

Radicalism

A Philosophical Study

PAUL McLAUGHLIN



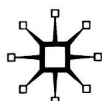
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A Philosophical Study

Paul McLaughlin
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Introduction

Aim of the study

This book presents a study of a rather broad category of political thought: *radical* political thought. Radical political thought is but one form of *radicalism*, and I will have quite a bit to say about radicalism in general, as well as other forms of radicalism (such as radical political practice), so I hope that this study will appeal to readers with different interests in radicalism. But my focus is on radicalism as a mode of political thought – and, even more specifically, on radical political *philosophy*. Again, I will have something to say about non-philosophical forms of radical thought (and many of the theorists discussed are – professionally or otherwise – ‘non-philosophers’), but my principal aim is to study radical political philosophy from the philosophical point of view (and I will treat the ‘non-philosophers’ in question from this point of view – that is, *as philosophers*). What I mean by the philosophical point of view will be outlined in the course of the study.

Of course, there are a number of ways in which one could study radical political philosophy or thought as such. Three of these ways could be labelled – loosely and non-technically – *theoretical*, *ideological*, and *traditional*. In the first way, one might investigate a particular radical political theory (or number of such theories) in its own (or their own) right, evaluating it (or them) in terms of internal coherence and practical applicability, for example. (In previous work, I have conducted such theoretical inquiry into anarchism.) In the second way, one might investigate any number of ‘competing’ radical political ideologies, evaluating them in terms of their relative theoretical and practical merit. (In previous work, I have conducted such ideological inquiry into the relationship between anarchism and Marxism.) But it is the third way – the

traditional way – of studying radical political thought that I pursue in this book. Thus, I am not as interested in the coherence of particular radical political theories or the relative merits of certain radical political ideologies as I am in the overall radical tradition to which such theories and ideologies belong, or could (for certain theoretical purposes that are explained later) be said to belong. That is to say, I am interested in the bigger radical picture. But why so?

In the first place, I would like to know what, if anything, makes the supposedly radical political theories and ideologies in question ‘radical’. And secondly, I would like to know what, if anything, these apparent radicalisms have in common with respect to the *objects* of their concern. My own feeling is that there is more common ground within the radical tradition than is usually acknowledged, and that the recognition of this common ground might be fruitful for cooperation – theoretical and practical – between otherwise indifferent or hostile radicals. Nevertheless, my purpose here is not to preach universal toleration: there are numerous intolerable radicalisms (religious and secular). My purpose is rather to encourage mutual respect between radicals who share not just ‘radicalism’, but a radical commitment to, for example, some idea of progress and political humanism – in the face of, for example, existing forms of exploitation and domination. Clearly, this does not describe all radicals. Fascists may object, and I would worry if they didn’t. Postmoderns may also object, and I will try to respond to some of their concerns (even if I don’t expect to convince them) in later chapters.

Outline of the study

We start with the general political phenomenon of radicalism. There is, it appears, little indifference to this phenomenon. It seems that people are generally for it (inspired by it, perhaps) or against it (fearful of it, perhaps). But why so? What is ‘radicalism’ (political or otherwise)? And what, if anything, is right or wrong with it? The phenomenon has occasionally been described and explained in general terms – by political scientists (Shea 1906), sociologists (Bittner 1963), historians (Methvin 1973), psychologists (Lichter & Rothman 1982), and historians of ideas (Edwards 2007); but it has yet to be adequately analysed and evaluated as such, in the appropriate philosophical fashion. The basic ambition of this book is to do some of this outstanding (clarificatory and justificatory) philosophical work. However, though we begin by examining radicalism in general, before turning to matters practical, our primary focus in the following chapters is, once again, on (i) political radicalism

of the (ii) theoretical (and especially philosophical) variety. Thus, we are principally, though not exclusively, concerned here with issues of radical political thought.

