing non-normative views, anti-democratic tendencies, political violence, terrorism or also quite often some combination of all the aforementioned (Bötticher, 2017; Canetti et al., 2013; Capoccia, 2001; Downs, 2012; Hogg, 2014; Midlarsky, 2011). One problem is that this variety of definitional elements can cause certain confusion as to what are the key aspects that distinguish extremism from other constructs. Moreover, another issue is that the term extremism occasionally appears in the literature to depict an entirely different phenomenon. Extremism also appears described as an ideology that is opposed to

centrism or moderate political ideas. In these definitions, extremism describes a particularly strong ideological position, a definite stance of great conviction upon a series of beliefs and values (Fernbach et al., 2013; Rozado & Kaufmann, 2022; Toner et al., 2013; Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2003; van Prooijen et al., 2015). To facilitate the reading throughout this section, we will label the first type of definition *extremism-as-imposition* and the second as *extremism-as-doctrine*.

This confusion started as part of the academic debate around research on the motives behind adhesion to fascist regimes (that would represent *extremism-as-imposition*) and gained traction as an academic inquiry (Adorno et al., 1950; Eysenck, 1954; Rokeach, 1960). Some of these pioneering works were criticized as they were specific explanations for fascism and allegedly pictured right-wing people as more sympathetic to authoritarian regimes (Eysenck, 1954; Rokeach, 1960). This controversy sparked the debate about the psychological similarities – and differences – between left and right ideologies and the propensities these differences elicited. Indirectly, this discussion also started the confusion between the two strands of extremism.

The question of whether some ideologies were more prone to extremism (as imposition) led to research that examined whether holding a left-wing or right-wing ideology was associated with particular psychological traits (Adorno et al., 1950; Rokeach, 1960; Shils, 1954). Some authors posited that those who were deeply entrenched in their political views were, at either side of the ideological spectrum, similarly intolerant to uncertainty (Shils, 1954). This intense commitment to an ideological group was initially referred to as *ideologuism*, but later on was also called extremism, in the sense of *extremism-as-doctrine* (Tetlock, 1983). As the debate continued, this hypothesis was even labelled by some authors as the *ideological-extremism* hypothesis. Since then, extremism can be found used as both *imposition* (LaFree & Dugan, 2004; Lipset, 1978) and *doctrine* (Fernbach et al., 2013; Tetlock, 1983; Toner et al., 2013).

However, by observing these two conceptualizations, one becomes aware that both strands of extremism differ significantly. Mainly, *extremism-as-imposition* is defined as authoritarian and anti-democratic and seems – at least – related to the acceptance of political violence. In the meantime, *extremism-as-doctrine* is not necessarily intolerant, anti-democratic, or prone to produce violence. What is thus the reason for this polysemy? One answer points towards both definitions describing something especially intense or powerful (Kruglanski, 2018). However, equating both conceptualizations and labelling them under the same category because they both depict something intense is comparable to equating tennis and baseball because both sports are based on ‘hitting a ball’. This is so because, even if both definitions are considered to depict special intensity, this intensity is relative to different aspects in each of them.

In *extremism-as-imposition*, the main definitional aspect is how people conceive politics, with intensity associated with the tendency to accept anti-democratic violent means to achieve political goals. What is intense about this definition of extremism is that it breaks the conventions of dialogue, democracy, and tolerance. Extremists aspire to use even the most intense means to achieve their political goals. On the other hand, *extremism-as-doctrine* definitions refer to intensity on a completely different level. Here, intensity refers to attitude strength (Petty et al., 2007) or to an especially intense partisan identity (Toner et al., 2013). Thus, the fact that both constructs depict an ‘intense’ process does not suffice as a criterion to equate them as one is concerned with the intensity of actions and the other with the intensity of beliefs.

Moreover, many conceptualizations of *extremism-as-doctrine* do not only define particularly strong or intense political beliefs but rather also consider extremism as a particular position in the traditional ideological division of left and right. Operationalizations of *extremism-as-doctrine* tend to label both those most liberal/left-wing and conservative/right-wing as extremists (see Brandt et al., 2015; Fernbach et al., 2013; Toner et al., 2013; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). Here, *extremism-as-doctrine* is not sustained exclusively on the ‘intensity’ of the beliefs as the strength of convictions. Rather, intensity refers to a staunch partisanship, or in a distancing from what is understood as centrism or political moderation (Kruglanski, 2018; Tetlock, 1983). This may be partially caused by the classical conception of ideology as a left-right (or in countries such as the United States conservative-liberal) continuum (Bauer et al., 2017; Kroh, 2007; Swedlow, 2008). We argue that this conception creates a spatial or geometric metaphor that helps the confusion, where extreme refers to a relative position on both ends of the left-to-right distribution.

Ultimately, what is more important is that, whether it is particularly intense beliefs, partisanship or both, *extremism-as-doctrine* describes the kind of ideas held by the individual. On the other hand, *extremism-as-imposition* does not attempt to picture specific ideological content but focuses on the – intense – methods people think are valid to promote

such content. This key difference means we are discussing different phenomena, and thus it makes the fact that they share the same label an issue.

