Extremism in America:
Some Rips in the Fabric of Consensus

OLIVER READ WHITLEY

A PREFATORY NOTE

This series of lectures was in process of preparation during the summer of 1967. In some respects, that fact is reflected in the lectures. As I read through them now, in early September, 1968, I do not find anything that I would want to change substantially, nor is there anything that seems to be in serious need of correction. I am, therefore, submitting the lectures, as they stand, for publication, confident that more recent events (most notably, the Democratic Convention in Chicago) serve, if anything, to confirm, rather than to vitiate, the conclusions to which I came a year ago.

I. PERSPECTIVES FOR THE STUDY OF EXTREMISM: WHY ARE THE NATIVES SO RESTLESS?

AS I begin the task of writing these lectures, the mass media are saturated with a steady outpouring of news that most of us would, in some respects, rather not hear. The spectre of riots and civil disturbances, of bombs and snipers, of arson and looting, is not a pretty one, and it is likely to be more than a little threatening. One of our first reactions to this sort of thing is likely to be the asking of the question, "could this happen in my community?" which may be followed by further questions, such as "how can it be prevented?" When this process of questioning is begun, it may very well have no stopping place until we are led finally to ask some very basic questions about the nature of societies in general and of our own society in particular. The subject with which we are concerned in these lectures virtually demands that we get beneath the surface of the things that disturb, irritate, and even frighten us, and make some attempt to develop a perspective that will enable us to understand what is happening around us. An important premise of this attempt is the view that before we can devise ways of coping with a problem we must have some viable notion in terms of which to reduce the booming, buzzing confusion of our experience to some kind of order or pattern. I cannot hold out to you the promise that we can completely "explain" the phenomena associated with "extremism," or that we can set forth the means for eliminating it from the current social scene. Yet I am confident that we can, through a considered effort to explore the matter, arrive at some tentative answers to the question of what extremism is and why we have it in our society. The psychotherapists, when they deal with a troubled patient, often proceed on the assumption that if they can help that patient to develop insight as to why he behaves the way he does they have at least laid the foundation on which he can begin to change his situation. I make a similar assumption here — if we can come to some understanding of the underlying realities of which the phenomena associated with extremism are symptoms, we will be in a much better position to cope with it.

The approach I will take in these lectures is broadly, but not exclusively, sociological. Extremism, like other sorts of human behavior, does not simply come out of the woodwork. It is a product of the structure and functioning of a society and its culture. What we must seek, then, is knowledge of the conditions under which extremism emerges,

OLIVER READ WHITLEY is Professor of Sociology at The Iliff School of Theology. This is the first in a series of lectures delivered by Professor Whitley at the 1967 Ministers' Week of the Oklahoma Methodist Conference.

of the crucial factors in its incidence. In order to carry on the search for these conditions and factors, we need a theoretical orientation of a broad scope, that will help us to determine, at the outset, what we are looking for. Such an orientation is provided in the work of the sociologists who have been concerned with what they call "social problems," of which extremism is undoubtedly one. Robert K. Merton and Robert A. Nisbet, in their volume on **Contemporary Social Problems,** have summarized this theoretical orientation in a series of nine points, each of which I have found helpful in laying the groundwork for an inquiry into extremism.[1]

First, "the same social structure and culture that in the main make for conforming and organized behavior also generate tendencies toward distinctive kinds of deviant behavior and potentials of social disorganization. In this sense, the problems current in a society register the social costs of a particular organization of social life." What this suggests is that the phenomena of extremism must be understood as emerging from the particular ways in which life has been organized in our society. Manifestations of extremism are the costs we have to pay for having our society organized the way it is.

A **second** point follows from the first one. We must reject the search for scapegoats or devils. The sociological orientation regards this search as inadequate and misleading and, instead, "alerts us to search out the ways in which socially prized arrangements and values in society can produce socially condemned results." In the course of these lectures I shall have occasion to mention the names of several particular individuals, whose behavior inevitably gets referred to in any discussion of extremism. The temptation to "blame" these individuals, to believe that we could eliminate extremism if we could get rid of **them,** must be resisted, since it explains much too much too easily, and distracts us from our intention to look beneath the surface of things.

