

Against the concept of extremism – in education, counselling, and prevention¹ – with reference to the tentative OppAttune concept of “everyday extremism”

OppAttune WP5 concept note _#1

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'Extremism' - the longer the years you look at the term, the more dazzling it looks back. As if to say: You still haven't understood what it's all about when you want to establish and safeguard a democracy well. Accordingly, there has always been a great deal of unease and outright rejection generated by the term 'extremism', at least among those directly involved in (civic) education, counselling and so-called extremism prevention. Nevertheless, even in our NGO, Cultures Interactive, it took almost 20 years of activity within the relevant federal prevent and democracy programs until we eventually employed a tentative terminological guideline and issued an according preface in one of our publication (on the basic principles, methodology and framework of "distancing work", formerly called deradicalisation):

"Overall, ... an attempt should be made to largely avoid the term 'extremism,' since it is ... associated with the so-called 'horseshoe theory' (implying a binary opposition), derived from the logic of security agencies and intelligence reports – and fraught by numerous academic shortcomings and political risks. Otherwise, the term 'extremism' is, as far as possible, given the attribute 'so-called' and, where feasible, is replaced by terms such as rejection of democracy and human rights, Group Focused Enmity/ group hatred, ideologies of unequal value, inter alia."²

Our primary concern here was to understand and implement "distancing work" in a strictly "cross-phenomenal perspective" – and in doing so always also consider the societal main stream as potentially needing prevention and "distancing work". Only in this cross-phenomenal perspective could the often-underestimated fact be neutralized that the term "extremism" continually invites the definition of sub-types of "extremism" – which are then inevitably played off against each other and used in partisan political struggle, also generating

¹ This concept note builds on a translation from the German paper: Harald Weinböck (2023): "Gegen den Extremismus-Begriff in Pädagogik, Prävention und Beratung"; Zeitschrift für Demokratie gegen Menschenfeindlichkeit" (Journal for democracy and against group-focused enmity), in print.

² Cultures Interactive e.V. (2022): "Distanzierungsarbeit/ 1. Grundlagen und methodische Leitlinien. (Distancing work/ deradicalisation 1. Basic principles and methodological guidelines); <https://www.cultures-interactive.de/de/flyer-broschueren.html>

discrimination against certain communities and sectors of society – and in any case greatly hindering all educational and rehabilitative work in this field.

In any event, all the problems and risks that the 'extremism' term poses in professional, scientific and socio-political respects have been known for a long time. For example ...

- ... the suggestion, well described in the metaphor of the horseshoe, that there are 'extreme' fringes of society that are merely attached to a presumably 'normal' and impeccably democratic center; although it has always been readily apparent that there are broader discourse and affect symbioses between that supposedly moderate center and the more drastic expressions of anti-democracy and anti-human rights attitudes by some.

- ... the unswerving insinuation that there are essentially two (extreme) ends of the 'horseshoe', which moreover form a symmetrical right-and-left construct with almost ontological immutability. Yet, left-wing extremism in the strict sense of the word (rejection of the constitution) has not really been recognizable anywhere for a long time (which is why the federal program had rightly spoken of "left-wing militancy" some time ago but today, for political reasons, uses the term "left-wing extremism" again); while those who for decades have been implicitly denigrated as being left-wing extremists, out of political partisanship by governmental and political rhetoric, have, in reality, campaigned and struggled for democracy and human rights in quite dangerous terrain and in widely unprotected circumstances so that they were frequently experiencing risks and attacks – and in numerous instances lost their lives. Moreover, well beyond the imaginary right-and-left construct, various forms of religiously based hostility to democracy and human rights have long been significant, as have new, secular manifestations of anti-democratic, authoritarian attitudes, e.g., in many conspiracy narratives.

- ... furthermore, the misunderstanding suggested by the term "extremism" that ideology in the narrower sense would play the decisive role here, whereas it is precisely the non-ideological, i.e. the biographical, psychosocial, life-/social-world related and affective-emotional aspects that have proven to be far more important than the cognitive level of ideology – both for the analysis of the phenomenon and for the pedagogical confrontation with it.

- ... lastly, the most unfortunate circumstance that the term "extremism" has been uncritically adopted from the working language of the security agencies, is thus associated with activities of "public security/ hazard control/ policing/ defense against imminent dangers and 'dangerous persons'", inter alia, and invokes notions of a relentless combat against a threatening evil or 'war on terror'. However, it is precisely this defensive – and "securitized"/security oriented – attitude of public security/ policing and combat against evil/ 'war on terror' etc. that is entirely misleading and unhelpful if one wants to do good educational work or practice good quality psychosocial interventions and counseling. For, whoever sows defense will reap resistance and aversion and will therefore hardly be able to stimulate beneficial pedagogical processes. In other words, who steps in front of one's so-called "target group" and, on however soft velvet paws, wants to fight something evil – or whoever, in whatever sheep's clothing, wants to identify "dangerous persons" and engage in whatever subtle forms of "public security/ policing/ 'war on terror'" claiming a need to avert imminent danger – will fail inevitably in any educational or counselling work; and will even create damage by violating the Do-no-harm-principle. Damage will particularly be incurred because by such attitude of defense, policing and 'war on terror' precisely those young people will be missed and alienated who we most urgently should reach out to in effective ways, i.e. the young people on the verge of sliding into anti-democratic, authoritarian and violent movements.

- ... not to mention that the 'extremism' concept put "security as a super fundamental right" before all other rights (German Interior Minister Friedrich, 2013), so that practitioners from civil society were pushed into those unholy "cooperations with the security agencies", sometimes labelled "inter-agency cooperation", that in many cases raise serious fundamental rights issues and undermine the division of functions and powers which is so highly important for the livelihood and resilience of democratic society.