The Problem of the Extremism-Radicalism Equivalence

Another terminological problem that can be found in the extremism literature is its equivalent use with radicalism. De Lange and Mudde (2005) denounced this by stating “The confusion over the appropriate terminology [regarding extremism and radicalism] is further worsened by the lack of clear definitions in the field. Although all authors emphasise that this deficit is problematic, very few provide their own clearly defined alternatives.” (De Lange & Mudde, 2005, p. 479). In this case, the similarity can be based on terms of both intensity and rarity, with extremism and radicalism arguably being stronger and also scarcer than other political stances (Kruglanski, 2018). However, again the similarities seem to us far less important than the differences. Especially in the consequences both constructs have, both for individual behaviour and society in general. We have already described extremism as a conception of politics that encourages people to impose their will at all costs. This arises as the crucial difference, as radicalism is not necessarily intolerant, thus lacking the anti-democratic and coercive tendencies of extremism. Commonly, radicalism is defined as a set of beliefs that are opposed to the political establishment or the status quo, or that differ from social convention, yet legitimisation of violence or even illegitimate means are mostly not a defining aspect of radicalism – although sometimes argued to be related to it – (Bittner, 1963; Bötticher, 2017; Cotgrove & Duff, 1980; Cross, 2013; Karell & Freedman, 2019; Taşpınar, 2009; Van Hiel et al., 2022).

The key idea is that extremism as we conceive it (as imposition), represents a *form* of doing politics, and as such is not intrinsically associated with any particular idea, be it radical or not. Extremism is but a tool that can be used by any group eventually, provided the necessary contextual and psychological determinants are in place. While radicalism and extremism have indeed intertwined in the literature, this association in our eyes not well enough substantiated. Many radical movements have become extremist throughout history, as changes in regimes were in many instances forced by some groups onto others (Berman, 1997; Denitch, 1976; Gerwarth & Horne, 2011). Nevertheless, many other movements that sought radical changes in society were also eminently peaceful and democratic, such as the feminist, civil rights and several environmental movements. Conversely, there is also evidence of non-radical groups trying to exert forceful imposition which aligns closely with our understanding of political extremism. Recent extremist surges among anti-vaccines (Chen, 2024) or anti-abortion (Winter, 2013) groups illustrate this point. It is important to clarify that we are not arguing that radicalism and extremism are completely unrelated, rather, we posit that the latter is not a necessary appendage of the former.

Accordingly, intolerance and imposition are intrinsically linked with extremism while radicalism would have a reformist nature (Bötticher, 2017). This implies that the psychological mechanisms explaining becoming a political extremist or a political radical should be – at least partially – different. Thus, their use as equivalents generates both confusion and blind spots in our understanding of their psychosocial causes. One notable example of this problem can be observed in the Pyramid Model by McCauley and Moskaleiko (2008). According to this model, individuals with personal or political grievances sometimes approach small, extremist groups, that progressively take them in. These groups then provide a certain moral framework and a series of rewards in terms of appreciation and support that generate a commitment between the individual and the group. This profound bonding will then facilitate extreme behaviour once the group incurs extremist actions (Gómez et al., 2020; McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008; Thomas et al., 2014). Thus, this work explains the process of adhering to extremism as a ‘zero-sum’ game where they push for the imposition of their ideas no matter the costs, but it does not describe how people adhere to certain political – radical – ideas. While the Pyramid Model is indeed an insightful approach to various psychological mechanisms involved in becoming an *extremist*, the authors state that this is a model of *radical* opinion and action. Therefore, the Pyramid Model explains the process of becoming an extremist, yet it claims to be dealing with radicalism. It is in instances like this that we argue that the problems become most evident.

The Problem of Violence: Is Extremism Necessarily Violent?

Another important limitation in the current conceptualization of extremism resides in its lack of clarity regarding whether violence is an intrinsic characteristic of extremism or not. Opinions differ, and scholars have argued in favour of both possible stances. Some argue that supporting extremism and even being part of extremist groups does not necessarily imply being violent (Becker, 2021; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Scrivens et al., 2023). Conversely, posit that violence is an inherent consequence of extremism and whether it appears or not depends on the political opportunity and strategic considerations rather than the nature of extremism itself (Bötticher, 2017; Schmid, 2014).

Nevertheless, these different approaches have in common their understanding of violence as direct physical violence against people or governmental infrastructure (Schmid, 2014). Thus, debates about whether extremism is intrinsically violent or not hinge on this particular conception of violence. The issue is that conceiving violence exclusively as *physical violence* may be too shallow to capture the totality of the implications of extremism. However, adopting a broader definition of violence, such as the one formulated by the World Health Organization, reveals a more nuanced perspective. According to this definition, violence is “The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.” (World Health Organization, 2002, p. 4). Under this comprehensive and detailed definition, the link between extremism and violence becomes clearer. Extremists, who conceive politics as a scenario where their beliefs must be imposed and their ingroup must triumph no matter what, inherently accept coercive and intimidating means. Even in the absence of physical violence, their actions may result in psychological harm or deprivation of freedom or other rights, aligning with a more holistic understanding of violence. Thus, it becomes hard to disentangle extremism from violence. It is true that not all those individuals who can be colloqued as extremists actively engage in coercion and imposition (Knight et al., 2022). However, as extremists wish for an imposition of their ideologies, we can argue that they at least accept these means. Hence, we can state that extremism is a violent position, even if not everyone who is an extremist executes violent acts.

