



# THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF EXTREMISM

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**J.M. Berger**

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*Illustration: Bouw van de toren van Babel (The construction of the Tower of Babel). A print by Hans Collaert, after a drawing by: Jan Snellinck. Circa 1579.*

# Abstract

There is no consensus definition of extremism in academic or policy circles. Most existing definitions classify extremism as a fringe or anti-authority phenomenon that only exists relative to the mainstream of society. This thesis addresses the important gaps that result in the literature. For instance, movements that seize and/or hold power are not considered extremist while in power even if their beliefs and behaviors are substantially unchanged. The relative framework also inhibits the study of how historically mainstream movements (such as White nationalism) are related to contemporary fringe movements with substantially the same beliefs. These questions are vitally important because most extremist movements seek to take control of their host societies. Using grounded theory to analyze case studies across a wide historical span, this thesis argues that defining extremism as “the belief that an in-group’s success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group” creates a thematically consistent category for comparative and longitudinal study. This thesis concludes that important insights can be generated by comparing diverse ideologies using the definitional framework, especially when comparing movements that are socially dominant to those that are socially marginalized. Across the case studies, extremists are found to grapple with the mechanics of social construction, including strategies to take or claim control of the in-group’s consensus view of reality. Social context also shapes the nature of the hostile actions extremists seek to implement. The thesis concludes with a challenge to the field’s conventional wisdom assertion that extremism presents adherents with a simplified worldview that reduces their cognitive labor.

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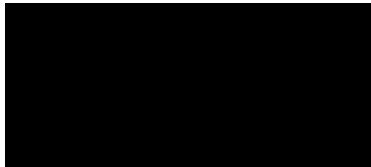
# Declarations

This work was funded in part by Facebook and the VOX - Pol | Network of Excellence.

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

This dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by endnotes giving explicit references. I confirm that this work is within the word limits dictated by Swansea University and that the university's ethical procedures have been followed.

If this work is accepted for a research degree, I agree to making it available for sharing and for inter-library loan (subject to the law of copyright), and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organizations.



27 September 2024

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# **PART I: LITERATURE AND METHODOLOGY**

# 1. Introduction

Extremism, in its broadest sense, is the story of groups.

One group is *our* group. Our group is always, quintessentially, the good group.

Other groups are *their* groups. Some of their groups are intrinsically bad groups.

From this simple distinction, great complexity arises.

Extremism is a continuously evolving narrative that explains why our group must harm their group. Although many people like to think of extremism as an aberration or fringe activity, it is the bread and butter of history. As natural as breathing. As human as to err. “As American as apple pie,” in the words of one infamous al Qaeda ideologue.<sup>1</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century so far, substantial intellectual capital has been spent on the challenge of understanding what extremism is, how extremism forms and evolves, and how we can counter extremism. To make progress on these questions, we must first accept that extremism is a normal part of human life. Extremism emanates from the same ordinary and universal mechanisms that shape most human behavior. To approach the problem of extremism, we must first approach the question of the human experience.

## 1.1. Motivation for study

As a late-career PhD student, I have already published a substantial body of work on issues related to this dissertation, including meaningful contributions to the field and its literature, especially as it relates to the definition of extremism.

Therefore, it’s worth taking some time to orient this dissertation within my broader output and examine how that output shapes considerations with respect to the literature and the academic consensus. To facilitate clarity, I will maintain the first person for the duration of this section.

My work on terrorism and extremism constitutes a second career. At the conclusion of my undergraduate studies in English literature and film, I took a job at a newspaper and worked as a journalist for more than 20 years. My initial forays into terrorism studies

were more journalistic than academic, including my first book, an investigative history of Americans joining jihadist movements.<sup>2</sup> Although I had set out to create journalistic work, my writing ultimately received more attention in academic circles, and the focus of my work slowly transitioned to more academic settings, including publications in peer-reviewed journals and in association with think tanks such as The Brookings Institution and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague (ICCT).

As part of this transition, I became increasingly interested in theory and analysis. This focus grew during my work with ICCT, under the guidance and encouragement of Dr. Alastair Reed, who later became my PhD advisor, and closely following on related work for ICCT by Dr. Haroro Ingram. My first significant attempt to employ Ingram’s linkage-based analysis (LBA) framework was published by ICCT in 2017 and was followed by several subsequent papers that built on the same concepts.<sup>3</sup>

I proposed a definition of extremism that was first published in the 2017 paper, “Extremist Construction of Identity,” inspired in part by the paper’s grounded theory exploration of the origins and evolution of a white nationalist movement known as Christian Identity. Similar to this dissertation’s methodology, the paper analyzed ideological texts in an LBA context in order to uncover insights. My definition of extremism was refined and formally codified in its current form in my 2018 book, *Extremism*, published by MIT Press.<sup>4</sup>

Since publication, the book has enjoyed slow but steady uptake as an introductory text on extremism for collegiate-level studies and in policy circles, including both government and the technology sectors. The Berger definition has been debated, discussed and, in some cases, adopted by academics and policy makers, notably featuring in several United Nations and UK policy papers.<sup>5</sup> In the six years since publication, the book *Extremism* has been academically cited 436 times, according to Google Scholar, in addition to citations in non-academic publications. “Extremist Construction of Identity” has been cited another 75 or more times, along with several other papers employing the Berger definition.<sup>6</sup>

Given the highly contested nature of extremism, I believe that the Berger definition and its attending scholarship have had a significant impact on the definitional debate.

Nevertheless, the field is still far from consensus, which is hardly surprising. The process of evaluation and adoption is naturally a slow one, and I have been strongly engaged in trying to push the debate forward in subsequent publications, panels and lectures, particularly with respect to publicly challenging definitions that privilege power, as detailed in Chapter 3.<sup>7</sup>

Recent developments have helped illuminate and foreground the definitional problem, including the struggles of social media companies to moderate potentially extremist content that originates with governments, as in Myanmar and in the United States, where the problem was sharply highlighted by the Capitol Insurrection of January 2021 and the subsequent deplatforming of President Donald J. Trump.<sup>8</sup>

To conclude, the Berger definition's place in the literature can be summed up as follows:

- The increasing reach of the definition has been observed in conversations with colleagues, academic book reviews,<sup>9</sup> syllabi published online,<sup>10</sup> academic citations, and the definition's circulation and citation in policy circles.
- Thanks to the growing adoption of *Extremism* as an introductory text at undergraduate and graduate levels, the question of definition is being emphasized to a new generation of scholars at an earlier stage in their education, with the Berger definition as a useful starting point for considering the issue.
- Given the relative lack of consensus around any other specific definition, the Berger definition may have the potential to eventually attract plurality support, but it's much too early to assess that issue definitively, and additional scholarship in the future may revise or replace the Berger definition.

Given these factors, one of my goals in writing this dissertation is to more thoroughly explore and more rigorously test the Berger definition in a variety of historical and social contexts, as it was intended to be deployed—examining and evaluating the LBA framework generally and asking whether the Berger definition in the context of specific, diverse extremist ideological texts serves to advance the state of scholarship, even if that analysis highlights weaknesses in the framework or the definition.

It is my hope that this dissertation will contribute to the definitional debate and help refine and defend the Berger definition and related LBA concepts. Most of all, I want this work to encourage academics studying extremism to continue striving toward a consensus understanding and clear statement of what, exactly, we are studying. Whether the Berger definition stands the test of time, or another takes its place, the field can only benefit from the adoption of more consistent language and standards.

## **1.2. Research questions**

This dissertation will use grounded theory to examine four very diverse examples of social movements that could be considered extremist. While the grounded theory approach is not driven by the intention to test a hypothesis, it still requires research questions to focus its exploration.

- **RQ1: Does the Berger definition create a consistent foundation for the comparative study of extremism?** While the author believes the definition published in *Extremism* and reiterated in Chapter 3 is robust and durable, this dissertation will assess its applicability across a set of ideological texts associated with diverse movements that have been deemed extremist by acclamation in the literature, as well as some movements that would seem to qualify based on the author's definition but have not traditionally been framed as extremism by either society or the academy. This dissertation will explore whether the category created by the definition lends itself to "apples to apples" comparisons among movements with divergent beliefs. This aims to address gaps in the literature that result from the existing body of definitional work, which is reviewed in Chapter 3.
- **RQ2: What are the commonalities among groups considered to be extremist?** Beyond the commonalities stipulated by the definition, what unites groups with divergent beliefs? This should, ideally, be addressed as a narrative question that encompasses both structure and content.
- **RQ3: How does status (meaning low or high levels of political and social power and acceptance) shape extremist ideological arguments?** As discussed in Chapter 3, the Berger definition is specifically intended to capture

movements that exist across a spectrum from powerful to weak, popular to fringe, high status to low status. But that doesn't mean powerful and weak movements are the same in all respects. What differentiates groups at opposite ends of the spectrum? What unites them? This aims to address a large gap in the literature that results from excluding mainstream or politically powerful movements from the category of comparables.

- **RQ4: How do extremist movements engage in the social construction of reality?** How do extremists socially construct reality? Do extremists construct reality differently than non-extremists? Does social construction inherently lend itself to extremism? The social construction framework has not featured prominently in extremism research to date.
- **RQ5: Do extremist movements attempt to reduce uncertainty for adherents, and if so, do they succeed?** As will be seen in Chapter 2, the literature strongly suggests that susceptibility to extremism is linked with a desire to avoid uncertainty, which is in turn associated with theories that suggest uncertainty avoidance is related to a desire to reduce cognitive load or effort. The literature is much less explicit and precise when talking about whether and how extremism actually reduces uncertainty for its adherents, and whether and how it reduced cognitive load or effort. This dissertation will question a number of assumptions related to these issues. Here, the thesis builds on a relevant body of literature, detailed in Chapter 2, but it seeks to go beyond the current state of the field to address some stated and unstated assumptions undergirding the theories.

### **1.3. Dissertation structure**

This dissertation is organized in three parts.

Part I will review the literature that informs the dissertation's analysis. Chapter 2 will review the literature on social psychology to show how the basic experience of living gives rise to "us versus them" framings that can be found in even the most ancient human writings, on stone tablets in Sumerian and Akkadian, and in the earliest records of Egypt and Greece.<sup>11</sup>



Chapter 3 will review the literature pertaining to definitions of extremism, examining the pros and cons of various approaches in both academic and policy circles, concluding with an articulation of the Berger definition, which will be used to inform the remainder of the dissertation. Chapter 4 will outline the dissertation's methods for analyzing and comparing a diverse collection of potentially extremist texts.

Part Two consists of four case study chapters examining five texts in detail. Each chapter assesses a different ideological strain through the frame of the Berger definition and employing LBA techniques. The first two case study chapters examine modern texts that are uncontroversially deemed to be extremist by a consensus of scholars—jihadist Abdullah Azzam's *Join the Caravan* and white supremacist James Mason's *Siege*. Since these chapters are more familiar to students of extremism and are situated in recent history, these chapters are relatively brief.

The second pair of case study chapters look at historical examples of ideological belief that have not, to date, been substantively analyzed as examples of extremism by the relevant modern academic community, whose output has focused heavily on terrorism, albeit with a greater focus on other forms of violent extremism in recent years. These chapters are meant to expand the aperture of extremism studies to new but relevant areas and produce the kind of insights that can only come from comparative study.

The third case study chapter examines *Studies on Slavery*, a text that defended the practice of racial slavery in the United States shortly before the onset of the American Civil War. This chapter is longer than the first two, since it incorporates a significant amount of history that readers may be less familiar with and since it addresses ideological beliefs that are not universally understood to be extremist.

The fourth case study chapter examines the separation of Christian and Jewish identity from the first century C.E. through the fourth century. This chapter is again longer, due to the significant amount of context readers may require, due to its description of a much longer historical period, and because it analyzes two texts instead of one—*Against Heresies* by Irenaeus (180 C.E.) and *Against the Jews* by John Chrysostom (387 C.E.), arguing that the former introduced key elements of extremist ideological construction and the latter represents a clearcut example of extremism.

Part Three is an extended discussion of the dissertation's findings. After a brief review of the body of the dissertation, two chapters will analyze certain elements of the findings in detail, followed by a short conclusion.

## **1.4. The grounded theory journey**

In grounded theory (described in more detail in Chapter 4), theory proceeds from data. By making less structured empirical observations on a dataset, the scholar maintains a more open stance and a commitment to follow where the data leads, even if that destination does not match their preconceptions. In "Extremist Construction of Identity," I intuitively pursued a grounded theory approach, although I didn't know it at the time. In this dissertation, I approached the texts more methodically, but with the same commitment to follow the data where it led. As a part-time student, I also had significant amounts of time to think in between writing each case study chapter, during which time I worked on related projects, all of which contributed to my understanding of the material.

In the beginning, I expected to approach this material in a more semantic mode, for instance by evaluating the choice of words around certainty and uncertainty (Chapter 2, section 3). As I proceeded, I found myself returning more to the sort of narrative analysis found in "Extremist Construction of Identity" and described by Andrew Glazzard in 2017 (section 4.3), pulling at conceptual constructs more than word choices.

In Chapter 9, I will discuss in some detail of how the grounded theory journey sparked an evolution in my thinking about extremism and collective identity dynamics. My thinking on the provocative case studies of slavery and early Christian identity construction evolved during the writing of this dissertation, and with additional insights from the first two case studies, I also came away with a much greater emphasis on the importance of in-group dissent and intra-group conflict in shaping extremist beliefs and strategies. Finally, I was moved to articulate a detailed dissection of the conventional wisdom in extremism studies with respect to whether extremist beliefs provide adherents with a simplified interpretation of the world.

The findings attributable to grounded theory form the core focus of this dissertation. In summation, I believe this dissertation makes the following major contributions to the field (in addition to a plethora of significant but less sweeping findings):

1. It explores and enumerates key differences between fringe extremist movements and dominant extremist movements, shedding light on how extremist ideologies adapt rhetorical and material tactics to different social settings.
2. It argues that the field must re-evaluate the conventional wisdom that a) extremism presents a simplified worldview for adherents and b) extremism is primarily or centrally a mechanism for reducing cognitive labor or achieving cognitive closure.
3. It presents and analyzes a substantially original view about the origins of extremism as an outgrowth of the dynamics of heresiology, stipulating that out-group status is always socially constructed rather than existing independently.

## 2. ‘Knowledge resides in consensus’

“Real isn't how you are made,’ said the Skin Horse. 'It's a thing that happens to you.’”

-- *The Velveteen Rabbit*<sup>12</sup>

Extremism is inherently social. It arises when members of a group become committed to harming members of a different group. In order to understand extremism, therefore, we must approach the question of how people form groups, how groups shape behavior, and what leads groups to become embroiled in “us versus them” conflicts.

One approach to this question, which describes dynamics deeply familiar to anyone who studies extremism, is known as the **social construction of reality**. In this view, the framing of “us versus them” can be understood as a side-effect of the mechanisms by which people seek to establish a stable sense of who they are (identity) and where they stand in relation to the world around us (reality).

In the 1960s, psychiatrist R.D. Laing explored these questions by proposing and developing a psychological concept known as “ontological insecurity,” influenced by existential philosophy. Ontological insecurity describes a state of being in which a person lacks “a centrally firm sense of his own and other people's reality and identity.”<sup>13</sup> For such an individual:

...living may feel more unreal than real; in a literal sense, more dead than alive; precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question. He may lack the experience of his own temporal continuity. He may not possess an overriding sense of personal consistency or cohesiveness. He may feel more insubstantial than substantial, and unable to assume that the stuff he is made of is genuine, good, valuable. And he may feel his self as partially divorced from his body.<sup>14</sup>

Boiled down to the basics, ontological insecurity is psychologically unpleasant and existentially untenable. A “sense of one’s own autonomous identity is required in order

that one may be related as one human being to another. Otherwise, any and every relationship threatens the individual with loss of identity.”<sup>15</sup>

Ontological insecurity, as deployed by Laing, is primarily concerned with the causes of mental illness. But Laing discusses the concept in terms that are not simply psychological but philosophical and literary. The framework is mainly useful here for establishing starting concepts and nomenclature, specifically with respect to two key dynamics that are highly relevant to extremism.

The first is **engulfment**, defined as a situation in which one’s individual identity becomes subsumed to the identities of other people one encounters. Laing casts engulfment as a source of anxiety for some mentally ill people, leading them to create barriers between themselves and others in order to avoid engulfment and maintain their strong sense of self. In contrast, people with stronger ontological security or a healthy sense of self-identity may find engulfment pleasurable.<sup>16</sup>

The second is **depersonalization**, a technique for managing interactions with other people by reducing the importance of their human qualities. Laing argues most people use depersonalization on a sliding scale in normal life. By classifying others as slightly less human than one’s own self, an individual seeks to prevent the needs of others from overwhelming one’s own needs.<sup>17</sup>

Because he is using these concepts in the study of mental illness, Laing’s discussion is intrinsically tied to dysfunction—an individual’s perception that the existence of others is reductive to one’s own existence rather than enhancing of it. People who experience ontological insecurity fear they are not the protagonists of their own stories but supporting characters in someone else’s. This understanding of the world can cause severe anxiety to the point of suicidal feelings.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) defines ontological insecurity somewhat more precisely as “repressed fears that the narrative of self-identity cannot withstand engulfing pressures on its coherence or social acceptability.”<sup>18</sup> Building on Laing’s work, Giddens outlines the traits of an ontologically insecure person, who “may lack a consistent feeling of biographical continuity,” may be “paralyzed in terms of practical

action,” and may “seek to ‘blend with the environment’” by taking on traits that do not differentiate them from others.<sup>19</sup>

Alternatively, ontological *security* is based on “trust in others,”<sup>20</sup> which is one of the earliest learned behaviors. Infants are usually taught to trust their earliest caretakers, such as parents. Trust in others is a critical component in the construction of a coherent understanding of reality, Giddens argues, because “the responses of the other are necessary to the sustaining of an ‘observable/accountable’ world, and yet there is no point at which they can be absolutely relied upon.”<sup>21</sup>

In essence, Giddens argues that individual experiences of reality are stronger when they are validated by others. The word “reality” in these pages is stipulated to refer to an individual’s subjective, functional, high-level understanding of the world and how to survive in it. When we are part of a community, our validation process becomes a socially constructed reality—an understanding of the world as shaped by a consensus of trusted others. Philosopher and educator Joseph Petraglia describes this process (accurately in my opinion, although intended as a critique):

Briefly (and broadly), a social constructionist argues that knowledge is created, maintained, and altered through an individual's interaction with and within his or her "discourse community." Knowledge resides in consensus rather than in any transcendent or objective relationship between a knower and that which is to be known.<sup>22</sup>

The creation of an original, coherent and complete view of reality is laborious and uncertain; it is the work of prophets, visionaries and lunatics. For most people, it is easier and safer to rely on the wisdom of the crowd and the thinkers who have gone before them. But even this is not a simple process.

Consensus arises from an individual’s social network. In early childhood development, that social network is familial. As a child grows older, the circumference of their network scales up to a neighborhood, then escalates through experience of school, town, state or province, country and world. For previous generations, this expansion of social networks was typically incremental, in the sequence described. In the present day, mass media and the Internet enable an expansion to global scales at a very early age.

As children grow toward adulthood and gain access to a much larger range of available social networks, they also gain increasing agency to self-select the social network most likely to accept them and meet their needs. If subjective reality is derived from social consensus, this raises the possibility of profound ontological insecurity. Each social network one encounters offers a different consensus view of reality. Sometimes these differences are minor, at other times profound and even irreconcilable.

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann authored a robust exploration of this framework in *The Social Construction of Reality* (1991).<sup>23</sup> The construction of even a singular social network's consensus reality requires the intake of knowledge through multiple lenses, they write. Some are direct and imminent (as in face-to-face interaction) and others removed, requiring the translation of experience into symbols that represent knowledge (objectivation),<sup>24</sup> categories that organize knowledge (typification),<sup>25</sup> and systems that implement knowledge in pragmatic ways (institutionalization).<sup>26</sup> All of these intellectual elements are required to transmit consensus reality as part of a consistent history that can survive over generations.<sup>27</sup>

Two important classes of knowledge are crucial to the social construction of reality and highly relevant to this dissertation's topic: recipe knowledge (knowledge of the steps required to obtain an outcome),<sup>28</sup> and theoretical legitimations (an explanation and defense of why those steps lead to the desired outcome).<sup>29</sup> Most daily experiences of subjective reality revolve around recipe knowledge, which reduces cognitive demands by habitualizing important practical tasks (such as how to drive a car or knowing which mushrooms may be safely eaten).<sup>30</sup>

**Theoretical legitimations** come into play when unfolding events challenge consensus knowledge, or when two social networks with differing consensus collide, forcing each to “develop conceptual machineries designed to maintain their respective universes.”<sup>31</sup> Berger and Luckmann argue that such contests are most likely to be won by the strongest party in the crudest sense—the greater military and economic power. Nevertheless, they write, both sides are likely to engage in “theoretical ingenuity” in order to contest their respective consensus.<sup>32</sup>

While the authors are correct that might often makes right, history is full of evidence that dominant consensus realities can be overturned, whether through the elaboration and modification of a group's internal consensus, or the modification or overthrow of a dominant consensus by theoretical developments that originate with an outside group. Ultimately, socially constructed realities are not stable, and even trusted others cannot be "absolutely relied upon" (Giddens, 1991).<sup>33</sup>

Many potential malfunctions can arise within a consensus view of reality. A consensus view (such as "the world is flat") may be proven objectively wrong by members of the group. The consensus may change gradually over time due to transmission or transcription emendations or errors (as with the text of the Christian bible). The social network of individuals that comprises the consensus (hereafter referred to as a "group" or "collective") may change due to death, demographics or social mobility, thus changing the consensus.

For all these reasons, people experiencing ontological insecurity may seek an enhanced sense of belonging within an existing social network that offers the appearance of a stable consensus. Berger and Luckmann identify two important approaches to stabilizing consensus reality when disagreements arise—**therapy** and **nihilation**.

Therapy seeks to manage people within a social network whose perceptions of reality diverge from the dominant consensus. It is an assimilation approach in which the consensus group seeks to modify individual beliefs through social control. Techniques range from psychotherapy to religious counseling, peer pressure, or even brainwashing. Executing a therapy strategy usually requires a "theory of deviance" to explain why an individual would depart from the consensus in the first place, as well as a method of diagnosing deviance, and a system for correcting it.<sup>34</sup>

Nihilation, in contrast, is a form of "negative legitimation" which assigns inferior status to people who belong to a group that supports a conflicting consensus view of reality.<sup>35</sup> Nihilation attempts to "account for all deviant definitions of reality *in terms of* concepts from one's own universe," (emphasis original).<sup>36</sup>



As social knowledge becomes habitualized and institutionalized, people begin to understand it as objective reality, rather than as a human construction. Although these understandings are still ruled and shaped by consensus, adherents perceive them as having objective validity. For instance, the right to own property is understood by some people to be an immutable, “natural” or “God-given” right. Berger and Luckmann describe this process as **reification**, “the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something else than human products—such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will.”<sup>37</sup> Reification can be **pretheoretical** (meaning automatic or instinctive reactions) or **theoretical** (meaning it is understood through intellectual justification).<sup>38</sup> Social roles and responsibilities can become reified, up to the point of “identity itself.”

Reification of identity, whether self or other, is “a total identification of the individual with [their] socially assigned typifications. [They are] apprehended as nothing but that type.”<sup>39</sup> Berger and Luckmann offer the example of Jewishness, the reification of which “may range from the pretheoretical level of ‘what everybody knows about the Jews’ to the most complex theories of Jewishness as a manifestation of biology (‘Jewish blood’), psychology (‘the Jewish soul’) or metaphysics (‘the mystery of Israel’).”<sup>40</sup>

Contact between previously separated societies can lead to a clash between their competing social consensus about what is real. Groups may respond to this situation in different ways, for instance by seeking to therapize the other group through assimilation or seeking to nihilate it with derision and hostility.<sup>41</sup> Contact with a conflicting consensus may cause a group to accelerate or amplify the reification of its own knowledge in an effort to establish dominance. This dissertation is primarily concerned with the problems that can occur when some groups encounter other groups with incompatible consensus views of reality. Extremism is one response to such situations, the reformulation of incompatibility into conflict, perceived to be irreconcilable, between “us” and “them.”

## 2.1. Us versus them

The terms *in-group* and *out-group* date back to the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, introduced by social scientist William Edward Sumner in *Folkways*, his 1906 study of culture and mores, which is also notable for its coinage of the term *ethnocentrism*.<sup>42</sup>

A group of groups may have some relation to each other (kin, neighborhood, alliance, connubium and commercium) which draws them together and differentiates them from others. Thus, a differentiation arises between ourselves, the we-group, or in-group, and everybody else, or the others-groups, out-groups. The insiders in a we-group are in a relation of peace, order, law, government, and industry, to each other. Their relation to all outsiders, or others-groups, is one of war and plunder except so far as agreements have modified it.<sup>43</sup>

In this dissertation, an in-group is defined as the group to which the referent person belongs—the “us” in “us and them.” Out-groups are constructed relative to in-groups and comprised of people who are understood by in-group members to be specifically excluded from the in-group. The existence of out-groups follows closely on the perception of in-group membership, or in the words of sociologist Everett Cherrington Hughes, “an in-group is one only because there are out-groups.”<sup>44</sup>

The in-group/out-group formulation vaulted into wide scholarly usage with the emergence of Social Identity Theory (SIT), a framework for analyzing and understanding group dynamics and intergroup conflict. SIT emerged from social psychology research on intergroup behavior in the 1960s and 1970s, being fully articulated by Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>45</sup> Their research sought to use conceptions of self-identity to address questions of prejudice, discrimination, intergroup violence and authoritarian dynamics.

At its heart, Social Identity Theory proposed to supplement previous lines of study that understood intergroup conflict primarily or exclusively as the result of divergent interests among groups—in other words, the idea that conflict was usually the result of competing real interests, such as the control of scarce resources.<sup>46</sup> Social Identity Theory posited an additional set of more nuanced and complicated social dynamics that

arose from the inherent psychology of individuals and groups. This approach was necessary, the authors argued, to explain why competition (such as for resources) does not consistently produce effects such as racism or nationalism, and why such effects were not evenly distributed among high-status and low-status groups.<sup>47</sup>

The authors argued that when people identify themselves as part of a collective or group, the psychology of membership would lead them to have more favorable views of their group (the in-group) and less favorable views of those who associate themselves with other groups (out-groups). This **in-group favoritism** and **out-group derogation** (or **bias**) occurred in empirical studies where the “mere awareness of the presence of an out-group [was] sufficient to provoke intergroup competitive or discriminatory responses on the part of the in-group,”<sup>48</sup> Tajfel and his collaborators wrote. Studies found that in-group favoritism and out-group derogation reliably emerge when people experience even very minimal group affiliations,<sup>49</sup> such as in experiments that simply separated a group of people into arbitrarily chosen teams.

These findings and concepts can be explained within the context of social construction of reality, in which the existence of competing and conflicting consensuses produces an inherent tension with respect to an individual’s subconscious perception of reality as stable and reliable. In-group favoritism and out-group bias can be seen as pretheoretical or automatic responses seeking to stabilize an in-group consensus reality. Extremist ideologies reify these tendencies through theoretical legitimization.

These effects are normally quite minimal. Tajfel and Turner argued that in-group favoritism and out-group derogation are more likely to occur in a context of social instability—periods during which group members perceive that their relative status may change or is already changing.<sup>50</sup> An example would be the breakup of Yugoslavia, which took place concurrently with an economic crisis and other destabilizing influences. In the years that followed, the former Yugoslavia descended into war and extremism, including but not limited to a horrific genocide against Bosnian Muslims by ethnic Serbs and a subsequent influx of jihadist foreign fighters.<sup>51</sup>

Tajfel and Turner identify three processes as unique to the SIT framework.<sup>52</sup>

- SIT necessarily begins with **social categorization**, the perception that two or more different groups exist, usually tied to the perception that one belongs to an in-group and that out-groups exist apart from the in-group.
- Categorization leads to **self-evaluation through social identity**, in which individual and collective perceptions of self-esteem become associated with the status or success of the chosen in-group.
- Status and success must then be measured through **intergroup social comparison**, which assesses the in-group relative to an out-group.

When groups of people were studied using these conceptual underpinnings, several dynamics were observed throughout multiple experiments, which usually involved recruiting cohorts of participants and placing them in different situations in which they were assigned to groups, with their responses to various competitive and non-competitive situations assessed.

Individuals who engaged in even very minimal acts of categorization (identifying as part of any in-group) tended to view members of the in-group collectively as superior to members of an out-group. In-group favoritism occurred even when the group was assigned, random, ad hoc and/or vaguely defined. Relatedly, individuals who engaged in categorization developed negative or disparaging attitudes toward members of out-groups. Again, this out-group bias arose even after very minimal acts of categorization and in the absence of competition or other exacerbating real-world factors.

Individuals who engaged in categorization sought to maximize the difference between the in-group and out-groups, even at the expense of maximizing in-group profit.

Through **maximum difference seeking**, participants prioritized in-group dominance of an out-group even over the objective prosperity of the in-group. Hurting an out-group in some cases can become prioritized even over maintaining the health and security of the in-group. Put another way, categorization leads categorized individuals to seek ever-greater **differentiation** between their group and the out-group. “The aim of differentiation is to maintain or achieve superiority over an out-group on some dimensions,” the authors write.<sup>53</sup>

From these findings, additional observations and hypotheses emerge. The first pertains to **categorical stability/instability**, meaning that the probability of intergroup conflict, in-group favoritism and out-group derogation increases in the presence of anticipated or actual changes in the relative status of an in-group compared to out-groups.

“Our hypothesis is that a status difference between groups does not reduce the meaningfulness of comparison between them providing that there is a perception that *it can be changed*,” the authors write (emphasis in original).<sup>54</sup> Both high-status and low-status groups will seek to bolster perceptions of an “insecure social identity by searching for enhanced group distinctiveness” (in other words, increased differentiation). If an in-group’s status relative to an out-group is negative or threatened, members may react in some of the following ways:

- **Individual mobility:** When possible, especially for groups with low cohesion, individuals may leave or disassociate from a low-status group.
- **Social creativity:** In-group members as a group seek to establish or describe positive differentiation from out-groups, using methods such as:
  - **Expanded criteria:** In-group members identify new “dimensions for comparison,” meaning comparative areas that had not been prioritized previously but in which the in-group is better situated to compete. For instance, if an in-group has lower status than an out-group with respect to wealth, it might instead prioritize comparisons based on morality, if that comparison is perceived to produce a better relative status for the in-group.
  - **Changing the values of the group’s assigned attributes:** Existing attributes of the in-group (for instance, skin or hair color) are assigned higher intrinsic value, especially if the trait has been denigrated by another group in a given society (Tajfel and Turner cite “black is beautiful” as an example).
  - **Frame shopping:** In-group members may seek to compare themselves to lower-status out-groups rather than higher status groups. For instance, impoverished American White people can

classify their in-group as defined by poverty or race. If they define themselves as poor, the out-group (“rich”) has higher status, and therefore self-esteem is impaired. If they define themselves as White, compared to non-White outgroups that are perceived as having lower social status, the result is higher self-esteem.

- **Social competition:** Positive in-group differentiation is enhanced by direct competition or conflict with out-groups. Here, in-group members take actions designed to assert their superiority over out-groups. This is a critical component of extremist behavior.

Tajfel and Turner write that the introduction of group identity to interpersonal relationships causes the emergence of “a quasi-ideological dimension of [group] attitudes, values, and beliefs” related to an “individual’s belief systems about the nature and the structure of the relations between social groups.”<sup>55</sup>

For the purposes of this dissertation, I propose that an in-group’s values, beliefs or practices take on an ideological dimension when the legitimacy of an in-group’s consensus view is challenged in a manner that is perceived to require an active response. This ideological dimension is shaped by the theoretical legitimation process and the dynamics of therapy and nihilation predicted by Berger and Luckmann.

## **2.2. Status quo**

While Social Identity Theory provides a basic framework for understanding intergroup dynamics, as well as some empirically supported conclusions with respect to in-group favoritism and out-group hostility or discrimination, critiques of the theory correctly observe that SIT is not sufficient to explain the full spectrum of intergroup and intragroup behaviors.

The most visible gap is the oft-cited linkage between categorization and in-group favoritism/out-group derogation, which some scholars have interpreted as a more absolute stipulation than the text necessarily suggests. SIT describes general, measurable tendencies, but not universal behaviors. Thus, not everyone experiences in-group favoritism, and in-group favoritism does not invariably lead to out-group

derogation. One especially notable exception is out-group favoritism—when members of an in-group (often but not always a disadvantaged or low-status group) assign a higher value to out-group members than to members of their own group.

While out-group favoritism is not necessarily the rule in social dynamics, it is far from uncommon and is not explained by SIT alone.<sup>56</sup> System justification theory (Jost and Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji and Nosek, 2004) argues that a bias toward acceptance of the status quo can explain the discrepancy and supplement the SIT framework. System justification theory argues that “existing social arrangements are legitimized, even at the expense of personal and group interest.”<sup>57</sup> The authors cite an earlier scholar, Howard Zinn (1968), for a summary of the basic premise:

Society's tendency is to maintain what has been. Rebellion is only an occasional reaction to suffering in human history; we have infinitely more instances of forbearance to exploitation, and submission to authority, than we have examples of revolt. Measure the number of peasant insurrections against the centuries of serfdom in Europe—the millennia of landlordism in the East; match the number of slave revolts in America with the record of those millions who went through their lifetimes of toil without outward protest. What we should be most concerned about is not some natural tendency towards violent uprising, but rather the inclination of people, faced with an overwhelming environment, to submit to it.<sup>58</sup>

Put simply, system justification theory argues that people dislike change and prefer the status quo, even if the status quo is not favorable to them or their group. “[T]here is a general (but not insurmountable) system justification motive to defend and justify the status quo and to bolster the legitimacy of the existing social order.”<sup>59</sup> Jost, Banaji and Nosek use the framework to argue against certain assumptions or conclusions of earlier identity-based theories, such as the argument that in-group favoritism is inherent to intergroup relations, disputing the importance accorded to status assignments in the main SIT literature as well as a host of derivative works and theories.<sup>60</sup>

The authors write that “in-group favoritism and out-group derogation may be relatively common, but they are by no means the only reactions that people have to social

groups,”<sup>61</sup> which is undoubtedly true. They correctly note that history is also filled with examples of intergroup cooperation and scenarios in which low-status groups acquiesce to the dictates and/or norms of high-status groups, even when those dictates and norms work against the low-status group’s self-interest. The undisputed fact that in-group favoritism and out-group derogation are “relatively common” is not trivial, however. Jost, Banaji and Nosek at times seem critical in tone regarding SIT and its derivative theories, and the underlying assumptions associated with those theories, but SIT and system justification theory can be read as complementary and progressive rather than competing or superseding.

In the reconciled view, self-categorization is associated with an inherent-but-not-absolute tendency toward in-group favoritism and out-group hostility, and system justification is associated with an inherent-but-not-absolute tendency to prefer a stable, predictable environment. These tendencies are sometimes in harmony and sometimes in conflict, as we will see below. When they are in conflict, one tendency sometimes wins out over the other.

System justification theory describes three key motives that inform intergroup relations: **Ego justification**,<sup>62</sup> when an individual is motivated to feel self-esteem and/or to feel justified in one’s actions; **group justification**,<sup>63</sup> the desire to “develop and maintain” positive feelings about the group with which one identifies; and **system justification**, the psychological need to see the status quo as legitimate, “good, fair, natural, desirable and even inevitable.”<sup>64</sup> Under system justification theory, social change only occurs when the combined demands of ego justification and group justification are sufficiently intense to overcome the demands of system justification.

The theory and its empirical testing offer specific cognitive mechanisms that individuals use to rationalize the status quo. In particular, people assess “likely events to be more desirable than unlikely events.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, **predictability** is inherently desirable, even if it leads to a less favorable outcome. Both high- and low-status group members use **stereotypes** to rationalize differences between groups in social and material status, which helps justify the continuance of the status quo.<sup>66</sup>



Jost et al. performed several analyses of opinion surveys that strongly supported the existence of a system justification motive, with disadvantaged populations tending to show strong patterns of in-group derogation and out-group favoritism relative to high-status populations in a wide variety of contexts.<sup>67</sup> Strong evidence supports the argument that system justification is a powerful force in shaping society, just as strong evidence exists for the social identity argument. Understanding the emergence of extremism requires an additional framework to explain how the often-conflicting impulses of social identity and system justification can produce extremism.

## **2.3. Uncertainty**

One of the implications of Social Identity Theory is that an in-group's insecurity or instability of status can lead to greater in-group favoritism and out-group derogation, and even spark intergroup conflict. This idea is fleshed out more concretely in uncertainty-identity theory (UIT), introduced by Michael C. Hogg and more fully developed by Hogg and a series of co-authors. Similar to SIT, UIT has been empirically demonstrated through a series of experiments placing participants in situations relevant to group identification and various types of uncertainty (Hogg, 2014).<sup>68</sup> Building on the elements of SIT, uncertainty-identity theory in its most basic form contains two "core tenets":

- People who experience feelings of uncertainty about themselves are likely to take action that reduces their uncertainty.<sup>69</sup>
- Categorization (in the SIT sense of identifying oneself with an in-group and identifying members of out-groups) reduces feelings of uncertainty by affiliating an individual with an in-group consensus opinion about "who one is and how one should behave."<sup>70</sup>

There are a variety of approaches to reducing self-uncertainty (or ontological insecurity, as Laing and Giddens would have it). Categorization is one particularly effective method, especially for people whose uncertainty revolves around where they fit in the social hierarchy, how they should act, and how they should expect others to act. Self-uncertainty can be extremely unpleasant,<sup>71</sup> Hogg writes, although some people in some

contexts may tolerate uncertain conditions better than others. Categorization allows people to reduce both anxiety and cognitive demands, Hogg argues. He writes:

We are particularly motivated to reduce uncertainty if we feel uncertain about things that reflect on or are relevant to the self—about our identity, who we are, how we relate to others, and how we are socially located. Ultimately, people need to know who they are, how to behave, and what to think, and who others are, how they might behave, and what they might think.<sup>72</sup>

Uncertainty-identity theory builds several components onto the SIT framework, or arguably it makes explicit components that were previously implicit. When people categorize, they “mentally represent” the in-group and out-groups with a set of **category prototypes**—attributes that “defines the category and differentiates it from other categories.”<sup>73</sup> These attributes are often related to values and practices but can include traits such as skin color, genitalia, gender assignment, nationality, and/or ancestry. Category prototypes reduce uncertainty by prescribing expectations about how group members should behave.

For people experiencing social uncertainty, one solution is to find **directive leadership**—someone who will tell them what to do. Uncertainty tends to correlate with a desire for strong or even autocratic leadership.<sup>74</sup> People may also gravitate to leaders who are strongly associated with the in-group (such as Osama bin Laden) or who are strongly aligned with the category prototype (for instance by pronounced racial traits or high religiosity).<sup>75</sup> Directive leadership often accompanies, but is by no means a prerequisite for, extremism.

Some group identities are more effective at reducing uncertainty than others. **Entitativity** is a “perceptual construct that describes group structure.”<sup>76</sup> Identities with “distinctive, unambiguous, clearly defined, and tightly shared prototypes” are said to be highly entitative (group-like), with “clear boundaries, shared goals and ... a common fate,”<sup>77</sup> along with “internal homogeneity.”<sup>78</sup> Highly entitative groups are particularly effective at reducing uncertainty, and existing groups may tend to become more entitative over time, especially when external social factors (such as war or technological progress) create higher levels of uncertainty. Critically, “the greater the consensus

among group members, the greater the group's entitativity" (Kruglanski and Orehek, 2011).<sup>79</sup> The consensus reality mechanisms of institutionalization and reification described by Berger and Luckmann have obvious salience.

When in-groups perceive themselves to be facing a threat, entitativity alone may not be sufficient to address uncertainty. In-group members experiencing uncertainty while also perceiving a threat to the group identify more strongly with forceful groups that describe an assertive **action component** to "remove or buffer the threat." Uncertainty during a time of threat "weakens identification with less assertive moderate groups."<sup>80</sup> In short, when people and groups experience uncertainty, they tend to identify more strongly with an in-group, and they tend to polarize their view of out-groups in order to better define the entitativity of the in-group through contrast.

All of this, Hogg writes, "lays the groundwork for extremism."<sup>81</sup> Hogg defines extremism as "strong, possibly zealous, identification with and attachment to highly distinctive groups that are intolerant of dissent; that are rigidly structured, with strong directive leadership; that have all-encompassing exclusionary and ethnocentric ideologies; and that promote radical and extreme intergroup behaviors."<sup>82</sup> The next chapter will argue that extremism can be better defined by relying on the SIT framework itself, which creates a more internally consistent basis for the study of extremism using SIT and its successor theories. While intense identification and highly entitative qualities are characteristic of extremist movements, these are not sufficient to fulfill the most commonly understood parameters of extremism.

Over the course of time, and with a growing body of empirical data generated through experimental studies, Hogg and his collaborators have expanded on the linkage between uncertainty and extremism. Citing an extensive body of literature, including field studies that strongly suggest a causal link between uncertainty and extremism, Hogg argues that such movements:

...may be particularly attractive under conditions of extreme and enduring uncertainty—for example widespread societal uncertainty caused by economic collapse, cultural disintegration, civil war, terrorism, and large scale natural disasters; or more personal uncertainty associated

with unemployment, bereavement, divorce, relocation, adolescences, and so forth.<sup>83</sup>

It's worth emphasizing that almost all of these factors relate to changes in the status quo. For instance, poverty per se has been widely discredited as a driver of extremism.<sup>84</sup> But economic collapse is about sudden disruptive change rather than poverty per se. Oppressive governance may not be conducive to the emergence of extremism, but civil war can be. This dissertation will examine some of these factors in more detail below.

## **2.4. Discussion**

“Factual truth ... is always related to other people: it concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved; it is established by witnesses and depends upon testimony; it exists only to the extent that it is spoken about, even if it occurs in the domain of privacy. It is political by nature. Facts and opinions, though they must be kept apart, are not antagonistic to each other; they belong to the same realm.”

-- *Hannah Arendt* <sup>85</sup>

It may seem precious to begin a treatise on extremism with an examination of how human beings interact with reality at a fundamental, psychological level. But the social construction of reality contains inherent traps. If reality is determined by consensus, and consensus is determined by social grouping, then reality must be determined by social identification and self-categorization. The social and psychological mechanisms used to maintain a stable consensus in the face of uncertainty contain the seeds of extremism. If reality is dictated by in-group consensus, then the conflicting consensus views held by out-groups can be understood to undermine the very fabric of reality, an existential crisis of uncertainty that can provoke a catastrophic response.

Thus, in the pages of the social construction literature, one finds a number of key concepts that are highly relevant to extremist belief and behavior, including but not limited to therapy, nihilation, differentiation, engulfment and depersonalization. In addition to offering avenues for understanding how and why extremism develops, these concepts also highlight the awful truth: The mechanisms that empower extremism are the same mechanisms that people use to navigate everyday life.

Extremism is not the default or inevitable setting for human socialization, but neither is it unnatural or even unusual. Extremism originates within the tools that underwrite ordinary socialization and empower humans to determine what is real and true. That means extremism is properly understood as part and parcel of the human condition, rather than as an aberration. Some readers may find that statement uncontroversial, but a powerful thread running through the literature on extremism argues the opposite. Extremism, some scholars maintain, is defined by the fact that it is *not* common. These scholars define extremism as an activity that can only occur on the fringes of society.

The following chapter will examine a wide selection of definitions for extremism, probe their weaknesses, and offer an alternative definition that arises from the social identity and social construction dynamics reviewed in this chapter.

### 3. ‘Far removed from the ordinary’

“The term ‘extremism’ is about as vague as a concept can be and can hardly be classified as a tool for sociological analysis; yet it frequently crops up in social science writings,” wrote Lewis M. Killian, a scholar of American ethnic and racial issues, in 1972. Nevertheless, he added, “some effort at definition seems necessary.”<sup>86</sup>

More than 50 years later, the problem he identified and the need for “some effort at definition” have only heightened. The problem has expanded well past social science and now extends into security policy, political science, jurisprudence, mental health, and many other fields. The array of issues raised by the question of definition was usefully summarized by security studies scholar Andrej Sotlar in 2004:

Scientists, political authorities and potential extremists usually define extreme phenomena in very different ways. There are many factors that influence the definition itself, such as a (non)democratic nature of the political system, the prevailing political culture, the system of values, ideology, political goals, personal characteristics and experiences, ethnocentrism, and many others. Extremism in terms of terrorism, racism, xenophobia, interethnic and inter-religious hatred, left- or right-wing political radicalism and religious fundamentalism is essentially a political term which determines those activities that are not morally, ideologically or politically in accordance with written (legal and constitutional) and non-written norms of the state; that are fully intolerant toward others and reject democracy as a means of governance and the way of solving problems; and finally, that reject the existing social order. But nobody is really happy with such understanding, for firstly, it is not legally precise enough to be effective, and secondly, it might be philosophically, sociologically, psychologically and especially politically incorrect.<sup>87</sup>

As Sotlar observed then, and others (including this author) have independently noted, attempts to define extremism resemble the attempt to define hard-core pornography in an infamous 1964 U.S. Supreme Court opinion by Justice Potter Stewart, who wrote that

he could not define what constituted pornography, but claimed “I know it when I see it.”<sup>88</sup> This lack of precision in definition presents a major challenge for scholars, community leaders and policy makers who seek to understand and mitigate the problem that extremism presents to society.

There is no single consensus definition of extremism. Scholars and policy makers have stipulated a variety of ad hoc and context-dependent definitions in a bewildering array of articles, books and policy documents. While these usually suit a particular piece of research or the formulation of an implementable policy, they create important obstacles to the study of extremism on a comparative cross-ideological basis and as a consistent historical phenomenon that unfolds over generational time spans.

Many works use the term “extremist” without definition, discussing specific movements that have been deemed extreme by acclamation (such as jihadism or white nationalism). Some scholars refer to extremism only by subtype, such as right-wing or religious extremism, without defining extremism as a baseline term.<sup>89</sup> Others discuss radicalization as a process of adopting extremism, without explicitly defining what is being adopted.<sup>90</sup> A great many scholars and policy makers focus on terrorism at the expense of defining extremism. Obviously, the two phenomena are closely connected, and the current academic and policy focus on extremism derives in large part from the cascading consequences of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on America. Many major foundational academic texts on terrorism, including Crenshaw (1981, 2017), Stern (2009), Horgan (revised ed., 2014), and Hoffman (revised ed., 2018), grapple with the definition of terrorism but do not give the same fulsome treatment to extremism. Another relevant foundational work, Juergensmeyer (revised ed., 2017) discusses content relevant to extremism under the heading of religious violence.<sup>91</sup>

This chapter will review and critique definitions of extremism found in the literature according to broad type. This discussion is not necessarily intended as a criticism of how these definitions are used in their native context. In any field, scholars routinely define their terms and then assess data based on the definitions they have provided. Rather, this discussion is intended to highlight how, in a wider context, existing definitions:

- 1) undermine our understanding of extremism as a coherent category for comparative study;
- 2) fail to create a stable category for studying extremist movements over historical and generational time scales; and
- 3) can be misappropriated by political actors to stifle dissent or to exempt themselves from being considered extremist.

As political science scholar Giovanni Sartori noted in 1970, conceptual clarity is especially important for comparative study. A failure to provide a fixed definition undermines the methodology of study, “the logical structure and procedure of scientific enquiry.” Yet the establishment of a strictly limiting definition is not enough, Sartori writes. The more we place “the wider world under investigation, the more we need conceptual tools that are able to travel.”<sup>92</sup> In order to guide credible study:

We do need, ultimately, “universal” categories—concepts which are applicable to any time and place. But nothing is gained if our universals turn out to be “no difference” categories leading to pseudo-equivalences. And even though we need universals, they must be *empirical* universals, that is, categories which somehow are amenable, in spite of their all-embracing very abstract nature, to empirical testing.<sup>93</sup>

### **3.1. Typology of definitions**

The category of extremism is emergent, in the sense that our attempts to define it are based largely on understanding commonalities among movements that have already been deemed extremist in the absence of a consensus definition. To some extent, this creates an unavoidable epistemological problem, but we can still seek a definition that is as empirical, consistent and pragmatic as possible, and which incorporates as many of the clearly relevant examples as possible. With Sartori’s guidance in mind, this chapter will assess five typologies of definition that recur most frequently in the literature, which stipulate that extremism is best understood as including one or more of the following dimensions:

- 1) beliefs far removed from societal norms;



- 2) the use of tactics deemed unacceptable by law or by societal norms, such as criminal violence;
- 3) opposition to the state or to a particular type of state;
- 4) selected characteristics observed in presumed extremists, such as intensity or rigidity of belief; and/or
- 5) the committed pursuit or encouragement of intergroup conflict.

The chapter will conclude with a proposed definition that aims to meet Sartori's criteria for comparative study and to provide the backbone for this dissertation.

### **3.1.1. Relative to societal norms**

The most frequently cited type of definition of extremism derives from the dictionary. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of extremism is that it is a "tendency to be extreme; disposition to go to extremes." Other dictionary definitions are similarly tautologous, with Merriam-Webster defining the term as "the quality or state of being extreme," or "advocacy of extreme measures or views," and so on. In order to parse these definitions, one refers to the word "extreme," whose first definition in the OED is "outermost, farthest from the centre (of any area); endmost, situated at either of the ends (of a line, series, or scale: opposed to mean)," while Merriam-Webster defines it three ways—"existing in a very high degree," "going to great or exaggerated lengths," and "exceeding the ordinary, usual, or expected."<sup>94</sup>

These pedestrian definitions set the tone for one of the most common academic and policy definitions of extremism, which appear as variations on the phrase "beliefs that fall far outside the mainstream of society." Under this framing, extremism is a relative quality that can exist only in comparison to the accepted norms of a given society at a given time. In other words, "[n]either moderation nor extremism can be assessed, much less judged, as simple rhetoric, absent a suitably defined reference point" (Hochman, 2002).<sup>95</sup> Some representative definitions include the following (presented chronologically):

**Lake (2002):** First, extremists hold political preferences that, in any distribution of opinion, lie in one of the “tails.” In other words, their political beliefs are not widely shared even within their own societies. Second, extremists currently lack the means or power to obtain their goals. Both traits are important in understanding their choice of strategy.<sup>96</sup>

**Nurullaev (2002):** Extremism, as it is well known, is characterized in the most general sense by adherence to extreme views and actions which radically diverge from social norms and rules.<sup>97</sup>

**Wintrobe (2002):** An extremist person or group can be defined as one whose equilibrium position is located at a “corner” rather than in the interior on some dimension (for example, the left-right dimension in political space).<sup>98</sup>

**Coleman and Bartoli (2003):** Most simply, [extremism] can be defined as activities (beliefs, attitudes, feelings, actions, strategies) of a character far removed from the ordinary.<sup>99</sup>

**Kruglanski, et al (2009):** Extremism is defined as motivated deviance from general behavioral norms and is assumed to stem from a shift from a balanced satisfaction of basic human needs afforded by moderation to a motivational imbalance wherein a given need dominates the others.<sup>100</sup>

**Neumann (2010):** The term can be used to refer to political ideologies that oppose a society’s core values and principles.<sup>101</sup>

**Webber, et al. (2018):** We define extremism as deviancy from a general pattern of behavior or attitude that prevails in a given social context.<sup>102</sup>

It is not uncommon for authors to acknowledge the inherent problem with a relative definition. “[T]hose who want to speak of ‘extremes’ and ‘extremism’ which in the framework of a scientific terminology must de-contextualize the terms to a certain degree to free them from their changing historical contents – unless relativity has been established as the central content” (Backes, 2007).<sup>103</sup> Conversely, some authors insist on the merit and necessity of relativity: “It is important to note that recognizing an act as

extremist is a relative perspective; the same extremist act can be analyzed as immoral and violent by some groups and as moral and just by other groups” (Fahed, 2016).<sup>104</sup>

While relativity may be a useful framework for identifying extremist movements during a snapshot in time, it becomes problematic when seeking a consistent category for study over historical scales. For instance, the practice of race-based chattel slavery was not universally considered to be extremist by dominant social groups in the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, but advocating the same practice in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context would almost universally be considered unambiguously extremist. People in the 17<sup>th</sup> century who opposed slavery were considered extremists, and under a relative definition, might still be deemed such, even when assessing them from a modern viewpoint.

But it is not at all clear when during the intervening years that advocating racial slavery *became* extremist, or when opposition to slavery *stopped* being extremist. Was there a singular day when the change occurred? What precise percentage of the population was required to pass that threshold? A plurality? A majority? It is worth noting here that the English word “extremist” was first popularized during the debate over slavery in the United States. In 1850, U.S. Senator Daniel Webster gave a speech that ended his political career—arguing for a compromise over the issue of slavery, which threatened to tear apart the American union.<sup>105</sup> In the speech, the Massachusetts senator drew moral equivalence between the defenders and opponents of slavery, referring to both with the recently minted word “extremist.”

Another exemplar of the problem with a relative definition is the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*—better known as the Nazi Party. Under the relative frame, Nazis were certainly extremists in 1924, when they were polling support from less than 3 percent of the German electorate, but did they stop being extremists by 1933, when they were polling at 39 percent, sufficient to locate them at or near the center of German polity? If so, precisely when? At some similarly ambiguous point after Germany’s defeat in World War II, did they presumably become extremists once more?<sup>106</sup>

Both slavery and the Nazis raise the additional and related question of how the center of society is framed for the purposes of relative evaluation. White Americans may have considered slavery normative, but why should the views of Black Americans be excluded

from such evaluation? If the Nazis were, for a time, non-extremist within a German frame, can the same be said about a European or global frame? How should we reckon with the views of German Jews?

As policing scholar Patrick Tucker notes in an article discussing the topic using the relative definition, “each different community will have its own measures of extremism,” and communities “exist in different mediums” including “geographical neighborhoods, as interest groups, as political parties, as religious communities, as ethnic communities,” and more.<sup>107</sup> All of these mediums provide alternate frames for assessment, allowing scholars, policy makers and extremists alike the ability to shop for the frame that suits their priors.

We can usefully return to Daniel Webster for an unambiguous example of the real-world consequences of the relative frame. In his 1850 speech, Webster argued that both sides of the slavery debate were extreme and that the status quo with respect to slavery should be maintained, with the practice neither expanding nor contracting. “[T]he extremists of both parts of the country are violent,” Webster said, “they mistake loud and violent talk for eloquence and for reason.”<sup>108</sup> In a national frame, the speech could be considered successful. Many people around the United States agreed with Webster’s main points. But in a different and consequential frame, the speech was a failure. Webster’s Massachusetts constituents did not appreciate the moral equivalence he implied between abolitionists and proslavery activists, and the senator ultimately resigned just months later under heavy criticism.<sup>109</sup>

For both racial slavery advocates and Nazis, a more important question lurks behind the nomenclature problem: Whatever we *call* these movements, did their shifting distance from the center of society result in changes to their fundamental tenets? Both movements aggressively engaged in racial supremacy throughout their histories; both committed their greatest atrocities while at the center of society, during which time the relative definition would exempt them from extremist status.

The relative definition also fails to provide a comparative framework for identifying types of movements based on meaningful similarities. “[W]e obtain comparability when two or more items appear ‘similar enough,’ that is, neither identical nor utterly

different” (Sartori, 1970).<sup>110</sup> While there would no doubt be merit in the comparative study of *unpopular* political movements, the ideology of racial slavery shares far more obvious and important commonalities with Nazi ideology than either movement shares with abolitionist ideology. The relative definition of extremism is not based on qualities intrinsic to the movements so labeled, but rather on the contemporaneous verdict of society at large. The definition does not capture a coherent set of movements that can be usefully compared, because it is not predicated on the “thing-in-itself.”<sup>111</sup>

In addition to these objections, the relative definition may be difficult or impossible to empirically determine for many historical contexts. What percentage of ancient Judeans supported or shared beliefs with the Jewish nationalist Zealot party or the apocalyptic Essene sect nearly two millennia ago? To answer such questions, especially for societies with low literacy levels, we rely primarily on motivated histories written by unreliable narrators. For example, a major source on both the Essenes and the Zealots was the Jewish-born Roman citizen Flavius Josephus, whose accounts of both movements range from suspect to clearly biased.<sup>112</sup> Most ancient narrators were not ordinary citizens (by the very fact of their literacy, if nothing else). They may not have direct experience with the movements they wrote about, and they may not have written their accounts contemporaneously with the existence of those movements.<sup>113</sup> While we can do better than a blind guess, we cannot address these questions with real precision for most periods preceding the advent of modern polling.

And even if the precision problem could be solved, there is no scholarly consensus (and precious little discussion) of what quantifiable thresholds exclude or include a movement in the category of extremism. A movement that enjoys majority or plurality support in any given society is likely excluded from the category, but what about movements that are widespread below that threshold? Can a movement be extremist if it enjoys 30 percent support? 20 percent? 15 percent? What if the movement is tolerated by a majority or plurality, even though its adherents are less numerous? For instance, Mormons comprise less than 2 percent of the U.S. population, Jews just over 2 percent, and Muslims less than 1 percent. Buddhists and Hindus ring in at around the same levels, Bahai and Daoists far lower.<sup>114</sup> Would all of these religions be considered extremist in an American frame? Would any of them?

Some would argue that the definition's stipulation of "far outside the center of society" is not quantitative, but rather qualitative, meaning that if the movement's beliefs are *similar enough* to those of a majority or plurality, it would be excluded from the extremist category. But this only increases the subjectivity of the assessment and the difficulty of applying it historically. Is an acceptance of polygamy "far outside" norms? Polytheism? Rules against racial intermarriage? The practice of fasting?

Even if scholars could solve the precision problem and then agree on a consensus threshold and methodology for deeming movements to be extremist, the historical challenge remains. The relative definition still forces scholars to assess the nature of historical movements based on the reconstructed opinions of a conjectured majority or plurality of an arbitrarily selected group of not-always-contemporary observers who bring their own biases to decidedly incomplete historical accounts that only survived the intervening millennia because they were politically or religiously palatable to civil authorities responsible for preserving, revising or destroying records for decades and centuries after the actual events.

For all these reasons, any definition that stipulates that the relative social standing of a movement as a necessary component cannot provide a reliable empirical category for studying extremism as a discrete and recognizable phenomenon across ideological types and over historical time frames. No practical application of a relative definition can overcome the inherent obstacles of:

- the instability of a classification over time (movements shifting in and out of extremism based on popular opinion rather than their intrinsic qualities),
- subjectivity of social inputs (extremism as defined by popular acclaim or condemnation),
- the arbitrariness or absence of empirical social acceptance thresholds (no consensus on, or even discussion of, how much and what kind of public support is necessary to qualify or disqualify a movement as extremist),

- the arbitrariness of social perspective framing (which social grouping is the relative barometer for whether the movement is extremist), and
- the inability to assess relevant empirical data for historical populations (lack of scientific polling data, unreliability of narrators).

Most of these objections emanate from the disconnect between the criteria for an extremist classification and the intrinsic qualities of a movement or organization. According to these definitions, extremists are made by the society in which they are situated and not by their own actions.

### **3.1.2. Tactics**

When Daniel Webster used the word “extremist” in 1850 to describe the American debate over slavery, he was characterizing both the intensity and the tactics of certain elements on each side. “Sir, the extremists of both parts of the country are violent,” Webster said. “They mistake loud and violent talk for eloquence and reason. They think he who talks loudest reasons best.”<sup>115</sup> The propensity for violence and the use of other offensive tactics form the core of the second major group of definitions for extremism found in the literature. Some representative examples include:

**Wintrobe (2002):** Alternatively, a political extremist could be defined as one who uses extremist methods, for example, bombings, inflammatory language, terrorist activity, and so forth, but whose platform is or may be centrist rather than extremist in political space.<sup>116</sup>

**Bowman-Grieve (2009):** Anti-abortion extremism is defined here as violent activity (including vandalism, bombings, arson and murder) orchestrated in support of the criminalisation of abortion.<sup>117</sup>

**Pirbudagova and Musalova (2015):** As for the definition of extremism, in its most general form, it should be understood as commitment to extreme measures and views, strive to solve problems and achieve goals using the most radical methods, including all kinds of violence and terror.<sup>118</sup>

**Executive Office of the President of the United States (2016):** [We define] violent extremists as “individuals who support or commit ideologically-motivated violence to further political goals.”

A tactics-based definition is better than a relative definition because it is derived from a behavior intrinsic to the group, rather than from subjective assessments of the group by a particular body politic. Yet it also presents challenges.

The first is defining what type of violence qualifies as extremist. Most scholars and policy makers would agree that the use of terrorism is almost always a sign of extremism, but that same community of stakeholders has yet to arrive at a fully baked consensus about how to define terrorism, despite putting a tremendous amount of intellectual effort into the question over the course of decades.<sup>119</sup>

This author has defined terrorism as “public violence targeting noncombatants, carried out by nongovernmental individuals or groups, in order to advance a political or ideological goal or amplify a political or ideological message.”<sup>120</sup> While it is difficult to cite uncontroversial examples from the real world, we can at least hypothesize scenarios in which the tactics of terrorism might be used for non-extremist reasons, such as during defense from an invasion or in a civil war where the sides have significantly different military capabilities. The line between terrorism and guerilla warfare—or as the cliché has it, “terrorist and freedom fighter”—is indeed blurry. One need look no further than the Syrian Civil War and its wealth of overlapping and competing rebel factions for examples of this categorization dilemma.<sup>121</sup>

Defining extremism by tactics quickly descends into a series of subsidiary debates. Extremists often kill, but killing is not always extremist. Beyond civil war, the question of organized crime quickly emerges as an important and challenging area of ambiguity. Criminal cartels commit murder, often for the purpose of intimidation, but they are not commonly considered extremist. Adding stipulations, such as that the violence must be connected to identity, does not fully clarify this question. Criminal organizations with an ethnic identity component—such as the Irish Mob, the Italian Mafia or the Russian Bratva—are not commonly considered extremist, in large part because, their violence is typically motivated by profit-seeking, despite their ethnic organizational attributes. An



ethnic gang or cartel certainly shares some traits with a racial supremacist movement, but few scholars treat them as part of a single category.

Similarly, some would deem any public mass murder to be terrorism, whether or not it has a clear political or ideological motive. In cases such as the 2018 Las Vegas shooting or the 2018 Parkland school shooting, where unambiguous evidence of extremist motive was lacking, experts and pundits alike continue to debate whether the tactic by itself merits inclusion in terrorism databases.<sup>122</sup>

Many tactics-based definitions attempt to qualify extremist status through a combination of tactics and intent. Russia's 2002 federal law "on countering extremist activity," which will be discussed at more length in the next section, uses an expansive definition of extremism which includes "creation of massive disorder, hooligan activities, and acts of vandalism motivated by ideological, political, racial, nationalistic or religious hatred or hostility, or otherwise motivated by hatred or hostility toward a social group."<sup>123</sup> Writing on postwar Germany, Lewis (1991) defines right-wing extremists as those "who used illegal means of activity, such as criminal actions, and espoused the strong right-wing nationalist ideology."<sup>124</sup>

The more important failing of most tactics-based definitions is not who they include, but who they leave out—due to overreliance on violence or criminal activity as foundational qualities of extremism. Many scholars and policies attempt to avoid this issue by addressing themselves to "violent extremism," rather than extremism per se. This does not solve the broader question of extremism as a category, or what distinguishes violent extremism from other forms of violence. In relation to extremism, and particularly in the policy realm, references to violence are almost always firmly situated in the physical realm, meaning such acts as assault or killing, with occasional extensions in property damage (such as "vandalism" in the example cited above). A more sweeping definition of violence, to include structural violence for instance, would capture more typical extremist activities, such as segregation or discrimination, or psychic violence such as targeted harassment and intimidation.

