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Left-Wing and Right-Wing Extremism: A Structural Analogy or an Analytical Fallacy

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1. Introduction

In public debates, media reports, and even in government documents such as the *Verfassungsschutzbericht* (a German annual report), left-wing extremism and right-wing extremism are often viewed together as two variants of political extremism, merely on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum. This semantic parallelism, which already arises from the structure of the term “extremism,” suggests comparability (Salzborn 2018). At least, that is what proponents of the comparative extremism doctrine say (Backes and Jesse 1989). However, this theory did not remain confined to academic discourse but also shaped concrete political decisions. One example in the Federal Republic of Germany is the *Unvereinbarkeitsbeschluss* (incompatibility resolution) of the *Christlich Demokratische Union* (Christian Democratic Union (party), CDU), which rules out cooperation with the *die Linke* (Left party) and the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany (party), AfD), thereby translating the theory’s core assumption, that political extremes on both ends of the spectrum should be excluded from power, into practical politics (CDU Deutschlands 2020). But even within the CDU, critical voices are now being raised against this view. For example, former CDU General Secretary Mario Czaja criticized his party in the summer of 2024 for its strict dissociation from the Left Party (*Der Tagesspiegel Online* 2024). This debate has become even more pressing in the summer of 2025. The CDU and the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland* (Social Democratic Party, SPD) need a two-thirds majority in the Bundestag to amend the *Grundgesetz* (constitution of Germany). They cannot achieve this without cooperating with either the AfD or the Left Party (Die Bundeswahlleiterin 2025). The theory of extremism is thus becoming the guiding narrative in politics. But is it also analytically justified?

This essay explores whether and to what extent a comparison between right-wing and left-wing extremism is meaningful and argues that such an equation obscures key differences and can therefore hinder a nuanced examination of political threats. The essay analyzes this using various literature from extremism research and follows a qualitative approach of literary and theoretical criticism, with a focus on the Federal Republic of Germany.

2. The Theory of Extremism (horseshoe theory)

The theory of extremism was primarily developed in Germany by political scientists Eckhard Jesse and Uwe Backes. The theory of extremism views left-wing and right-wing extremism as two equivalent variants that combine different characteristics. Examples include: identity theory of democracy, friend-enemy thinking, dogmatism, missionary zeal, conspiracy ideologies, and the rejection of pluralism, multi-party systems, and opposition (Jesse 1992; Backes and Jesse 1989). Jesse writes:

“Political extremism is characterized by its rejection of the democratic constitutional state and its desire to eliminate it (...)” (own translation, Jesse 1992, 148)

This quote illustrates that Jesse defines political extremism primarily through its rejection of the democratic constitutional state, regardless of ideological orientation. While he acknowledges differences between left-wing and right-wing extremism, his approach emphasizes the shared anti-constitutional character of both.

Jesse’s focus on anti-constitutional tendencies is also reflected in the terminology of the theory. The term “extremism” was introduced to distinguish these tendencies from “radicalism”, which in Germany was used before. (Salzborn 2018). One of the biggest critics of the concept of extremism is Richard Stöss. He writes in his book *Rechtsextremismus im Wandel*:

“Political science cannot limit itself to analyzing right-wing extremism exclusively as a manifest threat to the constitutional order. It must also examine the historical roots, causes, and consequences of right-wing extremism and its significance for socio-political structures and processes. In other words, it must deal with the phenomenon comprehensively in all its facets.” (own translation, Stöss 2010, 16)

Stöss further clarifies this idea:

“From a political science perspective, democracy cannot be reduced to attitudes toward the rule of law (...). Since there are very different, even contradictory ideas about the purpose and form of democracy, it is absurd to classify people according to whether they are for or against democracy.” (own translation, Stöss 2010, 16)

This view underscores that extremism theory employs a simplistic enemy-friend dichotomy and is too quick to delegitimize ambivalent or critical attitudes toward democracy. The concept is therefore only of limited use for political science analysis.

