

The Freshness of Fanaticism: The Abolitionist Defense of Zealotry

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Zealotry or fanaticism is increasingly regarded as one of the principal threats to liberal democracy in the twenty-first century. Yet even as it is universally disparaged, zealotry is a severely understudied concept. This article seeks to formulate a critical theory of zealotry and investigate its relationship to democracy through a close reading of the speeches of the radical abolitionist orator Wendell Phillips. The American abolitionists were passionate democrats. Yet many of them, such as Phillips, were also self-defined fanatics who believed in using extremist language and tactics on behalf of the slave. Phillips's speeches suggest a specifically political definition of zealotry as a strategy that seeks to mobilize populations in defense of a particular position by dividing the public sphere into friends (those who support the position) and enemies (those who oppose it) and pressuring the moderates in between. Through his defense of fanaticism and his argument for disunion, Phillips articulates a democratic form of fanaticism that challenges common pejorative associations of zealotry with irrationality, intolerance, fundamentalism, or terrorism.

At the close of the prayer at the Congregational meeting house in Lynn, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1842, Stephen Foster rose, unannounced, and began to lecture against slavery. The Rev. Mr. Cook commanded him to sit down. Foster continued speaking. Cook repeated his demand three times. Foster still spoke. Three men then seized Foster by the shoulders and the legs. He offered no resistance. The men violently threw him down the stairs to the ground. Foster rose, dusted himself off, exited the church, and walked across the common to the Baptist congregation. Again uninvited, he began to speak against slavery. Several men grabbed him, ripping his clothes. They shoved him into a closet under the stairs, then pulled him out and physically threw him out of the church. Undeterred, Foster interrupted a Quaker meeting that afternoon. He rose and again began to speak against slavery. This time it was the ostensibly nonviolent Friends who dragged him out the door and tore his clothing. Still Foster kept denouncing slavery, finally holding his own meeting that evening.¹

Stephen Foster was a zealot. A follower of William Lloyd Garrison's radical brand of abolitionism, he became infamous for breaking up services in churches that barred antislavery meetings. Such fanaticism came with a cost. He and other agents of the American Anti-Slavery Society were threatened with pistols and attacked with brickbats, eggs, rotten fruit, smoked herring, and even prayer books.² By the end of 1842 Foster had been forcibly ejected from twenty-four churches—twice from the second story.³ He had been jailed four times and once was nearly lynched by a mob when he proposed a resolution in a public meeting that denounced the U.S. government as “a wicked and nefarious conspiracy against the liberty of more than two million of our countrymen” and attacked complicit Northerners for being “the basest of slaves, the vilest of hypocrites and the most execrable of man-stealers, inasmuch as they voluntarily consent to be the watch-dogs of the plantation.”⁴ Despite his unpopularity, Foster never shrank from his fanatical approach to abolitionism. Such zealotry, he believed, was crucial in the struggle against slavery and for democracy. As his comrade and future wife Abby Kelley once exulted, “We should pray to be preserved in the freshness of our fanaticism.”⁵

As in Foster's time, zealotry is held in low regard today. The evil deeds of extremists are a staple of contemporary news media. Scholars of the American political tradition generally regard zealotry as a curious anomaly, a “paranoid style” of politics that sits at the fringes of the dominant paradigm of pragmatic liberalism.⁶ Theologians, philosophers, and psychologists typically view it as intolerant, irrational, even pathological. Yet a strong strain of zealotry has always marked American political discourse, from

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Thomas Paine to John Brown to Carrie Nation to Huey Newton, not to mention Stephen Foster. Further, American zealots have often presented their actions as advancing democracy rather than threatening it. Certainly this is what Foster and Kelley believed. If there be some truth to their claim, then the actual practice of zealotry in American political development suggests a need to rethink the nature of fanaticism and its relation to democracy.

Such a reevaluation begins with the movement that made Stephen Foster. The Garrisonian wing of the American abolitionist movement, led by William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879), president of the American Anti-Slavery Society and editor of *The Liberator* newspaper, and his fellow agitator and best friend Wendell Phillips (1811–1884), was a movement of self-defined fanatics with an unyielding commitment to the immediate and unconditional emancipation of the enslaved. They broke up church services, denounced the Constitution as a “covenant with death and an agreement with hell,” defied laws that enforced racial segregation, and called for the breakup of the Union twenty years before the Civil War. They were denounced by Northerners and Southerners alike as “officious and pestiferous fanatics,” “designing demagogues,” “irresponsible revolutionaries,” and “Hellhounds of the North.”⁷ They typically embraced rather than rejected such epithets. Yet they were also passionate democrats. They defended the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, fought against racial discrimination, advocated for women’s rights, and condemned the exploitation of industrial workers. Garrisonians championed free speech, welcomed African Americans and white women into their organizations, and developed new participatory practices in public meetings. Their zeal for the antislavery cause reflected their commitment to democracy; in turn, their democratic beliefs inspired fanatical opposition to enslavement and racism. Garrisonians brimmed with zealotry, yet they used their fanaticism to strengthen democracy rather than undermine it.

The history of Garrisonian agitation suggests that the relationship between zealotry and democracy is more complicated than currently assumed by scholarship and public opinion today. Certainly fanaticism can undermine democratic citizenship, particularly in the form of terrorism or religious fundamentalism. Garrisonians like Wendell Phillips, however, were neither terrorists nor fundamentalists but proud fanatics and radical democrats. Through a study of Phillips’s speeches I argue that zealotry is not inherently an undemocratic temperament. Rather, it is a strategy used to win political struggles, whose aim and outcome may or may not be democratic.⁸

My argument begins by describing what I call the “pejorative tradition” of zealotry, which dates all the way back to Plato. This tradition, which lives on in academia in the work of theologians, psychologists, and moral and political philosophers, identifies fanaticism as irrational, intolerant,

and as akin to fundamentalism and terrorism. The central flaw of this tradition, I argue, is that it treats zealotry as an individual moral or psychological defect rather than as a political activity engaged in by actors seeking to transform the public sphere. I then turn to the speeches of Phillips, as the Garrisonians’ most important theorist, to show how the radical abolitionists employed zealotry in a way that actually expanded democratic participation. Contrary to the pejorative tradition, Garrisonian zealotry did not oppose rational deliberation or empirical evidence and indeed made great use of both. The target of their zealotry was moderation, not reason. The only ally the slave has, Phillips insists, is one who draws lines between abolitionist friends and proslavery enemies. There is no middle ground. To claim there is, Phillips argues, is to serve the interests of the master. The article concludes with a discussion of how a critical theory of zealotry can improve the way scholars approach the study of fanaticism and its relation to democracy.