Predicating a definition on *extralegal* violence has obvious appeal for government policymakers, since the definition of modern statehood includes a monopoly on the

legitimate use of violence.<sup>125</sup> But for academic purposes, the violence-contingent definition creates problems, as the exclusion of nonviolent activities that are closely associated with extremism may result in significant omissions from the field of study. For instance, extremist movements such as White nationalism may endorse nonviolent tactics such as recruitment, self-segregation and discrimination on a temporary or indefinite basis, without participating in widespread organized violence over substantial periods of time. Some movements rely *primarily* on tactics like targeted harassment, such as online harassment of Jewish people, which most people would intuitively characterize as extremist in nature.<sup>126</sup> In theory, such a movement might never formally adopt physical or unsanctioned violence if it can achieve its goals politically. Ultimately, a shift toward or away from violence does not necessarily signal the need for a change of category, nor does it always reflect a fundamental change in the nature of the movement.

A reluctance to consider extremism in the absence of violence may also inhibit efforts to counter extremist movements *before they become* violent, whether by authorities or members of affected communities. While such early action may be controversial and always comes with significant complications, once a movement has committed itself to violence, a cascading series of consequences can render it difficult or impossible to counter the movement using nonviolent means.

Predicating the definition of extremism on the use of violence also leads to the same problem of category stability encountered under the relative definition. As a tactic, the endorsement or disavowal of physical violence may be transitory, with movements shifting in and out of violent periods depending on a variety of external factors and practical considerations. For example, the Egyptian Islamist group Gama'a Islamiyya has changed its tactical approach from violent to nonviolent over time, while still retaining many of its previous goals and organizational characteristics.<sup>127</sup>

Tactics are more clearly connected to an intrinsic quality of a movement than relativity, but they are ultimately transitory because they are designed to meet a movement's specific intermediate goals.<sup>128</sup> While a change in tactics may accompany a fundamental shift in the movement's philosophy, outlook, values or goals, tactics may also change if

the movement's immediate goals are achieved, or if it becomes clear that current tactics will not achieve those goals. There are important insights to be derived from examining a movement's actual and ideologically permitted tactics, but a change in tactics does not always herald a change in category.

### **3.1.3.      Opposition to prevailing power**

Many definitions characterize extremism in terms of opposition to state authorities. This is an exceedingly convenient formulation that creates obvious problems when implemented by authoritarian regimes, and rather similar problems when implemented by democracies. Perhaps unsurprisingly, examples of this type of definition have been prominently endorsed by Russia and China. Russia's statutory definition of extremism includes the following major components:

[Extremism is] activity of social and religious associations, or other organizations, whether through the mass media or by physical persons' premeditated organization, preparation and execution of actions directed at:

- forceful change of the fundamental constitutional structure and destruction of the integrity of the Russian Federation;
- undermining the security of the Russian Federation;
- seizure or appropriation of commanding authority;
- creation of illegal armed forces;
- carrying out terrorist activity;
- incitement of social, racial, nationalistic or religious animosity;
- debasement of national dignity. [...] <sup>129</sup>

Here, extremism is tantamount to treason, and thus the designation of a movement or organization as extremist can serve as a tool for controlling dissent. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization—a council of nations including China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—produced a similar definition of extremism as

part of the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, which states:

“Extremism” is an act aimed at seizing or keeping power through the use of violence or changing violently the constitutional regime of a State, as well as a violent encroachment upon public security, including organization, for the above purposes, of illegal armed formations and participation in them, criminally prosecuted in conformity with the national laws of the Parties.<sup>130</sup>

Defining extremism as opposition to the state has a number of effects on both policy and scholarship, most notably by exempting states from consideration. China, certainly, has a vested interest in this exemption, as it is currently detaining millions of ethnic Uighurs who practice Islam in concentration camps,<sup>131</sup> a practice that has been condemned as genocide by the United States and others.<sup>132</sup> The Chinese situation clearly illuminates the double-edged sword, as the government justifies this internment with an unsubstantiated allegation that all Uighurs are extremists.<sup>133</sup>

Politicized definitions of extremism are not the sole province of authoritarian regimes, however. They are found in liberal democracies as well, if couched in gentler terms. In such settings, extremism may be framed not as opposition to the state per se, but to its “values.” The most notable example of this is the official British government definition circa 2015, which stated that “extremism is the vocal or active opposition to our fundamental [British] values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs” as well as “calls for the death of members of our armed forces.”<sup>134</sup>

Sometimes this category of definition stipulates that opposition to the broad category of liberal or constitutional democracy is sufficient to define extremism, either in a country-specific context or on a global basis. The previously cited British definition was updated in 2024, after the first draft of this chapter was written, with a new version that takes this approach. Examples include:

**Backes (2007):** “[E]xtremism” [can be seen] as the antithesis of the constitutional state.<sup>135</sup>

**Danish Government (2009):** Extremism is characterized by totalitarian and anti-democratic ideologies, intolerance to the views of others, hostile imagery and a division into ‘them’ and ‘us’.<sup>136</sup>

**Neumann (2010):** The term can be used to refer to political ideologies that oppose a society’s core values and principles. In the context of liberal democracies, this could be applied to any ideology that advocates racial or religious supremacy and/or opposes the core principles of democracy and human rights. However, the term can also be used to describe the methods through which political actors attempt to realise their aims, that is, by using means that “show disregard for the life, liberty, and human rights of others”.<sup>137</sup>

**Obadi, Milan et al. (2018):** We define extremism as encompassing behaviors, ideas, intentions, attitudes, and values that are not in accordance with the norms of the society, such as rejecting the state monopoly on violence (and the promotion of alternative forms of violence) within a democracy.<sup>138</sup>

**Midlarsky (2011):** Political extremism is defined as the will to power by a social movement in the service of a political program typically at variance with that supported by existing state authorities, and for which individual liberties are to be curtailed in the name of collective goals, including the mass murder of those who would actually or potentially disagree with that program.<sup>139</sup>

**Bouhana (2019):** [O]ne way to reduce extremism to a useful concept, [in the very specific context of] *discovering its causes and in order to inform a national counter-strategy*, is to define extremist acts as what is deemed to be unlawful extremist behaviour in a given jurisdiction.<sup>140</sup> (emphasis in original)

**British government (2024):** Extremism is the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance, that aims to: (1) negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others; or (2) undermine, overturn or replace the UK’s system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or (3) intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve the results in (1) or (2).<sup>141</sup>

Some of these examples are simply variations on a relative definition that place democracy at the presumed center of the reference societies. Others seem to presume democracy is the natural center of society in general.

One definition in this category argues that extremism is best defined by its opposition to the existing social or political order in a society, whatever that may be. While this could be seen, to some extent, as another call to relativism, it is slightly different in that it identifies system disruption as the goal of an extremist movement:

**Jackson (2016):** I assert that political extremism is purposeful disruptive political activity that aims to replace or fundamentally alter the dominant political system. Because it is disruptive, political extremism cannot be understood outside of its context; it cannot be understood without reference to that which it attempts to disrupt.<sup>142</sup>

This definition is somewhat of an improvement on the state-based iterations, in that it allows for the disruption of a dominant political system without necessarily overturning said system. This would allow consideration of, for example, a strong shift in partisan orientation, or disruption by legal means, such as through the amendment of a state's constitution. To some extent, therefore, this definition seems to allow for state actors to be characterized as extremist, since the state itself can be a source of disruption, as opposed to the other definitions in this section, which preclude the notion of state extremism altogether. But this definition renders the concept of state extremism paradoxical (or at least short-lived), because when the extremist party is the dominant political system, it can only "replace or fundamentally alter the dominant political system" by self-abnegation or political suicide.

While state-opposition parameters hearken back to relative definitions, they insidiously replace "distance from the center of society" (presumed here to mean a consensus of the population) with "distance from power." This subtext was made explicit in Lake's definition, which stipulated both outlying political preferences *and* powerlessness:

**Lake (2002):** First, extremists hold political preferences that, in any distribution of opinion, lie in one of the "tails." In other words, their political

beliefs are not widely shared even within their own societies. Second, extremists currently lack the means or power to obtain their goals. Both traits are important in understanding their choice of strategy.<sup>143</sup>

If extremism is defined as opposition to the state or to the dominant political order, then virtually all dissent must be classified as extremism. As should be obvious, this approach problematizes both dissent and powerlessness in profoundly dangerous ways. Those seeking to counter extremism, under this formulation, can only be self-defeating *apparatchiks* to entrenched power interests. As Coleman and Bartoli (2003) aptly note:

Power differences also matter when defining extremism. When in conflict, the activities of members of low power groups tend to be viewed as more extreme than similar activities committed by members of groups advocating the status quo. In addition, extreme acts are more likely to be employed by marginalized people and groups\* who view more normative forms of conflict engagement as blocked for them or biased.<sup>144</sup>

Similarly, Lloyd and Dean (2015), writing about U.K. government interventions with respect to extremism, warn:

A major challenge is to define these concepts [extremism and terrorism] without criminalising or pathologising political beliefs or dissent, especially within a democratic, pluralist society in which freedom of thought is considered to be an inviolable human right.<sup>145</sup>

### **3.1.4. Definition by adherents' traits**

Hannah Arendt, writing about “militants” in 1969, ticks off a number of observed characteristics including courage, readiness to act and an “astounding confidence in the possibility of change.” But, she adds, “these qualities are not causes.” This important qualification was noted and expanded upon by John Horgan (2009), who properly asserts that it “can be difficult to reconcile checklist qualities with the rapidly changing

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\* Without derailing this discussion, I would strongly dispute the assertion that the marginalized are more likely to carry out extreme acts. The whole history of genocide argues otherwise.

silhouette of terrorists as well as with the process that characterizes increasing radicalization into a terrorist movement.”<sup>146</sup>

Similarly, the checklist of qualities found in extremists is not sufficient to frame extremism as a phenomenon, both on general principle and in practice relative to the particular qualities stipulated by these definitions in the literature. The identification of qualities shared by extremists and extremist movements plays an obvious and important role in illuminating key issues, but it is insufficient to the challenge of establishing a baseline definition, especially when the qualities in question are meaningfully contested.

Nevertheless, this approach is clearly a step in the right direction, as it is grounded in (theoretically) less-ephemeral characteristics of extremist movements and their adherents, rather than the attitudes of third parties in society or government. The challenge, then, might be to determine which characteristics are foundational. One trait that recurs in several iterations of this definition type is rigidity or fixation of thought among adherents. Some examples:

**Sidanius (1985):** Extremism theory assumes\* that political "extremists," of both the left and right, will display less-sophisticated cognitive behavior than "political moderates." For example, "extremists" are expected to be more tough-minded, authoritarian, rigid, intolerant of ambiguity, and emphatic than "moderates." The reasoning is that people adopt "extreme" social attitudes in an effort to oversimplify complex sociopolitical reality and reduce cognitive dissonance.<sup>147</sup>

**Breton (2002):** [For some scholars, extremism is] a characteristic of the way beliefs are held ... for example, if they are held rigidly or the person holding them displays a small capacity or willingness to compromise; a shrinking of the range, or a limitation of the number of options and choices which are considered; the

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\* It should be noted that Sidanius is summarizing a body of older literature (Le Bon, 1908, 1913; Eysenck and Coulter, 1972; Rokeach, 1956; Di Palma and McClosky, 1971 ; Taylor, 1960; Braungart and Braungart, 1979; Shils, 1954), rather than asserting this definition for himself. In fact, Sidanius, in the cited work, refutes these conclusions based on his own study.



salience or importance of a belief or set of beliefs; that is, an extremist is someone who is fixated on some idea or belief..."<sup>148</sup>

**Iannaccone and Berman (2006):** Within each religious tradition, moreover, some firms maintain rigorous systems of shared beliefs and morality, whereas other firms demand very little. It is the former that we label "extremists" (or "sects," "cults," and "fundamentalists"); the latter are more known as "moderates," "liberals," or "mainstream churches."<sup>149</sup>

**Tutu (2006):** Extremism is when, I think, you do not allow for a different point of view, and when you hold your view as being quite exclusive, when you don't allow for the possibility of difference.<sup>150</sup>

**Pressman (2009):** Extremism is defined as any political theory that holds to uncompromising and rigid policies or ideology. An extremist is a person who holds such uncompromising or rigid views or acts in a manner far beyond the norm.<sup>151</sup>

**Giner-Sorolloa, Leidner and Castano (2012):** Extremism can be characterized as putting a political, social or religious goal ahead of most other considerations.<sup>152</sup>

**Hogg (2014):** [Extremism is] strong, possibly zealous, identification with and attachment to highly distinctive groups that are intolerant of dissent; that are rigidly structured, with strong directive leadership; that have all-encompassing exclusionary and ethnocentric ideologies; and that promote radical and extreme intergroup behaviors.

**Lloyd and Dean (2015):** Extremist views or ideologies are characterised by simplistic, reductionist, bi-polar thinking (them and us; persecutors and persecuted; worthy and unworthy) which pre-empt argument, are emotionally charged and appeal to the part of our brains that mediate fight or flight in response to threat.<sup>153</sup>

**Winter and Hasan (2016):** In this paper, we define extremism as a rejection of ‘balance’, and an application of a single ideological perspective to all elements of an individual’s life with, importantly, a fervent disdain for alternative ideological perspectives.<sup>154</sup>

These definitions are a marked improvement over the previously discussed paradigms, and in some cases, they are connected to studies that demonstrate the presence of intellectual rigidity in the subject population. Taken as a whole, this set of definitions has considerably more utility than those discussed in the three preceding sections—relative, tactical and state-based, respectively. Rightly or wrongly, these scholars have identified variations on a salient trait based on observations of extremist movements and employed that trait to set boundaries on the phenomenon they wish to study.

Yet these traits, by themselves, do not seem to suffice. Consider the broad social consensus over activities such as murder, theft, cannibalism, necrophilia and incest. Within virtually all extant social groupings of meaningful size in the real world, one finds rigid and inflexible rules prohibiting these behaviors, although the extent and severity of their prosecution varies. We do not classify this inflexibility as extremist; indeed, we would be much more likely to classify those who reject that inflexibility as extremists.

A Christian who believes that Jesus rose from the dead is likely to be quite inflexible on that point, as is a Muslim who believes that Muhammad is God’s prophet. While some atheists might characterize those beliefs as extremist, few people of faith would agree. Many American conservative politicians rigidly adhere to the belief that low taxes result in a stronger economy. Certainly, some on the American political left would call that belief extremist, but a “low taxes” ideology is not (in and of itself) especially comparable to white nationalism or jihadism.

Thus, we find the return of the relativity problem. All societies and cultures hold some beliefs as absolute. Whether that absolutism is extremist is a matter of perspective. One person’s inflexibility is another person’s sincere conviction or self-evident principle. Tellingly, the framing of rigidity versus conviction has resulted in the term “extremist” being appropriated by such dissimilar figures as civil rights leader Martin Luther King

Jr. and American politician Barry Goldwater. Each man found himself accused of extremism, and each re-framed the accusation as testimony to the merits of his unmovable convictions.

King, writing from a Birmingham, Alabama, jail in 1963, famously responded to critics by saying, “So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?”<sup>155</sup> Goldwater, emanating from a very different place on the political spectrum, nevertheless expressed a very similar and well-remembered sentiment, stating, “I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.”<sup>156</sup> It tests the bounds of credulity to argue that King and Goldwater belong in the same category of thinkers.

Finally, this definition encounters problems accounting for how extremist movements are found in the real world. Despite being grounded in observation, the particular observations cited are contested, or at least complicated. For instance, if extremism is defined by inflexibility, how can we account for the fact that extremist movements change? Not only do they change, but they change frequently, sometimes rapidly, and often dramatically. Splintering and schism are rather common in movements deemed extremist by some in the academy, such as the notoriously fractious Irish Republican Army.<sup>157</sup> These dynamics are so widely recognized that they form the basis of a popular Monty Python comedy routine that is well-known to and frequently quoted by scholars of extremism.<sup>158</sup>

While splitting and fractures may reflect inflexibility, in the sense of rigidity and rejection of compromise, they cannot arise unless extremists’ opinions about the direction of their movement have evolved and diverged. A pertinent example can be found in the divergence of Al Qaeda in Iraq from the global al Qaeda movement. The two groups shared common identities, overall goals and tactics, but the former evolved quickly after its establishment to endorse and carry out considerably more violent tactics against a much broader array of targets. Eventually, those differences grew so substantial that the former seceded from the latter, becoming the Islamic State in Iraq

and Syria and leading the two groups into violent conflict with each other. Even after the separation, the Islamic State organization continued to evolve in its tactics and beliefs, for instance with its dramatic and controversial declaration of a caliphate in June 2014.<sup>159</sup>

If rigidity and inflexibility are intrinsic qualities of extremism, how could al Qaeda in Iraq move so far away from al Qaeda Central in such a relatively short period of time? While stridency, fixation and performative commitment to principle are important characteristics found among extremists, it seems they are not the entirety of the story.

Similarly, scholars frequently claim that extremists definitionally possess a tendency toward simplification or simplistness, sometimes alluded to as a “black-and-white” worldview. But extremist ideologies are often dauntingly complex in reality; many extremists require thousands of pages of books and articles and hundreds of hours of lectures to fully articulate their principles. Analysis of the words used in extremist texts strongly suggest that even hardened extremists are still capable of cognitive flexibility and addressing complexity.<sup>160</sup> These traits fall short as a useful tool for classification because they must be understood within an extremely complex set of countervailing considerations, some of which will be discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation.

### **3.1.5. Intergroup conflict (Social Identity Theory)**

The final type of definition focuses on the concept of intergroup conflict, which is a primary focus of Social Identity Theory (SIT). As discussed in Chapter 2, much of SIT consists of efforts to explain extremism, yet these works frequently neglect to offer a reference definition. Nevertheless, a few significant SIT-relevant definitions can be found in the literature:

**McCauley and Moskaleiko (2008):** [Radicalization is the] increasing extremity of beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the in-group. ... Functionally, political radicalization is increased preparation for and commitment to intergroup conflict.<sup>161</sup>

**Hogg and Blaylock (2011):** [Extremism] relates to social exclusion, maladaptive ideological belief systems, dysfunctionally hierarchical and rigid group structure, and individual and collective violence.<sup>162</sup>

**Barrelle (2014):** Violent extremism is conflict based on strongly and intensely held group identities.<sup>163</sup>

**Berger (2018):** 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.<sup>164</sup>

**Wilkinson and Quraishi (2024):** Any absolutely divided “Us” versus “Them” worldview by which a “chosen” in-group strips “condemned” out-groups of their basic human qualities, properties, and rights, and thereby sets them up for harm.

If any observation can be universally applied to extremist movements, it is that they are always *engaged in conflict*, whether that conflict is actual or aspirational, physically violent or merely rhetorical. All of these definitions include intergroup conflict in some form. It should be noted that the Wilkinson/Quraishi definition, published in 2024, post-dates the writing of most of this dissertation and cites Berger's *Extremism*, while taking a slightly different tack that offers impressive versatility.

The McCauley/Moskalenko, Wilkinson/Quraishi and Berger definitions are very similar in their essential meaning and produce a nearly identical and self-consistent category of extremist movements, but the last definition, contributed by this author, will guide exploration for the remainder of this dissertation, in part because the definition is closely related to the Linkage-Based Analysis methodology this dissertation employs.

### **3.2. The Intergroup Conflict Definition**

As we have seen, there are many pitfalls associated with the most common types of definitions. One challenge that runs consistently through the different definition types is relativity, which may be better understood as subjectivity.

The first three types of definition—relative, tactical, and based on opposition to the state—privilege those who hold social power, either explicitly or implicitly, as the

subjective arbiters of whether or not a movement or organization shall be deemed extremist, and whether particular actions by movements, organizations and individuals should be accorded special significance according to extremist intent. Power is also implicitly privileged in the rigidity definition since society deems some rigid beliefs (such as taboos against murder and cannibalism) to be acceptable and enforceable. Power and privilege are the sole determinants of whether or not a particular social rule is negotiable or absolute.

While it is possible as an abstract thought experiment to decouple the category and label of extremism from social and political responses such as censure and prosecution, the term “extremist” has a pejorative connotation in the real world that cannot be denied or ignored. Because of this, the label of extremism is profoundly consequential, especially when its definition is so closely tied to power.

In practice, of course, no definition is immune to subjective interpretation. No academic consensus, however strong, will prevent the politicized use of the extremist label by the powerful to afflict the powerless. Nor is any definition powerful enough to eliminate all potential gray areas. Even the most rigorous process for categorizing a movement will eventually require judgment calls and will result in differences of opinion. But while power and privilege can bend almost any concept or term to their uses, scholars need not actively enable such abuses, especially when the failure to construct a reasonably objective definition of extremism also runs counter to the demands of academic rigor.

Even our best efforts to create a rigorous definition are afflicted by the observer effect— analogous to the quantum mechanics principle that the very act of observing a phenomenon may change the outcome of the observation. In social science, this is sometimes referred to as the Hawthorne Effect, which has become shorthand for the notion that people may modify their behavior if they know they are being investigated.<sup>165</sup> In the same way, only moreso, people and groups may change their behavior based on the labels we assign them. As Ingram notes:

This is particularly important in Western nations where secular governments dictating what is a “legitimate” (indeed legal) doctrinal interpretation of religious texts and limiting freedoms of speech for some

citizens over others using an opaque definition of “extremism” are likely to fuel the conditions within which violent extremism flourishes.<sup>166</sup>

Despite all this, the scholarly community clearly recognizes the existence of something called “extremism,” and even in the absence of a rigorous consensus definition, it has committed significant resources to the study of activities within this category. These efforts can only be improved by defining the area of study in a manner that reduces ambiguities and lessens the label’s availability to abuse. In an ideal world, this well-defined category would probably be described by a new coinage better attuned to its parameters, but pragmatically, “extremism” so dominates the vernacular that it must be acknowledged and can hardly be replaced.

Fortunately, despite the critical flaws of the most common definition types, there are a number of movements generally accepted to be “extremist” that share enough important commonalities that we can credibly attempt to retrofit a definition. This was the process that led to the development of the working definition adopted in this dissertation, the Berger definition. To restate the definition: “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.”

The process by which this definition was developed and its current standing in the field will be examined in more detail in the following chapter, as part of the methodology discussion. For the moment, it suffices to note that this definition addresses or moots the most significant issues afflicting common definitions in the literature, including:

- **Proximity to power or popularity.** As previously noted, many of the definitions in the literature explicitly or implicitly exclude those who wield political or social power from the category of extremism. This definition makes no reference to the social or power centers of society, thus allowing for the existence of extremist states such as Nazi Germany, or other situations in which extremist movements exercise significant social, political or religious dominance.
- **Frame-shopping:** Relatedly, several definitions of extremism in the literature allow scholars and policymakers to shop for a suitable social frame (such as local

vs. global) under which a movement may be included or excluded from the extremist category for polemical or political reasons. In this definition, the social frame is irrelevant, as it assesses the movement strictly based on its articulated stance toward other groups.

- **Overemphasis on violence:** Definitions of extremism which rely on the presence or promise of violence may exclude important and obviously relevant movements that call for nonviolent hostile action against out-groups, such as segregation, discrimination or targeted verbal harassment and hinder the study of relevant movements in a pre-violent or post-violent stage. By predicating the definition on hostile rather than violent acts, this definition empowers longitudinal study of extremist movements as they turn toward (or away from) violence. In addition, by stipulating a *belief* in the necessity of hostile acts rather than the acts themselves, the definition is flexible with respect to a movement's short-term or tactical decisions about whether and when to act.
- **Assessment of historical politics:** This definition is primarily applied based on the contents of ideological texts, as detailed further in Chapter 4. Movements whose texts have survived can therefore be assessed in their historical context without relying on a subjective or unclear interpretation of the movement's standing relative to mainstream society. This definition also moots the question (largely unaddressed in the literature) of where to set the threshold of public support at which a movement transitions into or out of extremism.
- **Instability of category:** The definition's stipulation that the in-group can "*never* be healthy or successful unless engaged in hostile action against an out-group" attempts to distinguish extremism from ordinary forms of intergroup conflict (such as business competition or military hostilities over a border dispute) that are amenable to peaceful resolution. Under this definition, hostile action against an out-group or -groups is *inseparable* from the in-group's intrinsic goals. Should the movement abandon its absolute commitment to hostile action, this is a significant enough shift to justify a change in categorization. While this stipulation cannot completely eliminate gray areas and



subjective assessments, especially given the heated rhetoric that sometimes accompanies war or political campaigns, it emphasizes important distinctions between activity that is extremist and activity that is tactical (such as legitimate self-defense) or merely criminal (such as profit-seeking through hostage-taking).

- **Evolution within category:** The working definition proposed here also allows for the prospect of change rather than stipulating an overall landscape of rigidity and inflexibility. Almost every detail of an extremist movement's system of meaning can change while still remaining extremist—including the identity of the in-group, the identity of targeted out-groups, and the type of hostile action mandated by the former against the latter. So long as the movement maintains a general requirement for hostile action against an out-group, it can be effectively tracked and studied through many significant changes in behavior without jumping categories.

### 3.3. Conclusion

“[I]t is not difficult to imagine what the fate of factual truth would be if power interests, national or social, had the last say in these matters.”

*-- Hannah Arendt <sup>167</sup>*

This chapter reviewed a large, representative sampling of definitions for extremism found in the academic literature and in public policy documents. Most of these definitions fit into one of five typologies: a) relative to social norms, b) based on tactics, c) based on opposition to the state or political power, d) based on perceived adherent traits such as rigidity of belief, and e) based on a mandate of intergroup conflict. The review identified a number of ambiguities and problems associated with the most commonly used definition types, which render them prone to abuse and/or unsuitable for empirical comparative study.

This work will adopt a definition proposed by the author that fits within the last category, based on a movement's committed pursuit of intergroup conflict. The definition suits (and is derived from) the Linkage-Based Analysis methodology that will be utilized in this dissertation's methodology. However, the definition offers other

merits. Most importantly, the intergroup-conflict approach to definition offers the most reliable empirical basis for comparative and longitudinal study. It does so primarily by a) eliminating the need for category changes based on factors external to the movement being studied; b) reducing subjectivity in the designation of movements as extremist; and c) allowing for the existence of extremist movements that hold and wield substantial political power.

Finally, this definition provides some degree of insulation against politicized uses of the term by entrenched political power interests seeking to suppress or otherwise problematize dissent. It should be stressed that the primary goal of establishing a strong definition is academic—to clearly define and systematize our study of a phenomenon. But in a field where scholarship is especially prone to abuse and misuse, with potentially catastrophic human costs, we are obligated to speak clearly and define our terms carefully. No amount or quality of scholarship will prevent politicians and governments from weaponizing the label of extremism, but we can make such arguments harder to mount and easier to refute.

## 4. Methodology

On some essential, instinctive level, almost everyone understands that ISIS and Nazis have something in common. Despite the fact that their individual beliefs are wildly different, despite the fact that one is mainly religious and the other is mainly racial, despite the fact that each group's ideology stipulates that the other deserves death. Despite all this, we understand ISIS and neo-Nazis share a certain way of looking at the world, which we refer to as "extremism."

From here, we can expand the field of inquiry. What do neo-Nazis and the historical German Nazi Party have in common? What do contemporary neo-Nazi white nationalists have in common with the white nationalists who supported racial slavery in the antebellum United States? What does ISIS (itself a practitioner of slavery) have in common with antebellum American slavers? Are all these things of a piece? Are they all extremism? And if so, what unites them, and what differentiates them?

These are the questions this dissertation seeks to address. By analyzing a series of diverse case studies, this dissertation seeks to shed light on the mechanisms of social construction described in Chapter 2, and to test and refine the definition of extremism offered in Chapter 3. The case studies will be examined chiefly through the Linkage-Based Analysis framework introduced by Haroro Ingram in 2016<sup>168</sup> and subsequently iterated by Ingram and this author across several papers.<sup>169</sup> The framework will be applied to the source texts using a grounded theory approach that relies primarily on a close analytical reading, supplemented by a variety of reading and semantic analysis approaches.

The grounded theory approach is intended to enable the discovery of concepts and linkages that were not immediately apparent at the outset of this project, as well as providing continuity with the author's previous work.

The methodology section will discuss the following techniques and issues related to the production of this dissertation:

- Research questions
- Linkage-Based Analysis
- Grounded theory and literary reading
- Additional tools used to analyze texts
- Case study selection

## 4.1. Research questions

This dissertation will use grounded theory to examine four very diverse examples of social movements that could be considered extremist. While the grounded theory approach is not driven by the intention to test a hypothesis, it still requires research questions to focus its exploration.

- **RQ1: Does the Berger definition create a consistent foundation for the comparative study of extremism?** While the author believes the definition published in *Extremism* and reiterated in Chapter 3 is robust and durable, this dissertation will assess its applicability across a set of ideological texts associated with diverse movements that have been deemed extremist by acclamation in the literature, as well as some movements that would seem to qualify based on the author's definition but have not traditionally been framed as extremism by either society or the academy. This dissertation will explore whether the category created by the definition lends itself to “apples to apples” comparisons among movements with divergent beliefs.
- **RQ2: What are the commonalities among groups considered to be extremist?** Beyond the commonalities stipulated by the definition, what unites groups with divergent beliefs? This should, ideally, be addressed as a narrative question that encompasses both structure and content.
- **RQ3: How does status (meaning low or high levels of political and social power and acceptance) shape extremist ideological arguments?** As discussed in Chapter 3, the Berger definition is specifically intended to capture movements that exist across a spectrum from powerful to weak, popular to

fringe, high status to low status. What differentiates groups at opposite ends of the spectrum? What unites them?

- **RQ4: How do extremist movements engage in the social construction of reality?** How do extremists socially construct reality? Do extremists construct reality differently than non-extremists? Does social construction inherently lend itself to extremism?
- **RQ5: Do extremist movements attempt to reduce uncertainty for adherents, and if so, do they succeed?** As seen in Chapter 2, the literature strongly suggests that susceptibility to extremism is linked with a desire to avoid uncertainty. The literature is much less explicit and precise when talking about whether and how extremism reduces uncertainty for its adherents.

## 4.2. Linkage-Based Analysis

In 2016 and 2017, Ingram outlined a “linkage-based approach” to combating extremist propaganda,<sup>170</sup> as part of a pragmatic counter-messaging strategy using basic concepts from Social Identity Theory.

Ingram posited that extremist propaganda typically describes a “system of meaning” that contains the following linked concepts: In-group, crisis, out-group and solution. According to Ingram, extremist narratives describe a crisis caused by an out-group that affects the in-group from which the extremist movement seeks to recruit. The extremist group offers a solution to the crisis.<sup>171</sup> This solution typically includes hostile or violent action against the out-group in question.

Hereafter referred to as Linkage-Based Analysis (LBA), the conceptual underpinnings of Ingram’s approach form the basis of a more theoretically oriented framework by this author, described in publications from 2017 to 2018.<sup>172</sup>

The framework approaches a text with the object of identifying its component entities—in-group, out-group, crisis and solution—and then identifying how the text links those concepts. Using grounded theory, the analyst identifies entities through exploration and codes additional entities or subdivisions of the original entity categories.

Based on that body of research, this author developed the definition of extremism presented in Chapter 3: 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.<sup>173</sup> In this formulation, the crisis described by Ingram is the rationale that explains *why* the in-group's advantage cannot be separated from the out-group's disadvantage, and the solution described by Ingram is the "hostile action."

The primary object of LBA in the context of this dissertation is to dissect extremist texts and render them as conceptual maps of their linked components, including what the narrative describes as the in-group, the out-group or -groups, the crisis and the solution, as well as any relevant subdivisions of these broad concepts.

The primary entities of interest, briefly defined, are as follows:

- **In-group:** An in-group is the group or identity class to which an author or speaker belongs. For instance, a White nationalist's in-group typically includes anyone whom an author stipulates is part of the "White race." As this sentence should suggest, in-groups are socially constructed and their criteria may change over time, even though extremists will typically argue that their traits are intrinsic and immutable. Importantly, the phrase in-group does not imply power or social cachet. It is simply the referent group from which a text originates.
- **Out-group:** An out-group is a group or identity class that is specifically excluded from being part of an in-group. Extremist movements usually include multiple out-groups, which may overlap. For instance, Sunni Muslim extremists such as Islamic State define out-groups to include Christians, Jews, atheists, Shia and Sufi Muslims, Yazidis, Hindus and Buddhists, among others. Not all out-groups are equal in an extremist movement's orientation. Some are more hated, and different groups are often subject to different prescriptions for hostile action.
- **Crisis:** The crisis in an extremist ideology or propaganda work is typically structured as a narrative about how an out-group or -groups negatively impacts an in-group, creating a need for the in-group to take hostile action against the out-group. Another form of crisis is triumphalist, meaning that the in-group's ascendancy must be ensured by continuing to take hostile action against an out-

group or -groups. The critical element of a crisis narrative is that it requires the in-group to take immediate action and continue that action indefinitely. In short, the crisis is a *justification* for the action that an extremist ideologue prescribes.

- **Solution:** In the extremist system of meaning, an out-group is associated with a crisis affecting the in-group, and the in-group must “solve” the crisis by taking hostile action against an out-group or -groups. Hostile action is often, but not always, violent in nature.

Subsets of the in-group will be discussed (and discovered) in the analysis of the case studies, but important subcategories will recur throughout and therefore should be defined up front:

- **Extremist in-group:** The extremist in-group is the extremist movement or organization being discussed, such as al Qaeda, the Ku Klux Klan, or the Nazis.
- **Eligible in-group:** The eligible in-group is the broad identity category that an extremist in-group claims to represent and from which it seeks to recruit—Muslims in the case of al Qaeda, White Americans in the case of the KKK.
- **Ineligible in-group:** Extremist movements may deem that some people who technically qualify for membership in the eligible in-group (for instance, by having White skin) should be disqualified due to their beliefs or practices (for instance, marrying someone of another race). Members of the ineligible in-group are not simply at risk of expulsion from the in-group, however; they are at risk of being assigned to an out-group and subjected to hostile action. Extremists may or may not attempt to correct or reconcile with ineligible in-group members before initiating hostile action.
- **In-group prototype:** An idealized or standardized description of what members of the eligible in-group should look like and how they should act. Typically, extremist in-groups will argue that they are more perfectly aligned with the in-group prototype than the eligible in-group.

In the author’s approach to LBA, the system of meaning elements are graphed to specific language in an ideological text. An example of a linkage-based analysis graph, taken from a 2024 research paper by the author, helps illuminate some of the utility of the

linkage-based approach. In this chart, elements of the system of meaning are visualized to illustrate linkages to specific language in the Dred Scott decision, a U.S. Supreme Court ruling on slavery, which is also discussed briefly as part of Chapter 7.<sup>174</sup>

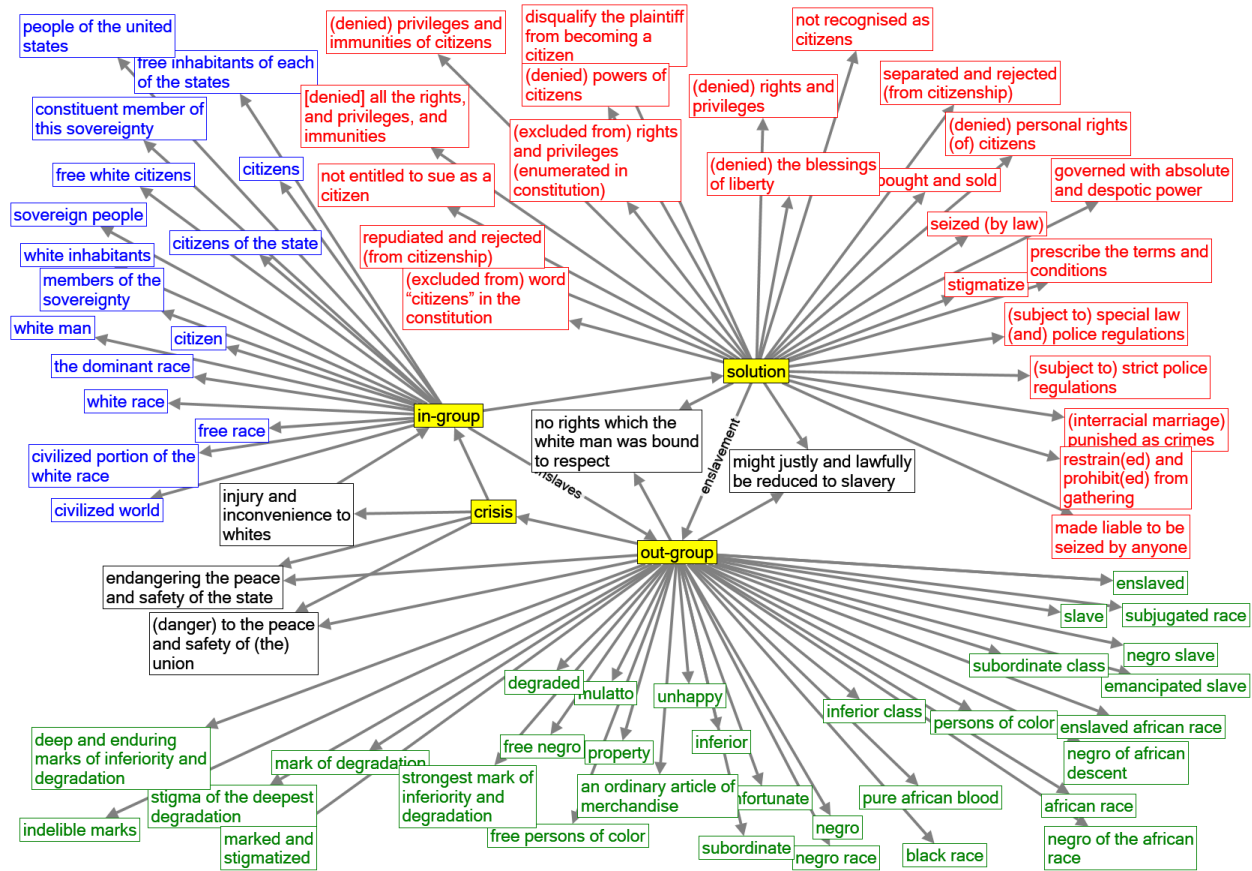


Figure 1: An example of linkage-based analysis, visualizing extremist language in the Dred Scott Decision.

### 4.3. Grounded theory and literary reading

The ideological texts that form the basis for case studies in this dissertation will be examined using a form of grounded theory approach, combined with a literary analytical approach. This distinctive approach has been employed by the author in previous works, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Grounded theory was articulated by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anslem Strauss in 1967<sup>175</sup> and has been described as follows:

The method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is built upon two key concepts: “constant comparison,” in which data are collected and



analyzed simultaneously, and “theoretical sampling,” in which decisions about which data should be collected next are determined by the theory that is being constructed.<sup>176</sup>

The “central premise” of this approach is that “theory must be developed from systematic analysis of empirical data.”<sup>177</sup> More simply put, grounded theory is inductive, drawing conclusions based on observation. Researchers using this approach do not necessarily seek to test a hypothesis but to draw fresh insights from behaviors or data observed “in the wild.” Although grounded theory may produce explanations of phenomena, it is also a mechanism for the discovery of phenomena.<sup>178</sup>

Grounded theory does not require the researcher to be a “blank sheet devoid of experience or knowledge” or to approach their subject with “a blank mind.” It is rather a commitment to focus on insights derived from observation as opposed to the structured testing of hypotheses.<sup>179</sup> This is important both in terms of the integration of the LBA approach and to reflect the late-career status of the author.

The specific methodology used here involves reading extremist ideological texts through a literary analytical lens<sup>180</sup> with an eye toward discerning narratives, while associating and coding terms and vocabulary from the texts with key elements such as in-groups, out-groups, crises and solutions. The literary lens is an important element of this exploration. As Andrew Glazzard wrote in 2017:

[T]errorist ideologues often *are* literary authors and storytellers, and indeed narrative may actually be fundamental to what they do and how they communicate. ... [Therefore] there is much to gain by bringing to this task the tools of literary studies, the academic discipline which surely has a claim to primacy when it comes to narrative.<sup>181</sup>

Form is what unites extremist ideologies, and content is what separates them. Therefore the comparative study of extremism necessitates what Glazzard calls the analysis of “both form and content, as well as the relationship between the two.”<sup>182</sup> In practical terms, this is a very relevant framing for a grounded theory exploration whose primary lode star is LBA. The entities and linkages of LBA—in-group, out-group, crisis and

solution—can be meaningfully described as the form or structure of an extremist ideology. They are structural necessities, present in virtually all types of extremist belief.

The content of an extremist ideology refers to its particulars, including the parameters of in-group and out-group assignment (such as racial, religious or national), the specific crisis narrative employed (such as conspiratorial, dystopian, or existential), and the type of solution prescribed (such as harassment, segregation, oppression or genocide).

Unlike structure, the contents of extremist ideologies can diverge wildly.

Given that extremist ideologies have one set of constants (structure) and a second set of variables (content), the LBA framework offers a way to perform comparative analysis through a grounded theory approach. Through analytical and literary reading, this dissertation will identify and code how the language of a case study text corresponds to the structure of extremism while describing its contents in literary narrative terms (i.e., what does the text say, and how does it say it). This dissertation will then compare the outputs from its case studies to discover and characterize commonalities and contrasts.

This discovery process explicitly leaves open the possibility of identifying previously uncharted entities, elements and subdivisions of or variations on previously identified entities and elements. Thus, while the texts are approached with the concepts of LBA in mind, the analytical reading process provides a check on those concepts, including an assessment of how well they describe extremist content, and the identification of any potential inconsistencies or problems in the LBA framework, such as structural features that may have been omitted from earlier iterations.

In keeping with the nature of grounded theory, the order of reading will shape the exploration to some extent, with insights from earlier case studies applied to later case studies. The initial case studies will therefore begin by examining works that are held by academic consensus to fall in the category of extremism, before expanding to consider examples that may be more controversial.

Since the later case studies move away from established scholarship on extremism and into new areas of focus, they require more context and analysis than the earlier ones and thus are longer. The earlier chapters have been revisited with additional context and

insights derived from the later chapters, but these changes were made with an eye to showing the progression of ideas from one case study to the next. Similarly, the style and content of the graph visualizations evolved throughout the writing of the dissertation. In some cases, earlier graphs have been updated to be more consistent with later usage, if such changes did not significantly impact the content and meaning.

Additionally, and consistent with the iterative process of grounded theory exploration, this dissertation takes an iterative approach to the author's published and unpublished research, seeking to incorporate, revise and expand findings from previous research. This dynamic will be further detailed in the later part of this chapter.

#### **4.4. Additional tools**

The primary methodology for this dissertation, as previously described, is a careful and analytical manual reading of extremist texts with an eye toward identifying conceptual linkages and elements consistent with extremist belief.

Some semantic and software analytical tools have been used to supplement and guide this reading, where available. These tools were not used as primary analytical devices due to various limitations of both the tools (in terms of capabilities) and the texts (some of which are too short to produce credible quantitative semantic analysis).

In other words, the outputs of these tools provided useful context for reading, but they were not directly used to produce analysis for this dissertation.

SketchEngine was used to produce lists of word frequency and compare the frequency of words in the text to their frequency in the standard English language corpus. These frequently surfaced specialized jargon used to describe in-groups and out-groups, a finding that has obvious utility. SketchEngine also identified collocations, meaning words that appear next to or in close proximity to other words. This was useful for getting a sense of how in-groups and out-groups are viewed (for instance, through collocations such as “kill disbelievers” or “protect White people”). Finally, SketchEngine offers a concordance function that makes it easy to see at a glance how frequently used terms are used in the text.

The other main tool used for this dissertation was NodeXL, an extension to Microsoft Excel designed to analyze network graphs. NodeXL can be used to visualize the LBA framework and to illustrate other linkages contained in texts, such as collocations. NodeXL also offers a suite of network analysis metrics, but these outputs were assessed to be outside the scope of this dissertation.

## **4.5. Case study selection**

A grounded theory approach requires a cohesive body of data to explore. Since Linkage-Based Analysis is intrinsically concerned with the contents of extremist ideological texts, such texts will form the basis of the case studies explored in this dissertation.

But which texts? As discussed in Chapter 2, one of the challenges in establishing the study of extremism as a credible field of scholarship involves defining the field in a consistent manner, in order to empower comparative study.

Extremism is widely understood to encompass different sorts of ideologies. Extremist ideologies span virtually all forms of political thought, from left to right and outside of that box. Extremists can be found purporting to represent a dizzying array of nations, races and ethnicities, as well as virtually every type of religious belief, including but not limited to Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu and Shinto.

While some motivated political actors claim that certain groups (typically their own) are immune to the lure of extremism, this argument is short-sighted at best and at its worst becomes a form of extremism in its own right—for example, when certain far-right actors argue that only Muslims can be terrorists or extremists.

More controversially, the definition used in this dissertation is structured to allow for popular or politically powerful forms of extremism, as opposed to the dominant type of academic definition that situates extremism only at the fringes of society. Under the “Berger definition,” extremism is understood to encompass movements that have achieved different levels of social acceptance and sociopolitical power.

In other words, movements need not be situated on the fringes of society, nor need they advocate for values “far removed from ordinary.” A movement can be extremist even

when it utterly dominates society, such as in Nazi Germany or under the regime of racial slavery that prevailed in the United States prior to abolition.

The Berger definition also allows us to study a movement as consistently extremist even when its popularity or power status changes dramatically, such as the journey of the Nazi Party from the fringes to the center of German society and back again.

With these factors in mind, the case study selection should focus on major texts with clear historical significance, while reflecting the diversity of extremist movements and contexts. The overall scheme of the case studies will be as follows:

- Two major case studies examining landmark texts from movements that are uncontroversially categorized as extremist in both academic and policy circles. The first example will be drawn from jihadism and the second from white nationalism, allowing for a comparison of two movements whose beliefs include radically different content—religious versus racial.
- The third major case study will examine the ideology of slavery in the United States. This example was chosen to test the definition of extremism in a case that clearly conflicts with the existing academic consensus. Additionally, this case study allows us to discover insights about extremism in defense of the status quo, as opposed to the previous examples, which seek to overturn the status quo.
- Using the grounded theory approach, these case studies and the author's comparable previous work find that extremist texts are often directly critical of their own in-groups in interesting and significant ways. Based on these findings, the final chapter in this section will examine a potentially controversial case study—early Christian texts on heresy and the evolution of a distinction between Jewish and Christian in-group identities.

## **4.5.1. Case study chapter detail**

### **4.5.1.1. Jihadist: Join the Caravan**

Abdullah Azzam was known as the father of the jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan during the 1980s, a tremendously consequential conflict that led directly to the rise of al Qaeda and the growth of the global jihadist movement.

In addition to working on the ground as an organizer and traveling internationally as a recruiter and fundraiser, Azzam wrote two seminal books of enduring influence: *The Defense of Muslim Lands* in 1985 and *Join the Caravan* in 1987.

According to Azzam's biographer, Thomas Hegghammer, Azzam coined the expression "join the caravan" and the latter text became "an instant classic of jihadi literature" that is "still widely read today."<sup>183</sup> An analysis of material read by convicted jihadists in the U.K. found that *Join the Caravan* was the second-most popular work, even decades after its publication.<sup>184</sup>

*Join the Caravan* is available in multiple English translations by Azzam's extremist supporters, some of which were obtained by the author from court records and others of which are available online. In addition to its landmark status and continuing importance, the availability of multiple translations by extremist adherents made this an excellent choice for a case study. In addition, its status as a seminal work in a then-nascent movement makes it useful as a baseline to compare against later jihadist works.

### **4.5.1.2. White nationalist: Siege**

*Siege* is the work of James Mason, a veteran neo-Nazi who joined the American Nazi Party (ANP) during the 1960s.<sup>185</sup> Under Mason, *Siege* was published first as a newsletter from 1980 to 1986, and subsequently collected as a lightly edited volume in 1993 with additional material added in later years, including appendices. The collected edition of the main text rings in at more than 160,000 words, not counting the later additions.<sup>186</sup>

Despite the limitations of the text itself and the controversy around Mason's embrace of Manson, *Siege* continued to percolate in fringe neo-Nazi and far right circles for several years, leaping to prominence in the 2010s after being posted on internet forums. In 2015, members of the Iron March online forum created the neo-Nazi organization Atomwaffen Division (AWD), which adopted many of Mason's concepts. The book became required reading for new AWD members,<sup>187</sup> although one iteration of the group subsequently broke with Mason in a public dispute.<sup>188</sup>

*Siege's* length, its widespread distribution, its outsized presence in online communities, and its role in inspiring violence all recommended it as a case study. *Siege* is one of only a handful of white nationalist texts to achieve wide influence and lay a credible claim to thought leadership in the movement. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, "*SIEGE* is now more popular than ever within the racist right internationally."<sup>189</sup>

In terms of broad impact and appeal within the fractionated white nationalist movement, the most comparable white nationalist work is *The Turner Diaries*, the notorious racist dystopian novel by William Luther Pierce. However, the author has already written about *The Turner Diaries* at length (Berger, 2016) and *Siege* is relatively underrepresented in the literature from a content-analytical perspective, excepting for a publication by the author carried out in conjunction with this dissertation (Berger, 2021).<sup>190</sup>

#### **4.5.1.3. Racial slavery: American antebellum ideologies**

Under the Berger definition, the practice of racial slavery in the United States would be considered extremism, as it involves an in-group (white Americans) that is committed in perpetuity to carrying out a hostile action (enslavement) against an out-group (Black Africans and their descendants).

The practice of slavery exists in several points of tension with the definition of extremism. Slavery has a long history, but throughout the majority of that history, the

practice was not intrinsically tied to race, and it existed alongside such economically motivated practices as indentured servitude.

But slavery took on a distinctly racial character in the United States, where the “peculiar institution” was enshrined in law and became a central tenet of civic life for many. This was a relatively late development, historically speaking. “[I]t was only in the New World, and particularly in what became the United States, that race became centrally connected to slavery” (Finkelman, 2019).<sup>191</sup>

Other scholars, working from the academic consensus definition of extremism as an activity confined to the fringes of society, have argued that American racial slavery could not be extremist because it simply reflected the values of the day. This view has at least two significant flaws: First, it erases the values and life experiences of enslaved people and free people of African descent. And second, it discounts the fact that slavery was always opposed by some people within the mainstream of White society. The Berger definition is explicitly intended to address this type of institutionalized bias and oppression.

The “values of the day” were not monolithic, and neither was the ideology of slavery. Pro-slavery ideology evolved over time and played out on multiple fronts. In its late stages, proponents followed three avenues of argument, seeking to position themselves as leading examples of economic, biblical or scientific thought.<sup>192</sup>

This dissertation will examine the historical context with a special focus on the 1852 text *Studies on Slavery*. The text is largely forgotten today but was widely read and very influential at the time of its publication, winning endorsement from key pro-slavery figures such as Confederate President Jefferson Davis and notoriously racist proslavery doctor Samuel Cartwright. As a case study, the text is also useful for its consolidation of several parallel streams of racist religious belief, some of which persist today.



#### 4.5.1.4. Early Christian: The *Adversus* genre

In grounded theory, as previously noted, “data are collected and analyzed simultaneously, and ‘theoretical sampling,’ in which decisions about which data should be collected next are determined by the theory that is being constructed.”<sup>193</sup>

In that spirit, the initial round of analysis (including the first three case studies and the author’s previous research) produced interesting discoveries about how extremist movements regard their own in-groups, particularly the dynamics by which members can be disqualified or expelled from an in-group and reassigned to an out-group.

Although in-group subdivisions have occurred throughout history, there is one fairly clear inflection point that seems relevant to the historical evolution of extremism—the splintering of Christianity from Judaism in the first few centuries of the Common Era and the development of a formal doctrine of heresy.

The concept of heresy, as it is understood today, originated in Jewish circles around the start of the Christian era, but it was formalized and articulated as early Christians first developed and embraced an in-group identity distinct from Judaism, and subsequently iterated as a tactic to enforce an idea of orthodoxy over multiple competing Christian sects, especially the Gnostics. Early Catholic Church fathers fought bitterly over which version of Christian belief was correct. These debates included explicit discussion of in-group boundaries, the expulsion of in-group members and their reassignment to an out-group, and the prescription of hostile action against in-group members who were perceived to deviate from the nascent concept of orthodoxy.

The fourth case study chapter will therefore include a review of relevant early Christian texts, a discussion of early Christian attitudes toward Judaism as a distinct out-group identity, and an analysis of the text *Adversus Haereses* (“Against Heresies”) by Irenaeus, a bishop in the early Church who played a key role defining the nature of orthodoxy and heresiology. The implications of these dynamics in the context of extremism will be discussed. It will be followed by an examination of *Adversus Judaeos* (“Against the Jews”), a fourth-century text by church father John Chrysostom, which constructs Christian identity in violent opposition to Jewish identity. Each text is

considered very important in its own right, and as exemplars of the *Adversus* genre of early Christian writing, which constructed Christian identity through mechanisms of exclusion.

#### **4.5.1.5. Caveats**

As the author only speaks English, case studies were largely chosen based on the availability of primary sources originally written in English or available in a viable translation. The pedigree of each translation will be detailed in the relevant chapter.

The language limitation and the author's prior professional and academic experience skew this collection of case studies toward Western and Middle Eastern examples. It is important to note that extremism knows no borders. Highly relevant examples can be found in all the world's cultures and regions, including in Asia and Africa, and it's important that future research cover these areas.

Consideration was given to whether the German Nazi Party should be included as a case study, given that the Nazis serve as a convenient reference for politically mainstreamed extremism at various points in this work. Ultimately, racial slavery in the United States was chosen as a better fit for several reasons, including the abundance of primary source material originally written in English, topicality to current debates about race and ideology in the United States, and overlap with the author's previous research—in the last case, meaning that the author is better qualified to situate the debate on slavery in its proper historical context.

Finally, although there are several important works on the ideology of slavery, few of these are positioned within the existing literature on extremism. In contrast, Nazi ideology has been much more extensively covered in both the literature on extremism and within academic scholarship more widely. Given these factors, the author and his advisors assessed that an extremism-oriented examination of the ideology of American slavery would address a gap and represent a more substantial contribution to the field, in addition to providing a more robust test for the definition and LBA framework.

## **4.6. A note on terminology**

As a general rule, references to racial in-groups and out-groups will be framed as references to people—White people and Black people most prominently herein, but also Asian people and Arab people, and so on. Essentializing labels such as “Whites” or “Blacks” will be avoided as much as possible except in quoted material.

With respect to religious in-groups, adherents typically self-identify with an essentializing label—for instance, as Christians, Jews, and Muslims. In some cases, most obviously “Jews,” the label may be ambiguous as to whether its context is racial or religious. But given the voluntary adoption of these labels as in-group descriptors, and their ubiquity in academic literature, they will be used as deemed fit, based on context.

## **PART II: CASE STUDIES**

## 5. “Join the Caravan”

Abdallah Azzam was the central figure animating the rise of jihadist foreign fighter activity during the 1980s, a powerful voice recruiting fighters from around the world to participate in the struggle to expel the Soviet Union from Afghanistan after its invasion in 1979.<sup>194</sup>

Although Azzam was assassinated in 1989, he remains one of the most influential ideological inspirations for modern jihadists of every stripe and is frequently referred to as the “father of the modern global jihad.”<sup>195</sup> His ideological writings and operational infrastructure contributed powerfully to the rise of al Qaeda starting in 1988.

Azzam’s 1987 book, *Join the Caravan*, is perhaps the most important jihadist tract of all time, and it remains one of the most widely read, even today. An earlier Azzam book, *Defense of Muslim Lands*, is nearly as important.<sup>196</sup> The eponymous “caravan” has “entered the jihadi lexicon as a synonym for joining the jihadi movement,” according to Azzam biographer Thomas Hegghammer.<sup>197</sup>

Despite the clear and lasting importance of this work among jihadis, and its frequent citation by both al Qaeda and the Islamic State,<sup>198</sup> *Join the Caravan* has received relatively little direct scrutiny in Western academic circles,<sup>199</sup> except as a transitional work in the broader jihadist ideological oeuvre.<sup>200</sup>

*Join the Caravan* is a short book of approximately 17,000 words. Initially published in Arabic in 1987, an English translation was published in the United States by extremists connected to Azzam’s international jihadist recruitment network, *Maktab al-Khidamat*, which did business under the name of the *Al Kifah* Center.<sup>201</sup>

A second edition in 1988 and a subsequent 1995 edition were translated into English and distributed by a successor organization to the Al Kifah Center. A 2001 re-translation of the work was uploaded to the website *Al Haqq* and republished in 2002 on the website *Religioscope*. This edition contains several minor corrections to the text but also introduces errors. For the purposes of this chapter, Religioscope serves as the primary

text, cross-referenced with the 1995 *al Kifah* edition in cases where the primary text is ambiguous or obviously incorrect.<sup>202</sup>

This chapter will examine how *Join the Caravan*:

- a) defines in-group and out-group identities consistent with the framework of extremism described in Chapter 3;
- b) describes multiple crisis narratives affecting the in-group; and
- c) mandates hostile and violent action against an out-group to solve those crises.
- d) examine whether and how the elements described above come together to form a complete extremist ideology (“system of meaning”); and
- e) examine how Azzam invokes consensus and in-group subdivisions to defend and establish his argument.

The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the text’s overall extremist system of meaning and consider the roots of *Join the Caravan*’s durable appeal among extremist groups that often diverge on important ideological details.

## **5.1. Overview of content**

Azzam’s *Join the Caravan* is a jihadist text, seeking to enlist Muslims as foreign fighters, nominally defending the religion of Islam by taking hostile action in response to aggression by disbelievers.

The major part of the text is divided into two parts, “Motivations for Jihad” and “Oh, Islam!”, with the first part being a brief, direct justification of fighting in defense of Muslims in Afghanistan, and the second being a more emotional appeal with reference to various religious authorities. Some post-1989 editions of *Join the Caravan* include a new introduction and a third section, written by Azzam, which contains clarifications of some points from the original text, in an apparent response to detractors.<sup>203</sup> Some editions also include a second introduction, written by the book’s editor, which features a biographical sketch of Azzam and a brief discussion of the book’s publication history. Material not written by Azzam has been excluded from the analysis in this chapter.<sup>204</sup>

*Join the Caravan* argues that “jihad” (“fighting disbelievers”) is necessary to prevent the domination of the eligible in-group (“Muslims”) by an out-group (“Disbelievers”), to protect or restore the dignity of the eligible in-group, and to properly honor God and practice Islam as a religion. Although the argument is contextualized around the Communist occupation of Afghanistan, Azzam argues his case in a broader context, which accounts in part for the text’s long-lasting influence.

The first section, “Motivations for Jihad,” consists of 16 theses, some circular or redundant, all presented as spare, direct assertions with short explanatory notes, backed by minimal argument and religious citations.

The second section, “Oh, Islam!,” is a more impassioned version of the same argument, presented in the tone of the dynamic, remonstrative sermons for which Azzam was rightly famous. This section is more emotionally evocative, narrative and impressionistic than the arguments in the preceding section.

The third section, “Clarifications about the issue of jihad today,” reemphasizes points from the first two sections and answers several very specific questions about who must participate in jihad and how to do so.

## **5.2. Identity Construction**

*Join the Caravan* describes several group distinctions relevant to extremist belief, including an in-group, which is broken into several subdivisions, and an out-group.

The primary in-group subdivisions reflect the standard extremist system of meaning, with an extremist in-group (the “jihad movement,” or “*mujahideen*”) making a recruitment appeal to an eligible in-group (Muslims). Azzam also addresses an ineligible in-group (Muslims who strongly reject the extremist worldview presented in the text).

In addition to these previously defined classifications (Berger, 2018), Azzam carves out a special status for the Muslims of Afghanistan, who do not fit neatly into either the eligible or extremist in-group categories. This “victim in-group” is discussed in more detail below.

In contrast to Azzam's extensive discussion of the in-group, the out-group description is relatively sparse and notably nonspecific (usually referencing "disbelievers" rather than Russians or Communists). Likely reasons for this imbalance are discussed in the second half of the chapter.

### **5.2.1. Eligible in-group**

*Join the Caravan* is an ideological text focused on recruitment. As such, it spends a considerable amount of time defining the characteristics of Muslims, the eligible in-group from which the author seeks adherents.

Variants on the word Muslim are used 79 times in the text, more frequently than people, which appears 77 times. Several other terms are used to denote the Muslim eligible in-group, including (in order of frequency) "Islam/Islamic" (72 occurrences) and "(the) religion" (20 occurrences). Both terms are used to describe the Muslim system of belief as well as the Muslim community. The word "*Ummah*," an Arabic word for the entire Muslim community, appears 27 times.

Adherence to the religion of Islam is what makes a Muslim. Muslims are expected to "practice," "protect" and "support" the religion against "enemies" who would "spoil" it. When they do so correctly, the religion is associated with "victory" and "honor."

While the religion of Islam is above reproach in Azzam's telling, the Muslims are not. Azzam tells the story of an *Ummah* whose great potential is currently unrealized, due to incorrect practices "which are lethal to perception and intuition." This failure has led to an internal crisis, discussed in more detail below, caused by Muslims who choose to "hold back" or "sit back" from jihad.

"Those of the believers who sit back, except for those who are incapacitated, are not equal with those who strive in the way of Allah with their wealth and their selves. Allah has granted a higher rank to those who strive with their possessions and selves, over those who sit back. [...] {Qur'an 4:95-96}

Some believers who "sit back" have "cold hearts," are "unfeeling," show "slackened determination," "fail to see evil," or are seized with "greed for life." Others stray in the



opposite direction, seized by an excess of feeling that is not focused, manifesting “hysteria,” “recklessness” or “rashness,” and losing focus because they feel “anger” or “jealous torment.”

In addition to the internal crisis, the Muslims are beset by an external crisis, caused by out-groups who have subjected the eligible in-group to “despicable subjugation,” leaving the Muslims in a “wounded” condition, both in Afghanistan and around the world.

Despite this external crisis, the *Ummah* is distracted by trivial concerns:

Surely, weighty matters and grave, painful disasters have befallen the Muslims. So stop talking about food and styles of speech, and instead, tell me about this important matter and what the Muslims have prepared for it. [...]

### **5.2.2. Extremist in-group**

Despite its problems, the *Ummah* is “prolific” and is “not barren of outstanding eras nor of delivery of men.” Although many Muslims are “weak,” some “extraordinary people” have emerged as “trustworthy custodians” of the religion—the extremist in-group, known primarily as the “jihad movement” or the “*mujahideen*” (an Arabic word for those who participate in jihad). The *mujahideen* are said to wage jihad, which in Azzam’s view means specifically to “fight in the Path of Allah,” specifically through “combat with weapons.”

Most of the current crop of *mujahideen* are “simple youths,” typically of “modest upbringing,” “good-heart,” and “healthy character,” Azzam writes. While their intentions are correct, these young recruits often lack education and maturity, they are “raw material” or “new blossoms,” who must be “ripened in the kiln of the battlefield, and ... matured by its heat.”

To properly shape these “fighters,” the extremist in-group requires “propagators,” who must promote the religion, educate adherents and most importantly “arouse the believers,” meaning they must communicate the necessity of “fighting” to members of the eligible in-group.

However, none have come to us other than simple youths, who were therefore our raw material. Of course, it was necessary to work on them so that they could make their contribution and participate with their fortune in this noble, blessed activity. Mature propagators are still the talk of the hour in the Islamic jihad of Afghanistan, and the subject of pressing necessity and glaring need.

Propagators are expected to be “mature,” “mindful” and “wise,” representing a “loftier [role] model” for members of both the eligible in-group and the extremist in-group. There are not enough mature propagators, Azzam writes, and they are badly needed to support the jihad movement.

The eligible in-group, Islam, can be enhanced with “benefits from the school of the Afghan jihad” if Muslims respond to the “true call” to join the jihad, aligning themselves with the extremist out-group.

### **5.2.3. In-group prototype**

We have seen that the land of Islam is still fertile; giving its produce at all times by its Lord's leave, whenever the plantations find a person of insight to serve as a trustworthy administrator. This *Ummah* only lacks exemplars to lead the journey sincerely, who are well acquainted with mobilizing an exploration, and who give priority to the commissioning of leadership.