The analysis offered in the first two chapters will allow us to make conceptual and historical sense of radicalism. It will enable us to answer two basic questions. First, what does it mean to be 'radical'? And, second, what are 'radicals' radical about? Of course, we may arrive at pretty unspectacular answers to these questions, such that being 'radical' doesn't mean very much and 'radicals' are radical about a bunch of random, unrelated stuff. But this remains to be seen. And, as the reader might expect, I anticipate more interesting answers, such that being 'radical' means something rather specific (about the nature of one's challenge to certain features of the existing order) and 'radicals' are generally, though not necessarily, radical about a certain series of related problems (concerning the distribution of socio-political power).

In the later chapters of this book, I will evaluate – and attempt to defend – radicalism, at least in a particular, progressive and humanistic form; not only because I believe it is possible to do so, but also because it is (a) a prominent form within the radical tradition and (b) especially controversial from the contemporary perspective. This may make our discussion more interesting than if, say, we were to focus on a marginal and neglected form of radicalism.

Overall, then, I will offer a conceptual and historical introduction to radicalism in the first two chapters of the book followed by a modest defence in the remaining two chapters. I say 'modest' because I acknowledge the weight of, and the basis for, the criticism of the position that I wish to defend. I do not swim against the tide of contemporary opinion for the sake of it; and I recognise that those who hold this opinion have some good reasons for doing so. However, the weight of such opinion is no argument in itself; and, though the reasons for holding it may be fairly strong, there are, I believe, stronger reasons to reject it. Ultimately, what will emerge is a defence of progressive and humanistic radicalism, considerably refined in the light of some valid and challenging criticism.

Approach of the study

Having explained *what* I intend to do in this book (to introduce radicalism in general), and *why* I intend to do it (to defend radicalism of a particular kind), I should now briefly consider *how* I intend to do so. The methodology that I intend to employ (most notably in the first two

chapters) is, in some respects, as controversial as the position that I intend to defend (in the last two chapters). So some explanation and justification of this methodology is called for at the outset. Generally speaking, if I were to account for the methodological controversy here, I would point to two commonplace attitudes among contemporary intellectuals: first, pertaining to the *elusiveness of meaning*; and, second, pertaining to the *contextualization of ideas*. These attitudes are so commonplace that they constitute a sort of intellectual fashion that is seldom reflected upon, let alone justified.

The first aspect of methodological controversy concerns the conceptual analysis of 'radicalism' in Chapter 1 (as well as some subsequent analysis of 'progress', for instance). In attempting to clarify this concept, we might be accused of (a) abstractly and (b) arbitrarily 'fixing' its meaning. Our analysis is allegedly *abstract* because of its supposedly ahistorical specification of necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of the term. Thus, we allegedly ignore the concrete use of this term: the diversity of its meaning in different contexts and the change in its meaning over time. (There is, the critic might add, no essential meaning of terms but – at most – only a family resemblance which loosely ties together the various uses of these terms.) However, what our conceptual analysis aims for is not *a priori* meaning, but stipulated meaning. We take such stipulation to be theoretically justifiable as a clarificatory means to an evaluative end: a means by which we can (i) avoid mere verbal confusion, (ii) understand the nature of our (evaluative) problem, and (iii) recognise success conditions for the solution of this problem. In other words, our case for analysis here is methodological (for analysis as a means to an end) rather than substantive (for analysis as an end in itself).

Analysis, so understood, is allegedly *arbitrary* because of its supposedly self-serving stipulation of meaning. Thus, we allegedly define terms in a way that, for example, suits our general argumentative or particular ideological purposes. (As an example of the arbitrary fixing of terms, we might think of the following: "Radical philosophy" refers to a collective body of work produced since the late 1960s by academic philosophers who seek to use their intellectual training and professional positions in the service of radical political, social, economic, and cultural change' (Gottlieb 1993: 1). It is doubtful whether the professional, temporal, and even transformative elements of this definition accord with anything like the ordinary usage of terms.) However, what our conceptual analysis aims at is not *any* meaning (that happens to suit our purposes), but the explication of meaning such that it accords (at least to some extent) with the conventions of the linguistic community to which we

