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Extreme Political Narratives: A Response to Spear's "Narratives that Divide and Narratives that Bind"

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Andrew Spear (2025) provides a useful and sympathetic account of our thoughts about narratives that arise in those with extreme political convictions (Ulatowski and Lumsden 2023). Indeed, his very title: “Narratives that Divide and Narratives that Bind,” gets to the heart of what we are attempting to do with our narrative account of political extremism. The narratives that bind are those political narratives that unite the members of a group not only by being held in common but by entering into those individuals’ narrative identities. The narratives that divide are the kind of narratives rooted in a form of rejection of the opposing group in a way that insulates itself from the reasoning that such a group might provide. Those two characteristics of narratives can be two sides of the same coin; the binding among members of the group can rest on the rejection of an opposing group.

Spear provides four critical concerns that challenge our account in interesting ways. We have something to say about each issue that Spear has raised but we shall start by addressing his remarks about what it is for a political narrative to count as extreme. We do so by appreciating how Spear has framed such political narratives as “extreme, evidence-resistant political commitments” (41), which is an explicit and direct definition of political convictions.

On Spear on Extreme Political Narratives

In attempting to engage with ideas of political extremism that mesh with current movements and commentary we inevitably wrestle with a multi-faceted notion. We have a particular interest in the *mentality* that underpins current political extremism. It is here that we bring narrative theory to bear, for we see the intensity of a person’s engagement with a political narrative reflected in the way that it becomes a narrative thread within the person’s identity. Moreover, the character of that narrative involves some degree of intolerance to those loyal to an opposing group. Spear usefully collects various things we say about political extremism and challenges us to say what is strictly necessary for a political narrative to be extreme. He divides our suggestions about the character of political extremism into two: the internalisation that can foster intolerance (and worse) and the content. This is a suggestive division, though there is interplay between the two. Thus, the intolerance in the mentality is fed by misinformation fostered in that particular political setting involving certain content.

One way of pulling apart the mentality from the content is to ask if there is some psychological kinship between political extremists and other kinds of extremists. Then we could say that political extremism embodies a version of that broader kind of mentality, one that is focused on the political arena. Perhaps an extreme climate activist who is prepared to take radical and illegal steps to further the cause possesses a comparable mentality. Arguably we are still broadly in the political sphere, as political change is required to achieve the goals. But this is different from the party-political context that is our main focus. Consider, in a similar vein, an extreme vegan activist group whose goal is to convert the whole of society to that programme not by mere persuasion but by serious direct action. In a different spirit, consider an extremist religious group where the character of the mindset is not so much focused on worshiping or revering their god or gods and pursuing a prescribed pattern of life but involves opposing, or fighting, rival religious groups. Indeed, we might find

something of a similar spirit in extreme sports team supporters where the unifying goal is mostly to fight the supporters of opposing teams. All this is intended to provide support for the idea that there can be some key aspects of the mentality of the political extremist that could be identified outside of the political sphere.

Our interest, though, is to locate that mental intensity in a certain kind of political context: party politics in a democratic system of government. The thinking is that there is some ideal of political functioning where there is a primary commitment to the democratic system and policy differences are to be assessed at the ballot box. The extremist group could be seen as one that goes beyond the familiar range of policy differences and, in effect, subverts the system. This description of extremists reminds us of how Eric Hoffer spoke of ‘fanatics’ as people who “eye each other with suspicion and are ready to fly at each other’s throat” (1951, 86).

One way in which that ideal system is subverted is at the epistemological level, where misinformation prevails in the flow of the news cycle and echo chambers tend to rule our epistemic communities. Richard Hofstadter has described this subversive attitude ‘paranoia’ where convictions are “believed and advocated” without concern for “the truth or falsity of their content” (2008, 5). This might in practice be associated with a location at one or other end of a spectrum of political opinion. But we need to be aware that the spectrum can shift over time such that what counted as extreme in US politics 20 years ago may pass as mainstream now. We need to acknowledge that our investigation of political extremism inevitably is located in a certain kind of familiar political context.

