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FEDERAL STATE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION
BUDGET SAINT-PETERSBURG STATE UNIVERSITY

Evaluation of Doctoral Thesis

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The State Influence on the Development of the Discourse on Extremism
22.00.05 — Political Sociology

The English requires work. I shall presume that in Russian that it reads well and that this would require a professional translator to bring it up to an appropriate academic standard. My evaluation is based on the scientific content and is not affected by grammatical and lexical deficiencies. The text is overwritten to a large degree, ie. it overly complicates the expression of ideas and there is no need to do so in order to explain these ideas clearly. The Russian original is likely not to suffer to the same degree but I cannot be certain. The ideas expressed throughout the thesis are sufficiently clear and the standard of English is acceptable in regard to being able to adequately evaluate the argument.

My understanding is that the thesis posits that the state determine what extremism is and that this therefore means that it is a fluid concept. This has several consequences:

- there is no essence of extremism
- that notions of extremism can be deployed by the state for its own ends in characterising ideologies as extreme when it suits them to
- that what is characterised as extreme in one historical (politico-juridical) context may be characterised otherwise in a different context.

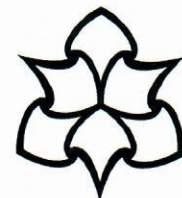
The introduction helpfully introduces the topic, the theoretical framework and perspectives taken as well as the methodology pursued. It also indicates that this work has been presented to scientific meetings and that this lends a degree of



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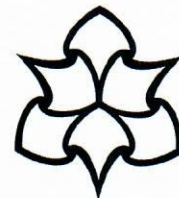


credibility to the thesis. It is a good idea to provide statistical context to indicate the existence and scale of an issue and some statistics about crime rates are used in the background introduction but I don't see that they are sufficiently relevant to a discourse on political extremism. It would be more helpful to present data in tabular form in order to more easily understand the argument being made and identify time based trends.

The thesis has two substantive chapter, the first focusing on 'meanings' and the second an analysis on the influence of the state on the discourse. There follows a short conclusion (which really ought to be longer and sum up the main arguments from each section in both chapters) and a long reference list from an international range of sources which shows wide reading, albeit that many authors are cited in passing. The focus is on extremism in Russia in post-Soviet times (and even more recently) and this means that the literature has a Russian focus. Discourse analysis is at the core of the thesis and a thorough grounding in such methods is appropriate.

I was interested that there was scant mention of extremism in pre-revolutionary Russia when there were some significant political extremists aligned with major historical figures, captured in important novels of the time. I am referring to Bakunin and his association with Nechaev as allegorically written about in Dostoyevsky "The Devils" (also translated as "The Possessed"). I do, however, recognise that it is important not to get side tracked by historical depth in a thesis with a focus on more recent times.

The theoretical framework is very much influenced by a range of, mainly French, theorists who represent quite different schools. It was not clear, initially, which of these were of major importance though it soon became apparent that Bourdieu was the prime theoretical influence. This, I felt, ought to have been more explicitly acknowledged and defended: why Bourdieu more than, for example Althusser (who is mentioned but doesn't figure much at all despite the obvious relevance of the ISA paper cited to chapter 2)? The relevance of Baudrillard is not clear to me at all while I can see that Foucault is important in regard to the discourse analysis approach taken. I was interested in the lack of engagement with Giddens who has written about political ideology as well the agency/structure theory that is important in understanding the tension between governing institutions and the governed.



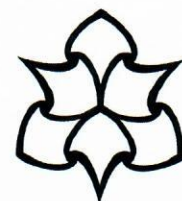
The argument focussing on the definition of extremism, contrasted with radicalism, is quite a historical section about Bentham and philosophical radicals aligned with utilitarianism. Noting that this is not ideological in terms of a left-right spectrum. This section is quite central to the thesis in my view as the relativism of consequentialist philosophy is at the heart of a shifting notion of extremism as can be articulated (and manipulated) by institutions (not just the state). This is important and should be broadened out further to encompass notions of populism as this also needs to be differentiated from extremism. The work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantalle Mouffe would be particularly important in fleshing out this chapter.

There is little written about political theory and ideology in chapter 1. I would have anticipated a discussion about a range of contrasting ideologies and the ways in which each can be thought of as having centrist elements as well as extremist ones. I believe that in focussing on discourses that the ideologies of the discourses is glossed over.

Political violence is a topic that needs to be captured in the discourse as well – I don't think that terrorism has been mentioned yet. Phenomena such as the IRA in Ireland/UK the ANC in South Africa ETA in the Basque country and do forth are important examples of organisations engages in what was described as extreme actions (and aligned to specific political manifestos), all of which became neutralised and two of which became legally governing.

The second chapter of the thesis is its strength, this is an intense analysis of Russian institutional perspectives, positions, regulations and laws in regard to political extremism. There is evidence of intense scholarship, attention to detail and original arguments which demonstrate a contribution to knowledge which is generally regarded as the main tests for the award of a PhD. I am satisfied that the material presented in this section meets these tests. The use of Bourdieu, Baudrillard and Habermas, the focus on practical politics and legitimacy are appropriate. Within the Russian context these arguments are both important and interesting and while I would be looking for important contrasts with other legal contexts outside Russia, this is clearly beyond the bounds of this thesis.

Conclusion



I feel that there is sufficient scholarship in this thesis to warrant the award of a PhD. There are a number of areas that are weak and a number of significant gaps. In recognition that a PhD is the start of an academic career and not its zenith, these deficiencies can be put to one side as long as the defence of the dissertation demonstrates that the logic of the thesis stands up to robust critical analysis.

Yours faithfully,

Professor Gary Pollock