The Political Epistemology of Extremism

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“In guten Zeiten gibt es selten Schwärmer”
Friedrich Hölderlin

Watching the mainstream media chatter on about whether x,y,z are racists, antisemites, fascists, Nazis makes me realize, more than ever, the debilitating effects of philosophical illiteracy on the public sphere. For these questions belong to “political epistemology,” the theory of the knowledge we have regarding political matters. This, in turn, is a special case of the epistemology of being-with-others, which asks: what sort of evidence can be given to justify claims to know what kind of person someone is, and what sorts of things they believe? Yet despite the immense stakes such questions assume in political affairs, an embarrassing stupidity prevails: immediate, positive evidence is privileged, while subtle inferential, analogical, historically situated and speculative reasoning is excluded. The greatest importance is attached to what people have said and done. If y has not said things that are B, then this is taken as evidence for y not being B. If z has not heard y say things that are B, then z can testify, publicly and with full confidence, that y is not B.

While political epistemology is merely a special case of the epistemology of being-with-others, it demands special considerations; political speech operates differently than ordinary speech, and has its own laws, its own principals. Indeed, the prevailing political stupidity is not without a certain justification; it is not simply a matter of “intellectual laziness” or a lack of emotional intelligence. When political life as a whole is characterized by moderation— when the majority gravitate toward centrist positions while consigning the extremes to the fringe — then it is not only quite reasonable to assume that political beliefs are manifest through word and deed, but it is salubrious, and in a way even necessary, to hold on to this principal even if it means judging poorly, stupidly, without imagination. This is because, under such conditions, we identify the “moderate” with the “reasonable” and the “reasonable” with the “practicable” (the feasible, that which can be realized), and we presume, moreover, that the very expression of extreme beliefs would alienate someone from the moderate center in which real political life takes place. These identifications and presumptions are performative in character: they serve to continuously consolidate the moderate center by marginalizing the extreme, treating it as mere fringe.

When political life is healthy and stable— during times of relative tranquility and freedom— this moderate center does not seem constraining, insipid, or vapid; it does not reach to the extremes of human possibility and human experience. It is still possible to hold a meaningful and subtle conversation about who we are and what we should do without passing beyond its limits. Even though extremism is marginalized, and must be marginalized, it is not absolutely silenced. If it were silenced, then the moderate center would begin to lose
its credibility, since this credibility depends on the broad conviction that extreme positions, which are known and to a degree even engaged with in certain venues, are unreasonable. It would itself begin to appear, to more and more people, as an extremism that has imposed itself as center; or, in other words, as propaganda. In totalitarian states, moreover, where correctness is enforced with violence, the moderate center is reduced to a hollow shell of itself. Under such circumstances, there is no longer any reason whatsoever to believe that words and deeds manifest beliefs. The opposite, rather, would seem to be the case. And it is also worth asking if the soft propaganda of neoliberal states—advertising, media, education—do not also impose a dangerous conformism.

But we need not suppose the existence of propaganda, hard or soft, to envision the decline of the moderate center. For, even under the best of circumstances, such decline is inevitable when political and economic reality changes too quickly for the discourse of the moderate center to keep up. The moderate center becomes ever more brittle; incapable of the suppleness needed to speak meaningfully to the political questions that confront it. It begins to break apart into fragments—dogmas of common sense that signify reasonableness and moderation without being truly reasonable or moderate. The moderate center hollows out: the most pressing questions of the political no longer fall within the domain that it can adequately address. At the same time, extreme beliefs, once condemned to a spectral fringe, grow in substance, meaning, force of conviction. The true and the correct part ways, and the correct is left stranded in the middle, a bare token of reasonableness and moderation that has lost the capacity for self-justification, and that, lacking substance, is incapable of substantiating itself.

When the moderate center is in decline, it can be propped up in various ways, including the soft propaganda of the mainstream media and the education system. The most powerful forms of ideology do not teach us what to think: such gestures are always transparently self-defeating unless backed by violence. Rather, they teach us how to live—to act, talk, and think—within the constraints of a historically established frame of moderate reasonableness. Ideology, at least in an age where people still value their freedom, works by giving us choices, always holding open the possibility of another choice beyond the choices that are laid out before us; a “path less travelled” that has always been carefully prepared as a more authentic choice. But when the moderate center enters into a phase of irreversible decline and crisis, then a certain political type comes out of the woodwork: that most subtle of creatures, the ideological schemer.

