



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Review of Cassim, Q. (2022) Extremism: a philosophical analysis

Abbas, T.

Citation

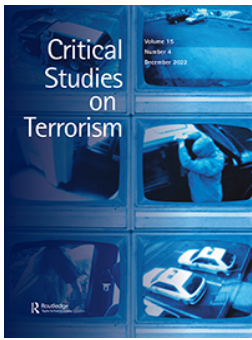
Abbas, T. (2022). Review of Cassim, Q. (2022) Extremism: a philosophical analysis. *Critical Studies On Terrorism*, 15(4), 1032-1037. doi:10.1080/17539153.2022.2082092

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3618840>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



Extremism: a philosophical analysis by Quassim Cassim: a review

Tahir Abbas

To cite this article: Tahir Abbas (2022) *Extremism: a philosophical analysis* by Quassim Cassim: a review, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 15:4, 1032-1037, DOI: [10.1080/17539153.2022.2082092](https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2022.2082092)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2022.2082092>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 18 Jul 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1141



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Extremism: a philosophical analysis by Quassim Cassim: a review

Tahir Abbas 

Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University, The Hague, The Netherlands

The first and most important thing that I would say is that I am extremely grateful to the conference organisers, and in particular Dr Rik Peels, for providing me with an opportunity to read the book and to provide some input on some of its topics. I was at once intrigued by the many ways in which different sorts of extremism are characterised in this book, and this continued throughout the book. Examples include the contrast between tactics extremism, ideological extremism, and psychological extremism as a valuable framework for working through ideas that are about the application, techniques, and mindsets concerning those that might interest us as extremists, among other things.

These themes are explored in-depth, and the philosophical ramifications of the application in context are discussed for all who are interested in its meaning in practice – and, in some cases, what can be done to alleviate it in working through these conceptualisations. But what is interesting is how there are synergies between all the themes explored. In other words, extremism does not exist in a vacuum – and as argued by Cassam, we are talking about violent extremism here, rather than extremism in general – because not all extremism is violent. And what matters to us as social and philosophical thinkers, as well as those involved in policymaking, is how to deal with the most concerning form of extremism, which is extremism that poses a threat to our national security.

This raises all sorts of questions around the politicisation of the very idea of extremism to have the effect of silencing criticism of foreign and domestic policy (Jackson 2008), potentially labelling those regarded as extremists as not just at risk but risky to the rest of us (Breen-Smyth 2014). There is also the obvious absence of ideas of state terrorism or the counter-terror state that is missing from this discourse (Blakeley 2007). Politicians who are faced with the urgent need to find answers to situations that might be regarded as “wicked” invariably have vested interests in this subject, and this is especially true at the federal level. In this case, however, part of the problem is that to frame extremism as wicked, a specific approach is required, which in some cases can result in basic human rights being abrogated (Dreher, Gassebner, and Siemers 2010). It can also lead to issues of surveillance and securitisation which can create the impression that there is a problem that is far greater than it is in practise (Buzan and Wæver 2009). The topic here becomes one of the necessities of policing extremism, specifically those who are on the cusp of becoming extremists or who have already become violent.

CONTACT Tahir Abbas  t.abbas@fgga.leidenuniv.nl

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

But what does this mean for extremism overall? It is in this space that we might find ourselves engaged in a variety of arguments about the freedom to express dissent and how this freedom intersects with issues of hate speech that encourage violent behaviour (Titley 2020). Another issue is what constitutes extremism at the state level, and this is complicated by the politics, ideology, and wider practises of the counter-terror state, all of which contribute to the difficulty of defining what constitutes extremism at the state level. The recent invasion of Ukraine by Russia comes to mind as a recent example. In this case, the subject of classification raises other worries about the finer points of detail that are sometimes disregarded while striving to find immediate solutions to pressing situations (Yousuf 2020).

Taking this as a starting point, we can assume that extremism in and of itself is not a problem, but that there is a type of extremism that leads nations and members of society to be alarmed due to the threats it poses to broader concepts of security. Indeed, if we take it even further, extremism might be thought of as a normative term. It has no meaning unless it is considered in context. For example, I may define myself as incredibly kind, extremely generous, and extremely open-minded, to name a few characteristics. In the eyes of others, my extremism may be considered to the point that it needs some level of policing if my fanaticism somehow unfairly disadvantages others (absurdly enough).

Additionally, this is related to the term radicalisation, which is frequently misunderstood. For most, radicalisation is a top-down, state-centric application in connection to detecting tendencies in society or among individuals that need to be resisted or prevented in one way or another (Silva 2018). To be radical, however, is absolutely appropriate in the setting of secular liberal democracies in Western Europe today, as it has been in the past, as has been previously said. In the case of the United Kingdom, we do not have to go back too far in history to consider the radical social events of the 1960s that heralded the beginning of the liberal period in race relations. We may also talk about the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and the anti-Vietnam protests that erupted across Western Europe during the 1960s and 1970s, which mobilised a generation of young people. Many of these actions could have been characterised as extreme or radical in the time they took place.