For, in the **third** place, "social problems are the unwilled, largely indirect, and often unanticipated consequences of institutionalized patterns of social behavior." Applying this to the object of our present interest, the suggestion is that extremism does not come about because someone says to himself, "I am going to be an extremist." No one, not even a person who calls himself an extremist (and very few people are willing to do this), deliberately sets out to earn this label. What happens is rather that, in the pursuit of goals or objectives which a person believes will implement his values, he engages in behavior that is regarded by others as "extremist." Extremist behavior is, in this sense, the unanticipated consequence of doing something else.

What has been said up to this point implies that, in the **fourth** place, we must first understand how things are put together before we can adequately understand how and why they get torn apart. The sociologist's language for this is that **dis**-organization in a society — of which extremism is certainly a possible symptom—must be approached in terms of how that society is **organized.** Disorganization and organization in a society are really two sides of the same coin. That being the case, a **fifth** point seems to follow: "each social and cultural structure will have its distinctive kinds and degrees of social problems." What we call extremism probably does not occur anywhere else in the world in precisely the same way that it does in American society; its manifestations here are the products of the kind of social and cultural structure we have developed.

The remaining points in the theoretical orientation being presented will help us to see why extremism appears to take such a variety of forms in the society. In the **sixth** place, then, sociologists indicate that "social structures

[1] Merton, R. K. and Nisbet, R. A. *Contemporary Social Problems* (New York: Harcourt Brace, and World, 1961), pp. ix-x.

are variously differentiated into social statuses, roles, and strata, having their distinctive as well as their shared values and interests. This premise directs us to recognize the differing pressures upon people differently located in the structure to engage in certain forms of deviant behavior and to be diversely subject to the consequences of social disorganization." People see the society in which they live from the angle of vision suggested, in part, by the statuses or positions they occupy in it, and the roles they play. What is going on in the society looks different to people located in one part of the structure from the way it does to people located in another part. So a **seventh** point is implied: "people occupying different positions in the social structure will ordinarily differ in their appraisal of the same social situations as problems requiring social action." To see the importance of this observation we have only to note the variety of proposals currently being advanced for dealing with race riots in American cities, or the different ways that people have of talking about extremism. For example, Senator Goldwater delighted some people immensely, and frightened the daylights out of others, by his almost casual observation that "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice."

What applies to the question of whether people differently located in the society agree on defining a given situation as a "problem," also applies to whether they agree on proposed "solutions." So our **eighth** proposition is this, that "the changes represented by the proposed solutions will accord with the interests and values of others." This must certainly be kept in mind if we are to make sense out of the proposals for dealing with extremism. And we must be concerned with the implications of one final point. Since the parts of a social structure are interdependent in varying degrees, efforts to do away with one social problem will often introduce other (either more or less damaging) problems." If our attempts to rid our society of extremism might succeed only in helping to produce other kinds of problems, we need to be aware of the question of whether the cure is not worse than the disease.

In the nine points that have just been presented, I think that a relevant theoretical perspective for an inquiry into extremism has been suggested. I have purposely dealt with this perspective at some length in order to set the tone, to indicate the stance, or style, in terms of which it seems to me to be necessary to approach a topic so often dealt with emotively, as extremism certainly is. I think it is of the greatest importance that those who want to understand and deal with extremism and extremists approach the task in the manner that does not suggest that we too are extremists. Extremists of various kinds can, and usually do, deal with other extremists emotively and passionately, that is, disdainfully or as often as not hatefully, but **we** cannot afford that kind of arrogance or self-indulgence. This does not, of course, mean that as advocates of the Judeo-Christian faith and believers in the democratic way of life, we do not have values and commitments that will influence our attempts to understand extremism. We could hardly be ministers worthy of the name of Christian if we did not entertain such commitments in some form. What I am trying to say is that if we are to understand extremism, and if we are to help the people in our congregations not to fall prey to it, we must seek to approach the study of it as objectively and dispassionately as possible. I find that the theoretical orientation presented helps me to do this, and the intention is that the influence of this orientation will be quite obvious as we proceed.