Azzam states that the eligible in-group “lacks exemplars” who can “lead” and “mobilize” the jihad movement. Exemplars are needed to catalyze the *Ummah* into action and to surpass its shortcomings. The membership of the extremist in-group includes “lofty examples,” although these are typically “raw materials” that must be improved through fighting experience and “religious education.”

Muhammad, the “Prophet of Islam” was “master” of the *mujahideen* in his day and a [role] “model” for those who have correct intentions but lack seasoning, experience and maturity. The contemporaries that Muhammad led are depicted as the most reliable prototypes, the “Pious Predecessors” of Islamic tradition, also referred to as “companions [of the prophet],” for whom jihad was a “way of life.”

The primary and overwhelming quality of the in-group prototype, as defined by Azzam, is acceptance of and “participation” in jihad. The companions were “bathed” in jihad, and “cleansed” of “engrossment in worldly matters.” They were “outnumbered” in battle but effective, with “outstanding courage,” and both participated in and “exhorted” others to participate in jihad.

This is the Book of Allah making judgement between us, and the *Sunnah* [traditions] of His messenger (*sallallahu alayhi wa sallam*) speaking and testifying before us, and the way of the Companions in their understanding of the importance of jihad in this religion.

#### **5.2.4. Ineligible in-group**

Azzam switches between positive and negative appeals in urging Muslims to join the jihad movement. The positive appeal stresses that participation in jihad provides benefits to Muslims both individually and collectively. The negative appeal argues that those who do not participate in jihad are not fulfilling their obligations as part of the eligible in-group and will face dire consequences in this life and the “Hereafter.”

With the exception of women, children, the elderly and the “gravely ill,” all members of the eligible in-group are required to “fight,” Azzam writes. Key to this argument is the identification of jihad as a non-negotiable religious obligation.

Citing an array of religious authorities, Azzam explicitly ranks jihad at the same level of importance as the most fundamental Islamic practices that define Muslim identity—the “pillars of Islam,” distinctive and “obligatory” in-group practices that include the profession of faith, fasting during Ramadan, performing daily prayers, donating alms to the poor, and the Hajj pilgrimage. Discouraging someone from jihad is the equivalent of discouraging them from fasting during Ramadan, Azzam writes.

Jihad is the obligation of a lifetime, just like *salah* (daily prayers) and fasting. As it is not permissible to fast one year in Ramadan and eat in the following Ramadan, or to pray one day and abandon *salah* another day, similarly one cannot perform jihad one year and abandon it for some years if he is capable of continuing.

The five pillars are perhaps the most important identity markers for the eligible in-group (Muslims), and by elevating jihad to the same status, Azzam seeks to make fighting an intrinsic and performative element of legitimate Muslim identity.

Thus, Muslims who do not participate in jihad are assigned to the ineligible in-group. Azzam does not directly state that non-participants risk being assigned to the out-group (eschewing terms like “heresy” or “apostasy” that have at times been employed by successor jihadist movements), but he opens the door to such arguments by associating fighting with eligible in-group’s most essential identity markers.

Azzam refutes a variety of objections to participation and excuses for non-participation, arguing that the necessity of jihad supersedes most other considerations. Short of extreme disability or advanced age, adult male Muslims are required to participate in jihad regardless of their circumstances.

Azzam cites the Quranic instruction, “Go forth, [whether] light [or] heavy, and strive (do jihad) with your wealth and selves in the Path of Allah.” Azzam details several possible meanings of “light” and “heavy,” with heavy correlated to various complicating factors that might make participation more difficult. Azzam’s citation of the verse is used to discount almost any excuse for non-participation.

“Those of the believers who sit back, except for those who are incapacitated, are not equal with those who strive in the way of Allah with their wealth and their selves. Allah has granted a higher rank to those who strive with their possessions and selves, over those who sit back. And to all of them has Allah promised good. But Allah has favored the *Mujahideen* with a tremendous reward, by levels from Him, and with forgiveness and mercy, over those who sit back. And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” {Qur'an 4:95-96}

Those who refuse to fight are “weak,” Azzam writes, and “weakness” is a “crime,” “making the one committing it deserving of Hell.” Penalties are not reserved entirely for the afterlife. People who “hold back from jihad” or “abandon jihad” should be “shunned,” in the same way that Muslims should shun adulterers, homosexuals, alcoholics and others who Azzam categorizes as “evil people,” including those who “call

for innovation in religion.” In Azzam’s view, such people are not worthy of engagement, and arguing with them results only in “barren disputation.”

While Azzam does not prescribe a violent penalty for the ineligible out-group in the temporal world, his solution to the problem of ineligibility—shunning—falls within the spectrum of standard extremist solutions,<sup>205</sup> albeit on the low end.

### **5.2.5. Victim in-group**

The “Afghan people” or “Afghans” are differentiated from both the extremist and eligible in-groups in Azzam’s writings, extensively enough to justify the definition of a new in-group subcategory—the **victim in-group**.

The Afghans have “ignorance” and “shortcomings” “like any other people,” Azzam writes, but unlike the eligible in-group they have “refused disgrace in their religion, and have purchased their dignity with seas of blood and mountains of corpses and lost limbs.”

Afghans are “illiterate” and lack a well-rounded Islamic education, requiring to be “instructed” and “educated,” but they are “faithful.” They value qualities found in the extremist in-group/in-group prototype, including “manhood” (meaning stereotypical masculinity), “chivalry” and “pride.” They have been forced to accept or make “enormous sacrifices,” but they have “endured” in protecting their religion, “honor” and “children.” They disdain “trickery” and “hypocrisy.”

Azzam writes that the Afghan people need “money,” “men” (meaning “fighters”) and “propagators,” from lowest to highest priority. The Afghans are in “severe distress” and face “definite, menacing peril.” They have satisfied the “obligations” of their religion, but their resources have been depleted. They called out to the *Ummah* for assistance, but the eligible in-group (Muslims) have “not heeded their call.”

Women and children are also accorded victim in-group status, separate from their status as part of the eligible in-group. Their “suffering” is highlighted, but they are exempt from the requirement to formally join the extremist in-group and participate in fighting. Muslim women are at risk of being “raped,” and some choose “suicide” over

loss of “chastity,” “modesty,” or “honor.” Azzam makes reference here to Afghanistan specifically, but at times uses language that extends to Muslim women throughout the world, whose honor must be “protected.” For example:

The villain has reached the depths of the Muslim women's chamber -  
shall we then leave him be? Shall we allow him to violate honors, spoil  
values and uproot principles?

Azzam cites the victimization of children less frequently. In addition to being killed and orphaned, Azzam says 5,200 Afghan Muslim children were taken by the Russians for indoctrination into Communism and “to sow heresy deep within them.” Other children are said to be educated in schools built by the Americans, at risk of corruption. For these reasons, among others, Muslim “educators” are needed as part of the jihad.

### **5.2.6. Out-group**

Although Azzam is chiefly concerned with a specific “enemy” out-group—the Russian army occupying Afghanistan—he frames that group in broad language, frequently using generic terminology. This choice, likely deliberate, allows his argument for the jihad movement to be repurposed for different arenas and different conflicts. The author of the foreword of the third edition highlights this, writing, “The book focuses on Afghanistan, but most of what is mentioned is applicable to jihad in general.”

The out-group is most often described as the “enemy” (36 times) or “disbelievers” (18 times) and only rarely as “Communists” (4 times) or “Russians” (3 times). The out-group “attacks,” “spoils,” “occupies,” and “dominates” the in-group. In turn, the in-group is urged to “terrorize,” “withstand,” “face,” “subdue,” “attack,” “repel,” “fight,” and “[wage] jihad [against]” the out-group.

The description of the out-group is extremely sparse, with very few adjectives associated with the most common out-group terms. The word “evil” appears 12 times in the text but is not always associated with the out-group (sometimes used in the generic religious sense, sometimes applied to the ineligible in-group). No other out-group descriptor appears more than a handful of times.

While the text of *Join the Caravan* clearly insists on the necessity of hostile action against the out-group, the out-group is mentioned far less frequently than the in-group. There are 54 references to the “enemy” or “disbelievers” in the text, along with 4 to Communists, 3 to Russians. This compares to 79 references to Muslims, 72 to Islam(ic), 27 to *Ummah*, 18 to *mujahideen*, and 9 to believers.

### **5.3. Crisis and Solution Constructs**

The typical extremist crisis narrative proposes that an out-group is responsible for events that negatively affect the in-group. Extremists then propose a solution to the crisis that requires hostile action against the out-group. But *Join the Caravan* outlines *two* crises. The first is an external crisis consistent with the extremist system of meaning (Ingram, 2016; Berger, 2018), while the second is an internal crisis, which is defined primarily as the eligible in-group’s failure to adhere to in-group prototypes.

The external crisis *reveals* but does not *cause* the internal crisis. It exposes the eligible in-group’s existing deficiencies and its misalignment with the in-group prototype. The internal crisis may be a critical factor in shifting an ideology toward extremism, because it can persist even after the proximate external crisis is resolved, making the need for hostile action against the out-group less remediable.

Here, Azzam argues that the eligible in-group (the *Ummah*) is experiencing a crisis of authenticity and legitimacy attributable to its own shortcomings, which are reflected in the general failure to participate in jihad. The eventual expulsion of the Communists from Afghanistan (which occurred after the writing of the first edition of *Join the Caravan*) would not necessarily resolve the internal crisis described by Azzam. The internal crisis is thus portable and can be transplanted, largely intact, into a new external crisis scenario. Azzam’s ideological successors—including al Qaeda and the Islamic State—did just that, furthering Azzam’s arguments about the *Ummah*’s internal crisis and extending them to new conflicts. Azzam almost certainly intended his ideology to survive the war in Afghanistan, although he probably didn’t foresee the entire subsequent trajectory of the movement.

### **5.3.1. External crisis and hostile action against the out-group**

The external crisis is relatively simple in its outline—the “invasion” of Afghanistan, a “Muslim land,” by the Communists of the Soviet Union. In the terminology of the extremist framework, an enemy out-group has militarily “occupied” a Muslim nation and “oppressed” members of the Muslim in-group in their own land. Therefore the out-group must be fought by force of arms.

With reference to Afghanistan specifically, the out-group “occupies” in-group territory, inflicting “tyranny” and “oppressing” the Afghan (Muslim) people. While the occupation is the *prima facie* reason for the writing of *Join the Caravan*, detailed descriptions of the invasion or occupation are almost entirely absent from the text. Azzam vaguely claims that in-group women are being raped, and in-group children are being orphaned and/or taken from their homes for “indoctrination” into “heresy.” However, he cites only one specific incident of mass rape and one incident of child abduction.

While lacking in particulars, Azzam’s description of the external crisis is nevertheless stark and evocative. Nine years into the conflict, “not a single house remains in Afghanistan that has not been transformed into a funeral home or an orphanage,” he writes. The Muslims of Afghanistan have fought the good fight, with the evidence seen in “skulls, cripples, souls and blood.”

More frequently, and at greater length, Azzam metaphorizes the Russian occupation by discussing enemies mentioned in religious and Islamic historical citations. Some of these references are to specific historical events, although Azzam generalizes them to sketch an outline of a generic enemy that must be “repelled” lest it “dominate” Muslim land. The “occupying enemy” is said to be “spoiling” the religion of Islam as well as the wider world. Contemporary and historical narratives are thoroughly blended, resulting in a merging of the contemporary out-group and an archetypical enemy acting over an indeterminate time frame with apparent expiration date before the “Day of Judgment.”



### 5.3.2. Internal crisis and in-group enhancement

Azzam strongly prioritizes the discussion of an internal in-group crisis over details of the external crisis, arguing that some members of the in-group are failing to meet the obligations of their religion. “In the ears of the Muslims is a silence,” Azzam writes, deaf to “the cries of anguish, the screams of virgins, the wails of orphans and the sighs of old men” that emanate from the Afghans. This is framed as a failure of will and character, rather than a lack of capability. In terms of capability, the *Ummah* is “fertile” and “prolific,” Azzam writes, but it lacks “exemplars” willing to take appropriate action. “The men who know are few, those who act are even fewer,” he writes.

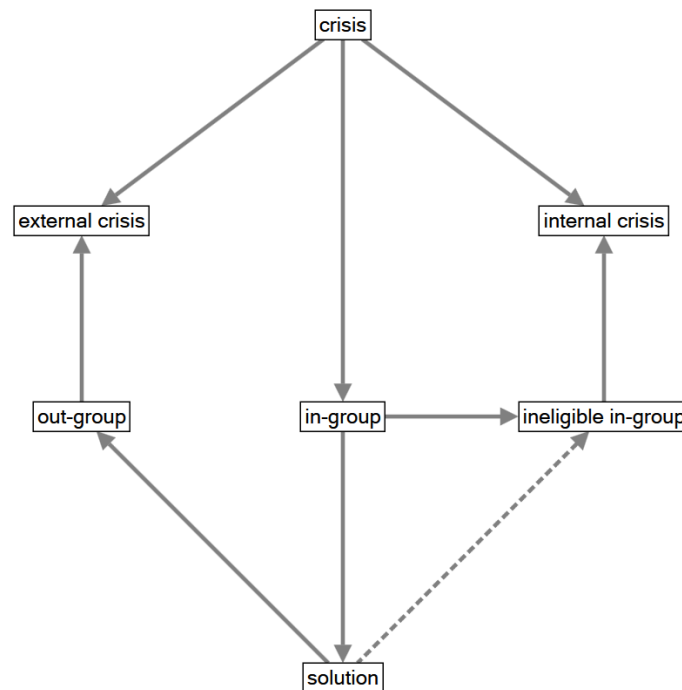
While “new blossoms” (recruits to the ranks of the *mujahideen*) are being “matured” by experience on the “battlefield,” most have not been adequately prepared for the task at hand. Despite having a “good heart” and “healthy character,” the new recruits are limited by “simple thinking” and “shallow knowledge” of Islam and its requirements.

This is a failure of the *Ummah*’s educational system, which “suppresses” correct action and instills a “cold heart,” “slackened determination,” “greed for life,” “hysteria,” and “recklessness.” Therefore, Azzam repeatedly stresses the need not just for fighters but for scholars and teachers who can instruct the youth in proper religious practices. To counter these failings, “mature propagators” are needed. But these have not been seen so far, because Muslims are “not occupying the roles they should.”

Further internalizing the crisis, Azzam writes that jihad should be undertaken not just to harm the out-group, but to improve Muslims’ conformity to the in-group prototype, which, as noted previously, is centered on participation in jihad as a “way of life.” This conformity can be encouraged through religious education for the “simple youth” who come to fight. It also requires an improvement in the character of the propagators of Islam, whose duty it is to “arouse the believers” to participate in jihad.

Scholars who fail to “arouse the believers” are not fulfilling their religious obligations, Azzam writes. Scholars and parents (mothers and fathers) who “forbid” young people from jihad are “miserly” and “afraid,” and God will “render their deeds void.” They are “holding back” and restraining the youth from joining jihad.

Emphasizing this importance of this point, Azzam writes that the in-group is under “subjugation,” but that in-group members have been made into made slaves by their own “submissiveness” rather than “military defeat,” assigning primary responsibility for the Muslims’ plight to in-group deficiency rather than the out-group aggression.



*Figure 2: The extremist system of meaning in Join the Caravan, including internal and external crisis factors.*

### 5.3.3. Solutions

For both the internal and external crises, Azzam will allow for only one possible solution—jihad, or fighting. Any other action (fund-raising, education, etc.) only offers value insofar as it enables and supports fighting, and these support functions are explicitly ranked as secondary to fighting.

Azzam insists that the term jihad in Muslim scriptures refers only to fighting, and specifically “combat with weapons.” Fighting is “fierce,” “decisive,” “severe,” “prolonged,” “blessed,” and “cleansing,” and it is the “only” path for a Muslim to achieve “glory.” Only fighting will cow the disbelievers, Azzam writes. If fighting stops, the

disbelievers will “dominate” the believers. Jihad is the “peak” or “zenith” of Islam and Islamic practice. It brings “certainty” to those who participate.

Jihad is “arduous,” Azzam writes, and those participating should expect “difficulties” and “adversities.” They must have “determination” and a “fortified” heart.

A prerequisite to jihad is *hijrah* or “emigration,” meaning that members of the eligible in-group must travel to the battlefield. Once a male Muslim has taken up position on the front lines (*ribat*), he is ready to protect other members of the eligible in-group. Actual combat proceeds organically; members of the extremist in-group are always considered to be participating in fighting by taking up position, which does not mean they will necessarily be constantly engaged in combat. But they are expected to take part in violent fighting that occurs as a natural result of their position.

Azzam argues that Afghanistan lacks the resources and fighting force necessary to stand up against its much more powerful foe, the Communists of the Soviet Union, and therefore, non-Afghan members of the Muslim in-group are obligated to mobilize for the country’s defense. The obligation to participate is therefore universal, Azzam argues, based on a Quranic injunction to “go forth light and heavy” (i.e., whether from a position of strength or weakness) and to “strive with your selves and your wealth.” The obligation falls on every individual (*fard ‘ayn*) who is part of in the in-group.

But if [the Muslims in an occupied land] sit back, or are incapable, lazy, or insufficient in number, the individual obligation (*fard al ayn*) spreads to those around them. Then if they also fall short or sit back, it goes to those around them; and so on and so on, until the individually obligatory (*fard al ayn*) nature of jihad encompasses the whole world. At that time, nobody can abandon it, just like salah and fasting[.]

Although Azzam reviews general issues affecting the disposition of the *Ummah*, *Join the Caravan* is centered on Afghanistan as a specific, inarguable case where a hostile or violent solution is called for. This might situate the text as non-extremist (discussed further below) since the conflict is clearly linked to a specific provocation, but Azzam fails to outline any conditions under which the conflict may end. Quite the opposite—instead of arguing that jihad must continue until the Communists have been expelled

from Afghanistan, Azzam states unequivocally that jihad must be waged “in order that the Disbelievers do not dominate.” In the same breath, he writes that “if the fighting stops, the Disbelievers dominate.” In other words, the only condition necessary for disbelievers to dominate is the failure of Muslims to fight. Thus, hostile action against the out-group is deemed inseparable from the health and success of the in-group.

The middle section of *Join the Caravan* is titled “Reasons for Jihad,” and it lives up to its name. Azzam provides 16 bullet point arguments for why fighting is obligatory, but they are redundant and can be boiled down to just three:

1. “Protection” of the in-group against out-group aggression
2. Divine mandate, which includes
  - a. Afterlife rewards for participation
  - b. Afterlife punishment for non-participation
3. In-group enhancement

#### **5.3.3.1. Protecting the in-group**

The first argument, protecting the in-group, is elaborated at some length. Jihad is necessary to prevent the “destruction” of “places of worship” and ensure their “security.” Citing the Quran, Azzam suggests these places of worship are considered to include non-Muslim institutions used by People of the Book (primarily Christians and Jews),<sup>206</sup> including “cloisters, churches, synagogues and mosques” (a view not shared by many of his jihadist successors).

The obligation to jihad is, in part, driven by the plight of the “weak” and “oppressed” members of the eligible in-group, especially women, who are described as being “abused” by the enemy, which compromises their “honor.” Azzam leans heavily on the rape of in-group women by out-group males, describing “thousands of women being raped in their homes” and drowning themselves to escape “Red Army rapists.”

Although Azzam was famously associated with the word “defense” in his second-most famous work, *Defense of Muslim Lands*, he employs variations on the word defense only 5 times in *Join the Caravan*, compared to 17 uses of the word “protect.” The distinction

between defend and protect may seem negligible on first consideration, and the words are commonly treated as synonymous. But there are subtle and meaningful differences. The primary definition of defense is “to drive [away] danger or attack,”<sup>207</sup> compared to protect, which is primarily defined as “to cover or shield.”<sup>208</sup> Thus, defense generally refers to actions taken in response to specific provocation. In contrast, protection is proactive and can be undertaken in response to the mere threat, fear or suspicion of provocation at any point in the future—and this is the context in which Azzam discusses the obligations of the in-group.

### **5.3.3.2. Divine mandate**

A significant part of Azzam’s argument for jihad is simply that God demands it. This concept is not always explicit in the text, and when it does appear, it’s often paired with other arguments, but it is an inescapable element of Azzam’s case for jihad.

Jihad is “a collective act of worship,” Azzam writes, and the “most excellent form of worship” as well. Fighting “in the path of Allah” is said to be “the highest peak of Islam,” and Azzam quotes *haditha* (Islamic scriptures whose authenticity may be contested) to present variations on this argument, such as:

"Nothing matches encountering the enemy, and face-to-face combat is the most excellent of deeds. Those who fight the enemy are the ones who protect Islam and its holy places, and what deed could be superior to that? ... {*Al-Mughni* 8/348-349}

God’s expectations run through *Join the Caravan* like a current, underwriting most of the arguments presented by Azzam. But God does not stop with the passive communication of his expectations. According to Azzam, God incentivizes jihad by *rewarding* those who participate and *punishing* those who do not.

### **Divine rewards**

Those who participate in the extremist in-group by waging jihad are promised a “high station in Paradise,” with the most elevated status accorded to those who die in battle. Jihad, battle, fighting and “striving” in the “Path of Allah” will be rewarded by God over

all other activities, according to Azzam and his favored scriptural sources. Participating Muslims will “reach the highest of ranks.” Azzam portrays these rewards as certain outcomes for those who make the ultimate sacrifice and take part in fighting.

Fighters will receive “blessings” and “rewards,” which are largely unspecified, but which do famously include the provision of 72 wives (“beautiful *houris*”). Other benefits are described more vaguely as luxuries (the “highest part” or “best part” of “Paradise”) and honors (“high station,” a “crown of dignity”), as well as special privileges of intercession with God on behalf of still-living family members. Azzam also makes two brief references to war “booty” as a secular, temporal reward for participation in jihad, but he explicitly deprioritizes this relative to character development and afterlife perquisites.

### **Divine punishment**

While jihad receives the greatest afterlife rewards, failure to participate in jihad receives commensurate punishment both in this world and the “Hereafter.” Again, these punishments are detailed using scriptural citations:

“Unless you go forth, He will punish you with a severe retribution, and will replace you with another people” {*Qur'an* 9:39}

Then, the abode of those people shall be Hell - how evil a destination!  
{[excerpted from] *Qur'an* 4:97-99}

“The severe punishment in this world is through the occupation of the enemy, and in the Hereafter by fire.” {*Tafseer Al-Qurtubi* 8/142}

Azzam stresses that except in the case of clearly delineated exceptions (women, children, the severely disabled and the extremely elderly), anyone who fails to participate in jihad for any reason is subject to the most extreme punishment in the Hereafter, even if they think they are not able.

Weakness is not an excuse before the Lord of the Worlds. In fact, it is a crime making the one committing it deserving of Hell.

In addition to punishing “those who sit back,” Azzam warns that merely associating with Muslims who abandon or neglect to fight makes in-group members “liable to punishment for not having helped” the negligent ones find “righteousness and piety.”

### **5.3.3.3. In-group Enhancement**

One of Azzam’s most-developed arguments for participation in fighting is that it enhances the quality of the eligible in-group, bringing members of the group into alignment with the in-group prototype, improving their character by “cleansing” them of saturation in “worldly matters” and “purifying” their souls.

The eligible in-group (*Ummah*) is described as suffering “disgrace” and “decadence” for its failure to properly follow the religion (by participating in jihad), in addition to a “loss of dignity” that is both self-imposed and externally imposed by a “conspiracy” of the “Disbelievers.” The solution to all of these problems is participation in jihad, which unleashes the “hidden capabilities” of the *Ummah* and the “good” buried within it.

Although the out-group is unambiguously depicted as villainous, the eligible in-group’s greatest wounds are self-inflicted—caused by “love of the world” and “fear of death.” These impediments to the *Ummah*’s health and “dignity” prevent eligible in-group members from joining the extremist in-group in waging jihad.

In addition to its character-building benefits for participants, jihad/fighting also benefits the collective in-group, the Muslim *Ummah*. Ultimately, jihad is said to be necessary to ensure the “prosperity” of the *Ummah*.

A religion, which does not have Jihad, cannot become established in any land, nor can it strengthen its frame. [...]

The Islamic movement will not be able to establish the Islamic community except through a common, people's Jihad which has the Islamic movement as its beating heart and deliberating mind.

Azzam stipulates that the *Ummah* must be established on a defined area of land in order to survive and be healthy and successful. Furthermore, the lands of the Muslims are part of a conceptual unity (“like a single land”) even when geographically separated, making

the perceived occupation of any portion of Muslim land inimical to the health of the global in-group.

The metaphor of the *Ummah* as a body and its enemies as a disease is a rhetorical technique called “biologization,” which is often tied to violence. Biologization is discussed further in section 8.7.

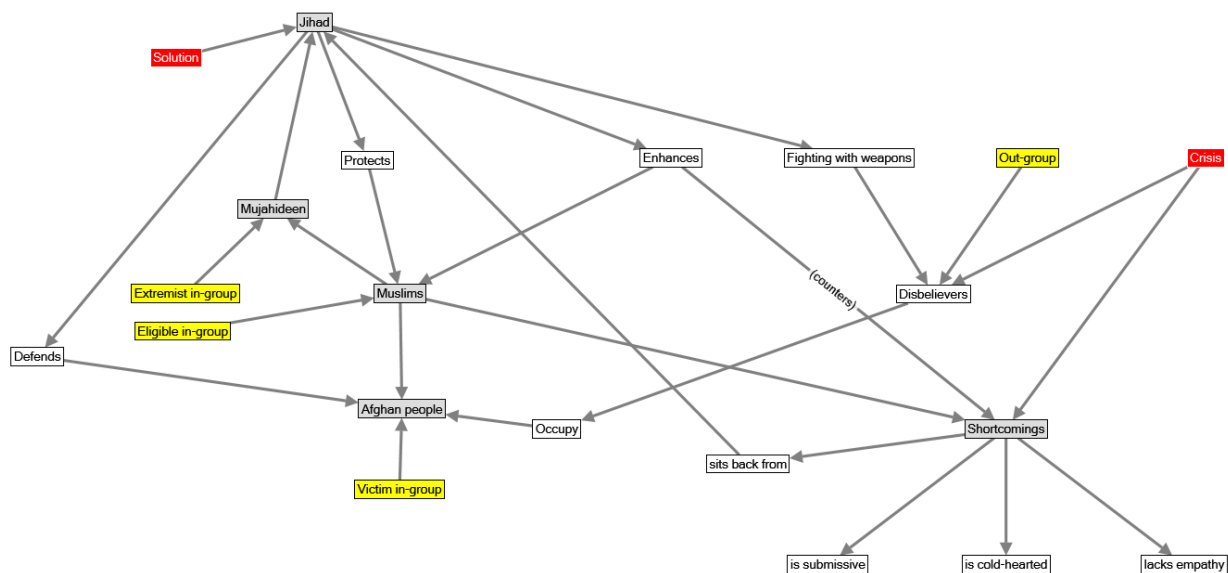


Figure 3: Extremist system of meaning components in Join the Caravan.

*Join the Caravan* was written in response to the Russian (Soviet) invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and is part of a broader argument for self-defense of the in-group against aggression. This has occasionally led to some consideration of whether



Azzam's ideology can be fairly equated with those of the movements that followed him and that continue to cite him as a key influence,<sup>209</sup> such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

In the widest context of his words and actions, Azzam surely meets the definition of extremism used in this dissertation. But the content of Azzam's wider oeuvre is outside the scope of this chapter. Here, the question is whether the bare text of *Join the Caravan* outlines an extremist ideology, and if so, why and how.

The extremism of *Join the Caravan* hinges on the question of whether the need for hostile action against an out-group ceases with the end of the specific occupation in question—Afghanistan. The devil's-advocate argument against classifying *Join the Caravan* as extremist is twofold. First, Azzam describes a motivation that is defensive, at least in part. Second, he describes a hostile solution that is obligatory, but the obligation is sometimes interpreted as predicated on aggression from an out-group.

If an ideology holds that hostile action can be terminated based on a conditional resolution of a specific, solvable crisis short of removing or eliminating the out-group, it may not be classifiable as extremist (although it may still be violent or otherwise problematic). Several passages in *Join the Caravan* seem to mitigate the unconditional requirement for participation in jihad, stipulating that the obligation continues:

- “until the last piece of Islamic land is freed from the hands of the Disbelievers”;
- “until the lands are purified from the pollution of the Disbelievers”;
- “until the inhabitants of the area have managed to repel the enemy”.

The use of the word “until” in these passages suggests the requirement for hostile action (fighting) could be understood as conditional. The expulsion of occupying out-groups from Muslim lands would, in theory, put an end to the external crisis, terminating the obligation to take hostile action (fighting) against the out-groups, voiding the extremist imperative, and removing Azzam's movement from the extremist category.

But—obviously—the movement started by Azzam did not end with the expulsion of the Soviets from Afghanistan in 1989. While Azzam, who died the same year, cannot bear

sole responsibility for how his words were interpreted in the years that followed, *Join the Caravan* is filled with intentional language choices, injunctions and justifications that clearly rule out a conditional cessation of hostilities against the out-group. Azzam's argument that jihad is unconditional takes two forms. First, it is justified through scriptural citations. Second, it is justified as a remedy to the eligible in-group's internal crisis, which does not necessarily resolve when the external crisis ceases.

The scriptural argument, described to some extent in previous sections of this chapter, holds that jihad can never be forsaken, due to its status as an essential identity marker, equal in importance to the pillars of Islam. Jihad is a lifelong obligation, which cannot be discharged by a temporary stint among the *mujahideen*. Ultimately, jihad is not about defending the in-group (waring off an attack) but protecting it (shielding it from any potential threat). A war of self-defense ends when the threat is neutralized. But the obligation to protect is ongoing, with no expiration date. Thus, Azzam writes and cites:

"And fight them until there is no *Fitnah*, and the way of life prescribed by Allah is established in its entirety. But even if they desist, Allah sees what they do." {Qur'an 8:39} [...]

So, if the fighting stops, the Disbelievers dominate, and the *Fitnah*, which is shirk, spreads.

Azzam cites scripture to insist that fighting must continue until there is no *fitnah* (Arabic for strife\*). But if the fighting stops, the *fitnah* spreads. Azzam does not allow for an end state in which *fitnah* has been eliminated; it can only be contained by fighting.

The argument would be extended by later jihadi ideologues such as Yusuf al-Uyayri, a veteran of the jihad against the Soviets, who wrote that jihad must continue until the "Day of Judgment." Uyayri (as translated by Amercian jihadist ideologue Anwar Awlaki) is even more explicit than Azzam about the circular nature of the argument, decoupling jihad from any outcome or even the notion of victory:<sup>210</sup>

Victory is not what we are accountable for; we are accountable for whether or not we are doing what Allah commands us to do. We fight

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\* Typically, *fitnah* is used in jihadi discourse to refer to internal fighting among Muslims, but in the glossary of *Join the Caravan* it is defined simply as "strife" or "anything that might lead to sin."

Jihad because it is *fard* (Arabic for obligatory) on us; we are not fighting to win or lose<sup>211</sup>

Returning to Azzam, we find *Join the Caravan* stipulates that no solution other than fighting is acceptable to meet the in-group obligation. Dismissing more normative understandings of jihad as encompassing multiple modes of striving or struggle, Azzam insists that any scriptural reference to the term jihad is a reference to fighting (“combat with weapons”), as is any scriptural reference to activity “in the Path of Allah” (*fi sabilillah* in Arabic). Azzam dismisses alternative interpretations of the word jihad, attributing them to inauthentic *haditha*. Thus, even those who support jihad with financial donations or other material assistance are not excused from direct participation in fighting. Participation may neither be deferred nor delayed, Azzam writes, citing *haditha* that state delay invites “destruction” and “loss.”

Beyond the simple invocation of divine mandate lies a more complex layer of argumentation, in which participation and support of jihad are understood to address and correct the internal crisis that Azzam has described at length. The internal crisis has several dimensions, including:

- Lack of empathy for suffering in-group members
- “Simple thinking” and “lack of education” about Islam
- Lack of “wise,” “mature leadership” within the *Ummah*
- Fear of death
- Lack of will or “determination,” attitude of “submissiveness.”

Some of these arguments are again circular. For instance, jihad is a remedy to the lack of mature leadership, because mature leadership is defined as supportive of jihad.

Similarly, fear of death and lack of will are contextualized here only as obstacles to participation in fighting, rather than being discussed as shortcomings in themselves. The more substantive elements of the argument pertain to education and empathy.

On the education front, Azzam’s critique is emphatic but largely non-specific. For the broader eligible in-group, the chief problem is failure to teach the “necessity” of jihad. This is not, however, the full extent of his critique, as he complains strongly about the

education levels of the young men who have joined him in Afghanistan. These recruits are aware of their obligation to fight, but they are lacking in many other respects, such as being unable to recite the Quran or perform proper prayers for the dead.

On the whole, Azzam's comments on the quality of education about Islam within the *Ummah* is likely designed (intentionally or not) as a method to encourage *engulfment*, a response to ontological insecurity discussed in Chapter 2. Through engulfment, one's individual identity becomes subsumed to that of the group. In an extremist movement, over-identification with the in-group, ordinarily pathological, is considered a virtue.

Similarly, Azzam's discussion of the need for empathy is reserved for in-group members only, symptomatic of both engulfment and its complementary dynamic, *depersonalization* (also discussed in Chapter 2), in which an individual classifies other individuals as less human than oneself. Paired with engulfment, depersonalization creates a mindset in which the welfare of in-group members powerfully outweighs any consideration of out-group members.

Empathy serves a dual purpose in the text, both as a goad to action against the out-group and a boost to feelings of in-group identification, thus forming the basis of an emotionally compelling recruitment appeal, with the emotionally charged suffering of victim in-group members presented in stark contrast to the in-group's cold indifference.

The previously cited comparison of the *Ummah* to a human body is especially effective at making this point, and variations on this unifying metaphor appear in other jihadist works. Azzam's Al Kifah Center, for instance, printed t-shirts that read "A Muslim to a Muslim is a Brick Wall,"<sup>212</sup> a slightly clumsy reference to a hadith stating that Muslims are united and self-supporting like bricks in a wall.<sup>213</sup>

The in-group failures that comprise the internal crisis—lack of empathy, lack of education, lack of maturity, fear of death, lack of will and submissive attitude—are exacerbated and revealed by the external crisis (out-group aggression), but they are not caused by the out-group. Therefore the internal crisis is prone to continue after the external crisis has been resolved. While *Join the Caravan* offers some mitigating

language, the balance of the text clearly situates jihad as inseparable from the health of the in-group, rather than being contingent on the withdrawal of Communist forces.

Taken as a whole, *Join the Caravan* formulates a system of meaning that meets the criteria for extremism, and more crucially, lays the groundwork for future escalation of extremist belief. While the text mitigates (or less generously, obfuscates) the extremist system of meaning with a few hypothetical conditions under which hostile action against out-groups might cease, it undermines those conditions extensively with other arguments that situate fighting as an activity that takes place in perpetuity.

## 5.5. Consensus and Certainty

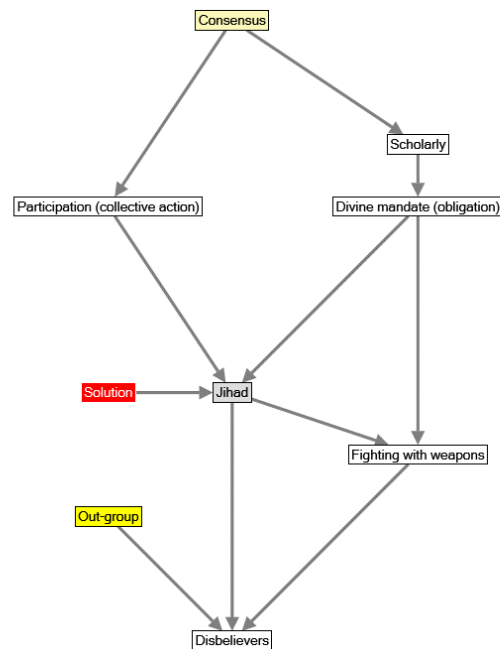


Figure 4: Consensus in *Join the Caravan*. Azzam cites a scholarly and historical consensus to support fighting because he does not have access to wide support in the eligible in-group.

As part of the internal crisis, Azzam describes an eligible in-group consensus that is at best indifferent to jihad and at worst actively opposed. While the *Ummah* is “fertile,” too many Muslims have chosen to sit back, due to a lack of “leadership.” To bolster his call for participation in the Afghan jihad, Azzam repeatedly invokes a *competing* consensus of religious authorities with respect to the obligatory nature of fighting. This is intended to help eligible in-group members “escape the cage” of “communal practice”

accumulated over “defeated generations.” The authorities Azzam cites are typically historical in nature.

There is agreement among *mufassirin*, *muhaddithin*, jurists and scholars of *usul* (religious principles) that when the enemy enters an Islamic land or a land that was once part of the Islamic lands, it is obligatory on the inhabitants of that place to go forth to face the enemy.

According to our modest experience and knowledge, we believe that jihad in the present situation in Afghanistan is individually obligatory (*fard ‘ayn*), with one's self and wealth as has been confirmed by the jurists of the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence, without any exception. Along with them, the same opinion has been given by the majority of exegetes (*mufassirin*), hadith-scholars and scholars of religious principles (*usul*).

According to Azzam, a majority of scholars and jurists are in agreement that jihad is obligatory. This scholarly consensus, repeatedly invoked, is explicitly placed ahead of the traditional and more immediate social consensus of the eligible in-group, specifically including parents, whose permission to join the fighting is not necessary and need not be sought. Similarly, scriptural (*haditha*) accounts attesting to the importance of jihad to the “companions” of the Prophet are said to be “ample,” “plain,” “clear,” “decisive,” and “reliable.” Consensus is especially important with regard to *haditha*, which are non-canonical Islamic scriptures whose authenticity is rated by scholarly consensus. Obviously, Azzam’s assessment of that consensus is not universally shared and should not be trusted.

Variants on the word “agree” appear 10 times in *Join the Caravan*, all of which pertain to a body of “scholars” who validate Azzam’s view on the obligatory nature of jihad. The text includes specific citations from the Quran (whose authenticity is understood to be unimpeachable) and from the *haditha*, whose authenticity is averred by Azzam. He also makes much vaguer claims of scholarly support (“by the agreement of the scholars” and “The Islamic jurists are in consensus”). For Azzam’s appeal to succeed, the scholarly consensus must override the eligible in-group consensus.

Azzam also describes the nature of his preferred consensus in terms strongly associated with certainty. Words associated with certainty appeared in the text at an elevated level

compared to a neutral English corpus (36.6 percent higher).<sup>214</sup> In Azzam's telling, all of the major scholars agree about the obligatory and necessary nature of jihad "without any exception," and a majority of lesser scholars are also in accord. The consensus is "explicit" and "definite," leaving "no room for interpretation, ambiguity or uncertainty." The necessity of jihad is a "certainty," a "necessity" and a "clear truth," known "surely," "assuredly," "undoubtedly" and "unquestionably."

The notion of jihad as a collective activity, fueled by consensus, is also reflected in Azzam's repeated use of the word "participate," which appears 9 times in the text, in contexts exclusively associated with fighting or jihad. Participation requires an object, which in the word's most common usage includes an element of "association with others."<sup>215</sup> In Azzam's description, jihad is a distinctly "participatory" activity, by definition undertaken in association with other members of the in-group. This is reinforced by the discussion of individual (*fard 'ayn*) and collective (*fard kifayah*) obligations, designations whose implications are counterintuitive to their descriptions.

Although the broader Islamic debate over these elements is complex, in *Join the Caravan*, the idea of communal obligation is simplified. *Fard kifayah* suggests that a communal response relieves individuals of an obligation to act, unless directed to do so by a legitimate in-group authority. A *fard kifayah* obligation may be "discharged by some people [emphasis added]," which then lifts the sin of failure off the entire community. In contrast, when an obligation is ruled *fard 'ayn*, or individual, every member of the community must participate in meeting the obligation. In other words, *fard 'ayn* requires total compliance from the entire community, a 100 percent consensus that would, if effected, greatly increase the in-group's homogeneity, and thus its *entitativity*, which in turn reduces uncertainty (Chapter 2).

At the same time, however, generalization and vagueness in the definition of certain elements of the extremist system of meaning may contribute to the radicalization of a movement, unmooring it from specific political or social circumstances and rendering its conflict unamenable to resolution through conventional means.

This insight goes against the grain of the popular perception of extremism as primarily characterized by rigidity or inflexibility of thought (Chapter 3). Like most things,

extremism has both yang (firm) and yin (flexible) qualities. Almost everything about an extremist movement may be flexible over time, but in the snapshot provided by a specific ideological text, it is useful to examine which qualities are specified and which are generalized.

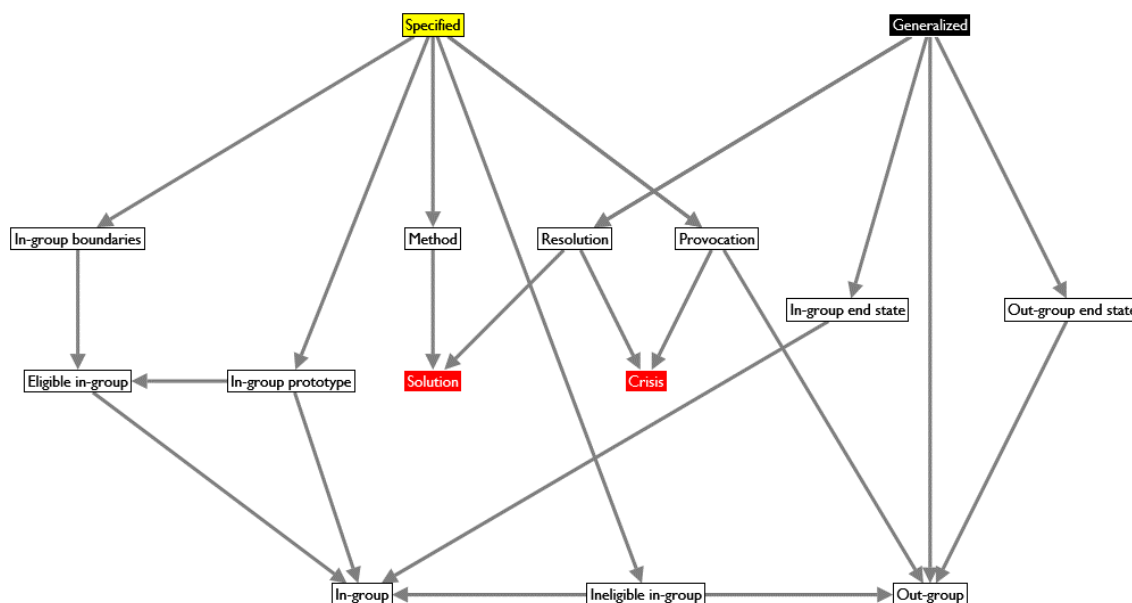


Figure 5: Specificity in *Join the Caravan*. Azzam is vague about conditions for ending the conflict, including its ultimate goals, but very specific about the type of action required.

Any given extremist movement is likely to feature different levels of specificity around various ideological elements. For instance, Nazis promulgate a fairly specific resolution and end-state to their crisis narrative (the extermination of the out-group), relative to Azzam's extremely vague end-states of victory, dignity and afterlife reward. This raises the question of whether specificity correlates to other qualities in the life cycle of an extremist movement.

Within the global jihadist movement, for examples, Azzam's undefined end-states give way to al Qaeda's more clearly defined but still idealized notion of a global caliphate, which then evolves even further, into a concrete and imminent manifestation of the caliphate under the Islamic State. In the global jihadist movement, this increase in specificity also appears to correlate with increased *radicalization*—defined in this dissertation as the adoption of increasingly negative attitudes about out-groups and the endorsement of increasingly hostile actions to solve the extremist crisis.



Thus, Azzam's formulation of a war with terrorist overtones evolved into a campaign of terrorism under al Qaeda, where early attention to targeting and tactics slowly eroded into looser rules of engagement. Both specificity and radicalization leapt forward as elements of al Qaeda broke away to form Islamic State, with its full-throated endorsement of total war, grisly spectacle violence, unrestricted terrorism, the enslavement of certain out-groups and, in some cases, genocidal slaughter.

Increases in both specificity and radicalization may contribute to extremism's hypothesized function in reducing uncertainty, with more-radicalized movements offering greater clarity about group boundaries, methods and outcomes. However, any ideological movement will naturally accrue detail over time, and further study will be necessary to disentangle whether and how specificity and elaboration may contribute to radicalization.

But despite these changes in the global jihadist movement, Azzam's works continue to resonate, suggesting that less specific ideological texts may be more enduring, allowing successor movements to elaborate on details within loose boundaries. For instance, al Qaeda and Islamic State ideological texts may theorize around out-groups and end-states without negating Azzam's contributions, so long as their proposed end-states stay within the very broadly sketched contours established by their predecessor. More-radicalized movements may be seen as exploiting and elaborating on generalized content, rather than eschewing it entirely.

## **5.6. Conclusion**

*Join the Caravan* is an ideological treatise intended to recruit members of the eligible in-group (Muslims) to take hostile action (fight) against an out-group (the Communist occupiers in Afghanistan). However, its discussion of identity focuses heavily on the in-group and spends relatively little time defining the out-group. The perfidy of the out-group is largely implicit and presumed to be understood by the reader, either through mainstream news coverage or the consumption of other works of extremist propaganda.

Instead, Azzam reserves his most incisive analysis and critique for the eligible in-group—the Muslims, or the global *Ummah*. Ultimately, *Join the Caravan* is not so much

a story of out-group aggression as it is a story of in-group failure—a critique of a passive, cold-hearted community that has failed to assist its most vulnerable members. The *Ummah* sits back, and *Join the Caravan* is intended as a corrective, urging in-group members to lean forward.

The focus on the internal crisis and the deliberate generalization of the out-group (almost always “disbelievers” rather than Russians or Communists) leaves the text open to redeployment and reinterpretation in other conflicts that followed the war in Afghanistan. In this way, *Join the Caravan* becomes the foundation of a portable ideology that transcends immediate strategic goals in favor of a continuing, open-ended philosophy of combat as a way of life, the stipulation that fighting an out-group is inseparable from the health or success of the in-group.

This portability was surely intentional on the part of Azzam, a Palestinian. Palestine is mentioned briefly in *Join the Caravan*, but these references lack the clear imperative associated with Afghanistan. In his public statements and other works, Azzam was more explicit. He saw the jihad in Afghanistan as a “means to an end,” a “necessary stage” on the road to jihad in Palestine (Hegghammer, 2020). Afghanistan was an opportunity to “build a movement,” and Azzam’s movement was never meant to stop with the expulsion of the Soviets from Afghanistan.<sup>216</sup>

Because of this intention, *Join the Caravan* leaves thematic openings wide enough to drive a caravan through, and subsequent generations of jihadists have done just that. As a result, Azzam has become a mythological, iconic figure to a worldwide jihadist movement, with an appeal that crosses many more granular ideological boundaries.<sup>217</sup>

Biographer Hegghammer also notes that the universality of Azzam’s work derives in part from his early death in 1989—before the outbreak of ideological infighting over the direction of his beloved jihad movement. Had Azzam lived, he would probably have been forced to take sides in the “vicious” jihadist debates of the 1990s, elaborating and specifying his ideological preferences in more detail. By virtue of his death soon after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, his works have instead remained in a gray zone, allowing his jihadist successors to appropriate them in a variety of ways.<sup>218</sup>

According to Hegghammer, “the content of [Azzam’s] message lent itself to being a common denominator across different groups with different agendas,”<sup>219</sup> a dynamic that this chapter’s analysis illuminates, charting *why* and *how* the message contained in *Join the Caravan* avails itself to successor extremist movements—the focus on internal crisis and the assignment of certain ideological elements with greater or lesser specificity, including deliberately generic language to describe the out-group and an open-ended crisis with no defined prospect of resolution.

## 6. “Siege”

A book-length manuscript comprised of excerpts from a 1980s neo-Nazi newsletter of the same name, *Siege* languished in obscurity for years before being rediscovered by contemporary White supremacists in the 2010s.

Since resurfacing, the text has influenced the formation and violent activities of a large number of neo-Nazi cells sometimes referred to as “Siege Culture” groups. Violent organizations inspired by *Siege* include Atomwaffen Division, The Base and other neo-Nazi groups around the world, including countless online collectives.<sup>220</sup>

While Mason and *Siege* are strongly oriented toward hate for and violence against out-groups, such as Jewish people and people of color, the narrative of the book is strongly—almost overwhelmingly—comprised of harsh criticism for White Americans, including most living leaders and adherents of White supremacist movements in the United States. While policy efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE) often focus on mitigating negative attitudes toward out-groups, these findings suggest that efforts to mitigate attitudes toward the in-group may also have utility in reducing the risk of violence associated with extremist belief.

This chapter will examine the substance of this in-group critique and explore how it shapes *Siege*’s wider system of meaning. Specifically, *Siege* advocates for a strategy known as “accelerationism,” arguing for actions that weaken society with the goal of accelerating its eventual collapse. The stated reason for this strategy is that the movement’s White in-group is hopelessly complacent and complicit in the system controlled by the out-group. Because of these in-group deficiencies, Mason argues that incremental and political solutions are not sufficient to achieve necessary change.

The chapter will conclude with a wider discussion of how in-group critiques offer utility to extremist movements, and how the content of such critiques may shape the extremist tactics and strategies.

## 6.1. History and Context

*Siege* is the work of James Mason, a veteran neo-Nazi who joined the American Nazi Party (ANP) during the 1960s. He later joined the National Socialist Liberation Front (NSLF), an extremist group led Joseph Tommasi, another ANP alumnus, who argued that neo-Nazis should foment “anarchy and chaos” in the process of attacking what he understood to be a Jewish-controlled “power structure” in the United States, talking points that Mason took to heart.<sup>221</sup>

Tommasi was killed by a fellow White nationalist in 1975, and Mason subsequently staged an NSLF revival. Starting in 1980, Mason resumed publication of the NSLF newsletter *Siege*.<sup>222</sup> He broke with the NSLF brand in 1982 to found a new and even more extreme movement, Universal Order, working with imprisoned cult leader Charles Manson. Universal Order was deeply polarizing among neo-Nazis at the time of its introduction, initially to the detriment of Mason’s status in the movement.<sup>223</sup>

Under Mason, the newsletter *Siege* was published from 1980 to 1986 and was subsequently collected as a lightly edited volume in 1993 with additional material added in later years, including appendices. The collected edition of the main text rings in at more than 160,000 words, not counting the later additions.<sup>224</sup>

*Siege* is formatted into small chapters that are individually digestible, but the flow of the overall text is uneven. The book largely lacks a clear narrative trajectory and is written in a casual tone filled with repetition and numerous tangents.

Despite the limitations of the text itself and the controversy around Mason’s embrace of Manson, *Siege* continued to percolate in fringe neo-Nazi and far right circles for several years, leaping to prominence in the 2010s after being posted on internet forums. In 2015, members of the Iron March online forum created the neo-Nazi organization Atomwaffen Division (AWD), which adopted many of Mason’s concepts. The book became required reading for new AWD members,<sup>225</sup> although one iteration of the group subsequently broke with Mason in a public dispute.<sup>226</sup>

*Siege* has also inspired a host of AWD-influenced peers, imitators and splinters, organized along similar lines. These groups are sometimes collectively referred to the “Siege Culture” movement, a phrase coined by Mason and AWD.<sup>227</sup>

Collectively, Siege Culture groups have been the subject of multiple prosecutions, including at least two for murder.<sup>228</sup> At least 14 members of AWD have been arrested on various charges since its founding, including murder, firearms violations and conspiracy with the intent to commit bombings and massacres. Eight members of the American Siege Culture group The Base were arrested in 2020 alone on an assortment of charges. In addition to its reach within the United States, Siege Culture has expanded globally, with the formation of AWD-inspired movements such as Sonnenkrieg Division in the United Kingdom, and the multinational Feuerkrieg Division.<sup>229</sup>

Siege Culture is also endemic in online neo-Nazi circles, including extensive networks of adherents and fans active on Telegram and other social platforms with loose moderation and low public visibility. Siege-oriented Telegram channels often grow to encompass thousands of participants. Networks of channels such as “Terrorgram” discuss Siege in detail and glorify acts of “lone wolf” violence in keeping with the text’s recommendations. Terrorgram and similar channels are purged by Telegram periodically, and thus rarely exceed 10,000 members.<sup>230</sup>

Siege Culture groups vary in their particular beliefs but are generally oriented around *Siege*’s central argument, which states that a total societal collapse and rebirth is necessary to achieve a White nationalist victory. This argument is referred to by analysts as “accelerationism,” a term that does not appear in *Siege* but accurately describes its content. The term has since been adopted by various neo-Nazi and other right-wing extremist groups. Accelerationism stands in contrast to other extremist strategies focused on swaying public opinion or effecting strategic change within or parallel to an existing political system.<sup>231</sup>

## 6.2. Overview of Content

*Siege* is grouped into eight roughly thematic sections, each containing up to dozens of short chapters. Most of the chapters were originally short articles in the *Siege* newsletter. For the collected edition examined here, the source articles have been lightly edited to suggest some degree of book-like continuity.

*Siege* is not written for the general public, but for an audience of committed neo-Nazis. Mason is focused on changing attitudes and strategies within an existing extremist movement, which already subscribes to an out-group crisis narrative. As such, the discussion is heavily focused on in-group activities. *Siege* is best understood as targeting readers who are already deeply radicalized, with the aim of moving them toward violent action.

Mason urges readers who already identify as neo-Nazis or White supremacists to adopt escalating and largely nonstrategic violence that may help accelerate the collapse of America's existing sociopolitical system.

Related to this shift toward greater and more frequent acts of violence, Mason is seen in the text to slowly move away from the National Socialist Liberation Front (NSLF), the organizational brand with which he was associated when he started writing the newsletter.

Inspired by and in communication with mass-murdering cult leader Charles Manson, Mason goes on to form Universal Order, a movement even more focused on extreme violence in the absence of particular strategic goals. Mason's transition from NSLF to Universal Order can be roughly traced in the text of *Siege*.

The broadest identity formulations sketched out in *Siege* are as follows:

- Eligible in-group: The "White race," generally referring to people with White skin and White European ancestry. Mason capitalizes White throughout the text, and this chapter will follow that usage.

- Extremist in-group: “The Movement,” an umbrella term used flexibly to discuss a range of political views from far-right conservatism to White supremacy to National Socialism (Nazism). “Movement” most commonly refers to the more extreme portion of that spectrum.
- Out-group: “The System,” referring to existing social and political structures, including the government. The System’s interests are allied with those of other out-groups, chiefly Jewish and Black people.

The remainder of this section will examine these identity formations in detail.

### **6.2.1. Eligible in-group: The “White Race”**

The word “White” denotes the primary characteristic that defines *Siege*’s eligible in-group, which is understood to be racial in nature. The “White race” is demarcated by “White skin,” but more importantly by “White genes” and “White blood,” concepts explicitly constructed to exclude Jewish people with White skin. In its most basic form, Whiteness therefore encompasses all people with White skin whose ancestry is White European and non-Jewish.

*Siege* associates Whiteness with specific social groupings and dynamics. These qualities contribute to a sense of “entitativity,” or “groupiness,” with the accompanying implication that White people are part of a distinct collective.<sup>232</sup>

*Siege* frequently addresses Whiteness as American, strongly situating it within an American context, but Mason also contextualizes the collectivity of Whiteness in other social and political configurations, with phrases such as White society, (the) White world, White Christian(s), White nation(s) and White power.

Extremist texts often describe the prototypical traits of the eligible in-group, outlining why the in-group is superior to the out-group.<sup>233</sup> *Siege*, perhaps because of its target audience, does not undertake this process of affirmation to any great extent. The text associates the White collective with decency, order and civilization, usually in extremely vague terms.



A recurring theme claims that White culture is “ancient” and “true,” but it must be “rediscovered” or “claimed” because White people are not sufficiently educated about their past. In a typical example, Mason writes:

All of the White nations of the earth– from antiquity to the recent past– possess the most magnificent histories, customs, and traditions of their own equal to the best that Germany has. All branches of the White Race have great cause to be proud of their own heritage... so long as that great heritage is made known to them.<sup>234</sup>

While Mason asserts that the collective nature of Whiteness is vitally important, he says it has been compromised by countervailing tendencies:

The White Man's greatest strength in the past has been his genius for organization. His greatest weakness has always been his tendency to contrariness and disunity.<sup>235</sup>

The most important positive trait associated with Whiteness is implicit, rather than explicit. Words associated or co-located with “White” in *Siege* incorporate personhood in ways that words associated with “Black” or “Jew” do not. For instance, the following terms are co-located with White in the text:<sup>236</sup>

- White person/people/population
- White man
- White woman/girl
- White brother and/or sister
- White families
- White children

The co-located terms appear infrequently or not at all in connection with Black or Jewish people, or any other non-White people. Possessive pronouns follow the same tendency—people are almost always “ours” (White) and almost never “theirs” (non-white).

Extremist texts are well-known to employ language that dehumanizes out-groups,<sup>237</sup> but these linguistic associations illustrate the corollary to that rhetorical approach. In *Siege*, members of the in-group are explicitly humanized, while out-group members are not.

### **6.2.2. Extremist in-group: The Movement**

In an extremist worldview, an *extremist in-group* is the organization or movement that takes action to secure the health and success of the eligible in-group.

For many extremist ideologues, the description of the extremist in-group is a celebration of the movement's merits. When the composition of such movements is in flux, or in competition, the tone can be markedly different, and so it is with *Siege*, which was composed as its author was in the process of changing his organizational affiliation.

Mason, a controversial figure even within extremist circles, delivers an extensive critique of multiple extremist organizations and ideologies. As a result, the overarching extremist in-group—described most consistently as “The Movement”—can be seen as a rapidly moving target, distinguished by overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, concerns and interests.

In a chapter titled “What Movement, Whose Movement?,” Mason lays out the complexity of the competing social strains encompassed by the term:

The Nazi Movement? The Klan Movement? State's Rights? Racial Nationalist? German-American? Anti-Communist? Majority Rights? White Christian? White Conservative? For practically every cell of the Hard Right in this country you'll find a separate definition of what the Movement is, as well as what the goal is and the methods for achieving that goal. Not to mention the identity of that "special person" to lead us onto that great destiny. Some of it gets pretty damned ridiculous which is why I stopped where I was in listing Movement "brand names" above. It is never my intent to offend anyone doing the best they can.<sup>238</sup>

The Movement is roughly broken down into the following major groupings, all of whose members are explicitly or implicitly limited to White people:

- The Right-Wing.

- Mason notes that the Movement is, for the most part, a subset of the Right-Wing, which also includes:
  - Anti-Communists
  - Conservatives of various stripes
  - Far-right Christians
- Racialists (Mason's word for White supremacists)
  - The Ku Klux Klan
  - Christian Identity
- National Socialists
  - Historical German Nazis
  - Contemporary American neo-Nazis
- The National Socialist Liberation Front (NSLF, the neo-Nazi organization/movement with which Mason identifies at the beginning of the text)
- Universal Order (the splinter movement founded by Mason during the course of writing *Siege*)

The listing above presents the Movement's components in ascending order of alignment with Mason's ideological project, with each further refinement coming closer to his evolving idea of a prototypical Movement organization.

A critical distinction between the eligible in-group (Whites) and the extremist in-group (the Movement) can be found in action. Mason rarely discusses Whites in action terms, relying primarily on constructions such as "Whites are" or "the White race is." The Movement, in contrast, is often discussed in terms of the actions it takes, or is expected to take, and the actions that members of the Movement are expected to undertake on its behalf. This can be seen in the co-location of Movement (and the associated pronouns, "we" and "us") with active verbs.

Mason discusses the Movement in two primary action frames:

- What the Movement stands for (what it "knows," "believes" and "demands").
- How the Movement falls short of its ideals (how it "fails," "struggles," "splinters," and "wastes" opportunity and resources).

These points are played out over time, in lengthy discussions of what the Movement has been and what it must “become,” although Mason is overwhelmingly focused on the present—what is happening now, and especially what adherents must do now. Imperatives, representing his prescription for the Movement’s health, are strongly focused on building and nurturing:

- “We must *build* confidence within the entire movement...”<sup>239</sup>
- “...these are the only type of people that can ever *make* a true movement...”<sup>240</sup>
- “Can you not find sufficient motivation and discipline to fall in line, to *forge* a movement with which to smash pig power?”<sup>241</sup>

While “building” is a positive action, it carries a clear implication that the Movement has not yet achieved its ideal configuration. And indeed, the Movement’s shortcomings comprise an overwhelming theme in *Siege*, reiterated and emphasized throughout the course of the text. The context and content of Mason’s critique of the Movement will be discussed in much greater detail below.

### **6.2.3. Out-groups: The System**

The primary out-group described in *Siege* is known as “the System” (capitalization in original), which is the most-used word in the text after excluding common parts of speech. Mason construes the System to include virtually any form of authority and any structure of society. It is both Communist and capitalist in nature (the two go “hand-in-hand” according to Mason).

The System, Mason claims, is largely controlled by Jewish people and shaped by Jewish ideology. It serves to advance the interests of non-White people more broadly. However, the System is not monolithic. It includes White collaborators in its ranks and counts Black and leftist “revolutionary” factions among its enemies. (These factions are not, however, allies to the Movement.)

Mason defines the System as follows:

We use the term 'System' in place of the word 'government' because what controls America and the whole West today are not governments, they

are faceless tyrannies, branch offices of a single monstrous SYSTEM. When we speak of the thousands of interchangeable, expendable parts of the alien, inhuman bureaucracy, we speak of the System. From police to welfare bureaucrats, to city, local, state and national appointees and so-called "elected officials"; from prison administration to the Armed Forces; those who either represent the System or who are in the employ of the System ARE in fact the System itself.<sup>242</sup>

Under the broad umbrella of the System, Mason frequently uses the following terms, which he defines as follows:

- The Enemy: Generally, a synonym for the System, but includes non-White people in general, as well as White people who collaborate with the System or engage in interracial relationships. Mason repeats in the text that “the enemy is anyone who attacks.”
- The Establishment: Representing “the economic and social goings-on in the nation and the world today”—essentially meaning any existing social, political or economic power.
- Big Brother: Representing “the Conspiracy,” which is controlled by Jewish people but includes wider elements of the System. It is the concept or source of control and ideology, “the alien worldview which now permeates everything consumed by the public.”

These words, and others, are often combined, creating a fairly consistent pattern, such as “Big Brother System,” “Beast System,” “Jew System” and “Enemy System.”

The System is “rotten,” “filthy,” “evil” and “degenerate,” and a source of “brainwashing,” “compulsory liberal education” and “propaganda” that keeps people passive and subdued. Another key source of the System’s control is “economic,” “capitalism,” or simply “money,” which is associated with Jewishness. (Paradoxically, Jewish elements of the System are condemned for being both capitalist and “Marxist.”) Enemies are “alien,” “intellectualized, computerized, mechanized, de-humanized.”

Action words associated with the System (or the pronouns they/them) contrast sharply with those linked to the Movement, both in the variety of terms, and most notably for

verbs where the System is the object, which reflect the definitional stipulation that extremists must insist on hostile action against an out-group. Readers are repeatedly urged to “fight,” “smash,” “destroy,” “break” and “cripple” the System, and to “kill” its supporters and adherents. These and other violent words lie at the heart of Siege’s extremism. But the System is not the only target of Mason’s ire.