In this work, we advocate for the use of a broader conception of violence that revolves around imposition, coercion, and the use of non-democratic means of imposing certain ideas. We believe this approach better captures all the potential consequences of extremism while indirectly resolving the debate about whether extremism is always violent or not. Under more comprehensive and modern definitions of violence, the only way to reconcile extremism with strict nonviolence would be to go back to a definition of *extremism-as-doctrine* or to confound extremism and radicalism. This is precisely the outlook that can be found in the literature that discusses the existence of non-violent extremism. In such works, extremists appear often defined as “those holding attitudes and beliefs that did not fit with a mainstream opinion regarding political, religious and/or ideological issues” (Knight et al., 2022, p. 684). If we conceive extremism this way it would be valid to state that it may be non-violent, same as if we equate it with radicalism, which we have seen is not defined by violent intent or attitudes. However, we argue that both *extremism-as-doctrine* and *extremism-equal-to-radicalism* cause problems. Therefore, separating the conceptions of *extremism-as-imposition*, *extremism-as-doctrine*, and radicalism also contributes to furthering the debate of whether political extremism is intrinsically violent.

The Problem Behind the Term ‘Radicalization’

The final terminological problem addressed in this article refers to the use of the term ‘radicalization’. The term radicalization seems to be more consensual than any of the previously discussed. Radicalization is often defined as the process through which people become increasingly willing to use violence as a means to affect the behaviour of outgroups and to achieve political goals (Doosje et al., 2016). The problem is that this would mean that radicalization describes the process of becoming an extremist. According to our view, extremism is intrinsically associated with violence through the willingness to forcefully impose, while radicalism is not. Thus, radicalization referring to the process of increasingly committing to violence as a means to a political end is compatible with extremism but not radicalism as an outcome of that process.

Turning into a political radical would entail becoming disaffected with the system and hopes to change it, without necessarily using violence to do so (Bötticher, 2017). On the other hand, accepting violence as a legitimate mechanism

of political influence should then, from a logical standpoint, better be called *extremization*. It seems clear that labelling the process of becoming an extremist as radicalization is problematic. More so, when we advocate for differentiating between extremism and radicalism. However, the entrenchment of the term in the literature makes a change of label a poor idea in our eyes.

A possible way out of this conundrum that does not involve changing the label ‘radicalization’ is provided by some approaches in the literature that define radicalization as a process that may end in multiple outcomes not limited to extremism (Gaspar et al., 2020; Malthaner, 2017). We advocate for such a conception and argue that, under this procedural approach, radicalization can be conceptualized to bind together the different terms that have been discussed in this work. In the next section, we will further elaborate on this and, based on existing literature, provide a definition of radicalization that attempts to integrate extremism and the related concepts discussed as multiple outcomes of this process.

Slicing the Knot: Proposing Solutions for Extremism’s Terminological Imbroglia

After highlighting the main issues detected regarding to the current use and conceptualization of extremism, radicalism and radicalization, we offer some potential solutions. These include elaborating a definition of extremism where the main definitory characteristic is the willingness to forcefully impose one’s ideas; a definition of radicalism as convention-challenging ideology; and a definition of radicalization as a multifinal process based on attitude strength and identification.

Setting Up the Basics: Proposing Clear and Differentiated Definitions for Extremism and Radicalism

As it is the main driving conductive thread of this work, the first definition that we discuss is that of extremism. In order to solve the issues identified in the previous section, we ought to propose a definition that is not polysemic and is separated from radicalism. Regarding the polysemy problem, our position is to argue in favour of a definition based on the *extremism-as-imposition* (Bötticher, 2017; Canetti et al., 2013; Capoccia, 2001; Downs, 2012; Hogg, 2014; Midlarsky, 2011) approach.

The main reason behind this positioning is that it seems that *extremism-as-imposition* is more uniquely associated with the extremist label. Supporting this, we find that the literature lacks a way of labelling *extremism-as-imposition* with any other term, but we can define *extremism-as-doctrine* by using alternative names. As mentioned in the previous section, one of the first words used to describe this profile was that of *ideologue* (Shils, 1954). Furthermore, this particularly strong ideological orientation has been labelled with alternative terms like *zealous* (Tetlock, 1983) or *partisan* (Toner et al., 2013).

Moreover, we argue that the term extreme appears to be more uniform when it comes to differentiating extreme and non-extreme ways of conceiving politics and political means (*extremism-as-imposition*), than when it comes to specific attitudes or partisanship (*extremism-as-doctrine*). In *extremism-as-doctrine*, extremists are conceived as those who intensely believe in a particular ideology or who deviate from moderation. However, whether strong attitudes or partisanship are extreme is relative and highly context-dependent (Tetlock, 1983).