belong (however this community is to be delimited). As such, the stipulated meaning is in fact non-arbitrary. So, for example, our analysis of 'radicalism' might yield a definition in terms of 'fundamentality' and 'violence'. (Let's not worry about what exactly these conditions involve, or whether such an analysis would be defensible, for the time being.) The critic may imagine that both of these conditions are supposed to be necessary, and that together they are supposed to be sufficient, for the application – in every context – of the term 'radicalism'. But this is not the kind of analysis that we intend to conduct. Rather, we intend to specify some seemingly necessary conditions, and some other more contentious conditions, for the application of the term. The purpose of specifying the seemingly necessary conditions is, once again, to avoid the charge of arbitrariness in the 'fixing' (that is, stipulation) of meaning; whereas the purpose of specifying the more contentious conditions is to produce more complete (stipulative) definitions and to achieve a certain level of overall theoretical coherence. The element of contentiousness with respect to these stipulative definitions doubtless gives rise to talk of 'essential contestability' and the like. But even if the meaning of concepts – especially normatively-loaded ones – is 'essentially contestable', it doesn't follow that every analysis is of equivalently little value. In fact, analyses can still be distinguished in two respects on the account just presented: (a) with respect to the degree of necessity that they capture (that is, in terms of their respect for linguistic convention); and (b) with respect to the degree of overall theoretical coherence that they yield (that is, in terms of their general theoretical value). Of course, if two analyses are indistinguishable in these respects, then we may appear to have a problem (which meaning to stipulate?). However, it should still be possible to argue for the relative theoretical fruitfulness of the two analyses (with respect to particular theoretical problems) or even for their complementarity (with respect to theory in general). In any case, since there is as yet nothing resembling an adequate analysis of 'radicalism', this apparent problem does not arise.

The second aspect of methodological controversy concerns the history of radicalism discussed in Chapter 2 (as well as some of the history treated in subsequent chapters). In attempting to make historical sense of radicalism, we might be accused of a certain unjustifiable 'constructivism': of constructing a so-called 'radical tradition' for (from a strictly historical point of view) spurious evaluative purposes. Hence, we are allegedly guilty of an abuse of history. In a strong form, this criticism could take the following shape: there is (as a matter of fact) no such tradition; so, we merely fabricate one; whatever 'historical' narrative we

present is therefore a simple fiction. This criticism raises some real difficulties (we might say ontological difficulties) with the notion of 'tradition'. On the one hand, 'tradition' could be understood in an *organic* sense – as an emergent fact of human history. On the other hand, it could be understood as an *intellectual construct*, introduced in order to help us make a certain artificial sense of human history. One might be highly sceptical of the notion of 'tradition' in the former sense, suspecting that there are, in fact, no traditions at all. This might incline one to think of the notion in the latter sense, though one might still regard these sceptically, as of little, if any, theoretical value. I adopt a fairly moderate view here: I think we can speak reasonably of traditions in both senses. So far as the 'radical tradition' is concerned, my belief is that there are organic components: in the nineteenth century, for example, one can trace a self-conscious line of intellectual inheritance from Saint-Simon to Fourier to Proudhon to Marx to Bakunin and so forth. Some may prefer to call this the 'socialist tradition', but it remains difficult to account for the diversity of that tradition and its complex and intimate relation to other (older, then-current, and later) 'radical traditions'. In any event, I am happy enough to give up on talk of the 'radical tradition' in an organic sense, if it satisfies the critic; philosophically (as opposed to historically), little hangs on this anyway. I will assume from this point in the text onward that the 'radical tradition' is an intellectual construct which (arguably) helps us to make sense of a very broad series of ideas. The critic will doubtless claim that this series is *too* broad, so that the 'tradition' in question covers too much and informs us of too little. I will challenge this view in Chapter 2, where I try to impose a little intellectual order on the factual chaos: identifying some common elements (concepts, problems, methods, and arguments) in the history of 'radicalism' (as defined in Chapter 1). Thus, my approach to the history of ideas – and, more specifically, to the radical tradition – will be *systematic* rather than strictly *historical*: that is to say, my primary interest is not in recounting the facts of the intellectual past as reliably as possible, but in making use of the intellectual resources of the past for present philosophical purposes. (I will elaborate on this distinction at the beginning of Chapter 2.)