Spear gently urges us to be clearer as to what we propose as the necessary features of political extremism and that is a very reasonable sentiment. Our approach, though, is to locate a certain kind of mindset in the particularities of a certain kind of political setting and we need to incorporate multiple features of that setting. That may be as close as it is possible to get to specifying the necessary features.

Spear’s First Concern: What is Normal or Ideal in Narrative Selves?

We say little in our article about what might count as normal or ideal in narrative selves. For our purposes here, we could regard the normal or ideal as the other side of the coin from the mindset of the political extremist. Encouraging hostile or antagonistic stances toward members of other groups or people who are not like them is one mark of an extremist. A typical non-extremist will steer clear of aggressive approaches and find alternative means of addressing people with whom they disagree. The mindset of the political extremist tends to be more aggressive than that of the non-extremist.

To characterise the normal or ideal narrative self more precisely is a difficult task. Even so, we are implicitly relying on some intuitive notion of balance within the structure of narrative threads that form a self. That balance within the threads can be regarded as reflecting a balance in life. The easier task is to identify what appears to be an *imbalance*, as found in the political extremist. Spear asks whether politically extreme selves are different only in degree

from “normal” or ideally organised selves, or whether there are important structural differences? It does seem right that political extremism is a matter of degree, remembering that in characterising political extremism we aren’t dealing with a single, straightforward axis. It is a good challenge to identify the normal or ideal in narrative selves but, for now, we can regard an account of political extremism as a step towards that goal.

Spear’s Second Concern: What Does the Narrative Account Add?

We appeal to the work of others, such as Nguyen (2020) on epistemic bubbles and echo chambers, in a way that we take to be compatible with the narrative lens through which we are viewing the issues. We take that lens to be explanatory insofar as it unifies different aspects of the phenomenon.

There is a danger, evident in the literature that we cited in our paper, of identifying a political group in a simplistic manner on the basis of a certain set of evidence-resistant political convictions. The reality is almost inevitably more nuanced. There may be certain headline convictions that are held by largely overlapping subsets of a political group but not all beliefs expressed by the leaders of the group are going to be held by all members of the group. To take a somewhat amusing example, in the 2024 US Presidential election, candidate Donald Trump and his running mate J.D. Vance repeated and endorsed a rumour that originated in a Facebook post that Haitian immigrants were eating the dogs and cats owned by the citizens of Springfield, Ohio even in the face of refutations by local officials and by the original author of the rumour on Facebook.

Let us assume that Trump and Vance actually believed what they claimed and it had political significance for them. It does not follow, and nor was it the case, that the broad base of the MAGA republican movement including members of Congress uniformly shared that false belief. This kind of issue can be investigated by looking at the narratives members of the political group express and assessing what beliefs have been incorporated into their self-narratives.

This example illustrates what the notion of a narrative contributes to our understanding in this area. On the one hand, the notion of a narrative applies to what various members of a political group say in a political context, in this case articulating a narrative about eating cats and dogs. On the other hand, it applies to the structure of the self, where political convictions are understood to appear as significant narrative threads that compose the person. This applies to the issue as to whether the eating cats and dogs narrative is really a political conviction of particular members of congress.

This narrative framework moreover allows us to describe the process of loosening the grip of the political narrative within a person by connecting with another of the narrative threads that compose them. While, unsurprisingly, there are various things we say that can be described in non-narrative language, we claim that the notion of a narrative provides a unifying framework that is, for that reason, explanatory.

Spear's Third Concern: Confabulated Narratives Explaining Actions After the Fact Cannot be Explanations for Those Actions

Spear points out that sometimes people explain their actions in ways that can be shown to be confabulated, such that the explanatory content of their narrative was not directly present prior to the action. The notion of confabulation is typically understood to refer to an unconscious creation of a story and, in a medical context, typically refers to someone filling in gaps in their memory. That kind of *ex post facto* narrative about an action therefore cannot provide an explanation of why the person acted in the way that they did; the causal order would be backwards and that explanatory content would not have been part of the self-narrative that initiated the action.