In addition to Stöss's substantive and analytical criticism, there is also a normative-semantic classification that questions the political impact of extremism theory. Butterwegge, for example, argues that the term poses several problems. According to Butterwegge, in addition to downplaying far-right structures (Salzborn 2018), it shifts responsibility to the political fringes and relieves the political center of any shared responsibility. This creates a fictitious political center that can discredit all criticism, whether from the left or the right, as “extreme”. Butterwegge writes:

“In this way, a fictitious 'political center' presumes to stigmatize competing positions to its left and right as 'undemocratic' and thus exclude them from democratic discourse.” (own translation, Butterwegge 2010, 14)

This form of equation prevents a differentiated examination of the causes of right-wing extremism. Butterwegge believes that this systematically obscures the socio-economic causes of right-wing extremism as well as its nature and roots. He also writes that extremism theory is less a concept of knowledge than an ideology for securing power that delegitimizes political opponents and trivializes right-wing structures. In this respect, a comparison of left-wing and right-wing extremism based on extremism theory is not only analytically useless but also normatively dangerous, as it lays the foundation for trivializing right-wing threats and stigmatizing legitimate left-wing criticism (Butterwegge 2010).

However, it should be noted that, according to Backe and Jesse, extremism theory does not refer to a specific “political center”, but to the democratic basic order as defined by the German constitution. In their approach, the center does not refer to an ideological or partisan position, but stands normatively for the acceptance of constitutional principles, human dignity, pluralism, and the separation of powers (Böttcher and Mares 2012; Backes and Jesse 1989). This normative basis clearly distinguishes the approach from polemical or strategic equating and should be considered in a critical discussion. Nevertheless, it remains questionable whether this abstract normativity is always understood in such a differentiated way in political practice or whether it does not contribute to prematurely branding legitimate criticism from the left as anti-systemic.

The criticism levelled by Stöss and Butterwegge shows that Jesse's concept of extremism ignores important dimensions of political movements. By focusing primarily on anti-systemic attitudes, the concept neglects historical contexts and ideological content. And it is precisely these points that are central to the analytical classification of left-wing and right-wing extremism. For despite methodological similarities, there are fundamental differences at the ideological level.

3. The Ideological Contrast

Left-wing ideology and right-wing ideology differ fundamentally from one another and are antagonistic. Left-wing ideology strives to completely overcome inequalities. Right-wing ideology accepts inequalities as natural, inevitable, or even desirable.

Italian political scientist Norberto Bobbio also argues in his highly regarded work *Destra e Sinistra*, that the central difference between left-wing and right-wing movements lies in their approach to social inequality (Bobbio 1994).

If we look at left-wing extremism and right-wing extremism, we see that, contrary to the horseshoe theory, the connecting element between these two forms of violence is not ideology, nor is there any ideological proximity, but rather the methodology. The rejection of the democratic middle ground and radicalism are commonalities that unite extremists. However, this does not mean that they are ideologically close. Their ideologies are incompatible. A direct comparison would not be meaningful (Bobbio 1994).

However, the incompatibility of right-wing and left-wing ideology is evident not only in their approach to inequality, but also in their respective systems of goals.

4. Different Systems of Goals

Another objection to equating left-wing and right-wing extremism lies in their fundamentally different systems of goals. Right-wing extremism seeks to abolish democracy, while socialism aims to overcome capitalism. This is emphasized by political scientist Richard Stöss. Right-wing extremism is directed against the democratic order as such. The socialist revolution, however, is primarily concerned with economic structures, especially private property and the unequal distribution of economic power. The goal is social justice as a prerequisite for “true” democracy.

According to Stöss, socialism only becomes anti-democratic when it is perverted or abused by bureaucracy (Stöss 1989).

This distinction makes it clear that equating the two phenomena ideologically is not only analytically inaccurate, but also normatively distorting. The theory of extremism in its hooved shape fails to recognize that left-wing and right-wing radicalism do not work against the same basic structures. Right-wing extremism attacks democratic principles, while left-wing extremism attacks capitalist property relations. A comparison based on an assumed common hostility toward the status quo ignores this substantive asymmetry and relativizes the hostility of right-wing extremism toward democracy.

