



RADICALISM AND EXTREMISM: ESSENCE, SIMILARITIES, AND DIFFERENCES

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Article history:	Abstract:
Received: 7 th May 2026 Accepted: 6 th June 2026	Radicalism and extremism are among the most frequently invoked yet least precisely defined concepts in contemporary political discourse, where they are routinely treated as synonyms. This conceptual conflation has significant analytical, legal, and policy consequences, particularly for programmes of countering violent extremism and de-radicalisation. This article undertakes a conceptual and comparative analysis of the two notions, clarifying their essence and systematically examining their similarities and differences. Drawing on terminology and extremism research, political philosophy, and the sociology of social movements, the study employs conceptual analysis, etymological and historical reconstruction, and comparative method. It argues that radicalism and extremism, though overlapping and often empirically entangled, are analytically distinct: radicalism denotes a root-and-branch opposition to the prevailing order that is historically tied to the Enlightenment and may be emancipatory, egalitarian, and compatible with democracy, whereas extremism denotes an anti-pluralist, anti-constitutional disposition organised around the conviction that an in-group's survival requires hostile action against an out-group. The two are best understood as related but separable points on a spectrum, with radicalism situated at the edge of the democratic order and extremism beyond it. Conflating them risks both misdirecting prevention and delegitimising legitimate dissent.
Keywords: <i>radicalism; extremism; radicalisation; violent extremism; conceptual analysis; political violence; democracy; in-group/out-group; de-radicalisation; terminology</i>	

1. INTRODUCTION

Few pairs of concepts are as central to contemporary security discourse, and as carelessly used, as radicalism and extremism. In public debate, policy documents, and even scholarly writing, the two terms are frequently treated as interchangeable, often alongside a third—terrorism—as if they formed a single undifferentiated continuum of dangerous belief (Bötticher, 2017; Sedgwick, 2010; Coolsaet, 2019). The conflation is not merely a matter of loose usage. Most states lack legal definitions of either term, yet operate extensive programmes of countering violent extremism and de-radicalisation whose targeting, scope, and legitimacy depend on how the underlying concepts are understood (Schmid, 2013; Kundnani, 2012). Uzbekistan illustrates the pattern: it has given the concern statutory and programmatic form through its 2018 Law on Countering Extremism and its 2021–2026 National Strategy, which define extremism in law and prioritise its prevention (O'zbekiston Respublikasi, 2018; O'zbekiston Respublikasi Prezidenti, 2021). When “radical” and “extremist” are used as synonyms for “terrorist,” the effect is frequently to pathologise dissent and to obscure the very distinctions on which

proportionate and effective responses depend (Neumann, 2013). Conceptual clarity is therefore not a scholastic luxury but a practical necessity.

The difficulty is compounded by the fact that both terms are relational and historically variable: what counts as radical or extreme is defined against a shifting mainstream, and the labels carry a heavy normative charge wielded by those with the power to define the centre (Sedgwick, 2010). The radicals of the nineteenth century were the democrats, liberals, and socialists who fought absolutist regimes for universal suffrage and emancipation; the label has since migrated to denote a threat, attaching today most readily to jihadist and far-right milieus (Calhoun, 2012; Khosrokhavar, 2017; Roy, 2017). This article undertakes a conceptual and comparative analysis of radicalism and extremism in order to clarify their essence and to map their similarities and differences. It is guided by three questions: (1) what is the conceptual core of each term; (2) in what respects do they converge; and (3) in what respects, and along which dimensions, do they diverge? The article sets out its methodology, presents its comparative findings, discusses their implications for theory and prevention policy, and concludes.



2. METHODOLOGY

This study is conceptual and theoretical rather than empirical: it does not test hypotheses against new data but seeks to clarify and differentiate two contested concepts. Its methodology combines four complementary procedures. The first is conceptual analysis in the tradition of Sartori, attending to the intension and extension of each term and to the criteria by which cases are included or excluded. The second is etymological and historical reconstruction, in the tradition of conceptual history associated with Koselleck, tracing how the meanings of “radicalism” and “extremism” have shifted across contexts—an approach explicitly adopted in the most systematic recent attempt to define the two terms (Bötticher, 2017). The third is the comparative method, juxtaposing the concepts across a set of analytical dimensions to render their similarities and differences explicit. The fourth is a critical-interpretive synthesis of definitions advanced across terrorism studies, political science, and political philosophy, a field in which the definitional dilemma has been widely acknowledged (Striegher, 2015; Maskaliünaitė, 2015).

