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Social Movements as Potential Carriers of Extremist Action : A Sociological Analysis of the Construction of the Meaning of Extremism in Framing Theory .

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***Abstract*—**The importance of studying the phenomenon of extremism lies in its destructive effects ,especially since understanding it requires reference to the prevailing social and legal frameworks. What may be labeled as terrorism, rebellion, or insubordination in one context could be perceived as struggle, revolution, or resistance in another. The ambiguous nature of extremism is therefore less about identifying its causes and effects and more about understanding the mechanisms through which it manifests in social life, While both individual and collective frameworks are important, this study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach to examine the meaning of extremism in its social context. It further analyzes the mechanisms through which extremism is constructed within social movements as a framework for collective action, drawing on Robert Benford and David Snow's framing theory through a multidimensional and multidisciplinary analytical perspective.

***Keywords*—**Social Movements – Extremism – Framing Theory – Sociological Analysis

1. Introduction :

Social theories attempt to explain various social phenomena with the same precision traditionally applied to understanding the natural environment. However, the distinctive and dynamic nature of social phenomena requires constant reference to historical evidence and empirical data. Such references are necessary to ground an understanding of social behavior that takes into account the specificity of time and place, where norms, rules, laws, and even religious justifications serve as reference points for labeling actions as either deviant or compliant. Consequently, any social analysis must begin by interrogating the interpretation and meaning that social actors assign to particular phenomena. This initial stage becomes especially crucial when addressing topics that reflect conflictual relationships, particularly when historical and empirical evidence confirms the destructive impact of such conflicts across political, cultural, social, and economic dimensions—as exemplified by extremism. The challenge with extremism is not merely the divergence in interpretations but also the difficulty in identifying the point at which ordinary social behavior transforms into extremist behavior, since extremism often initially appears compatible with social norms.

Extremism can be conceptualized as a form of cognitive closure, whereby the individual refuses to consider beliefs that contradict their own. This grants their own knowledge framework an unquestionable authority, which can lead to attempts to impose it forcibly on others. Extremism—whether intellectual, religious, ideological, social, political, moral, or emotional, and whether individual or collective, organized or spontaneous—isolates the actor from broader social contexts. It creates a dogmatic mode of thinking that justifies actions not only rejecting alternative perspectives but actively eliminating those who hold them, through mechanisms that may manifest as violence, fanaticism, terrorism, rebellion, or insubordination. For the extremist, these actions remain legitimized and consistent with their perception of compliance. The theoretical challenge lies in constructing a model capable of explaining this phenomenon while accounting for its evolution, destructive consequences, and the precise dogmatic processes that ensure its persistence, thus complicating intervention or cessation.

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Various theoretical approaches—both classical and contemporary—have sought to explain extremist behavior from intersecting perspectives: psychological, political, cultural, religious, economic, totalitarian, and social. The present study focuses on social approaches, not to the exclusion of other perspectives, but to narrow the research scope, particularly given the diversity of social analysis regarding extremism, which overlaps with psychological and media theories. Social approaches emphasize the role of environment and social relationships in understanding extremism, exploring its causes, forms, and the conditions under which specific social institutions —such as families, schools, peer groups, or social movements (religious associations, political parties, or sports/scientific clubs)—may foster it. Durkheim associates extremism with normlessness and value imbalance (anomie), while Marx attributes violent reactions to marginalized groups' response to resource inequality and power exploitation (social conflict theory). Bandura interprets it as a socially learned behavior (social learning theory), Sutherland emphasizes the role of group membership (differential association theory), and Goffman and Becker link extremist identity to social labeling and stigma. Other theories, such as relative deprivation, social identity, social network theory, subcultural theory, social disorganization, resource mobilization, and framing theory, examine the social and collective dimensions of extremism, while digital and postmodern contexts have prompted additional models addressing online radicalization, virtual crowds, identity crises, political asymmetries, and societal fragility.