4.1 Party Programs, a Short Comparison

The ideological and systemic differences cannot only be observed in theory but are also clearly evident in the respective party programs. A comparison between the program of the extreme left-wing *Marxistische-Leninistische-Partei Deutschland* (MLPD) and the extreme right-wing party *Die Heimat* (formerly NPD) illustrates these contrasts.

The MLPD calls for a revolutionary transformation of society. In its party program, it advocates the abolition of capitalism and private ownership of the means of production. It wants to overcome class society, dismantle patriarchal structures, and declares its solidarity with international “liberation movements.” It understands social injustice as historically grown and politically reproduced and wants to overcome it through democratic socialism. The MLPD describes in its party program that it supports armed liberation struggles for national and social liberation. In this sense, the party legitimizes violence. Nevertheless, the direction in which the violence is directed is different (not directly against groups of people, see chapter 5), (Marxistisch-Leninistische Partei Deutschlands 2017).

In contrast, the Heimat party advocates a nationalist and ethnically homogeneous vision of society. In its program, it calls for the German “people” to have priority in all state decisions, the exclusion of foreigners from the social welfare system, and the preservation of traditional family and social order concepts. Diversity, migration, and

globalization are portrayed as threats. Social hierarchy is considered natural or culturally evolved and should be preserved (Die Heimat 2010).

The Heimat Party's demands for a welfare state do not stem from an egalitarian worldview but are ethnonationalist in nature. They are not based on a universal view of humanity, but on ethnic solidarity. The Heimat Party's demands for direct democracy are strategic and selective. Although they use the term “constitutional state”, they use it in an ethnically narrow sense, thereby undermining democratic principles.

These positions make it clear that the two political extremes do not refer to the same range of issues and legitimize conflict resolution in fundamentally different ways. While left-wing ideologies aim at inclusion, redistribution, and structural change, right-wing ideologies link political order with demarcation, hierarchy, and national homogeneity. This comparison shows that the political extremes differ fundamentally not only in their objectives, but also in their definition of social problems, their view of humanity, and their political language. The comparison thus shows that a formal equation of politically extreme actors is analytically misleading and ultimately also problematic from a democratic theory perspective.

It must also be noted that politically extremist parties often present their goals in a strategically moderated way in party programs, out of concern for state surveillance or possible bans. This strategic self-restraint can obscure the more radical ideological foundations behind seemingly softened formulations.

The ideological differences are also reflected in their respective attitudes toward political violence. In how deeply violence is embedded in their worldviews and in the targets of that violence.

5. Violence and Ideology

If we focus solely on violence, we see that it is an integral part of right-wing extremist ideology (racist murders, fantasies of annihilation). This is not present to the same extent among left-wing extremists. Salzborn argues:

“(...) while for the right wing, the murder of people is a logical and desired consequence of their worldview, it is only advocated by a small minority on the left (left-wing-terrorism)” (own translation, Salzborn 2018, 19)

This aspect is crucial. It shows that violence in right-wing extremism is not only understood as a means, but as a goal and expression of an ideological worldview. It is directed specifically against people (or groups of people) who are constructed as enemies based on ethnic, religious, or cultural characteristics. In left-wing extremism, however, violence is primarily directed against institutions, symbols of capitalism, or the state. In most cases, this takes the form of property damage, arson, or roadblocks. The deliberate physical destruction of people is not ideologically anchored, but is, according to Salzborn, represented at most by fringe groups. If one equates both extremes, one fails to recognize the substantive orientation and misanthropy that is anchored in right-wing extremism (Salzborn 2018).

6. Actual Threat

To assess whether a comparison between left-wing and right-wing extremism is meaningful, it is important to consider not only the ideological roots and objectives of violence, but also the actual threat level. In the case of Germany, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution provides figures for politically motivated crimes in 2023 in its *Verfassungsschutzbericht* (Constitution Protection Report) (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat 2024). There were around 25,660 crimes committed by the extreme right in Germany, including 1,148 violent crimes. In comparison, 4,248 crimes were committed by left-wing extremists in Germany during this period, including 727 violent crimes. This means that in 2023 there were around six times more crimes committed by right-wing extremists, and right-wing violent crimes were approximately 60% more frequent (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat 2024). Looking at the total number of right-wing violent crimes recorded between 1990 and 2009, these have increased tenfold (Stöss 2010). This is even though the number of people potentially involved in right-wing extremism has fallen sharply. According to Stöss, this means that the potential threat to democracy has grown significantly. There are fewer practices that conform to the system and more that are hostile to it (Stöss 2010).