The schemer does not say what he really thinks; he speaks and acts publicly with a view to a future that is different from the present; his intentions are such that he cannot give voice to them; his values are such that their future realization demands their present suppression. The schemer may pursue merely private interests in private life, or he may pursue private interests in public life. Such schemers may inflict a great deal of harm on the world, but they are not the most dangerous. If a schemer pursues political power, and nothing more, than this remains a private interest. Such schemers, moreover, have thrived as
long as there is politics; the danger they pose to the existing order is not absolute, but can be constrained by good laws. More dangerous than the merely private schemer is the factional schemer; the schemer who schemes on behalf of established factional (party) interests—interests that appear as factions with a view to the whole. Factional schemers are perhaps the most ethically repugnant, but, in their pure form—though it is doubtful that this exists—they are not the most dangerous, so long, at least, as the factional interest remains constrained through the whole to which it necessarily belongs. The ideological schemer, by contrast, pursues a public interest (a certain—however partial, inadequate, one-sided—conception of the political good) in the public realm. The laws offer only a limited defense against ideological schemers, since whereas ordinary schemers must operate within the constraints of the law—otherwise they are not schemers but criminals (though the boundary separating these categories may be quite porous)—, and thus cannot generally achieve a kind of power that is contrary to the law itself, the ideological schemer seeks nothing else than a negation of the existing political order, the existing system of laws, but he seeks this through a series of steps that are in and of themselves lawful. It may be hoped that good laws offer a defense against schemers, but it can never be guaranteed. Hence an extraordinary political vigilance is required.

Political schemers, for obvious reasons, thrive during periods when the moderate center upholding the existing political order is in crisis. During such times, the felicitous stupidity of our ordinary political epistemology—the stupidity that tells us that x can’t be B unless they have said and done things that are B—not only fails us utterly, but proves dangerously naive, and above all in precisely those situations where the political stakes are highest: when it is a question of the formal and informal (public) vetting of a candidate for public office. The common sense of the moderate center will prove itself, again and again, utterly incapable of coming to terms with the danger that ideological schemers pose, since it simply cannot let go of its commitment to the performative gestures through which it seeks to substantiate its own reality; its own semblance of absolute and exclusive reasonableness. Since it has always already excluded extreme beliefs from the sphere of political reason, it cannot imagine that human beings might exist who have the intelligence, foresight, imagination, and originality to hold on to extreme beliefs without giving voice to them or acting in accord with them in the immediate future. It supposes, instead, that the extremist is a kind of madman, idiot, or criminal, incapable of suppressing their true beliefs and restraining their actions. The extremist, they suppose, will act according to an impulsive immediate need, since their extremism has the only value that the common sense of the moderate center can grant to it: a signifier of non-conformity as an end in itself, as a form of pure self-expression. Acts of terror will never be comprehended from the only perspective that appreciation the danger that they pose to the existing order: they will never be understood as future-directed political acts drawing on that most dangerous power, self-sacrifice. Rather: they will be ruthlessly pathologized; regarded as expressions of thwarted narcissism, pent-up anger—the deranged self-expression of misfits and losers.
For those who, during darkening times, wish to help ward off the catastrophe of an extreme politics a special kind of vigilance is necessary. This vigilance must come from the center, but it must always also include a vigilance toward the center. The center must be continually protected not only against its own stupidity—its failure to reckon with the power of the extremes — but against its growing discursive impoverishment; its incapacity to deal with reality. The moderate center must be transformed from within without destroying what is in fact its greatest virtue; its moderation and reasonableness. Specious reasonableness must be turned into real reasonableness; a common sense that has ossified into an ensemble of fragile cliches, incapable of justifying and sustaining the assent to which they lay claim, must be turned back into real common sense; the prosaic yet rich capacity to think through the demands of political life. Real common sense can never shield itself from engaging with extreme thoughts; rather, it must be able to neutralize these by showing their inner poverty—whether this consists in logical incoherence, scientific untruth, or an untimeliness, as is the case with either political ideals that have lived out their reasonableness, or messianic ideals that have not yet come.

This vigilance demands two contrary gestures. Always on the lookout for ideological schemers, it must always look beyond the immediate evidence of words and deeds when searching for evidence of political belief. It must learn to think inferentially, analogically, historically, and must develop the finest scent for ideological dangers of all kinds. But the greatest danger is never what is said, but what is not said. Attention must be paid to the implications of seemingly benign, eclectic or eccentric statements. Yet in the same measure as ideological schemers are “called out” — identified publicly with the positions to which they secretly ascribe — the public discourse of the moderate center must be enriched and revivified. For if it seeks to discredit the extreme positions without presenting a compelling alternative, it will end up discrediting itself; the secret position will no longer need to be secret anymore. The very insubstantiality of the center will grant substance to what had once been the fringe; half the work of the ideological schemers will have already been done.