The abundant sociological literature on extremism underscores the necessity of multidimensional analysis, as a unidimensional interpretation fails to capture its complex interpretive nature. This paper, therefore, limits its focus to the generation of meaning of extremism within framing theory in social movements—a field intersecting sociology, political science, psychology, communication studies, and history. A subsequent study will apply this theoretical framework to the Algerian experience, where extremism emerged as a collective behavior within social movements, consistent with the institutionalization of framing theory in the 1980s. In this context, the present paper examines both the significance and manifestations of extremist behavior, as well as the process of constructing the meaning of extremism through the lens of framing theory.

II – The Meanings of Extremist Action and Its Manifestations :

Considering the social and legal norm as a reference framework for labeling an action as extremist or non-extremist makes it difficult to determine precisely the threshold at which social action transforms into extremism. This difficulty is not limited to variations in cultural and social particularities or historical contexts that shape collective identities; rather, it also emerges within the same social environment, where the criteria defining what is acceptable and unacceptable are subject to change over time.

Accordingly, any attempt to define extremism encounters, from the outset, the problem of blurred conceptual boundaries between extremism and other notions used to describe seemingly similar situations, despite their positioning outside the social norm. These notions include terrorism, violence, fanaticism, deviance, conflict, anger, aggression, and crime. The frequent co-use of the term *extremism* alongside these concepts in scientific literature has often led to premature labeling, sometimes reaching the point of equating extremism with phenomena such as terrorism, violence, or deviance.

However, extremism can be understood, in its core meaning, as *"a movement toward the social, legal, or moral norm that exceeds the limits reached and accepted by society"* (Al-Badawi, 2003, p. 21). Linguistically, the term extremism derives from *ṭarf* (edge or margin), referring to reaching the far end of something and implying —the transgression of moderation. It conveys rigidity, excess, and overcommitment to a position or attitude. In this sense, extremism represents the maximum degree of deviation, characterized by exaggeration that surpasses balance and moderation (Lamoualdi, 2016, p. 7).

From this perspective, extremism operates along two opposing directions, with moderation situated at the center of socially accepted norms and laws. The label *extremism* emerges at the moment when this threshold of moderation is crossed—whether through radical rejection or radical acceptance of the social or legal norm. A comparison between these two positions clarifies the meaning of extremism. In the case of radical rejection, the authority of the social norm is entirely denied and perceived as unjust or corrupt, thereby losing its binding force and becoming a target for destruction. Conversely, radical acceptance entails rigid adherence to the social norm to the extent that no exceptions, adaptations, or contextual modifications are tolerated, leading to the imposition of literal compliance even when such imposition generates social conflict.

In both cases, flexibility disappears, channels of dialogue are blocked, and openness to the Other is negated, producing a dogmatic condition characterized by cognitive closure and rigid thinking. This condition is commonly

referred to as *extremism* and materializes within social relations through multiple **manifestations**, which reflect how extremist orientations translate into concrete forms of social interaction and behavior.

1. Cognitive Manifestations of Extremism (Religious)

Cognitive manifestations of extremism reflect the way extremists perceive and interpret their social reality, positioning it within binary opposites with no intermediary: good or evil, positive or negative, right or wrong, just or unjust, friend or foe, ally or adversary. The extremist holds their stance as the absolute and unquestionable truth, leaving no room for logical debate or for consideration of empirical evidence outside this absolute framework. Any conflict that arises is fully attributed to the opposing party, labeled as the enemy.

Extremist ideologies excel in constructing a socio-political reality based on this dichotomy of good versus evil, not as a rhetorical strategy, but as a foundational mechanism for identity formation and policy justification. In general societal contexts, the adopted ideology—particularly when religion occupies a central position—shapes this mode of thinking. Religion, in this regard, serves not only as a cognitive framework for interpreting reality but also as a tool for justifying this perspective and attracting new adherents who adopt it as a reference. It operates as a dual force in the path toward extremism: mobilizing individuals under the pretext of grievances while simultaneously providing resilience and endurance to sustain extremist commitment (United Nations, 2023, p. 17).