Besides, as extreme here refers to both intensity and deviance from the political centre, it is not clear whether to be considered an extremist, one should display intensity in both these areas or just one of them. With *extremism-as-doctrine*, it remains unclear whether someone who has a staunch ideological position based on centrism would be an extremist. Due to the construct also being linked to deviating from bipartisanship (Tetlock, 1983; Toner et al., 2013) it would seem not. Nevertheless, this person would still show some features (attitudinal strength) that could be termed ‘extreme’. Thus, disregarding *extremism-as-doctrine* would also help avoid this confusion. On the other hand, if we adopt *extremism-as-imposition* and we conceive that wishing to impose one’s beliefs on others is the threshold for ‘extreme’, we argue this is less relative, as anyone wishing imposition is an extremist, regardless of other considerations.

For these reasons, we stress the need to define political extremism from the approach of *extremism-as-imposition* and propose the following definition:

Political extremism is a political stance that implies supporting and advocating for the forceful imposition of a set of values or ideas, implying at least the acceptance of violence as a political means, regardless of whether the latter is manifested as physical violence or not.

In this definition we sought to include the core defining elements of political extremism identified in the literature: 1) it does not care for agreement and seeks only the imposition of the ingroup's ideology (Bötticher, 2017; Capoccia, 2001) such imposition is thus *forceful* and anti-democratic (Capoccia, 2001; Midlarsky, 2011), 3) it is intolerant of any alternative political ideas (Midlarsky, 2011), and 4) it is intrinsically violent as it seeks imposition upon disagreeing others disregarding their will and desires (Canetti et al., 2013; Schmid, 2014). We suggest that these key elements be enclosed under the idea of 'forceful imposition'. Under this definition, the violence deriving from extremism may be psychological, through the use of intimidation or insults; institutional or even structural through restriction of others' freedom and rights; or physical as long as of other psychosocial determinants and political opportunities (Bötticher, 2017; Khalil et al., 2022; Lake, 2002). Our definition would then encompass 'traditional' extremist actions like riots and bombings, but also actions that may have not been considered part of the political extremist repertoire, like wilfully bending the democratic system to impose a certain belief or intentionally disseminating false information. Despite widening the repertoire of actions that can be considered extremist, we believe our definition establishes a clear distinctive feature in the willingness for imposition. This could pose an advantage when researching about what are the psychosocial causes behind this shift in the conception of politics.

Once we have argued for a monosemic definition of political extremism, we find that *extremism-as-doctrine* now lacks a label. To address this issue, we think the most sensible approach would be to recover one of the first terms used to describe this particular ideological configuration: *ideologue* (Shils, 1954; Tetlock, 1983). Ideologism would be:

The political position of strongly and exclusively supporting an ideological doctrine and identifying with that political group, not willing to adopt or consider any ideas that are promoted by any other ideological faction.

We argue that this definition captures the ideological profile of those definitions we have catalogued as *extremism-as-doctrine*, emphasizing attitude strength and adherence to a certain political group, usually identified as either a left-wing or right-wing outlook, and away from moderate positions (Fernbach et al., 2013; Shils, 1954; Tetlock, 1983; Toner et al., 2013; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019).

After providing an alternative label for the previously problematic meaning given to political extremism, our next step is to discuss the meaning of radicalism. The etymology of radical refers to something derived from roots. Then, in the 18th century, the word acquired political connotations related to 'radical reform' as in reforms done at the root of the political system (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023). This is the sense that Marx gave to the word, as he equated radicalism with '*grasping by the root*' (Marx, 1844). Only later radicalism and extremism were confounded and the term radical acquired a certain kinship with intolerance and violence (Bötticher, 2017; Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023). However, we side with the abundant literature that argues that radicalism is not necessarily anti-democratic nor violent (Bittner, 1963; Bötticher, 2017; Cotgrove & Duff, 1980; Cross, 2013; Karell & Freedman, 2019; Taşpınar, 2009). There are two main differences then that set apart extremism and radicalism. First, while the former may not necessarily oppose establishment or conventions, the latter typically does. Additionally, extremism advocates for forceful imposition whereas radicalism does not. Accordingly, we understand radicalism as:

A political stance based on the defence and promotion of far-reaching, profound, or drastic changes to the status-quo, political system, political institutions, or any other collective practice widely accepted within a certain society.

This definition establishes seeking a profound change in any system, or institution of practice of public life that is widely accepted in a certain society as the main defining characteristic of this particular phenomenon. By providing this

definition, we have attempted to disentangle all three constructs that were somehow confounded under the umbrella of political extremism.

In summary, an ideologue would be someone who strongly believes and identifies with a certain ideology, a radical would believe that some central and widely accepted aspect of society or its institutions needs to change, and an extremist believes that their ideas should be imposed upon others without mattering which means are used in the process (see Table 1). Crucially, these definitions do not imply mutual exclusivity among extremism, ideologism and radicalism. Extremism refers to how a group seeks to enforce their ideas, while ideologism and radicalism pertain to what those political ideas are specifically. Thus, ideologues and radicals are not necessarily extremists but can become one if they ever pursue imposition through any means necessary. On the other hand, political extremism is not necessarily linked to either being an ideologue or a radical, but rather other ideological profiles can also become extremists. For instance, a political extremist can seek the imposition of a certain idea (e.g. banning abortion) without strongly believing and identifying with a political outlook as an ideologue would do.