To structure the comparison, the analysis specifies a set of dimensions along which any political orientation can be characterised: its relation to the existing order and to the political centre; its attitude toward democracy, pluralism, and constitutional norms; its underlying values, particularly regarding equality and human dignity; its preferred means, ranging from reform to revolution to violence; its construction of the political “other”; and its normative valence. The corpus of sources was selected for conceptual centrality rather than exhaustive coverage, and includes the foundational terminological work of Schmid and Bötticher, Berger’s identity-based theory of extremism, the conceptual-history scholarship of Backes and Calhoun, the comparative party-politics distinction drawn by Mudde, and the radicalisation-process literature represented by McCauley and Moskalenko, Neumann, Borum, Moghaddam, and Kruglanski and colleagues (Borum, 2011; Moghaddam, 2005; Della Porta, 2013; Hafez & Mullins, 2015). The analysis is interpretive and aims at conceptual illumination; its proposed distinctions are offered as analytically useful ideal types rather than as rigid empirical partitions.

3. RESULTS

The analysis yields a structured account of the essence of each concept, of their points of overlap, and of the dimensions along which they diverge; the comparison is summarised in Table 1. A final subsection characterises the relationship between the two.

3.1. The Essence of Radicalism

The term “radical” derives from the Latin *radix*, root: to be radical is to address matters at their root, to question first principles, and to seek thoroughgoing rather than incremental change (Calhoun, 2012). Historically, the concept is tied to the Enlightenment and to the French and American revolutions; through the nineteenth century, radicals were the democrats, liberals, and socialists who advocated republicanism, secularism, universal suffrage, and egalitarian citizenship against absolutist regimes (Bötticher, 2017). On this understanding, radicalism is defined primarily by its relation to the status quo—a fundamental rejection of the prevailing order in favour of root-and-branch transformation—rather than by any particular method or moral valence. Crucially, radicalism in this sense is not intrinsically violent or anti-democratic; it may pursue its aims through persuasion and democratic participation, and many causes now regarded as morally progressive were once radical. Contemporary scholarship accordingly treats radicalism as occupying the outer edge of the democratic order, dissenting sharply from the mainstream while not necessarily rejecting the constitutional framework itself (Bötticher, 2017; Schmid, 2013).

3.2. The Essence of Extremism

Extremism is defined less by its relation to the status quo than by its relation to the political “centre” and to the foundational norms of pluralist democracy. In the conceptual-history tradition, extremism denotes orientations hostile to the constitutional democratic order—anti-pluralist, anti-egalitarian, and inclined to homogenise society and to reject the legitimacy of opposition (Backes, 2010; Bötticher, 2017). Its defining content is captured in Berger’s influential formulation: extremism is the belief that an in-group’s success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group, where hostility ranges from discrimination and verbal attack to violence and, in the extreme, genocide (Berger, 2018). Built on the social-psychological dynamics of in-group and out-group identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), extremism thus rests on a Manichean “us-versus-them” worldview in which the out-group is construed as an existential threat and aggression against it becomes constitutive of the in-group’s identity. Where radicalism may be emancipatory and universalist, extremism is exclusionary and hierarchical, and it lies, in Bötticher’s formulation, outside rather than at the edge of the democratic consensus.

3.3. Shared Features

Despite this contrast, radicalism and extremism share important features that explain their frequent conflation. First, both stand in sharp opposition to the



prevailing mainstream and reject the legitimacy of the status quo as presently constituted, distinguishing them from moderate or reformist positions (Schmid, 2013). Second, both involve an intensity of conviction and a totalising critique that subordinates ordinary interests to a higher cause (Midlarsky, 2011). Third, both are relational and context-dependent: each is defined against a mainstream that varies across time and place, and both labels are normatively loaded instruments often applied by the powerful to delegitimise opponents (Sedgwick, 2010; Neumann, 2013). Fourth, the two are empirically entangled: radical milieus can function as recruitment environments and ideological reservoirs for extremism, and the boundary between them is frequently blurred in practice (Pisoiu, 2012). Fifth, both can—though neither must—culminate in political violence, which is why they are jointly implicated in the study of terrorism and in the design of prevention programmes (Bötticher, 2017; Wintrobe, 2006; Kruglanski et al., 2019). These commonalities make the terms genuinely related rather than merely confused.