The Pejorative Tradition

A prime minister urges his people to be resolute against the “fanatical” terrorists. A newspaper columnist encourages the government to resist “the assembled mass of lunatics, nut-cases and religious zealots” that is engaged in a campaign of suicide bombing. Intolerant “vegan fanatics” attack politicians who exploit animals. Those who would reject capitalism after 1989 are “naïve zealots.” Such comments represent the typical way in which zealotry is understood in the media today.⁹ Contemporary scholarship shares a similar understanding. The official mission of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, for example, is to examine “the ways that bigotry, advocacy of extreme methods, or the use of terrorism deny civil or human rights to people.”¹⁰ For the Center, apparently, “extreme methods” of political engagement are of the same family as bigotry and terrorism. It is this invariably negative connotation of zealotry that I term the pejorative tradition.¹¹

The pejorative tradition of zealotry has roots in ancient political philosophy. In the *Republic* Plato argues that the soul consists of three parts: reason, spirit, and appetites. Justice is present when an individual uses his reason to rule over his brash spirit and limitless desires. Justice is harmony, which requires the exercise of moderation to control one’s appetites.¹² Injustice, meanwhile, is immoderation, or disharmony among the three parts. Extremes of spirit or desire inevitably corrupt the polis as well as the soul.¹³ Aristotle similarly argues in *Nicomachean Ethics* that virtue is a mean between vices and that in all things a “middle life” is best. Vice is an excess or lack of a certain quality, while virtue is the path between excess and defect. Moral virtue “aims at what is intermediate.”¹⁴ Courage, for example, is a means between the extremes

of rashness and cowardice.¹⁵ For both Plato and Aristotle, reason results in moderation, which produces order, harmony, and moral virtue. The lack of reason or its improper use induces a moral and political disequilibrium that takes a person beyond the virtuous middle and towards an extreme.

Enlightenment thinkers sharpened this conception of virtue as ethical balance and vice as immoderation. Montesquieu, for example, defines moderation as equilibrium in nature as well as in human morality.¹⁶ By adding Newton to Plato and Aristotle, he gives the term a more scientific feel that evokes a balance among bodies, forces, or ideas. This notion of equilibrium influenced the Framers of the U.S. Constitution. Faced with the problem of providing for republican government while protecting property rights vulnerable to the mood of majority opinion, Madison adapted Montesquieu's theory of separation of powers to create an equilibrium between the states and the federal government, the three branches of government, and the rich and the poor.¹⁷ Checks and balances, by design, regulate the passions of the public and thereby maintain the "constitutional equilibrium of the government."¹⁸

Montesquieu's notion of vice, however, is more than simply disequilibrium. It is fanaticism. According to Paul Carrese, Montesquieu understands immoderation as a "structural imbalance of forces," which in the realm of politics means despotism.¹⁹ One primary source of despotism for Montesquieu and other Enlightenment thinkers is "enthusiasm," the old term for religious fanaticism, because it suppresses free inquiry and thereby threatens intellectual and moral progress. The term was particularly pejorative in Britain following the Glorious Revolution. Locke, for example, condemns enthusiasm in *An Essay on Human Understanding* for basing truth on "impulses" or "fancy" rather than reason.²⁰ Hume, meanwhile, attacks enthusiasm as a form of "false religion" because the fanatic thinks he has a special relationship with God and therefore considers himself above human reason, morality, and established religion. "The fanatic consecrates himself and bestows on his own person a sacred character, much superior to what forms and ceremonious institutions can confer on any other."²¹

Voltaire goes further than the British critics. He considers fanaticism to be not just irrational but a pathological condition.²² In his entry on "fanaticism" in his *Philosophical Dictionary* he writes, "Fanaticism is to superstition what delirium is to fear and rage to anger."²³ It turns an unhealthy urge into an obsession. It corrupts the mind, making it impervious to reason, justifying murder and other crimes. For Enlightenment thinkers, then, fanaticism represents not just disharmony and immoderation but also irrationality and intolerance. It is the crude cudgel of the despot.

For Edmund Burke, meanwhile, Enlightenment rationalism is itself a form of fanaticism that is as dangerous as

religious enthusiasm. He sharply criticizes the French Jacobins, for example, for their fanatical emphasis on rationality and their disregard for experience and tradition.²⁴ Similarly, the nineteenth century English historian Thomas Macaulay attacks the political and moral fanaticism of the French *philosophes* for basing their ideas on absolute, non-negotiable abstract principles rather than concrete political circumstances.²⁵ For Burke and Macaulay, the religious tradition serves as a bulwark *against* fanatical rationalism. Yet regardless of how such different thinkers as Voltaire and Burke understand what constitutes fanaticism, they are united in their opposition to it.

The contemporary pejorative tradition follows this genealogy in characterizing zealotry as irrational and intolerant. It follows the Enlightenment in understanding it as a form of religious fundamentalism. It adds to this an association of zealotry with terrorism. These four characterizations of zealotry are particularly apparent in the media. An analysis of the terms "zealotry," "extremism," and "fanaticism" in newspapers dated from September 12, 2001, to July 7, 2005 (i.e., between the terrorist attacks on the United States and the bombing of the London subway), for example, shows that in 91.6 percent of occurrences the terms are used to characterize a person or group in at least one of these four ways.²⁶ As is evident in what follows, such usages are reinforced by contemporary scholarship.

Against reason. In one of the few book-length studies of the topic, Jay Newman argues that fanaticism is a vice of excessive commitment, or "overbelief," which "interferes with an agent's ability to live a good life."²⁷ Fanaticism is a "disease" that prevents an individual from using her reason in an effective and healthy manner. Echoing Plato and Voltaire, Newman argues that the fanatic is a weak person who "fails to put the various elements of his personality under the appropriate control of reason."²⁸ In another study, Robert Jewett and John Lawrence argue that zealotry, which "seeks to redeem the world by destroying enemies," entails a sense of righteousness that can easily turn into a consumptive fury.²⁹ So consumed, one loses one's ability to find a middle ground among parties.

Against tolerance. Journalist Amos Oz argues that fanaticism is an "evil gene" that represents the intolerant, self-righteous, often violent desire lurking within all of us to force someone else to change to our liking.³⁰ Fanaticism, one psychologist argues, relies on "emotional dependency" and "cult authority" rather than critical thinking.³¹ It is a single-minded devotion to an end and a claim to a special knowledge that justifies subordinating all other ends to it. Fanatics refuse to accept criticism and seek to suppress challenges to their dogma. Such intolerance is the very antithesis of philosophy, according to John Passmore. Philosophy is by nature tolerant because it is "the practice of free discussion, encouraging the participants to

raise questions, to ponder, to make clear their objections, their ground for disagreeing.”³² Fanaticism, however, cannot tolerate challenges to its absolute truth, and so seeks to censor them.

Fundamentalist. In the pejorative tradition, zealotry is an indispensable tool of religious fundamentalists, whose excessive devotion requires that they defend their faith with a zeal that brooks no skepticism. Fundamentalists seek to suppress “impure” or “dangerous” ideas for the common good. As a result, zealotry conflicts with free speech, since free speech inevitably airs unorthodoxies that adhesion to the faith will not permit. Zealotry is a form of fundamentalism because it lacks the ability “to seriously entertain the possibility that one might be wrong.”³³

Terrorist. Finally, in the post-9/11 world, fanaticism is frequently equated with terrorism. The zealot and the terrorist both divide the world into good and evil and castigate the latter. This Manichean worldview makes them incapable of empathy, obsessed with purity, and driven by a hatred that leads one to not just rebuke the Other but also to want to destroy it.³⁴ Such “narcissistic rage” provides the terrorist with his basic justification for using violence against civilians in order to carry out God’s will.³⁵ While all zealots are not necessarily terrorists, all terrorists are zealots, and a zealot is often but a terrorist in waiting.