Table 1

Summary of Key Differentiating Aspects of Ideologism, Radicalism and Extremism

	Seeks profound change	Anti-establishment ideas	Supports forceful imposition of own ideas
Ideologue	Not necessarily	No	No
Radical	Yes	Yes	No
Extremist	Not necessarily	Not necessarily	Yes

Reconsidering the Process of Radicalization

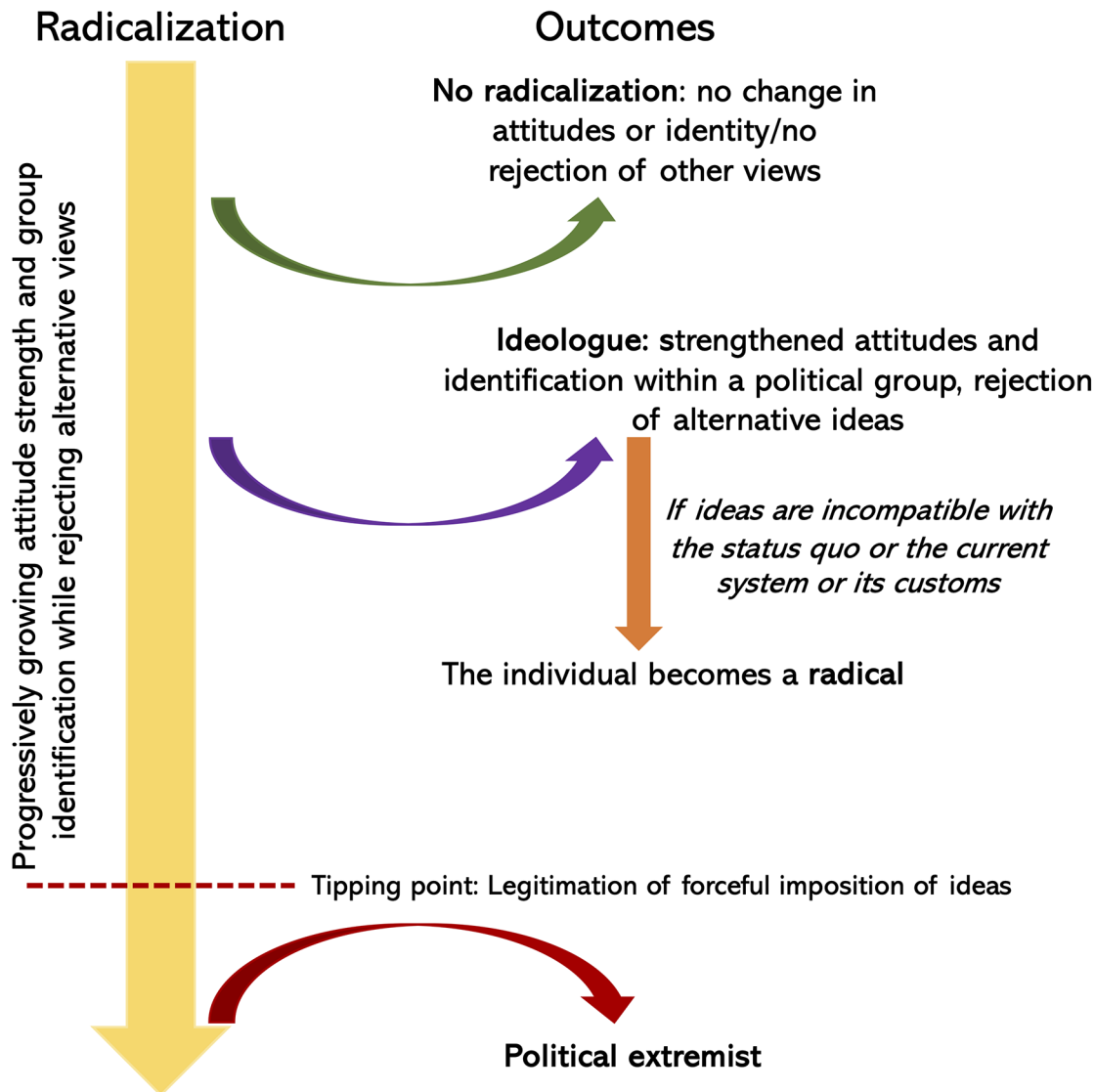
We believe that addressing the last piece of this terminological problem deserves a separate section. The main challenge with the term radicalization is that it often refers to the process of becoming an extremist (Doosje et al., 2016) rather than a radical.

As argued, we believe that the solution to this issue should not lie in a change of terminology, but rather in adopting a wider scope when considering the radicalization process. The term radicalization started to gain traction after the Islamist terrorist attacks that happened at the beginning of the millennium (Schmid, 2013; Sedgwick, 2010). Hence, its more entrenched conception has become that radicalization is the process that people undergo as they ultimately become terrorists (Kundnani, 2012; Schmid, 2013). Broadly, terrorism is defined as a specific type of political violence that implies physical violence towards non-combatant civilians to achieve a political goal through the use of terror (Ruby, 2002; Schmid, 2011). Considering this definition and that of extremism we can conclude that all terrorists are extremists, whereas not all extremists are necessarily terrorists. The problem is that the recent study of radicalization evolved out of a necessity to explain a particular end-product rather than the process per se, so radicalization became associated with the ‘production’ of extremists (and more specifically terrorists). In line with some proposals in the field, we argue that radicalization should be conceived as a wider process that has several ends, depending on how the process itself develops.