Such acts of confabulation complicate the picture of the origin of actions, as we shall show, but they do not undermine the main thrust of our claim about the self as a bundle of narrative threads that underly our actions. Our first response to this concern is that we can find various narratives that fit within the context of a particular action but we do not claim that all of them provide an origin of the action. I might construct a little narrative about how I will go into town to buy a pair of shoes but, as sometimes happens, that thought gets lost and I later set off for town with other thoughts in mind. This provides an alternative scenario to the confabulation one in which I set out for a walk without any clear goal, end up in town, buy shoes and retrospectively tell myself and others that that had been my plan all along.

So, it should be clear that stretches of narrative can occur in someone's mind without necessarily serving to initiate action. Of course, there are times when thoughts do lead to action. I think, these shoes are nearly worn out, I shall wear them for a last time to walk into town and buy a similar pair, and indeed I carry out that plan. This whole sequence can be described in terms of a narrative structure but that does not relate to our account of the role of narrative threads within the self.

Our account of narrative threads as sources of action has a much narrower focus. We are considering relatively stable narratives that are so significant that they have become threads that are part of the self. Such narrative threads can be seen to play a significant role in the initiation of action in conjunction with other things, current perceptions and beliefs, emotional states and so forth. For example, Henry's self-conception as a gracious and experienced host, something that is part of a significant narrative thread within him, will form part of the explanation of how he greets and speaks to first time guests, whether he does so expertly or not.

Spear claims that where a narrative thread is a confabulation it is unlikely to have the kind of motivating and thus explanatory role that we discuss. Indeed, any *ex post facto* act of confabulation cannot be the motivating origin for the act in question. But the situation is a little more complex. Particular acts of confabulation can feed into a developing narrative thread. Henry confabulated an account of how he treated an overseas visitor, thinking he greeted her warmly and provided her promptly with a drink, when in fact he did not do so.

That act of confabulation, in itself, was not motivating of action, but, over time, similar acts of confabulation, building on previous ones, could contribute to that self-conception as a gracious and experienced host which builds into a significant narrative thread that is part of Henry's self.

We have seen how acts of confabulation can feed into the development of a narrative thread within the self. Moreover, a narrative thread can also produce an act of confabulation. To change examples, some politicians have a form of confidence that involves an unrealistic assessment of their own abilities and the success of their prior actions. They have within themselves a narrative about how their skills help the nation. This can lead to various acts of confabulation, where they attribute some successful outcome to their deep knowledge of international trade or their skill in negotiations with foreign governments. Those acts of confabulation can then feed back and reinforce that narrative thread that underpins that (misplaced) self-confidence. That whole narrative thread is infused with confabulation but that does not prevent it from contributing to actions as events play out.

Spear's Fourth Concern: The Success of Anti-Extremist Intervention Depends on a Precise Balance within the Self

Spear claims the structure of the self and the success of anti-extremist intervention requires a rather precise balance within the self for the intervention to work. The political commitments mustn't dominate everything, and the spheres mustn't be so dissociated as to not need coherence. If this conclusion is accurate, then drawing someone away from the kind of political extremism we are talking about is not easy. Moreover, while that on its face does seem correct, the issues are even more thorny than we or Spear have let on. There are too many ways in which our effort to make amends with the extremist could go wrong. In fact, we may end up further alienating the extremist to such a degree that they no longer trust anyone. While we were, by implication, suggesting a method for approaching the political extremist, we did not mean to imply that this was a reliable procedure with a high success rate. Indeed, the process would depend on some kind of favourable circumstances in the subject as well as skillful rapport building by the intervener. Even so, such circumstances can obtain, if only infrequently. The very problem with political extremism is how hard it is to connect across that kind of political divide.

Concluding Thoughts

Spear challenges us to tighten up our conception of political extremism and to clarify what we regard as a normal or ideal kind of narrative self. In each case, we suggest that a precise specification may not be available. We do stand by our view that the notion of a narrative is genuinely explanatory by providing a unifying framework linking political expressions and the nature of the self. Confabulated narratives introduce an interesting complexity to the story but do not undermine narrative explanations in general. Reaching across a political divide is indeed hard and we do not claim to provide a method for doing so that guarantees success.

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