3.4. Points of Divergence

The differences between the concepts emerge clearly once they are compared along distinct analytical dimensions. With respect to the reference point of opposition, radicalism is defined against the status quo, whereas extremism is defined against the centre and the foundational norms of pluralist democracy. With

respect to democracy and pluralism, radicalism may be compatible with—indeed historically constitutive of—democratic and emancipatory politics, while extremism is anti-pluralist and anti-constitutional by definition (Bötticher, 2017; Backes, 2010). With respect to underlying values, radicalism in its classic form embraced equality, universalism, and emancipation, whereas extremism characteristically affirms inequality, exclusion, and the supremacy of the in-group (Berger, 2018). With respect to the political “other,” radicalism contests the prevailing order but need not dehumanise its opponents, whereas extremism constructs the out-group as an existential enemy whose suppression is integral to the in-group’s success. With respect to means, radicalism ranges across persuasion, mobilisation, and reform as well as revolution, while extremism is structurally disposed toward coercion and the rationalisation of violence. A further widely noted distinction concerns ontological status: radicalisation is generally theorised as a dynamic process, whereas extremism is theorised as a relatively stable ideological and psychological state (Kruglanski et al., 2019). Finally, the two differ in normative valence: radicalism is descriptively neutral and may be progressive or reactionary, whereas extremism carries an inherently pejorative, anti-democratic connotation. These contrasts are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. *Radicalism and extremism compared across analytical dimensions.*

Dimension	Radicalism	Extremism
Reference point of opposition	The status quo / prevailing order	The political centre & democratic-constitutional norms
Relation to democracy & pluralism	Possibly compatible; at the edge of the consensus	Hostile and anti-pluralist; outside the consensus
Core values	Equality, universalism, emancipation (classically)	Inequality, exclusion, in-group supremacy
View of the “other”	Adversary; not necessarily dehumanised	Existential enemy; hostility constitutive of identity
Preferred means	Reform, mobilisation, persuasion, revolution	Coercion; rationalised hostility and violence
Ontological status	A process (radicalisation)	A state (ideological / psychological)
Normative valence	Neutral; progressive or reactionary	Inherently pejorative; anti-democratic

3.5. The Relationship Between Radicalism and Extremism

The two concepts are best understood not as identical and not as wholly separate, but as related and partly overlapping points on a continuum of opposition to the prevailing order. Radicalism may, but need not,

deepen into extremism; the move from radical dissent to extremist hostility is one possible trajectory of radicalisation, not its inevitable terminus (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017; Bötticher, 2017). This relationship is illuminated by the distinction, common in the literature, between cognitive and behavioural radicalisation—



between adopting system-rejecting beliefs and committing to hostile or violent action (Neumann, 2013; McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008). It is also reflected in comparative party politics, where Mudde distinguishes a “radical right” that opposes elements of liberal democracy while working within it from an “extreme right” that rejects popular sovereignty and democracy as such (Mudde, 2007, 2019). The crucial analytical point is that the defining threshold of extremism is the turn against pluralism and the equal standing of the out-group—a threshold that radicalism, however thoroughgoing, does not necessarily cross.

3.6. The Contested Nature of the Labels

A final feature of both concepts complicates any neat taxonomy: their definitions are relational, and the reference points against which they are measured—the “status quo” and the “centre”—are themselves neither fixed nor politically neutral. Because what counts as radical or extreme is defined by distance from a mainstream, the power to define the mainstream is also the power to designate enemies, and both labels are routinely deployed as instruments of delegitimation rather than as neutral descriptions (Sedgwick, 2010; Kundnani, 2012). The same position may be called “extremist” in one polity and unremarkable in another, and yesterday’s radicalism—abolitionism, universal suffrage, anti-colonial nationalism—is frequently today’s orthodoxy. Usage also varies across intellectual traditions: in much post-Soviet and Uzbek scholarship, for instance, radicalism is treated as the theoretical seedbed of extremism, a tighter coupling of the two than the Western emancipatory reading implies (Radikalizm, n.d.). This relativity has prompted two cautions in the literature. The first is against essentialising either term, treating it as a fixed psychological type rather than a positional and contextual judgement (Neumann, 2013). The second is against the assumption that the centre is by definition moderate or benign, since states and majorities may themselves pursue exclusionary, anti-pluralist ends. Recognising the contested character of the labels does not dissolve the conceptual distinction defended here, but it counsels analytical humility in applying it.