These approaches suggest that radicalization may end before people get to the extremist phase, producing different results (Gaspar et al., 2020; Reidy, 2019). This procedural notion is present in many models of radicalization, that treat extremism as its final stage. This definitions encompass different elements like detecting a grievance and acquiring sensitivity towards an idea, sympathising with a political group that defends that idea, actively joining that group, legitimizing and ultimately exercising violence (Baran, 2005; Bosi & Malthaner, 2015; della Porta, 2018; Doosje et al., 2016; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017; Moghaddam, 2005). Out of those successive steps, only the last two are necessary conditions of being an extremist, yet a person must not necessarily complete all steps. Based on a ‘multifinal’ approach, we seek to provide a definition of radicalization that attempts to integrate the constructs discussed throughout this work as potential products of the radicalization process (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Flowchart of the Radicalization Process



To this end, we also argue in favour of considering radicalization as a cognitive process that may or may not result in the development of extremist ideas and actions. Conceiving radicalism, at least in part, as a cognitive phenomenon is a relatively extended perspective, as many authors consider its cognitive dimension (della Porta, 2018; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017; Neumann, 2013; Schmid, 2014). However, some definitions distinguish between cognitive and behavioural radicalization, with violence being the primordial end of the process. On this line, cognitive radicalization relates to the ideas that push people into violence while the behavioural dimension is concerned with the actual execution of such violence (Neumann, 2013; Vidino et al., 2017).

We propose to represent radicalization as a cognitive and identitary process and to treat active involvement in extremist actions as a related phenomenon that requires additional factors to occur. The reason for this choice is that, even if the radicalization process is completed and the individual becomes a political extremist, this does not necessarily imply their involvement in the extremist actions. This is supported by research suggesting that adopting extremist views and executing violent extreme political actions are differentiated processes explained by different sets of motives (Khalil

et al., 2022; Khalil & Dawson, 2023), or at least non-linearly related (Neumann, 2013). We thus consider an individual who has come to desire the forceful imposition of their ideas and legitimises violence to that end as someone who has completely radicalised, becoming an extremist. Whether and why someone who holds an extremist view and legitimises violence goes on to execute violent acts or not seems to be yet another research question.

Once determined that the focus of our conceptualization would be the cognitive side of radicalization, we need to face the challenge of attempting to integrate the different potential outcomes. We argue that the fact that these constructs are currently entangled could suggest they share some aetiological factors, making their integration as different possible products of the same process more feasible. As mentioned above, some multifinal accounts of radicalization already exist that consider potential outcomes of the radicalization process different from political extremism (Gaspar et al., 2020; Reidy, 2019). These definitions consider the chance that radicalization results in non-extremist outcomes as ‘non-violent’ or even ‘benevolent’ radicalization. Nevertheless, they rely on the rejection of the establishment as a key component (Gaspar et al., 2020; Reidy, 2019). Thus, the product of radicalization will always be radical, either with an extremist outlook or not. This will then mean that those extremist groups that do not challenge the establishment will be left out as potential products of the radicalization process. This also would mean that in the multifinal process of radicalization, the only alternative product of the process other than extremism will be radicalism. Conversely, we aspire to integrate within the framework of radicalization those who end up being extremists but do not hold radical (transformative) ideas, and by extension also those who do not reach the tipping point of extremism but do not become radical either. To this end, we conceptualize radicalization as a ‘slippery slope’ or a progression towards extremism (della Porta & LaFree, 2012; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Moghaddam, 2005) but that does not necessarily include adopting anti-establishment ideas.

Accordingly, we believe that the process that could assimilate all these outcomes while potentially ending in the wilfulness to forcefully impose ideas is a progressive increase of the strength of political attitudes and social identification, parallel to an incremental rejection of alternative ideas. All these aspects are supported by the literature as drivers of political extremism, which we argue would still be the final product of complete radicalization. Increased attitude or personal relevance of political attitudes (Kruglanski, 2018; Pretus et al., 2018), strengthened social ties with certain groups (Gómez et al., 2020; Hogg et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2014), and rejection of alternative ideas (Dono et al., 2022; Duckitt, 2009) are all variables associated with political extremism. However, as long as the forceful imposition of ideas is not desired, we argue that these factors could lead to either ideologism or radicalism. In fact, the increased personal significance of certain attitudes (Skitka et al., 2015), stronger social identities (Greene, 2004) and rejection of alternative ideas (van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019) have all been positively associated with what we have defined as ideologism (i.e. extremism-as-conviction). This supports our argument of a partially shared aetiology between ideologism and extremism based on these elements. Provided the specific ideas and the groups observed also show anti-establishment attitudes, this set of factors would then have radicalism as the end product, which seems to also require strong attitudes (Kruglanski, 2018), thus fitting with our conceptualization of radicalization. Hence, we argue for a move from a definition focused on a single outcome to one that is multifinal and, beyond that, does not necessarily include anti-conventional attitudes. Such a process is one of increased attitude strength and identification with a group formed around a particular cause or idea, which is coherent with ending up producing extremism but also ideologism and radicalism. Finally, trying to also address another topic of debate arisen around this construct, we have attempted to formulate a definition that could be equally applicable to both individuals and groups (Malthaner, 2017). Ultimately, we propose to define radicalization as:

The process of becoming increasingly attached to a series of political values and ideas and building a strong sense of identity around an opinion, religious or political group, while simultaneously developing a progressively summarily rejection of alternative political ideas. A complete radicalization would culminate in a willingness to impose the ideas of the ingroup.