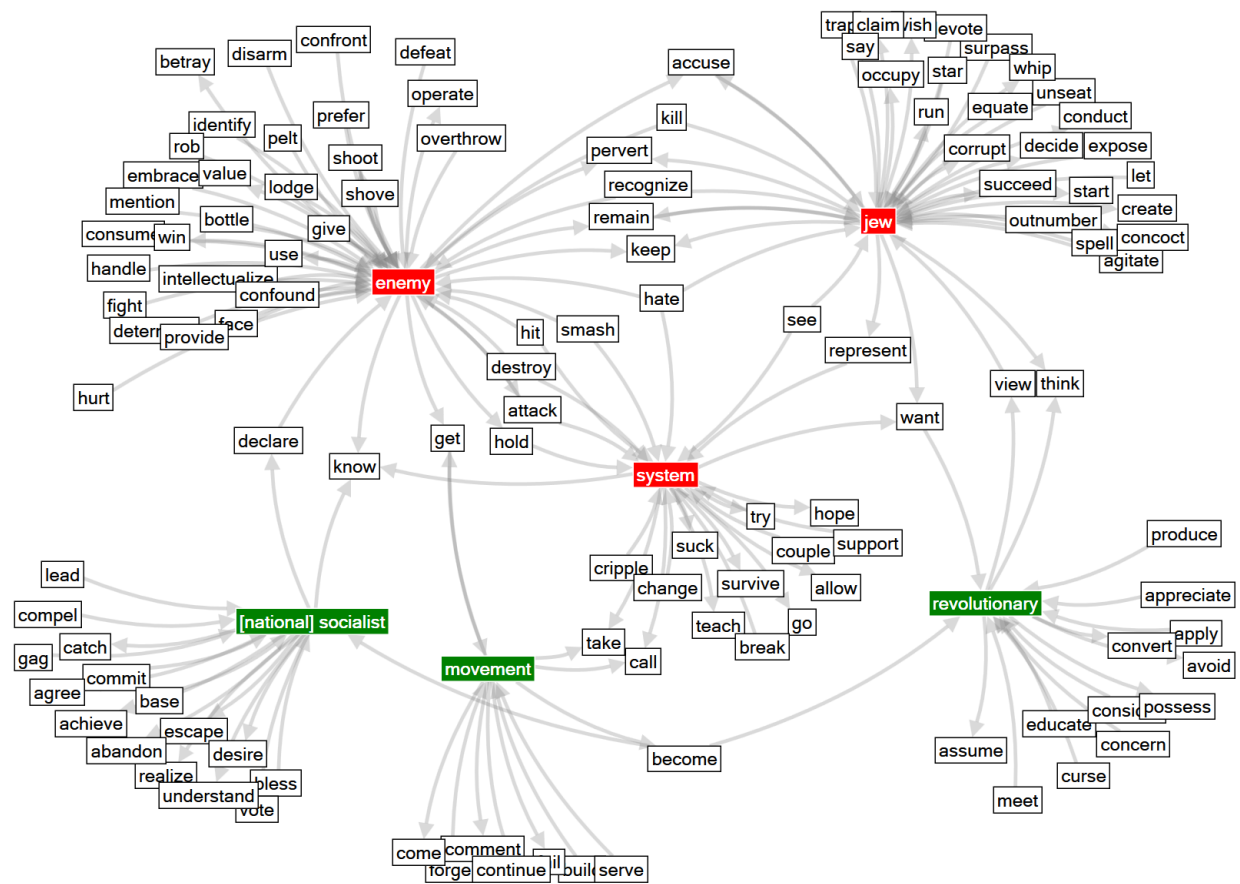


Figure 6: In-group and out-group descriptors in Siege. The “System” out-group is controlled by a Jewish out-group; both of these groups are characterized as the “enemy,” which is described in more kinetic (violent) terms.

### 6.3. In-group Crisis: A Paler Shade of White

Extremism is the belief that an in-group can never be healthy or successful unless it is engaged in hostile action against an out-group, and the extremist orientation of *Siege* is clear from the language it applies to each group, as explored in the preceding sections.

This hostile action is typically justified by a *system of meaning* stipulating that an out-group or -groups is responsible for a crisis that afflicts the in-group.<sup>243</sup> The eligible in-group is understood to be weakened by the crisis, but the crisis may also be exacerbated or even precipitated by the weakness of the eligible in-group.

Mason's ideological argument is intensely concerned with the weakness and broad deficiencies of the in-group. This extremist framing of an *internal crisis* is not unique to *Siege*, as will be discussed in the following section, but it is particularly visible here.

The internal crisis narrative pervades *Siege*, discussed in almost every part of the book, as well as being the primary subject of dedicated sections, including "Conservatism and the Lost Movement" and "Leaders." While Mason's critique of in-groups is sweeping, he continually returns to three overarching themes:

1. Passivity of the (White) eligible in-group
  - a. White people lack the will to fight against the System, having become passive consumers who are content with less than their due.
2. Complicity of the (White) eligible in-group
  - a. White people actively participate in the System, contributing to their own oppression, and mix with or emulate racial out-groups.
3. Inadequacy of the (Movement) extremist in-group
  - a. Leaders of the Movement have adopted a variety of bad strategies and engage in ego-driven conflict with each other.

The remainder of this section will examine each of these critiques in turn.

### **6.3.1. Complacency of the eligible in-group**

While Mason is deeply concerned with advancing the supremacy of the "White race" on principles of genetic superiority, his assessment of White people is deeply negative and pessimistic. According to Mason:

Aryans, or Whites, on the other hand, as we have seen, by and large have abdicated not only their world role but their individual roles as members

of the Great Race, to the point where the Race is now only "great" in so far as its past and potential are concerned.<sup>244</sup>

White people, in Mason's view, bear much of the responsibility for the System's dominance, because they are passive and complacent. Mason criticizes those who are willing to accept "business-as-usual," a phrase that serves as the title of one chapter bemoaning the failure of White people to resist the System, opting instead to "to work their jobs, go home or to the bar, drink and watch television," indulging in what Mason calls "comfort corruption." The problem pervades White society, but is concentrated in the upper and middle classes, which have a stronger interest in the System's success and the maintenance of their comfortable "lifestyles."

This passivity and acceptance of the status quo renders White people "positively incapable of turning a page of history," providing part of the rationale for Mason's accelerationist argument—only a complete collapse of society is enough to shake such White people out of their stupor and force them to change.

In another chapter, Mason argues that White people have had their "character and will" drained by the System's brainwashing, to the point that "there's nothing left of them." While the System is blamed for this brainwashing, Mason takes pains to contrast the general White population with himself and other committed extremists, who have chosen to reject the System's media, propaganda and "total brainwash job." Brainwashing is a malicious activity, but accepting the System's media output is a sign of White people's stupidity, complacency and cowardice.

As these passages indicate, passivity is frequently framed in terms of fear, distraction and/or laziness. The word "coward" appears 19 times in *Siege*, almost always in relation to White people. In another section of the text, Mason writes:

[W]hen given a choice, human nature inevitably takes the course of least resistance. The diabolic nature of the Big Brother System in power today may be largely responsible for breeding a race of docile "consumers" who roll over like a spaniel when kicked and otherwise outraged, but for us that is no reason, no excuse, for revolutionary inaction. It CAN be done!



They say a coward will allow himself to be bullied and backed up as long as there is room left for him to back up. All of White America has been behaving like a damned coward in the face of arrogant Blacks and traitors in government dismantling the once-great United States of America.<sup>245</sup>

But Mason does not truly believe that White people will “come out fighting.” Rather than elevating the eligible in-group, he argues that the Movement must dominate it. In victory, at some point after a future societal collapse, the Movement will exploit the same White passivity that empowered the System:

In the face of the implied threat from the System today they behave like sheep. After witnessing the fire and fury that removes the System, don't expect any problems from them. No consideration is due to cowards and shirkers.<sup>246</sup>

Ultimately, these White mediocrities “have lost all racial pride and identity” and are “alienated from their own people, their own past.” And for the Movement to succeed, many of them must be “removed,” even if doing so means the end of the United States as it is currently constituted.

This level of alienation is serious enough that some White people must be disqualified from the eligible in-group, even though they meet the *prima facie* criteria.

Then there is also dysgenics which means, though a person is nominally “White”, he is so only in color, there is nothing underneath. This is the product of fratricidal wars and total lack of breeding: the creation of a race of boobs.<sup>247</sup>

In some cases, this dissociation with White racial identity goes so far that the White person becomes a “would-be nigger,” Mason writes, who is “more closely related” to Black people than to White people.

Passages like these put a punctuation mark on the social construction of race, even within movements predicated on the belief that race is a non-negotiable biological reality. White supremacists insist it is impossible for non-White people to cross the racial barrier and join the in-group, but almost all of them stipulate that people who

violate racial taboos can have their in-group status revoked. The biological reality of race is irrefutable, until it becomes convenient to refute.

### **6.3.2. Complicity of the eligible in-group**

White people who are passive within the System are to be ignored, at best, and are fated to be dominated by the Movement after its victory. But another class of the eligible in-group must be dealt with more harshly. These are the collaborators, or “race traitors,” whose complicity with the System and its norms requires a reclassification that moves them functionally into an out-group, even if they meet the strictest racial criteria for Whiteness (so-called “pure blood” or “genes”).

There are two major categories of complicit White people:

- Those who collaborate with the System, including working for it in positions of authority
- Those who have sexual relations with non-White people, thus diluting the purity or integrity of White identity.

Collaborators include a wide range of people involved with the System, frequently referred to as “White renegades” or “traitors.” White traitors include people who work in government at any level, from bureaucracy to elected office.

Although the System is Jewish in nature and ideology, “the Beast System is still basically manned and operated by renegade, sold-out Whites,” Mason writes. “What we are fighting has always been, and will always be, *a sickness from within*.”<sup>248</sup>

Mason also expresses a high level of contempt for police and military personnel, referring to them as the System’s “most dangerous and irredeemable reactionaries.” Quoting another Movement figure, he opens one chapter with the sentence, “The only thing lower than niggers and Jews is police that protect them,” an observation Mason characterizes as “profoundly correct.” Informants and White people who collaborate with the police (referred to as “Uncle Toms”) are similarly condemned.

Worst of all are the “race-mixers.” The System and its educational system encourage race-mixing, according to Mason, making America “a cesspool of miscegenation.” Mason attributes this in significant part to the degeneracy of White people who participate in the System, claiming that “[h]ealthy people aren’t susceptible” to race-mixing impulses.

“Real White Americans ... HATE the very sight of race-mixing,” Mason writes. “They HATE those of their own race who are involved in it.” Yet race-mixers are genetically White, Mason concedes, writing, “a lot of the most rabid, sneering miscegenators are blond, blue-eyed doll babies.”<sup>249</sup>

Quoting Hitler, Mason writes that the Movement must “close [its] heart to pity” when dealing with those who break the racial boundaries around sexual conduct. Race-mixers and collaborators are to be killed under the vaguely defined new world order that will arise after the collapse of the System.

According to Mason, “there will be no need for concentration camps of any kind, for not a single transgressor will survive long enough to make it to that kind of haven.”<sup>250</sup>

### **6.3.3. Inadequacy of the extremist in-group**

As discussed further in the following section, extremist texts often contain some degree of critique directed at the eligible in-group. Mason does not stop there, however. *Siege* includes a lengthy and substantiative criticism of The Movement itself, addressing flaws and failures at almost every level of extremist in-group activity.

To some extent, these criticisms can be understood as emanating from Mason’s personality—a mix of egotism and ideological evolution. Mason is convinced that his attitudes and ideas are superior to those held by most living Movement figures, and his commentary on his peers often takes on an air of axe-grinding.

But *Siege* is also the work of an ideologue whose ideology and group affiliation are in the process of changing. Mason begins *Siege* as a committed National Socialist before transitioning to herald the formation of a splinter movement, Universal Order, which is centered primarily on the personality of cult leader Charles Manson.

Mason sees Manson as a more honest and action-oriented leader than those who currently exist within The Movement, comparing him favorably to honored dead Nazi and neo-Nazi icons such as Adolf Hitler, George Lincoln Rockwell and Joseph Tommasi. The extremist in-group critique in *Siege* can arguably be seen as a process of trying to bring the extremist in-group in line with a new set of principles. Universal Order is not well-defined in the text and has not manifested organizationally in the real world, but it follows the Manson model (as understood by Mason) in two respects: First, it prioritizes violence that is relatively indiscriminate, and second, it encourages adherents to “drop out” from the System rather than trying to live a life of accommodation within society.

Mason delivers a scathing, lengthy critique of the Movement and its leadership, including the following major points:

1. The Movement is not unified.
2. The Movement’s leaders are egotistical, petty or otherwise unqualified.
3. Some members of the Movement cannot be trusted, either because they are turncoats or because they seek to profit from true believers.
4. The Movement is unwilling to adopt sufficiently violent tactics.

The first three items overlap significantly. Mason stipulates early in the text that there are “huge ideological and theoretical differences” in the Movement’s many components (for instance, the KKK versus National Socialism). Although these differences are “very slight” compared to their common purpose (White supremacy), some Movement leaders see their role as competing with others in the Movement rather than acting against the System, Mason writes.

In *Siege*, Mason paints a dire portrait of unspecified Movement leaders as “flunkies,” “pretenders,” “cowards,” “overblown losers,” “dabblers,” “idiots,” “fakers,” “two-bit ‘leaders’ [in] flashy uniforms,” and “krinklejammers” (referring to people who adhere to a Nazi ideology but use less inflammatory terms to describe it). Many of these criticisms revolve around “ego-cult[s] built around ... self-styled *Führer[s]*.”<sup>251</sup>

More serious than personal shortcomings, in Mason’s view, is the failure to adopt “armed struggle” as the Movement’s strategic focus. He argues that too many in the

Movement are following a “mass strategy,” trying to build popular support by appealing to large portions of the eligible in-group (White Americans).

As outlined in the preceding sections, Mason considers the eligible in-group beyond redemption. Because of their complacency and complicity, White people can only be rehabilitated after the System has been completely destroyed.

From the outset of *Siege*, Mason’s prescribed solution in the extremist system of meaning is violence, preferably against the System, but almost any violence will do.

The exact contours are fluid depending on context, but Mason generally supports terrorism and so-called “lone wolf” attacks that theoretically weaken the System in advance of a more decisive confrontation at some undefined point in the future. Mason is highly critical of Movement leaders and adherents who do not support armed struggle, at least in principle if not practice.

The worst critics of the Armed Struggle are inside the Movement. If you want to be told how "not to do it", just consult the "Phony *Führers*". For some very good reasons do they fear and reject the concept of the Armed Struggle. It is because you can be a damned, total fool in the Mass Strategy and still live. You cannot be thus in the Armed Struggle. You can be a complete incompetent and an abject failure in the Mass Strategy and yet still live to formulate clever and complicated reasons to hide or justify your failure. You can get away with being a faker and a blowhard within the Mass Strategy and no one can tell you apart from those who may be sincere. You can eke out a "living" as a Mass Strategy mail-order fraud but the Armed Struggle holds no reward unless made a total success. It is therefore a decidedly uninviting climate for the fakers and the kooks.<sup>252</sup>

Mason does not demand that every member of the Movement be continually engaged in violence. But he praises individuals and groups who do take violent action, such as The Order (a White supremacist terrorist cell)<sup>253</sup> and Joseph Paul Franklin, a serial killer who targeted mixed-race couples.<sup>254</sup> Mason criticizes Movement leaders for failing to praise such violent actors, accusing them of timidity and laziness.

I have not read a single word in any Right Wing publication— Nazi or Klan regarding James Vaughn/Joseph Franklin, either for or against. It is as

though he has become a non-person. One could then safely assume the so-called "Movement" has disowned him or wants no part of him. But by "playing it safe" they do not "disown" Vaughn, they in effect RULE THEMSELVES OUT as being worthy of anything except total oblivion.<sup>255</sup>

Finally, Mason addresses the issue of infiltrators, informants and turncoats within the Movement, which is caught between the rock of misplaced trust and the hard place of excessive paranoia. For those who betray the Movement to the System by informing to the authorities or betraying confidences, "death is the proper medicine," Mason writes.

## **6.4. In-groups in crisis**

While this chapter is focused on *Siege* specifically, it's useful to note that in-group critique and crisis narratives are not unique to this text. Some extremist in-groups may capture support from a majority of the eligible in-group, but more frequently, extremist movements find their legitimacy challenged by the very people they claim to represent.

Ideologues can respond to this challenge with a variety of overlapping arguments, for instance by asserting that the purity of the eligible in-group has been corrupted by an out-group, or that members of the eligible in-group are ignorant of relevant facts.

Some antagonistic members of the eligible in-group may be deemed to suffer from deficiencies of character or morality, and these deficiencies may be deemed so severe as to potentially or actually disqualify them from in-group membership altogether.

People who possess the canonical requirements for eligible in-group membership but who oppose or fail to support the extremist in-group can be assigned to an *ineligible in-group*. The ineligible in-group is a liminal category consisting of:

- In-group people who are at risk of being assigned to an out-group due to neglect of the extremist in-group's priorities.
- In-group people who have been provisionally assigned to an out-group, but who may be forgiven and reabsorbed into the in-group under the right conditions.

- People who meet the *prima facie* criteria for in-group membership (i.e., White skin) but have been fully assigned to an out-group for all practical purposes. Nevertheless, they remain distinct from the proper out-group due to their *prima facie* qualifications.

This dynamic is clear in *Siege*, where large swathes of the eligible in-group are dismissed for their complacency. Mason argues that a “mass strategy” designed to win over ordinary White Americans is pointless. They can only be dominated by the extremist in-group, after the System has collapsed and been replaced. While this is purportedly in their best interests, domination is still a form of hostile action, albeit less severe than Mason’s genocidal intentions toward out-groups.

However, Mason also describes a group of White collaborators and race-mixers who are fully equivalent to an out-group, despite meeting the canonical requirements of the in-group (e.g., White skin and White genes). Mason prescribes death as the only possible solution to the crisis these ineligible in-group members create. This solution is arguably harsher than the hostile action prescribed for some out-groups (for instance, Black people, who Mason allows could be permitted to live in autonomous, racially segregated societies).<sup>256</sup>

While *Siege* is exceptionally focused on ineligible in-groups and in-group crises, Mason is not unique in delivering an extensive in-group critique. Many extremist ideological texts contain similar arguments, often delivered in more detail and at greater length than their corresponding critiques of out-groups. A robust in-group critique appears in *Join the Caravan*, discussed in the previous chapter. As in *Siege*, passivity is the chief criticism leveled against the eligible in-group, but Azzam also spares some harsh words for the “rash,” “reckless” and angry who lack focus on the specific mission. *Siege*, in contrast, praises virtually any act of violence that targets the System, even tangentially.

One of the few then-living Movement leaders that Mason seems to respect at all is William Luther Pierce, leader of the neo-Nazi National Alliance, and author of *The Turner Diaries*, a White supremacist dystopian novel that has had an outsized impact on the Movement as Mason defines it.<sup>257</sup>

*The Turner Diaries* was first published shortly before Mason began work on *Siege*, and likely influenced its content. Mason knew Pierce and directly cites *The Turner Diaries* multiple times in *Siege*, extolling its merits.

As in *Siege*, some of Pierce's sharpest criticisms are aimed at White "conservatives" and "right-wingers." The failure of these groups and individuals to act, "due to a combination of cowardice complacency and corruption", is directly blamed for the rise of the dystopian regime that Pierce's protagonists battle.<sup>258</sup>

Pierce's fictional insurgent group, The Organization, takes steps to purge the "fainthearts," "hobbyists" and "talkers." When The Organization launches its rebellion, it does so in the hopes that the right-wingers will support its guerilla war. But those hopes prove to be fruitless. The solution to this internal crisis, proposed by Pierce in the words of the book's narrator, Earl Turner, foreshadows sentiments found in *Siege*:

Of all the segments of the population from which we had hoped to draw new members, the "conservatives" and "right wingers" have been the biggest disappointment. They are the world's worst conspiracy-mongers—and also the world's greatest cowards. [...] Woe betide any whining conservative, "responsible" or otherwise, who gets in the way of our revolution when I am around! I will listen to no more excuses from these self-serving collaborators but will simply reach for my pistol.<sup>259</sup>

The jihadist movement known as Islamic State (IS) is another extremist movement with a strong focus on the ineligible in-group. In fact, the term "ineligible in-group" was first coined by this author in the context of IS propaganda.<sup>260</sup> As an extreme outlier within its eligible in-group of Sunni Muslims, IS must spend significant energy explaining its lack of legitimacy—including widespread criticism and active kinetic (i.e. violent) opposition from the eligible in-group.

At various points, IS has faced existential challenges from the eligible in-group, notably the Sunni Awakening, or *sahwat*, movement, which used military force to oppose its designs (and the designs of its predecessor group) in Iraq at various points in the 2000s and 2010s. IS has devoted extensive propaganda focus to the question of whether and



how participants in the Awakening could be “rehabilitated” into IS. An initial focus on reconciliation soon gave way to stronger condemnation, although IS officials still conceded that *sahwat* members remained part of the eligible in-group, at least if they were willing to recant.<sup>261</sup>

Later, however, this question escalated in importance, as internal ideological conflicts broke out within IS on the question of *takfir*, or excommunication, the formal expulsion of ineligible in-group members from the eligible in-group (the Sunni Muslim *Ummah*). While *takfir* has always featured in IS thought, the more extreme faction of IS argued for a much broader implementation, which would potentially deem most Sunni Muslims to be apostates, formally assigning them to an out-group (*kufir*, or disbelievers).<sup>262</sup> The dispute led to a serious fracture that continues today, weakening and dividing IS during a period when it also faced external setbacks.<sup>263</sup>

## **6.5. Conclusion: The out-group in the in-group**

Extremist movements typically position themselves as the defenders and promoters of an eligible in-group identity, and extremism is defined by a commitment to taking hostile action against an out-group. So why do extremist ideologues sometimes choose to criticize or even attack members of their own in-group?

When extremist movements fail to capture significant support from their eligible in-groups, they may seek to rationalize that failure with a critique of the eligible in-group. This rationalization can take many forms. For instance, extremists may argue that eligible in-group members are misinformed, complacent or have become corrupted by contact with an out-group. When this critique escalates, extremists may attempt to revoke the eligibility of problematic in-group members (“they’re not really White”) or prescribe hostile action against them (“race traitors must be killed”).

This internal crisis can grow so significant that it eclipses the traditional extremist narrative describing a crisis caused by an out-group. In both *Siege* and *Join the Caravan*, the internal crisis is discussed in more detail, and at greater length, than the crises precipitated by out-groups. In *Siege* especially, the dimensions of the internal crisis have dire implications for the in-group and profoundly shape the hostile action

prescribed to counter the out-group. Thus, the particular strain of extremism articulated in *Siege* is inseparable from its in-group critique.

Ideologues may have specific aims in crafting in-group critiques, such as:

1. Attempting to shift the eligible in-group's practices and consensus views so that they are better aligned with the extremist in-group.
2. Increasing extremist in-group recruitment by shaming or inspiring the eligible in-group to take hostile action against an out-group.
3. Defending the legitimacy of the extremist in-group in the face of opposition by some or all of the eligible in-group or competing extremist movements.

In practice, most ideologues are likely motivated by some combination of these three factors, but in some cases, one motive supersedes the others. For instance, in *Join the Caravan*, Azzam explicitly seeks to shame members of the eligible in-group into adopting his military mission against the out-group. In contrast, *Siege* explicitly argues that any "mass mobilization strategy" is doomed to fail due to the eligible in-group's complacency and corruption. Instead, Mason seeks to defend the legitimacy of his very specific extremist in-groups (National Socialism and Universal Order) against the overwhelming rebuke of the eligible in-group and against conflicting ideological views held by competing extremist in-groups and their leaders.

Mason's critique of the eligible in-group as irremediably complacent and corrupt also supports his accelerationist strategy preference. In *Siege*, accelerationism is necessary not just because of the System's "tyrannical power," but because the System has changed the nature of the eligible in-group itself. The System's corruption weakens the eligible in-group, while the in-group's complicity strengthens the System in turn. In Mason's view, this vicious circle can only be broken by the System's total collapse.

Other extremist groups may determine that the in-group must be purified or improved before the crisis can be solved, and they may take action against the ineligible in-group prior to or concurrent with action against out-groups.

The White supremacist fixation on race-mixing is one example. For example, the "Day of the Rope"—an oft-cited mass execution described in the infamous extremist dystopian

novel *The Turner Diaries*—squarely targets race-mixers and White Quislings for especially harsh treatment. These ineligible in-group members are hanged and disgraced in an extremely graphic public spectacle, while out-group members (non-White people) are killed concurrently, but efficiently, out of the public eye.

In *Siege*, the in-group critique plays a critical role in dictating the type of hostile action—accelerationist—to be directed against out-groups. In Mason’s estimation, the vast majority of the eligible in-group has become complacent or complicit with respect to the System, rendering futile any strategy that depends on awakening or mobilizing the masses. While the System’s “tyrannical power” is partly to blame for the situation, the in-group’s deficiencies are the primary reason that a “mass strategy” cannot succeed.

Mason’s strategies proceed directly from his diagnosis of in-group weakness, which precludes more ambitious forms of violence. As Mason writes:

We are the first to realize that no popular revolt can be contemplated at this time as the only thing "popular" at the moment is further pleasure and more diversion among the quivering masses.<sup>264</sup>

Instead, Mason encourages a war of attrition, to be carried out by so-called “lone wolves” and very small groups. In *Siege*, Mason endorses and praises even relatively wanton and astrategic acts of violence, on the presumption that such attacks will damage the System and “hasten its demise.”

Toward the end of the text, Mason adds further guidance, encouraging Movement adherents to “drop out” of society—to segregate themselves from both the out-group and the deficient eligible in-group—in order to better survive the System’s expected collapse.

Notably, Mason offers no meaningful blueprint or mechanism for creating a new society in the wake of the old. Despite vague allusions to a more ideal social order, *Siege* proposes only destruction, unlike other extremist groups such as Islamic State, which offer and even implement very specific plans for the society they wish to build. Mason shows no interest in building, only in demolition.

## 7. “Studies on Slavery”

The practice of slavery was neither new nor unique to the United States, but in many ways, the institution occupies a central position in the American story.

Slavery has existed, in one form or another, throughout most of human history, before finally falling out of general favor. Although the debate about slavery played out over vast expanses of time and space, the elaboration of proslavery arguments during the first century of United States history was especially consequential. In the United States, chattel slavery evolved from European practices but soon became inextricable from race. While profit drove demand for slavery, race justified its practice—specifically the belief that White people were naturally superior to Black people and thus justified in enslaving them. From its founding, America was primarily conceived as a White in-group, a framing supported by deeply held cultural norms and explicitly racial laws, although some people dissented, even from the earliest days of the American experiment.<sup>265</sup>

Defenses of chattel slavery and its racial justification reified distinct strains of White nationalist ideology and eventually fueled a bloody civil war. Proslavery advocates, concentrated in the southern United States, committed wholeheartedly to the extremist proposition that the White American in-group could never be healthy or successful without enslaving the Black out-group. But on the opposite side, a powerful and growing abolitionist movement presented a serious and credible threat to the institution of slavery and the financial interests of its defenders, who fought bitterly to resist the tide.

Unlike the ideologies discussed in the preceding chapters, slavery was part and parcel of mainstream American society starting from the colonial days through abolition. Advocates of the ideology of slavery sought to defend the status quo, not overturn it. Slavery therefore stands as an example of extremism situated squarely in the center of society, rather than at its fringes.

This chapter will interrogate important and representative texts that articulated the ideology of race-based slavery in the antebellum United States. Important

acknowledgements must precede this examination. First, and most importantly, the dominant American antebellum polity tended to erase the voices and perspectives of enslaved Black people, thus failing to present a complete picture of American views. Both contemporary accounts and many subsequent histories tend to depict White American thought as American thought, a framing that automatically awards control of the American in-group consensus to White people. Since this chapter specifically examines White supremacy, it will focus heavily on such White viewpoints, but it's imperative to remember that the consequence of these ideologies fell overwhelmingly on enslaved Black people, who were denied a voice in debates about their fate.

Secondly, discussions of slavery and historical racism are often framed to excuse its defenders as “men of their time.” But it is important to note that any number of people with antiracist views can be found in the annals of history, including the antebellum era, and merely living “in the time” does not excuse racism. Indeed, the defenses of slavery discussed herein were written in direct response to the criticisms of antiracists and abolitionists (terms that are not synonymous). Without the existence of principled men and women “of the time,” these ideological defenses would not have been necessary. Racial enslavement was never morally excusable, no matter the context.

Finally, while “North” and “South” were used by contemporary people to describe the opposing sides in the conflict over slavery, and that shorthand may be occasionally employed herein, it is important to note that White people in the South were not uniformly racist and did not uniformly support slavery, while people in the North were not uniformly opposed to the practice. Antislavery activists could be and often were racist, and many supported other less extreme forms of White supremacy, including segregation and discrimination. The story of racial slavery in the United States, and how it ended, is complex, with many unambiguous villains, and few unambiguous heroes.

## **7.1. Ideological fluidity**

Extremist ideologies may evolve and radicalize when their legitimacy comes under attack (Berger, 2016),<sup>266</sup> and the period preceding the American Civil War was uniquely conducive to such ideological iteration. The practice of race-based, or chattel, slavery

was the target of a sustained assault by a growing abolitionist movement, and its defenders were forced to articulate elaborate philosophical defenses of both the practice and its underlying assumptions. In the words of American historian Drew Gilpin Faust:

Although proslavery thought demonstrated remarkable consistency from the seventeenth century on, it became in the South of the 1830s, forties, and fifties more systematic and self-conscious; it took on the characteristics of a formal ideology with its resulting social movement. The intensification of proslavery argumentation produced an increase in conceptual organization and coherence within the treatises themselves, which sought methodically to enumerate all possible foundations for human bondage[.] (Faust, 1981)<sup>267</sup>

The prewar social environment resulted in the codification of several more complex ideological arguments concerning racial hierarchy and human bondage, and ideological texts defending both slavery and white supremacy proliferated and complexified through the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But in some ways it was uncomplicated.

Extremism is defined in this dissertation as the belief that an in-group cannot be healthy or successful unless it is engaged in hostile action against an out-group. Antebellum proponents of slavery clearly met this definition. In all its variations, the argument in favor of slavery rested on the explicit premise that the in-group (White Americans) could not succeed or even survive without enslaving an out-group (Black people). The proslavery argument typically contained at least two of the following three claims:

- The United States could not succeed economically or politically in the absence of race-based slavery.
- Slavery was considered a generally acceptable practice throughout history.
- White people were superior to Black people, justifying a racial hierarchy.

Each of these components existed in variations. For instance, a defense of slavery as a generally acceptable practice could be framed as political, historical or scriptural. Assertions of in-group (White) superiority and out-group (Black) inferiority could be disguised as science (citing hereditary, cultural or environmental causes), or they could be justified through religious sources (more often apocryphal than canonical).

For many proslavery ideologues, the assertion of economic necessity was sufficient to justify actions otherwise considered unpleasant or undesirable. But some defenders of slavery went further still. Not content to stipulate that the hostile action of enslavement was a necessary evil, some infamously argued that slavery was a “positive good”—a practice that actually benefited the enslaved out-group.

As noted by Faust, the antebellum period of U.S. history produced an avalanche of books, pamphlets, articles and speeches in defense of slavery, and the discussion that follows should be read with significant caveats regarding the diversity and volume of argumentation. Some ideological texts were arcane legal and economic tracts that sought to close down debate through historical precedent, narrow technicalities or naked self-interest. Other defenders outlined broad arguments with deep societal implications. The multifarious defenses frequently contradicted each other, in addition to containing internal contradictions. For instance, it was quite common for proslavery advocates to argue that Black people were physically inferior to White people, while simultaneously warning that Black people were so physically strong that they posed a continuous danger to White people. Black people were alleged to be intrinsically docile, but they were also alleged to be plotting violent uprisings. For the most part, such contradictions did not seem to trouble those who supported the proslavery movement.

The following chapter will analyze a selection of texts describing racial hierarchies in the antebellum United States, including secular and religious varieties. The list of potential case studies is breathtakingly long. For the sake of length and clarity of focus, I will focus on texts that address race as an explicit ideological tenet, as opposed to texts that focus on slavery’s economic importance or its nature and ubiquity throughout history. Such arguments are no less racist or extremist than those to be examined herein, but unpacking their subtext and contextualizing their false and pseudohistorical claims would require lengthy tangents covering economic, historical and cultural details outside of my expertise. The history of slavery in the United States is a sweeping and complex topic. This dissertation does not aim to describe that history comprehensively, but rather to understand how ideological defenses of the practice relate to our modern understanding of extremism.

## 7.2. Identity construction

Because the debate over slavery had riven the American in-group, its defenders were forced to draw distinctions among overlapping in-groups and out-groups.

In the most important sense, the extremism of slavery revolved around racial groups. Proponents of slavery (the extremist in-group) understood the practice to be defensible only when the enslavers were White (the eligible in-group), and the enslaved were Black (the out-group). Beyond these clear distinctions, other group boundaries could be ambiguous. Divisions could be found within both North and South on the issues of slavery, and even many Northerners and/or abolitionists supported extremist solutions to the “race problem,” such as segregation and “colonization”—the deportation of emancipated Black people to Africa. As in-group opponents of slavery, abolitionists were in-group enemies of proslavery extremists. These in-group enemies were rarely addressed in the manner of an ineligible in-group—meaning specifically that proslavery ideologists did not, for the most part, explicitly claim that abolitionists or Northerners were at risk of being expelled from the White in-group. However, proslavery extremists proved entirely willing to take hostile action against their in-group enemies, up to and including waging a civil war against them, placing the in-group enemies in a functionally similar role to the ineligible groups seen in Chapters 5 and 6.

Proslavery extremism thus existed alongside other strains of racist extremism and white supremacy, either in harmony with them or in conflict, as well as less-powerful antiracist movements. For the extremist in-group, the *specific* hostile action was fundamental and definitional to the extremist ideology, while other elements of identity were debatable and arguably optional. For instance, some proslavery ideologues argued that the “races” had different origins and represented distinct species, while others believed that Black and White people shared a common human ancestor. Only one tenet was sacrosanct—the enslavement of Black people by White people. In-group members might disagree on the origins of the human race, but only those who opposed the institution of slavery were placed in irreconcilable conflict with the extremist in-group. Ultimately, the extremist in-group would wage civil war against its in-group opponents in order to protect this ideological commitment.



Group divisions	
Eligible in-group	White Americans
Extremist in-group	Proslavery Americans Slaveholders White Southerners
In-group enemies (ineligible in-group)	Abolitionists White Northerners
Out-group	Black Americans Black people Enslaved Black people Free Black people

It is important to note that other racial out-groups existed, but only Black people were considered eligible for institutional enslavement. White European theorists of the day offered a variety of views on racial hierarchies, which differed in many details but mostly agreed that White European people were the highest-born race and Black African people the most inferior, with other groups such as Asian, Arab and Indigenous people falling somewhere between. Most proslavery extremists argued that Black people were uniquely suited to enslavement, and White people uniquely suited to mastery.

Racial identity is a social construction and a form of categorization in the context of Social Identity Theory. Additionally, race is, in the words of historian Barbara Fields, “profoundly and in its very essence ideological.” As Fields notes, “it is ideological context that tells people which details to notice, which to ignore, and which to take for granted in translating the world around them.”<sup>268</sup> Racial descriptions of the antebellum period (and before and after) reflect this reality, emphasizing perceived traits and purported observations that supported White supremacy and slavery and de-emphasizing contradictory information.

Race was an inescapable element of the ideology of slavery—the all-important means of sorting people into in-groups (masters) and out-groups (slaves). Racism could and did

exist in the absence of slavery, but the American style of slavery could not exist without racism. Scholar Ezra Tawil describes the question of which came first, racism or slavery, as a “historiographical thicket.”<sup>269</sup> But as contemporary American theologian Charles Hodge (himself a supporter of slavery) noted, the 19<sup>th</sup> century rush to develop theories of racial origins seemed primarily motivated by a desire to retroactively furnish “a satisfactory foundation for the perpetuity of African slaveholding.”<sup>270</sup> While some elements of proslavery racial ideology pre-dated the American institution of slavery, the most important antebellum ideological arguments were reverse-engineered defenses of the institution as it existed in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Some ideologies of racial supremacy were constructed specifically to support the “peculiar institution” of slavery as it existed in the antebellum United States, but certainly not all. And even many abolitionists subscribed to racist ideas. Prominent critics of slavery, including Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, argued at times that Black and White people could never live together peacefully and that the races would have to be segregated should slavery ever be abolished. Jefferson, who famously penned the words “all men are created equal,” criticized the practice of slavery while still owning and abusing slaves himself.

For the purposes of this chapter, it is enough to stipulate that racism and slavery were mutually reinforcing ideological elements. Even those who defended slavery primarily on economic grounds embraced the centrality of its racial component. No mass movement or ideology existed to argue that White people could or should be enslaved, out of economic necessity or for any other reason. And for decades, the nation’s power centers—legal and social—had worked in concert to reinforce a racial hierarchy that was used to justify the practice of White people enslaving Black people.

Ideological racism and the stipulation of formal racial hierarchies in the antebellum United States were broadly dominated by two major lines of argument, secular and religious. Secular racism typically clothed itself in the guise of science, while religious racism turned to scripture and apocrypha for justification.

### 7.2.1. Secular justifications

As part of his book *Notes on the State of Virginia*,<sup>271</sup> Thomas Jefferson recorded his views on race at some length. Despite his critique of slavery as a practice, the third president of the United States believed firmly in White supremacy and White superiority. Using the language of science but basing his comments on his own purported observations, he “set out many of the arguments that Southerners would develop into a full-blown proslavery defense in the first half of the nineteenth century” (Finkelman, 2019).<sup>272</sup>

Jefferson argued for the superiority of White people over Black people in physical, mental and spiritual realms. Physically, he wrote, White people were more beautiful and elegant than Black people, who he claimed possessed a “strong and disagreeable odour.” Jefferson wrote that Black people were “more tolerant of heat, and less so of cold” than White people. He claimed Black people required less sleep than White people, but also asserted they were lazy and would sleep all day if left to their own devices.

On the mental and spiritual fronts, Jefferson adopted a patronizing attitude. He claimed that Black people were less intelligent than White people—“equal” in memory but “in reason much inferior,” writing that “their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection.” He dismissed their capacity for love as “eager desire” in comparison to the “tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation” he ascribed to White people. Jefferson wrote that Black people were “at least as brave, and more adventuresome” than White people, but he speculated that this could be attributed to “a want of fore-thought.” Jefferson claimed that Black people were “more generally gifted” than White people in music at a basic level, while their capacity for more complex composition was “yet to be proved.” Outside of music, Jefferson flatly rejected the idea that Black people had any advanced capability or aptitude for art, science or literature. “Never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration,” he wrote.

While Jefferson was himself inclined toward emancipation, at least in theory, his characterizations of Black people both reflected and influenced the ubiquitous racial

arguments that would be employed by slavery's defenders. Secular racist beliefs were extremely widespread in the antebellum United States, among both the defenders and opponents of slavery. Secular racist beliefs were predicated on biased, inaccurate and often entirely fabricated observations about the traits of different peoples. Some were **experiential narratives** such as Jefferson's, which claimed to be based on direct observation of Black people. Others were **evidentiary narratives**—so-called “race science,” a field that proliferated in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, driven in significant part by the debate over slavery.<sup>273</sup> These evidentiary narratives marshalled purported facts to advance a view of White superiority. Some of these “facts” were subjective assessments, others were blatantly false. Few authors bothered to hide the presumption of White superiority that undergirded the illusion of science.

Different “experts” offered different classifications of race, but most antebellum American race-ologists agreed that White people stood at the top of the racial hierarchy, and Black people at the bottom. Phrenology—a now-debunked discipline that linked intelligence to skull measurements—was one of the most popular lines of inquiry. Proponents of such “racial science” included doctors such as Josiah C. Nott, a medical doctor and phrenologist, and Samuel A. Cartwright, a physician and prominent proslavery agitator most infamous for claiming that the desire of Black people to be free was a mental disorder called “drapetomania.”<sup>274</sup>

Secular explanations of race offered by White people included a wide range of theories, which differed as to the number and nature of races, the origin of racial differences, and the traits and degrees of humanity associated with non-White people. While some genuine antiracist thinkers could be found among White Americans, much of this pseudoscientific content was unmistakably White supremacist. Even many people who opposed slavery believed in the inferiority of Black people, although some of these believed Black people could improve themselves and even “become White.”<sup>275</sup>

Many of the most important works in this genre were printed and distributed by John Van Evrie, a New York-based publisher who widely distributed significant texts on racial hierarchies, in addition to authoring his own derivative works.<sup>276</sup> His 1861 book *Negroes and Negro “Slavery:” The First an Inferior Race: The Latter Its Normal Condition*

summarized a range of contemporary racist thought on the “scientific” classification of the races, which Van Evrie and his peers considered to be distinct species. Van Evrie theorized that there were at least six races, ranking them in order of their merits, with White people as exemplars of perfected humanity and Black people as the most inferior (after Asians and various Indigenous peoples). Van Evrie asserted that the traits he assigned to the races were factual, eternal and unchanging—in his words, “unalterable,” “demonstrable,” “unmistakable,” “undeviating,” “uniform” and “invariable.”<sup>277</sup>

Van Evrie’s tract was riddled with circular logic and baseless assertions, including variations on phrenology. In Van Evrie’s view, non-White races were incapable of significant achievement, and he dismissed any contradictory evidence by attributing the historical accomplishments of non-White people to White people—such as Aztec and Mayan civilizations, ancient Hindu civilizations, and the conquests of Atilla the Hun and Genghis Khan. All the architects of these successes were White, or had White blood, Van Evrie insisted.<sup>278</sup>

Other secular theories of racial difference were contested. Some scientists cited environmental factors as the cause of racial differentiation, arguing that the skin color and temperament of Black people were shaped by external factors such as exposure to the sun. Many climate theorists insisted, against all evidence, that Black people would “become White” if relocated to a cooler climate. One prominent abolitionist, Benjamin Rush, claimed that Black skin was caused by disease, and Black people should be treated with the same sympathy reserved for the gravely ill.<sup>279</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, some racists argued that White and Black were entirely different species, descended from different primal progenitors, including implied or explicit claims that Black people were closely descended from or interbred with non-human primates.<sup>280</sup>

What unified prevailing thought was the widespread belief among White people that racial difference was more than skin deep, and that Whiteness was superior to Blackness, an assumption shared by many antislavery activists.<sup>281</sup> This supposed inferiority was used to justify slavery as a just and natural state of being for Black people. But “scientific evidence” was not the only basis for the conclusion that Black people must be enslaved by White people. Even as the pseudoscientists advanced and

elaborated their theories, religiously minded people were approaching the premise from a different direction.

### 7.2.1. Religious justifications

Religion was an important part of antebellum American life, and it was also an important source for proslavery ideology. Proslavery ideology was not the chief characteristic of American religion, but proslavery ideologues mined religious texts and traditions to justify the peculiar institution. Many of these religious justifications were legalistic—collections of Bible verses that referred to slavery without criticizing the practice, and somewhat fewer verses that appeared to actively endorse it.<sup>282</sup> But more insidious strains of argument became prominent in the years leading up to the Civil War. Two Judeo-Christian racial theories took on especial prominence.

The first, and most widespread, is known as the “Curse of Ham.” According to the Bible (Genesis 9:18-28), sometime after the great flood and the journey of the ark, Noah became drunk and passed out in a state of undress. Noah’s son Ham witnessed his father’s nakedness and told his brothers but did not treat his father respectfully or cover his nakedness. Noah’s brothers, Japheth and Shem, responded with respect toward their father, averting their eyes and covering him with a garment. When Noah awakened, he cursed Ham’s son Canaan as punishment for Ham’s offense: “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.”

Most of the ideological ideas associated with the Curse of Ham are not clearly derived from canonical scripture, instead being based on a combination of non-scriptural traditions and creative exegesis. In Jewish and Christian tradition, the story had been embellished in a variety of ways. Some retellings claimed Noah’s curse caused the skin of Ham and/or his descendants to instantly turn Black. Others stipulated that Ham’s skin had been Black from birth or had been changed as the result of an earlier sin.<sup>283</sup>

The **tradition-based narrative** attached to the Curse of Ham was originally part of two distinct etiologies—one tradition that sought to explain the origins of slavery, and another that sought to explain the origins of racial difference generally and people with Black skin specifically. The two themes—slavery and race—increasingly merged during

the antebellum period, creating the key elements of an extremist system of meaning by stipulating a divine mandate for hostile action directed at a specific identity group.

[The combined dual curse] more profoundly and more insidiously ties blackness to servitude, for dark skin is now either a result of the curse of slavery or occurs with it as part of the curse. Dark skin is no longer merely associated with slavery. It has now become an intentional marker of servitude. The divine approval for the social order of black slavery is no longer implicit; it has become explicit in a most visibly forceful way. (Goldenberg, 2009)<sup>284</sup>

A second religious theory claimed that Black skin originated as the “mark of Cain,” which God placed on Adam’s son as punishment for committing the first murder (Genesis 4:1-25). In this interpretation, Black skin becomes an inherited signifier of wrongdoing and sin. Proslavery advocates increasingly combined the mark of Cain with the curse of Ham, with racial theorists claiming that Ham had married or fathered children with a descendant of Cain. Thus, Noah’s curse joined slavery to the Black skin that Canaan had already inherited as a result of Cain’s sin. References to this combined curse were an established part of American political discourse by the mid-1800s.<sup>285</sup>

A third variation claimed that God had created Black people in a pre-Adamic era, before concluding the arc of creation with the “perfected” form of the first White man, Adam. In some versions of this story, Black people are said to have been transported on Noah’s Ark as animals. In other cases, the pre-Adamic narrative was combined with the curse narratives, with Cain and/or his descendants said to have miscegenated with pre-Adamic races, producing a mixed race of humans with Black skin.

The politics of the antebellum United States supercharged these pseudo-Biblical race narratives,<sup>286</sup> mixing and melding them with greater or lesser amounts of coherence. Variations on the Ham/Cain narratives were widely adopted by Christians all over the United States<sup>287</sup> and were even embedded in foundational Mormon doctrines.<sup>288</sup> Beliefs about the Curse of Ham were so widespread that even some enslaved Black people subscribed to them.<sup>289</sup> Nor were these views outside the mainstream of American Christianity, especially in the South, where Protestant leaders were heavily invested in

efforts to “frame an apologetic for human bondage that would consolidate southern opinion and also, if possible, undermine abolitionism in the free states.”<sup>290</sup>

Beyond the religious sphere, the Curse of Ham and related narratives formed a key plank in the suite of arguments employed by those at the very highest levels of proslavery politics. According to abolitionist Theodore Weld, the “prophecy of Noah is the *vade mecum* of slaveholders, and they never venture abroad without it.”<sup>291</sup> Jefferson Davis, the first president of the Confederacy, cited a fully blended iteration of the narrative on the floor of the U.S. Senate in 1860, prior to Southern secession.

When Cain, for the commission of the first great crime, was driven from the face of Adam, no longer the fit associate of those who were created to exercise dominion over the earth, he found in the land of Nod [pre-Adamic Black people] to whom his crime had degraded him to an equality; and when the low and vulgar son of Noah, who laughed at his father's exposure, sunk by debasing himself and his lineage by a connection with an inferior race of men, he doomed his descendants to perpetual slavery. Noah spoke the decree, or prophecy, as gentlemen may choose to consider it, one or the other.

This, Davis continued, was the source of the “inequality of the white and black races—stamped from the beginning, marked in decree and prophecy—the will of God which the puny efforts of many have in vain attempted to subvert.”<sup>292</sup> Davis’s comments were likely influenced by Samuel Cartwright, who published a similar account in 1860,<sup>293</sup> and both Davis and Cartwright were influenced by Louisiana author John Fletcher and his mammoth 1851 tome, *Studies on Slavery*.<sup>294</sup>



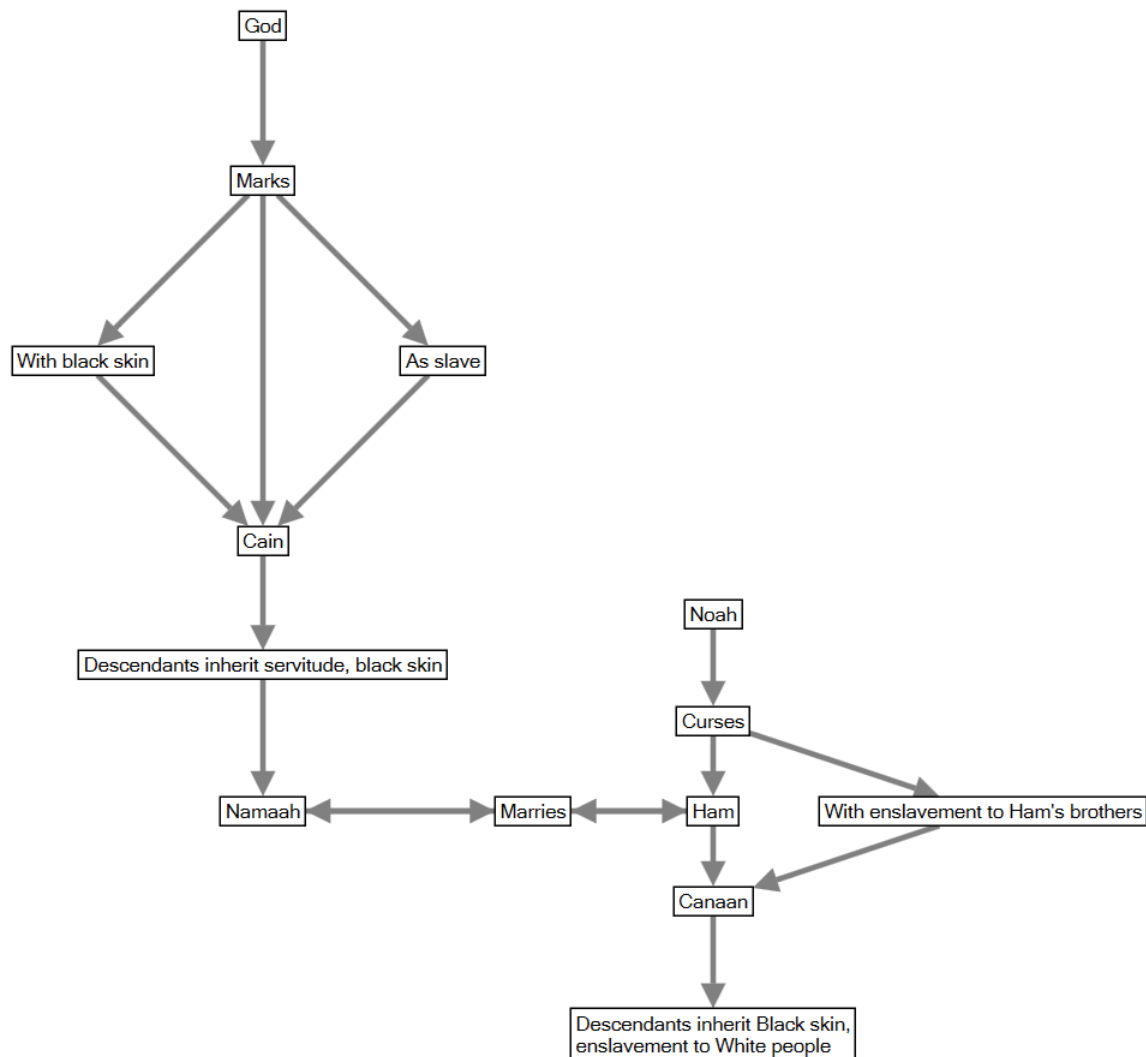


Figure 7: Linkages in *Studies on Slavery, Study VI*. Fletcher describes two overlapping biblical sources for a divine mandate that Black people should be enslaved by White people. The first is God's curse of Cain (left), and the second is Noah's curse of Ham (right).

### 7.3. Case Study: Studies on Slavery

First published in 1852, *Studies on Slavery in Easy Lessons* was a 637-page book by John Fletcher, a proslavery author from Louisiana. The book's preface states Fletcher was educated in the North and lived for many years in the South. Obituaries and contemporary news accounts flesh out these details only slightly; Fletcher was born in Vermont, attended Dartmouth College and subsequently lived for many years in Concordia, Louisiana, where he owned a plantation and dabbled in local politics.<sup>295</sup> Fletcher sold his plantation in 1860, and set off "wandering," according to a newspaper

account that described him as “eccentric.”<sup>296</sup> He eventually settled in Natchez, Mississippi, where he died “at an advanced age” in 1862. The announcement of his death in the local paper mentioned his “singular and peculiar characteristics,” which were not described in detail but which “made him the subject of notice to strangers.”<sup>297</sup>

Despite the author’s eccentricity and historical obscurity, his work was deeply influential. As previously noted, prominent readers included Confederate President Jefferson Davis and the notoriously racist proslavery doctor Samuel Cartwright.<sup>298</sup> Like Davis, Cartwright gave *Studies on Slavery* a glowing public endorsement, praising Fletcher’s “erudition, and the remarkable power of his mind.”<sup>299</sup> Another prominent proslavery activist, former Mississippi Governor John Quitman, wrote that he was “happy to see the vindication of the system of negro slavery assumed by so profound a thinker.”<sup>300</sup> Contemporary accounts praised or damned the volume based largely on each reviewer’s position regarding slavery. The abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* drily observed that “Mr. Fletcher is not at all lacking in confidence” as part of a lengthy and scathing rebuttal. A Mississippi newspaper exclaimed that every home should have a copy of the Bible first and *Studies on Slavery* second, while a critical Washington, D.C. writer observed that the work was far more imaginative than rigorous.<sup>301</sup>

*Studies on Slavery* is an extensive work, more than 250,000 words broken down into eight “studies,” each containing multiple lessons.<sup>302</sup> Most of the studies were rebuttals to specific abolitionist ideologues. Fletcher’s argument was substantially based on pseudo-linguistic analyses of historical sources and Bible passages, including extensive lists of biblical references to slavery that either directly support the practice or fail to condemn it. The linguistic analysis often runs on homophonic lines, asserting that similar-sounding words must have related meanings, with the soundalike word replacing the meaning of the original in some cases. Conveniently, Fletcher uses this technique to replace many Biblical ethnic and tribal terms with the words “black” or “Ethiopian” (which is used to encompass any Black person of African descent).

In terms of contemporaneous influence and subsequent legacy, the most important section of *Studies on Slavery* is Study VI, in which Fletcher drills down on a **tradition-based narrative** (religious-historical) purporting to describe the origins of Black skin

and stipulating a divine mandate for the enslavement of the out-group (Black people) by the in-group (White people). Fletcher's contribution to this mythologizing process is not particularly novel, but it was a relatively early and robust example of a comprehensive synthesis of disparate elements—particularly the Curse of Ham and the Mark of Cain.

Reduced to its simplest form, *Studies on Slavery VI* describes the following etiologies for the Black race, enslavement and the linkage of Black race to enslavement. According to Fletcher, the story of Cain begins with his inheritance of the burden of labor incurred by Adam's original sin ("Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it.", Genesis 3:17). Labor is characterized here as servitude or (mild) slavery, which serves as both punishment and prevention of sin, in contrast to idleness, which encourages sin. When Cain murders his brother Abel, God sets a mark on him that designates an *increased* burden of servitude and proclaims his sin to all who see. Through inductive reasoning based on an array of nonbiblical citations, Fletcher concludes that the Mark of Cain was associated with Blackness, which he calls the natural visual representation of sin, and that Black skin was therefore inherited by Cain's descendants.<sup>303</sup>

According to Fletcher, God intended for this racial inheritance to remain separate from the White race sired by Adam's third son, Seth, but subsequent generations of men sinned by miscegenating, and so God ordained the flood to erase the mixed-race products of interracial sexual intercourse. All of the mixed-race people were swept away in the flood except for the children of Noah's son Ham. According to Fletcher, Ham had married a woman named Naamah, a descendant of Cain. When Noah curses Ham's Black-skinned son Canaan, as described in Genesis (the curse not the skin color), he is not simply acting on the basis of the offense as described (disrespecting Noah in his nakedness) but also reinforcing and escalating curses that Canaan had already inherited from Cain through his mother and the stain of the sin of miscegenation. Fletcher says Noah's curse adds to this inheritance the designation of specific masters for the enslaved race, White descendants of Ham's brothers Japheth and Shem.<sup>304</sup>

*Studies on Slavery VI* provides this account using a hybrid **evidentiary** and **tradition-based narrative**. It derives its *authority* from tradition (in the form of religion), explicitly arguing that the racial hierarchy of White supremacy joined with Black

enslavement is divinely mandated, and that anyone who challenges this divinely ordained social structure risks the ultimate arrogance of “condemn[ing] God, unless his government shall comport with their views.” Not only do abolitionists risk their own souls by defying God’s blueprint, Fletcher argues, they also risk the souls of the enslaved, because “slavery is intended, to some extent, as a preventive, as a shield against sin”—a preventative measure reserved for those who are most at risk of sin due to their racial heritage. God “has seen fit to care for [Black people] by placing them under the control of others; or by placing them, in mercy, under the guidance of a less deteriorated race.” Thus, anyone who argues for the end of Black enslavement is at best misguided, counted among the “poor fallen ones,” in Fletcher’s eyes.<sup>305</sup>

While Fletcher seeks to access the divine authority derived from a tradition-based narrative, he is also keenly aware that his argument does not proceed cleanly from undisputed sources—specifically, the Bible itself makes no mention of race and does not identify the skin color of Cain, Ham or anyone else. Nor does the Bible clearly stipulate an eternal and unlimited curse of slavery on the descendants of Canaan, and neither does it clearly identify the descendants of Canaan with Black people. Fletcher addresses these lacunae with a narrative based on his purported mastery of ancient languages, bombarding the reader with dizzying claims concerning the original text of the Bible that consistently and conveniently interpolate racial dimensions into Biblical texts.

Thus, “Ham” is understood linguistically to mean “Black.” Biblical ethnicities such as “Cushite,” “Ammonite” and “Canaanite” are all deemed synonymous with “Ethiopian,” which is deemed synonymous with “Black.” Fletcher claims, among other things, that Cushite “became and was used as a general term, by which all descendants of Ham were designated by their colour, in the same manner as we now use the Latin word negro to designate the same thing.”<sup>306</sup> Fletcher frequently invokes a consensus of unnamed scholars to support his interpretations (“all the scholars agree” and “we beg to notice a fact which we suppose no scholar will dispute”). At one point, Fletcher spends almost 4,000 words laboriously transmogrifying the passage “You Cushites, too, will be slain by my sword” into “ye Ethiopians, reduced to a condition of bondage, remember ye are the inheritors of the curse of Ham,” ending with a concession that he may have “occupied too much time, in remarks too obscure” on the issue.<sup>307</sup>

While the main thrust of Fletcher’s argument is linguistic, he also draws on non-canonical and even non-Christian traditions when they serve his narrative. For instance, Fletcher cites Islamic tradition in several places, with greater or lesser degrees of accuracy. (Some Islamic traditions and exegetical treatises do, in fact, argue for a racial interpretation of the Curse of Ham.<sup>308</sup>)

For Fletcher, the **evidentiary narrative** is a method to reframe a **tradition-based narrative** that does not unambiguously support his extremist premise. The evidentiary narrative serves to appropriate the transcendent authority of tradition (in this case, religion) and endow the extremist prescription for the unconditional enslavement of Black people by White people with the power of an unassailable divine mandate. In the words of Jefferson Davis, White enslavement of Black people is reframed by Fletcher as “the will of God, which the puny efforts of many have in vain attempted to subvert.”<sup>309</sup>

### 7.3.1. Legacy

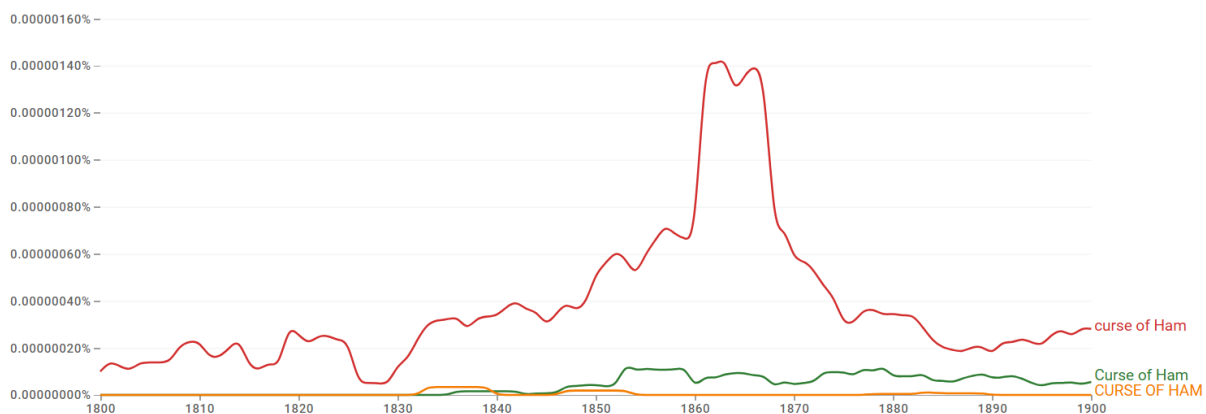


Figure 8: Google Ngram Viewer visualizes the frequency of references to phrases in published books. Published references to Noah’s curse of Ham spiked sharply just before the Civil War, then declined sharply after.

Fletcher’s *Studies on Slavery* is situated within a broader current of religious justifications for slavery, and after emancipation, for other forms of racial discrimination and oppression. Many of the same arguments used to justify White enslavement of Black people were immediately redeployed to deny civil rights to emancipated Black people, including the right to American citizenship and the right to vote.<sup>310</sup> References in print to the Curse of Ham, for instance, remained high for some

years immediately following emancipation.<sup>311</sup> The curse has also become a powerfully recurring feature in some 20<sup>th</sup> century forms of White supremacist extremism.<sup>312</sup>

Of unclear significance is the fact that Fletcher's linguistic gymnastics are remarkably similar to the writings of British-Israelists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which covered the same source material and similarly sought to analyze the origins of human racial differences. As scholar Michael Barkun has noted, British-Israelists were prone to "mimic techniques of historical scholarship, so that conclusions might be advanced not merely as statements of faith but as intersubjectively testable knowledge."<sup>\*</sup> An extensive (but less than comprehensive) review of British-Israelist texts finds no direct citations of Fletcher, but the stylistic and content similarities are unmistakable, and future research might be able to establish either a direct connection or a strong argument for parallel construction. Regardless of the exact paths of transmission, relatively recent white nationalist ideologies such as Christian Identity, an outgrowth of British-Israelism, rely substantially on ideas first articulated by Fletcher, Cartwright and other contemporaries.<sup>313</sup>

Cartwright, in particular, helped advance Fletcher's argument toward a form that would be more recognizable to modern White supremacist extremists. In 1860, Cartwright published "Unity of the Human Race Disproved by the Hebrew Bible" in the influential proslavery Southern magazine *De Bow's Review*.<sup>314</sup> The article followed Fletcher's lead in referring to the supposed original Hebrew text of the Bible but positing dubious alternative translations that seemed to stipulate the existence of a pre-Adamic race of human beings. According to Cartwright, inferior races, including Black people, were created prior to the creation of Adam. Cartwright claimed the tempter in the Garden of Eden had not been a serpent but a Black man. He argued that Cain's descendants had miscegenated with the Black pre-Adamic races, who were targeted by God for extermination in the flood. A few were preserved on Noah's ark, as animals, and placed under the charge of Ham, which led to them being cursed to endure slavery. In this

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<sup>\*</sup> Barkun, op. cit., 126, 162.

interpretation, the “son of Ham” was not a literal son, but those creatures for whom Ham had been deemed responsible.<sup>315</sup>

Cartwright was not the first to promote the idea of pre-Adamic people, but he was an early and influential proponent of the concept’s racialization. The pre-Adamic narrative reached its peak popularity at the height of the Civil War, and slowly declined after but never fully disappeared. Cartwright’s treatise was soon followed by others, notably Dominic M’Causland’s influential *Adam and the Adamite* (1864), which helped popularize a term previously employed by both Cartwright and Fletcher—the “Adamic race,” synonymous with White.<sup>316</sup> As Barkun notes, writers like M’Causland “foreshadowed” (at minimum) the pre-Adamic racial narratives of late British-Israelism and its successor, Christian Identity.<sup>317</sup> Future research may be able to more concretely trace the transmission and development of these ideas, potentially offering fresh insights into how extremist ideologies persist and evolve.