Zealotry as a Political Category

The pejorative tradition understands zealotry along the lines of Weber’s famous distinction between the “ethic of ultimate ends” and the “ethic of responsibility.” The latter, Weber argues, considers “the foreseeable results of one’s action” when evaluating the morality of political conduct, whereas the former sticks to principle regardless of the consequences.³⁶ The fanatical temperament wholly lacks an ethic of responsibility, according to the pejorative tradition, and is only concerned with absolute ends. This impolitic approach to politics often results in irrationality, intolerance, fundamentalism, or terrorism because it is too often willing to engage in morally dubious or even violent means to achieve its ends.

Undoubtedly this analysis captures a real aspect of zealotry. Yet fanaticism is more than a temperament. The personal biographies of the leading Garrisonians suggest this. For one, they were not emotionally or mentally unstable. Phillips, Garrison, Foster, and Kelley were all well-adjusted, happy people with strong families and enduring friendships. They did not share the fundamentalist belief in a whole, unified, absolute, and inerrant truth, the source of which is God, and they never insisted on any religious orthodoxy. (Phillips, for example, was a Puritan while Garrison was a Christian anarchist who rejected institutionalized religion.) They certainly sought to change hearts

and minds but they did not try to impose any dogma or suppress any opinion. Rather, they championed free speech and welcomed criticism of their politics. The Garrisonians were zealots, yet they defied the basic conclusions of the pejorative tradition. Their fanaticism was less a product of moral failings, personality disorders, or blind belief than a chosen method of political engagement. (As Garrison’s biographer Henry Mayer puts it, Garrison “became an agitator as much out of love as hate, as much from plenitude as deprivation.”)³⁷ The archetype of the Garrisonian fanatic is not the isolated madman bent on ruling the world but the movement organizer who is completely committed to the cause.

In other words, while understanding fanaticism as a temperament may capture the psychological and moral makeup of some persons who are passionately committed to a cause, it misses the *political* nature of zealotry. Politics is a crucial element of zealotry; fanatical collective action is rarely the product simply of a mass mania. The Garrisonians’ fanaticism, for example, was intended to recruit and mobilize people for collective action against a common enemy. The basic limitation of the pejorative tradition is that it fails to recognize zealotry as a political strategy to achieve one’s “absolute ends.” It defaults to an understanding of zealotry as the act of irrational or immoral individuals rather than a collective activity implicated in relations of power. It presumes zealotry to be an anti-democratic ideology rather than part of a struggle for hegemony that is in itself neither inherently democratic nor undemocratic. It thus inhibits a critical inquiry into the subject. This is the value of Garrisonian fanaticism, for it provides more than just an interesting counterexample to the pejorative tradition. It reveals the fundamentally unpolitical nature of the tradition itself.³⁸

What is needed, then, is a theory of zealotry that does not defer to the pejorative tradition. Such a theory must recognize zealotry as a form of collective action rather than simply an individual affliction. It must not automatically presume that fanatical activity is undemocratic, yet it must acknowledge the antagonistic, us/them character of extremism. Zealotry is an activity practiced not so much by disturbed temperaments as by collectivities working to transform relations of power by creating an “us” in struggle against a “them,” and by pressuring those in between to choose sides. Accordingly, zealotry is *political activity, driven by an ardent devotion to a cause, which seeks to draw clear lines along a friends/enemies dichotomy in order to mobilize friends and moderates in the service of that cause.*

By “ardent devotion” I mean two things. First, zealous political activity is typically driven by the zealot’s total identification with the oppressed (slave, fetus, working class, animals, etc.) and her readiness to kill, die, or suffer (such as enduring imprisonment) on their behalf. As Kelley once said, “I rejoice to be identified with the despised people of color. If they are to be despised, so ought their

advocates to be.”³⁹ Such devotion may be religiously motivated, but not necessarily. Abolitionists, Islamic suicide bombers, and pro-life assassins are all driven by religious commitment, but not anarchist assassins at the turn of the twentieth century or the Animal Liberation Front.⁴⁰ What is essential to ardent devotion is less a specifically religious motivation than an ideal that puts a fire in the zealot’s belly that she is willing to sacrifice for. Second, given this willingness, zealotry typically includes activities that lie outside the boundaries of conventional politics. The zealot’s commitment to her cause leads her to contemptuously dismiss the boundaries of “respectable” politics and to consider participating in the disruption of church services, sabotage, wildcat strikes, revolutionary cabals, terrorist cells, or other forms of direct action.⁴¹

I borrow the notion of “friends and enemies” from Carl Schmitt, who defines politics as an activity that divides the world into friends and enemies, with the potential of combat between them. For Schmitt, “friends” is a collectivity with which one shares a relation of identity. An enemy, on the other hand, is “the other, the stranger” that is “existentially something different and alien” from one’s group.⁴² It is the collective enemy of one’s own collective. The enemy of the underground eco-sabotage group the Earth Liberation Front, for example, is those corporations who hurt animals or the environment. The Garrisonians, we shall see, similarly sought to divide the nation into antislavery friends and proslavery enemies.

If the essence of zealotry as political activity is a vigor to draw lines between friends and enemies, then its antithesis is not reason but moderation, for moderation denies that us/them distinctions are the defining characteristic of politics. Instead, in the spirit of Aristotle, moderation seeks to find a middle ground between extremes. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, defines moderation as “avoidance of excess or extremes in behavior; temperateness, self-control, restraint.” Moderate, meanwhile, means “not strongly partisan; not radical or extreme.” Surprisingly, while the term is widely used by political scientists and commentators it is rarely defined and there are precious few studies of moderation as a political concept. In those few instances in which scholars do define it, they generally follow the OED definitions. One, for example, defines moderation as “convergence to the position of the median voter” and a corresponding willingness to compromise and negotiate.⁴³ Another defines it as the abandonment of “radical goals,” the willingness to participate in normal party politics, and a commitment to liberal democratic principles.⁴⁴ One of the few political theorists to seriously analyze moderation as a political category is Aurelian Craiutu.⁴⁵ Borrowing from the seventeenth-century English tradition of “trimming,” in which a politician seeks to keep the ship of state on an even keel by moderating opposing factions, Craiutu defines political moderation as “a politics driven by opposition to extreme

formulations and extreme remedies.”⁴⁶ The moderate tacks between parties or factions in order to preserve social stability and constitutional rule and to prevent civil war.

In all of these definitions, political moderation is understood as the middle of the political or moral spectrum, a willingness to compromise, and a bulwark against the extremes of the spectrum, which threaten social stability. In sharp distinction from Schmitt or radicals such as Marx, the moderate asserts that the essence of politics is not conflict between friends and enemies but reasonable compromise to avoid extremes and maintain the ship of state. It is for this reason that zealotry attacks moderation as a bulwark of oppression. The enemy is the primary agent responsible for the oppression, but the moderate is culpable in her own way because her desire to trim between the opposing camps leads her to tacitly sanction at least some of the oppressive practices of the enemy. Thus, as I shall explain, zealotry as a political strategy typically implies a three-corner fight among friends, enemies, and the moderate middle. It seeks to mobilize moderates by pressing them on their culpability. Its aim is to win as many moderates as possible over to the fanatical position and to push the rest into the enemy camp in order to clear the way for a final showdown.