This conception suggests that radicalization is a gradual process, where people transition from ideologue/radical to political extremist as they develop stronger attitudes, identities and rejection of other ideas. We do consider that attitude strength, identification and rejection of alternative ideas should indeed be more acute for extremists than for non-extremists. However, we do not discard that other variables could help explain whether people reach the tipping

point of being willing to forcefully impose their ideas, for instance, as moderating variables. Whatever the case, we believe that using this definition as a platform will allow us to better examine and respond to this question of what facilitates the ‘completion’ of the radicalization process.

Implications of Slicing the Knot: What Does the Current Proposal Offer?

We have argued that ideologuism, radicalism and extremism are all distinct constructs that carry different implications and thus may be researched as unique realities. Even if extremists may be more captivating due to the risks they entail, the reasons and mechanisms that underlie people’s transition into each of these ideological orientations are interesting and worthy research questions themselves. Distinguishing them and avoiding confounding their labels can only help in these research efforts, as these distinct concepts must be driven by different psychosocial motives, even if occasionally they may overlap for some of them. To better illustrate how this effort can contribute to the literature, we will use some existing research as practical examples.

One such instance exposing the advantages of ‘slicing the knot’ relates to the study of the role of the Need for Cognitive Closure (NCC; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) as a motivating factor of these phenomena. Research on extremism supports the role of NCC as a facilitating factor of extremism (Hogg, 2014; Webber et al., 2018). According to this theory NCC, defined as a personal need to see uncertainty and ambiguity reduced, drives people into groups with a dichotomic way of thinking, who provide clear thought guidelines thus reducing the distress caused by uncertainty (Hogg, 2014). There seems to be a robust association between NCC and what we have termed ideologuism (Doosje et al., 2013) and also with our definition of extremism (Hogg & Adelman, 2013; Webber et al., 2018). However, its association with extremism (legitimizing violent actions) seems more complex than its link with ideologuism. For instance, De Zavala et al. (2010) found that, in conditions of high threat, NCC positively predicted intergroup aggressiveness among conservatives, while it did not predict it – and even showed a negative non-significant tendency – among liberals. In another piece of research, NCC was related to feelings of ingroup superiority that we can relate to ideologuism but not directly associated with violent intentions (Doosje et al., 2016). Lastly, whether NCC motivates ideologuism and – at least to some extent – extremism, it seems conceptually challenging to reconcile the idea that NCC could motivate radicalism as we have defined it. Simply put, people averse to uncertainty are unlikely to prosecute profound social or political changes. This time it is the radicalism-extremism equivalence that confounds the one that hinders a more precise understanding of the dynamics of NCC.

The reason why we choose to utilize the potential problems that the lack of clear terminology on extremism poses for research on NCC as a first example is that this is a very well-researched construct within extremism literature. Moreover, we believe that the posited terminology would contribute to more clearly determining its role in all three processes of ideologuism, radicalism and extremism. However, other research programs could also benefit from this differentiation. Loss of significance (LoS), for instance, is another variable that has received a good deal of empirical support as a motive for extremism (Kruglanski et al., 2017; Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011). Yet the question remains, once again, which ‘extremism’ does it specifically predict. In our opinion, a conceptual analysis of Significance Loss Theory is coherent with personal significance heightening intentions to adhere mostly to intolerant and authoritarian groups (extremism) as LoS theory posits violence salient as a way of obtaining significance within a group (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011). However, its premises do not explicitly suggest that people under significance loss have a preference for ideologuism or radicalism, which we have already described as not necessarily related to violence. Nevertheless, there is a possibility that LoS could explain ideologuism and radicalism, as those people who seek significance tend to desire to feel part of a greater cause (Kruglanski et al., 2017). Again, we see our definitions as an adequate tool to help answer this question.

Moving from models that aim to explain extremism, we believe that the System-Justification Theory (Jost, 2019) is the most fitting theoretical proposal to explain radicalism, as radicals necessarily should challenge the system, thus showing low system justification. Yet it would not necessarily affect the process of becoming a conservative ideologue or extremist, as these may be system-justifying groups. Another example is the role of distrust in democratic institutions

and conspiracy beliefs, that may enhance extremist intentions (van Prooijen et al., 2022) although it may not be necessarily related to ideologuism or radicalism. Of course, all these relations are probably more complex than what may initially seem, and they should be moderated by personal traits or contextual factors. Nevertheless, we argue this reinforces rather than weakens our thesis since a clear differentiation between the three phenomena is essential in exploring this kind of complex model.