Crimes such as assault, incitement to hatred, and insult are increasingly being committed by right-wing extremists. Other crimes, such as arson or damage to

property, are exactly the opposite. It is worth remembering, for example, the riots in Hamburg during the G20 summit in 2017. This example shows us that left-wing extremism can also trigger violence that endangers people. Nevertheless, it remains crucial that this violence does not stem from a systematically misanthropic worldview, as is the case with right-wing extremism.

Right-wing extremism thus displays more targeted violence against people. In contrast, left-wing extremism shows a stronger focus on property damage.

Empirically speaking, right-wing extremism poses a significantly greater threat. This is true in quantitative terms, but also in terms of the quality of the violence (against people, racially motivated). These figures prove that right-wing extremism is not only ideologically more dangerous but also poses a significantly greater threat to physical integrity and democratic order. Equating the two phenomena does not do justice to this reality and contributes to trivializing right-wing violence.

7. Conclusion

Has the comparison between right-wing and left-wing extremism proven to be analytically useful?

The analysis has shown that, although a comparison between right-wing and left-wing extremism may seem obvious at first glance, on closer inspection it obscures key differences and is therefore not analytically justified. Left-wing ideology, which aims at complete equality for all people, and right-wing ideology, which reinforces or accepts inequality among all people, differ so fundamentally from each other that they are antagonistic and incompatible.

The goals of the ideologies also differ. Right-wing ideology aims to abolish democracy, while left-wing ideology aims to create a classless society and end capitalism.

The violence of right-wing extremists is also directed against people. They are turned into enemy stereotypes that have no place in right-wing ideology. Left-wing violence, in contrast to right-wing violence, is generally directed against institutions, the state, or symbols of capitalism. Violence against people also occurs in left-wing ideology, but much less frequently and not as inevitably as in right-wing ideology.

This is also reflected in the Constitution Protection Report when looking at the number of criminal and violent acts, broken down by left-wing and right-wing extremist

motivation, for the Federal Republic of Germany in 2023. Right-wing crimes occur six times more often and right-wing violent acts 60% more often than left-wing crimes and violent acts. Right-wing extremism is, at least in Germany, empirically the greater danger in both quantitative and qualitative terms, as it is increasingly directed against people.

Extremism theory can contribute to trivializing right-wing violence by structurally equating it with left-wing violence, and it runs the risk of stigmatizing system-critical left-wing positions if these are broadly classified as “extreme” outside a normative center of society. A comparison therefore seems superficially plausible but is analytically and normatively misleading. A comparison and thus an equation leads to right-wing violence being trivialized, legitimate criticism being marginalized, and, most importantly, resources being misallocated. For example, when it comes to prevention work. This does not mean that left-wing extremism is not a threat to the democratic order or does not cause suffering to those affected! Above all, it means that research must take a differentiated view of extremism.

These findings are not only important for scientific analysis but also have direct political relevance. As the current discussion on Grundgesetz amendments in the Bundestag shows, in which a two-thirds majority cannot be achieved without cooperation with the AfD or the Left Party, extremism theory is becoming a real limit to action. Political deadlocks are fueled not least by this view, which equates right-wing and left-wing extremist forces despite their fundamental differences.

Such an equation not only makes it more difficult to combat right-wing violence but also hinders the democratic handling of left-wing positions that are critical of the system. That is why extremism research, like political practice, must differentiate more strongly instead of leveling differences. Effective prevention policies, future research agendas, and democratic resilience all depend on treating right-wing and left-wing extremism according to their empirical realities and ideological foundations, not on maintaining a misleading symmetry.

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