We see this ardent devotion and friends/enemies perspective in Wendell Phillips. Phillips’s discourse was neither irrational nor intolerant but simultaneously rational, open-minded, democratic, and fanatical. Further, a reading of his speeches suggests that in certain circumstances moderation can undermine democracy while zealotry can advance it. The former point is evident in Phillips’s defense of fanaticism in “Philosophy of the Abolition Movement,” while the latter is demonstrated in his argument for disunion.

Philosophy of the Zealot Democrat

Wendell Phillips was born to an aristocratic Boston Brahmin family in 1811.⁴⁷ He was trained as a lawyer but had little taste for practicing it. In the mid-1830s his soon-to-be wife, Anne Greene, drew him into the Garrisonian wing of the abolitionist movement. By 1837 Phillips was making extemporaneous speeches at abolitionist meetings. He quickly became one of the most important abolitionist intellectuals and a leader of the Garrisonians second only to Garrison himself. A masterful orator, he and Frederick Douglass were arguably the most popular public speakers of the nineteenth century. He was immensely influential in American politics without ever holding office. A self-described “agitator” rather than politician, he essentially acted as “a delegate at large” in American politics, as a friend once put it.⁴⁸ As the nation went through the long drama of the Civil War and Reconstruction, he was perhaps the most important shaper of public opinion from a radical perspective. He was also a major spokesperson

for workers' rights (including the eight-hour day), women's suffrage, and temperance. He died in poverty in 1884, partly as a result of giving his wealth away to friends and causes in need.

The American abolitionist movement, as Aileen Kradtitor argues, can generally be broken down into two camps.⁴⁹ Reformist abolitionists generally held that American society was fundamentally moral and just except for slavery. They argued for a gradual end to slavery by working through existing institutions, insisted on following norms of decorum in political deliberation, and placed reconciliation with the South ahead of freedom and civil rights for slaves.⁵⁰ Radical abolitionists (of which the Garrisonians made the largest faction) believed that slavery was but the worst of many sins in American society and that it had so corrupted the body politic that American institutions would have to be transformed. In the spirit of Stephen Foster, they were often willing to defy decorum, the South, and the institutions of church, state, and capital. Overwhelmingly Christian, they believed slavery was a national sin that required national repentance and atonement. Their political and theological radicalism made them open to zealotry as a political strategy, and no one was a more articulate defender of this strategy than Wendell Phillips.

"Philosophy of the Abolition Movement," a speech Phillips delivered at a Massachusetts Antislavery Society meeting in 1853, provides the most comprehensive and systematic defense of the Garrisonians' zealotry. Phillips spoke in defense of a resolution that read, in part, "*Resolved*, that the object of this society is now, as it has always been, to convince our countrymen by arguments addressed to their hearts and consciences, that slaveholding is a heinous crime, and that the duty, safety, and interest of all concerned demand its immediate abolition, without expatriation."⁵¹ The resolution was meant to affirm the Garrisonians' strategy of using moral suasion to transform public opinion. Fully convinced of the morality and efficacy of the Garrisonian approach, Phillips seeks to uphold it before his fellow radical abolitionists as well as win over moderate antislavery persons to the Garrisonians' "fanatical" strategies and tactics.

The main criticism of the Garrisonian wing by moderates within the abolitionist movement is that the former are too fiery and outrageous. Many moderate abolitionists urged the Garrisonians to be more "respectable" in their criticisms of slavery.⁵² They argued that results would be better achieved through a cool, rational discussion of the facts than through a zealous denunciation of slavery, slaveholders, the federal government, and the church. Garrisonians, moderates claim, erroneously "imagine zeal will supply the place of common sense."⁵³ For this reason, they have become a hindrance to the movement. In his rebuttal to these arguments, Phillips does not deny or downplay the zealotry of the Garrisonians. Instead, he holds it up as a model for the antislavery movement. Rather

than toning down the Garrisonians' fanaticism, he urges abolitionists to become *more* zealous, more fanatical, more extreme in their attacks on slavery and those Northern institutions—from the church to the parties to the state—that perpetuate it. It is moderation, Phillips charges, that hurts the slave's cause, not zealotry.

Phillips reminds his audience that contrary to the critics' claims, the Garrisonians have employed judicious reasoning, rational argumentation, and empirical evidence in their fight against slavery. They have appealed to the reason of white Americans. They have worked through conventional political channels. They have begged the church to stand against slavery. But none of these efforts have worked. The entire political and economic apparatus of the Union remains arrayed against the slave. The parties and Congress have no will to discuss slavery, much less resist it. The church, rather than being a moral voice on behalf of the slave, refuses to condemn slavery, and thus becomes a cohort in her oppression. The state actively protects property in slaves. In such a climate, Phillips maintains, reason by itself is too pitiful a force to combat this grievous sin. Abolitionists must have recourse to other tools. To abolish an evil so powerful, agitation and fanaticism are necessary. He thunders:

The cause is not ours, so that we might, rightfully, postpone or put in peril the victory by moderating our demands, stifling our convictions, or filing down our rebukes, to gratify any sickly taste of our own, or to spare the delicate nerves of our neighbor. . . . The press, the pulpit, the wealth, the literature, the prejudices, the political arrangements, the present self-interest of the country, are all against us. God has given us no weapon but the truth, faithfully uttered, and addressed, with the old prophets' directness, to the conscience of the individual sinner. The elements which control public opinion and mould the masses are against us. We can but pick off here and there a man from the triumphant majority. We have facts for those who think, arguments for those who reason; but he who cannot be reasoned out of his prejudices must be laughed out of them. . . . There are far more dead hearts to be quickened than confused intellects to be cleared up—more dumb dogs to be made to speak than doubting consciences to be enlightened.⁵⁴

This defense of zealous action recalls the very first issue of *The Liberator*, in which Garrison famously promised,

On this subject [slavery] I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. No! no! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen;—but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD.⁵⁵

Frederick Douglass, who began his public abolitionist career as a Garrisonian, makes a similar point in his famous 1852 speech, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"

At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could I reach the nation's ear, I

would today pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be denounced.⁵⁶

As these quotes demonstrate, fanatical discourse was a central part of the radical abolitionists' strategy. In their speeches and newspapers they were impolite and immoderate and refused to temper their language. For example, the Garrisonians refused to honor the moderate Southern Senator Henry Clay after his passing because whatever good he did for the nation, Phillips explains, he also perpetuated slavery. Commitment to principle forbids praising the dead when they did evil while alive. "If these things be necessary to courtesy, I cannot claim that we are courteous. We seek only to be honest men, and speak the same of the dead as of the living."⁵⁷ The slave narrative likewise functioned as a form of zealous discourse. It spoke bluntly about the horrors of slavery: the auction block, families being sold, whippings, the neglect of elderly slaves, the pursuit of fugitives by dogs and slave catchers. Radical abolitionists published and distributed slave narratives (Garrison published Douglass's *Narrative*, for example, for which Phillips wrote an introductory letter) for the same reason they used provocative oratory: to shock their audience into action.