We also believe that our conceptualization could help answer the question of whether radicalism is meaningfully associated with extremism. We have defended that radicalism does not necessarily imply holding an extremist stance. Nevertheless, we have anticipated that they may be related, which would contribute to their current confounding. One could imagine, for instance, that radicals, due to their pursuit of anti-establishment ideas, would be less represented. This could in turn make them perceive their political actions as less efficacious, something that has been related to the rise of extremism (Tausch et al., 2011). We hope that outlining a process where people can transition between radicalism (and ideologuism) and extremism while setting clear boundaries between these constructs can contribute to a better understanding of how and why people reach the willingness to forcefully impose their ideas signalled as the tipping point of extremism.

Beyond the scientific implications that this proposal may have, providing a clear conceptualization of the phenomena of ideologuism, radicalism and extremism has also practical implications. The first of these implications has to do with scientific outreach and dissemination, a subject of growing relevance in Science (Gill et al., 2015). Clear transmission of scientific knowledge is key to building a prosperous society that trusts science and drifts away from misinformation (Friedman, 2008; Johnson et al., 2014; Plohl & Musil, 2021). In scientific outreach, we must assume that laypeople may not be familiar with the academic debates or may lack sufficient expertise to make certain inferences or training to carefully process all the details of an academic paper. And the same happens to journalists or other institutions that may play a mediator role in this process (Christensen, 2007). Therefore, the problem with the polysemic meaning of extremism and its confounding with radicalism is not only a significant issue for research and academics, but it also jeopardizes the diffusion of scientific knowledge into society. A layperson or a journalist who reads a paper about the motives for extremism may not have the expertise, the interest or the time to examine whether that extremism is defined as a strong belief or a violent intention. However, the implications of this confound are of paramount importance in determining what they extract from the article. They may come to think that radicalism and extremism are true synonyms when this does not seem supported either by the implications or the history of both terms (Bötticher, 2017; Neumann, 2013). Even more worrying is the perspective of these issues affecting another kind of scientific dissemination: teaching. In a similar fashion to the layperson, a student may not yet have all the skills required nor pay enough attention as they navigate through multiple courses, to make the careful reading needed to separate these terms if we continue to treat them in this fashion.

Furthermore, due to the implications of the terms, the impact of the confusion is not mere misinformation but impacts how political groups and social movements are perceived by the general public. Media, and thus people, usually identify extremism in line with what we posit here: movements and parties that are anti-democratic and support violent means (BBC News, 2020, 2023; The New York Times, 2022). Therefore, the problem caused by associating extremism with being ideologue or radical, is that we would be favouring a discourse that problematizes these groups and treats them as violent. As a meaningful example, the main goal of the British Radicals, probably the first (self)identified radical political party was to extend suffrage to the working classes (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023), hardly a violent or an anti-democratic objective. To equate radicals – or ideologues – with extremists is, to begin with, unfair towards those political groups and ultimately also perilous, as the perception that political violence is ubiquitous can increase polarization and conflict within society.

Conclusion

Ideology and political extremism are two of the main research areas in Social Sciences. However, despite their importance, we have arrived at a point where we treat concepts from these areas inordinately and inaccurately, including the very term that defines extremism. Extremism has various meanings within the literature, it is used as equivalent

to radicalism and radicalization uses the radicalism root while being defined based on its end-product extremism. Continuing to use them in this way could hinder our future research efforts, hampering our attempts to study the motives behind them and even the way these constructs may interact. Moreover, these negative effects are cumulative. As long as studies continue to conflate two different extremism meanings or interchangeably use extremism and radicalism, the problem will persist and possibly worsen. Moreover, studies conducted with this confounded terminology are included in meta-analyses and systematic reviews, crucial pieces of research that should synthesize and clarify existing research. However, if studies investigating similar constructs are inaccurately categorized or conceptualized differently, it can lead to confusion and undermine the reliability of these synthesis efforts. With the current usage of the terminology, deciding what studies would be included in a meta-analysis of political extremism predictors would be a strenuous task. To be selective and to analyse any of the two meanings and separate it from radicalism would also require utmost attention and lengthy justification. To not do so would mean that the final product will inform of different processes under the same name.

In this work, we have tried not only to raise awareness about the problems but also to offer potential solutions. In this line, we have attempted to provide clear definitions of ideologuism, radicalism, and extremism with robust boundaries. We have also advocated for a conception of radicalization that drifts away from a single potential outcome (Reidy, 2019), positing radicalization as a cognitive process of indoctrination that may have different results among which we find – beyond simply failing to generate an effect – becoming an ideologue, a radical, or an extremist.

In Science, we need clear terms with clear definitions, otherwise we are dooming ourselves into using blurry jargon that obscures rather than sheds light on our research questions. Meanings and terms in the research field of political ideology, radicalism and extremism become ever increasingly more tangled, so we argue it is time to slice the knot. We need to have precise and consensual terminology. In this theoretical piece, we have provided some definitions, yet we do not anticipate colleagues to necessarily accept them blindly or uncritically, nor deny the merits of previous accounts. Our goal is to spark academic discussion, hoping to instil a sense of urgency among the experts in this field to address these issues. Failure to do so threatens the progress of scientific inquiry on such capital topics as the ones here discussed.

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