Hopefully, these brief methodological reflections cast some light on my intentions: if my *problem* in this book is to make sense of radicalism, and my *motivation* for dealing with it is to defend radicalism (so understood and in a particular form), then my *method* is broadly analytic (on the conceptual side) and systematic (on the historical side).

1

The Meaning of Radicalism

In this chapter, my purpose is to make conceptual sense of ‘radicalism’: that is, in very simple terms, to clarify its meaning. Such clarification I take to be both possible and desirable. It is stipulatively possible (and non-arbitrarily so, as I argued in the Introduction). And it is methodologically desirable (in so far as it facilitates substantive – and, for our purposes, specifically evaluative – argumentation). I doubt that necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of the term “radicalism” (in all of its actual, historical, or conceivable senses) can be specified. But I also doubt that much would be gained by evaluating an undefined phenomenon (since we may simply be talking past one another in doing so). Thus, the philosophical challenge for this first chapter is (to fall back on some philosophical clichés) to maximize conceptual clarity so that we may then engage in a process of rigorous ethico-political argumentation.

I will attempt to make conceptual sense of ‘radicalism’ in four initial steps. First, I will examine the *connotations* of the term “radicalism”, providing a description thereof. These varied and contrary connotations, which are rooted to some extent in factual and theoretical ignorance, are a major obstacle to the analysis and evaluation of radicalism, so they certainly cannot be ignored. Next, I will turn to the *history* of the term, which may explain (in part) its connotations. At any rate, this history is of some political interest in itself. Then, I will briefly consider the *etymology* of the term, which may constitute a useful philological point of departure for our analysis. Indeed, etymology proves especially instructive in this case. Finally, I will conduct the actual conceptual *analysis*. The first three of these steps reflect the linguistic context in which the conceptual analysis takes place. In other words, the analysis offered is not an analysis for all times, places, and linguistic communities, but

a twenty-first century analysis conducted in the English language. I expect that this analysis has other applications (historical, cultural, and linguistic), but I will not insist on this point. I also hope that this analysis is not limited in other, excessively narrow ways: by gender, nationality, ideological outlook, and so on. But the reader will have to judge for themselves. Perhaps what follows is merely the analysis of an Irishman and an anarchist writing in English in the year 2011. Or, if one wishes to push these things further still, perhaps it is merely the analysis of such a person under the influence of coffee after a night of disturbed sleep, sitting in an uncomfortable chair and feeling sorry for himself. We shall see.

Not only is the analysis that follows *merely* a twenty-first century analysis conducted in the English language (by ...), but the definition that it yields is also understood to be revisable. Indeed, *revisability* is an important feature of our methodologically justifiable analysis that produces non-arbitrary stipulative definitions: definitions in terms of seemingly necessary and other more contentious conditions. If revision is called for, it may be either *basic* (a revision to the seemingly necessary conditions) or *superficial* (a revision to the more contentious conditions). Ideally, the stipulative definition that we present will not require any immediate basic revision (which would be a mark of its relative merit). However, it is likely that it will require some superficial revision, even within the text itself (and this appears to be a normal characteristic of the gradual refinement of an analysis in the course of theoretical work).

Context of analysis: connotations, history, and etymology of “radical(ism)”

In everyday social and political discourse, the words “radical” and “radicalism” conjure up a number of images – attractive to some, repulsive to others: these are images of heroism and villainy, of hope and fear. Such associations depend, perhaps, on political outlook and cultural context. Thus, to many socialists in a time of economic crisis, radicalism is considered a good thing; however, conservatives in a time of political instability may consider radicalism to be a bad thing. But let us grant at the outset that socialism and conservatism are not necessarily fixed in their attitudes toward radicalism: some socialists see radicalism as a bad thing under certain future circumstances (those of revolutionary consolidation, for instance), while some conservatives see radicalism as having been a good thing under certain past circumstances (those which

contributed to the current social order, for instance). In any case, what accounts for the positive and negative connotations of “radicalism”?

We start with the negative or pejorative connotations, which are arguably dominant today, such that radicalism can be described in a recent edition of the *International Herald Tribune* (Pfaff 2011) as a ‘perversity’.