As Kimberly Smith shows, zealous abolitionist discourse followed less the model of rational deliberation than the tradition of neoclassical rhetoric, the art of speaking well (of which Phillips was a master, having studied it at Harvard and practiced for decades in the movement). In this tradition, public speaking was considered a performative art whose function was to persuade one's audience and influence political decision-making.⁵⁸ Zealous discourse was just such an act of persuasion, passion, and sermonizing. Even more, it sought not just to express but also to mobilize. The purpose of zealous rhetoric, as Garrison puts it, is to fill the audience with "an unutterable abhorrence of slavery" and animate them "with a determination to seek the immediate overthrow of that execrable system."⁵⁹ Whites need to be roused to oppose slavery by shame, anger, guilt, and pity as well as rational argument. Radical abolitionism employed a form of "antideliberative discourse," as Smith puts it, whose aim was empathy rather than mere rationality, action rather than mere sympathy.⁶⁰ He who cannot be reasoned out of his prejudices must be laughed out of them.

This is not to say that the radicals rejected rational deliberation. The Garrisonians readily acknowledged the place of reason in the struggle against slavery. In fact, Phillips notes, they have done more than anyone else to develop the empirical and moral argument against slavery.

Their intellectual accomplishments include developing an analysis of the workings of the slave system, interpreting the Bible and the Constitution on slavery, and revealing the influence of slavery on the national government. These topics have been so exhaustively explored by the Garrisonians that all moderate antislavery activists have been obliged to borrow from them. "Of that research and that argument, of the whole of it, the old-fashioned, fanatical, crazy Garrisonian antislavery movement has been the author. From this band of men has proceeded every important argument or idea which has been broached on the antislavery question from 1830 to the present time."⁶¹ Nevertheless, Phillips explains, reason alone is not enough. Moderates charge the Garrisonians with "indulging in fierce denunciations instead of appealing to reason and common sense by plain statements and fair argument."⁶² To such accusations, "we must plead guilty," Phillips admits.⁶³ Yet the Garrisonians had to employ unorthodox methods of persuasion because rational deliberation has failed to convince on its own. Sometimes fanatical tactics are necessary to let the light of reason in. "Prove to me now that harsh rebuke, indignant denunciation, scathing sarcasm, and pitiless ridicule are wholly and always unjustifiable; else we dare not, in so desperate a case, throw away any weapon which ever broke up the crust of an ignorant prejudice, roused a slumbering conscience, shamed a proud sinner, or changed, in any way, the conduct of a human being. . . I should be ashamed to think of the slave, or to look into the face of my fellow man, if it were otherwise."⁶⁴

Girding this combination of reason and zealotry was the bedrock Garrisonian principle of free speech and agonal participation. There was no ideological test within Garrisonian organizations beyond a commitment to immediate emancipation of all slaves. All opinions were welcome at their public meetings, including proslavery sentiments, and participation was often raucous. The result was a "robust and contentious atmosphere" at meetings that was greatly enjoyed by its participants.⁶⁵ Abolition would thrive, Garrison always believed, as long as "farmers, mechanics, and workingmen are allowed a full and unobstructed participation in all its proceedings. Limit this right to the few, instead of extending it to the many, and courage will give place to timidity, principle to expediency, integrity to corruption, and liberty to conservatism."⁶⁶

It is possible, Phillips demonstrates, to be a reasonable zealot. The Garrisonians' combination of zealous discourse, rational inquiry, and untrammelled free speech undermine the common assumption, rooted in the pejorative tradition, that reason is exclusive to moderation. This confirms Smith's claim that "democracy and reasoned argument don't necessarily imply one another." Zealous discourse may occasionally speak so loudly that one cannot hear the opposition (as happened when Foster interrupted church services), but it also serves democratic ends by "cultivating a general climate of public-spiritedness [and]

mobilizing supporters.”⁶⁷ The philosopher and the politician may insist on reason over fanaticism, but Phillips shows that the agitator needs both.

Disunion and the Three-Cornered Fight

“Philosophy of the Abolition Movement” disproves the syllogism that moderation is rational, zealotry is not moderate, and therefore zealotry is not rational. Phillips disproves a second syllogism of moderation in his controversial argument for disunion. According to this one, compromise is essential to democracy, moderation implies a willingness to compromise; therefore moderation is democratic. Zealotry, which rejects compromise with one’s opponent, is thereby anti-democratic. In his defense of disunion, Phillips demonstrates that regarding the question of slavery, at least, fanaticism can advance democracy while moderation and compromise may actually undermine it.

Disunion was a strategy devised by Garrison in 1843 that called for the North to secede from the South. The Garrisonians argued that slavery depended on union. The South needed Northern capital to sustain its economy, federal law to guarantee the return of fugitive slaves, federal courts to deny rights to Black people (think of *Dred Scott v. Sandford*), and federal troops to protect against slave uprisings. Northern bayonets, Phillips once quipped, kept slavery alive. If the northern states withdrew from the Union, the Garrisonians reasoned, the absence of national economic and military support would lead to slavery’s collapse. Disunion would lead to abolition, paving the way to rebuild the Union on the principles of liberty and equality for all, including African Americans.

As a leading advocate of disunion, Phillips gave several powerful speeches on its behalf in the months leading up to the Civil War. He delivered “Disunion” in January 1861, two months after Abraham Lincoln’s election and three months before cannons would fire at Fort Sumter. A hostile anti-abolitionist mob occupied a large part of the hall where he spoke, spilling out into the streets outside. If Phillips was intimidated, his fiery rhetoric did not show it. He begins by asserting that justice requires that the North secede from the Union, leaving the South to its own defenses. The purpose of disunion, Phillips argues, is to end the North’s constitutional duty to protect slavery and thus to break up “the whole merciless conspiracy of 1787.”⁶⁸ If the Union is dissolved, Phillips reasons, slavery would crumble, paving the way for a new union based on true antislavery principles.⁶⁹

