

John George and Laid Wilcox, *Nazis, Communists, Klansmen, and Others on the Fringe: Political Extremism in America*. (New York: Prometheus Books, 1992) pp.523. \$27.95 ISBN 0879756802

The many faces of extremism evoke great emotion within American political life. The contentious debates between the left and the right and the attempt by those in the middle to understand the beliefs and actions of those on the edges of the ideological spectrum require objective analysis by scholars who can cut through the rhetoric that obscures understanding “True Believers.” John George, a professor of Political Science at The University of Central Oklahoma and Laid Wilcox, the founder of the Wilcox Collection of Contemporary Political Movements, have combined their long-term interest and impressive research to give the reader a road map to, and detailed guide of, American extremist groups.

After a succinct overview of the long history of American extremism, Wilcox provides an excellent conceptualization on what constitutes extremism. He makes a telling case for the view that “extremism is more an issue of style than content” (p. 54). In so doing, he underscores the commonality that exists between both extremes of the political spectrum. He then provides a cogent discussion of the major traits of extremism – a virtual check list that can be used by students wanting to identify and achieve a basic understanding of individuals and groups on the extreme left and right. George further refines the major characteristics of extremist groups, contending that they would subvert the basic principles of the Constitution in an attempt to impose their values on American society.

The authors provide a fine survey of the literature which seeks to explain the motivation among those who join extremist movements and organizations. They are circumspect in seeking simplistic answers for the motivation and “. . . tend to view the existence of an extremist-prone personality as a more reasonable hypothesis than attempts to account for the ‘pathology’ of a particular point of view” (p. 72). In viewing extremist motivation in this manner they are careful not to simply label extremism as a form of a political disease. They “posit the notion that extremists are potentially useful, usually of little consequence, and rarely dangerous” (p. 72). The motivation theories behind extremism is summarized as is the major conspiracies theories that form the foundation for the world view of various extremist groups. The summary will be of particular use to those interested in the development of social and political movements.

In Part II, *The Far Left*, George and Wilcox describe the evolution of Marxism-Leninism in the United States. They are sensitive to the fact that organizations subscribing to Marxist now face the task of adjusting their beliefs to the post-Cold War era. The authors’ readable and well documented description of groups, ranging from the Communist Party to the Black Panthers, offers an

insightful walk through the landscape of the contemporary left. They effectively lead the reader through the schisms, fragmentations, and personality conflicts that have characterized highly diverse groups. George and Wilcox's analysis of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) will be of particular interest for those students and faculty who experienced the campus turmoil of the 60s and 70s. The authors note that the legacy of these groups continues today for a number of these former radicals have fueled "the trend for authoritarianism on some campuses" under the banner of "political correctness" (p. 162).

Part III, *The Far Right*, also enables the reader to have the opportunity to understand the development of those individuals and groups who, under the call for "core values" of individualism, capitalism, religiosity and nationalism, have sought to impose their own agenda on the American political and social environment. George and Wilcox describe those, who by the force of their personalities, astute political manipulation, and clever use of television, have sought to achieve their own version of Utopia. The discussion of Billy James Hargis and the Christian Crusade, and Robert Welch and the John Birch Society should serve to remind us that the merchants of fear and conspiracy, however outlandish many of their claims, spread their own form of rhetorical terrorism. At their zenith, they hit a resonant chord among those who were gripped by the paranoia that surrounded the coldest days of the Cold War. Chapter 31: *The LaRouche Network* is a treatment of a personality and group that could not easily be ideologically labeled.

The authors' treatment of The Jewish Defense League, the Nation of Islam, various neo-Nazi Groups, and the Klu Klux Klan, are a must to read for those who want to understand the history, tactics, and dynamics of organizations using racism and violence in pursuit of intolerance.

The appendices will be of use to the student of extremism. The section on fake quotes and documents follows in the tradition of John George's earlier co-authored book *They Never Said It*, (Oxford University Press, 1993). The section on characteristics of extremism will be useful for those wishing to chart future development on the far sides of the political spectrum.

Nazi, Communism, Klansmen and Others on the Fringe is an outstanding book. It should be in the library of, and required reading for, those who wish to understand forms of belief, organizations, and actions that will continue to challenge the political mainstream.

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