2. Affective Manifestations of Extremism

Affective manifestations of extremism appear in two main clusters of psychological and emotional states. The first cluster positions the self consistently as the victim—oppressed, humiliated, fearful, and threatened by the adversary—toward whom an aggressive stance is justified. This reflects a Manichean worldview, derived from the ancient religion of Manichaeism, which divides the world into absolute dualities: us, the pure or righteous, versus them, the evil or dangerous (Khalfaan Al-Sawafi, 2025). Extremism cannot thrive without fostering a profound sense of existential fear and danger, even when in a position of strength, often accompanied by a rhetoric of victimhood (Khalfaan Al-Sawafi, 2025).

The second cluster involves exaggerated trust and absolute reverence for a friend, group, leader, or political goal. When political objectives are transformed into sacred ends, they shift from the realm of negotiable possibilities to that of the absolute and obligatory, leaving no space for compromise or critical reflection (Khalfaan Al-Sawafi, 2025).

3. Behavioral Manifestations of Extremism

At this level, extremism shifts from the sphere of cognition to that of action. Behavioral manifestations constitute some of the most visible and frequently cited indicators of extremism, which explains the tendency toward excessive association—and sometimes conceptual confusion—between observable behavior and the concept of extremism itself. In this phase, the extremist translates ideological rigidity into practice through progressive withdrawal from the immediate social environment—family and friends—while increasingly interacting with groups that share and reinforce the same interpretive framework of reality. As emphasized by the United Nations (2023), social isolation, disengagement, and limited interaction with others are key factors in shaping early conditions that make individuals more vulnerable to adopting violent extremism later in life.

This interaction often reaches its peak through full integration into such groups, accompanied by the internalization of their normative frameworks and the imposition of these norms both within personal relationships and beyond them. The means employed to enforce these norms—such as hate speech, various forms of violence, protest, vandalism, and aggression—are perceived by the extremist as legitimate and morally justified, particularly when they are framed as necessary tools for changing the existing order or reclaiming what is construed as a violated right.

4. Social Manifestations of Extremism

At this level, extremism poses a more direct threat to social structures. It manifests through the adoption of an alternative social identity that is fully articulated across multiple dimensions—language, dress codes, communicative symbols, sacred references, and regulatory norms—that directly contradict the identity deemed acceptable according to the social standards of the community to which the individual belongs. The danger of this manifestation lies not merely in adopting an alternative identity, but in the active rejection and displacement of the original identity in order to assert the dominance and hegemony of the alternative identity, thereby reshaping the

social relational system according to its imperatives.

Identity serves as a bridge through which individuals relate to their social and cultural environment; it embodies a sense of belonging and attachment to a group. Consequently, the capacity to assert an identity is closely tied to the social positioning of the group within the broader social system and the network of relationships it inhabits (Atil Lamoualidi, 2016, p. 5).

5. Symbolic Manifestations of Extremism

Symbolic manifestations of extremism do not directly express practices or behaviors; rather, they operate through hidden, implicit codes that carry meanings reinforcing allegiance to an alternative identity and creating a rupture with the original identity. These symbols legitimize any violent practice or conflictual stance, provided that it aligns with the norms and values of the alternative identity.

Beyond merely reinforcing extremism, symbolic manifestations serve to perpetuate and reproduce it. For example, the adversary may be transformed into a symbol of evil, labeled with epithets such as “the devil” or assigned the name of a repulsive animal or insect, and this terminology becomes widely disseminated and normalized. Simultaneously, former personal or group names may be abandoned in favor of new ones that align with the ideological framework of the alternative group, thereby embedding its worldview and ensuring its continuity.

III- Mechanisms of Constructing the Meaning of Extremism in Framing Theory within Social Movements

This study’s focus on the mechanisms of constructing collective extremism within social movements is a methodological choice, not a dismissal of individual-level extremism or extremism emerging in other social institutions. It also does not imply a deterministic link between social movements and the emergence of extremism; rather, the aim is to analyze, sociologically, how the meaning of extremism is constructed within collective action using Benford and Snow’s framing theory, developed in the 1980s within analytical sociology to study social movements and collective mobilization.

According to framing theory, social actors do not act solely based on objective circumstances; instead, their actions are mediated by interpretive frameworks produced by social movements. These frameworks provide meaning to social realities, guiding actors’ perceptions of problems, adversaries, and potential supporters. Social movements thus function to construct meanings about social events, issues, and problems in ways that mobilize and legitimize collective action. Actions and interpretations that deviate from socially accepted norms and values are considered extreme, which is the focus of this analysis.