The South threatened to secede to preserve slavery; the abolitionists would secede to abolish it. Given that a South Carolina convention had just the previous month approved a declaration of secession, Phillips’s argument might have seemed treasonous to some in the audience. Yet Phillips continues to insist on disunion, for two reasons. First, it

calls the South’s bluff. Southerners had been threatening to secede since South Carolina’s Ordinance of Nullification, passed in response to the Tariff Act of 1832. Northern moderates had sought to appease the South ever since. Garrisonians took the Southern threat and upped it by pronouncing that secession is actually in Northerners’ interests, since it will separate them from sin, and in the slaves’ interest, since disunion would leave the South defenseless against insurrection. Second, disunion puts pressure on the North. As part of their attempt to appease the South, Northern moderates continually downplayed slavery by claiming to put the Union first and foremost in national affairs. The price of Union, however, was capitulation. The South insisted not only that slavery be federally protected but also that the North cease even discussing it. Northern moderates were willing to pay this price to hold the Union together, including defending the censorship of abolitionist mail and enforcing the gag rule in Congress. Phillips was not. “Sacrifice anything to keep the slaveholding States in the Union? God forbid! we will rather build a bridge of gold, and pay their toll over it, accompany them out with glad noise of trumpets, and ‘speed the parting guest.’ . . . Let them take the forts, empty our arsenals and subtreasuries, and we will lend them, beside, jewels of gold and jewels of silver, and Egypt be glad when they are departed.”⁷⁰ With disunion, the South will become a monocrop economy ruled by a petty dictatorship of planters, while the masses (free whites and slaves) sink deeper into poverty—and into thoughts of insurrection. After a short period of such “independence,” the South will beg to be let back in the Union, but this time on the North’s terms.⁷¹ A new union would thereby be created, one based on true justice. Hence Phillips has no use for this union. “Disunion is abolition!” he booms. “That is all the value disunion has for me. I care little for forms of government or extent of territory; whether ten States or thirty make up the Union. . . . It matters not to me whether Massachusetts is worth one thousand millions, as now, or two thousand millions, as she might be, if she had no Carolina to feed, protect, and carry the mails for. The music of disunion to me is that at its touch the slave breaks into voice, shouting his jubilee.”⁷²

Disunion condenses politics into antislavery friends and proslavery enemies. It boils down several supposedly distinct political positions regarding slavery (Unionists, slaveholders, Copperheads, Free Soilers, abolitionists, etc.) into two: “those who like slavery, and mean it shall last [and] those who hate it, and mean it shall die.”⁷³ Phillips continues, “In the boiling gulf goes on the perpetual conflict of acid and alkali; all these classes are but bubbles on the surface. The upper millstone is *right*, and the lower *wrong*. Between them, governments and parchments, parties and compromises, are being slowly ground to powder.”

When politics is conceived in terms of friends versus enemies, there might seem to be little conceptual space for

any other category. But this is not quite true. A bipolar framework actually implies three categories: one side of the duality (e.g., friends), the other side (e.g., enemies), and an unstable category of those who are presently neither.⁷⁴ Any dualism always has its “borderlands” between the two contending sides.⁷⁵ Aware of this tripartite division, Phillips’s immediate target is not so much his slaveholding enemies as it is the moderates who stand before them. Abolitionism for him is a three-cornered fight among antislavery friends, proslavery enemies, and moderates who must be pressed to join one side or the other in order to clarify the political situation to the point where a final showdown between friend and enemy can take place.

For this reason, Phillips specifically targets those who seek a middle ground on slavery, such as Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky and Abraham Lincoln. Clay and Lincoln were morally opposed to slavery but both believed that preserving the Union should take priority over abolition. In his 1852 eulogy of his political role model, Lincoln praises Clay as a man who “knew no North, no South, no East, no West, but only the Union.” Clay rightly rejected abolitionism, Lincoln argued, for fear that its demand of immediate emancipation threatened the Union. “He did not perceive, as I think no wise man has perceived, how [slavery] could be at *once* eradicated, without producing a greater evil, even to the cause of human liberty itself. His feeling and his judgment, therefore, ever led him to oppose both extremes of opinion on the subject.”⁷⁶ Yet charting such a middle path, Phillips retorts, requires compromising with slave masters. Thus, Clay and Lincoln objectively preserve slavery regardless of their personal opposition to it. Northerners face a choice, Phillips argues, not so much between abolition and slavery as between Garrison’s fanatical disunionism and Lincoln’s moderate Unionism. The latter implies collaboration with the South and is thus not a genuine alternative to slavery. “Broadly stated, the South plans a Southern confederacy to uphold slavery, the North clings to the Union to uphold trade and secure growth.”⁷⁷ Fanatical abolitionism represents the only real alternative, for moderation still keeps the slave in her bonds.

By denying the legitimacy of a “middle ground” on this question—or more accurately, by making the middle ground the site of political conflict rather than a refuge from it—Phillips seeks to push moderates off the fence and force them to openly choose one side or the other. His friends/enemies framework leads him to see the struggle for abolition as a three-cornered fight between slaves and abolitionists, slaveholders, and pro-Union moderates. Converting the moderates to abolitionism is key to the destruction of slavery. “Northern opinion . . . is the real slave-holder of America,” he states in an 1842 speech. “Their presence in the Union is the Carolinians’ charter of safety.” Should this moderate middle be won over to antislavery, the Slave Power will crumble. “Every lover of peace, every one who hates bloodshed, must rejoice that it

is in the power of Northern opinion to say to slavery, cease,—and it ceases.”⁷⁸ The only way to win over moderates and counter Southern fanatics, who refuse to retreat a single inch on slavery, is with an abolitionist fanaticism that likewise refuses to back down. As Phillips once proclaimed, “We should be, like the South, penetrated with an idea, and ready with fortitude and courage to sacrifice everything to that ideal. No man can fight Stonewall Jackson, a sincere fanatic on the side of slavery, but John Brown, an equally honest fanatic on the other. [Applause.] They are the only chemical equals, and will neutralize each other. You cannot neutralize nitric acid with cologne-water. You cannot hurl [U.S. Secretary of State] William H. Seward at Jeff Davis. [Great applause and laughter.] You must have a man of ideas on both sides.”⁷⁹ Zealotry must be met with zealotry.

Phillips’s defense of disunion illustrates that moderation, not reason, is the antithesis and target of zealotry. His point is that justice lies on the side of disunion rather than union, the abolition of slavery rather than its containment, and fanatical adhesion to principle rather than trimming. Pushing moderates to one side or the other enables a final battle between friends and enemies. “Disunion must and will come,” Phillips predicts as early as 1847, “Calhoun wants it at one end of the Union—Garrison wants it at the other.”⁸⁰ Further, the Garrisonians firmly believed that in this struggle, zealotry was a force for democracy while moderation undermined it. When moderates finally recognize that the South will never be placated, Phillips predicts, they will have to reconsider the “irrationality” of the Garrisonians and the “prudence” of negotiating with slaveholders. Garrisonian fanaticism sought to shift the political center and produce a new hegemony in which Northern opinion finally came to see democracy and slavery as contradictory rather than compatible and that it was impossible for a nation to be half slave and half free.