As a result, what we consider extremism must be considered in its context (Becker 2021). There is no such thing as an absolute extreme. The reality of extremism is relative – after all, today, what one person considers an extremist may be considered a counter-violent extremism campaign by another. As the first chapter of the book explains, we assign meanings to words that do not have meanings on their own, and this is true of their use in popular discourses, policymaking, and academic as well as community circles, where all these terms, namely, extremism, radicalisation, and even terrorism, are understood, experienced, and externalised in vastly diverse ways.

This book, as I understand it, is concerned with a philosophical approach to understanding the essence of the concept of extremism, and this is a valuable contribution considering so much that is being done to counter it, without truly recognising or understanding exactly what is being done to counter it (Abbas 2021). As a result, this can often create more problems than it solves, particularly when it comes to the implications of how certain communities are defined as radical and how this labelling has the effect of reifying the relationships between those who are labelled and those who are not. For this discussion, I am referring to how Muslim minority communities, particularly in

Western Europe, are drawn into a broader discourse about Islamophobia that is based on misinterpretation and misdirection and that is largely guided by various media and political discourses (Abbas 2019). Of course, some “very bad people” need to be “put away” because they are capable of or have done very bad things.

But how much of what we understand as extremism in popular parlance is framed by an Islamophobic perspective on Islam and Muslims that maintains the false notion of internal issues rather than external issues? In general, labels like Jihadi, Takfiri, and Salafi are thrown around carelessly and without proper diligence. Furthermore, individuals who look to fight this negative labelling are often branded as extremists, leading to the belief that they are a contributing factor to the problem of extremism in and of itself. Muslims who have experienced genuine grievances, whether on the streets and in the towns of Western Europe or more of the Middle East today, in the recent past, or more historically, over the last three hundred years, are dismissed as having a dissenting or critical reaction. By doing so, it confirms another feature of Islamophobia, namely, the immediate discounting of Muslim criticism (Sabir 2022).

And so, bearing all these perspectives in mind – namely, historical, political, cultural, ideological, policy-oriented, economic, and, as a result, structural and individual factors – it is true that the study of extremism must be interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary, whether it be through philosophy, sociology, political science, international relations, and other fields, as well as others. We must not lose sight of the growing importance of psychology and public mental health in this context, which focuses on individual-level vulnerabilities that are often the triggers between the factors described as the “push and pull” on the path to extremism, radicalisation, and terrorism. As a result, we must develop a vocabulary that will aid in the understanding of extremism while also being true to its intended aim. However, the question of, for what reason, will always be present. Who stands to gain? And who endures most of the consequences?

In addressing the philosophical character of extremism and how we must think through it as a notion that is open-ended, unbounded, and capable of offering solutions to issues, it is difficult to avoid the politics of the realities that reinforce features of extremism in the writing of this book. There are legitimate material problems that are driven by ideological reasons that exist in environments that are a result of historical and contemporary conflicts, and these are addressed in this book. As a result, it is impossible to put two radicals in the same room together, even though they have similar origins and are fighting for the same causes, and to set up the extent to which their similarities can be understood in general terms. Countering extremism entails more than simply opposing narratives or opposing ideologies. The existence of grievances often results in material difficulties for people who are motivated by the desire to improve structural disadvantages. I agree with Cassam when he asserts that unless we deal with the genuine issues at hand, there will always be some level of extremism since certain individuals will always be unsatisfied with their material circumstances. Society is unequal by its very nature. As a result, divisions are unavoidable in any organisation. And, in today’s world, polarisation divides individuals more than ever, and this is especially true in a space where there is no common ground that holds a majority consensus that is acceptable to most people (Ali 2018).

However, there continues to be the assumption in the field in general that a path to extremism exists and that it can be reversed through clever re-engineering of policy and practise to interrupt a linear path between different degrees of extremism that can lead to political violence in the end, or in some cases, can be reversed into anti-extremism or de-radicalisation, depending on how the term is defined. Having said that, the problem with this approach lies in its linearity. It presents the conveyor belt hypothesis, which says that people are on a conveyor belt, and if that conveyor belt can be changed, people will shift away from extremism.

However, the growing body of evidence from extremism and radicalisation studies shows that there is no single road to radicalisation (Baker-Beall, Heath-Kelly, and Jarvis 2014). There is no logical reason for this. There is no one pattern of knowledge that applies to everyone. As opposed to this, every individual's experience is distinct (by definition). As a result, it is exceedingly difficult to develop solutions that are acceptable to everyone, and the reality is that the realm of policymaking often chooses the straightforward way out, which can have profound consequences. Apart from destroying fundamental ideas of human rights, the social compact, and concerns of social and political confidence, it also assures that a counter-terror state is established in which legislation is introduced first and thought follows later. Police, securitisation, and intelligence collection systems are introduced that are less concerned with the individual and more concerned with notions of defending nation-states that are still hypothetical at this point. Because of this, polarisation is becoming more pronounced, which has the consequence of fostering the emergence of new types of radicalisations. Unsurprisingly, the introduction of counter-violent extremism policies can have the unintended consequence of increasing the spread of violent extremism. This is especially true when there is competition among individuals and organisations to position themselves at the top of the food chain in pursuit of personal and group gain. This simply serves to enrage the margins even more, and it only serves to expand the terrain of violent extremism even further.