#### **7.4. Identity closure**

Unlike the fringe extremist movements examined in previous chapters, the defenders of slavery were attempting to preserve the status quo rather than overturn it. The solution (hostile action) required to preserve the health and success of the in-group was therefore obvious—slavery, as it already existed. Proslavery advocates did not seek to implement a new extremist solution, but rather to protect and continue unimpeded the enslavement of the out-group (Black people) by the in-group (White people).

Because they represented the status quo, adherents of the proslavery movement enjoyed resources that most fringe extremists could only dream of, including an abundance of authors and authority figures willing and able to wade into the debate. No less an authority than the Supreme Court of the United States enshrined and even doubled down on both racism and slavery in the landmark 1857 decision *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. Citing “the degraded condition of this unhappy race,” the court ruled the nation’s founders had intended that Black people—whether enslaved or emancipated—could never be citizens of the United States and should thus be excluded from enjoying any of the human rights enumerated in the Constitution.

Black people had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect,” Chief Justice Roger Taney, himself a slaveowner, wrote for the majority, attributing this view to historical precedent. “The unhappy black race were separated from the white by indelible marks, and laws long before established, and were never thought of or spoken of except as property, and when the claims of the owner or the profit of the trader were supposed to need protection,” Taney wrote. Although Taney never mentions Cain, he repeatedly uses the word “mark” in relation to Black people and U.S. laws pertaining to them—the “strongest mark of inferiority and degradation was fastened upon the African race,” “marking the condition of this race,” “marks of inferiority and degradation,” “persons marked and stigmatized” and so forth.<sup>318</sup>

Taney’s judicial overreach and provocative intervention in the nation’s political crisis ignited a firestorm of criticism and controversy.<sup>319</sup> Attacks on the decision became a cornerstone of Abraham Lincoln’s failed 1858 Senate campaign and his successful 1860 presidential campaign. While the Dred Scott decision was on its face a victory for proslavery forces, it provoked a destructive backlash of such magnitude that most historians today credit it with accelerating America’s march toward civil war.<sup>320</sup>

Extremist ideologies typically posit the existence of a crisis in order to justify the in-group’s hostile actions against an out-group. For fringe groups, this crisis is often exaggerated or entirely imagined. But as the Dred Scott backlash illustrated, the United States was caught in a genuine crisis. Proslavery ideologues warned that the battle over slavery would lead to the breakup of the United States, and they were correct, although the prophecy admittedly contained a self-fulfilling aspect.

Some proslavery ideologues and propagandists drew on less plausible imaginaries to warn of additional crises that would accompany the end of slavery—an apocalyptic race war that would end in the extermination of either White or Black people, or a society in which fanatical antiracists used the law to force people to take part in miscegenation and mixed marriages (“amalgamation” in the language of the day). While these scenarios obviously never came to pass, the associated crisis narratives would recur in White supremacist propaganda for more than a century to come.<sup>321</sup>



### 7.4.1. Necessary evil or positive good?

Because hostile action toward an out-group was the status quo, legally and socially, proslavery ideologues did not seek to *mobilize* people to become slaveholders. Rather, they sought to demobilize an antislavery movement that sought to abolish the institution. This distinction impacted the shape of proslavery ideologies in many ways—perhaps most importantly by making the proslavery argument into an exercise in post-hoc rationalization and defensive maintenance.

Proslavery ideologues were not revolutionaries engaged in an effort to transform the world into something new, nor reactionaries seeking to restore some mythical golden age; they were trying to preserve the *current* status quo *against* the forces of transformation. A proverbial saying of unknown origin states that “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”<sup>322</sup> Proslavery arguments first and foremost sought to dissuade members of the eligible in-group from taking action to change the extant state of affairs. This is a significant difference from conceptions of extremist ideology based on fringe movements, in which modern scholars are chiefly concerned with how extremists seek to inspire adherents to positive mobilization.<sup>323</sup>

One of the biggest problems for these proslavery advocates was the institution’s brutal and all-too-visible reality. Even those who supported slavery were sometimes dismayed at its cruelty, degradation and violence. Popular antislavery works such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s bestselling novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* helped intensify the average American’s growing discomfort with the institution’s depravity.<sup>324</sup> Grappling with the ugly nature of the hostile action, proslavery ideologues often found themselves engaged in absurd and often disingenuous mental contortions, solemnly posing rhetorical questions that sound absurd to modern ears.

- Is slavery a necessary evil?
- Is slavery evil at all? Could slavery actually be good?
- Does slavery harm or help the enslaved (out-group)?

For years prior to the Civil War, some White Americans had argued that slavery was a benefit to the enslaved. In 1819, American lawyer Robert Walsh Jr. wrote that the effect of slavery on Black people was “positively good,” leaving them “exempt from those racking anxieties—the exacerbates of despair” that afflicted free workers.<sup>325</sup> Walsh would later change his opinion and write in opposition to slavery, but the coinage would persist. Again and again, defenders of slavery would characterize the practice not as a necessary evil, but as a “positive good” that benefited enslaved Black people.

The concept (and its dependence on identity construction) was summarized in fairly typical manner by proslavery ideologue Josiah Priest: “The relation of master and servant harmonizes strictly with the best interests of the inferior or African race in particular, in securing to him that protection and support which his native imbecility of intellect disqualifies him from securing for himself.”<sup>326</sup> Perhaps the most infamous articulation of the “positive good” argument came on the floor of the United States Senate. Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, responding in 1837 to abolitionist petitions before Congress, argued that the South—and the Union itself—faced an existential crisis. The status quo—the “existing relations between” the Black and White races—was essential to the continued “peace and happiness” of the United States. To upset the status quo could only lead to “drenching the country in blood, and extirpating one or the other of the races.”

Calhoun’s speech was squarely aimed at the eligible in-group, a statement of defiance from “the South” (proslavery) toward “the North” (antislavery), warning that any concessions by the former would lead to a “slippery slope” and ultimate defeat. Calhoun’s argument was firmly based in racism, presuming the superiority of White people to Black people, but he took issue with another senator’s earlier comment characterizing slavery as a “lesser evil” in comparison to emancipation. “I hold that in the present state of civilization, where two races of different origin, and distinguished by color, and other physical differences, as well as intellectual, are brought together, the relation now existing in the slaveholding States between the two, is, instead of an evil, a good—a positive good,” Calhoun said.

Although Calhoun wove various social and economic critiques into his comments, his core argument was relatively simple. Black people, he speciously claimed, had a higher quality of life as slaves than they would if free. “Never before has the black race of Central Africa, from the dawn of history to the present day, attained a condition so civilized and so improved, not only physically, but morally and intellectually,” he said without evidence. The arrangement was also good for White people of European descent, he claimed, praising the “virtue, intelligence, patriotism [and] courage” of Southern slaveholders, who had not “degenerated” because of the practice.

Calhoun claimed that the living conditions endured by slaves compared favorably to the situation (as he imagined it) of Black people living freely in Africa and to that of impoverished free White laborers. He claimed that slaveholders provided “kind care” to old and infirm slaves, relative to the “forlorn and wretched” poor houses that awaited destitute free White workers. Parallel to these arguments, Calhoun mounted a pointed attack on capitalism and free labor practices.

The “positive good” argument inverts the traditional extremist formula, disingenuously, arguing that the *out-group* can never be healthy or successful unless it is being enslaved by the in-group. The “positive good” argument was meant to disguise the *hostile* nature of the action the White in-group wanted to inflict on the Black out-group. Even if the sentiment were sincere, the attempt to camouflage hostile intent would be absurd since slavery by its intrinsic nature forcibly denies consent to the enslaved.

At any rate, the sentiment was not sincere. At the very start of his speech, Calhoun put his cards on the table, perhaps unintentionally. Describing the need for slaveholders to fight back against the abolitionist tide, he said that making any concession would be “fatal” and warned that “those who do not meet aggression steadfastly are prepared to become slaves.” Enslavement might be a “positive good” for Black people, as understood through the prism of a constructed racial identity, but for Calhoun and his fellow White Southerners, it was an unthinkable fate.

The positive good argument owed much to secular identity construction narratives, which sought to “scientifically” prove that Black people were, due to their intrinsic nature, happier and healthier in conditions of bondage, but the religious argument

made similar claims. Ideologues like Fletcher argued that labor (in the form of slavery) bettered the souls of enslaved Black people, who would fall into sin because of idleness, if left to their own devices. In the words of another prominent religious ideologue:

...Hamitic bondage in America [is] God's plan for ameliorating the condition of the Hamites, and the only feasible one to subject them to God's law of labor, and obedience to the gospel. By doing this we shall better the condition of the slave, and inspire new zeal in the advancing cause of emigration to Africa.<sup>327</sup>

A similar effort to recast hostile action can be found in the “separate but equal” rationale for maintaining racial segregation in the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which attempted to square the realities of segregation with the ideas of the U.S. Constitution’s guarantees of equal rights. In a formal endorsement by the Supreme Court almost 40 years after *Dred Scott*, the majority wrote that the Constitution (as amended after emancipation) “undoubtedly [enforced] the absolute equality of the two races before the law, but, in the nature of things, it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color.” Segregation, the Court wrote, did not inflict a “badge of inferiority” on Black people, even if Black people “put that construction upon it.”<sup>328</sup> While some argued that segregation was a positive good for Black people, a more common justification and the basis of the legal argument was that segregation was *not bad* for Black people. The goal, again, was to convince critics of the hostile action to remain passive, and that no change to the status quo was necessary.

The “positive good” argument does not function solely as a defense of the status quo, but it is arguably more effective when it seeks to demobilize potential eligible in-group opponents to accept the way things are. The positive good narrative benefits from the impulses described in Jost’s System Justification Theory (Chapter 2), which argues that people have a predisposition to perceive an existing state of affairs as just. The positive good narrative seeks to exploit that tendency, increasing support for the status quo while reducing the perceived moral benefit of changing an existing system. As a defense of the status quo, the positive good argument also empowers the use of anecdotal evidence and experiential narratives that are not available to movements seeking to upset the status quo. This can be clearly seen in the proslavery arguments, which

frequently charged that abolitionists who had not lived in the South and interacted with Black people there could not make a fair assessment of slavery's impact.<sup>329</sup>

Some fringe extremists do try to employ the positive good argument for their hostile actions—for instance, many modern white nationalists refer to themselves as separatists and claim that racial segregation benefits all races, not just their in-group.<sup>330</sup> But this is a much tougher row to hoe, and there is little evidence that this line of argument is effective. Critically, this approach differs from the proslavery argument in that it seeks to mobilize and attract disengaged eligible in-group members rather than passivize in-group members who are actively working against the extremist ideology. Such positive good narratives may work to some extent as an enticement to curious non-adherents who seek moral reassurance before exploring an extremist movement. But as a recruit's engagement with the movement deepens and radicalizes, the positive good argument generally fades and eventually vanishes.

#### **7.4.2. The ineligible in-group**

While modern White supremacists, such as Mason and Pierce (Chapter 6), describe an ineligible in-group in the form of “race traitors” (apparently a late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup>-century coinage), I found no evidence that proslavery ideologists attacked abolitionists as members of an ineligible in-group—meaning that proslavery ideologists do not appear to have mounted any serious argument that abolitionists were not White, nor did they argue that abolitionists were in danger of forfeiting White status. Fletcher, in the sections of *Studies on Slavery* not covered herein, refers to abolitionists as “wicked,” foolish, misguided, and disingenuous, but he never questions their Whiteness or suggests they should be expelled from the White in-group. Even these references are relatively few compared to the length of the text.

I did not see evidence for an ineligible in-group in the significant number of ideological texts reviewed for this chapter, and I did not find evidence of such an argument when I searched for relevant terms or phrases in databases of 19<sup>th</sup> century publication and in secondary sources. I cannot rule out that such lines of attack were prosecuted, but I think it's safe to say that they were not prominent, if they existed at all.

I suggest that two factors primarily shape the omission of the ineligible subgroup. First, a very significant part of the argument for slavery was predicated on the establishment of the still relatively nascent concept of race as an inviolable category backed by absolute science and divine mandate. Introducing the rhetoric of ineligibility would have risked undermining those principles at a time when their legitimacy was subject to intense attack. Second, the practice of slavery was only sustainable as a whole of society effort. Any cracks in the unanimity of the in-group threatened to escalate into civil war and the utter collapse of the proslavery legal regime—which is what, in fact, happened. Proslavery advocates were keenly aware of this risk and desperately sought to hold the White in-group together under the status quo. Attacks on the eligibility of other in-group members undermine group unity in profound and difficult-to-repair ways. The rhetoric of race traitors and the ineligible in-group emerged in force only after the battle to preserve slavery had been conclusively lost.

While I think these preliminary ideas likely have some merit, they remain preliminary, and this question is worthy of extensive future research that would trace the origins and development of “race traitor” rhetoric in more detail and examine it through the lens of this dissertation’s analytical approach.

## **7.5. Conclusion: Status quo extremism**

Slavery was the law of the land in the United States from before the nation’s founding, and the practice only ceased because of a disastrous war that left unprecedented numbers of Americans dead.<sup>331</sup> While slavery represented the status quo of American law and society during the ideological outpouring of the early 1800s, the institution clearly faced a grave and existential challenge, both in the eyes of contemporary partisans and as understood today. Indeed, that challenge was the *primary cause* of the high volume of ideological output. With its legitimacy under siege, the proslavery movement crafted ever more elaborate defenses, creating, evolving and detailing White supremacist narratives that would endure long after the last slave was freed. Against this backdrop, the ideological construction of proslavery arguments looks very different from the products created by fringe extremist movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

For modern fringe movements, the boundaries of the extremist in-group are tightly drawn, authored by a limited number of ideologues for very small audiences. Thus, while there are innumerable varieties of White nationalist thought, each is a “private club,” with its own exclusive collection of tenets. Jihadism is even less diverse, with powerful overarching principles and relatively few (albeit important) points of divergence. In both of these strains of fringe extremism, even minor ideological differences can lead to conflict, and even to internecine killing.

As a status quo movement, proslavery ideology was much different—simultaneously more diverse and less fractured. Since these events took place before the advent of modern polling, exact numbers are not available, but certainly something approaching a third or even half of the White U.S. population supported slavery, and ideologues clearly considered some of the remainder to be persuadable. Whatever the precise numbers, the potential audience for ideological arguments for and against slavery was undeniably huge, and the number of ideologues swelled in proportion to demand.

These writers were, for the most part, attempting to retroactively justify an existing practice, and they approached the problem from wildly different perspectives. Divergent secular and religious arguments were often entirely unrelated to each other, and not a few were incompatible with each other. While proslavery ideologues sparred occasionally, their disagreements were generally presented in mild terms and did not result in violent internecine conflict comparable to that seen in the al Qaeda/ISIS split, for example. Critically, while proslavery consensuses conflicted on questions of racial origins and other details, they universally agreed on the definition of the White in-group, the hostile action necessary to maintain the health and success of the in-group (enslavement) and the out-group to whom that action should be addressed (Black people of African descent).

Modern fringe extremists have shed blood over far less profound disagreements. The difference may be explained in part by the nature of the in-group consensus. Neo-Nazism and jihadism are fringe extremist movements, meaning that their beliefs are “far removed from the ordinary.” Within the framework of this dissertation, we would say that these movements promote an extremist in-group consensus reality that sharply

conflicts with the eligible in-group consensus. That incompatibility poses a question that extremist ideologues feel obliged to answer—typically by criticizing members of the eligible in-group for ignorance, complacency and/or corruption.

Proslavery, as a status quo extremist movement, tells a different story. The proslavery consensus was shared by a large number of people, perhaps as much as half the White population, and the difference between the proslavery consensus and the antislavery consensus was much narrower than the difference between, say, neo-Nazism and current mainstream American culture. While antiracist clusters certainly existed in the antebellum United States, it's almost indisputable that a majority of White Americans shared anti-Black racist views, including a very significant portion of the antislavery movement. Relatively few abolitionists advocated for full racial equality, and many thought emancipation should be followed by “colonization” (the expatriation of Black people to Africa) or some other form of strong segregation. The relative similarity of the extremist in-group consensus and the eligible in-group consensus may explain several elements of the proslavery ideological narrative approach.

- **Proslavery was proslavery:** The proslavery movement was very specifically focused on preserving slavery. Differences in rationale (i.e., the reasons why) were far less important than maintaining a unified front against a real and substantial political assault. The overwhelming footprint of the slavery debate in American discourse eclipsed any other potential point of disagreement.
- **Genuine crisis:** The most pervasive crisis narrative—that the South would have to choose between preserving slavery and preserving the Union—was mostly true, lending a sense of urgency to the movement and motivating participants to close ranks against in-group opposition. The (correct) assessment that the nation was hurtling toward civil war may have led partisans to conserve energy and rancor for the outbreak of hostilities. Indeed, many ideologues claimed their writings were intended to *prevent* the outbreak of civil war, unlike modern fringe movements that seek to *spark* one. Importantly, the focus of the crisis was almost exclusively on in-group conflict, mainly because the out-group had very little agency to effect change. However, some of the most severe pro-slavery ideologists



foretold a race war between White and Black people would result in the event that the Union split into sections or dissolved.<sup>332</sup>

- **Significant in-group unity:** Related to the above points, the overall White American in-group consensus was meaningfully grounded in White supremacy. Even many opponents of slavery were racist, and few argued for full racial equality. In other words, while one big issue (slavery) split the eligible in-group, in most other respects the consensus view of reality was fairly similar. Many people on both sides bemoaned the debate over slavery for the divisions it created in an in-group otherwise perceived as strong and fairly unitary. Too much focus on in-group division would risk alienating potential supporters of slavery or mobilizing its opponents. Leveling attacks against uncommitted in-group members may therefore have seemed astrategic and counterproductive. In contrast, a modern fringe movement ideologue knows that most people are already primed to reject their message, shifting the strategic calculus of in-group critiques. This is not to deny the existence of heated disagreements and factional in-group conflict prior to the Civil War, but intra-group rancor was noticeably muted in the texts reviewed for this chapter. However, some degree of selection bias may tinge those results, as texts were selected in part for their emphasis on identity construction.
- **Demobilization:** Although proslavery ideologues predicted the coming of a civil war over slavery, the examples examined herein did not advocate for war, nor did they urge the in-group to prepare for war. Instead, they were overwhelmingly focused on demobilizing in-group opposition—winning the war of public opinion by eroding support for abolition. While some contraindicated examples can certainly be found,<sup>333</sup> the most important and influential ideologues for years cast their appeals firmly in the name of preserving the Union. War, here, was a crisis that could and should be avoided, as compared to the modern fringe extremist concept of acceleration. To prevent Civil War, all that was required was for “good men to do nothing.” Proslavery ideologues sought foremost to convince opponents of slavery to sit back and do nothing, thus preserving the status quo.

- **Out-group focus of ideology:** Unlike the modern fringe texts examined in previous chapters, proslavery ideologies were overwhelmingly focused on describing and contextualizing the out-group as inferior and/or corrupt. The factors described above likely contributed to this focus. As previously noted, proslavery ideologues were chiefly concerned with demobilizing in-group opposition, rather than mobilizing supporters. By denigrating the out-group, proslavery ideologues sought to bolster in-group cohesion and convince in-group bystanders to remain bystanders.

As most of these points highlight, the most striking difference between the “status quo extremism” of the proslavery movement and the “fringe extremism” of the modern movements pertains to whether they take a conciliatory or confrontational approach to the in-group. This shows a certain logic. The status quo extremist seeks to subdue challenges to the existing in-group-controlled social hierarchy, while the fringe extremist seeks to empower challenges to the same hierarchy. In these examples at least, the status quo extremist seems committed to maintaining the unity of the in-group at the expense of the out-group, while the fringe extremist perceives divisions within the in-group, and seeks to accentuate and deepen rifts that pertain to how the in-group interacts with out-groups, even going so far as to expel in-group members on the basis of divergence from the in-group prototype.

These observations raise interesting questions about how in-groups split and separate, and whether and how such separations shape extremist impulses and ideological construction. We have seen that uncertainty and hostility can emerge when an in-group consensus reality encounters a conflicting out-group consensus. When an in-group consensus is fractured due to internal conflicts, the resulting uncertainty may be even more profound, and the resulting hostility may be deeper and more dangerous. The next chapter will examine a particularly interesting and possibly controversial example of in-group splitting and the seeds of extremist thought—the separation of early Christian communities from the Jewish identity espoused by the religion’s founders, the emergence of anti-Semitism as a marker of that split, and the subsequent formation of

important elements underpinning future extremist ideologies, including a growing tendency toward out-group demonization and the invention of heresy.

## 8. “Against the Jews”

Through the preceding chapters, some insights have emerged. First, fringe extremist groups are often heavily invested in a critique of their own in-group, which is sometimes presented with even more intensity than criticism of an out-group. Second, this in-group critique can escalate to the point that in-group members are formally disavowed and reassigned to an out-group. Third, the in-group focus may be related to power—our case study of a status quo extremism movement, antebellum slavery, found that ideologues who held political power focused on the out-group far more intensively than did those without power. Fourth, attacks on an out-group may be more effective at demobilizing in-group opposition to an extremist ideology, while attacks on the in-group may be more effective at mobilizing adherents to proactive steps.

Given these dynamics, we turn our lens next to an example of an in-group in transition from the fringes to the center, from powerlessness to power—the formation of the Christian in-group, first as a subset of Judaism and subsequently in opposition to Judaism,<sup>334</sup> an evolution that unfolded concurrently with the invention and articulation of the concept of **heresy**. Refined amid roiling dynamics of division and identity formation, heresy is a mechanism to deem in-group members as potentially ineligible for continued in-group membership.

In many ways, this is a story about the evolution of **differentiation**. The Greek root word *haireseis* describes a benign differentiation based on choice, which evolved and mutated during the early Common Era into the fully articulated concept of heresy, a kind of differentiation deemed toxic by the in-group and believed to demand a corrective response. While we have reason to think extremism predates the invention of heresy,<sup>335</sup> the concept of heresy, as articulated by the early “Church fathers,” has become a powerful tool for asserting extremist identities in the modern world.

To be clear, this dissertation does not assert that Christianity writ large should be considered extremist from its outset in any unambiguous sense. However, the separation of Christianity from Judaism and the innovation of heresy offers a

particularly interesting and consequential example of identity construction, with significant implications for the later emergence of unambiguously extremist trends, Christian and otherwise, including the ancient roots of modern anti-Semitism.

This chapter will argue that the introduction of heresy at the start of the Christian era was a critical step in the evolution of extremism, with far-reaching ramifications due to its subsequent codification and aggressive implementation by early Christian ideological theorists.<sup>336</sup> Essentially, I will argue that heresiology is a key historical development empowering the **systemization** of less articulated psychological tendencies associated with extremism.

I will briefly review selected literature on the development of heresy as a tool for responding to in-group differences. I will then review selected literature on the separation of early Christianity from Judaism and the emergence of a well-defined Christian identity (not to be confused with the capital-I “Christian Identity” sect discussed elsewhere in this dissertation). Finally, I will examine two case studies of highly relevant ideological documents of the early Church: *Against Heresies* by Irenaeus (circa 180 CE) and *Against the Jews* by John Chrysostom (circa 387 CE).

A word on terminology: Orthodoxy and heresy have specific historical and contextual meanings, which will be discussed below. While orthodoxy carries an implication of “correct” or “true” belief, it refers here to a *dominant in-group consensus* about which beliefs or practices are correct, true, and intrinsic to an in-group’s definition and membership eligibility.<sup>337</sup> As we will see, dominance is a fluid state and cannot always be clearly established during this time period. It may be more useful to think about orthodoxy and heresy as both process and product, pertaining to the *establishment* of dominance and its subsequent *enforcement*.

Accordingly, heresy is defined here as the designation by a dominant in-group consensus that certain beliefs and practices are forbidden to in-group members. In other words, “whoever deviates from [an asserted majority] consensus is, by definition, a heretic” (Pagels, 1996).<sup>338</sup> Left unchecked, heretical beliefs or improper practices may fully disqualify a person or group from in-group membership, resulting in apostasy, the expulsion of said people and groups from the in-group and their formal reassignment to

an out-group. In the language of this dissertation, accusations of heresy are the raw materials from which an ineligible in-group is constructed.

## **8.1. A Jewish in-group**

Many elements of earliest Christianity are historically uncertain, due to the paucity of reasonably objective contemporaneous sources, but few historians would dispute that the religion was founded by a Jewish man, Jesus, who preached mainly to Jewish people during his lifetime, and whose first followers were primarily Jewish. Jesus would have seen himself as Jewish, and his followers during his lifetime would have considered themselves to be Jews, an identity that even their Jewish critics would have acknowledged as legitimate.

Over the first four centuries of Christianity's history, Jewish and Christian identities separated, first by defining Christianity as something explicitly distinct from Judaism, later by characterizing Christianity and Judaism as identities that were not only distinct but antagonistic and mutually exclusive.<sup>339</sup>

The term "Christian" was not used during the life of Jesus, emerging only after his death. Early Christian identity was multifaceted and covered an impressive range of competing practices and beliefs, which were eventually consolidated into what is commonly referred to as "orthodoxy," a particular iteration of Christian creed institutionalized in the fourth century by the Roman church at the urging of Emperor Constantine I. Historians today have largely rejected the idea that a true Christian orthodoxy, in the sense of a singular "correct" belief or tradition dating back to the religion's founding, can be reliably identified. Instead, informed in part by 20<sup>th</sup> century archeological discoveries, most scholars today agree that many competing Christocentric ideologies sprang into existence almost immediately after the death of Jesus, some of which persisted for centuries.<sup>340</sup>

### 8.1.1. Pre-Christian conception of heresy

The consolidation of orthodoxy was a process of validation for a single specific creed and single scriptural canon, and the invalidation of many other ideas and texts, a process that started early and became increasingly systematic during the second century C.E.<sup>341</sup> Validation and invalidation processes can take a number of forms. For proto-orthodox Christians, **heresiology** became the tool of choice.

The practice of heresiology emerged and was reified concurrent with the rise of “orthodox” Christianity, but some elements likely derived from contemporaneous Jewish thought. Jewish identity narratives had long included contentious in-group framings, telling the story of God’s “chosen” people and their constant opposition and oppression at the hands of alien nations.<sup>342</sup> Around 100 BCE, members of a religious community based in or near Qumran, near the Dead Sea,<sup>343</sup> began to reframe the struggle over Jewish (or the nation of Israel’s) identity in even harsher terms, a struggle against enemies who were internal rather than external. The Qumran community introduced relatively novel ideological elements to Jewish thought, which would eventually contribute to the modern conceptualization of heresy. Many of these elements will be familiar to scholars of extremism, including:

- Sectarianism, the elevation of one particular strain of belief over others within the same eligible in-group, in this case, Judaism. The Qumran community’s sectarianism included:
  - A strong eligible in-group critique, including an argument that the Qumran sect represented the “one true Israel”, and that other self-professed Jews were illegitimate.
  - A fixation on purity and purification.
  - An “us versus them” paradigm of hostility toward those outside the sect.
  - Apocalyptic dualism, the belief that the world is caught up in a cosmic war between the forces of good and evil, with those outside the sect believed to be aligned with Satan.
- Excommunication based on doctrinal difference,<sup>344</sup> what was then a largely novel mechanism to expel nonconforming members from a religious in-group on the

basis of incorrect belief (as opposed expulsion on the basis of incorrect practices, for which there is more precedent).<sup>345</sup>

- Eschatology, the belief that the end of history is imminent.<sup>346</sup>

The Qumran community's religious texts (and some other material) were discovered during 20th century archaeological digs and dubbed the Dead Sea Scrolls. A number of theories address the likely identity of the Qumran community.<sup>347</sup> Some scholars believe John the Baptist and/or Jesus may have had direct social ties to the Qumran community.<sup>348</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation, it's sufficient to note that the heresiology of early Christianity likely represents an evolution of ideological tools inherited from the Qumran community, or it may include some parallel development.

More definitely, the literature broadly agrees that many components intrinsic to the conceptualization of heresy are reliably dated to the period just before and concurrent with the life of Jesus, after which the concept was more formally developed by early Christian "church fathers," as part of their struggle to define and control the course of the new religion. This internal battle was not driven only by social identity dynamics but by pragmatism. For instance, a very early articulation of Christian heresy came in a letter from Church father Justin Martyr to the Roman emperor, in which Justin argues that Rome has no quarrel with "right-thinking" Christians, but rather with people who called themselves Christians but whose ideologies came from demons.<sup>349</sup>

Christians did not invent heresy from the whole cloth, but they developed the concept in its modern form and spread it throughout the world. The preceding discussion is meant as an acknowledgement that the origins of the mechanics of heresy are not exclusively Christian, and it should be further noted that other Jewish theological schools were developing their own versions of heresiology concurrently with the Christian development.<sup>350</sup> Both Christian and Jewish conceptions of heresy and apostasy undoubtedly shaped the development of corresponding ideas in Islam. Other non-Western religions include heresy or similar concepts, but in a less central role, and generally developing later, often with some debt owed to the Christian formulation.<sup>351</sup>



I feel comfortable asserting that the Christian iteration of the concept is the most clearly influential and directly consequential on the historical stage, initially due to its association with Roman imperial power and later to its role in such large-scale historical events as the Crusades and the Inquisitions. Christian heresiology also developed in tandem with the crafting of important ideological components of anti-Semitism, many of which continue to influence modern extremist movements.

For all these reasons, this chapter will focus primarily on Christian heresiology as a key formative concept in the modernization of extremist ideologies, starting in the “middle of the second century, when Christian writers start to employ it with the technical sense of incorrect doctrine, religious deviance, or error” (Royalty, 2013).<sup>352</sup>

## **8.2. Prime in-groups and emergent in-groups**

Virtually all scholars agree that “ancient Christianity was itself a type of Judaism” (Fredriksen, 2010).<sup>353</sup> For mostly obvious reasons, the New Testament is overflowing with strong characterizations of “the Jews.” Jesus was Jewish, living and preaching to Jews in a Jewish community. Both his supporters and his enemies were overwhelmingly Jewish, and his Jewish opponents figure prominently in the narrative passed down surrounding his death.<sup>354</sup>

Written a generation or more after the death of Jesus by pseudonymous authors who did not witness the events described, the gospels reflect the ways that Christians increasingly sought to redefine themselves as something more than or other than Jewish. This transition did not happen instantly, but it happened swiftly.

One of the ironies of early Christianity is that Jesus himself was a Jew who worshiped the Jewish God, kept Jewish customs, interpreted the Jewish law, and acquired Jewish disciples, who accepted him as the Jewish messiah. Yet, within just a few decades of his death, Jesus’s followers had formed a religion that stood over-against Judaism. How did Christianity move so quickly from being a Jewish sect to being an anti-Jewish religion? (Ehrman, 2005)<sup>355</sup>

The epistles of Paul were likely written between approximately 48 and 62 CE,<sup>356</sup> followed by the gospel of Mark around 70 CE, Matthew and Luke around 80 to 85 CE, and John around 90 to 95 CE.<sup>357</sup>

The gospels as we know them were largely composed in the wake of a Jewish catastrophe—the Jewish-Roman wars and especially the destruction of the Second Temple by Rome in 70 CE. The written works that followed that event (both Jewish and Christian) reflect decades of meaning-making over a crisis that struck at the heart of Jewish national and religious identity, creating tremendous stress and uncertainty for those who identified with Judaism. The entangled questions about what it meant to be Jewish and what it meant to be Christian were heightened by this dramatic upheaval.<sup>358</sup>

To discuss the separation of Jewish and Christian identities, I propose the following terminology:

- **Prime in-group:** The referent in-group and social context from which a new in-group emerges and is situated. “Prime” here denotes an earlier position in chronology rather than carrying any implication of merit or authenticity.
- **Emergent in-group:** A subdivision of a prime in-group in the process of adopting an explicitly distinct identity. The distinct identity may have a doctrinal or demographic element, or it may be based on other criteria. In some cases, an emergent in-group may view the prime in-group as its eligible in-group (i.e., the group from which the emergent group seeks to attract adherents), but as the process of emergence advances, the prime in-group may be reclassified as an ineligible in-group or an out-group.

Emergent in-groups sometimes, perhaps typically, function as sects. I have chosen this alternative language because sects can stabilize over time, while emergent in-groups are defined by a *process* of differentiation. Potential outcomes of this process include:

1. The emergent in-group adopts a stable sectarian identity under the umbrella of the prime in-group, for instance, as a religious order or cloistered community.
2. The emergent in-group abandons its efforts to modify or compete with the prime in-group, and its adherents return to the fold.

3. The emergent in-group prompts a modification to the prime in-group's identity to align the latter with the former's new beliefs or practices.
4. The prime in-group suppresses or destroys the emergent in-group through violence or by other means.
5. The emergent in-group fully disaffiliates with the prime in-group to form a new and distinct in-group identity. Disaffiliation may be enacted by the emergent group or demanded by the prime group. Disaffiliation can be peaceful but is often contentious, especially in the case of strongly held identities.

At first, emergent in-groups usually identify as part of the prime in-group while prioritizing specific doctrinal elements, such as ministering to the poor or living chastely. For a time, they may continue to affiliate with the prime in-group identity in spite of disagreements or even open conflict, such as the contemporary Traditional Latin Mass movement, which sits uneasily within the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>359</sup>

When co-existence is not possible or sustainable, emergent in-groups may disaffiliate from their prime groups, either by renouncing the prime in-group identity and declaring a new, exclusive identity, or by declaring that the prime in-group has become corrupt, illegitimate or invalid (*ineligible* in the language of this dissertation) and assuming for itself the mantle of the one true in-group. In either instance, the emergent in-group tends to claim the mantle of legitimacy once accorded to the original group. Alternatively, the emergent group may be expelled by the prime group, or the prime and emergent groups may both take steps that contribute to mutual separation.

While these terms most accurately describe Christianity's emergence from Judaism, proto-orthodox authors also created a parallel narrative of prime and emergent groups within the Christian in-group. As the orthodox identity was constructed, heresiologists proceeded from a conception of "truth before error"—the belief that one "true" church existed first, with "heretical" sects emerging from the orthodox in-group at a later time. As will be discussed below, the accuracy of this framing is debatable at best.<sup>360</sup>

### **8.2.1. Emergent in-group critique of prime in-group**

Since the earliest Christians were also Jewish, the movement's initial in-group critique was naturally aimed at other Jewish people, seeking to explain why all members of the Jewish prime in-group did not embrace the emergent in-group's beliefs. Early Christian in-groups (circa first century C.E.) maintained an unstable and often contentious relationship with their Jewish prime in-group. Some early Christians scrupulously upheld Jewish laws and practices, while others relaxed those demands in order to prioritize the conversion of non-Jews to Christianity.<sup>361</sup> In turn, some Jewish leaders reportedly rejected Christians altogether, declaring them *ineligible*, forcing them out of synagogues and exiling them from the daily life of the Jewish community.<sup>362</sup>

All of this took place in the midst of heated debates about almost every other theological and ideological tenet of Christianity, from the question of whether Jesus was God to creation myths to the nature of evil and more. None of these creedal issues were authoritatively decided in the first century after the death of Jesus, and so Christian ideology was extraordinarily fluid for a long period.

In this environment, differentiation between Jewish identity and Christian identity escalated, starting from initial disagreements and expanding over time into animosity and open hostility from Christians toward Jews. This change, reflected in the New Testament and in other early Church texts, played out concurrently with efforts to establish a Christian orthodoxy that differentiated not just between Christianity and Judaism but among several competing strains of Christian belief.

### **8.2.2. Caveats**

Before discussing this evolution, some important disclaimers should be noted. First, the story of Jewish Christianity and the separation of Christianity from Judaism is complex and incompletely attested in the historical record. Specifically, the canonization of certain texts in the second through fourth centuries CE prioritized the preservation of anti-Jewish content over less hostile content, skewing the corpus. Early Christian

attitudes toward Judaism were far from universally negative, but surviving texts tend to emphatically highlight such negativity.<sup>363</sup>

Second, while some key elements and mechanisms of modern antisemitic ideologies formed during early and late antiquity, it would be a mistake to fully conflate or equate these early ideologies to their modern successors. Ideas and narratives change constantly, even within a single generation, let alone over millennia. Nevertheless, if history doesn't precisely repeat, it rhymes,<sup>364</sup> and the similarities to modern iterations of antisemitic ideology are striking.

Third, this chapter does not seek to provide a comprehensive description of either early Christianity or the root causes of anti-Semitism. Following the methodology of the previous case studies, this chapter will examine the manifestations of identity dynamics in selected texts. As this dissertation is primarily focused on extremism, by design it will highlight negative dynamics rather than providing a holistic portrait. For a more nuanced view of this period, readers may consult the many scholars cited herein, who have studied this complex transition more comprehensively.<sup>365</sup>

Fourth, this section of the dissertation is more reliant on third-party analysis and translation than the preceding sections, since the author does not read the ancient languages of the primary sources. Subtleties of translation are often important, and many of these texts have been translated by Christian or Catholic scholars. Except where noted, the translations cited herein are generally considered accurate, but some translator bias may creep through. Additionally, some of the surviving texts discussed herein have undergone dramatic revision and redaction throughout their histories, as opposed to the texts in the previous chapters, which exist for the most part as their authors intended.

Fifth, it's important to note that the meaning and significance of these early texts are often contested among scholars of the Qumran community and/or early Christianity, and that future archeological finds could potentially transform our understanding of this material and its historical context.

Finally, parallel to the question of whether early Christians thought of themselves as Jews is the question of whether Jews thought of early Christians as Jews, and whether and how Jewish ideologists engaged in acts of identity construction. Here, I follow Judaism scholar Daniel J. Lasker, who notes, “Although there are anti-Christian statements in the *Talmud* and some *midrashim* ... in the first eight centuries of Christianity, there was no sustained and comprehensive Jewish critique of this religion.”<sup>366</sup> In other words, surviving critiques did not generally rise to the level of ideological complexity this dissertation is concerned with.

The complexity of the social setting offers a lot to consider, but the disparity may chiefly reflect the existential need for an emergent group to justify its emergence. In contrast, an established prime in-group may not need to address a breakaway in ideologically rigorous ways. Jewish critiques of Christianity in later periods are worthy of study but substantially post-date separation and are therefore beyond the scope of this chapter.

Jewish communities certainly came into conflict with Christians, in some cases as aggressors. Conflicts discussed below include the alleged expulsion of Christians from Jewish communities and alleged violent attacks on Christians by some Jews, such as Saul, who would later convert to Christianity and become the apostle Paul. These claims and related historical context will be discussed, but it’s important to remember that the Christian authors of these accounts may not be reliable narrators.

This chapter was undertaken with close attention to these limitations.

### **8.3. Entitativity in Paul (33-65 CE)**

The earliest surviving Christian texts, canonical or otherwise, are the epistles of Paul. Paul was deeply invested in establishing a proto-orthodoxy of Christian belief, by explaining doctrine and correcting what he characterized as “errors” among the Christian communities to whom the epistles are addressed.

Religious scholar Robert Royalty refers to this as a “rhetoric of difference.”<sup>367</sup> Proto-orthodox ideological theorists sought to establish their forms of belief as distinct and superior, in order to maintain the loyalty of their followers and advance their followers’

understanding of the religion. I choose to use the word “differentiation” to highlight the agency of the ideologists who authored the texts on which I base my analyses, an especially important qualification given how much is not known about early Christian communities. Difference may occur organically; differentiation is actively cultivated during the process of in-group **categorization** (see 2.1).

The view of Paul as a champion of orthodoxy is retrospective, since orthodoxy did not exist in any meaningful way at the time of his writing, a fact that can be clearly seen in Paul’s disputes with the apostles Peter and James and other church leaders.<sup>368</sup> The epistles reflect Paul’s desire to impose ideological coherence and consistency on his community, but they are considered to stop short of formal heresiology, in part because Paul does not emphasize ideological enforcement tactics.<sup>369</sup> For instance, while Paul discusses excommunication in one letter, the tactic is raised due to a church member’s sexual transgression, rather than a doctrinal distinction (this is discussed in more detail later in this chapter).<sup>370</sup>

Paul’s narrative nevertheless emphasizes the urgency of theological conformity, often expressed through injunctions to imitate his example, an approach that “indicts the very notion of difference, and thereby constructs the nature of early Christian social relationship; Christians are Christians insofar as they strive for the privileged goal of *sameness*” (Castelli, 1991, emphasis added).<sup>371</sup> In the context of this dissertation, one would argue that Paul is strongly concerned with *entitativity*—urging Christians to embrace “clear boundaries, shared goals[,] common fate”<sup>372</sup> and “internal homogeneity.”<sup>373</sup> This trend toward increasing entitativity would continue through the generations that followed, culminating in the pivotal fourth-century merger of Christianity with the imperial power of Rome.

Paul does not *explain* the contours of Christian belief so much as *invent* them. Christian doctrine was nascent and unformed during the years of his ministry, which ran from roughly 33 to 65 CE, starting soon after the death of Jesus. Paul’s epistles are evidence of the new religion’s indistinct nature, devoted as they are to settling often-unprecedented disputes over both beliefs and practices in various localities.

Christianity had no clear mechanism to resolve such disputes. Paul's injunctions to imitate his example—his reliance on his own personal charisma and authoritative reputation—stem in part from the absence of an accessible hierarchy (or a **recipe-knowledge** method) to establish the boundaries of in-group belief and practice. This effort was wildly successful by any measure.<sup>374</sup>

Our received story of Paul suggests that his advocacy of conformity may derive in part from his personality. By all accounts, including his own, Paul was an over-zealous member of the Pharisaism movement (“the Pharisees”) who aggressively persecuted Christians before becoming one.<sup>375</sup> Some converts with such tendencies identify with a new religion very intensely and quickly take part in strong expressions of out-group derogation, although this experience is not universal or even necessarily typical.<sup>376</sup>

Entitativity, or “groupiness,” can be understood here as an important component of differentiation. An emergent in-group cannot differentiate from its parent in-group until it attains a high level of sect-specific “groupiness.” Encouraging in-group homogeneity—as Paul does in his epistles—is an important step toward creating emergent in-group prototypes (different from those of the prime in-group) and establishing clear boundaries about whom the emergent in-group includes or excludes.

The epistles of Paul, written decades before the earliest gospels, attempt to generate entitativity—the homogeneity and clear boundaries associated with “groupiness”—but they fall short of presenting a complete picture of a singular Christian religion. As more Christian texts were produced, ideological theorists attempted to enhance entitativity by differentiating Christianity from Judaism and establishing a dominant Christian faction in increasingly strident terms.

The narrative elements surrounding the death of Jesus were well-established by the time the gospels were written. Jesus had not died in his sleep. He was killed by enemies. Even the most skeletal narrative tradition necessarily included an explanation of who those enemies were and why they did what they did. And the authors of the gospels, writing in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple, had more to fear from the Romans than the Jews.



“The Jews” came to be “discursive formations, not social formations” (Royalty, 2013), or in the language of extremism, an intimate enemy.<sup>377</sup> The evangelists take pains to show how Jesus meets the criteria of a Jewish messiah and how his life fulfils Jewish prophecy and confounds Jewish law.<sup>378</sup> Jewish traditions are contextualized to support the exalted status of Jesus, and Jews who fail to recognize Jesus are judged harshly and even demonized. In contrast, as described in the next section, the gospels often depict pagans as better attuned to Jesus’s exalted status than members of his Jewish own in-group.<sup>379</sup>

## **8.4. Differentiation in the gospels**

A certain degree of conflict is baked into the origin story of Christianity, whose central feature is the betrayal and execution of Jesus at the behest of Jewish enemies. But that narrative was the result of evolution over time, and the progression of Christianity into an anti-Jewish religion was not inevitable. Individual ideologues shaped the direction of the young religion in myriad ways. An especially illustrative example can be found in the “Passion narratives” of the canonical gospels—detailed descriptions of the trial and execution of Jesus that evolved significantly over the course of 50 years.

The gospels contain historical evidence of a sort, but they are not histories. The authors are not primarily concerned with attempting to preserve a factual record of events. The gospels are “theological treatises” written with the “outward form of a biography.”<sup>380</sup> Although informed by historical tradition and the contents of prior texts, each gospel imposes its author’s ideological framework on the story, altering small and large data points in the process. The Passion accounts, therefore, are best understood as a skeletal collection of early traditions, which may or may not be fundamentally accurate, but which indisputably contain a significant amount of editorial embellishment.

The early oral tradition likely stipulates that Jesus was arrested by the Romans, that his case was reviewed by Jewish religious authorities and then decided by Pontius Pilate, resulting in his execution by Roman authorities, most likely on charges of sedition, or some similar pretextual charge.<sup>381</sup> Almost everything else in the Passion narratives was likely embellished, including and especially the parts of the narrative that pertain to the

role of the Jewish community in Jesus's arrest and execution. Read chronologically, the assignment of blame in each gospel reflects a deepening hostility toward Jews.

#### **8.4.1. Mark (70 CE)**

From the earliest gospel onward, Jesus is depicted in conflict with Jewish leaders of the day. Just before the Passion narrative begins in Mark, Jesus predicts the destruction of the Jewish temple<sup>382</sup> and warns his followers of future conflicts with Jewish authorities, saying they will “be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues.” Immediately after this prediction of in-group conflict, Jesus predicts a period of intimate in-group betrayal—“brother will betray brother” and children will cause the deaths of parents.<sup>383</sup> This passage likely reflects the “precarious” relationship between early Christians and Jews at the time of Mark's composition, which was concurrent with or shortly after the Temple's destruction.<sup>384</sup>

According to Mark, the plot to kill Jesus originates with Jewish sects—specifically the Pharisees, Saducees and Herodians—as well as the scribes, who were akin to lawyers. Together, these groups comprised the elites of Jewish society at the time, and Mark frames the death of Jesus as the result of an “internal Jewish conflict.”<sup>385</sup> His reasons for doing so were not *necessarily* ideological or historical. Writing in the immediate aftermath of the Roman destruction of the Jewish temple about a Jewish man crucified by Rome for seditious (or sedition-adjacent) statements, Mark had compelling reasons to cast the Jesus movement as unthreatening toward the empire, a motivation shared by the gospel writers who followed him.<sup>386</sup>

#### **8.4.2. Matthew (80-85 CE)**

The gospel of Matthew borrows content from Mark, sometimes verbatim, but adds a layer of narrative that was taken from a different early tradition, as well as inventions or embellishment particular to its pseudonymous writer. The pressures implied by Mark's “brother against brother” prophecy had intensified after that gospel's composition, with early Christians likely feeling increasingly marginalized by Jewish rejection of the new

sect's increasingly differentiated ideology. At the same time, Christianity was absorbing an influx of Gentile converts who had no particular ties to Judaism, and who did not observe Jewish practices such as diet and (especially) circumcision.<sup>387</sup> As a result, the attitudes of Christians toward Jews were rapidly changing, with adherents “asserting that [Christianity] was more authentic than its parent group” (Nickelsburg, 1985).<sup>388</sup>

Matthew's rhetorical focus narrowed to the Pharisaic movement, which he viewed as the chief competition to Christian proselytization. At the time Matthew's gospel was written, the Pharisees emphasized scrupulous adherence to Jewish practices, while Christians were increasingly permitting Gentile converts to neglect or reject them.<sup>389</sup> In Matthew, the Pharisees are the first to plot the death of Jesus, and Jesus attacks them in strong terms, as “sons of the evil one,” a “brood of vipers” and “children of hell.” This rhetoric of **demonization** was a relatively novel tactic in the ancient world but had been seen previously in the Qumran community.<sup>390</sup>

Matthew expands the Passion narrative found in Mark, in consequential ways. Here, the Jewish crowd agitating for Jesus to be crucified threatens to riot before Pilate, who ritually washes his hands of the matter (“I am innocent of this man's blood”). Crucially, Matthew attributes the response to Pilate's words to the “whole [Jewish] nation,” not just its leaders, who collectively state “His blood be upon us and upon our children,”<sup>391</sup> a phrase that would fuel antisemitic ideologies for centuries to come.

The introduction of this language marks a critical pivot from a pseudo-historical narrative that blamed specific Jewish people for Christ's execution to a meta-narrative that blamed *all Jews in perpetuity*.

#### **8.4.3. Luke (80-85 CE)**

Luke's gospel introduces a concrete role in the Passion narrative for Satan, a personality who was relatively new in Jewish/Christian ideology. In the Jewish scriptures (including the Old Testament), a *satan* is an angel of God who acts at God's behest, rather than being the proper name of a singular malevolent enemy of God. The *satan* appears throughout the gospels at various times as a tempter, possessing spirit or adversary, but

Luke is the first to implicate him in betrayal of Jesus, which is instigated when “Satan entered into Judas Iscariot.”<sup>392</sup>

Luke also recasts the identity of the soldiers who arrest Jesus, depicting them as Jews directed by the “chief priests and temple offices and elders” instead of Romans. Jesus accuses the Jewish leaders of exercising “the power of darkness” against him. In Luke, as in Matthew, “all the people” join in the call for Jesus’s execution, although Luke omits the “blood upon us” language found in Matthew. Pontius Pilate is depicted here as being even more reluctant to execute Jesus than in Mark and Matthew, arguing that Jesus has done no wrong and eventually giving “Jesus over to their [the Jews’] will.” Luke’s rhetoric, in both the Passion narrative and subsequently in the Acts of the Apostles, places the blame for Jesus’s execution firmly on the “men of Israel.”<sup>393</sup>

#### **8.4.4. John (90 to 95 CE)**

The author of John, writing later than any of the other evangelists, emerged from a small Christian community locked in bitter struggle with the local Jewish majority, and his gospel mentions Jewish leaders expelling followers of Jesus from the synagogues, which likely reflects the author’s own experience.

As previously noted, while this dissertation examines Christian texts, the separation between Judaism and Christianity was not entirely one-sided. As one scholar puts it, the account in John likely reflects, to some extent, “Christian resentment and disappointment” about being excluded from Jewish communities.<sup>394</sup> John’s gospel depicts the Christian community as a minority subject to persecution by Jewish people, with his gospel using the word “Jew” more often than any of the others, often in the context of people who oppose Jesus. The word “Jew” begins to serve as a proxy for all unbelievers, those who have heard the message of Jesus but refused it.<sup>395</sup>

The Passion narrative, here expanded to fill half the gospel, blames Jews for every aspect of Jesus’s arrest, trial, and execution, which John depicts as revolving around religious charges rather than political sedition. Here, Pilate is merely a means to an end—a plot device that allows Jewish leaders to execute Jesus, since they claim to lack the authority to enforce a death penalty.<sup>396</sup> In John’s narrative, the Romans become,

improbably, malleable tools in the hands of nefarious Jewish elites. Pilate here tries everything imaginable to save Jesus from enraged Jewish leaders and a furious Jewish crowd, but he capitulates in the end, out of fear.<sup>397</sup>

The gospel also sharply increases the rhetoric of demonization regarding Jesus's Jewish opponents. In one scene, Jesus accuses some "Jews who believed in him" of plotting his death. The Jewish followers defend themselves strongly in the language of the in-group—as "legitimate [...] descendants of Abraham"—prompting a scathing, dehumanizing response from Jesus:

You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.<sup>398</sup>

In John, Jewishness becomes synonymous with not just evil, but the cosmic, supernatural evil of Satan and his minions. The text is clear in making this association, although many Christian theologians have sought recontextualize or reinterpret this obviously problematic concept.<sup>399</sup> But for early Christians writing in John's wake, animosity toward Jews and other disbelievers became an ever more visible article of faith and mechanism of in-group solidarity.

#### **8.4.5.        Uncertainty after the end of the Second Temple period**

While a full exploration of this historical period is outside the scope of this dissertation, it's worth noting that conditions in Jewish and Christian communities were ripe for the development of toxic identity dynamics. The Roman siege on Jerusalem, culminating with the destruction of the temple, killed and displaced thousands of people—enough to make a "demographic impact"—while destroying the most visible symbol of Jewish faith and tradition.<sup>400</sup> The event was profoundly disorienting for Jews and for Christians, many of whom still considered themselves Jews at the time.

Coming at a time when Christians were struggling with how to differentiate themselves from Judaism, the destruction was seen by some Christians as a punishment from God

for the Jewish rejection of Jesus and his teachings, and the gospel authors describe Jesus as predicting the Temple's punishing destruction.<sup>401</sup> Hot on the heels of a bitter in-group contest for ideological legitimacy, it's not hard to see how this event would harden Christian attitudes toward their parent group, enveloping their ideological criticisms in "objective" righteousness as the parent group visibly weakened and the emergent in-group continued to grow. The fractious nature of this split may have contributed to Christian ideological theorists taking a very hard line toward internal dissent as the movement grew in popularity during the second century of the Common Era.

## 8.5. The *Adversus* genres

Christianity originated as a Jewish sect but almost immediately divided into still more Christian sects. Some early Christians strictly observed Jewish law, likely including a group around the apostle James, known as the brother of Jesus.<sup>402</sup> Others argued that Jesus had come to overthrow the Jewish law. In Paul's epistles and the Acts of the Apostles, written by the author of the gospel of Luke, clear divisions can be seen over whether Jewish law must be maintained, and if so, by whom. Many non-Jews (pagans and other "Gentiles") sought to become Christian but did not wish to observe Jewish dietary restrictions. Adult male pagans also, understandably, resisted mandatory circumcision.

During the second to fourth centuries CE, twin genres of ideological rhetoric emerged as part of the drive to shore up a concrete Christian identity— *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies) and *Adversus Iudaeos* (Against the Jews). Each genre contains multiple entries, written by some of the most important "Church fathers," many of whom wrote examples of each.<sup>403</sup> Both anti-heretic and anti-Jewish texts proceeded from a conception of orthodoxy, or rather the adoption of the mantle of orthodoxy, in an effort to consolidate a faith beset by a bewildering array of proliferating sects and often-conflicting scriptures. The *Adversus* genres were notable for constructing Christian identity by means of exclusion, working to define what Christianity *was* in the context of what Christianity *was not*.

This rhetorical approach was deemed necessary to control the in-group consensus. Both “heretics” and observant Jews could legitimately claim to be part of the Christian in-group if they followed the teachings of Jesus in some way. Judaism had only recently given rise to Christianity, and even the proto-orthodox authors had adopted Jewish scriptures as part of the emerging Christian canon. Meanwhile, heresies were still very much in the eye of the beholder. The authors of many landmark anti-heresy tracts themselves held beliefs that their peers and their successors would deem heretical.

At least four major Christian movements existed during the second and third centuries, each of which existed in multiple variations,<sup>404</sup> as well as an unknown number of smaller sects. Some believed Jesus was a wise but purely mortal teacher. Some thought Jesus was born mortal and became God after his death and resurrection. Others claimed that Jesus was only God and had never been mortal, and that he had not died at all. Many members of the Gnostic movement held that the Jewish God was a “demiurge” who had created a world filled with evil, while the “true” God existed on a higher plane.<sup>405</sup> Within this chaos, the proto-orthodox movement was only one among many, and it is only considered orthodox today because it eventually won out over the others.

Proto-orthodox Church fathers sought to take control of the Christian movement and define Christian identity in exclusionary terms, by attacking those they deemed ineligible for membership in the in-group. Their key weapon was heresiology—the elaboration of rigid guidelines for beliefs and practices that would determine who could legitimately claim to be part of the Christian in-group and who could not.

The *Adversus* genres are large, including works from early Christian thinkers such as Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Epiphanius, Cyprian of Carthage, Gregory of Nyssa and more. Each of these writers featured elements of interest. I have chosen to examine here two works widely considered to be among the most historically important and impactful—*Adversus Haeresis* (180 CE), by Catholic saint and Church father Irenaeus of Smyrna, and *Adversus Judeaeos* (circa 387 CE), by Catholic saint and Church father John Chrysostom. The texts selected for analysis in this chapter are among the best-documented, most studied, and most thoroughly articulated exercises in identity construction among early Christians.

Irenaeus is a figure of tremendous importance in the history of the Catholic Church, perhaps most significantly in his selection of the four “authentic” gospels to be included in the Christian canon, which he did as part of *Against Heresies*.<sup>406</sup> “No one has presented a more unified account of God, the world and history than has Irenaeus,” wrote scholar Eric Osborn, describing his writing as contextualized in scholarship as a faithful record of the “common doctrine of the ancient church.”<sup>407</sup> His writings and analysis of heresy were understood to be consequential both by his contemporaries in the ancient church and by later generations.<sup>408</sup> In *The Origin of Heresy*, Richard Royalty asserts that heresy was “invented” by Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, with the latter “clearly [showing] the internal policing of the community.”<sup>409</sup> Irenaeus is also “the earliest author in which early Christian heresiological discourse comes to full fruition.”<sup>410</sup> Justin was earlier, but Irenaeus was more comprehensive.

John Chrysostom was a figure of similar stature, “one of the most studied figures in early eastern Christianity.”<sup>411</sup> The Catholic Church remembers him as a saint and Church father, “generally considered the most prominent doctor of the Greek Church and the greatest preacher ever heard in a Christian pulpit.”<sup>412</sup> Nearly 1,000 surviving written works are attributed to him, including sermons and letters, covering a vast range of topics and scriptural analyses.

He is also remembered for his bigotry toward gay people<sup>413</sup> and his notorious animus toward the Jews. His arguments in this regard were prefigured by some of the same thinkers who preceded Irenaeus, including Justin Martyr and Tertullian. His *Eight Homilies Against the Jews* represent a fully mature iteration of Christian anti-Jewish discourse, creating, or more charitably, “reveal(ing) a new trend in the attitude toward Jews of some Christian intellectuals in the late fourth century.”<sup>414</sup>

Chrysostom’s influence did not stop in antiquity. *Against the Jews* has a remarkably long shelf-life. From the 1930s through the 1940s, multiple editions of Chrysostom’s writings were published in Germany. *Against the Jews* was cited approvingly by Nazi propagandists and pro-Nazi authors in books with titles like *The Global Jewish Plague*, *Handbook of the Jewish Question* and *Luther and the Jews*,<sup>415</sup> as well as in official Nazi Party publications, some of which cited Chrysostom as a source for the claim that



Jewish people are “thieves.”<sup>416</sup> English translations of *Against the Jews*, available online and in print, are still widely praised by anti-Semites today.<sup>417</sup>

While *Against the Jews* is only part of Chrysostom’s legacy, it has come to dominate in recent years. In the words of Catholic priest and author Edward Flannery, Chrysostom “stands without peer or parallel in the entire literature *Adversus Judaeos*.”<sup>418</sup>

## **8.6. Case study: *Against Heresies* (180 CE)**

Irenaeus was the bishop of Lyons, in modern-day France, around 180 CE, around which time he wrote *Against Heresies*, a five-book opus detailing and refuting what he perceived to be the most important heretical Christian sects active at the time, including Gnostics, Marcionites and Valentinians.<sup>419</sup>

Clocking in at almost 215,000 words, *Against Heresies* makes the tenor of its rhetoric clear from the outset. Irenaeus sets “the church” as the eligible in-group in his system of meaning, and “heretics” as an ineligible in-group whose adherents are in imminent danger of being reassigned to an out-group. The bulk of the text is devoted to constructing eligible and ineligible in-group identities through an extremely detailed account of their respective doctrines.

While the doctrinal differences mattered intensely to Irenaeus, this dissertation is concerned with how he characterizes the battle between “the church” (eligible) and the “heretics” (ineligible). For Irenaeus, this is a war between “truth” and “lies.”<sup>420</sup> His rhetorical approach is two-pronged, seeking to discredit the “heretics” by arguing first that their beliefs contain logical fallacies and second that their beliefs deviate from the “apostolical tradition” handed down by the first followers of Jesus.

Both prongs establish and reinforce the concept of “truth before error.” Irenaeus raises the issue of “truth” again and again, characterizing the church as “the haven of truth,” and the recipient of the “gift of truth,” and the protector of “true knowledge” embodied by “the doctrine of the apostles.” The heretics, in contrast, know only “error” and “falsehood,” whether due to being misguided or due to a malicious desire to manipulate

Christian believers for power, money, or sexual gratification—with the latter charge frequently leveled against heretic ideological leaders.

Even though Irenaeus was writing during a period of great diversity in Christian belief, he allows little room for dissent or disagreement, explaining that he writes to oppose those who “have set the truth aside” with “craftily constructed plausibilities,” falsifications and “machinations.” The heretic ideological theorists are “evil interpreters” of the “good word,” intentionally drawing gullible believers to damnation via “an abyss of madness and of blasphemy against Christ.”

While allowing that many *adherents* of heretical sects are “simple-minded,” misguided, or deceived, Irenaeus had harsh words for the *authors* of heresy. They are:

...utter aliens from the divine nature, the beneficence of God, and all spiritual excellence. But they are altogether full of deceit of every kind, apostate inspiration, demoniacal working, and the phantasms of idolatry, and are in reality the predecessors of that dragon [the antichrist] who, by means of a deception of the same kind, will with his tail cause a third part of the stars to fall from their place, and will cast them down to the earth.

In another passage, Irenaeus writes:

If any one will consider the prophecy referred to, and the daily practices of these men, he will find that their manner of acting is one and the same with the demons.

Striking at the heart of the church, the heretics “corrupt the truth” and “pervert the scriptures,” including by citing texts that Irenaeus believes are distorted versions of “true” scripture or entirely fabricated works, whose authorship is sometimes falsely attributed to the apostles. Irenaeus argues that the bishops of the church were part of an authentic “apostolic succession” that safeguards the truth of the church’s “original” teachings. He legitimates himself as part of this apostolic “succession,” saying he was a disciple of Polycarp, who was in turn said to be a disciple of the Apostle John. This true doctrine, handed down through the apostolic line, was the Christian in-group consensus according to Irenaeus—a sweeping construction of reality from creation to apocalypse, in heaven and on earth.

### 8.6.1. Not yet an out-group

The ineligible in-groups (aka heretics) targeted by Irenaeus have not been clearly assigned to out-group status, a fact that significantly powers the crisis and solution elements of his system of meaning. Irenaeus mentions Satan repeatedly in *Against Heresies*, he generally did so in the context of temptation and inspiration, referring to heresy as being “authored,” “instigated” or “sent forth” by Satan. But significantly, heretics are also associated with “antichrists,” a plural term first found in epistles attributed to John the Evangelist. An infernal or supernatural figure, the antichrist is understood to lead in-group members astray by *pretending to be one of them*. Quoting from one of John’s epistles, Irenaeus writes:<sup>421</sup>

For this reason also [John] has thus testified to us in his Epistle: "Little children, it is the last time; and as ye have heard that Antichrist doth come, now have many antichrists appeared; whereby we know that it is the last time. *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us: but (they departed),* that they might be made manifest that they are not of us. Know ye therefore, that every lie is from without, and is not of the truth. Who is a liar, but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? This is Antichrist."<sup>422</sup>  
[emphasis added]

The phrase “went out from us” describes the in-group identity process of becoming ineligible, characterizing the heretics’ embrace of incorrect beliefs as a decision to begin the process of leaving the in-group. At the most extreme end of the spectrum, they are wolves “covered with sheep’s clothing,” language borrowed from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount—enemies who are merely pretending to be part of the in-group.

The crisis described by Irenaeus is a threat to the unity of the in-group broadly and the in-group consensus view of reality specifically, as defined by doctrinal points such as the trinity, the dual divinity and humanity of Jesus, and the expected bodily resurrection of Christian believers after the end of the world. The “varied and diverse” views of reality held by heretics, “burdened with so great contradictions and perplexities,” threaten to “cleave asunder and separate the unity of the church.”