4. DISCUSSION

The central finding of this analysis is that radicalism and extremism, though routinely conflated, are analytically distinct concepts whose difference turns on a single decisive threshold: the posture toward pluralism and the equal moral standing of others. Radicalism names a thoroughgoing opposition to the established order that may be emancipatory and compatible with democracy; extremism names an anti-pluralist orientation built on the conviction that the in-

group can flourish only through hostility toward an out-group (Berger, 2018; Bötticher, 2017). The two are related—extremism can be understood as one direction in which radicalism may develop—but they are not equivalent, and the boundary between them is precisely the boundary of the democratic order. This thesis, that radicalism sits at the edge of democratic consensus while extremism lies beyond it, offers a more discriminating framework than the undifferentiated continuum implied by much policy language.

The conflation of the two concepts carries real costs. Analytically, it obscures the mechanisms it purports to explain, treating a dynamic process and a stable disposition as a single phenomenon. Politically and legally, it licenses the treatment of dissent as incipient terrorism: where radicalism is equated with extremism and extremism with violence, sharp but democratically legitimate criticism of the status quo becomes suspect, and the protective boundary around lawful protest erodes (Kundnani, 2012; Neumann, 2013). Because the labels are wielded by those who define the centre, conflation also lends a scientific veneer to what may be the suppression of political opposition (Sedgwick, 2010). A more precise vocabulary protects legitimate radical dissent while reserving the censure attached to “extremism” for orientations that genuinely reject the equal standing of others.

These distinctions have direct implications for prevention. If extremism, rather than radicalism as such, is the proper object of concern, then countering violent extremism should target the specific cognitive structure that defines it—the construction of an out-group as an existential enemy whose suppression is constitutive of in-group success—rather than thoroughgoing dissent in general (Berger, 2018). Programmes that conflate the two risk both over-inclusion, alienating and stigmatising non-violent radical communities, and under-specification, failing to identify the precise beliefs that warrant intervention (Pisoiu, 2012). The process-versus-state distinction further suggests that prevention aimed at trajectories and intervention aimed at entrenched dispositions require different strategies—the former emphasising the conditions, grievances, and perceived unfairness that drive movement along the spectrum, the latter the cognitive and social architecture of the extremist worldview itself (Van den Bos, 2018; Moghaddam, 2005; Kruglanski et al., 2019). National frameworks increasingly embody this logic: Uzbekistan’s strategy, for example, couples legal measures with spiritual and educational efforts—epitomised in the slogan “enlightenment against ignorance”—aimed at building societal resilience to extremist ideologies (O’zbekiston



Respublikasi Prezidenti, 2021; Saidov & Samatov, 2025).

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The analysis is conceptual and offers ideal types rather than rigid empirical categories; in practice the boundary between radicalism and extremism is contested and porous, and the same movement may be characterised differently by different observers. The distinctions drawn here rest largely on a Western political and intellectual tradition, in which "radicalism" acquired its emancipatory, Enlightenment-linked connotations, and their transposition to other contexts requires care. Moreover, the normatively neutral reading of radicalism is itself contested, since the term carries pejorative connotations in much contemporary usage. Future research should operationalise the proposed dimensions for the empirical coding of movements and texts, test the radicalism-to-extremism trajectory longitudinally and comparatively across ideological families (Della Porta, 2013), and examine how the conceptual distinction translates across legal systems and cultural settings.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that radicalism and extremism, despite their frequent treatment as synonyms, are analytically distinct concepts. Radicalism, rooted etymologically in the radix and historically in the Enlightenment, denotes a thoroughgoing opposition to the prevailing order that may be emancipatory, egalitarian, and compatible with democracy. Extremism denotes an anti-pluralist disposition organised around the belief that an in-group's survival demands hostile action against an out-group, and it lies outside the democratic consensus that radicalism merely strains. The two are genuinely related—overlapping in their opposition to the mainstream and jointly implicated in pathways to violence—yet separated by a decisive threshold: the turn against pluralism and the equal standing of others. Preserving this distinction is of more than terminological interest: it is essential for analytically sound research, for prevention that targets the right phenomenon, and for a politics that can defend itself against extremism without delegitimising legitimate dissent.

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