As I have tried to understand extremism I have found it very illuminating to approach the subject from three angles, each of which is clearly capable of being pursued in the light of the style suggested by the over-all theoretical orientation I have presented. I want

now to look at each of these angles, pointing up as I go along what may be learned about extremism if it is approached in the manner indicated. The first of these angles is that suggested by the study of **social movements**, as carried out by certain sociologists and social psychologists. According to Hans Toch, a social movement is "a large-scale, informal effort designed to correct, supplement, overthrow, or in some fashion influence the social order . . . . an effort by a large number of people to solve collectively a problem that they feel they have in common."[2] In terms of this definition, quite a few of the phenomena associated with extremism might be seen as at least quasi-social movements. Social movements are most likely to arise in a society when people feel themselves abandoned or frustrated, when they experience the need to protest what they regard as indignities, to escape suffering, to find relief for tensions and anxieties, or perhaps to "explain" confusing and threatening events.[3] When a number of people are "dissatisfied" with the existing state of affairs, to the extent that they feel the need to seek clarification, or to "do" something, they tend to act out a kind of "search for meaning" which will enable them to get rid of the feelings of dissatisfaction. Such people might be said to be "susceptible" to the setting up of a social movement. What will appeal to a given individual who is engaged in this kind of a quest for meaning will depend upon the variety of factors that have helped to determine his basic outlook, for it seems clear that susceptibility to the appeals of social movements is selective.[4] Sometimes, the appeal of a particular social movement may lie in a susceptibility different from that which appears on the surface. For example, a group may "ostensibly engage in political action, while serving as a social outlet or as a means of expressing protest; scapegoats may be provided under the guise of assigning responsibility for a social problem, and conservatively stated invitations may implicitly hold out extravagant promises. Such latent appeals are especially common among social movements whose offerings might otherwise appear too controversial or lacking in respectability."[5]

The existence of a considerable amount of susceptibility to the appeals of various social movements is not difficult to account for . Ours is the kind of society in which rapid social and cultural changes are almost regarded as the rule rather than the exception, and in which adjustment to changing times is thought to be a paramount requirement. Yet at the same time it is a society that seems to many people to become more complex and bewildering as it continues to change. When a person's customary ways of doing things, his routine habits, seem "violently jarred by worries, fears, anxieties, and frustrations, when he begins to question the norms and values which have become a part of him, when the customary social framework can apparently no longer satisfy his needs, then a serious discrepancy emerges between the standards of society and the personal standards of the individual."[6] A person so described is certainly one who is likely to be susceptible to any appeal which gives promise of lessening his worries, allaying his fears, or reducing his feelings of frustration. In contemporary American society, beset as it is in so many ways by the problems associated with its reluctant emergence as a great world power, the possibility is infinitely increased that many people will find themselves confronted with stimuli or problems for which they have no viable response or solution. In some instances, people find themselves dis-

[2] Toch, Hans, *The Social Psychology of Social Movements* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 5.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 12-14.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

[6] Cantril, Hadley, *The Psychology of Social Movements* (New York: J. Wiley, 1963, first published, 1941), pp. 15-16.

satisfied, annoyed, or bothered, until they hit upon some way that seems to enable them to make sense out of what is happening; in other cases, they feel threatened by what is going on and need to assign a meaning to it. In either event, there is a need for "closure," for the resolving of tension.[7]

More than twenty-five years ago, Hadley Cantril, in a book re-issued in 1963, used the approach being suggested at this point as an intellectual device for understanding social movements as diverse as a lynching mob, the kingdom of Father Divine, the Oxford Group (Moral Rearmament), the Townsend movement, and the Nazi Party in Germany. More recently, Hans Toch has updated it, and shown its applicability to the understanding of the Ras Tafari Brethren movement in Jamaica, a variety of religious and secular movements, and significantly for our purposes, to the understanding of ultra-right-wing extremist groups in America. Unquestionably, a significant amount of extremist behavior — both left and right — can be meaningfully approached from the standpoint suggested by the study of social movements. In the second and third lectures I will be indicating in some more specific ways how this standpoint is helpful to us. At the moment, I want simply to point out in a general way that this is likely to be a fruitful line of inquiry. Its potential usefulness to us is shown plainly in this summary of the approach given by Hadley Cantril. People in a condition of "puzzlement," he says, "because they are eager to free themselves from a state of indecision and bewilderment . . . are unusually likely to accept whatever interpretation is offered as long as it seems plausible, that is, as long as it does not conflict with any standard they feel they can rely on . . . It is these critical situations that furnish fertile soil for the emergence of the mob leader, the potential dictator, the revolutionary or religious prophet, or others with new and untried formulae . . . Whether or not a person becomes a member of a particular organization or movement will be determined essentially by his personal values . . . and . . . his derivative ego drives and frames of reference."[8]