Thus, the solution proposed by Irenaeus must aspire to heal and restore the unity of the church and its in-group consensus. To fix the problem, Irenaeus employs both tools available to him under social constructionism—*therapy*, an effort to restore the heretics to orthodox thought, and if that fails, *nihilation*, an effort to diminish their importance to the in-group through derogation. As defined in Chapter 2 of this dissertation:

Therapy is a device to manage people within a social network whose perceptions of reality diverge from the consensus. It is an assimilation approach in which the consensus group seeks to modify individual beliefs through social control. This can entail anything from psychotherapy to religious counseling, peer pressure, or even brainwashing. Executing a therapy strategy usually requires a “theory of deviance” to explain why would an individual depart from the consensus in the first place, as well as a method of diagnosing deviance, and a system for correcting it.<sup>423</sup> Nihilation, in contrast, is a form of “negative legitimation” which assigns an inferior status to members of a conflicting consensus that originates outside the group.<sup>424</sup> Nihilation attempts to “account for all deviant definitions of reality *in terms of* concepts from one’s own universe,” (emphasis original).<sup>425</sup>

As a whole, Irenaeus’ text leans heavily toward nihilation, given its strong focus on derogating the heretics’ logical inconsistencies and depraved sexual practices, but much of this fodder is provided, at least nominally, for use in therapy, since “it is impossible for anyone to heal the sick, if he has no knowledge of the disease of the patients.” Irenaeus’ detailed criticisms are intended to be a “severe remedy,” which he compares to cutting away diseased flesh. Overthrowing the pride of the heretics by “confuting” their doctrines and preventing them from going “further into the deep of error,” adherents of the church should then “stretch out the hand unto them” seeking to return “them into the haven of the truth [and] cause them to attain their salvation.”

But there are limits. Quoting Paul, Irenaeus writes that “after the first and second admonition, [orthodox believers should] reject” or “avoid.” Orthodox believers should “flee from (unrepentant heretics) as we would from (the antichrist).”

The more moderate and reasonable among them thou wilt convert and convince, so as to lead them no longer to blaspheme their Creator, and

Maker, and Sustainer, and Lord, nor to ascribe His origin to defect and ignorance; but the fierce, and terrible, and irrational [among them] thou wilt drive far from thee, that you may no longer have to endure their idle loquaciousness.

Irenaeus blames the heretics for a crisis that is leading Christians into sin and error, threatening the unity of the church. The crisis is empowered by the heretics' claimed in-group status and their ability to win over in-group audiences. Irenaeus seeks to deny them the credibility of in-group membership, leading him to a solution that culminates in expulsion from the in-group.

Irenaeus does not mandate that this expulsion be enforced through physical violence; his advice is more akin to shunning, perhaps the least harmful manifestation of extremist crisis-solving. Anything resembling violence was reserved for the afterlife, “not merely temporal, but rendered also eternal.” After death, heretics who had been expelled from the community of God would burn with “unquenchable” and “eternal” fire, words of punishment that Irenaeus repeatedly invokes.

While these crisis and solution narratives are spelled out fairly clearly in the text, it's important to note that they are far less developed than the descriptions of the traits, practices, and beliefs of the eligible and ineligible in-groups. While the Christian church would eventually go on to implement extreme measures against heretics—up to and including torture, execution, and genocide—this early work of Irenaeus is focused on overwhelmingly on identity construction: how to recognize a member of the eligible in-group (the church) and what it means to be ineligible (a heretic). Members of an ineligible in-group are offered opportunities to recant their opposition to the in-group consensus and fully return to the fold. Irenaeus thus urged his readers to attempt to redeem heretics before shunning them, emphasizing the urgent need for in-group unity.

### **8.6.2. An out-group: The Jews in *Against Heresies***

As discussed in the preceding sections, the separation of Christianity from Judaism was gradual and messy, likely beginning soon after the death of Jesus, and characterized by steadily increasing hostility from Christians toward Jews. The *prima facie* reason for

this hostility was that Christians blamed Jews as a collective for the death of Jesus, a culpability that the gospels emphasized more and more as time passed, but the situation also reflected, perhaps to a lesser extent, growing Jewish intolerance of Christian evangelizing and the decision by some Jewish communities to expel some Christians from their in-group.

By the time Irenaeus wrote *Against Heresies*, religious Jews were formally considered an out-group to Christianity, with Jewish and Christian identities considered mutually exclusive by the proto-orthodoxy. In the words of Irenaeus:

[Since the Jews] have rejected the Son of God, and cast Him out of the vineyard when they slew Him, God has justly rejected them, and given to the Gentiles outside the vineyard the fruits of its cultivation.

Irenaeus spends relatively little time discussing Jews, in comparison to heretics, but when he does, he spares little criticism. The Jews are “slayers of the Lord,” he writes, and “their hands are full of blood” for that and for their subsequent “persecution” of the apostles and the church. Irenaeus compared Jewish people to unclean animals, although he made a point of emphasizing that the comparison was “figurative,” in order to comply with the letter of God’s mandate to the apostle Peter that no person should be called unclean.<sup>426</sup>

Irenaeus emphasizes throughout *Against Heresies* that one of the most important and central doctrines of the church is that Jesus died in order to save humanity from its sins and their consequent punishments. The sins of the Jews were, paradoxically, the means of Christian salvation:

For as [Jews in the time of Moses] were saved by means of the blindness of the Egyptians, so are we, too, by that of the Jews; if, indeed, the death of the Lord is the condemnation of those who fastened Him to the cross, and who did not believe His advent, but the salvation of those who believe in Him.

If Jesus had not been killed by the Jews, then the people of the church could not have been saved by his sacrifice.

As part of his arguments against certain specific strains of heretical belief, Irenaeus also emphasizes commonalities between Christianity and Judaism—specifically that the god of Christianity (the father figure in the trinity) is the same entity as the god of the Jews, with all of Jewish history and scriptures presaging the coming of Jesus. This oddly affirming line of argument emerged because some heretics, including many Gnostics, believed that the god depicted in the “Old Testament” was not the true god.

Despite Irenaeus’ anger and hostility toward Jews, the principle of continuity was sacrosanct. Christianity had separated from Judaism and overturned its laws, but “orthodox” Christian belief was inextricably connected to the predecessor in-group. But these facts made the Jewish rejection of Jesus even *more* repugnant to the proto-orthodox, since in the view of Christians like Irenaeus, the Jews should have known better—as opposed to the Gentiles, who had been ignorant of God’s promises.

Despite his harsh words for the Jews and their clear status as a hated out-group, Irenaeus does not recommend hostile action against them at any notable length. Others among the proto-Orthodox “church fathers” would fill that gap.

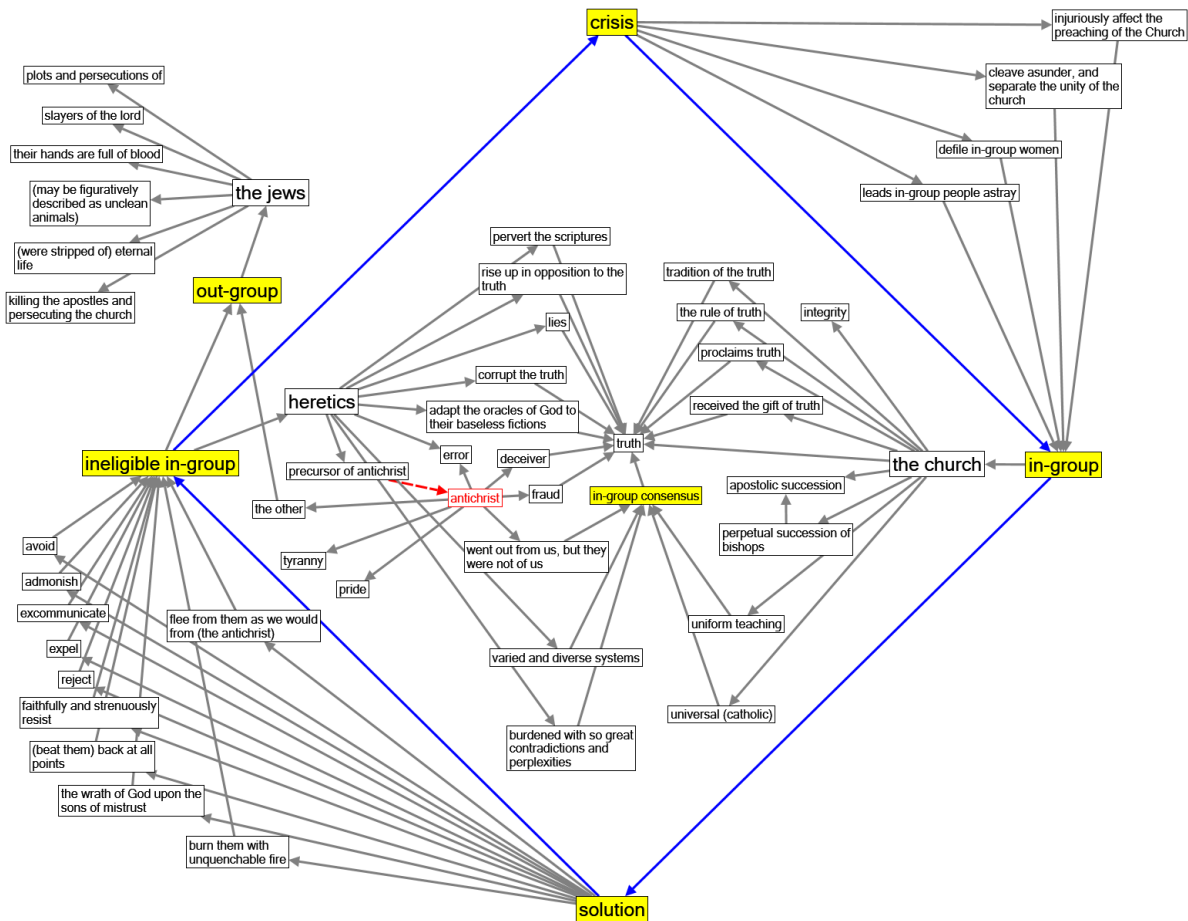


Figure 9: The system of meaning in "Against Heresies." While the text includes a discussion of an out-group (Jewish people), the primary focus is on defining the in-group and which people could properly call themselves "Christian."

## 8.7. Case study: Against the Jews (387 CE)

The drive to suppress heretics evolved in tandem with a drive to eliminate Jewish influences from the early Christian church, and some Church fathers, such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian, active in the second and third centuries CE, published parallel tracts in the *Adversus Haereses* and *Adversus Judaeos* genres.

Affinities between the two rhetorical oeuvres were natural, given their similar dynamics of identity construction and the reification of in-group fractures. Some early *Adversus Judeaos* works, such as Tertullian's, were relatively<sup>427</sup> tame theological arguments about how Jewish scripture foretold the coming of Jesus and why Jews should acknowledge the divinity of Jesus.<sup>428</sup>



Other works more clearly prefigured what we now refer to as anti-Semitism. John Chrysostom, revered as a Church father and canonized as a saint in Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox traditions, was perhaps the most important and certainly the best-remembered contributor to the *Adversus Judaeos* genre.<sup>429</sup> Chrysostom's *Eight Homilies Against the Jews* was not the first or the only expression of Christian anti-Semitism in antiquity, but it fully articulates a mature antisemitic ideology. Over the course of millennia, *Against the Jews* has remained an explicit influence on modern iterations of anti-Semitism, including Nazism (see 8.5).<sup>430</sup>

*Against the Jews* was written in or around 387 CE and presented as sermons to Chrysostom's congregation in Antioch, a Roman-controlled city located in modern-day Turkey. Chrysostom's venom toward Jews was fueled, at least in part, by his local context. In the early fourth century, under Roman Emperor Constantine I, the Empire had formally stopped persecuting Christians and instead began to support them. During Chrysostom's lifetime, that support had been painfully reversed by one of Constantine's successors, Emperor Julian, known to the church as Julian the Apostate. For a few years, Christianity lost its favored legal status, while Julian made friendly overtures to Jewish communities.<sup>431</sup> Julian had an especially complicated and antagonistic relationship with Antioch, where the local Jewish community had lobbied for his support to rebuild the Temple, a situation directly referenced by Chrysostom.<sup>432</sup>

By the time Chrysostom wrote his eight homilies, Christianity had returned once more to favor under successive emperors, with the orthodox faction bolstered by both political and religious advancements. But despite meaningful progress toward orthodox consolidation, Chrysostom still faced competition locally from at least two other Christian sects.<sup>433</sup> "Here we are fighting not only against the Jews but also against the pagans and many heretics," Chrysostom wrote. And even at this late date, some Christians still maintained some Jewish practices and retained some degree of Jewish identity. Chrysostom's viewpoint was thus informed by the living memory of threat and turbulence, the triumphal restoration of Christian political power, and the religious diversity of the city where he preached.<sup>434</sup>

*Against the Jews* is highly concerned with an out-group, the Jews, and with an ineligible in-group, “Judaized Christians”—members of the in-group who called themselves Christians but maintained close relationships with Jewish people, including participating in Jewish religious observances.

Given his status as a Church father and canonized saint, Chrysostom has accrued a vast number of apologists over the course of millennia. These seek to excuse or explain away the antisemitic content of *Against the Jews* using a variety of strategies, including the argument that Chrysostom was a “man of his time,” that the context given above mitigates or explains the viciousness of his prose, that he was writing in a specific contemporary rhetorical mode that encouraged comprehensive abuse, and more.<sup>435</sup> Others, including Catholic priest and author Edward Flannery, reject these efforts at rehabilitation. Chrysostom, Flannery writes, “stands without peer or parallel in the entire literature *Adversus Judaeos*. The virulence of his attack is surprising even in an age in which rhetorical denunciation was often indulged with complete abandon.”<sup>436</sup>

Intent is largely irrelevant to the textual analysis that follows, but the author joins other scholars in presuming Chrysostom was sincerely *Against the Jews* for the reasons plainly stated in the text, and with the intensity depicted in the text.

### **8.7.1. A note on translation**

This analysis relies on the sole published English translation of Chrysostom’s work.<sup>437</sup> Its title, *Discourses against Judaizing Christians* as opposed to the more commonly used *Against the Jews*, suggests an apologetic angle on Chrysostom.

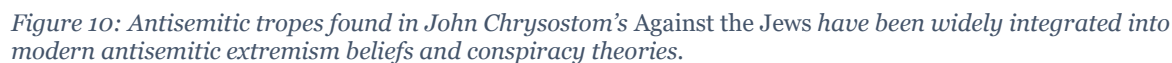
The translator’s preface argues the title change is fitting because the work primarily addresses the problem of Christians who keep up Jewish practices. But, as detailed in the following sections, Chrysostom’s characterization of Judaizing Christians is very different than his characterization of Jewish people, their faith, and their practices. In his account, Judaizing Christians are simple-minded and misguided, while Jews are malevolent and murderous. His characterizations of Jews are also more extensive and voluminous than his characterizations of Judaizing Christians. In short, Chrysostom is

trying to rescue Judaizing Christians *from* the Jews, but his approach to this task is to comprehensively denigrate Judaism and its adherents.

The translator also describes the context of the book's composition as a "perilous" situation for the Church stemming from Judaizing influences—tacitly endorsing the antisemitic crisis narrative proposed by the author. Here, it's important to note that the translation was published by a Catholic university press and received an official imprimatur from the Catholic church, which considers Chrysostom a saint.

No other English translation was available for comparison to assess if the body of the work had been sanitized. However, the text as published is shockingly and unapologetically antisemitic. The translator readily concedes this point, which he says "cannot be excused," although he then proceeds to attribute Chrysostom's hateful invective to "an overzealous pastoral spirit."

A raw text version of the book, published online, was used for this dissertation's semantic analysis methodology.<sup>438</sup> While not cited to the published volume, a side-by-side inspection confirmed that the online text was taken from the paperbound *Discourses against Judaizing Christians*, with some errors introduced during transcription or digitization. Direct quotes included in this dissertation were verified against the published volume in the event of any ambiguity.



Similar to the pro-slavery ideologues discussed in Chapter 7, Chrysostom wrote from a position of power in a context of deep uncertainty. And like those authors, Chrysostom is overwhelmingly focused on defining and derogating a designated out-group.

Chrysostom's homilies were addressed to his Christian congregation and urged listeners to separate fully from Judaism and develop a strong sense of alterity, or "otherness,"

toward Jewish people.<sup>439</sup> He exhorted members of his flock to prevent, with physical force if necessary, co-religionists from fraternizing with Jews or observing Jewish religious feasts or fasts, which he considered a grievous sin and a threat to the unity of the church. In order to make his case, Chrysostom constructed a picture of three identity groups: an in-group (the “orthodox” Church), an out-group (the Jews), and an ineligible in-group, Judaized Christians.

### **8.7.2.1. In-group: The Church**

The in-group is the least developed entity in *Adversus Judeaeos*, although Chrysostom describes it with more detail in other works. Here, references to Christians, collectively referred to as the Church, are mainly defensive, citing those who would disrespect, harm, or destroy it. The word Christian (or Christians) appears 21 times in the eight homilies. The word Jew (or Jews) appears 60 times, with Jewish appearing another 36.

The Church itself is described only sparingly—often as the object of attacks from the enemies described below. The Church is a “body” under threat from “disease,” and its enemies “despise” it and seek to “tear [it] asunder.”

But the Church is also formidable. In one passage, Chrysostom describes the Church as “frightening,” because God’s power can be found within, and because Christian homilies focus “on eternal punishments, on rivers of fire, on the venomous worm, on bonds that cannot be burst, or exterior darkness.” Those who cling to the Church find redemption, “profit(ing) from the instruction,” and “thrust(ing) aside his sin.” Those who faithfully “follow the Church [pay] heed to charity and peace before all things.”

Good Christians carry out their religious obligations “in a spirit of confidence, pleasure, good cheer, and full freedom.” Chief among these obligations is following the example of Jesus, which entails going out into the world and “cur(ing) sickness of both body and soul.” This specific obligation is related to the main topic of the eight homilies—the Jewish out-group and in-group members who are “sick with the Judiazing disease.”

### 8.7.2.2. Out-group: The Jews

Although Chrysostom presents doctrinal arguments in the same manner as Irenaeus, *Against the Jews* is far more concerned with identity, and his doctrinal examples are leveraged to condemn Jews. shows boundless venom for Jews, describing them in comprehensive and extremely negative terms. In addition to some general purpose insults (for instance, “pitiable” and “miserable”), his characterizations can be divided into six major categories, most of which will be familiar to anyone who has encountered modern forms of anti-Semitism:

1. Jews are sinful.
2. Jews reject and/or killed Christ.
3. Jews are scheming/engaged in plots.
4. Jews are less than or other than human.
5. Jewish synagogues are the abode of demons.
6. Jews commit religious sacrifice of human beings or children.

Chrysostom’s most substantive criticism of Jewish people revolves around the perceived role of Jews in rejecting or killing Jesus, to whom Chrysostom refers almost exclusively as Christ, a commonly used title in this period, but one which emphasizes the messianic role found in Jewish tradition and prophecy.<sup>440</sup> Since Christ emerges from this Jewish tradition, Chrysostom is enraged that contemporary Jewish people have failed to accept his message, while placing collective blame on the Jews as a people for their purported role in killing Jesus.

To make the latter point, Chrysostom cites the scriptural language discussed in section 8.4 with respect to Jewish culpability, including later additions such as “His blood be upon us and upon our children.” In addition to “slaying” Christ, Jews perpetuate this outrage by “blaspheming” and “rejecting” the express wishes of God with respect to Jewish law, which Chrysostom and his peers argued had been abrogated by the coming of Christ. Chrysostom writes that the Jewish rejection of Christ and the tenets of Christianity is the “ultimate evil,” fueled by “mad rage” and “hardness of heart.” He describes their disbelief as intoxicating, akin to “drunkenness” or “madness.”

But if the man in the grip of passion or anger is drunk, this is all more true of the impious man who blasphemes God, who goes against his laws and never is willing to renounce his untimely obstinacy. This man is drunk, mad, and much worse of than insane revelers, even if he does not seem aware of his condition. ... This, in fact, is the special danger of madness: those who suffer from it do not know they are sick. So, too, the Jews are drunk but do not know they are drunk.

The critique of Jews begins, but does not end, with this Christ-centric theme. Chrysostom proceeds to attack Jewish people as collectively sinful—gluttonous, covetous, impious, thieving, murderous, licentious, and indecent, associating with “effeminates” and “harlots”<sup>441</sup> (the last a particularly tone-deaf accusation given scriptural accounts of Jesus’ associates).

Beyond this wide-ranging but largely generic denigration, Chrysostom mounts several claims against the Jews that would persist long beyond his historical context, such as “thieving,” a characterization that Nazi Party publications would cite centuries later.<sup>442</sup> Other attacks include dehumanizing language, a very early iteration of concepts that would later become known as the “blood libel,” and a repeated assertion that Jews by nature are constantly “plotting” or “scheming.”

To some extent, the “scheming” description is undeniably related to Chrysostom’s specific context. As previously noted, former Roman emperor Julian the Apostate maintained a presence in Antioch, where he courted the Jewish community. Chrysostom references this both explicitly and indirectly, accusing the Jews of “whispering in everybody’s ear and bragging that they will get their city back again.”

Beyond seeking to restore Jerusalem and the temple, activities characterized as defiance of God’s deliberate punishment, Chrysostom accuses the Jews of “plotting” and conspiring in collusion with demons:

If the Jews are acting against God, must they not be serving the demons?  
... The demons know how to plot and do harm, not to cure.

Chrysostom mentions demons 70 times in *Against the Jews*, accusing Jews of being possessed by demons who “dwell in their souls,” or colluding with demons. He singles

out the synagogue repeatedly, calling it the “dwelling of demons,” the “fortress of the devil,” and an “abomination.” The accusation echoes earlier texts, including the Book of Revelations, where “synagogue of Satan” was used to refer to people who claimed to be Jews but were not, and prefigures later antisemitic movements from the Middle Ages all the way to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where the expression was used by Christian Identity preacher Wesley Swift and other modern anti-Semites.<sup>443</sup>

In addition to literally demonizing Jews, Chrysostom also dehumanizes them by repeatedly comparing or equating them to animals, including dogs, wolves, pigs, goats, “brute beasts,” and “wild beasts.” Importantly, Chrysostom frequently equates Jews and Judaizing to disease, a dehumanizing tactic commonly associated with genocide.<sup>444</sup> The disease metaphor will be examined in more detail in the next two sections, as it is highly pertinent to both the ineligible in-group and the solution element of the extremist system of meaning.

Finally, Chrysostom accuses the Jews of human sacrifice. Variations on this accusation had been circulating since slightly before the advent of Christianity and had more recently been directed at Christians.<sup>445</sup> Chrysostom repeats the accusation multiple times with differing details, in one instance saying that Jews sacrifice “the souls of men,” and in another that they “sacrificed their own sons and daughters to demons,” incurring “blood-guiltiness,” and that they “slaughtered their own children.”

These accusations foreshadow, but are generally considered distinct from, the modern antisemitic “blood libel” conspiracy theory, which asserts that Jewish people sacrifice Christian children and consume their blood. Despite some precursor accusations, including but not limited to those raised by Chrysostom, the blood libel is widely considered to have its origins in the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>446</sup> In the words of the aphorism, “history does not repeat itself, but it rhymes.”<sup>447</sup>



### 8.7.2.3. Ineligible in-group: Judaized Christians

Chrysostom's third group categorization is an ineligible in-group: Christians who had become Judaized, or were in the process of Judaizing, by fraternizing with Jews, attending ceremonies in their synagogues, or observing their feasts and fasts. By Judaizing, these in-group members directly risk being assigned to an out-group. A Judaized Christian is "only half a Christian," he writes, and when they go too far, they risk "indestructible and unending punishment" and "deserve a stronger condemnation than any Jew."

While the out-group discussion of Jews is almost entirely generalized, Chrysostom shares what he presents as specific anecdotes of his interactions with ineligible in-group members, such as a man who tried to forcibly drag a woman to the synagogue. The ineligible in-group has not (yet) been reduced to a collection of stereotypes; its members exist as individual human beings, as opposed to Jews, who are essentialized to collectively embody all of their worst alleged traits.

Similarly, while Chrysostom certainly holds a negative view of Judaizing Christians, his characterizations are less homogenous and generally less severe than his descriptions of Jews. Consistent with many conspiracy theories, Chrysostom tends to assign the out-group full agency over its actions, and thus full culpability, while in-group members are potentially excused by language ("weakness," "madness") that mitigates their agency. Christians who associate with Jews are not presumed to have evil intent; they are often "simple-minded" or "weak." In more advanced cases, they are afflicted with "madness and derangement," echoing words used to describe Jews.

One of the most impactful and frequently repeated descriptions casts Judaizing as a "disease" that must be cured. Christians who are "sick with the Judaizing disease" or "rotting with disease" may "partake in the Jews' transgressions," losing their immortal souls in the process. The faithful are partly responsible for this affliction:

Surely those who are sick deserve to be accused. But we are not free from blame, because we have neglected them in their hour of illness; if we had

shown great concern for them and they had the benefit of this care, they could not possibly still be sick.

Disease metaphors are common in extremist texts. In some cases, out-groups are accused of harboring and spreading literal disease,<sup>448</sup> but in others, out-group traits or beliefs are “biologized” and directly stated to *be* the disease.<sup>449</sup> Thus, for Chrysostom, the disease is Judaism, which has infected some members of the in-group and as a result, threatens the health of the in-group as a whole. In Chrysostom’s words, Judaizing is “an illness which has become implanted in the body of the Church.” The biologization of Jews plays an important role in determining the solution element of the extremist system of meaning, discussed further in the next section.

### **8.7.3.      Solution and crisis**

“The man who does not have enough of loving Christ will never have enough of fighting against those who hate Christ,” Chrysostom writes.

Chrysostom’s thesis clearly fits the definition of extremism—the belief that an in-group can never be healthy or successful unless it is engaged in hostile action against an out-group. While his prescription for hostile action—the “solution” of the system of meaning—does not reach the genocidal heights of modern anti-Semitism, his dehumanizing rhetoric beats a path toward such future escalation, and it comes as little surprise that his words carry weight with modern anti-Semites.

Chrysostom’s extremist solution has multiple layers.

First and foremost, Chrysostom plainly urges Christians to shun Jews in every context. “I exhort you to flee and shun their gatherings,” he writes in several different variations. “Flee the gatherings and holy places of the Jews,” he writes in another place. To be a “sincere and genuine Christian,” it is necessary for adherents to “free themselves from (any) wicked association with the Jews.”

Second, he urges the use of hostile and even violent measures to “cure” the ineligible in-group of the “Judaizing disease.” The rhetoric of cure is derived from the biologization

of Jews as the embodiment of disease. In its early stages, the disease can be mitigated. Association with the Jews produces moral “wounds” which good Christians must bind up “with mildness” and “cure with [...] patience.” Judaized Christians are “sick brothers,” and “we want to see one thing and only one thing,” their “rescue” and “return to health.”

As in Irenaeus, the primary tool for remediating ineligible in-group members is rhetorical. Chrysostom expects heroic efforts to verbally convince the Judaizers of their error. But if patience and mildness are not enough, Chrysostom instructs his followers to take much more serious steps, including physical abuse.

Even if you must impose restraint, even if you must use force , even if you must treat him ill and obstinately, do everything to save him from the devil's snare and to free him from fellowship with those who slew Christ.

If his followers lack the resolve or the physical strength to overcome a Judaizing Christian, Chrysostom promises to do the work for them.

But your brother is stronger and more powerful than you. Show him to me. If he will stand fast in his obstinate resolve, I shall choose to risk my life rather than let him enter the doors of the synagogue.

Chrysostom also militarizes the Church in the service of rooting out any subscribers to the “alien” Judaic ideology.

Since you are the army of Christ, be overly careful in searching to see if anyone favoring an alien faith has mingled among you, and make his presence known—not so that we may put him to death as those generals did, nor that we may punish him or take our vengeance upon him, but that we may free him from his error and ungodliness and make him entirely our own.

If all else fails, and the Judaizing Christian cannot be dissuaded from associating with Jews, Chrysostom demands that they should be shunned. Following Paul, Chrysostom argues that Judaized Christians who do not respond to “sharp rebuke” should be expelled from Christian assemblies—amputated before the “Judaizing disease” can spread through the body of the Church. “Some sins, of their very nature, demand cure

by a quick and sharp excision.” Here, one clearly sees the dynamic nature of ineligibility. Ineligible in-group status is not static; it is a path that runs from therapy to nihilation, in the language of social constructionism (Chapter 2). Ineligibility stands poised at a decision point between reconciliation and expulsion.

Finally, Chrysostom applies violent language to Jews, although not extensively, and not in the obviously literal sense with which he urges the use of force to restrain Judaizers. For the most part, this comes in the form of justifying outsider violence against Jews, especially the destruction of the Second Temple, as divinely endorsed or ordained.

The Jews will tell you: "Men waged war on us; men plotted against us."  
When they say this, tell them that men would certainly not have waged  
war against them unless God had permitted it. Granted that men tore  
down your walls. Did a man keep the fire from Coming down from  
heaven?

Chrysostom sometimes attributes the catastrophe to God directly and at other times interprets as a sign that God has withdrawn his blessing and protection from the Jews. “It was not by their own power that the Roman emperors did what they did. They did what they did because God was angry with the Jews and had abandoned them,” he writes in one instance.

Chrysostom also combined violent language with dehumanizing language in one particularly notorious and long-lived passage that cites scripture to argue that Jewish people are like an “untamed calf” that throws off the yoke:

Although such beasts are unfit for work, they are fit for killing. And this is  
what happened to the Jews: while they were making themselves unfit for  
work, they grew fit for slaughter. This is why Christ said: "But as for these  
my enemies, who did not want me to be king over them, bring them here  
and slay them".

Here, Chrysostom drastically recontextualizes a phrase from a parable attributed to Jesus, describing a king and his faithless servants (Luke 19:27). The “slay them” instruction is not attributed to Jesus but is unambiguously spoken by the character of the king in the parable. While the parable is often interpreted, at least in part, as a

commentary on Jews who fail to recognize the authority of Jesus,<sup>450</sup> a large and dubious interpretive leap is required to contextualize the command given by the story's protagonist as an instruction from Jesus to kill Jews.

All of these prescriptions for action are directed at solving a specific crisis. The "Judaizing disease" is not opposed solely for its own sake, but for its effect on the Church. According to Chrysostom, Judaizers pose an existential threat to the stability of the Christian in-group consensus. The "sickness" is internal dissent, and Chrysostom links the threat of Judaizing directly to the threat of heresy, placing the battle firmly on the ground of in-group consensus.

Moreover, the first thing I have to say to the Judaizers is that nothing is worse than contentiousness and fighting, than tearing the Church asunder and rending into many parts the robe which the robbers did not dare to rip. Are not all the other heresies enough without our tearing each other apart?

Following Paul, Chrysostom is highly focused on entitativity. In dealing with an outbreak of trouble among the Corinthians, Paul "passed over all the other crimes, and corrected their contentiousness first."

Although he could make so many accusations, his first charge against the Corinthians was dissension and contentiousness. At the very beginning of his letter he said: "I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all say the same thing, and that there be no dissensions among you." For he knew, he knew clearly, that this problem was more urgent than the others.

Chrysostom states that the in-group's health and safety depend on total conformity of thought and behavior, citing with approval the early Church fathers' supposed "harmony of ... thinking [and] oneness of mind." Some Christians may not perceive the harm in observing a religious feast with Jewish friends, but Chrysostom insists "there is no room for disagreement" in differentiating Christian beliefs or practices. Failure of the in-group consensus compromises the in-group's health and strength.

Nothing produces weakness so effectively as contentiousness and strife; and nothing produces power and strength so effectively as love and

concord. ... Do you see the great strength which comes from concord?  
And do you see the great harm caused by contentiousness? A kingdom in  
revolt destroys itself. When two brothers are bound together and united  
into one, they are more unbreakable than any wall.

#### **8.7.4. Exclusivity**

While not causative, Chrysostom's *Against the Jews* reflects a tipping point in the separation of Jewish and Christian identities. In the earliest days of Christianity, adherents did not necessarily separate from a Jewish identity, but tensions noticeably escalated even during the first century CE. By the fourth century, figures like Chrysostom were finishing the job of eradicating all trace of Jewish identity from the increasingly dominant, orthodox Christian identity.

For Chrysostom, the Christian in-group is defined in significant part by its resolve to turn away from Judaism. To be Christian means to accept that God has revoked the privileged status of the “chosen people” from Jews, as punishment for the Jewish rejection of Christ and reflecting Jewish culpability for Christ's death. Christians are said to be the sole arbiters of key Jewish prophecies, which Jews are accused of ignoring, rejecting, or misunderstanding.

In Chrysostom's view, this requires the emergent Christian in-group to erase all traces of its prime in-group—practices including but not limited to fasting, sacrifices, or feast days, and associations of any kind. In Chrysostom's view, even casual association with Jewish people puts Christians at risk of expulsion from the Christian community in the temporal world and eternal damnation in the world to come. The in-group can never be healthy or successful unless it eliminates all influences of the out-group.

Chrysostom's demand that Christians actively shun association with Jewish people, and that the in-group should violently coerce any members who fail to meet this demand, situates *Against the Jews* as an unambiguously extremist text, with hostile and violent action deployed for the explicit purpose of shoring up an emergent in-group consensus.

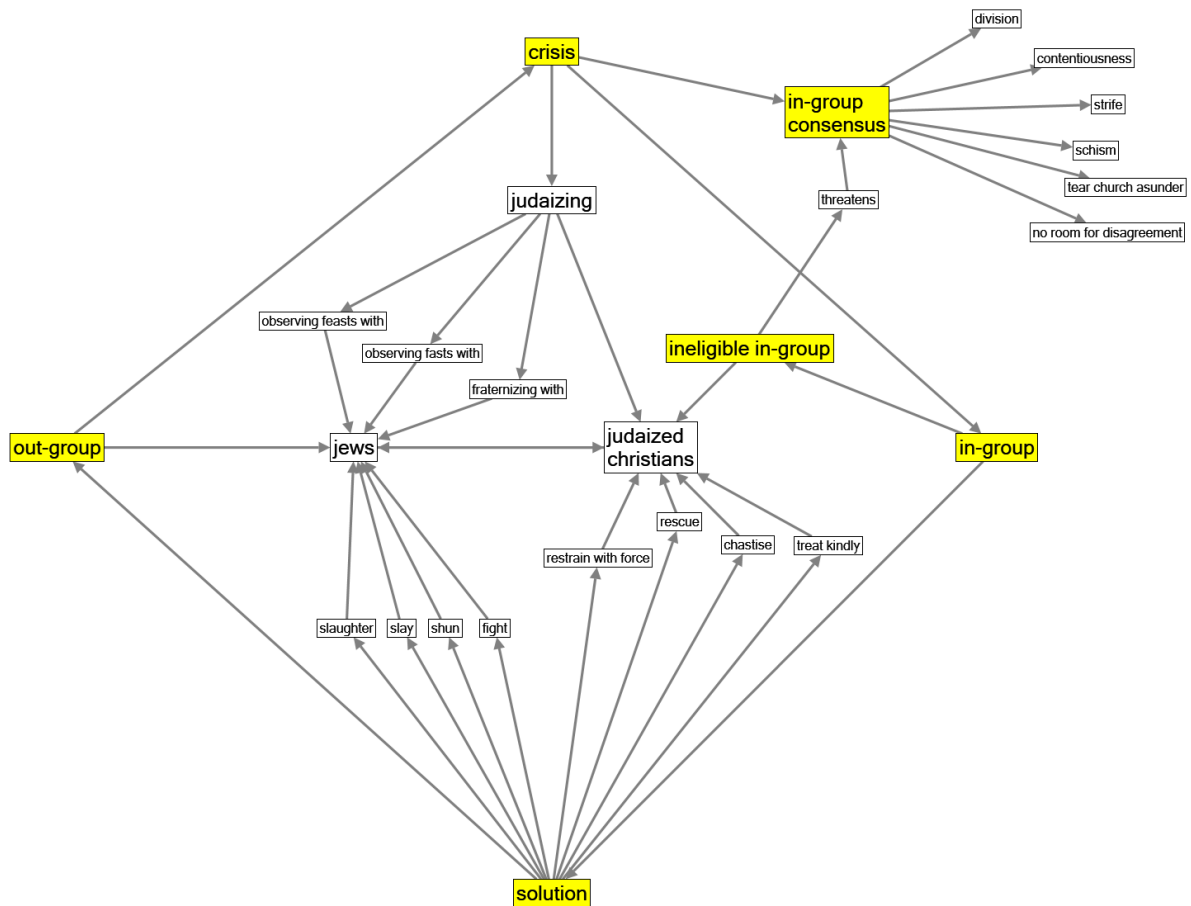


Figure 11: The system of meaning in *Against the Jews*. While much of the text is concerned with demonizing the Jewish out-group, Chrysostom is also heavily concerned with policing the Christian in-group.

## 8.8. Conclusion

The evolution of distinctly separate Jewish and Christian identities is literally ancient history. What lessons are found for modern times in the story of their separation, especially when we lack a clear and uncontested historical record of key developments? And how is that process of separation relevant to understanding modern extremism? The argument in favor of this case study chapter includes:

- **Impact:** The social dynamics of this particular in-group fracture are widely influential in the modern world. Antisemitic tropes that developed in the early Christian church are still repeated today, but even more importantly, Christian frameworks for heresy, and derivative concepts such as apostasy and

excommunication, have emerged as near-universal mechanisms for in-group regulation, especially among extremists, regardless of the in-group's religion and even when the in-group is not based on religion.

- **Documentation:** While the historical record is deeply unclear, it is far from undocumented. Through critical readings of the surviving texts, one finds a remarkably rich view of how in-group identity was contested, even if one cannot claim clarity regarding the historical facts under discussion. Ironically, thanks to decisions made by late antiquity Christians about preservation and suppression, almost every surviving Christian text from the first four centuries of the Common Era is relevant to in-group and out-group identity construction.

Christianity began as a Jewish movement but soon established an identity of its own. Jewish communities reacted to this in a variety of ways. In some cases, followers of Jesus largely maintained their Jewish identity while incorporating some version of Jesus' teachings. Other factions pursued growth by courting pagan converts. That process created immediate tensions around adherence to Jewish law and Jewish practices, notably dietary rules and circumcision.

Some Christian factions—memorialized by Paul, Irenaeus, Chrysostom, and many others—reconciled this tension by advancing a narrative that the arrival of Jesus had put an end to Jewish laws, values and practices and replaced them with new ones. Jewish and Christian identities soon came to be considered mutually exclusive, a view that became dominant or “orthodox” over time. The orthodox faction then accrued adherents and consolidated power by aggressively attacking and eventually defeating other factional challengers using the newfound art of heresiology.

Heresy is far more than a dispute over any given ideological particulars. In-groups paint heretics as obstacles to in-group consensus and the homogenizing demands of entitativity.<sup>451</sup> Heresy makes the in-group less than whole, but, importantly, it undermines the in-group consensus that undergirds the social construction of reality. In other words, in-groups often treat heretics as an existential and apocalyptic threat because their challenge to the in-group destabilizes reality by threatening to unravel its social construction.



Heresiology seeks to heal in-group divisions through *therapy* first and *nihilation* second (to use Berger and Luckmann's terminology). The process begins when an in-group ideological theorist develops an argument stating that certain beliefs or practices render adherents ineligible for in-group membership. First, the ideologist urgently attempts to therapize the rift by convincing ineligible in-group members to adopt corrected beliefs. If this effort is unsuccessful, the ideologist may prescribe hostile action to force therapy on ineligible people, such as in the violent manner described by Chrysostom. Finally, if therapy is judged to have failed, the ineligible member is nihilated. They are assigned inferior status as part of an out-group, ending their challenge to the in-group consensus by expelling them from the in-group. The heretic, an ineligible in-group member, thus becomes an apostate, an out-group member who claims in-group status.<sup>452</sup> (Despite being an out-group for most intents and purposes, apostates are still technically part of the ineligible in-group, because they claim in-group status and/or still meet some technical requirements for in-group membership, such as being baptized and claiming to be a follower of Jesus Christ.)

Intrinsic to a finding of heresy is its challenge to the in-group consensus beliefs, practices and/or values. Heretics may stumble into heresy at first, but they often soon find themselves explicitly contesting the dominant in-group consensus, regardless of whether they're playing offense or defense. Heretics do not simply assert their in-group membership, they usually claim their views and practices are correct and in-group prototypical, in defiance of the dominant in-group consensus.

The dominant in-group does not always succeed in defeating heretics, but it frequently manages to differentiate them from the prime in-group, sometimes causing a split or schism and producing an emergent in-group. Somewhat less commonly, heretics may win the contest of ideas and take control of the existing in-group's consensus, replacing the old orthodoxy with a new one. Such fundamental shifts, if they occur, may require generations to fully resolve.

While some individuals may delight in defying in-group norms for the sake of defiance, heresy is a status usually declared by ideological theorists affiliated with the dominant in-group consensus. Similarly, while an individual may proudly declare themselves to be

an apostate or infidel, a determination of apostasy must also ultimately emanate from ideologists purporting to represent the in-group consensus or a subset thereof. Apostasy is the result of excommunication; it requires action by the dominant in-group.

One of the functions of extremism is to reduce uncertainty for adherents, and few things disrupt the certainty of an in-group consensus more than legitimacy challenges from within the in-group. Thus, extremist movements have a well-established proclivity for pronouncing harsh judgments of apostasy on in-group members considered to be ineligible, such as in the case of the Islamic State organization, or in the neo-Nazi designation of “race traitors.”<sup>453</sup> In-group traitors are subjected to even harsher solutions than out-group members, as in the Day of the Rope (section 6.4), and serious in-group legitimacy challenges cause a proliferation of radicalizing ideological innovation in the form of theoretical legitimation (section 7.1).

Heresiology pre-dates Christianity and may well have spread around the world in the absence of orthodox Christianity, but the history is what it is. Modern extremist movements owe a tremendous debt to the heresiology framework developed by early Christian ideological theorists.

## **PART III: Conclusions**

## 9. Framing the discussion

In the four preceding chapters, I examined four diverse ideological texts, asking whether and how each should be considered extremist, and how each one compared to the other. I found that extremist movements can exist in a wide spectrum of social contexts, and I found that useful insights could be extracted by comparing very different sorts of movements. The organization of the case studies flows from least complex (*Join the Caravan*) to most complex (early Christian identity formation).

- My examination of *Join the Caravan* introduced the concept of the in-group critique and spotlighted the tendency of extremists to criticize their in-group at greater length and in more detail than they criticize out-groups.
- My analysis of *Siege* showed how an in-group critique can escalate until the extremist movement deems almost the entire in-group to be “ineligible” for in-group membership and its associated perquisites. When that happens, the in-group can be targeted for hostile action with the same intensity or more than applied to out-groups.
- *Studies on Slavery*, the third case study, highlighted a very different dynamic, an exclusive focus on constructing out-group identity, which likely stems from the fact that the extremist in-group in question held the dominant status quo position in American society at a time when the risks of disunity loomed large.
- Finally, I explored how a distinctly Christian identity emerged from Jewish identity in the first four centuries of the Common Era, offering insights into the roots of extremism as a product of in-group splitting and an example of how different types of hostile action can be applied to an ineligible in-group and an out-group respectively.

In this chapter, I will review the grounded theory process and address my findings with respect to this dissertation’s research questions at a very high level. The following two chapters will then explore certain elements of those findings in much more detail. After that, I will close this dissertation with a short chapter of concluding remarks.

## 9.1. The grounded theory journey

I began with an expectation that this work would test the Berger definition of extremism, but I was not certain precisely how. During the course of work, I came to understand that the case studies helped clarify and amplify that the definition's primary utility is comparative. In looking at these case studies, was the definition creating a coherent category that empowered comparative work? At the end of this work, I was more convinced than ever that it does. As noted in the introduction (1.4), an enhanced framework for the comparative study of extremism is one of the key contributions this thesis seeks to make. I sought to cast a wide net by looking at movements that have traditionally been excluded from the study of extremism, including the ideology of racial slavery and early Christian identity construction.

I believe comparative study also relates to the originality and main contributions of this dissertation. I'm certainly not the first to explore extremism in a comparative manner. One book that I read at the very beginning of my work on extremism that deeply influenced my thinking was *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*, a comparative study of religious extremists by Dr. Jessica Stern—who to my amazement and delight would later become my co-author and friend. Others followed in this comparative work, but their focus was frequently delimited in important ways—for instance, comparing different kinds of *religious* extremists or comparing religious and racial extremists who were united by highly conservative and reactionary views of the world and society.

In this dissertation I sought to cast a wide net. One area I had long considered ripe for study was the phenomenon of racial slavery in the United States. I have informally sparred with colleagues about whether slavery should be considered extremism, with some pushing back that it could not be extremist because it was the dominant view in American society in its time. For reasons articulated at great length in the pages that follow, I disagree with this conclusion. Again, my thinking evolved in the course of writing Chapter 7 on this subject, but also thanks to the concurrent writing of the paper “Lawful Extremism: Extremist Ideology and the Dred Scott Decision,” which helped clarify my thoughts about how extremism and power are related. In the end, my

expected conclusions about uncertainty were greatly modulated by my findings about how power and status shape extremist ideologies.

Finally, the exploration in Chapter 8 of how Christian and Jewish identity separated covers ground that is well-known to religious scholars but little considered by those who study extremism. Here, I sought to look at a relevant historical example that was far removed from the main body of extremism studies in order to see how far the Berger definition could extend from the field's comfort zone. In the process of integrating concepts that I had previously studied out of personal interest, and on top of the previous chapters and my concurrent related non-dissertation work, I began to reach some unexpected conclusions about certain assumptions in our field.

It is almost a truism for scholars to say that extremism presents a “simplified” or “black-and-white” view of the world, a statement usually offered to explain why extremism appeals to certain people. I had been skeptical of this claim for some years, but the analysis in this dissertation elevated that skepticism into a full-throated rejection. The ideologies analyzed herein are anything but simplifying. In fact, they make the world considerably more complicated, full of uncertainty, and difficult to survive. While I had thoughts about this prior to writing the dissertation, the grounded theory journey brought those thoughts much more forcefully to the forefront, and much of Chapter 11 is now devoted to a discussion of this issue.

Finally, the process of writing this dissertation crystallized and expanded my thoughts about in-groups and their subdivisions. Specifically, from the first case study to the last conclusions, readers will find a narrative in which the division of in-groups becomes a critically and existentially important key to understanding extremism. The theme of in-group critique and who is eligible to be part of the in-group surfaces in Chapter 5, expands dramatically in Chapter 6, and becomes an intrinsic component of extremism as articulated in Chapter 11 based in significant part on findings in Chapter 8. I found that the mechanisms of extremism are oriented toward control of the in-group generally and stabilizing its consensus view of reality specifically, which is accomplished by removing out-group consensuses that might conflict with the in-group consensus. Ultimately, I found myself arguing that all out-groups are in reality carved from a

unified human in-group through a process of eligibility, a conclusion that goes far beyond my thinking at the start of the dissertation process.

In short, while my initial focus proved to be fruitful, and most of the issues I identified at the start were strongly represented in my conclusions, the grounded theory process of exploration opened up new areas for exploration and led to findings that went further than I originally expected, ultimately resulting in conclusions that challenge some of the most widely cited assumptions in our field about what extremist ideologies do and why people are attracted to them.

Specifically I question the truism that extremist ideologies present adherents with a simplified version of the world. Instead, I argue that the obvious complexities of extremist ideologies render the world much more confusing and dangerous than non-extremist beliefs, requiring substantial cognitive labor on the part of adherents. Being an extremist is hard. The cognitive labor created by an extremist ideology makes adherents more dependent on the in-group consensus—and thus the in-group itself—for feelings of security and stability.

## **9.2. Research questions**

My research questions were:

- **RQ1: Does the Berger definition create a consistent foundation for the comparative study of extremism?** I found that the Berger definition, tied to the “system of meaning” analytical construct proposed by Ingram,<sup>454</sup> proved very effective as a tool for empowering comparative study. Important insights were generated by teasing out the narratives of in-group and out-group identity, group subdivisions, crisis formulations, and perhaps most importantly, the unconditional hostile action required to definitively categorize a movement as extremist. One significant finding that would not have been possible without this comparative framework was that extremist movements use crisis narratives in very different ways, sometimes ascribing crises to an out-group threat, but often blaming them on the in-group’s failings. Some of the implications of this finding are further detailed in section 10.2.

- **RQ2: What are the commonalities among groups considered to be extremist?** Beyond the commonalities stipulated by the definition, what unites groups with divergent beliefs? All of the movements examined herein grappled with issues that included legitimacy (detailed in section 10.1.2) and control of the in-group consensus, whether they had such control or lacked it (section 10.1.1, 10.1.4, 10.1.7). Importantly, all of the case studies highlighted the complexity of extremist narratives. Despite the clear applicability and seeming simplicity of the “system of meaning” framework, extremist narratives consistently found ways to make life more confusing and complicated for adherents (section 11.3).
- **RQ3: How does status (meaning low or high levels of political and social power and acceptance) shape extremist ideological arguments?** Power and status shaped extremist movements in profound ways. Although they still functioned within the parameters of the system of meaning, with more-powerful or status-quo movements placing a far greater emphasis on constructing out-group identity. Weaker movements and movements with a less established status quo spent more time talking about and constructing in-group identity, drawing strong distinctions between the extremist in-group and an ineligible in-group (section 10.1.1, 10.1.2, 10.1.4).
- **RQ4: How do extremist movements engage in the social construction of reality?** All extremist movements examined in this dissertation attempted to socially construct reality by describing an in-group consensus that was more often aspirational than actual. The in-group consensus was found to be observer-dependent, meaning that extremists’ described the eligible in-group consensus that they wanted to manifest in the world and claimed it reflected reality. Extremist in-groups often relied on nostalgia to describe (often inaccurately) a historical version of the eligible in-group consensus that aligned with the in-group consensus’s beliefs (detailed further in section 10.1.4 and 10.1.6).
- **RQ5: Do extremist movements attempt to reduce uncertainty for adherents, and if so, do they succeed?** While extremist movements used certain tools that seemed designed to reduce uncertainty (claiming extensive evidence in support of their beliefs and attempting to frame many of the world’s



problems as caused solely by the out-group), I ultimately found that extremist movements did not truly reduce uncertainty nor did they provide a simplified worldview with easy answers to the world's problems, as scholars of extremism sometimes assert they do. Chapter 11 is devoted to an in-depth examination of this issue. Although extremist movements are well-documented to attract people with a need for cognitive closure, I found that the complexity of extremist belief *increased* uncertainty and cognitive load, causing people with a high need-for-closure to become more dependent on the in-group, specifically seeking a strong in-group consensus with high availability (section 11.3, 11.4). I found the hostile action that is central to the Berger definition of extremism is meant to shore up the in-group consensus by physically removing out-groups with a competing and conflicting consensus view of reality (section 10.1.4).

### **9.3. Chapters 10 and 11 explained**

As cross-referenced in the research questions above, the next two chapters offer a detailed account and expanded analysis of this dissertation's findings.

Recommendations for future research will be divided between the chapters, with the Chapter 11 focusing more intensely on the findings and recommendations that I believe are most impactful on the field.

Chapter 10 addresses the in-group consensus, how crises are located with different identity groups, with an extended discussion and detailed analysis, followed by an assortment of recommendation for future research on these questions and others raised throughout the dissertation.

Chapter 11 will take a deeper dive into some of the biggest questions and boldest challenges posed by this dissertation. Here, I will argue that all extremism proceeds from heresiology because extremists understand at some fundamental level that all human beings are part of a unified in-group. I will argue that dividing the human in-group into "us and them" requires extensive justification and cognitive effort, which is reflected in the complexity of extremist ideological texts.

Contrary to some widely accepted assertions in the field, I will argue that being an extremist is hard and not being an extremist is easy. I will argue that extremism is a social construction strategy that seeks to reduce an out-group's substantive challenge to an in-group's consensus view of reality. While this is sometimes perceived as offering a "simplified" worldview that lessens the need for cognitive effort, it is not. Extremism, ultimately, requires an effortful rejection of an instinctive understanding that all human beings are fundamentally part of a unified in-group.

## 10. 'Some effort at definition'

Near the beginning of this dissertation, I quoted Lewis M. Killian, a scholar of American ethnic and racial issues:

The term "extremism" is about as vague as a concept can be and can hardly be classified as a tool for sociological analysis; yet it frequently crops up in social science writings. ... Although the concept "extremism" is admittedly vague, some effort at definition seems necessary.<sup>455</sup>

Hopefully, the concept of "extremism" has been rendered less vague in the preceding pages, and a definition has been advanced. The first research question proposed by this dissertation was: **Does the Berger definition create a consistent foundation for the comparative study of extremism?**

The Berger definition—"extremism is the belief that an in-group can never be healthy or successful unless it is engaged in hostile action against an out-group"—cannot and does not eliminate all gray areas. But it eliminates many of the biggest problems created by the existing definition types, which are detailed in Chapter 3. Most importantly, it identifies a coherent set of movements that can be usefully compared on an apples-to-apples basis, a framework that the literature does not currently provide and that this dissertation seeks to address. I believe the analysis of the four case studies in this dissertation answers the first research question in the affirmative. The lodestar of the in-group's demand for unconditional hostile action against an out-group creates a category that is specific enough to capture a consistent type of movement but diverse enough to empower comparative study.

Most of the alternative definitions discussed in Chapter 3 would preclude the study of pro-slavery ideology and/or John Chrysostom's antisemitism under the category of extremism. In both of those case studies, I found ample evidence of clearly identifiable commonalities with the less-controversial examples found in Chapter 5 (*Join the*

*Caravan*) and Chapter 6 (*Siege*). The ideologies of Fletcher and Chrysostom are indistinguishable from their fringe counterparts on the basis of bias/hate motivation and the unconditional demand for hostile action, but they would be excluded from our field of study under most of the definitions found in the literature due to their higher relative status in society. Even the other social identity-based definitions discussed in Chapter 3 strain in the face of pro-slavery ideology. For instance, it is not entirely clear whether “a commitment to intergroup conflict” would apply to a stable condition of permanent oppression, since conflict as used in this context could be read as referring to more dynamic situations.

The Berger definition covers all of these examples while still encompassing nearly every movement currently deemed to be extremist by a consensus or plurality of scholars. The definition adds sharper, clearer boundaries that productively expand and revise the area of investigation rather than arbitrarily limiting it.

## **10.1. The in-group consensus**

If it be true that all governments rest on opinion, it is no less true that the strength of opinion in each individual, and its practical influence on his conduct, depend much on the number which he supposes to have entertained the same opinion.

-- *James Madison, Federalist 49*<sup>456</sup>

Social construction holds that knowledge and reality proceed from consensus, or more specifically that they are built and negotiated in dialogue among members of a group. Social identity theory identified the key group for any given person as their in-group—a group to which the person belongs, and sometimes but not always the group to which the person professes allegiance. The in-group consensus rules on the veracity of history, values, practices and more. When members of the in-group encounter an out-group that holds a different consensus, trouble ensues. In this section, I will examine the various kinds of trouble that can ensue and propose explanations for why trouble sometimes escalates into extremism.

### 10.1.1. Extremism, prevalence and power

Starting in Chapter 3, this dissertation has argued that extremism should not be defined as beliefs exclusively found on the fringes of society. Using a social identity-based framework, I have presented my case that extremism can exist within the mainstream of any given society. Further, I assert that our understanding of extremism will be meaningfully and fatally incomplete if the field fails to consider its mainstreamed manifestations. The field cannot stop treating movements as extremist simply because they succeed at bending society to their beliefs. If it does, it will forever be retreating from its subjects just as they reach the zenith of their destructive power.

If fringe extremists like neo-Nazis and ISIS are worthy of our attention, how much more so extremists with the power to wreak their nightmarish violence at the industrial scales of the Holocaust, the Inquisition, or nuclear war? In the early stages of this dissertation, I started by thinking about extremist movements as existing on a simple spectrum from fringe to dominant, but the case studies, additional related research, and discussions with colleagues led me to interrogate the space between prevalence and power.

- **Prevalence:** If an extremist ideology is widely accepted, how do its actions and ideological texts reflect that status?
- **Power:** If extremist adherents control the society in which they are situated, how do their actions and ideological texts reflect that status?

A consensus view of reality typically includes assertions about the eligible in-group's beliefs, values, traits and practices, among other things. Prevalence refers to how widely an extremist in-group's internal consensus view is accepted by members of the eligible in-group, while power refers to the extremist in-group's ability to impose its consensus view on the eligible in-group.\*

Power and prevalence travel together often but not always. For instance, an extremist in-group can use force or exploit political advantages to take control of an eligible in-group's government without securing full popular adoption of their ideas. Power and

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\* In-group subdivisions are defined in section 4.2.

prevalence may also drift apart after traveling together. For example, popular opinion in a society may change faster than its entrenched power structures—leading to a shift in prevalence without a corresponding change in power.

Extremist movements, like any other social or political movement, claim a certain and often quantifiable amount of support from the societies in which they exist. That support can be very small, as in the case of al Qaeda or James Mason’s National Socialist Liberation Front, or it can be very large, as in the case of the right-wing Hindutva movement in India.<sup>457</sup> A movement that is popular or widely disseminated may also hold power, as currently seen in India. But powerful movements are not always popular, and popular movements are not always powerful.

When an in-group’s power and prevalence move in different directions, profound uncertainty can result, often leading to the escalation of extremist tendencies. This can be seen clearly in the proliferation of antebellum pro-slavery ideologies described in section 7.1. Prior to the U.S. Civil War, pro-slavery ideologues held ample power to impose their beliefs on society, even as the prevalence of pro-slavery attitudes went into sharp decline. As pro-slavery beliefs became less and less prevalent, the U.S. Supreme Court issued the Dred Scott decision, increasing the power of the pro-slavery position in a disastrously misguided attempt to control popular sentiment. The resulting disconnect accelerated the march toward the Civil War.<sup>458</sup> After the Civil War, the passage of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments ended the power of a specific pro-slavery ideological movement but did not come close to ending the prevalence or power of a more broadly conceived White nationalist extremism.<sup>459</sup>

John Chrysostom faced similar disconnects. Due to the volatile nature of the Roman imperial succession, Chrysostom had lived through massive upheavals in the status of Christianity, from power to persecution to power again. The Christian church in Antioch faced both internal and external challenges, from the Jewish community and other “heretical sects.” Faced with questions about both his prevalence and his power, Chrysostom launched vicious attacks on Jews and on the “misguided” or “diseased” Christians whose beliefs diverged from his own.

Accelerationists like James Mason, the neo-Nazi author of *Siege*, represent extremist in-groups that enjoy neither power nor prevalence. Since Mason had no meaningful status to protect, he had no compunctions about attacking the eligible in-group in even stronger terms than the out-group. For Mason, the eligible in-group became ineligible by putting itself squarely between him and his detested out-groups and blocking his movement from carrying out the hostile actions he believed to be necessary. Faced with overwhelming rejection, Mason's only perceived path to power and prevalence was the literal destruction of all existing systems in the unlikely hope that what rose from the ashes afterward would be more aligned with his ideological beliefs.

The effects of power and prevalence play out in different, specific ways, but both are intimately connected to the question of legitimacy. Prevalence is often used as a proxy for legitimacy, while power is commonly perceived to depend on legitimacy—at least in the long term. A closer interrogation of legitimacy as a concept opens up new avenues for understanding the dynamics that drive extremism.

It should be noted that many of the dynamics described in the following sections apply not only to eligible and extremist in-groups but to prime and emergent in-groups. Most of this discussion will focus on an extremist context, but emergent examples will also be considered, followed by some more specific observations about the relationship between the relationship between extremism and prime/emergent movements.

### **10.1.2. The in-group consensus and legitimacy**

In “Extremist Construction of Identity” (2018), a study following the development and evolution of the White nationalist ideology known as Christian Identity, I noted a tendency for ideological movements to radicalize in the face of serious challenges to their legitimacy. I defined legitimacy then as “the conclusion that a particular collective identity group may rightfully be defined, maintained and/or protected.” Based on insights developed in this dissertation, I want to withdraw that definition and put forward one that is more useful and accurate.

In each of the case study chapters, we have seen multiple responses to things that we intuitively understand to be legitimacy challenges, all moving in the direction of greater

radicalization. In *Join the Caravan*, the eligible in-group is bitterly blamed for its failure to recognize the legitimacy of the extremist in-group. In *Siege*, that blame becomes so profound that the solution—hostile action—must be directed at conquering and even killing the eligible in-group in order to replace it with the extremist in-group.

Unlike Azzam and Mason, Fletcher's *Studies on Slavery* is written from a position of status quo power. Slavery was already the law of the land, Fletcher and others like him sought to preserve it, and to do so, they had to maintain a fragile balance within the in-group. Attacking in-group dissenters would only accelerate the looming sectional crisis. Instead, pro-slavery ideologists sought to bolster the legitimacy of the in-group through the comprehensive degradation of the out-group. Race-based slavery, an extraordinarily depraved practice, could only be justified by a narrative that asserted equally extraordinary differences in the essential humanity of the enslaver and the enslaved. These ideological innovations were retrofitted to the ground truth of slavery. While racial slavery existed for centuries before the pre-war proliferation of ideologies, slavery had become an intrinsic and even defining characteristic of American society—the in-group's success could not be separated from the enslavement of the out-group.

*Against Heresies* by Irenaeus is overwhelmingly concerned with legitimacy—defining in great detail who is a legitimate Christian (eligible) and who is not (ineligible), as part of a larger identity construction project. In-group eligibility for Irenaeus is almost synonymous with legitimacy, but not perfectly, as seen in the distinction between heresy and apostasy, discussed in more detail below.

So how should we define the legitimacy of the eligible in-group as defined by extremists in their ideological constructions? Legitimacy here can be thought of as *the compatibility of an extremist in-group consensus with its eligible in-group consensus*. It can similarly refer to the compatibility of an emergent in-group consensus with a prime in-group consensus. When the extremist and eligible in-group consensus are highly compatible or even identical, at least one group sees the other as having high legitimacy. When compatibility is low, at least one group sees the other as illegitimate.

The perception of low legitimacy is positional but is typically a two-way street. When consensus diverge, the extremist in-group sees the eligible in-group as illegitimate,



and vice versa. In other words, all groups and subgroups have a tendency to proceed from the assumption that *they* are the seat of legitimacy, and any misalignment with another group or subgroup is the *other group's problem*.

The seeds of conflict sprout in the soil of misalignment, shaped more by the stakes of the disconnect than the scale. When the stakes are low, an in-group can tolerate quite a bit of variation. People who believe in UFOs or the healing properties of crystals typically have very little friction with the American in-group, likely because these issues are not strongly tied to power. People who believe the U.S. government was replaced by a fraudulent corporation in 1871 are more likely to experience active conflict with the eligible in-group because their in-group's consensus holds that eligible in-group laws do not apply to them.<sup>460</sup> People who believe the American government is controlled by a Jewish conspiracy have historically experienced a great deal of friction with the eligible in-group (although the current trajectory on this issue is not entirely encouraging).<sup>461</sup>

Legitimacy is fluid. As noted in Chapter 3, an eligible or extremist in-group's composition may change due to the death or mobility of its members, or the opinions of its members may evolve, improving or reducing the compatibility of the eligible and extremist consensuses. Methods for measuring the in-group's consensus may also change or evolve, producing different ways to assess alignment. The measurement of alignment is not a neutral act, and it may be manipulated, resulting in changes to perceived legitimacy. Emergent subgroups may petition their prime groups for legitimacy, or they may declare themselves legitimate and the prime illegitimate. The process of settling such questions may take years or centuries.

### **10.1.3. Therapy and nihilation**

The battle for legitimacy is essentially a battle over who gets to define reality via the in-group consensus, the consequences of which spill over into virtually every aspect of life. The in-group consensus shapes everything from the mundane—what kind of food we like to eat, and the style of clothes we wear—to the momentous—what do our gods demand of us, and what sort of activities will lead the in-group to punish or even kill us. While we can tolerate significant amounts of nonconformity, extremism holds that our

most cherished daily rituals and sacred norms are in imminent danger of being forcibly overturned by an out-group. Little surprise then that extremist groups so often escalate their crisis narratives to apocalyptic dimensions. An assault on consensus reality can alter our lives at every level great and small. Nothing could be more consequential or cosmic in scale.