Framing theory conceptualizes social movements not merely as carriers of preexisting ideas or ideologies, but as active producers of meaning. Movement actors, alongside media, local authorities, and sometimes the state, engage in what is termed “signification policies” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 140), shaping shared interpretations of social reality. These shared meanings are not simply the sum of individual perspectives but emerge through interactive, negotiated processes. They encompass not only descriptive judgments (e.g., “oppressive,” “unjust”) but also prescriptions for change, responsibility allocation, and preferred alternatives (Bichou, Filliol & Mathieu, 2017, p. 50).

Meaning-making is a dynamic process: it evolves within the movement and its interactions with opposing actors and broader society, often giving rise to counter-frames. Over time, new interpretive frameworks emerge, which may align with or diverge from dominant social norms, sometimes producing extremist dynamics. This iterative process can be understood through Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective, in which social interaction is performed symbolically, shaping identities, meanings, and social action (Asaad & Tufah, 2023, p. 18). Individuals perform roles consciously or unconsciously to influence others’ perceptions, thereby reinforcing or negotiating collective frames.

Social movements mobilize participants by promoting conflictual relations with clearly identified adversaries, dense informal networks, and distinctive collective identities (Delaportia & Diani, 2019, p. 41). These dynamics may operate within socially acceptable bounds or generate unexpected extremist outcomes, either intentionally or unintentionally.

According to framing theory, the production of extremist frames within social movements follows two primary mechanisms: frame generation and development, and frame diffusion, implemented through core framing tasks: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing.

1. **Frame Generation and Development:**

- Diagnostic framing identifies social problems and their causes.
- Prognostic framing proposes solutions, strategies, or action plans to address these problems.
- Motivational framing recruits participants and mobilizes them to engage in collective action, ultimately constructing a new collective identity.

These processes occur through:

- Discursive processes: Communication among frame participants—verbal, written, symbolic, or via media—connects individual experiences into a shared conceptual "anchor" that organizes events and issues (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 154).
- Strategic alignment processes: Recruitment and resource mobilization, achieved through four processes: frame bridging (connecting similar frames), frame amplification (emphasizing core values), frame extension (linking new concerns to the frame), and frame transformation (replacing old meanings with new ones).
- Contested processes: Frame development is inherently disputed within and outside the movement, producing counter-frames. Disputes arise from internal disagreements or external opposition, influencing which frames prevail based on participant responsiveness and social legitimacy (Benford & Snow, 2000, pp. 157–158).

Through these mechanisms, social movements construct and negotiate meanings that may legitimize extreme positions. Extremism, in this view, is not inherent in individuals or groups, but emerges from the collective interpretive work embedded in social action, shaped by interaction, negotiation, and contestation.

2 Mechanisms of Frame Diffusion

Frame diffusion refers to the processes through which the ideas, culture, beliefs, and practices of a social movement are transmitted to other social movements or groups of actors. It involves the mechanisms of communication and persuasion between the sender (movement actors) and the receiver or adopter of the movement's ideas, culture, and convictions.

This diffusion may occur through:

- **Strategic adoption:** The deliberate selection and implementation of a frame or purpose in a new context, adapting it strategically to the norms and culture of the receiving environment (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 160).
- **Strategic accommodation:** Active engagement by the sender in integrating the movement's frames or practices into the host culture, deliberately making them compatible and acceptable within the new social or cultural context (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 160).

Through these mechanisms, social movements not only construct collective meanings internally but also extend their influence externally, shaping perceptions, behaviors, and social practices beyond the original movement

Conclusion

Social movements, as frameworks for constructing the meaning of collective extremist action, are **dynamic entities** that are formed from the outset in a **contested context—either explicit or implicit**. They are involved in the reproduction, modification, alteration, or replacement of frames depending on the degree of **alignment, coherence, conflict, and confrontation** resulting from their interaction with the **political, cultural, social, religious, and even economic institutions** of the society in which they emerge.

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