A second angle from which to approach the study of extremism is that suggested by the study of what sociologists call **social systems.** The intricacies of the analysis of social systems cannot be pursued in any depth; for our purposes it is not necessary for us to present more than a grossly oversimplified account of the theory of social systems. The understanding of social systems begins at the point of asking a quite basic, and very broad, question: how are order and stability possible in human relations, or, to state it differently, how does a society persist? Bredemier and Stephenson, in their excellent volume entitled **The Analysis of Social Systems,** provide a brief summary of the relevant theory that answers this basic question, and that indicates for us a potentially useful angle from which to see extremism. "Human responses to physical and biological stimuli," they point out, "depend upon the meaning assigned to those stimuli by cultural definitions. Cognitive ideas tell people what to 'see' in the environment; cathectic definitions tell them what is pleasant and unpleasant about what they see; and evaluative ideas tell them what is morally good and bad about what they see. Cultural definitions not only permit people to abstract different aspects of concrete reality; they also permit people to generalize about them . . . In order for people to interact with one another, it is necessary for them to share common definitions."[9] One answer to the question of how society is possible, then, is that people share certain common definitions of the situations that they must face together.

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 59-61.

[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 69.

[9] Bredemeier, Harry C. and Stephenson, D., *The Analysis of Social Systems* (New York: Holt, Rineheart, and Winston, 1964), p. 27.

A second answer to this question is this. "The basis of social life consists of a division of labor among participants such that each contributes in some measure to the needs of the other through some degree of specialization. Differentiation within a human group is accomplished by means of a social system composed of statuses. Each status specifies the rights and obligations of the person occupying it in relation to other status-occupants in the system. Any given person ordinarily has membership in many different groups and therefore occupies several different statuses . . . Any system must be so organized as to maintain some degree of integration among its units (statuses) and some degree of adaptation to its environment."[10] If the necessary integration of the system is to take place, people must "learn to cognize the statuses in which they act and be motivated to conform to them. By means of socialization, they learn to define conformity as intrinsically or instrumentally gratifying, as necessary for the favorable response of others, or as a means of self-approval. By means of social conditioning of biological needs and through the processes of identification and internalization, people learn to define social objects and to respond to them in ways more or less consistent with the systems in which socialization takes place."[11] Yet this is not true of every person in a society; there are some who do not "get the message," and some for whom, for a variety of reasons, the culturally patterned expectations are not acceptable or do not "verify." It appears that any social system produces a certain amount of deviant or non-conforming behavior. Entirely apart from the question of whether deviation is good or bad, desirable or undesirable, functional or dis-functional with respect to a given society, there is apparently no exception to the generalization that any social system inevitably generates, in varying amount, deviant or non-conforming behavior. There are at least three primary sources of deviant behavior motivations. "People may be inappropriately socialized, they may be inadequately socialized, or the structure of the system may present inconsistencies or impose demands that lead to frustration and motivate to deviance. Their deviance may take the form of innovation, ritualism, retreatism, or overconformity."[12] I find these categories useful in trying to understand certain kinds of the behavior we think of as extremist in our contemporary situation. The **innovator** is described as a person who may strive for the **prescribed goals** that are accepted in the society, but who adopts **proscribed means** for reaching them. If an innovator thinks of himself as a reformer, he is likely to see himself as a pragmatic realist when he utilizes proscribed means, and to regard those who are unwilling to adopt these means as traditionalists.