Given the literally existential nature of the in-group consensus, extremists often prioritize internecine threats over threats from an out-group, since only in-group members have the power to directly overturn the in-group consensus.

Even out-group threats can be centered on in-group composition. One of the most consistent extremist crisis narratives pertains to the purity of the in-group—perceived threats such as race-mixing (*Siege*) or Judaizing (*Against the Jews*) that describe outsiders infiltrating and corrupting the in-group, and thus its consensus. Indeed, the almost ubiquitous extremist obsession with in-group purity may be motivated entirely by sublimated concerns about who controls the in-group consensus.<sup>462</sup>

When extremist ideologists feel comfortably dominant, they tend to focus more on denigrating out-groups than critiquing in-groups, but the in-group consensus is never more than an arm's length away. Consider the Dred Scott Decision, an 1856 decision by the U.S. Supreme Court on slavery. The decision, written by Chief Justice Roger Taney, answered a legitimacy challenge from anti-slavery forces by stripping *all* Black people of *all* rights, escalating the hostile action against the out-group, instead of merely preserving the status quo. Although the text of the majority opinion is overwhelmingly focused on constructing an out-group identity, correspondence uncovered in subsequent historical investigations definitively prove that the opinion was explicitly intended to “decide & settle a controversy which has so long and seriously agitated the country”—in other words, to resolve an in-group consensus dispute that presented an increasingly existential threat to the unity of the United States.<sup>463</sup>

In its broadest context, legitimacy is a measurement of how closely aligned any given in-group subset is with the overall eligible in-group consensus *as that consensus is perceived and understood*, wherein lies the rub. As noted in the preceding section, all

groups and subgroups assume that they are the *seat of legitimacy* and typically believe any misalignment with another group is the *other group's problem*.

For instance, as seen in the Christian separation from Judaism in classical antiquity, an emergent in-group will pronounce itself legitimate and may seek to delegitimize the prime group through argumentation. In other cases, such as the reified Christian orthodoxy of late antiquity, in-group leaders convince in-group members to understand legitimacy as a quality that can only be bestowed or denied by a power hierarchy in a formal process.

Legitimacy does not exist in the absence of misalignment. If there is no misalignment—no conflict—legitimacy will never come up. There is only “the way things are.”

Misalignment can only be solved by changing the in-group consensus or changing the ways that people perceive and define the in-group consensus. Social construction empowers groups to address misalignment through therapy (healing conflicting consensus through persuasion) and nihilation (establishing in-group legitimacy by denigrating and dehumanizing a subgroup or out-group).\*

Therapy and nihilation are not mutually exclusive; the subgroup usually defines thresholds at which therapy must give way to nihilation, or it may push both approaches tactically as a good cop/bad cop strategy of persuasion. Extremist or emergent groups seeking to remedy a gap with the eligible or prime in-group consensus usually rely on some combination of the following four strategies:

■ **Therapy:**

- Deny the existence of a gap.
- Reduce the gap by changing the eligible in-group's views (or, more rarely, its own) to improve the alignment.

■ **Nihilation:**

- Explain the gap by alleging that the eligible in-group consensus has become corrupted.

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\* These terms are more fully defined in section 2.1.

- Blame the eligible in-group for abandoning a purportedly correct in-group consensus that existed in some nostalgically remembered past.

Denial helps potential extremist adherents rationalize their beliefs, especially those who are already very close to committing to a new ideology. Denialists may stipulate that everyone secretly agrees with them but won't say so out loud. This simplistic tactic is surprisingly common and seemingly effective.<sup>464</sup> White supremacist preacher Wesley Swift, for instance, told his congregation that "people feel like you do [about race] even though they are afraid to say anything."<sup>465</sup> George Lincoln Rockwell, one of James Mason's chief inspirations used similar tactics in a 1966 speech at Brown University. "I'll get letters from Brown University starting tomorrow, telling me 'I didn't dare say anything but I'm with you,'" Rockwell said. "Every time I speak this happens, but you're all scared to come up as a body and say I think you're right."<sup>466</sup>

Obviously, this tactic is especially effective at persuading people who *are* scared to say what they think, but it also makes the in-group consensus tacit instead of explicit. If adherents accept the premise of a "silent majority," they can be convinced to accept any number of evidence-sparse assertions about the in-group consensus (see sections 10.1.5 and 10.1.6 below for examples of how such evidence-scarcity works).

The second therapy strategy involves trying to change the minds of the eligible in-group through persuasion. For Azzam, this required an emphasis on correct (as he saw it) Islamic education and effective proselytization. "Mature propagators (of the faith) are still the talk of the hour in the Islamic jihad of Afghanistan," he wrote, "and the subject of pressing necessity and glaring need."<sup>467</sup> Irenaeus emphasized the need to educate heretics and convince them of their errors, but he also warned that such efforts should not continue indefinitely. If a heretic could not be convinced, they should be shunned, in order to avoid contaminating the in-group consensus.

The extremist in-group must turn to nihilism when the gap with the eligible in-group is too wide or the sides are too entrenched to reconcile.

The first nihilism strategy is to characterize the eligible in-group consensus as corrupted by out-group influences or infiltration. This is the primary theme in *Against*

*the Jews*, with John Chrysostom's insistence that any contact at all with the out-group was fatally compromising in-group unity of thought. Racial extremists like James Mason talk endlessly about the many ways that out-groups corrupt the in-group consensus, including by controlling the media and the economy. Miscegenation, the perennial obsession of racial extremists of all sorts, is perceived as the greatest of all threats because it represents the out-group's tangible encroachment on in-group boundaries.

Weaker extremist movements that cannot close the gap with the modern eligible in-group consensus often seek to contextualize themselves against a remembered or imagined in-group consensus that is framed as historical. The need to reframe the in-group consensus helps explain why **nostalgia** is so frequently found in extremist narratives, invoking a vision of the past that is, to a greater or lesser extent, fictitious.<sup>468</sup> When extremist ideologists cannot find legitimacy in the current in-group consensus, they seek it in the past, as Abdullah Azzam and Wesley Swift do with vague citations of religious scholars and historians. While arguably in a stronger position, Irenaeus similarly centered his defense of the proto-orthodox consensus on claims that his views had been passed down from the apostles. Rampant dissent in the contemporary consensus was dismissed in favor of a narrative about a once-unified church that was questionable at best.

The tactical deployment of nostalgia at the ideological level is further encouraged by what nostalgia does at the personal level—increase feelings of well-being, social connectedness and personal meaning.<sup>469</sup> Nostalgia helps people who are struggling to find their place in the world—people who are already vulnerable to extremism. By linking the positive psychological effects of nostalgia to an imagined past in-group consensus, extremist ideologists gain a powerful tool to attract and retain adherents.

#### **10.1.4. In-group consensus and availability**

One can take our exploration of root causes at least one level deeper and ask why the in-group consensus must be so aggressively defended against an out-group consensus or stabilized against internal challenges. What makes the in-group consensus so compelling? Why do people tend to assert its superiority rather than learn from and

compromise with outsiders and dissenters? And, perhaps most importantly, why do people take hostile action against people whose consensuses differ from theirs?

In 1972 and 1973, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman published heuristics to describe how people attempt to estimate probabilities—**representativeness** and **availability**. Representativeness means that people judged the probability of an event “to the extent that it represents the essential features of its parent population.” Availability means people judged the probability of an event based on their most-recent experience or most-accessible memory of a similar event—for instance, judging the probability of divorce to be higher because people you know personally have been divorced. Both heuristics are supported by empirical research.<sup>470</sup>

As the examples above, drawn from the paper’s text, suggest, prediction here does not simply mean predicting the future but can refer to any process in which an individual must attempt to guess at an unknown quality or quantity. In other words, prediction is a method for confronting and resolving uncertainty.

Kahneman’s broader corpus includes a number of interesting propositions that are relevant to extremist ideological and propagandistic texts,<sup>471</sup> and representativeness has some obvious relevance to extremism, but I want to briefly discuss availability, which I believe helps explain why people so strongly prefer their in-group consensus to an out-group consensus, as well as specific tactics used by extremists.

If reality is found in consensus, the in-group consensus is the most *available* consensus. By definition, most people are surrounded by their in-group, which is the source of their most frequent and recent interactions. The forceful intrusion of a conflicting out-group consensus, for instance through migration or online encounters, competes with the availability of the in-group consensus and destabilizes it, undermining the in-group’s position *because of its availability*, a factor that applies regardless of any other high-stakes challenges that derive from the out-group consensus’s content.

When the in-group and out-group consensuses conflict, in-group members must adapt, either by therapy that heals the divide, or by nihilation that diminishes the perceived worth of the out-group. Importantly, many nihilation tactics directly reduce the

*availability* of the out-group consensus through hostile actions such as shunning, segregation and even genocide. Entirely removing the out-group from in-group spaces is on some deep level intended to reduce the availability of the out-group consensus to zero, in theory if not in practice.

This dynamic may help explain why many extremist ideologists focus so heavily on characterizing out-group *spaces*, relative to the amount of verbiage devoted to out-group *people*. In addition to ejecting the out-group from in-group spaces, the in-group must be deterred from visiting out-group spaces. Out-group spaces are obviously domains where the out-group consensus can be most fully realized. If those spaces are peaceful or pleasant, the destabilization of the in-group consensus escalates dramatically. Extremists must therefore denigrate out-group spaces in the strongest possible terms and deter in-group members from going to see for themselves.

Thus anti-Chinese extremists in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century United States created elaborate fictions about Chinese neighborhoods, describing them as filthy centers of disease and vice.<sup>472</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> century anti-Muslim extremists railed about what they called “no-go zones” in major European cities that they claimed were unsafe for non-Muslims to visit.<sup>473</sup> John Chrysostom was obsessed with Jewish spaces, calling them the home of human sacrifice and the “dwelling of demons,” and insisting that Christians should be forcibly restrained from visiting them. James Mason claimed U.S. cities, which he called “hell-holes” dominated by Jewish and Black people, were sending “every source of filth and decadence” out into the nation.

These characterizations create psychic space between the in-group and the out-group, but, importantly, they also encourage in-group members to avoid the physical spaces where out-group members live, a blunt but effective tool to reduce the availability of the out-group consensus and increase the salience of the in-group consensus.

#### **10.1.5. In-group consensus and the observer effect**

The observer effect is a well-known physics principle stipulating that the act of making an observation in the real world inevitably affects the thing being observed.<sup>474</sup> Since its introduction, the observer effect has been offered as a principle in many other fields of

inquiry, not always uncontroversially.<sup>475</sup> In the case of measuring consensus within a group, there should be no controversy at all, as one can clearly see a number of ways that the act of taking measurement unambiguously affects the outcome.

The observer effect is most obvious when looking at examples further back in history. Prior to the rise of popular voting and modern polling, there were fewer objective tools to disentangle measurements of prevalence from the effects of power. Protests, mass uprisings and mob violence could signal a disconnect between prevalence and power, but then as now, well-staged dissents did not necessarily reflect the prevalence of dissenters' opinions. Assertions about the in-group consensus were contested through rhetoric and adjudicated ambiguously at best, with a bias toward treating power as evidence of prevalence.

Irenaeus' account of early Christianity, for instance, survives because the proto-orthodox faction he represented took power, emerging victorious in the struggle to define the in-group and systematically repressing nearly all records of competing sects, overwriting historical complexities with an incredibly successful myth of early Christianity as a near-monolith following an "unbroken apostolic succession." One can hypothesize, but we have no direct evidence to tell us how prevalent the proto-orthodox sect was relative to the "heretics and apostates." What one can say more definitely is that the proto-orthodox sect eventually succeeded in convincing a large number of people that its views reflected a powerful in-group consensus.

*And convincing people is the main thing.*

In any in-group larger than a neighborhood, members rely on someone's assertion about what beliefs are supported by the in-group consensus. An objectively strong in-group consensus is still the most important factor in socially constructing reality; the availability heuristic suggests that people will be most convinced by those they interact with regularly, so one cannot simply will an alternative consensus into existence.

Yet there are many ways to manipulate the in-group consensus short of magic, to create a metronomic beat of input around which real people will synchronize. Merely to depict a set of views as the in-group consensus is to sway the real consensus. Authoritarians



routinely seek control of mass media for precisely this reason. Newspapers, radio and television offer an opportunity to shape what an in-group perceives as normative, a vector easily abused by those with sufficient power or money.

The observer effect can be seen even in ostensibly independent media outlets, whose reporting and editing choices shape perceptions of the in-group consensus in ways that are not necessarily accurate. For instance, some media operations fall prey to interpreting an obligation of fairness as an obligation to report “both sides” of any given issue with equal emphasis, even when the veracity of one side is dubious or wrong outright.<sup>476</sup> Stories that give equal weight to both sides of a lopsided in-group split create an impression that the in-group consensus is up for grabs and so enhance the actual standing of the previously marginal position. “Both sides” reporting creates a perception that some views with low prevalence have higher prevalence, and that perception of higher prevalence creates a tendency for people to consider that the low-prevalence view is correct—a vicious circle that can elevate and empower previously unpopular ideologies.

Finally, the emergence of democratic voting and modern polling offer new and more systematized tools for determining the contours of an in-group’s consensus. While they may be improvements over the assertion-based approach of Irenaeus, these too come with observer effects. Voting, for instance, does not take place in a vacuum. Quite the opposite: Voting almost always takes place in a context of ideological contest, amid crucial in-group-defining disputes about who gets to vote. Politicians may try to shape themselves to fit a perceived in-group consensus, thus strengthening it, or they may try to shift an in-group consensus toward them through persuasion. Either way, elections are not merely vehicles for neutral measurement. Polling can, in theory, be more objective when done carefully, but the field is plagued with intentional and unintentional observer effects, such as questions presented with a leading preamble, or which frame a multifaceted issue as a two-sided proposition thus oversimplifying the question, or by selecting a polling sample that is not broadly representative of the polity being assessed.<sup>477</sup>

It's worth stressing that these in-group consensus determinations do not pertain to whether a movement should be considered extremist. As discussed at length in Chapter 3 and thereafter, a movement is not extremist simply because it is unpopular (misaligned with the dominant in-group consensus). Rather, these determinations pertain to how extremists *understand themselves* relative to their in-group consensus, which appears to be one of the most important considerations shaping extremist ideological arguments and strategies for hostile action.

### **10.1.6. The impact of emerging technologies**

Newspapers, radio and television are forms of top-down media that have historically reached massive audiences, but they are expensive to produce and may be subject to licensing and other certification requirements. On the one hand, this made top-down media vulnerable to capture by the state or moneyed political interests. On the other hand, the advertising model that supported many of these efforts was a numbers game, highly dependent on identifying and catering to the widest possible audience, which created incentives lashing content decisions to the broadest possible in-group consensus in ways that were quantifiable, if indirect.

As a result, these institutions often had a stabilizing effect on society (which is not necessarily the same as improving a society or making it more just). Old media institutions reinforced the status quo for better and for worse<sup>478</sup> by depicting a world where people were more or less aligned around a more or less coherent set of values, which included mostly shutting out explicitly extremist language such as racial slurs.<sup>479</sup> Old media created a drag on progress by reinforcing existing biases, but they also enabled a slow and steady increase in pluralism and inclusivity, driven in part by the desire of advertisers to reach ever-bigger audiences.<sup>480</sup>

The rise of the Internet upended almost every one of these dynamics, a topic large enough to fill its own article or book or several books.<sup>481</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, I point to four key changes from the pre-Internet landscape:

- **Cost:** Newspapers, radio and television were and remain very expensive to produce, with massive recurring costs for staffing, equipment and distribution.

Emulating those formats with amateur products like newsletters and videotaped propaganda could be done in the pre-Internet age, but those efforts were still quite costly, especially relative to the size of the audience. Even the most exorbitant online publishing ventures are far cheaper to start and maintain than their old media corollaries. Individual users can reach genuinely massive audiences using services that enable the creation and distribution of polished products for free or at a very minimal cost.

- **Gatekeeping:** Old media regulators, production codes, industry standards, and advertiser pressure often reinforced negative mainstream attitudes such as implicit or explicit sexism and racism,<sup>482</sup> but they also effectively banned aggressive and violent extremist viewpoints and language. Even if extremist movements like the Ku Klux Klan or al Qaeda could somehow raise the funds to work at that scale, these robust gatekeeping structures would bar them from major platforms with the ability to reach large audiences. In the Internet age, gatekeeping has been erratic at best, with wildly different standards from one platform to the next and one year to the next. Key gatekeeping decisions may reflect not only systemic biases but also the personal biases of platform owners.<sup>483</sup> Importantly, gatekeeping in the Internet age often takes place after publication, creating more opportunities for strategic evasion of content moderation and other tactics.<sup>484</sup> In contrast, during the old media era, a pro-KKK television series would never have reached the public in the first place.
- **Audience fragmentation:** Because of the high cost structure, old media outlets had to reach very large audiences to remain viable, organically incentivizing them to avoid content that would potentially alienate large segments of a market—such as a metropolitan, state or national demographic. The economics of the Internet era made it much easier to enjoy commercial success by catering to niche audiences, and online publishers responded by creating tools that could identify and market to ever more-specific demographics.<sup>485</sup> These pressures fractured a large body politic into thousands of smaller groups, resulting in the categorization and cultivation of many smaller group consensuses, some of which included strong extremist tendencies or ideologies. Dispersed over a global stage, these smaller groups were often still

large enough to provide the appearance of a strong in-group consensus with enough psychological weight to socially construct reality.<sup>486</sup>

- **Participation:** Old media platforms projected information overwhelmingly in one direction, from producer to consumer, but new media platforms are built on participatory technologies—the ability to like, share, and comment, along with more complex forms of content creation, such as memes and user-generated video. These technologies serve as a virtual dashboard for measuring in-group consensus. If a group of users I know, virtually or in the real world, agree with the sentiment I posted, then it must have worth. If my online friend posts a factual claim and my other friends share it, it is likely to be true. As noted previously, even small in-group dynamics are enough to give people a feeling of in-group support. Social media metrics are as close as most people come to directly experiencing an in-group consensus. Techniques that manipulate those metrics, such as astroturfing, are therefore powerful (but not omnipotent) tools for directly shaping an in-group consensus.<sup>487</sup>

Obviously, these media developments are not needed to explain the existence or widespread adoption of extremist ideologies, which predate even the “old” media infrastructure by centuries and possibly millennia, but the new conditions do contribute to *how* extremism arises in the current socio-political environment, which I think can be fairly described as faster-paced, more diverse, and more chaotic than in the past.

### **10.1.7. Reification of the in-group consensus**

This chapter has extensively discussed the in-group consensus as a key component of the social construction of reality. The in-group consensus determines what is real, but when a question arises, in-group members are not always available to be polled.

To function meaningfully, the in-group consensus has to be reified into a more accessible institutional form. In the words of Berger and Luckmann (1991), “reification is the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something else than human products—such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations

of divine will.”<sup>488</sup> One primary function of “the reification of institutions is to bestow on them an ontological status independent of human activity and signification.”<sup>489</sup>

In *Studies on Slavery*, Fletcher launders his views through the bible and other religious sources rather than presenting them as his own construction. Some of his interpretations are relatively straightforward, others derive from contested or obviously distorted readings. Regardless of the veracity of his citations, Fletcher literally seeks to depict as God the author of a degraded Black out-group identity that mandates enslavement by the White in-group as morally correct and even obligatory—a “manifestation of divine will.”

Similarly, the contemporaneous Dred Scott Decision seeks to depict the Constitution and the law as co-author of the same out-group identity, in an ideological decision that is almost exclusively devoted to negative characterizations of the out-group. While the decision emerged from the context of the U.S. sectional crisis, Supreme Court Justice Roger Taney locates the crisis with the out-group, arguing that allowing Black people to have rights would foment Black insurrection.<sup>490</sup> Ironically, the only insurrection fomented by the debate over whether Black people should have rights was distinctively White in its cause and nature. Taney also alludes to concepts advanced by Fletcher and other religious advocates of slavery, repeatedly referring to Black skin as a “mark of inferiority” and “degradation,” echoing the “Mark of Cain” justification for racism.

This rhetorical device is sometimes called an “appeal to authority,” a persuasive technique generally considered to be fallacious, especially in cases like Fletcher where the authorities are objectively misrepresented. (In the Dred Scott decision, the appeal to authority is arguably intrinsic to the format of a court ruling, although Taney clearly misrepresents his citations.<sup>491</sup>) Appeals to authority are common in extremism—examples from Azzam and Swift have already been cited—but religion and law writ large are not *just* authorities, they are also reified identity markers for in-groups. Reification makes them appear to be independent sources of authority, but they cannot be separated from the in-group consensus that produce them.

## 10.2. Locating the crisis

The extremist system of meaning described at the start of this dissertation stipulates that an in-group is afflicted by a crisis caused by an out-group. While this holds true as a broad outline, the devil is in the details. The crisis is always understood to affect the in-group, but the in-group has subdivisions that are not always affected equally. The crisis is always attributable to an out-group at the highest level of analysis, but the severest condemnations are often reserved for in-group members who collaborate with or acquiesce to the out-group. Similarly, the solution is ultimately meant to protect against the out-group, but it may require that hostile action first be taken against dissenting or traitorous parts of the in-group.

One can think about this as a question of location: The crisis ultimately affects the in-group and is caused by an out-group, and the solution is implemented by the in-group to harm the out-group, but where is each component located among the identity constructs of an extremist ideology? And the related, nearly identical question, where has the extremist ideologist chosen to focus their identity construction efforts?

Extremist ideological texts are not rigidly formulaic. Their authors make choices about which elements to emphasize in order to reach their desired audience and prompt the desired outcome. Different authors within the same extremist movement may highlight different elements of identity construction, and even a single author may make many different choices across a corpus of work. For now, let's consider the ideological texts described in this dissertation's case studies (see Table 1).

Even with these relative few examples, it's immediately apparent that there is no singular approach to identity construction. For instance, Azzam and Mason each make an ideological pitch that denigrates the eligible in-group, but Mason does so in much stronger terms than Azzam. While Azzam seeks to mobilize the eligible in-group, Mason seeks to destroy it. Azzam canonizes the extremist in-group, aligning it with an idealized eligible in-group prototype, while Mason is nearly as critical of his fellow extremists as he is of the eligible group. Neither spends as much energy on the out-group, although Mason's critique of the in-group revolves around the out-group's corruptive influence.

*Studies on Slavery* takes a wildly different tack, presenting a comprehensive denigration of the out-group in order to argue that their enslavement is justified. This defense is necessary, Fletcher writes, because the legitimacy of slave-holding has been challenged by White people—“our own brethren, bound to us by freedom’s holiest associations and religion’s most sacred ties.” Fletcher largely declines to engage directly with “the false reasoning, distorted views, and prejudiced conclusions” of the abolitionists, instead building a fortress against the challenge through the construction of a detailed Black out-group identity, including claimed traits, history, and religious doctrines.

Case study	Crisis	Solution	Focus of identity construction
<b>Join the Caravan</b>	An external crisis (the out-group invasion of Afghanistan) highlights an internal crisis—the coldness and reticence of the eligible in-group.	The eligible in-group must fix itself by engaging in jihad, thus aligning with a detailed in-group prototype. This may additionally resolve the external crisis.	Eligible in-group / extremist in-group
<b>Siege</b>	The eligible in-group is irretrievably corrupted and complacent, leading to domination by out-groups. Extremist in-groups are also largely corrupt and ineffective.	Society must be destroyed so that the eligible in-group can be purged, allowing the rise of a new eligible in-group that has been purified.	Eligible in-group / extremist in-group
<b>Studies on Slavery</b>	Members of the eligible in-group increasingly oppose the legitimacy of the ongoing enslavement of the out-group.	Claim divine mandate via biblical narrative that comprehensively denigrates out-group, mandates enslavement.	Out-group
<b>Against Heresies</b>	The emergent in-group faces a serious legitimacy challenge from competing sects that emerged from the same prime in-group.	Establish “truth before error” narrative that stipulates singular correct creed passed down through apostolic succession.	Emergent in-group
<b>Against the Jews</b>	The in-group is being corrupted by exposure to an out-group and resulting adoption of out-group practices. This corruption threatens the unity of the in-group.	In-group members must comprehensively shun the out-group. In-group members who refuse to shun the out-group should be verbally corrected, physically restrained, and beaten.	Out-group / ineligible in-group

*Table 1: Identity construction in the five case studies analyzed in this dissertation.*



### **10.2.1. The eligible/extremist in-group**

For many extremist movements, especially those lacking prevalence or power, the primary crisis narrative is located at the juncture of the eligible and extremist in-groups. Such movements are typically forced to undertake a two-handed exercise in identity construction to explain why the eligible in-group *should* support the extremist in-group but *does not*. The first part of the argument typically describes the extremist in-group (e.g., neo-Nazis) as aligned with an idealized in-group prototype. The second part of the argument consists of an in-group critique stipulating that a crisis within the eligible in-group (e.g., White people) has compromised the in-group's values, either through the eligible group's own internal failings (as seen in Azzam) or due to exposure to the corrupting influence of out-groups (as seen in Mason, Chrysostom).

The milder, internally focused critique suited Azzam, who had already enjoyed considerable success recruiting from the eligible in-group. Despite being situated on the fringe in terms of mobilized members, Azzam's movement was widely respected by the eligible in-group and even by out-groups, such as the Americans. A full-throated attack on the in-group would have risked those assets. Instead, Azzam urges the in-group to reject the traits (coldness, complacency) that comprise his critique. Mason, who despairs of persuading the eligible in-group, uses out-group infiltration as a rationale for extending hostile action to include many or even most in-group members. Mason does not seek to convince the in-group, except around the edges. His goal is to mobilize the small number of people who already share his ideology to take immediate and severe hostile action against *both* the in-group and the out-group.

### **10.2.2. The ineligible in-group**

The ineligible in-group presents a natural target for extremist movements. Typically, in-group members come to be seen as ineligible (at risk of being assigned to an out-group) because of their opposition to the extremist in-group, rejecting some or all elements of the extremist ideology, including identity construction, crisis narratives and proposed solutions. While extremist movements often stipulate the existence of an ineligible in-group, they may or may not situate the crisis in ineligibility.

For John Chrysostom, the crisis is located at the juncture of the ineligible in-group (Judaizing Christians) and the out-group (Jews). The crisis can only be solved by policing the ineligible in-group, with violence if necessary, until the ineligibility is resolved, either by returning the Judaizing Christians to orthodoxy, or by expelling them from the Christian community. Importantly, the ineligible in-group is the *means* by which the out-group harms the in-group. Chrysostom's crisis narrative claims the out-group will disrupt and pollute the in-group consensus. Judaizing Christians provide the out-group with access to the in-group consensus that would otherwise be unavailable.

The importance of the ineligible in-group thus becomes clear—it is the chink in the armor, the Achilles' heel, the door through which an invasive out-group can wrest control of the in-group consensus. For some extremist movements, closing that door—resolving the ineligibility—can even take priority over direct action against an out-group. For James Mason, the entire eligible in-group has become ineligible and this must be resolved by accelerationism. Similarly, *takfiri* movements such as ISIS are strongly focused on resolving all perceived instances of ineligibility, either by forcing ineligible members to conform to their extremist ideology or by killing them.<sup>492</sup>

The out-group may be capable of oppressing or even killing the in-group, but only the ineligible in-group can give the out-group control of the in-group consensus—and thus reality. Therefore, any time that in-group ineligibility is diagnosed by an extremist movement, *it must be resolved*, urgently, swiftly and decisively.

### **10.2.3. The out-group**

As noted previously, John Chrysostom locates his crisis at the juncture of the ineligible in-group and the out-group. While much of his energy is aimed at rehabilitating Judaizing Christians, his description of that group is sparse, and his identity construction is overwhelmingly focused on the Jewish out-group. *Against the Jews* is unambiguously against the Jews, despite apologists' efforts to deflect criticism by retitling it *Against Judaizing Christians*. Without the Jews, there would be no crisis, and Chrysostom's solution—shunning—seeks to remove Jews from the equation.

In *Studies on Slavery*, Fletcher writes in response to a crisis of legitimacy—specifically, attacks on the legitimacy of slavery by abolitionists. In Lesson VI, analyzed in Chapter 7, Fletcher seeks to rebut criticisms of slavery as morally unacceptable and anathema to Christian religious principles. He does so by deploying the Christian bible (Old and New Testaments) as a source of out-group identity construction. In this view, both the crisis and the solution are located with the Black out-group, because God has cursed the “races of Ham,” thus necessitating the hostile solution of enslavement. The need for hostile action is blamed on the out-group’s intrinsic, biblically mandated nature, which takes precedence over the secular-temporal morality of the abolitionists.

### **10.3. Future research**

By design, this dissertation has focused on combining the depth of analysis in the case studies with the breadth of a multidisciplinary theoretical concept. This yin-and-yang approach—necessary to establish a baseline conceptualization of the social construction of extremism—points the way for future research that seeks to expand the breadth of the deeper sections and the depth of the broader sections.

Tremendous amounts of literature exist just adjacent to the topics covered in this dissertation, too much to stuff into this overstuffed document but substantive enough to demand to be integrated into this framework after appropriate review and analysis.

In addition to more fully integrating these existing bodies of knowledge, the initial set of assertions outlined above should be explored in more detail and tested across a much wider range of case studies, and the context around the existing case studies can also be expanded and improved, preferably by drawing in multidisciplinary collaborators from fields including philosophy, psychology, theology and history.

I will highlight some of the most promising avenues for future research below.

Following that, in the final chapter, I will address some of most important insights I have drawn from this research journey and consider the possibility that the ideas put forward in this dissertation may offer an opportunity to reshape our understanding of extremism at a fundamental level.

### **10.3.1. Prime and emergent in-groups**

As this dissertation probably makes apparent, there are significant similarities between eligible-extremist in-group dynamics and prime-emergent dynamics (section 8.2).

Emergent in-groups often, perhaps always, grapple with questions of legitimacy. The prime group must inevitably decide whether it considers an emergent group to be legitimate, while emergent groups may seek to challenge the legitimacy of the prime group either on their own initiative or as retaliation for a reprimand from the prime.

Extremist movements often radicalize in the context of response to a legitimacy challenge from the eligible in-group, a process one can dissect and explain. The flip side of that question is less clear: Do legitimacy challenges *cause* radicalization, or to phrase it more carefully, do all groups *have a tendency* to radicalize in the face of legitimacy challenges? If the answer to that question is yes, then the prime-emergent dynamic—essentially the process of splitting a group—will tend to produce extremism at a higher rate than seen within in-groups that do not split. These questions can be interrogated in more detail and across a wider range of case studies—specifically including movements that faced legitimacy challenges without radicalizing. By examining the null case, one may be able to gain better insights into how collective radicalization can be prevented.

### **10.3.2. Early Christianity**

Chapter 8 of this dissertation included an attempt to distill a vast amount of scholarship on early Christianity and the separation of Christianity from Judaism into a relatively short format. This topic would benefit from a much more extensive examination, and it would benefit significantly from collaboration with biblical scholars and experts.

While I believe the chapter is an accurate representation of certain strains in early Christian studies, other scholars with a wider view of this topic would likely be able to empower more insightful research into the *Adversus* genres, which are much larger than the two works examined here. Collaboration with scholars who study the languages of the day would also bring vital insights into how key identity construction terms were used and understood by writers of the day.

As I will argue in the next chapter, I believe that insights derived from this period in history are crucial to understanding extremism as it exists today.

### **10.3.3. Shared reality theory**

Shared reality theory runs somewhat parallel to social constructionism, with both appearing to have been developed around the same time without much overt reference to each other. Shared reality theory argues that:

[P]eople are motivated to achieve mutual understanding or ‘shared reality’ with specific others in order to (i) establish, maintain, and regulate interpersonal relationships, thereby satisfying relational needs for affiliation ... and (ii) perceive themselves and their environments as stable, predictable, and potentially controllable.<sup>493</sup>

This frame has obvious relevance to social identity theory and its spin-offs, including uncertainty-identity theory and system justification theory. While the general thesis of each theory is similar—reality is apprehended through negotiation or consensus—shared reality theory may offer a different lens on the issue, with some research addressing how the modes and valences of sharing shape messages.<sup>494</sup>

Future research could usefully reconceptualize or reframe some of the arguments in this dissertation with reference to shared reality theory, particularly in studying how extremist ideologies are transmitted and communicated among adherents. Ideally, this approach could be integrated and reconciled with the significant insights that social constructionism brings to the study of extremism, particularly with respect to the latter’s formulations of therapy and nihilation, which emerged during this thesis as key tools for understanding extremist ideological construction.

### **10.3.4. Consensus-based CVE**

The fairy tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes” describes an emperor who is duped by conmen to believe, or say he believes, that he is wearing a fine raiment that is invisible to stupid people, when he is in fact naked. Afraid to be identified as stupid, his subjects

quickly coalesce around praise for the quality of the emperor's garments until a young child points out that the emperor is wearing no clothes, breaking the spell.

In reality, the in-group consensus is often much harder to deflate, regardless of the facts (if objective truth even matters in this context). While tactics such as fact-checking and pre-bunking are quantifiably effective at swaying a certain number of people, they fall far short of solving misinformation-based social problems such as vaccine hesitancy, election denial, and belief in extremist conspiracy theories.<sup>495</sup>

Based on the findings in this dissertation, the persistence of these problems is likely driven by the strength of the in-group consensus and/or the perception of an out-group threat, questions that have been studied somewhat obliquely to date,<sup>496</sup> and without making an especially big splash in extremism and counterextremism studies.

Future research should probe this question more deeply through experimental studies but also through a broad range of narrative analysis work, following the general approach in this dissertation and examining much larger corpora of extremist texts for language that invokes, portrays or contests an eligible in-group consensus. Armed with insights from this research, it may be possible to design messaging initiatives as part of countering violent extremism (CVE) initiatives that attack the problem using a consensus-driven strategy, either devising language to weaken extremist portrayals of the eligible in-group consensus or offering alternative language that can more effectively promote a competing consensus view.

While all this is well and good, the current political winds suggest a looming problem of a different nature—the prospect that an accurate description of the eligible in-group consensus may strongly align with an extremist in-group ideology in places around the world. This raises an even more urgent need for research on whether and how pro-social values can be framed, described and evangelized in societies whose in-group consensus have been captured by extremism. To survive these challenges, we will need far better tools than a child crying out that the emperor has no clothes.

The United States—facing an imminent and credible threat of extremist capture as of this writing—offers some historical background that can inform such research, including

studies of how the anti-slavery movement gained support in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the growth of the civil rights movement from the 1960s through the 1990s.

These historical examples offer hope, but they also highlight peril. Our goal should be to learn from their successes and seek to avoid—if possible—the violence that has in the past surrounded and sometimes defined these struggles.

### **10.3.5. Lawful extremism**

One obvious aspect of the definition and framework of extremism put forward in this dissertation—perhaps the primary finding—is that it enables us to consider a category of extremist movements that are not powerless or situated on the fringes of society. This has been discussed extensively throughout these pages, but there is an expanding horizon of important research avenues on this subject. I have already begun to explore this question in papers written and published during the composition of this dissertation, and those papers have in turn fed insights back into this work.

As of this writing, two “Lawful Extremism” papers have been published, one by me, and another in collaboration with Beth Daviess at the Center on Terrorism, Extremism and Counterterrorism at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies. The first dissected the Dred Scott Decision, discussed here at some length, and the second looked at the Chinese Exclusion Act, a U.S. law restricting immigration. As of this writing, a third paper is being written on legislation targeting LGBTQIA+ people in the United States, specifically a Florida law targeting the civil liberties of trans people.

The study of lawful extremism opens up a world of insights that have not been directly available to extremism studies as a field, due to the institutional bias against considering movements situated at the center of society. These include insights on the nature and direction of identity construction and especially on how movements seek to divert criticism by disguising extremist ideologies as common-sense policy preferences. These early efforts have already produced very interesting and useful insights, and the subfield of lawful extremism has only just begun.

### **10.3.6. Other important avenues**

This dissertation suggests several additional avenues for future research, many of which are at least as important than the ones previously enumerated, but which are currently less developed as to the project research questions and methodologies. These include:

#### **Out-group spaces**

As discussed in section 10.1.4, the characterization of out-group places and the demand to avoid them serves multiple purposes for the extremist ideologist, most significantly the reduction of the availability of an out-group consensus. Vituperative characterizations of out-group spaces are sufficiently common that they recommend themselves for additional scrutiny with more case studies, including a variety of movements or deeper dives into individual movements.

#### **Therapy and nihilation**

As discussed in 10.1.3, some extremist movements turn to therapy to heal in-group divisions and others turn to nihilation, with the latter strategy creating the most problematic manifestations of extremism. While the discussion in this chapter offers various narrative explanations of why each case study chose the approach it did, it's almost certainly worth digging deeper into this question to see if some general principles can be developed and whether those can be converted into signals that a movement is lurching toward violence. This research would likely involve polling and coding a much bigger group of case studies, including control group studies of movements that engage in intergroup conflict without radicalizing into extremism.

#### **Locating the crisis**

Section 10.2 discussed the location of the extremist crisis narrative, again offering artisanal explanations of why and how each case study movement located the crisis, and what that suggests about the movement's goals and strategies. This research can be expanded with additional case studies, or deeper dives that seek to identify how multiple ideologists within a single movement tailor their narratives. These might fruitfully



consider whether and how rhetorical choices become identity construction choices, or whether these sets of choices should be considered separately.

### **Individual versus collective behavior**

Somewhat implicit in this dissertation is the idea that ideologies exist primarily to influence collective behaviors and values—to shape and even control the in-group. But collectives are made up of individuals, and much of the literature on extremism, violent extremism, and terrorism is concerned with individuals—specifically predicting what they will do and preventing them from doing it. Although many of the dynamics in this dissertation are framed around groups, they also shape individual behavior, although the exact parameters of how and how much are still unclear and thus fodder for future research. Mechanisms will be a critical question for this project—how much individuals are being swayed by dynamics such as *social constructionism and in-group consensus* versus being attracted to *ideas that are exclusive to extremism* such as the a proclivity for violence or other harms. This question is highly pertinent to understanding radicalization pathways, extremist recruitment, lone actor terrorism, and more.

## **10.4. Concluding thoughts**

The process of working through such a diverse set of texts over a fairly long period of time has been rewarding for me. In the spirit of grounded theory, my views have evolved and my aperture has expanded as I absorbed each text and sought to understand their unique goals and points of view. Almost all of these avenues for future research seem important and fruitful, and I look forward to tackling as many of them as I can in the months and years to come. However, in my opinion, one particular set of insights and avenues rises above the others, and that is the subject of my final chapter.

## 11. The in-group in the out-group

This dissertation has argued that extremism is a consistent historical phenomenon dating back thousands of years, if not more. While that might seem like a prescription for despair, there are glimmers of hope to be found in the particulars.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I examined fringe extremist movements whose ideological texts contained a strong in-group critique, criticizing the eligible in-group for complacency and cold-heartedness in Azzam, for corruption and collaboration in Mason. As explained in Chapter 6, these critiques lead to the creation of a subcategory--the ineligible in-group, comprised of in-group members teetering on the edge of being assigned to an out-group. The ineligible in-group is the “out-group in the in-group.”

In Chapter 7, I showed how a dominant extremist movement sought identity closure by creating vivid and elaborate etiologies of race to demonstrate that the out-group (Black people) was alien to the in-group (White people). And in Chapter 8, I considered how Christianity, initially a Jewish sect, not only differentiated itself from its original Jewish in-group but deemed that parent group to be a hated out-group while moving ideologically dissenting in-group members first into an ineligible in-group of “heretics” and then into an out-group of excommunicated “apostates.”

All of these ideologies are primarily concerned with categorizing people, placing them in an in-group, an out-group, or in a liminal space between.

The preceding sentence should be read with the emphasis on *people*, not *categorizing*.

Consider non-human primates. Primates share many humanlike characteristics, from general shape to intelligence to opposable thumbs and even some capacity for language. But no one thinks gorillas are human; no one thinks gorillas need to be dehumanized; and no one demands hostile action against gorillas on ideological grounds.

If out-groups were entirely unrelated to in-groups, one would expect to find historically significant pockets of ideologically constructed anti-primate extremism around the world. One does not find such discrete and identifiable movements at any meaningful scale, because gorillas were never considered part of the human in-group.

To be sure, people debate whether gorillas should be treated more humanely and whether they should have rights. Many people hunt and kill gorillas for various reasons. Undoubtedly, some people hate gorillas and treat them badly because of that hate. But we don't see any culturally significant construction of elaborate narratives about why gorillas are intrinsically evil, nor do we find lengthy manifestos detailing the unconditional threat that gorillas present to the purity of the human race.

Extremism begins with categorization, but *categorization is only necessary to differentiate groups that are otherwise undifferentiated*.

Extremists do not create ideologies because they instinctively understand that people of other races, religions or cultures are *less* human than we are. Extremist ideologies are required to *negate* our instinctive understanding that people of other races, religions or cultures are part of the *same* human race that we are.\*

I submit that on some fundamental level, humans instinctively understand that they belong to a broad and universal human in-group. From this follows the proposition that out-groups are not inevitably born of difference, but rather they must be consciously constructed. Differentiation is always a process and always a choice.

From this foundation, several novel ideas proceed—for future research, for reevaluating existing research, and for new approaches to countering extremism.

### **11.1. All extremism is heresiology**

If we are all part of one human in-group, then the extremist ideologist's first and most important task is to carve that in-group into parts. Extremism should therefore be understood as a form of heresiology—a subtractive process that seeks to construct an in-group identity prototype and remove anyone who does not conform with it.

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\* I will refer to "humanity" as the source of this kinship for most of the rest of this chapter, but it may be more accurate to describe the common denominator as the ability to communicate through verbalization. Science may allow us to test this question in the future by enabling communication with more intelligent animals, but for this dissertation, I'll stay focused on the here and now.

Does this conclusion change anything? I argue that it does.

First, it speaks to cognitive effort. As alluded to in more general terms throughout this dissertation, I assert that extremism is labor-intensive and does not make life simpler or easier for adherents. I will enumerate various ways extremism creates cognitive labor below, but from first principles, extremism is hard because our inherent stance toward the world is unifying. We instinctively understand ourselves to be part of a unified human in-group, and most of us are taught as much. Carving that group into parts requires cognitive effort.

This is the process through which *all* out-groups are born, and it is an *effortful process*—sometimes quicker and more intuitive, often elaborate and deeply intellectualized, and always built on pre-existing labor. Every human in-group and out-group is constructed upon a vast pre-existing architecture of real and imagined history, all of which were constructed in turn through effortful processes.<sup>497</sup>

Second, it speaks to the importance of in-group prototyping. As seen in 7.6, the invention of heresy is a two-part process. To start, a detailed in-group identity must be constructed—the in-group prototype, a statement about what eligible in-group members should look like and how they should behave. Then, a rationale must be constructed for removing certain members from the eligible in-group—rendering them “ineligible” before expelling them from the in-group altogether.

The construction of an in-group prototype is almost always an exercise in narrowing eligibility for inclusion in the in-group. Prototyping (simple or complex) is a prerequisite to heresiology, and thus to extremism. Future research should study the formation of in-group prototypes in extremist, pre-extremist, and non-extremist movements, to understand whether and how prototyping can exist in positive or healthy ways and examine whether relevant insights offer utility for protecting groups against radicalization into extremism.

## 11.2. Prime and emergent groups revisited

If all out-groups were once part of an in-group, the dynamics between prime and emergent in-groups (sections 8.2 and 10.3.1) take on much greater importance in our understanding of extremism.

As seen in the early history of Christianity (Chapter 8), an emergent in-group may face legitimacy challenges from its prime in-group. Emergent groups often turn those challenges back on the prime group, suggesting that the prime group has lost its legitimacy and that the emergent group is more legitimate than its predecessor. The directionality of prime to emergent is subjective and arguably not that important. The prime group can radicalize into extremism against the emergent group, although the other direction may be more common. But what matters is the fact of categorization, the subdivision of the in-group.

As discussed in section 10.1.2, legitimacy challenges seem to be flashpoints for creating or deepening radicalization into extremism. By their nature, such challenges between a prime and emergent in-group trigger tensions between the two identities, positioning each as less legitimate in the eyes of the other. Irenaeus responded to ideological challenges by articulating a strong vision of an in-group prototype and cataloging the ways that dissenters had deviated. Such contentious dialogues over ideological legitimacy increase the salience of the boundary between sub-groups, a process sometimes referred to as “boundary activation,”<sup>498</sup> to which we will return shortly. An argument over ideological differences escalates into active competition between factions seeking to control the in-group consensus—and thus to control reality itself.

Heresiology, as practiced by Irenaeus and others, *embodies* ideological disputes as subdivisions of the in-group—an effortful process that reifies disagreements about the in-group consensus. To restore the stability of the in-group consensus in the face of these hardening social structures, the dissenting subgroup must be permanently separated from the in-group, a process that inherently requires ongoing hostile action.

Thus extremism is born.

Irenaeus gives us a fairly detailed look at this process, but studying emergent in-groups is complicated by the fact that the division of the in-group is shrouded in historical lacunae. For instance, archaeological discoveries in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century revealed that Irenaeus had distorted many facts about the “heretics,” while confirming that he got many other things right.<sup>499</sup> Even with the new evidence, our understanding is incomplete (albeit better than even before) with respect to the emergence of Christianity from Judaism, and the process of differentiation among different strains of early Christianity.

Almost every major form of in-group in the world today—religious, racial, national, gendered—is the result of centuries or even millennia of identity construction and elaboration. Untangling these trajectories is challenging at best. For instance, pre-modern scholarship on the division of humanity into racial in-groups historically relied on myth and extremist meaning-making of the sort depicted in *Studies on Slavery* (Chapter 7). Those narratives tell us a lot about their authors but tell us literally nothing about how humanity first started dividing itself into races. There are no clean, objective historical accounts that we can consult to show how racial divisions began, or how racial subgroups emerged from a human prime in-group.

Contemporary scholars are tackling this question in earnest today, but much of this work is reconstructive, and a firm scientific consensus view is thus far elusive. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the central role of Christianity in developing heresiology, a lot of recent research into the origins of racial division focuses on the construction of race in and around early Christianity.<sup>500</sup> This research might well benefit from the insights of the extremism studies community, and the extremism studies community would surely benefit from greater engagement with this research.

Finally, our discussion of prime and emergent in-groups has been derived from ideological texts and thus reflects a focus on ideologists, who have significant agency in shaping their own narratives. In other words, our case studies focus on the views and behaviors of self-declared in-groups. Due to this methodology, this dissertation has not focused on the views of people declared to be ineligible in-groups or out-groups.

In social identity theory, categorization starts with the perception that at least two different groups exist.<sup>501</sup> You may come to categorization through a journey of self-discovery, but the much more typical case is that categorization was done to you before you were old enough to understand it. Racial and gender categorization, for instance, are foisted upon children from a very early age. Would we invent racial differentiation without being taught? Putting aside the counterfactual, it's safe to say that racial identities are *enforced* at least as often as they are discovered, and probably more.

Future research must grapple with the views of the heretics and the apostates who were separated or expelled from the Christian in-group, the Jews targeted by John Chrysostom (and his ideological ancestors), and the Black people subjected to slavery (research exists on all of these groups, but not contextualized around extremism).

New insights can be found by interrogating how group members respond to charges of ineligibility, and how out-groups react and respond to being designated as out-groups. For instance, are enforced categorizations of in-groups and out-groups similar to emergent in-groups that voluntarily separate from the prime? Or are they different? How does this positionality affect responses to legitimacy challenges? These questions are both important and fascinating.

Specifically, future researchers could draw on the rich body of research about early Christianity and on the ongoing analysis of relatively recent discoveries of primary sources describing what supposedly heretical sects actually believed. Some heretics, for instance, scornfully condemned the proto-orthodox for worshiping a “blind god.”<sup>502</sup> Another place to seek insights on enforced emergence would be American slave narratives of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These are already known to reflect how people forced into out-group status sometimes internalize the identity constructed by the group that stigmatized and dehumanized them but at other times flipped the script and used the same narrative constructs to stigmatize and dehumanize their oppressors.<sup>503</sup>

Crucially, this research should interrogate why enforced out-groups specifically seem relatively resistant to reciprocal radicalization.<sup>504</sup> The history of heresy and apostasy is marked by extreme in-group violence against heretics and apostates, but relatively few clear examples of retaliation in kind.<sup>505</sup> While that may simply be a question of power,

more recent examples highlight the question. By any objective measure, Black Americans have a large number of legitimate grievances against White Americans, both historical and contemporary. If, as some have theorized, grievances are an important primary driver of extremism,<sup>506</sup> we would expect to see far more extremism within Black American communities than exists currently or historically.

If social identity dynamics provide a stronger explanation of which groups radicalize into extremism and why, they should also be able to provide an explanation of which groups do not radicalize, and why. We urgently need to study these dynamics, both for general insight into social ecosystems and for a better understanding of what factors may protect in-groups against radicalization into extremism.

### **11.3. Extremism is hard; not being extremist is easy**

If we accept the premise that instinct leads us to see all humans as part of an original in-group, and that cognitive effort is required to expel humans from the human in-group, this leads us to one of the sacred cows of the extremism studies field. If complex cognitive efforts are required to socially construct extremism, why do so many experts talk about extremism as if it's a strategy to simplify the world?

Explanations of extremism frequently assert that extremist ideologies and conspiracy theories lighten the cognitive load of their adherents by “simplifying” the world. This notion of cognitive load reduction is often predicated on the assumption that extremists and conspiracists prefer to see the world as “black and white” rather than shades of gray, which may in turn be predicated on an assumption that a black-and-white worldview is less cognitively demanding than the alternative. Some examples:

**Gjellerod (1999):** “Extremism relies on social discontent to propose simplistic and stereotyped solutions in response to the anxieties and uncertainties felt by certain social groups in the face of the changes affecting our societies.”<sup>507</sup>

**Rash (2004):** “Some have found a voice and the promise of future power and security in the simplistic worldview offered by extremism.”<sup>508</sup>



**Arena & Arrigo (2006):** “Terrorist organizations are attractive because they offer a simplistic worldview, an unambiguously defined enemy, and a clearly delineated set of norms of behavior through which the individual and the group can dramatically improve their debilitating conditions.”<sup>509</sup>

**Schmid (2013):** “Extremists generally tend to have inflexible ‘closed minds’, adhering to a simplified mono-causal interpretation of the world where you are either with them or against them, part of the problem or part of the solution.”<sup>510</sup>

**Schils & Verhage (2017):** “[Extremist] groups mainly target vulnerable individuals, who are susceptible to the simple worldview and clear identity they have to offer.”<sup>511</sup>

**Obaidi (2019):** “[A]necdotal accounts suggest that an increased search for order, structure and a simplified worldview mentality seem to be at play among all types of extremists and particularly right-wing and Islamist extremists.”<sup>512</sup>

**Barnen (2020):** “The simplified worldview and easy answers provided by extremist groups can be appealing to a young person...”

**Pisoiu et. al. (2020):** “Extremist groups and actors take advantage of these psychological mechanisms of ingroup-outgroup relations by conveying a dichotomous and heavily simplified worldview regarding what is right and wrong as well as good and evil using collective narratives.”<sup>513</sup>

This line of argument is often referenced more as a maxim or an assumption than as an empirical or well-supported thesis, although there are some relevant empirical studies in the citations above. In my experience, the “simplified worldview” thesis seems to be verbalized even more often than it is published to academic standards—although it is certainly published on a fairly steady basis. I have heard this view from some of my most respected colleagues during conversation and presentations (including one that coincidentally took place within days of writing this passage), and I have asserted it myself in the past—including in my co-authored 2015 book on ISIS.<sup>514</sup>

The idea that extremism supplies simple answers to life's questions is often raised in relation to a concept called cognitive closure, which is, in turn, related to Uncertainty Identity Theory (section 2.3). The "need for closure" thesis argues that some or all people who embrace extremism for its "relatively simplistic, black-and-white understanding of the social world" are driven by a "a desire for structure, predictability, and decisiveness" and "find ambiguity unpleasant."<sup>515</sup>

In plainer English, some people especially dislike uncertainty or ambiguity ("need closure") and are inclined to take actions that resolve their uncertainty ("get closure"),<sup>516</sup> such as adopting a "simplistic extremist worldview." Seeking closure is sometimes conflated with seeking a lighter cognitive load, whether out of individual preference or due to lack of cognitive bandwidth, with the idea being that someone whose questions have been answered no longer needs to expend cognitive effort thinking about them.<sup>517</sup>

Several studies support a correlation between the need for closure and a preference for various kinds of extremist and extremist-adjacent beliefs,<sup>518</sup> and it's not my intention to dispute that correlation. But instead of looking at demand, I want to talk about supply—whether extremism *provides* or *aims to provide* closure in any meaningful sense. In light of the complexities discussed in this dissertation, I am challenging the not-always-tacit implication that the *correlation between the need for closure and extremist tendencies* should be interpreted as meaning that extremism *delivers* a simplified worldview and/or that extremism *provides* closure.

The idea that extremism and conspiracy theories simplify or promise to simplify adherents' views of the world is remarkably widespread, perhaps even ubiquitous, but after working through the case studies in this dissertation and other material, I have come to believe it undermines our ability to understand extremism and conspiracism.

I submit that extremist ideologies and conspiracy theories neither simplify the world nor lighten cognitive demands for their adherents. In most cases, they do the opposite.

To reiterate and emphasize: I am not arguing that cognitive load-lightening is *never* a factor for extremist adherents, nor do I propose to throw out wholesale theories that

include some element of this argument—especially Uncertainty Identity Theory, which I believe is key to understanding extremism, albeit for different underlying reasons.

But I submit that this rooted underlying assumption—*extremism offers a simple narrative that resolves net ambiguity and reduces net uncertainty*—undermines our efforts to understand and respond to extremism and conspiracism and the damage they wreak on society. I will next address the elements of this underlying assumption. After that, I will propose an alternative explanation of the underlying dynamics that make Uncertainty Identity Theory and cognitive closure relevant to the study of extremism.

With respect to the underlying assumption, I will argue the following points:

- Extremist worldviews are not simple.
- Monocausal narratives are not simple.
- Hostile action is not simple.
- Fringe extremism is *really* not simple.
- Extremist ideologists expect you to think.
- It's not cognitive closure if you don't stop thinking about it.

### **11.3.1. Extremist worldviews are not simple**

If the appeal of extremism stems from its ability to present a simplified worldview, then extremist ideologies should be simple—concise and easy to comprehend. As we have seen in the case studies herein and beyond, they are anything but.

*Siege*, one of the most influential extremist tracts in recent memory, is 160,000 words long and almost certainly has been read in full by more extremists than academic experts on extremism. *Studies on Slavery* is 255,000 words and presents a dazzlingly complex collection of interconnected assertions. Each of these works is overflowing with entities—names, places, events, nations and written works, most of which are densely interconnected. They are not light reads.

Both works incorporate a wealth of other sources, and neither is the only word on their respective ideologies. For example, *Siege* sits alongside scores of neo-Nazi books and

hundreds of speeches and newsletters, which are themselves built on top of a mountain of original Nazi ideological texts. *Studies on Slavery* was part of an explosion of ideological tracts defending racial slavery using multiple lines of similarly complex argumentation—in categories that included economic, religious, anthropological, sociological, evolutionary, and biological.

Mason and Fletcher are hardly unique. John Chrysostom couldn't explain why his audience should hate Jews in just one sermon; he required eight. Even that was small change compared to modern extremist clerics Anwar Awlaki and Wesley Swift, each of whom have recorded hundreds of hours of lectures and sermons. While some themes repeat, most of this material is diverse, attacking the argument for extremism from scores of different angles, citing different authorities, and pointing to different examples, again in ways that are densely interconnected. Extremist arguments are not necessarily *sophisticated*, but they are almost always *complex*.

One might object that these are the products of ideologues and ideologists, intellectuals who operate far above the level of a typical extremist adherent. But none of these figures are Emily Dickinsons, writing in an attic for the sheer joy of words. All of them are propagandists. They create ideological texts because people read and listen to them, and because people are persuaded by them. The United States government did not assassinate Anwar Awlaki because he was an egg-headed intellectual who bored people to death. It assassinated him in large part because people listened to his words and thought deeply about them, engaging with his ideas and eventually acting on them.<sup>519</sup>

### **11.3.2. Monocausal narratives are not simple**

One frequently advanced explanation for the simplifying power of extremism and extremist conspiracy theories is that they provide monocausal explanations for why bad things happen. Under this view, extremism simplifies the world because it blames the out-group for most or all of the world's major problems, eliminating the need for further cognitive effort.<sup>520</sup>

To be sure, there is a high-level conceptual clarity that comes with attributing many or most bad things that happen in the world to a single evil out-group. But clarity is not the

same as simplicity, and it is not achieved effortlessly. The monocausal thesis fails on multiple levels, almost immediately upon investigation.

- Extremists do not stop cogitating on the causes of major problems simply because they are blamed on an out-group. If anything, they contemplate them *more*, obsessing over details of *how* and *why*, constantly elaborating on and adding to the list of nefarious activities that the out-group is responsible for. This dynamic is visible in virtually every extremist movement, especially those that center conspiracy theory narratives. An exemplar can be found in Christian Identity, in which the in-group's description of the out-group's Satanic background and apocalyptic plans complexified steadily over many years.<sup>521</sup>
- Blaming an out-group for most or all of the in-group's problems is an assertion in search of a justification. To make the out-group responsible for *all* of the world's ills requires spectacular mental gymnastics—far more than incurred by simply blaming an out-group for any one problem. Global conspiracies are like black holes, absorbing every available data point into a supermassive singularity, a process that requires intense cognition just to follow, let alone to devise. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* thus proliferates into the Bilderberg and Rothschild conspiracy theories, which are then further elaborated, complicated, and transformed by adherents into QAnon.<sup>522</sup>
- Extremists rarely blame *just* the out-group for in-group problems. As seen in our case studies, Azzam, Mason, and Chrysostom blamed major problems on parts of the in-group, often at more length and with more detail than they blamed out-groups. While the corrupting influence of out-groups lay behind many of these problems, the continued push for investigating the in-group makes clear that “blaming the out-group” neither simplifies the worldview in any meaningful sense nor provides cognitive closure. Blaming the out-group may be the culmination of an in-group critique, or it may be the cause of an in-group critique, but it is almost never the end of the road.
- Reality itself is multicausal. People certainly seek to blame their problems on delimited and definable causes, and they often elide the facts of a situation to arrive at such conclusions. But that is a choice, and the choice to blame a problem

set on a single source is not without cognitive effort. While it might be slightly easier to blame a single source, this typically requires a conscious decision to rationalize or look away from contradictory evidence. And the bigger the problem, the more existential the crisis, the more rationalization is required.

Finally, it's important to emphasize, as noted above, that some extremists explicitly reject monocausality and instead denominate multiple out-groups (i.e., for Mason, Black or Jewish) with different alleged traits (violent or cunning) and roles (muscle or masterminds). Groups like ISIS have even more iterations of out-groups, with each subject to slightly different hostile actions—including Christian, Jewish, polytheist, and atheist out-groups, in addition to apostates and other ineligible in-group enemies.

In summation, monocausality is not simplifying, but even if it was, extremists are not demonstrably content with monocausal explanations. Any given out-group may be an extremist in-group's *greatest* enemy, but it is almost never the *only* enemy.

### **11.3.3. Hostile action is not simple**

If extremism stopped with its diagnosis of the out-group as the prime mover behind the in-group's problems, it would still create more complexity and cognitive effort than it reduces. But it doesn't stop there. To qualify as extremist, a movement must also demand that the in-group's members engage in hostile action against an out-group. This adds yet another layer of cognitive effort to an already heavy load, a problem-solving task that becomes more demanding as a movement radicalizes toward harsher actions.

People generally have a negative view toward unprovoked hostile or aggressive action and typically must accept some sort of cognized justification in order to view hostile or aggressive action as good or morally correct.<sup>523</sup> Angry rumination about grievances has been found to be a cognitive strategy for regulating negative emotions<sup>524</sup> that may also increase motivation to take part in collective action.<sup>525</sup> The process of rumination may be more important than the substance of the grievances.

Many violent extremists, such as Timothy McVeigh<sup>526</sup> and Anders Breivik,<sup>527</sup> show obvious evidence of ideological rumination prior to carrying out an attack, and other

evidence shows the same pattern across larger samples. For instance, individuals who take part in fringe extremist violence usually engage extensively with ideological material, as highlighted by the research of Donald Holbrook and Max Taylor into media consumption among people prosecuted for terrorist offenses:

Subjects began by engaging with different types of media that glorified, promoted, or justified political violence or other extremist causes. In some cases, these activities appeared to have an abrupt beginning. In others, interest in this content had germinated for years. Subjects would search for particular titles online or acquire them through friends, associates, or a wider network on copied CDs or other means. The individuals in these cases would share some of this material online, or perhaps quote from it, posting excerpts on social media forums. They debated aspects of content, or compared notes via social media. In short, therefore, they interacted with beliefs and ideas for some time before turning to more operational activities where they planned to put these ideas into action.<sup>528</sup>

Committing to violence can be a costly cognitive process, especially for people whose views are out of step with the mainstream, requiring stealthy action, subterfuge, and a variety of security precautions. The alternative scenario, which unfolds when extremism is the dominant force in society and involves more people who may not individually carry out violent acts, is less cognitively demanding and discussed in more detail in section 11.4.3. But let us remain with the fringe extremists for a short while longer.

### **11.3.4. Fringe extremism is *really* not simple**

As discussed in section 10.1.4, the availability heuristic suggests that the in-group consensus is a powerful social construction tool because it's easiest to access and likely the most recent input that any given person remembers. Dominant extremist groups have access to this cognitive short-cut, the ramifications of which will be discussed shortly, but fringe extremist groups notably do not. Fringe extremist adherents must battle the availability of the eligible in-group consensus at every turn, incurring substantial cognitive effort and layering complexity onto evaluative processes. This dynamic will be considered in more detail in section 11.4.3.

### 11.3.5. Extremist ideologists expect you to think

Related to this need for justification, ideologists typically ask their audiences to follow along with them as the ideologist “solves” the crisis and then instructs them to independently “think about” the argument that has provided. While the ideologist obviously seeks to guide the audience to arrive at a fixed conclusion, they seek to produce the sort of committed endorsement that arises out of a subjective experience of independent consideration. In *Siege*, for instance:

We're back in the saddle now and making our moves. Whatever the outcome of that, it afforded a priceless and 100% realistic "dry run" for what can happen in life under a police state, in life in the reality of revolution, and not the fantasy of books. I urge all of you to think about it. Then act.

In Chrysostom:

You Jews broke the yoke, you burst the bonds, you cast yourselves out of the kingdom of heaven, and you made yourselves subject to the rule of men. Please consider with me how accurately the prophet hinted that their hearts were uncontrolled.

And:

And let each one of you consider this matter; let him not think it is something of secondary importance.