After the Cold War ended, America rewrote [its Cold War] ideology into one that moved on from the Communist threat to the idea of promulgating democracy throughout the world in the belief that this could eventually put an end to global radicalism, terrorism and other international perversities.

What this article suggests is an association, and perhaps a very common one, of radicalism with *extremism*. In certain contexts, these terms are taken to be practically synonymous. These seemingly synonymous terms are exonymic: that is to say, radicalism and extremism are ascribed to others – those from whom we would wish to dissociate ourselves culturally or politically, whether we are willing to understand their views or, as is usual, not. Thus, in journalistic writing, we often encounter the following kind of discourse: ‘With few prospects, these young men [in North Sinai, Egypt] are particularly susceptible to the extremist ideas of radicals, like Al Qaeda’s Osama bin Laden, calling for global jihad or holy war against non-Muslims’ (Gauch 2006). On the theoretical side, it would seem that radicalism-extremism takes fundamentalist form; that is to say, radicalism is bound up, theoretically, with simplistic, dogmatic, and reactionary world views (religious or ideological). On the practical side, it would seem that radicalism-extremism takes violent form; that is to say, radicalism is bound up, practically, with discriminate and especially indiscriminate violence (including ‘terrorism’). Clearly, radicalism as extremism-fundamentalism-terrorism is a repulsive phenomenon to most ordinary citizens going about their daily lives. However, it is not clear that such an association is justified. The analysis of radicalism we offer below will enable us to determine whether it is.

A second, and closely related, negative association of radicalism is with *revolution* (or revolutionism). Thus, Eugene Methvin, in a semi-popular history of radicalism, observes that ‘in the clear classic meaning’ of “radicalism” it is ‘redundant’ to add the adjective “revolutionary”. “Radicalism” connotes “revolutionism”, though certain ‘ideological hair-splitters’ have caused some ‘semantic confusion’ about this matter with their talk of “non-revolutionary radicalism”. But they just ‘want to use the word like Alice: when they use it, it means precisely what they

want it to mean, no more and no less' (Methvin 1973: 17–18). In any case, there is perhaps little difference between the extremist and revolutionary associations of radicalism; arguably, the former is a contemporary equivalent of the latter, or the latter is an old-fashioned equivalent of the former. As such, we could say that the major negative association of radicalism is with revolutionism-extremism. But assuming (for now) that revolutionism is not identical with extremism, or that one doesn't have to be an extremist to be a revolutionary, one might still think badly of radicalism because of its specifically revolutionary connotations. The revolutionary association will come under scrutiny in the course of our analysis.

A third negative association of radicalism is with *utopianism*. Thus, Methvin, in the same semi-popular history of radicalism, denounces the radical tendency to dream of future reality (a 'post-revolutionary' reality on his account) 'in all sorts of impossible shapes' and to commit all sorts of 'horrendous crimes' in attempting to force mankind into these shapes (Methvin 1973: 16–17). Radicalism, so understood, is both illusory and dangerous: prone to fantastic views and violent practices, which may indeed account for its extremist and revolutionary associations. But assuming (for now) that utopianism does not entail anything about revolution, let alone violent revolution, one might still think badly of radicalism because of its specifically utopian connotations. The utopian association will also be examined in the course of the analysis to follow.

The positive connotations of "radicalism" are perhaps less prominent and more difficult to pin down. But one seemingly positive association of radicalism is with *progress* (or progressivism): with, that is, the endeavour to achieve 'change for the better' in society and other domains – practically, for example, with respect to the development of freedom, and theoretically, for example, with respect to the development of reason. In this positive sense, the term "radicalism" is endonymic: that is to say, it is ascribed by "progressives", for example, to themselves – as well as to those with whom they identify in some way (the 'like-minded'). Examples of such usage are common enough, but here is a rather curious example from David Cameron, leader of the British Conservative Party, during his successful general election campaign: 'the Conservatives are today the radicals... we are now the party of progress' (Cameron 2010).

It should be noted here that there is a possible distinction in the general usage of the term "radicalism" between, for example, Great Britain and the United States. In Great Britain, owing perhaps to its progressive