The tentative OppAttune concept of "everyday extremism" – which may also imply a concept of "everybody's extremism", i.e. view what has been called extreme as something rather human and thus potentially normal – can be expected to be heuristically helpful in compensating for these problems and risks of the "extremism" concept.

In any event, given these problems and risks, is all the more astonishing that even today, as Germany currently moves toward a Democracy Law (authorizing the federal government to sustainably fund projects and structures supporting democracy in the German states and communities), we have not succeeded in replacing the 'extremism' term in our field of work –

civic education, democracy education, preventive intervention and psychosocial counseling, inter alia – and consistently speak of preventing and working through "attitudes hostile to democracy and human rights" as well as "Group-focused Enmity" and "ideolog(ies) of unequal status".³ Certainly, the federal programs have had very appealing terms in their names for some time now – tolerance, cohesion, diversity, and so on. The current program is called "Live Democracy!"; and its pillars consist of "promoting democracy," "facilitating diversity", and "civic education" – but still also of "extremism prevention" (which then is subdivided in "Islamism", "right-wing extremism", "left extremism", inter alia) and thus still using "securitized" language.⁴

The fact that this terminological change has not yet succeeded is, as so often, due to systemic reasons. Even today, we are far too little aware of the serious birth defect of European programs of "extremism prevention" and democracy education, which lies in the fact that, since their early years, these programs were predominantly tied to ministries of interior and security agencies – where they did not belong at all, due to the educational-pedagogical, psychosocial and counselling nature of their work (cf. the aforementioned foundations of "distancing work"; cf. footnote 2).

Therefore, we are still very clumsy in observing one of the most important key distinctions which resilient democracies must unswervingly keep within the different areas of governmental action: the distinctions between public security/ policing/ intelligence services etc. on the one hand and educational-pedagogical work, psychosocial and rehabilitative services on the other – and accordingly relinquish and return to the security agencies the 'extremism' concept for which there is not much use in any other area of governmental action.

How serious the need for this distinction is may be poignantly demonstrated by looking at what is called "joint case conferences" in the area of "distancing work", formerly called deradicalisation – but is hardly known neither to the general public nor to the wider professional community of prevent programs in Europe. "Joint case conferences" have been conducted within the policy framework of "inter-agency cooperation"/ "cooperation with the

³ "Group-focused enmity describes a generalized devaluation of outgroups. At its core is an ideology of unequal status." (37); cf. Andreas Zick, Beate Küpper, Andreas Hövermann (2011): "Intolerance, Prejudice and Discrimination. A European Report (Friedrich Ebert Foundation). Therein the chapter: "Prejudice and Group-focused Enmity" 27-42.

⁴ On the phenomena and consequences of "securitization" and "securitized" governmental PVE programmes" see: Harald Weilnböck (2022): "Doing State in a Civil Society-Based Fashion. The Standards of Exit and Rehabilitation Work and the so-called "Inter-Agency Cooperation with Security Agencies", in Germany and Europe. In: Der islamische Fundamentalismus im 21. Jahrhundert. Analyse extremistischer Gruppen in westlichen Gesellschaften. Hrsg. von Rauf Ceylan und Michael Kiefer. (pp. 383 – 436)

security agencies" at least since the beginning of the 2010s. In these "joint case conferences", civil society distancing practitioners who were commissioned by governmental administrations engage in continuous information exchange about their clients with representatives of security and intelligence agencies, including the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, thus suspending the clients' protection of personal data. This affects clients who have been assessed by police as "dangerous persons"/ "high-risk individuals" – and as so-called "endangerers" (which in the 2010s seems to have been employed solely with persons from populations with Muslim connotations). The distancing practitioners (formally civil society NGO staff) sign nondisclosure contracts with the governmental agency about their work – while their handling of clients' personal data seems to be in evident breach of the professional ethics of their mandate with the client.⁵

Hence, the demarcation between public security/ policing/ intelligence services etc. and educational-pedagogical work, psychosocial and rehabilitative counselling will be of great importance in the future. Once the visionary moment has arrived in which this urgently required demarcation is safely kept, civic education and preventive psychosocial counseling will also no longer need the vocabulary of "extremism". For, we will then be able to eventually operate in a post-securitized area which, of course, should have been the case from the very beginning of education, counselling and prevention with regard to issues of rejecting democracy and human rights and being entangled in group focused enmity.

Moreover, the surrounding political rhetoric would also change for the better. The responsible minister would then no longer position "democratic civil society" as "one of the strongest bulwarks against extremism" or issue the motto: "We (the civil society) defend ourselves ... with all our strength against enemies of the constitution" (Dec. 14, 2022, Nancy Faeser regarding "Democracy Promotion Act").

Democracy promotion would then not any longer be a bulwark and defense against something evil – and "extremism" – but it would be what the name actually says: promotion, education, upbringing, psycho-social counseling, i.e. support of something good, e.g. building personal development, competences, social skills and beneficial structures of social life. The term "prevention" could then basically be dropped as well, since building and preparing things to develop is different from preventing something to happen. In any event, such endeavors are building and preparing of citizens for participating in and constituting a democratic society will no longer be subordinated to any apriori of the security agencies.

⁵ Cf. Harald Weilnböck (2022): "Seven reasons why the 'Joint Case Conferences' in the deradicalization of so-called 'dangerous persons' should no longer take place"; https://www.cultures-interactive.de/files/publikationen/Fachartikel/2021_Weilnböck_Seven%20Reasons%20Joint%20Conferences.pdf.