William Pierce spoke disdainfully of eligible in-group “lemmings”<sup>529</sup> while urging his followers to think deeply about their responsibilities:

And I say to you now. Think about what you are doing with your life. Think about the responsibility you have to your children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Think about the responsibility you have to all of those who came before you. And whose sacrifices made your life possible. And think about your responsibility to yourself, your responsibility to be the best person the most righteous person that you can be. Think about all of these things. And then let me hear from you.<sup>530</sup>



Wesley Swift not only asked his audience to think but explicitly emphasized the importance of thinking:

I want you to know that when God wakes you up, He wakes up your mind, because that is where you think. And if your religion is something which you can't think about or reason with then, my friends, it is a bondage not a liberty.<sup>531</sup>

Anwar Awlaki, one of the most successful ideologists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

I believe that as Muslims we should advise each other sincerely and we should talk with honesty, sugar coating is not going to do anyone any benefit, so if we want to change our situation we really need to sit down and think about it and decide what the illness is, what the symptoms are, and how to cure it.<sup>532</sup>

### **11.3.6. It's not cognitive closure if you don't stop thinking about it**

Omar Hammami was an American who loved al Qaeda and left home to join the affiliated Somali militant group al Shabaab, becoming a foreign fighter and a self-proclaimed terrorist. Yet despite his absolute commitment to extremism, he never stopped looking for more answers. He wrote books and articles, and recorded lectures in English and Arabic. He rebelled against the ideology of al-Shabaab, arguing that it was less pure than that of al Qaeda, and al Shabaab killed him for it. Hammami's well-documented personality certainly suggested that he had a need for closure, but he demonstrably failed to find it, despite his full-throated embrace of extremism.<sup>533</sup>

People with a need for closure may be attracted to extremism, but that doesn't mean they get what they want. Everything discussed in the preceding sections points to a well-known reality: Committed extremists think about extremism all the time. These thoughts are sometimes intense, sometimes casual, but overwhelmingly present.

Extremist worldviews are complex works of social construction that often require significant cognitive effort to understand and integrate into one's life. Because these are social constructions, they bleed out into everyday life in a variety of ways. People living in the antebellum South confronted the social reality of slavery every day, and every lash

of a whip against a human being's back required some level of justification, even if that justification was practiced and nearly automatic.

Fringe extremist views are even more laborious to understand and integrate on a daily basis, since they run counter to the most-available in-group consensus. This explains, in part, why people falling into deep radicalization tend to become monomaniacs, obsessed with an extremist ideology that crowds out friends, family and other work. The implementation of the extremist solution—hostile action—is also a much more laborious and uncertainty-causing process for fringe movements. There are steep penalties for following a fringe extremist ideological prescription. The adherent must carefully contemplate and plan for the consequences of hostile and violent actions not sanctioned by the eligible in-group. Adherents also engage in self-critique, considering deeply whether they are doing enough for the cause, and after-action critique, asking themselves whether the cause deserves their sacrifices. If the answer to that question is “yes,” the adherent returns to the self-critique and repeats the process.<sup>534</sup>

Committed extremists think about their place in the world, the world's problems and how to solve them *all the time*. Extremist ideologists author long and complicated ideological arguments because audiences want them, audiences consume them, and audiences are convinced by them. If audiences were not prepared to think deeply about complex extremist conceptualizations of the world, challenging and lengthy works—such as *Siege, Against the Jews*, Breivik's *2083 – A European Declaration of Independence*, Kaczynski's *Industrial Society and Its Future*, and Hitler's *Mein Kampf*—would not so clearly influence readers and would not ultimately endure. Many, perhaps most, ideologists would find another way to achieve their goals. Instead, these works and others like them endure for generations and even millennia.

Again, the evidence strongly suggests that extremists appear to be motivated by a *need for closure*, defined as discomfort with ambiguity and a desire for clear guidelines about who they are and how to act, which may in turn be related to a desire to reduce cognitive effort.<sup>535</sup> But the evidence discussed in the preceding sections also strongly suggests that extremism does not categorically *fill that need*. Extremism does not eliminate and may

even increase uncertainty and ambiguity, and extremism undoubtedly increases cognitive effort in many of its most common scenarios.

In the next section we will consider ways to square this circle, or at least pose the questions that might get us to an answer.

## **11.4. Extremism as a social construction strategy**

If extremism doesn't meaningfully deliver closure by answering important existential questions in a manner that resolves ambiguity and/or reduces cognitive load, why does it attract people with a need for closure at statistically significant rates?

Based on everything discussed so far, we can take a stab at explaining this, although the potential explanations offered here fall firmly in the realm of proposals for future research, rather than representing firm and final conclusions.

I propose that extremism is a social construction strategy whose primary goal is to win control of an in-group's consensus. Extremist ideologists try to accomplish this goal through an iterative process that first seeks to make people feel **ontologically insecure** (section 2.3) and then falsely promises to relieve their insecurity through hostile action against an out-group, a vicious circle that repeats endlessly and never achieves definitive closure.

The complexity and hostility of an extremist ideology makes adherents feel ever more unsafe and ever more ontologically insecure, which they seek to remedy by **engulfment** (Chapter 2), an ever-stronger connection to and immersion in the in-group consensus and escalating hostility toward competing out-group consensuses. Eventually, the in-group consensus and the in-group itself (or mental representations thereof) become the only things that can provide adherents with any sense of security and stability.

In plainer English, extremism attracts people who abhor uncertainty, but if they stop feeling uncertainty, they will be less motivated to engage with extremism. For an extremist movement to endure over time, it must promise closure with one hand and take it away with the other.

Three principles to keep in mind while contemplating this question, both in the context of this section and for scholars researching related matters in the future:

- First: People often do not know what they want, and even when they do know what they want, they often do not know how to get it.
- Second: We as academics should be much more careful about saying that extremism “offers” or “provides” something if what we really mean is that *adherents hope* extremism will provide them with that something.
- Third: Anyone directly asserting that a given extremist movement “simplifies” the worldview of adherents should show their work, explaining exactly what they mean by “simplify” and then explaining in detail how the movement does so. Some specific movements, at specific moments in time, may offer a simplified worldview, but the data in this dissertation and encountered in my wider career suggests that those are the exception rather than the rule.

I will next summarize the social construction of extremism as a process at a very high and abstract level. Then, I will examine how constructed extremist ideologies iterate and evolve. Finally, I will consider how the first two points inform our understanding of dominant versus fringe extremist movements, the challenges associated with each, and what happens when an extremist movement captures the society in which it sits.

#### **11.4.1. Constructing extremism**

The Tower of Babel is a story found in the Jewish bible, which holds that at some point in the distant past, the entire world spoke one language. Prideful humans sought to challenge God by building a tower that could reach heaven. God thwarts their plan by destroying their unified language and scattering people around the earth with different languages in each place. Among other things, this myth seeks to explain why different nations and cultures exist.<sup>536</sup> The desire for an explanation of human separation arises because we instinctively understand that humans belong to one unified group.

Extremism begins when members of one human group (an in-group) determine through social processes that the human group should be divided into exclusive subgroups. We come to this process late. The origins of human division (undoubtedly multiple rather

than singular) lie in pre-history. Almost no one alive today has gone through the process of differentiation unguided. We have all inherited an understanding that humanity is differentiated, and we have inherited ideas about what those differences are.

That being said, we can usefully describe a process of group differentiation that leads to extremism. It begins with the determination that one identifiable group exists and another stands apart from it. From this process, all else proceeds.

1. Members of a group (an in-group) perceive that a different group exists. The different group may be perceived as emerging from the in-group or as having an external origin.
2. Members of the in-group construct a narrative about what the other group believes and how it behaves. This narrative may be evidence-based, wholly fabulist, or something in between.
3. Members of the in-group conclude (rightly or wrongly) that what is deemed real by the other group's consensus is consequentially incompatible with what the in-group consensus agrees to be real.
4. The in-group proposes to resolve this inconsistency by distancing, diminishing, disempowering, or exterminating the other group.

This is a description of pure process and does not address root causes. None of these steps are inevitable, and an in-group can turn away from the process at any point.

Future research questions are embedded within the process, including:

- How do in-groups construct narratives about other groups?
  - Does the development of extremist tendencies shape the accuracy or inaccuracy of these narratives, or is an inaccurate perception more likely to lead to extremism? We can say with some confidence that extremism tends to be correlated with inaccurate narratives about out-groups, but we cannot say for certain in which direction the arrow of causality points.
- Are certain kinds of incompatibilities considered consequential more often than others? Or is the assessment of incompatibility primarily based on contextual factors rather than the specifics of belief?

Some of these dynamics are related to a phenomenon known as **boundary activation**,<sup>537</sup> meaning they arise from tense or contentious intergroup interactions that prompt participants to become more keenly aware of their respective identities. Sociologist Charles Tilly writes:

Boundaries between social classes, ethnic groups, religious faiths, neighborhoods, and other categories already exist. They organize some of routine social life. But contention typically activates one of these boundaries while deactivating others that could have been relevant. That activation brings a certain pair of identities into play. Ethnic conflict does not pit people who have nothing but ethnic identities. On the contrary, differences by gender, locality, class, or occupation commonly give way as ethnicity X and ethnicity Y begin attacking each other.<sup>538</sup>

I would expand this definition to note that boundary activation need not take place in dyads. Multiple overlapping identities and groups can be activated at once, or in succession. For instance, the United States polity historically and currently has included a powerful ideological movement known as White Christian nationalism. Whether the movement is more visibly White, Christian, or nationalist at any given moment can vary greatly, and despite its name, White Christian nationalism can coexist with and even ally with people who do not necessarily identify as White or Christian (for instance, Christian Latinos who may or may not be considered White by other members of the movement, or Jewish Zionist groups that ally with Christian millenarians).

Tilly identifies five causes of boundary activation, which should be studied as part of future research to assess how each one may or may not encourage extremism. The causes include:

- **Encounter:** Two previously separate or indirectly connected groups come into proximity with each other, for instance, by relocation.
- **Imposition:** Someone imposes distinctions between identities that did not previously exist. An example would be Irenaeus' differentiation among orthodox Christians, heretics and apostates.

- **Borrowing:** People within a group copy distinctions that they have seen used by other groups. For instance, teachers and students in a private academy might borrow military hierarchies and ranks.
- **Conversation:** People communicate with each other across and within identity boundaries, resulting in shifts to those boundaries. Tilly gives the example of women entering a previously male workplace and slowly reducing harassment and increasing their standing through incremental change and exchange.
- **Incentive shift:** Boundaries between or among groups change as the result of shifting incentives. Tilly offers the example of the English-only movement in the United States, which sought to incentivize immigrants to give up group identity markers such as the use of their homeland's language.

#### **11.4.2. Iterating extremism**

At the beginning of this thesis, I wrote that extremism is a *continuously evolving* narrative that explains why an in-group must harm out-groups. The story of extremism does not end once an extremist ideology has been constructed by naming an out-group and prescribing unconditional hostile action against it.

To keep adherents engaged, extremist ideologists must constantly trigger and re-trigger the audience's feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. This continuing crisis narrative is not definitional to extremism, but it informs the definition by ensuring hostile action against the out-group can never be separated from the health of the in-group.

Adherents who crave closure are kept in a perpetual state of anxiety, constantly seeking assurances that will never come, with only the false promise that an ever-increasing commitment to the ideology and to hostile action will eventually bring peace. I am not arguing that this is a fully intentional strategy on the part of ideologists, although some of the smarter ones have surely figured it out. It's more likely the result of evolution, with ideologists gradually weeding out narrative types that wrap up too easily and strengthening those that are self-sustaining.

Given that extremism does not provide closure, future research should more fully interrogate the motives of extremists who show a high need for closure. One possible

explanation is that extremism offers extravagant explanations for uncertainty and extravagant methods for resolving uncertainty. People who have a higher need for closure might feel more visceral satisfaction from taking part in extravagant actions, similar to how an angry person might feel after punching a wall. Punching the wall usually causes collateral damage (to wall and/or fist) while generally failing to eliminate the source of the anger. But for some people, it feels good—a rush, if only for a moment.

Extremist ideologies can arguably extend that rush beyond the wildest dreams of the wall-puncher. Precisely *because* extremism is so complex, it offers the opportunity to feel continually soaked in extravagance, whether immersing in the details of a conspiracy theory or plotting a terrorist attack.

Extremist ideologists can exploit several narrative tools that may serve to extend the rush. One of the most common and obvious approaches is a steady iteration and/or escalation of the crisis narrative found in the extremist system of meaning. Extremists must keep adherents highly engaged at all times. Therefore they constantly introduce updated narratives about the out-group's repulsive traits and perfidious activities.

Claims about the prevalence of illegal immigration are thus supported by a steady stream of stories about alleged “swarms” of immigrants and alleged crimes by immigrants, eventually escalating into a full “invasion” narrative.<sup>539</sup> Antisemitic conspiracies about Jewish cabals are constantly elaborated with novel details—new people, schemes and events—sometimes mutating into dramatically new paradigms such as sovereign citizenry or QAnon.<sup>540</sup>

Hostile action is also a way to extend the satisfaction, particularly for fringe movements that recommend violence and other actions that carry legal consequences. Fringe extremists often engage in an extended planning cycle, full of purpose.<sup>541</sup> Additionally, fringe extremist violence tends toward approaches such as terrorism and accelerationism, both of which inherently foment insecurity by undermining the sources of stability in society. Destabilizing in-group society with these tactics also creates the possibility of reciprocal radicalization—when the out-group responds in kind to extremist attacks, for instance in the spate of hate crimes against Muslims in the United States following September 11.<sup>542</sup> Mobilizing the out-group to attack an extremist



movement's *eligible in-group* is an unmitigated victory for extremists that can validate previously shaky crisis narratives.

Many things that extremists do and say serve to destabilize the world around them, exacerbating uncertainty and extending cognitive engagement, but not everything, and not all the time. But there is one context in which extremists genuinely seek to reduce uncertainty—victory. When extremists control their host society, most of their incentives flip. The question before us is whether that incentive flip is in some way *unique to extremism*, or whether it's just *politics as usual*. Is the victory of extremism uniquely tied to the goal of cognitive closure, or is that just what naturally happens to members of a social movement that achieves dominance?

### **11.4.3. When extremists win**

With the caveats described in section 10.1.1 and elsewhere, an in-group's dominant ideology (extremist or otherwise) generally dictates the contents of the in-group consensus. These contents may be trivial (the rules of Major League Baseball), or they may be profound (centuries of racial enslavement). Either way, the in-group consensus is a self-reinforcing approximation of what a majority or plurality of an in-group believes—self-reinforcing because once established, it becomes the *de facto* point of reference for most people living in a space controlled by the in-group. At least two cognitive tendencies discussed in this dissertation (possibly overlapping) contribute to the self-reinforcing cycle: the availability heuristic (section 10.1.4) and system justification (section 2.2).

Both of these tendencies help dominant social movements stay on top. The availability heuristic says people tend to resolve uncertainty by relying on what they have heard most recently and/or most frequently. The in-group consensus is the most easily accessed information for an in-group member, and so it becomes the “default setting,” especially for questions that seem less complicated or consequential. Most Americans don't think deeply about why red means stop at a traffic light, they just accept it.

The system justification impulse is connected to and maybe even attributable to availability. System justification holds that people will, in the absence of complicating

factors, tend to support the maintenance of the status quo, which contains the most available information about how to live. As part of system justification, people prefer predictable outcomes even when those outcomes are quantifiably less favorable than they could be. They also tend to rationalize the status quo, inventing reasons why it should be seen as just.<sup>543</sup> System justification helps account for why extremists use nostalgia. By presenting their ideology as a *return* to the status quo rather than an attempt to *overturn* it, they can avail themselves of the system justification bias, although to a lesser extent than afforded by ongoing dominance.

When an extremist movement successfully takes and holds control of society, it becomes the status quo and the narrator of the in-group consensus, pressing both cognitive tendencies into service on its behalf. In this scenario, finally, extremism may become the “simple” or “easy” choice, a decision to “go along and get along” rather than incur the risks and challenges that come with bucking a vindictive system.

An important question for future research is whether this dynamic pertains to our much-discussed need-for-closure group. Do highly engaged adherents of extremism enjoy the same reduction in cognitive effort as the general public? Or do they double-down, seeking to expand the reach of their ideology into every corner of public life, e.g. drafting laws about how many drops of out-group blood it takes to disqualify you from the in-group?

It’s possible that the need for closure can never be satisfied, that it represents an internal deficit that cannot be remedied by “fixing” the world. In the unlikely event that an out-group could be completely eradicated by an extremist movement, would the extremists just start looking for another out-group? Or would they carve one out from the in-group, if they couldn’t find one in the wild? We have some evidence that suggests the latter, but deeper and more focused research is needed.

For instance, pro-slavery ideologues spent significant cognitive capital defending their beliefs, but how did the complexity of their arguments evolve throughout the history of slavery? Was the ideological explosion of the ante-bellum period qualitatively different from thinking about slavery in previous years? Were individual slaveholders inclined to reckon with the morality of their practice on a regular basis, or did they simply accept it

as proper since it was in line with the in-group consensus? Future research tracing the patterns of historical ideological development and the writings of slaveholders (diaries, letters, newspaper articles, etc.) could shed light on this question.

Aside from the need-for-closure crowd, availability and system justification do seem to allow in-group members to live their lives in general accordance with the values of an extremist ideology, even a complex one, without necessarily incurring a high cognitive load. But this conclusion too comes with significant caveats.

To reiterate a crucial point, cognitive load benefits are available to *any* socially constructed set of beliefs that dominates the in-group consensus. While future research would be welcome, there is no evidence at this time to suggest that extremists *especially* or *exclusively* benefit from dominance; they likely benefit in proportions similar to any other movement. Dominance is dominance. It's just easier and simpler to go along with the dominant in-group in the space where you live. Winning control of the in-group consensus dramatically reduces the costs (cognitive and otherwise) of participating in extremism. At minimum, this almost certainly changes *how* adherents relate to and think about ideology, but not necessarily *how much*.

On the other end of the equation, fringe or emergent groups that live in eligible or prime in-group spaces must constantly battle the availability of the dominant in-group consensus, incurring massive cognitive costs—whether or not they are extremists. Members of fringe groups must actively turn away from the most available information and seek out less available information, or they must change the circumstances of their life to make their views and values more available, for example by sequestering themselves in a compound with fellow believers—a process that itself requires a significant effort.

The bottom line is that availability and system justification are *neutral heuristics* on their face. These ideas were not created as explanations of extremism, and their dynamics are structural; they don't care whether a set of beliefs is extremist or pluralistic.

But while availability may not care about extremism, extremist ideologists care deeply about availability. As discussed in section 10.1.4, the hostile action that is existentially central to an extremist ideology almost always reduces the availability of an out-group consensus with the effect, and perhaps the intention, of buttressing the in-group consensus. Extremism can be understood at a very high level as a social construction strategy that uses rampant and unconditional nihilation to bolster the availability of an in-group consensus by diminishing or removing the availability of a conflicting or competing consensus using any means necessary.

Many questions for future research arise from this proposition. Most importantly, does this strategy work? Certainly, extremist regimes can be long-lived. Racial slavery endured for centuries in North America. The Spanish Inquisition lasted more than 350 years, and the Crusades almost 200. The Islamic Republic of Iran's theocracy turns 45 in 2024, and there is no particular reason to think it's going away any time soon.

On the other hand, extremist regimes often contain the seeds of their own failure. The Third Reich lasted about a dozen years; the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's caliphate lasted about six. Both regimes were marked by extravagant extremist violence, and both were brought down by international coalitions. But each of these "anti-extremist" coalitions were more concerned with global stability than the torture and murder of out-groups. It's not at all clear that the world would have intervened if these movements had not paired their atrocities with expansionism.

As far as "success," *all* of these regimes created enormous human suffering and death, but *almost* none succeeded in completely eliminating or permanently suppressing their designated out-groups. All such regimes face in-group challenges for their brutality and oppression, although those challenges are not always sufficient to produce change. Even the most objectively successful extremist campaigns—such as the Albigensian Crusade, in which the Roman Catholic Church pursued and was unusually effective at implementing a total genocide against the "heretical" Cathar sect—did not succeed in securing the in-group from threats or ending the in-group's pursuit of hostile action. The Church simply moved on to the next group of heretics.<sup>544</sup>

Is any of this really “winning”? The question deserves to be the focus of future research that specifically interrogates how extremists define success in both the short and long term, how history views extremist successes and failures, and how extremist ideologies do or do not evolve during periods of apparent success.

I will close this section with a final thought. We often talk about extremism as a manifestation of hate, but it is also and arguably foremost a mechanism for control. Extremist ideologists typically seek to claim or seize control of their eligible in-group’s consensus. The question then arises: Should we respond to and counter these movements as if their primary goal is power-seeking?

Extremists engage with a suite of behaviors that interact with a suite of human emotional and cognitive needs and biases, and it may be too reductive to think about extremism as simply a subset of politics. Some extremist ideologists and adherents may be too mired in complex dynamics of bias and emotion to clearly state or pursue a goal of social or political control, and many groups disavow politics altogether (albeit because they think they can’t win, rather than on principle).

I believe that power-seeking (specifically seeking control of the in-group consensus) should be much more prominent in our thinking about extremism and how to counter it, but I think the jury is still out whether that should be seen as extremism’s *primary* goal. Hopefully, the frameworks in this dissertation can spark a greater and more in-depth discussion of this question.

#### **11.4.3.1. Variations on engagement**

Different people will engage with an extremist ideology in different ways due to individual variation and social context, with the latter factor likely carrying the most weight. As previously noted in section 10.1.4, very different dynamics apply to dominant and fringe extremist movements, due to the availability heuristic.

We can surmise that fringe extremists incur much higher cognitive costs when justifying adherence to a movement that is different from their native in-group consensus. In plainer English, it’s generally easier to go along with the people around you than to defy

their values and norms. Jihadists, for example, are often asked to uproot their lives and move across the world to defend strangers in a strange land, as Azzam demanded. With some exceptions, this requires the jihadist adherent to engage deeply with the core ideological premise—the existence of a crisis that afflicts the in-group and can only be solved by taking hostile action against an out-group.

As previously noted, per Holbrook and Taylor, fringe extremist adherents, including some of the most committed and violent, appeared to engage extensively with the ideology. This engagement need not be deep or complex, but it appears to be voluminous, and extremist movements actively promote such engagement. Azzam noted the “pressing necessity and glaring need” for adherents to study and comprehend jihadist ideology. Al Qaeda (and virtually every other organized extremist movement) typically insisted that recruits undergo extensive ideological indoctrination before being deployed on operations.<sup>545</sup> So-called footsoldiers (as opposed to ideologues and ideologists) might or might not *enjoy* this training, and different people will engage with the ideology at levels suited to their interest and intellectual capability. But it’s virtually impossible to be an extremist without clearly understanding and deeply absorbing the minimum elements of the system of meaning—in-group, out-group, crisis and solution.

Fringe extremism is hard in part because it runs counter to the most *available* in-group consensus—the dominant ideas, values and practices of an in-group that are most frequently and most easily accessed. Relocating away from the eligible in-group and surrounding oneself with the extremist in-group inverts that dynamic and makes availability work in favor of the ideology. Your in-group consensus is shaped by the people you interact with every day. If you are constantly surrounded by extremists, you’re more likely to find extremism “normal” and less likely to question its tenets.

This effect is magnified further when extremists win control of a society and become dominant. In that case, availability is fully deployed in favor of the dominant extremist movement. This does simplify the world in important ways and reduce the amount of cognitive effort required from adherents, but, again, that simplification is not likely a function of extremism—it’s merely the result of dominance. Dominant extremist

movements reduce cognitive demands for adherents, but the reduction does not seem to flow from the qualities of extremism itself or the nature of extremist beliefs.

### **11.5. Only the in-group can threaten the in-group consensus**

If the construction of extremism is so labor-intensive, if extremism fails to deliver the closure it promises, and if people instinctively understand that we are all part of a unified human in-group, why do we see extremism as often as we do? Why has extremism endured through millennia of human history? Why do people keep coming back to it, again and again?

Extremism can best be understood as a rarely occurring response to a commonly occurring situation—a stressful interaction between one human subgroup and another. Extremism is statistically rare in one sense, arising in perhaps one out of a thousand such scenarios, or one in ten thousand, or more. But the human ecosystem contains a million billion such scenarios, with new ones pouring in all the time, in all their infinite variations, made even more fractally complex by the modern proliferation of participatory media. When an extremist movement arises, even if it's a rare emergence, it can quickly grow, thanks to the suite of psychological tendencies it seeks to exploit, further assisted by millennia of refinement to the nature of its ideological appeals.

While it is not the default human posture, extremism thrives under certain conditions—uncertainty, insecurity, and especially sudden or unforeseen changes to the status quo, which upset multiple social dynamics at once while triggering the psychological tendencies that make extremism attractive.

None of that changes the fact that extremism is an effortful rejection of an instinctive human solidarity. The process of constructing extremism is laborious precisely because in-group people instinctively recognize a kinship with members of the other group.

Uncertainty and the need for closure come into play when an in-group consensus is threatened by a conflicting group consensus that undermines the perception of a stable reality. People tend to seek foremost to resolve the conflict, even at the expense of increasing their cognitive load, because the conflict destabilizes reality.

But an out-group consensus can only destabilize reality if members of the out-group are seen as *peers*. Dogs have a perspective on reality, but their perspective doesn't threaten ours. Only humans can undermine the social construction of reality. That is precisely why nihilism seeks to reduce the humanity of out-group members—even dehumanizing them, even deeming them literally equivalent to dogs. Nihilism is a strategy to combat the instinctive recognition of the humanity of an out-group, a recognition that can only be defeated through substantial cognitive effort.

When the smoke clears, extremism runs counter to instinct, which is why it requires so much effort to sustain. That is not to say that humans lack violent or exclusionary instincts and tendencies, including many that have been discussed herein. But people are not hardwired to hate people of different races or religions or nationalities, to perceive them as nonhuman, or to engage in programs of hostile action against them. If these impulses were intrinsic to human nature, extremists would not require such complex collections of ideological justifications. We do not ideologically justify our need to eat, or sleep, or breathe. But in virtually all forms of extremism, we find justifications not just of *how* but *why* and even *whether*.

And while instincts and tendencies shape our reactions to these various social interactions, they do not dictate extremist outcomes. When people turn toward extremism, they are not simply succumbing to human nature. They are exercising agency. They are making a choice. Extremism does not “just happen,” and it is not inevitable. Out-groups are not inevitably born; they are consciously constructed.

Differentiation is always a process and always a choice. To embrace hostile action is a choice. To inflict pain, suffering and death on people is a choice.

If we want to combat extremism effectively, we must be clear on these points. We are not asking people to make a hard choice to implement a complex and unnatural ideology of pluralism or “wokeness.” We are telling them they don't need to laboriously construct an ideological edifice in support of a dumb and destructive program.

We are asking them to make the *easy* choice—the choice that requires less cognitive labor, the choice that entails less risk and suffering, the choice that provides true



cognitive closure. We are asking people to surrender to their instinctive understanding that people are people, and that others are deserving of respect.

## 12. Concluding remarks

This dissertation has examined academic and policy understandings of extremism, through the lens of linkage-based analysis and the frame of social constructionism. In the first chapter, I outlined my research questions and grounded theory methodology—using four case studies to explore how extremism is defined as a category, how extremist ideologists seek to situate their beliefs as supported by their wider identity group, and how extremist ideologies change when they enjoy such support.

In the second chapter, I examined some high-level theories about how people organized themselves into groups, and the dynamics that emerge when they do. Specifically, I describe the social construction of reality, which holds that people in groups rely on other group members to affirm their understanding of what is real. When that group consensus is called into question by conflicting views held by internal (in-group) or external (out-group) dissenters, people respond by trying to heal the rift either through therapy (convincing the dissenters to change their minds) or nihilation (diminishing the human worth of the dissenters).

I then discussed dynamics that stem from the organization of people into in-groups and out-groups as described by Social Identity Theory, including that when people are sorted into groups, they tend to favor their own in-group and disfavor those excluded from their group. I looked at theories built on the scaffold of Social Identity Theory, including Uncertainty Identity Theory, which states that people tend to embrace hard divisions between in-groups and out-groups in order to avoid existential feelings of uncertainty about their place in the world and how they should behave, and System Justification Theory, which states that people tend to rationalize the status quo as good and just, even when it puts their own in-group at a disadvantage.

In the third chapter, I reviewed definitions of extremism most often used by academics and policymakers with an eye toward whether those definitions were reasonable, whether they created a self-consistent category for classification and comparative study, and whether they were factually grounded. I then presented the definition of extremism that this dissertation would follow and explained why I believe it creates a self-

consistent category that captures most activity currently recognized as extremist. The following chapters would test that belief and examine some of the analytical outcomes that the definition empowers.

A brief discussion of methodology ensued, including grounded theory, an inductive approach to extracting insights from data, and Linkage-Based Analysis, which breaks narratives down into a system of meaning that includes an in-group, an out-group, a crisis caused by an out-group and afflicting the in-group, and a solution to the crisis that demands the in-group take hostile or violent action against an out-group.

Over the course of the dissertation I illustrated further divisions of the in-group, including the eligible in-group, which is the broad identity to which an extremist group appeals (e.g., “White people” for neo-Nazis); the extremist in-group (e.g. neo-Nazis), and an ineligible in-group consisting of people who meet the criteria for membership in the eligible in-group but risk being re-assigned to an out-group because of their beliefs or actions (e.g., for neo-Nazis, White people who have interracial sex). I identified a handful of other subdivisions, which were useful but less prevalent.

While *Join the Caravan*, the infamous jihadist tract by anti-Soviet jihadist Abdullah Azzam, described a crisis caused by an out-group (the invasion of Muslim nation Afghanistan by non-Muslim nation the U.S.S.R.), it devoted far more verbiage to creating an “in-group critique” that blamed Muslims for being cold and indifferent to the safety of Afghan people. In contrast, the text provides almost no identity-constructing detail about the out-group itself and only limited information about how the out-group’s actions affect the in-group. While we understand extremist movements as being heavily focused on out-groups, for good reason, the crisis Azzam describes is overwhelmingly internal to the in-group rather than external.

In *Siege*, a lengthy tract by neo-Nazi ideologist James Mason, the in-group critique explodes to virtually consume the narrative. For Mason, the eligible in-group has been hopelessly complacent and corrupted by interaction with and submission to out-groups. In Mason’s view, the entire eligible in-group (with the exception of only the purest members of the extremist in-group) has become ineligible and thus should be subjected to hostile action, including oppression and murder. Mason’s in-group critique leads him

to embrace a philosophy called accelerationism, in which the eligible in-group must be destroyed so that a pure in-group can emerge from the actions. Mason's ineligible in-group differed from Azzam's in that the in-group's problems are less self-inflicted and more a result of contamination stemming from friendly contact with the out-group.

Mason represented a set of views found on the far fringes of society. In Chapter 7, I examined the ideological underpinnings of the practice of racial slavery in the United States prior to the Civil War—an ideology that was dominant for many years and that was supported by an underlying racial extremism that dehumanized Black people in order to justify their enslavement by White people. Unlike the fringe neo-Nazi *Siege*, this dominant movement text contains virtually no in-group critique but is instead focused exclusively on constructing the identity of the enslaved Black out-group.

Finally, I examined a pair of early Christians texts—*Against Heresies* (circa 180 CE) and *Against the Jews* (circa 387 CE). Set against the backdrop of Christianity's emergence and separation from Judaism, these texts highlight the construction of identity concepts that are crucial tools for extremist ideologists, including the invention of then-novel ineligible in-group identities such as “heretics” and “apostates.” These building blocks of extremism were not well-known or widely used in the ancient world prior to the rise of Christianity, which would spread them to the four corners of the earth. While these concepts were profoundly shaped by their Christian origins, it's quite possible and even likely that they would have emerged in some form eventually, as human societies grew bigger and more complex.

In Chapter 10, I outlined several of the dissertation's findings, most of which point the way to future research. I discussed the idea of the in-group consensus extensively, explaining how its role varies depending on the power and the prevalence of an extremist movement, and how a dominant extremist movement seeks to exploit actual power or prevalence, and how a fringe extremist movement seeks to compensate for the lack thereof. Related to this, I examined how different extremist ideologists locate the crisis element of the system of meaning with different identity groups and subgroups, depending on what their movements need to accomplish.

Finally, in Chapter 11, I gave a detailed account of what I believe to be the most important findings of this dissertation, pushing back against the conventional wisdom framing that depicts extremism, extremist ideologies, and conspiracy theories as presenting adherents with a simplified view of the world that reduces their need for cognitive labor. I argue that extremist ideologies are self-evidently complex, that deciding to participate in hostile action is inherently effortful, and extremism requires people to expend considerable cognitive labor to suppress their instinctive understanding of other people as fully human. I argue that the making of ineligible in-groups— through mechanics of heresy and apostasy—is the key dynamic for extremists, and that the categorization of people into out-groups is in fact heresiology—a process of subdividing a singular human\* in-group that people instinctively acknowledge.

Extremism is ultimately a social construction strategy that arises when one group encounter another group that understands reality in consequentially different ways, destabilizing the in-group’s consensus view of reality. Extremism is thus a rarely occurring response to a commonly occurring situation—a stressful interaction between one human subgroup and another.

Instead of solving such problems when they arise, extremist movements are subject to perverse incentives. We know extremism attracts people who crave “cognitive closure”—who dislike uncertainty and “find ambiguity unpleasant.” But if someone with a need for closure is provided with closure, they may not continue to accept the burdens of effortful hostile action and violence that extremism places on its adherents. Extremist ideologists string adherents along with the promise of a simplified world that is constantly just around the corner but never arrives.

There is one exception to this rule. Extremism can become simplifying when it becomes dominant—when it controls the in-group consensus. When one is surrounded by people who all share the same values and beliefs, it’s easier to go along with the crowd than to

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\* “Human” here is a temporary stand-in for intelligent species that can communicate with humans. I think it’s important to acknowledge that it’s not hard to imagine scenarios in the not-too-distant future in which humanity must grapple with its customary behaviors toward other intelligent species on this planet, but that is a whole other dissertation.

stand against it. But, crucially, there is no evidence to suggest that extremism benefits from dominance *more than any other system of belief*. Going along with a dominant belief system—any dominant system—simplifies the process of interacting with the world at almost every level, regardless of whether the belief system is extremist.

Ultimately our efforts to counter extremism should be informed by an understanding that extremism is not the “easy choice”—it’s a difficult and laborious choice, and as a field, we should be constantly encouraging everyone involved to understand that fact.

While extremism has been a continual blight on human history, it is not the default human condition. Extremism is a conscious and learned response to the separation of people into groups and the ways those groups interact with each other. We can choose a different type of response, or we can choose not to separate people into groups at all. Extremism derives from a suite of collective behavioral tendencies that are neither inevitable nor absolute. For most people, extremism is effortful, far more effortful than trying to be decent or even just indifferent to other people. Cognitive labor is required to make life difficult and unpleasant for a fellow human being. Perhaps with the right framing, more people can be persuaded that they do not have to take on this labor. The labor is not necessary, it is not noble, it is not just. Extremism is curdled passion and wasted days. Rejecting extremism is not just the right choice, it’s the easy choice.

# Glossary

*Some entries in this glossary are adapted from Extremism (J.M. Berger, 2018).*

**Accelerationism:** The belief that a society or government has gone wrong at a fundamental level that can only be remedied by destroying that society or government and starting anew.

**Apostasy:** The belief that substantially wrong beliefs or practices have disqualified an otherwise eligible individual from membership in an in-group.

**Availability:** The psychological tendency to overvalue easily available information or recent events when setting expectations and making decisions.

**Biologization:** Characterizing people as equivalent to a disease or infestation.

**Boundary activation:** An event or situation (such as a conflict over resources) that increases the salience of a boundary between two groups.

**Categorization:** The act of understanding yourself to be a member of an in-group and determining whether others are part of your in-group or an out-group.

**Consensus:** A measure of the preponderance of opinion within a group, usually subjective.

**Conspiracy belief:** The belief that out-groups are engaged in secret actions to control in-group outcomes.

**Constructionist:** Someone who employs the “social construction of reality” framework.

**Crisis:** A pivotal event that requires an active response from the in-group.

**Dehumanization:** Characterizing people as less than human by comparing them to or asserting they are animals, insects, demons, robots, or other lower forms of life.

**Depersonalization:** A technique for managing interactions with other people by reducing the importance of their human qualities.

**Differentiation:** The act of comparing an in-group to an out-group by highlighting differences in their beliefs, practices, and traits.

**Eligible in-group:** The broad identity collective that an extremist organization claims to represent and from which it seeks to recruit.

**Emergent in-group:** A subdivision of a prime in-group in the process of adopting an explicitly distinct identity. The distinct identity may have a doctrinal or demographic element, or it may be based on other criteria.

**Engulfment:** When an individual's identity becomes subsumed to the identities of other people.

**Entitativity:** Having group-like characteristics ("groupiness") including but not limited to shared beliefs, practices, and traits, that inform clear boundaries for membership and encourage internal homogeneity.

**Excommunication:** The act of expelling an in-group member and making them part of an out-group.

**Extremism (relative definition):** Any definition of extremism that is predicated on a movement's status relative to a dominant movement, rather than on the movement's beliefs, practices, and traits.

**Extremism (Berger definition):** The belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group.

**Extremist ideology:** A collection of texts, usually in narrative form, that describe who is part of an in-group and who is part of an out-group, and how an in-group should interact with out-groups.

**Extremist in-group:** An identity collective consisting of an extremist movement or organization, usually including both formal members and active supporters.

**Genocide:** Systematic slaughter of out-group members on a large scale.



**Heresiology:** The study of heresy, here taken especially to include the setting of boundaries for eligible in-group membership.

**Heresy:** The belief that substantially wrong beliefs or practices put an otherwise eligible person at risk of expulsion from membership in an in-group.

**Hostile action:** In extremism, any act that intended to harm an out-group. Hostile actions range from relatively low harms, such as verbal harassment, to very high harms, such as genocide.

**Identity collective:** A group of people who are defined by a common nation, religion, race, or some other shared trait, interest or concern.

**Identity:** The set of qualities that are understood to make a person or group distinct from other persons or groups.

**Ineligible in-group:** In-group members who are at risk of being expelled from the in-group, in the view of an extremist movement. See also **apostasy** and **heresy**.

**In-group:** The group to which one belongs; organized around a shared identity, such as religion, race, or nationality.

**In-group prototype:** A description of the beliefs, practices, and traits of an idealized in-group member, typically as a model for other in-group members to emulate.

**Legitimacy:** A measure of the compatibility of an emergent in-group's consensus views with the consensus of its prime in-group. In extremism, a measure of the compatibility of an extremist in-group's consensus views with the consensus of its eligible in-group.

**Linkage-Based Analysis:** A narrative analysis method based on understanding linkages of concepts between an in-group, an out-group, a crisis, and a solution.

**Nihilation:** The assignment of inferior status to out-groups whose norms and/or perceptions of reality substantively differ from the in-group consensus.

**Nostalgia:** The belief that a purportedly historical version of an in-group's status, beliefs, practices, and/or traits is preferable to the in-group's current status, beliefs, practices, and/or traits.

**Ontological insecurity:** The unpleasant experience of being uncertain about one's identity and one's place in the world.

**Out-group:** A group of people who are excluded from a specific in-group.

**Power:** In the context of extremism, a measure of the ability of an extremist in-group to impose its norms and practices on members of the eligible in-group.

**Prevalence:** In the context of extremism, a measure of how widely an extremist in-group's internal norms and consensus view of reality are accepted by members of the eligible in-group.

**Prime in-group:** The referent in-group and social context from which a new in-group emerges and is situated. "Prime" here denotes an earlier position in chronology rather than carrying any implication of merit or authenticity.

**Radicalization into extremism:** The escalation of an in-group's extremist orientation in the form of increasingly negative views about an out-group or the endorsement of increasingly hostile or violent actions against an out-group.

**Segregation:** The physical separation of an in-group from out-groups.

**Social construction of reality:** A framework arguing that when ambiguities are encountered, people determine what is real in consultation with trusted others.

**Social Identity Theory:** A theory stating that when people are separated into groups, they tend to have more favorable opinions about their in-group and more negative opinions about out-groups.

**Solution:** Specific hostile actions that in-groups should take against out-groups to resolve a crisis.

**System Justification Theory:** A theory stating that people dislike change and prefer the status quo, even if the status quo is not favorable to them or their group.

**System of meaning:** In extremism, a narrative stating that an in-group is being affected by a crisis that has been caused by an out-group, and that the crisis must be solved by the unconditional use of hostile action against the out-group.

**Terrorism:** Public violence targeting noncombatants, carried out by nongovernmental individuals or groups, in order to advance a political or ideological goal or amplify a political or ideological message.

**Therapy:** Any method that seeks to change the minds of in-group members whose norms and/or perceptions of reality substantively differ from the in-group consensus.

**Traits:** Descriptive qualities that apply to group members, including physical (such as skin tone or hair type), mental (intelligence or creativity), social (dialect, slang, and accents), or spiritual (virtuousness or piety).

**Uncertainty Identity Theory:** A theory stating that people who feel uncertainty about themselves may tend to turn to extremism to clarify questions about who they are and how they should behave.

**Victim in-group:** A subset of the eligible in-group that is singled out as especially vulnerable to being attacked by an out-group (for example, in-group women and children).

**Violent extremism:** The belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for violence against an out-group.

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- <sup>322</sup> Reuters Fact Check. (2021). "Edmund Burke did not say evil triumphs when good men do nothing." *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/factcheck-edmund-burke-quote/fact-check-edmund-burke-did-not-say-evil-triumphs-when-good-men-do-nothing-idUSL1N2PG1EY>, retrieved September 21, 2024.
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- <sup>324</sup> Reynolds, D. S. (2011). *Mightier than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America*. WW Norton & Company.
- <sup>325</sup> Tise, L. E. (1990). *Proslavery: A history of the defense of slavery in America, 1701-1840*. University of Georgia Press. p. 49.
- <sup>326</sup> Priest, J. (1851). *Bible defence of slavery*. p. vi.
- <sup>327</sup> Baldwin, S. D. (1857). *Dominion; or, the unity and trinity of the human race: With the Divine Political Constitution of the World, and the Divine Rights of Shem, Ham, and Japheth*.
- <sup>328</sup> *PLESSY v. FERGUSON*. (1896, May 18). LII / Legal Information Institute. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/163/537>, retrieved September 21, 2024.
- <sup>329</sup> e.g. Elliott, E. N. (1860). *Cotton is king, and pro-slavery arguments*. Negro Universities Press (New York). pp. 671-673.
- <sup>330</sup> Dobratz, B. A., & Shanks-Meile, S. L. (2006). The strategy of white separatism. *Journal of Political & Military Sociology*, 49-79.

- <sup>331</sup> The Civil War was the deadliest U.S. military conflict if both Union and Confederate soldiers are counted as Americans. Hacker, J. D., & McPherson, J. M. (2011). A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead: With Introductory Remarks by James M. McPherson. *Civil War History*, 57(4), 307-348.
- <sup>332</sup> Berger, J.M. "The First Literary Race Warrior." *jumberger.com*. July 28, 2023. <https://www.jumberger.com/dystopia/the-black-gauntlet>, retrieved August 9, 2024.
- <sup>333</sup> e.g. Foote, L., & Wongsrichanalai, K. (Eds.). (2015). *So Conceived and So Dedicated: Intellectual Life in the Civil War–Era North*. Fordham University Press. pp. 217-218.
- <sup>334</sup> Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. pp. 13-25.
- <sup>335</sup> Berger. *Extremism*. Op. cit. pp. 11-13.
- <sup>336</sup> Royalty, R. M. (2013). *The origin of heresy: a history of discourse in second temple Judaism and early Christianity*. Routledge. pp. 3-4.
- <sup>337</sup> See also Ehrman, B. D. (1996). *The Orthodox corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*. Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition. p. 7.
- <sup>338</sup> Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. p. 163.
- <sup>339</sup> Boyarin, D. (2010). *Border lines*. University of Pennsylvania Press. pp. 2-4; Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. Kindle location 204, 1256.
- <sup>340</sup> Ehrman. *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*. Op. cit. pp. 6-8.
- <sup>341</sup> Royalty. *The origin of heresy*. Op. cit. p. 22-23.
- <sup>342</sup> Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. p. 47.
- <sup>343</sup> Royalty. *The origin of heresy*. Op. cit. p. 39-43.
- <sup>344</sup> Forkman, G., & Sjoelander, P. (1972). *The Limits of the Religious Community: Expulsion from the Religious Community within the Qumran Sect, within Rabbinic Judaism, and within Primitive Christianity*. pp. 40-52; Royalty. Op. cit., p. 51.
- <sup>345</sup> Horbury, W. (1985). Extirpation and Excommunication. *Vetus Testamentum*, 35(Fasc. 1), 13-38.
- <sup>346</sup> Royalty. Op. cit. pp. 39-43.
- <sup>347</sup> Atkinson, K., & Magness, J. (2010). Josephus's Essenes and the Qumran Community. *Journal of Biblical literature*, 129(2), 317-342.
- <sup>348</sup> Royalty. *The origin of heresy*. Op. cit. pp. 58-60.
- <sup>349</sup> Ibid. p. 6.
- <sup>350</sup> Ibid. p. 99.
- <sup>351</sup> "The concept and combating of heresy has historically been less important in [Buddhism](#), [Hinduism](#), and [Islam](#) than in Christianity." Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2019, May 8). *heresy*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/heresy>. See also: O'Flaherty, W. D. (1971). The origin of heresy in Hindu mythology. *History of Religions*, 10(4), 271-333; Shrimali, K. M. (2020). Heresy, heterodoxy and nonconformism in early India. *Studies in People's History*, 7(1), 5-22; Yü, C. F. (2005). *Absolute Delusion, Perfect Buddhahood: The Rise and Fall of a Chinese Heresy*.
- <sup>352</sup> Royalty. *The origin of heresy*. Op. cit. p. 3.
- <sup>353</sup> Fredriksen, P. (2010). *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian defense of Jews and Judaism*. Yale University Press. p. xiii.
- <sup>354</sup> Ehrman, B. D. (2012). *Did Jesus Exist?*. HarperCollins. p. 118.
- <sup>355</sup> Ehrman, B. D. (2005). *Misquoting Jesus: The story behind who changed the Bible and why*. HarperSanFrancisco. p. 208.
- <sup>356</sup> Marrow, S. B. (1986). *Paul: His letters and his theology: An introduction to Paul's epistles*. Paulist Press. pp. 48-50.
- <sup>357</sup> Ehrman, B. D. (2012). *Did Jesus Exist?*. HarperCollins. pp. 74-76.
- <sup>358</sup> Goldenberg, R., & Katz, S. T. (2006). The destruction of the Jerusalem temple: Its meaning and its consequences. *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, 4, 191-205.
- <sup>359</sup> Kilgore, E. (2021). "Why Pope Francis Is Cracking Down on the Latin Mass and Angering Traditionalists." *New York Magazine*. August 15, 2021. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2021/08/why-pope-francis-is-cracking-down-on-the-latin-mass.html>, retrieved September 21, 2024; Elie, P. (2023). "What's Behind the Fight Between Pope Francis and the Latin Mass Movement?" *New Yorker*. April 9, 2023. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/whats-behind-the-fight-between-pope-francis-and-the-latin-mass-movement>, retrieved September 21, 2024.
- <sup>360</sup> Royalty. *The origin of heresy*. Op. cit. pp. 9-14.
- <sup>361</sup> Ibid. Kindle location 1272-1289.
- <sup>362</sup> Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. Kindle location 1256-1264.

- <sup>363</sup> For instance, orthodox authorities suppressed texts of sects such as the Ebionites, who maintained Jewish law and tradition while following Jesus. See Ehrman. *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*. Op. cit. pp. 50-51.
- <sup>364</sup> Often attributed to Mark Twain, probably incorrectly. Twain, M. (2014). History Does Not Repeat Itself, But It Rhymes. *Quote Investigator*. <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/01/12/history-rhymes/>, retrieved November 26, 2023.
- <sup>365</sup> Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit.; Ruether, R. R. (1996). *Faith and fratricide: The theological roots of anti-Semitism*. Wipf and Stock Publishers; Taylor, M. S. (1995). *Anti-Judaism and early Christian identity: a critique of the scholarly consensus* (Vol. 46). Brill; Gager, J. G. (1985). *The origins of anti-semitism: attitudes toward Judaism in pagan and Christian antiquity*. Oxford University Press.
- <sup>366</sup> Lasker, D. (2006). Jewish Anti-Christian Polemics in the Early Modern Period: Change or Continuity. *Tradition, Heterodoxy and Religious Culture: Judaism and Christianity in the Early Modern Period*, Beer Sheva, 469-488.
- <sup>367</sup> Royalty. *The origin of heresy*. Op. cit. p. 87.
- <sup>368</sup> Gregory, A. F., & Rowe, C. K. (Eds.). (2010). *Rethinking the Unity and Reception of Luke and Acts*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- <sup>369</sup> Royalty. *The origin of heresy*. Op. cit. pp. 62-63, 68.
- <sup>370</sup> Smith, David Raymond. *Hand this man over to Satan': Curse, Exclusion and Salvation in 1 Corinthians 5*. Vol. 386. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009.
- <sup>371</sup> Castelli, E. A. (1991). *Imitating Paul: A discourse of power*. Westminster John Knox Press. pp. 116-117.
- <sup>372</sup> Hogg, M.A. "From uncertainty to extremism." Op. cit. p. 339.
- <sup>373</sup> Hogg, M. A. (2012). Self-uncertainty, social identity, and the solace of extremism. Op. cit. Kindle location 1290.
- <sup>374</sup> Campbell, W. S. (2008). Paul and the creation of Christian identity (Vol. 322). A&C Black. p. 54, et. al.
- <sup>375</sup> Tabor, J. (2024, June 12). *The Quest for the Historical Paul - Biblical Archaeology Society*. Biblical Archaeology Society. <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/the-quest-for-the-historical-paul/>, retrieved September 21, 2024.
- <sup>376</sup> Snook, D. W., Williams, M. J., & Horgan, J. G. (2019). Issues in the sociology and psychology of religious conversion. *Pastoral Psychology*, 68(2), 223-240; Snook, D. (2019). Zeal of the convert? Comparing the structure of Islamic religiousness between convert and non-convert Muslims. [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1198&context=psych\\_theses](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1198&context=psych_theses)
- <sup>377</sup> Royalty. *The origin of heresy*. Op. cit. p. 101
- <sup>378</sup> Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. Kindle location 1501, 1998, 2080; Ehrman. *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*. Op. cit. pp. 82, 84, 99, 232, 269; Annand, R. (1956). Papias and the Four Gospels. *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 9(1), 46-62; et. al.
- <sup>379</sup> e.g. Matthew 15:21-28.
- <sup>380</sup> Winter, P. (2014). *On the trial of Jesus*. de Gruyter. p. 1-3. See also Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. Kindle location 170; Robinson, J. M. (1956). *The problem of history in Mark*. pp. 104-105.
- <sup>381</sup> Winter. Op. cit. pp. 68-70, 190-191.
- <sup>382</sup> Although Mark was written after the temple was destroyed, many scholars believe it is likely that Jesus did make this prediction, which was consistent with his broader apocalyptic message.
- <sup>383</sup> Mark 13:12
- <sup>384</sup> Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. Kindle location 641.
- <sup>385</sup> Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. Kindle location 654.
- <sup>386</sup> Winter, P. (2014). *On the trial of Jesus*. de Gruyter. p. 33-34.
- <sup>387</sup> Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. Kindle location 1251-1259.
- <sup>388</sup> Nickelsburg, George. "A criterion for inclusion and exclusion: From Jewish sectarianism to early Christianity." in *To see ourselves as others see us: Christians, Jews, "others" in late antiquity* (1985). pp. 73-91.
- <sup>389</sup> Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. Kindle location 1474.
- <sup>390</sup> Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. Kindle location 1592-1605. Pagels writes that she is unaware of any precedent for the demonization of enemies. There may be some loose precedents, although they are not necessarily perfect matches with the conceptualization here. For examples, the *Rig Veda* allows for alliances between humans and demons, but these appear to be utilitarian with the humans in control, rather than the demons. Cohn, N. (2001). *Cosmos, chaos, and the world to come: the ancient roots of apocalyptic faith*. Yale University Press. Kindle location 1643.

- <sup>391</sup> Matthew 27:24-25 via Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. Kindle location 1663.
- <sup>392</sup> Luke 22:3. Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. Kindle location 1751.
- <sup>393</sup> Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. Kindle location 1778-1842.
- <sup>394</sup> Horbury, W. (2006). *Jews and Christians*. Bloomsbury Publishing. p. 11-12.
- <sup>395</sup> Ibid. Kindle location 1949-1961.
- <sup>396</sup> Ibid. Kindle location 2001-2029. It's unclear whether the Jewish council actually had capital punishment powers, but the question is largely tangential to this discussion.
- <sup>397</sup> Ibid. Kindle location 2054. Notably, the historical Pilate was renowned for cruelty and arrogance, and his depiction in the gospels is decidedly in conflict with more objective sources.
- <sup>398</sup> John 8:44; Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. Kindle location 1922.
- <sup>399</sup> For example: Anderson, P. N. (2017). Anti-Semitism and Religious Violence as Flawed Interpretations of the Gospel of John. *John and Judaism: A contested relationship in context*, 87, 265; Idinopulos, T. A., & Ward, R. B. (1977). Is Christology Inherently Antisemitic? A Critical Review of Rosemary Ruether's: "Faith and Fratricide".
- <sup>400</sup> Schwartz, S. (2014). *The Ancient Jews from Alexander to Muhammad*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 87-87.
- <sup>401</sup> These predictions may not have been retroactive embellishments created after the Temple had already been destroyed, but at minimum their context was manipulated by writers after the event. See e.g. Relcke, B. (1972). Synoptic Prophecies on the Destruction of Jerusalem. In *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (pp. 121-134). Brill; powers. Ehrman, B. D. (1999). *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*. Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition. pp. 155-159.
- <sup>402</sup> Pagels. *The Origin of Satan*. Op. cit. p. 64.
- <sup>403</sup> For instance, Tertullian and Justin Martyr. See: *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History, First Edition, Adversus Iudaeos*. pp.111–113; Royalty. *The origin of heresy*. Op cit. p. 7-9.
- <sup>404</sup> Ehrman, B. D. (2005). *Lost Christianities: The battles for scripture and the faiths we never knew*. Oxford University Press, USA. p. 94 et. al.
- <sup>405</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>406</sup> Sanders, J. N. (1943). *The fourth gospel in the early church: its origin & influence on Christian theology up to Irenaeus*. CUP Archive.
- <sup>407</sup> Osborn, E. (2001). *Irenaeus of Lyons*. Cambridge University Press.
- <sup>408</sup> Parvis, S., & Foster, P. (2012). *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy*. Kindle location 6876.
- <sup>409</sup> Royalty. *The origin of heresy*. Op. cit. Kindle location 4345-4347.
- <sup>410</sup> den Dulk, M. (2018). Justin Martyr and the Authorship of the Earliest Anti-Heretical Treatise. *Vigiliae Christianae*, 72(5), 471-483. Citing Lieu, J. (2015). *Marcion and the making of a Heretic*. Cambridge University Press, e.g., 19-20, 26-27.
- <sup>411</sup> Mayer, W., & Allen, P. (2017). John Chrysostom. In *The Early Christian World* (pp. 1054-1071). Routledge.
- <sup>412</sup> Herbermann, C. G. (Ed.). (1913). *The Catholic encyclopedia: An international work of reference on the constitution, doctrine, discipline, and history of the Catholic Church*. Encyclopedia Press. Entry on John Chrysostom, reprinted online at <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08452b.htm>, retrieved March 3, 2024.
- <sup>413</sup> De Wet, C. L. (2014). John Chrysostom on homoeroticism. *Neotestamentica*, 48(1), 187-218.
- <sup>414</sup> Stroumsa, G. A. (1996). *From anti-judaism to antisemitism in Early Christianity*. JCB Mohr.
- <sup>415</sup> Esser, H., & Bierbrauer, J. J. (1939). *Die jüdische Weltpest: Judendämmerung auf dem Erdball*. Eher; Fritsch, T. (1907). *Handbuch der Judenfrage* (pp. 391-401). Hanseatische Druck-und Verlags-Anstalt; Pauls, T. (1939). *Luther und die Juden*. G. Scheur.
- <sup>416</sup> Examples include the periodical *Mitteilungen der Kommission für Wirtschaftspolitik der NSDAP* (1938), *Neues Volk: Blätter des Rassen-politischen Amtes der NSDAP* (1938), and *Arbeitsunterlagen für die weltanschauliche Ausrichtung der politischen Leiter des Gaues Osthannover* (1943).
- <sup>417</sup> Among many examples: <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1404691/#post16229974>, <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1404691/#post16229974>, <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1353680/#post15637597>, <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1285126-27/#post15395911>, <https://twitter.com/adversusjudaeos/status/1775225406083223583>, retrieved April 8, 2024; <http://www.dailystormer.com/?p=134992#comment-2216857>, retrieved August 10, 2015; <https://vnnforum.com/showthread.php?t=544697>, retrieved October 14, 2017, <https://www.amazon.com/Discourses-Against-Judaizing-Christians-Patristic/product->



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[reviews/0813209714/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_d\\_show\\_all\\_btm?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all\\_reviews](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/3513209714/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_show_all_btm?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all_reviews), retrieved March 3, 2024.

<sup>418</sup> Flannery, E. H. (1985). *The anguish of the Jews: Twenty-three centuries of antisemitism*. Paulist Press. p. 47.

<sup>419</sup> Foster, P., & Parvis, S. (2012). *Irenaeus: Life, scripture, legacy*. Augsburg Fortress Publishers. Kindle Edition. Kindle location 377-498.

<sup>420</sup> Irenaeus. (2012). *Against heresies and fragments from the lost writings of Irenaeus*. Wyatt North Publishing LLC. Kindle location 141-183. Reproduced from Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, and Arthur Cleveland Coxe. *The ante-nicene fathers: translations of the writings of the Fathers down to AD 325*. Vol. 1. Christian Literature Company, 1885. There is no standard academic translation of Irenaeus; this edition is considered accurate, if less than eloquent, and is widely cited. It is employed here in part because of its availability in an electronic format suitable for taking notes and copying excerpts. This edition is cross-referenced as necessary against other editions, including Unger, D. J. (1992). *Ancient Christian writers: Against the heresies*. and Hitchcock, F.R.M. (1916). *Early Church Classics: St. Irenaeus Against the Heresies*. The translations typically emanate from a place of religious orthodoxy, which is suitable for the purposes of this chapter. Differences among the translations are to some extent a matter of magnitude rather than substance, for instance, where Roberts et. al. and Unger translate as “falsify,” Hitchcock translates idiomatically as “play fast and loose.”

<sup>421</sup> For a discussion of whether Irenaeus considered the author of the epistle to be the apostle John, see Bingham, D. J. (2017). Senses of Scripture in the Second Century: Irenaeus, Scripture, and Noncanonical Christian Texts. *The Journal of Religion*, 97(1), 26-55, footnote 39.

<sup>422</sup> 1 John 2:18, via Irenaeus

<sup>423</sup> Berger & Luckmann. *The social construction of reality*. Op. cit. p. 112.

<sup>424</sup> Berger & Luckmann. *The social construction of reality*. Op. cit. p. 114.

<sup>425</sup> Berger & Luckmann. *The social construction of reality*. Op. cit. p. 115.

<sup>426</sup> Acts 10:28

<sup>427</sup> “[T]he rather flaccid attack in *Adversus Iudaeos* does not square with Tertullian’s pugilistic style in other *adversus* works, such as *Adversus Marcionem* and *Adversus Praxean*.” Fulton, J. P. (2011). Tertullian’s *Adversus Iudaeos*: a Tale of Two Treatises. Fulton also notes questions raised in the literature about whether the work is properly attributed to Tertullian.

<sup>428</sup> Jacobs, A. (2012). *Adversus Iudaeos*. In *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History, First Edition*, 111-113.

<sup>429</sup> Chrysostom, S. J. (2010). *Discourses against Judaizing Christians (The Fathers of the Church, Volume 68)* (Vol. 68). CUA Press; raw text version obtained from Wikisource, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Eight\\_Homilies\\_Against\\_the\\_Jews](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Eight_Homilies_Against_the_Jews), accessed December 2, 2023.

<sup>430</sup> Additional sources: Laqueur, W. (2006). *The changing face of antisemitism: From ancient times to the present day*. Oxford University Press, USA. page 48; Nixey, C. (2017b). *The Darkening Age: The Christian Destruction of the Classical World*. Pan Macmillan. Kindle Edition, p. 132.

<sup>431</sup> Bradbury, S. (2020). Julian and the Jews. In *A Companion to Julian the Apostate* (pp. 267-292). Brill.

<sup>432</sup> Kleinman, B. The crisis at Antioch under Julian the Apostate. *Hirundo*, bd. 7, p. 67-76, 2008-2009; Kraeling, C. H. (1932). The Jewish Community at Antioch. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 130-160; See also Finkelstein, A. (2018). *The specter of the Jews: Emperor Julian and the rhetoric of ethnicity in Syrian Antioch*. University of California Press.

<sup>433</sup> Brown, A. R. (2002). *Hellenic heritage and Christian challenge: Conflict over panhellenic sanctuaries in Late Antiquity* (Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley).

<sup>434</sup> *Discourses against Judaizing Christians*. Op. cit. Introduction, pp. xxv-xxvii.

<sup>435</sup> Mayer, W. (2019). Preaching hatred? John Chrysostom, neuroscience, and the Jews. In *Revisioning John Chrysostom* (pp. 58-136). Brill.

<sup>436</sup> Flannery, E. H. (1985). *The anguish of the Jews: Twenty-three centuries of antisemitism*. Paulist Press. p. 50.

<sup>437</sup> Chrysostom. *Discourses against Judaizing Christians*. Op. cit.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

<sup>439</sup> De Wet, C. L. (2014). Identity-formation and alterity in John Chrysostom's In Epistulam ad Galatas commentarius. *Acta Theologica*, 2014(sup-9), 18-41.

<sup>440</sup> Aune, D. E. (1983). *Prophecy in early Christianity and the ancient Mediterranean world*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing. pp. 136-137. To be clear, I am not asserting that the use of Christ here is especially important, merely that it resonates with the overall content of *Against the Jews*.

- <sup>441</sup> Early Christianity scholar Chris L. de Wet cites words found elsewhere in Chrysostom's corpus of work that are sometimes translated as "effeminate" and "harlots" but may be better translated as "fag" and "whore," reflecting the author's disgust, which may also apply to this passage. De Wet, C. L. (2014). John Chrysostom on homoeroticism. *Neotestamentica*, 48(1), 187-218.
- <sup>442</sup> Op. cit., *Mitteilungen der Kommission für Wirtschaftspolitik der NSDAP, Neues Volk: Blätter des Rassen-politischen Amtes der NSDAP und Arbeitsunterlagen für die weltanschauliche Ausrichtung der politischen Leiter des Gaues Ostthannover* (1943).
- <sup>443</sup> e.g. Swift, W.A. (1963) "The Covenant Race." Recorded sermon. February 12, 1963. Swift used the expression at least a dozen times in recorded sermons.
- <sup>444</sup> Russell III, E. P. (1996). "Speaking of annihilation": mobilizing for war against human and insect enemies, 1914-1945. *The Journal of American History*, 82(4), 1505-1529.
- <sup>445</sup> Feldman, L. H. (2018). *Studies in Hellenistic Judaism* (Vol. 30). Brill. pp. 205-206, 294; Ehrman, A. (1976). The origins of the ritual murder accusation and blood libel. *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, 15(4), 83-90.
- <sup>446</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>447</sup> History Does Not Repeat Itself, But It Rhymes. *Quote Investigator*. Op. cit.
- <sup>448</sup> Landry, A. P., Ihm, E., & Schooler, J. W. (2022). Filthy animals: Integrating the behavioral immune system and disgust into a model of prophylactic dehumanization. *Evolutionary psychological science*, 1-14; Esses, V. M., Medianu, S., & Lawson, A. S. (2013). Uncertainty, threat, and the role of the media in promoting the dehumanization of immigrants and refugees. *Journal of social issues*, 69(3), 518-536.
- <sup>449</sup> Savage, R. (2007). "Disease Incarnate": Biopolitical discourse and genocidal dehumanisation in the age of modernity. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 20, 404-440. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6443.2007.00315.x>; Valtorta, R. R., et al. (2021). Seeing Others as a Disease: The Impact of Physical (but not Moral) Disgust on Biologization. *International Review of Social Psychology*, 34(1): 7, 1-17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/irsp.407>.
- <sup>450</sup> Van Eck, E. (2011). "Do not question my honour: A social-scientific reading of the parable of the minas" (Lk 19: 12b-24, 27). *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies*, 67(3).
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