

DIVISION AND MOVEMENT

Extremes in the natural world, such as extreme weather phenomena, are rather unpleasant for people. In turn, the extremes that permeate society have far-reaching consequences. But where should extremes be encouraged?

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Extremism is a source of anxiety, even terror. Extreme political ideas can be alluring and captivating. They seem able to explain everything, in a simple way. They make the world easy to understand, it is clear what needs to be eliminated to make it a better place. Radical thinkers assert that things will be good, even ideal – we only need a complete shift away from the existing status quo. Such a utopian vision can become very powerful in political action, but it is not necessary – those who fan extremist attitudes can do without it. In political life, extremes are usually ignited from the top down. They need to fall on fertile soil, which should nonetheless ideally stay loose and unsolidified. Activity on the part of distinguished individuals, those who keep a high-profile and remain vocal – in a word, those who form the elite – becomes necessary for the extremes to crystallize. Once the top and the bottom meet, everything changes. If a spirit of identity also prevails or comes alive – a belief in our exceptional value, a sense that any attempts to curb our identity will force us to give up a part of us, then these condensed, polar identities and mutually reactive extremes will lead to a clash. A civil war. A mood of heroism and purification. A tragedy, as the philosopher Raymond Aron describes it.

The main task of every responsible politician is to strive to counter this. Always. But not everyone believes so; Aron is no longer present nowadays. His writings scream out, but hardly anyone can hear it. Hardly anyone is listening. Rather, a different scholar of politics is becoming popular in our country: Carl Schmitt. A German national, not a Frenchman like Aron, he was on the same side as the *Übermenschen* during World War II. His writings are now being read, and he is being considered a realist. He lists the advantages of a civil war – a cold one, true, but the line between a mental state and behavior can be very thin. Those in power need an enemy. An ever-present threat should constitute our identity, allow us to define ourselves. Those in power then become needed, palpable, and their decisions are treated as salutary. They protect us, they mobilize us. In sum, the ultimate manifestation of extremes in politics is a civil war – the worst tragedy that can occur to *Homo politicus*. Some people believe that it is an inevitable benefit from governing. These “certain people” sometimes actually appear to outnumber the “many,” they are more visible and adamant.

In society, inequalities have a similar system of signs. Currently, the most dangerous inequalities are those that follow from income and wealth disparities. We have known about them for a long time, and their scholar Thomas Piketty recently became the world’s most high-profile economist. Wide inequalities, nowadays even very wide, not only disrupt social bonds but also cause the degradation of democracy by turning it into oligarchy. After all, the “one person, one vote” rule is a delusion.

The Americans have long believed that a different rule actually applies: “one dollar, one vote.” The benefits from such inequalities were once highlighted by trickle-down theory, recently referred to as a joke by the International Monetary Fund. This theory, or essentially concept, holds that when the richest are getting richer, those who live modest lives, including the poorest, will also benefit. Wealth trickles down from top to bottom, just like the bread crumbs that fall from the master’s table or just like the native inhabitants of Africa benefited from the presence of white men.

Income and wealth inequalities become even wider when we look at the whole of the world. Another important institution, the World Bank, has recently announced that two-thirds of the world’s population do not benefit from the positive effects of globalization. Pressure on the world to open up also lays bare the inequalities-without-borders.

In economic theories, when they are applied in practice, extremes also intertwine, just like they do when political ideas are propagated. Any criticism of economic planning (not only the kind of central planning typical of socialist countries) is based on the growing bureaucracy found in such systems; the free market was expected to remedy the situation. A strong alternative was presented: either market self-regulation or administrative regulation. However, it turned out that since the arrival of neoliberalism and free-market utopia in the final quarter of the 20th century, bureaucracy has grown rapidly. It has permeated the state, all private businesses, major corporations, schools, and hospitals. It is referred to as management, regulation, control, and monitoring, but all these and other new terms have the old meaning. From our perspective, they offer yet more proof that opposite extremes indeed inform and attract one other. Just like in the mechanism of reproduction found in nature.

Aristotle recommended moderation. People’s lives are better in a society without extremes, an economics of moderation does not turn what is bad into external costs, and a politics based on friendly relations makes no enemies.

Nevertheless, there are two fields where a radicalism of going to extremes is allowed, even recommended, together with the kind of courage that releases it. These two fields are art and science, forms of highly sublime culture. In the twentieth century, John Cage showed that silence was also a sound and the audience was a composer. Conceptualists and performance-artists concluded that what matters is the creative process, not the tangible work of art. It becomes a commodity and by the same token degenerates. In art, extremes are manifestations of opposition or spark off opposition. They show that we can refer to the world and express it in a completely different way than others.

The same holds true for science, or more precisely for basic research, where extremes unleash both the minds of people linked to science and the whole of the field. Consequently, according to Karl Popper’s postulate, hypotheses should be strong, even extreme. Boldly formulated and risky. Susceptible to refutation. But if they withstand the test of falsification, this means a leap forward. Sometimes a major one, on par with the Copernican Revolution. Various academic assignments written to be graded or research papers funded by grants are commended for the consistency of the findings with the hypotheses initially posited by the authors. Naturally, such hypotheses are cautious, predictable, even banal. Yet this custom proves the isolation of science from true creative work, the mind of a scientist from intellectual nonconformity, as well as the dominance of administration over academia.

Extremes in society, economics, and politics are destructive. It is no coincidence that Aristotle disqualified them. In high culture, in its most sublime forms, which means art and science, the extremes of imagination and thought are signs of freedom. That is exactly what creativity is all about. ■



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