The **ritualist** is seen as a person who may conform to the expected and allowable means, but who fails to work for the prescribed goals. The prototype of the ritualist is the bureaucrat who meticulously observes all the rules of his particular game but who has lost sight of what the game is all about. Here again, if he thinks of himself as a reformer, he will regard himself as pursuing the course of righteousness and integrity, and those who want to set aside the rules as seeking after false goals. In his own way, then, the ritualist is an extremist, if extremist is taken to mean a person who pursues a given course of action to "a very pronounced or excessive degree."[13] So is the **retreatist,** who deviates by rejecting both the institutionalized goals and the allowable means provided for in the society. Of the retreatist it can be said that he feels no commitment to the values of the society, and no need to

[10] *Ibid,* pp. 58-59.
[11] *Ibid.* p. 89.
[12] *Ibid.* p. 145.
[13] Webster's *Third International Dictionary,* p. 807.

conform to its demands. The obvious examples of this type are the drug addict ,the alcoholic, the psychotic, and outcasts like vagrants and bums; but in the present situation we must add the beatnik, the hippie, and the alienated youth, about which we shall have more to say in a subsequent lecture. If a retreatist is in a reforming mood, he will undoubtedly see himself as prophetic, and regard those who accept the system in some sense as squares or dupes.

There is at least one other way of deviating from cultural prescriptions. This is the way of the **over-conformists,** whose deviation consists in the fact that they conform excessively to both prescribed goals and allowable means in the society. "Adhering strictly to means and with their eyes fixed firmly on goals," the over-conformists "take inordinate risks, . . . push themselves to the breaking point, and . . . seize upon every legitimate means and exhaust every legitimate advantage. They are overscrupulous in their insistence upon conformity of others, lest they lose advantage or so that they may gain leverage by instrumental use of such compliance. The prototype may be found in some upwardly mobile people in our own society. It may be seen among those 'newly arrived' who, as they strive to validate their status, are 'more royal than the royalists.' "[14] As we shall see when we consider the extremism of the right, the category of the over-conformer is not without its relevance.

A third angle from which to approach the study of extremism is that which considers it as a position on the **political spectrum.** In considering extremism in this way, I have found it illuminating to make use of a typology of political positions suggested by Clinton Rossiter, whose **Conservatism in America** is certainly one of the most important statements of the conservative view of American society. In that volume, Rossiter indicates that seven attitudes can be distinguished in a community "in which government is constitutional, society and the economy are well-structured, science and technology are active, and men are at liberty to propose and oppose reforms designed to meet the problems of an evolving way of life."[15] The first of these attitudes is that of **revolutionary radicalism.** This position holds that existing institutions are sick, that they oppress people, and that the values they uphold are dishonest. It proposes to disrupt institutional processes as much and as quickly as possible, indeed, to sweep the status quo away so that it can be replaced by a more just and benign way of life.

The second position is that of **radicalism,** without the qualifying adjective. Equally critical of the existing order, and committed to sweeping change, those who accept this view are more patient and peaceful, much less in a hurry to get to Utopia. Subversion and violence are not here regarded as allowable means. **Liberalism,** the third position, is held by those who are, in the main, satisfied with our way of life, but who think that it can be improved upon without betraying its ideals or scuttling its institutions. The liberal, in general, adopts a balanced view, but it is apparent that he will opt for change over stability, when faced with a necessary choice in this regard.

Conservatism, the view which Rossiter himself holds (and which he calls "the thankless persuasion"), advocates a discriminating defense of the social order against change and reform. The conservative tends to be pessimistic about the possibilities of reform; he is likely to prefer stability over change. Rossiter makes it clear that he stands for a constervatism on philosophical grounds, that is, he "subscribes consciously to principles designed to justify the established order and guard it against careless tinkering and determmined reform."[16] This kind of conserva-

[14] Bredemeier and Stephenson, *op. cit.,* p. 124.

[15] Rossiter, Clinton, *Conservatism In* America (New York: Vintage Books, 2nd Ed., Rev., 1962), pp. 10-11.

[16] *Ibid.,* p. 9.

tism is to be clearly distinguished from the conservatism of **temperament,** which rests upon habit, fear, inertia, and emulation, and the conservatism of **possession,** which is concerned to protect status, reputation, power, and property.