Ironically, the best evidence in support of their argument for the democratic force of zealous disunionism emerged when the Garrisonians became Unionists. Nine days after the Civil War began on April 12, 1861, Phillips publicly abandoned his disunionism and threw his full support behind the Union. Many of his critics accused him of flip-flopping. Even Phillips’s biographer, James Brewer Stewart, claims that with his support for the Union and the war, Phillips had “dramatically reversed his entire political position.”⁸¹ There was no reversal. Phillips remained true to his fundamental goal of immediate and unconditional emancipation. The only difference was that now he had determined that it could be better achieved by fighting on behalf of the Union rather than against it. Consistent with his claim that abolition is “all the value disunion has for me,” in his first speech after the war he says, “In the whole of this conflict, I have looked only at Liberty, —only at the slave. . . . [A]cknowledge secession

or cannonade it, I care not which; but 'Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.'"⁸² Once the war began, Phillips explains, the Union finally stopped protecting slavery in the South. War for the Union now means that the North inevitably will have to fight to abolish slavery rather than prop it up. As he explains in a letter to the *New York Tribune* in 1862, "From 1843 to 1861, I was a Disunionist, and sought to break this Union, convinced that disunion was the only righteous path, and the best one for the white man and the black. . . . I rejoice in those efforts. They were wise and useful. Sumter changed the whole question. After that, peace and justice both forbade disunion."⁸³ On April 11, 1861, to support the slave was to advocate disunion. On April 12, solidarity with the slave meant to defend the Union. Phillips's position had not changed; rather, the North's had. Phillips became a Unionist but more importantly, the North had become antislavery. The fanatics had swayed the nation.

Proof of this lies in the transformation of Northern public opinion regarding the abolitionists during the war. Abolitionists quickly went from being a pesky burr under the North's conscience to its moral vanguard. By 1863 Northern newspapers were admitting that the abolitionists had been right all along and regretted that they had encouraged mobs against them. They acknowledged that their work had, in effect, led to Lincoln's election and the end of slavery. Formerly vilified, Garrison and Phillips became celebrities. Little more than a year after his "Disunion" speech was nearly mobbed, Phillips became one of the most influential persons in American politics. In 1862 alone probably five million Americans heard him speak or read his speeches.⁸⁴ As an advisor to General Benjamin J. Butler put it, "No man will speak oftener or to larger audiences in America. . . . The masses in New England or New York and Ohio are reached by Phillips."⁸⁵ He addressed Congress in April 1862 and was greeted with cheers; soon after he met with Lincoln. Garrison was hailed at the 1864 Republican convention in Baltimore, the very city where in 1830 he had served jail time for libeling a slave merchant. In a ceremony that virtually no radical has ever lived to experience in her lifetime, he personally hauled up the Stars and Stripes over Fort Sumter in April 1865, signifying the death of slavery and culminating thirty-four years of fanatical agitation. The zealots had won, and democracy rejoiced.

These accolades, while symbolic, attest to the success of the radical abolitionists' zealotry. Moderates had been obliged by events to move toward the Garrisonians rather than the other way around. Radical abolitionists' relentless attacks on pro-Union moderates for appeasing the Slave Power had finally sunk in. Squeezed between the bombasts of Phillips and the bombs of Sumter, Northern moderates had to admit that reconciliation was impossible. Phillips had by then surrendered his disunionism, but his fanaticism prevailed. The Garrisonians had split the

churches, divided the press, hastened the demise of the Whig Party, paved the way for John Brown, ruptured the Democratic Party, and helped the Republicans to power. The result was a final conflict between North and South bloodier than any Garrisonian imagined (especially given that many were pacifists) yet still a struggle they had been demanding since 1831. The abolitionists were never able to fully abolitionize the North, as Gerald Sorin points out. That is, they could not convince a majority of Northerners that slavery and racial discrimination were moral sins requiring radical action or that Black people are fully equal with whites. Nevertheless, they succeeded "in making the slaveholders appear to be the enemy of the Republic," which precipitated the South's drastic response and the move toward war.⁸⁶ They had achieved their objective—immediate and unconditional emancipation without compensation to slave owners—in a generation. As Noel Ignatiev puts it, "The course of events can never be predicted in other than the broadest outline, but in the essentials history followed the path charted by the abolitionists. As they foresaw, it was necessary to break up the Union in order to reconstitute it without slavery. . . . Their actions brought about a new situation, which led millions to act and think in new ways. Have ever revolutionaries been more thoroughly vindicated by events? Have ever revolutionaries had a greater impact on events?"⁸⁷

By setting out the fanatical pole of antislavery opinion, the Garrisonians redefined the political landscape. As Phillips explains, their fanatical strategy was twofold. First, it sought "to waken the nation to its real state" and make slavery "the question of this generation." This required redefining the relationship between zealotry and reason. Second, it aimed "to startle the South to madness" so that it had to act rashly to end slavery or break up the union.⁸⁸ Disunionism did just that. Phillips never claimed that this strategy would be popular. That's why, he once quipped to a friend, "Garrisonians never go out, even on the most gala occasions, without their 'pockets full of rocks.'"⁸⁹ But it was effective. It contributed to a final confrontation with slavery that ended in Jubilee and that created opportunities to expand democracy even further during Radical Reconstruction. As the prominent nineteenth century author George Curtis noted, "It was the fanaticism of abolitionism that has saved this country from the fanaticism of slavery. It's fire fighting fire. And the fire of Heaven is prevailing over that of Hell."⁹⁰

No doubt such a strategy had its risks, for it posed the possibility of awful defeat as well as victory, subjugation rather than Juneteenth. Indeed, Phillips's analysis rested on an extraordinary gamble: the worst-case scenario would have been a victorious Confederacy that could have expanded its territory and extended the life of slavery for decades. But, the Garrisonians surmised, moderation had surrendered to slavery since 1787 and the Slave Power had only grown stronger as a result. What else but their zealotry

(and the self-activity of the slaves) could counter the zealotry of the masters—or the moderation of the government?

Of course, the Garrisonians were not the most fanatical of the abolitionists. If Phillips made the South crazy, John Brown turned it apoplectic. Nevertheless, whether through Foster's disruption of church services, Phillips's defense of fanaticism and disunion, or Brown's attack on Harpers Ferry, abolitionist zealotry always sought to expand American democracy. The radical abolitionist experience contradicts the pejorative tradition and in so doing, contributes to a specifically political understanding of fanaticism as a strategy to transform power relations. The concluding section suggests how scholars can use this understanding to study zealotry in the twenty-first century.

Studying Factions and Their Fanatics

What leads a movement to embrace zealotry? Under what circumstances do extremist positions become prominent or remain marginalized within political factions? What factors tend to produce a democratic or anti-democratic zealotry? These and other important questions emanate from a theory of zealotry freed of the distortions of the pejorative tradition. Yet some questions, I suggest in conclusion, are less useful than others in understanding zealotry because they insist on empirical answers to questions that are ultimately normative. Three questions suggested by the above analysis of Phillips are particularly tempting to ask: when is it *reasonable* to be a zealot, when is it *moral* to do so, and when is it politically *prudent* to engage in zealous action? These questions, while interesting, are still framed by the pejorative tradition of zealotry and are thus of limited value to the scholar, for they essentially ask, somewhat defensively, when is fanaticism *not* irrational, immoral, intolerant, fundamentalist, terroristic, or otherwise politically inappropriate? In other words, they ask for proof that a particular form of fanaticism is “good,” which is determined by assessing how dissimilar it is to pejorative understandings. Understanding zealotry as a strategy rather than a temperament, however, requires evaluating it according to somewhat different criteria. The key to judging zealotry lies not in its reasonableness, morality, or prudence, but its relation to democracy.