However, this is often the result of Ivory Tower thinking, in which individuals can be persuaded or even co-opted by grand narratives that have their origins in other ideological perspectives such as exceptionalism or nationalism, and which are then used to justify their own positions. Was Donald Trump an extremist in his views? According to ongoing investigations into the events of 6 January 2021, it is possible that his comments, however rambling and unclear to the trained ear, were able to rouse and mobilise the disenfranchised and disillusioned into violent extremism, with conspiracy theories rife. It should come as no surprise that individuals who believe the implausible are also the ones who are most prone to believing in conspiracies (Uscinski 2018). Do we consider Boris Johnson to be an extremist because he has instigated and supported the United Kingdom's separation from the European Union? Was that contentious and extremely problematic move the result of an extremist ideology on the part of the government? In these kinds of scenarios, who has the authority to decide what should happen? Who has the authority to punish unaccountable elites, particularly when actions of political resistance are themselves monitored and labelled as extreme by the very institutions of the state that make it possible for global leaders of such hues to hold power? This extremism can be seen both in the centre and on the fringes of society at the same time. The fact that extremism can be found in all sectors of society suggests that philosophical approaches to understanding extremism can provide us with an additional dimension.

However, it is still important to better understand what we can do to combat extremism in these contexts after establishing that it is a problem. As nations look to distinguish themselves as distinctive or unique, all of these are value-laden stances that necessitate specific answers capable of transcending broader concerns about who we are and who we are not as a people. But extremism crosses boundaries, not just through the mobility of ideas carried by people on the move, but also through the proximity and immediacy of social media and other digital modes of contact and exchange, which are becoming increasingly prevalent. Extremism leads to real-world difficulties that necessitate the development of real-world remedies. When it comes to extremism, philosophical tools can assist us in thinking through the concept so that we can cut through the noise, heat, and ambiguity that plagues minds, policymakers, and communities all over the world. Cassam's book is a great contribution to the ever-expanding field of what can only be called "ambiguous extremism studies", and it is worth reading for that reason alone.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Tahir Abbas FRSA is Professor of Radicalisation Studies at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs at Leiden University in The Hague. He holds a PhD in Ethnic Relations from the University of Warwick (2001). His current research interests are the intersections of Islamophobia and radicalisation, gender and violence, inter-generational transmission of Islamism, and ethnic relations. He is the author, editor, and co-editor of 14 books (18 vols) and over 70 peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and encyclopaedic entries.

ORCID

Tahir Abbas  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0968-3261>

References

- Abbas, T. 2019. *Islamophobia and Radicalisation: A Vicious Cycle*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Abbas, T. 2021. *Countering Violent Extremism: The International Deradicalization Agenda*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Ali, T. 2018. *The Extreme Centre: A Second Warning*. London: Verso.
- Baker-Beall, C., C. Heath-Kelly, and L. Jarvis, Eds. 2014. *Counter-radicalisation: Critical Perspectives*. Routledge.
- Becker, M. H. 2021. "When Extremists Become Violent: Examining the Association between Social Control, Social Learning, and Engagement in Violent Extremism." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 44 (12): 1104–1124. doi:10.1080/1057610X.2019.1626093.
- Blakeley, R. 2007. "Bringing the State Back into Terrorism Studies." *European Political Science* 6 (3): 228–235. doi:10.1057/palgrave.eps.2210139.
- Breen-Smyth, M. 2014. "Theorising the "Suspect Community": Counterterrorism, Security Practices and the Public Imagination." *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 7 (2): 223–240. doi:10.1080/17539153.2013.867714.

- Buzan, B., and O. Wæver. 2009. "Macrosecuritisation and Security Constellations: Reconsidering Scale in Securitisation Theory." *Review of International Studies* 35 (2): 253–276. doi:[10.1017/S0260210509008511](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509008511).
- Dreher, A., M. Gassebner, and L. H. Siemers. 2010. "Does Terrorism Threaten Human Rights? Evidence from Panel Data." *the Journal of Law and Economics* 53 (1): 65–93. doi:[10.1086/596021](https://doi.org/10.1086/596021).
- Jackson, R. 2008. "The Ghosts of State Terror: Knowledge, Politics and Terrorism Studies." *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 1 (3): 377–392. doi:[10.1080/17539150802515046](https://doi.org/10.1080/17539150802515046).
- Sabir, R. 2022. *The Suspect: Counterterrorism, Islam and the Security State*. London: Pluto.
- Silva, D. M. 2018. "Radicalisation: The Journey of a Concept', Revisited." *Race & Class* 59 (4): 34–53. doi:[10.1177/0306396817750778](https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396817750778).
- Titley, G. 2020. *Is Free Speech Racist?* Oxford: John Wiley & Sons.
- Uscinski, J. E. 2018. *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*. USA: Oxford University Press.
- Yousuf, S. 2020. "Muslim Resiliency in the Face of counter-terror and Violent Extremism." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 17 (4): 386–394. doi:[10.1080/14791420.2020.1829660](https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2020.1829660).