The fifth position is that of the **standpatter.** This is the position of those who think that society can be made to remain static. The standpatters are afraid of movement in any direction; they fear change, period. Seen in this way, the standpattism position is an excessive kind of conservatism that appears to rest on fear, ignorance, inertia, and selfishness. The genuine conservative is discriminating in his efforts to conserve things; the standpatter tries to conserve everything, indiscriminately. The sixth position, that of **reaction,** is not so concerned to conserve the present as it is to retreat to a past that is better than what we now have. The reactionary wants to turn back the clock to some time or other when things were as they should be, to go back to the kind of society we had at some past time, and from which we have now gone astray. The reactionary's desire to turn back the clock does not lead him to a willingness to use violence for that purpose, as does the position of the **revolutionary reactionary.** Revolutionary reaction is not only willing, but eager, to employ violence on behalf of its objectives. This is what leads Rossiter to suggest that the spectrum of positions we have been describing is not a straight line, but a circle, with the revolutionary forms of radicalism and reaction next to each other, rather than at opposite ends of a continuum.

The relevance of this typology of political positions for our interest in extremism can be readily seen. It points to the fact that when we talk about politics we tend easily — sometimes too easily — to employ the spatial metaphor suggested by the terms Left and Right. As will be noted, I have used these terms in the titles of the next two lectures. This has been done deliberately, but not without some awareness of the fact that, unless we are careful, such terms come to be utilized invidiously or pejoratively, or at least imprecisely. The language of Left and Right is tricky, but if used descriptively and not emotively it can serve our purposes well. In that regard I find the dictionary to be a helpful guide. When I use the term Left, I shall be referring generally to "individuals or groups professing views usually characterized by opposition to and a desire to alter (as by reform or revolution) the established order, especially in politics, and usually advocating change in the name of the greater freedom or well-being of the common man."[17] By the term Right, I shall mean "individuals or groups sometimes professing views characterized by opposition to change in the established political, social, and economic order and favoring the preservation of traditional attitudes and practices . . ."[18] As the presentation of Rossiter's typology indicates these definitions need to be expanded and modified in some ways, in order to take account of all the possibilities, but they are useful in directing us to be descriptive rather than biased in our use of words.

An overall theoretical orientation to, and three angles of vision from which to approach the study of extremism have now been presented. The angles of vision indicated are, I believe, useful in helping us to understand extremism, and they are all well within the context of the stance or style of approach I tried to outline in setting forth the theoretical orientation. We have had all too many attempts to deal with extremism that have been little more than pseudo sophisticated name-calling. In what follows, I hope to avoid that pitfall, and instead, contribute to an effort to see extremism steadily and see it whole. In carrying out that objective, I trust that I shall be endeavoring to realize the hope expressed by Mr. Coffin in his letter of invitation. "We are hoping," he

[17] Webster's *Third International Dictionary,* p. 1289.
[18] *Ibid.,* p. 1955.

said, "for an objective presentation and discussion of the phenomenon, rather than apologetics or persuasion." This initial lecture has, I hope, made it clear that I shall try to fulfill this request that light rather than heat be generated by what we do here. I must add to this, however, something of a disclaimer. I am under no illusion that I have entirely escaped the revealing of my own judgments about the phenomena of extremism. I have been in the sociology and religion games too long to entertain the notion that there is any such thing as complete objectivity when we are dealing with matters about which we care deeply, or in which there is a considerable personal or social stake. Yet what I have to say will, I am sure, reflect quite faithfully the consenus of thoughtful students of extremism, most of whom are social scientists. Mr. Coffin's letter suggested another clue to what you had in mind. "We would be interested in the psychology of the individual extremist as well as the sociology of the various movements. We are also curious about the relationship of extremism of the right or left to religious liberalism and fundamentalism." I have taken this to mean that what would be most helpful to you is an attempt to provide an interpretation of extremism as a psycho-social phenomenon, a frame of reference for understanding it. This first lecture was intended to indicate the general stance that seems to be called for; in subsequent lectures its application will be illustrated in a variety of ways.