When it is reasonable to engage in fanaticism? A critical theory of zealotry derived from an analysis of the Garrisonians demonstrates that terms such as “reasonable” or “legitimate” are not objective criteria in regards to fanaticism. Rather, these are political terms that are used, in part, to exclude *a priori* certain persons or activities from the public sphere. When the Sierra Club seeks to distance itself from the radical environmental group the Earth Liberation Front, for example, by denouncing it as violent and extremist, they are not so much seeking to objectively

evaluate the ELF as they are to define the very terms of “reasonable” environmentalist activity.⁹¹ Moderate abolitionists sought to do the same in their attacks on the Garrisonians. This may or may not be an effective strategy but regardless, determining whether the ELF or the Garrisonians are “reasonable” and therefore “legitimate” is a normative question that is ultimately settled through political struggle rather than empirical evidence.

The criterion of reasonableness also distorts an understanding of the relationship between religious faith and zealotry. According to the pejorative tradition, the combination of faith and fanaticism produces irrational fundamentalism. This conclusion, however, is too simplistic and in some cases, simply wrong. This is evident in the relationship between Christianity and abolitionism. An evangelical schema of slavery as a national sin and abolitionism as a public confession of sin, leading to national spiritual rebirth and reform, did indeed frame the abolitionists' understanding of slavery.⁹² This schema of “confessional protest” did not inherently lead to zealotry, however, since both reformist and radical abolitionists employed it. Further, Michael Young and Stephen Cherry find that this religious framework actually led many abolitionists *out* of the church (some into unorthodox forms of faith, others into atheism) and to base their abolitionist politics on increasingly secular arguments. “The divine principles of [abolitionists'] particular cause brought them into conflict with religious authorities and ultimately with their very own evangelical commitments. As a result of these conflicts, many . . . lost their faith in the religious institutions that had shaped their social activism.”⁹³ In other words, abolitionist zealotry actually led to secularization rather than fundamentalism. This history suggests that the relationship between religion and fanaticism is more complex than the pejorative tradition allows.

When is it ethical to engage in zealotry? Slavery might seem to be a case study that is unfairly tilted in favor of a sympathetic evaluation of zealotry, for surely the only ethical response to an egregious evil like slavery is absolute opposition, yet the majority of contemporary conflicts are much more morally complex. A theory that sees only black and white, one could argue, is of little use when an issue or conflict is draped in shades of gray. For example, historian Owen Whooley argues that the abolitionists' Manichean framework did not translate well to the “muddled” environment of Reconstruction, which required pragmatic political solutions rather than moral absolutism. Hence the Garrisonians' main organization, the American Anti-Slavery Society, hobbled along after the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 until it disbanded in 1870, even as much work against racism and for the social rights of the freedmen and women remained. A zealous framework is less effective when a struggle loses its “self-evident

quality” and “assumes more ambiguity,” Whooley suggests.⁹⁴

This argument falters on two grounds. For one, the judgment of whether an issue is morally clear-cut is one that can often only be made in retrospect. It is obvious today that slavery is unconditionally wrong but it is anachronistic to assume it was always an “easy” moral issue.⁹⁵ When Clay attacked the “ultra-abolitionists” for insisting on immediate abolition and not respecting the rights of property and when Lincoln opposed slavery but advocated the colonization of freed African Americans to Africa, they were taking a “moderate” position for their time between the “extremes” of unconditional abolition and the unlimited expansion of slavery.⁹⁶ The fact that Clay’s and Lincoln’s positions are awkward today (to put it politely) shows that what is “complex” in the past might be crystal clear in the future.

Further, just as with the terms “legitimate” and “reasonable,” the description of a moral issue as “clear-cut” or “ambiguous” is a normative distinction. Slavery became self-evidently wrong for most Americans as a result of political struggle, not through analytical reasoning or empirical evidence. Similarly, contemporary issues such as Palestine, abortion, affirmative action, globalization, Northern Ireland, and a nuclear Iran, while unquestionably complex, are quite clear-cut for many involved in these conflicts. One person’s negotiable issue is another person’s ultimate sin demanding the most radical treatment. The determination of what is beyond the pale of negotiation and compromise is always politically and historically contingent. To define an issue as morally ambiguous is thus a political move, for it attempts to exclude “extremist” perspectives by demanding that all parties be willing to compromise according to the terms set by those defining the matter as “ambiguous.” Yet slavery, universal suffrage, and women’s equality were not always “easy” issues. Racism is an “obvious evil” that could have been employed to make Radical Reconstruction easy. Perhaps abortion and gay marriage will be easy someday, too. If this happens, it likely will be due to political struggles that make such morality so obvious and so much a part of common sense as to appear timeless. A critical analysis of zealotry suggests that fanatics on either side of that struggle will likely play a role in developing that new common sense.

When is it politically prudent to engage in zealotry? When should one draw lines between friends and enemies and when should one seek to moderate between opposing parties? Deciding between zealous and moderate approaches to politics is a judgment political actors make in part according to the circumstances of the conflict, their ideological or theological worldview, the relationship one has with one’s opponent, the tack taken by the opposition, and the likely consequences of each strategy. Moderation is a sensible form of political engagement when all parties

in a conflict are willing to see each other as something other than an enemy. Yet if this is not acceptable to at least one of the parties then fanaticism is a possible feature of such conflict. Once again, the determination of whether zealotry is prudent is ultimately a normative judgment made by political actors rather than an empirical or analytical puzzle to be solved by scholars. The more important question regarding zealotry is not whether it is sensible but whether it is democratic. That is, the principle issue regarding fanaticism today is how it relates to democratic institutions and practices. Given this, there are two key questions scholars should ask: what structural factors lead to zealotry, and does the zealous activity enhance or undermine democracy?

One advantage of theorizing zealotry as a type of collective action is that it becomes amenable to social movement theory. This literature points to three factors in explaining the emergence of social movements; these in turn can be applied to the study of zealotry. I will briefly sketch these potential applications here.⁹⁷ First, political opportunity structures are those political and social conditions that encourage or discourage collective action. A group’s access (or lack thereof) to the normal channels of political reform and the state’s capacity for and willingness to use repression against movements, for example, are two opportunity structures that suggest whether or when a group might consider zealotry as a viable method of collective action. Second, mobilizing structures are organizations or institutions that mobilize resources (political, economic, cultural, intellectual) for collective action. Resource mobilization scholarship finds that disruptive tactics and the extremist wing of social movements can add new energy to a movement and spur bargaining between elites and moderate elements of the movement. This suggests that zealotry may emerge when a movement is deadlocked with elites. Third, framing processes refer to the ways in which social movements diagnose injustice in order to motivate and mobilize a collective response to it. Framing tends to constrain the number and type of tactics available for a movement to use in its fight against injustice, ruling out certain tactics and favoring others. A movement that frames its struggle against injustice in Manichean terms raises the possibility of zealotry, or at least for zealous flanks to emerge within the movement.

Social movement theory has less to offer regarding evaluating zealotry’s relation to democracy. Specifically, it is not equipped to address the question, does a particular form of zealotry expand democratic participation or foster a plural public sphere? Phillips’s speeches, fortunately, suggest three tests for determining the democratic or undemocratic potential of zealotry. First, does the zealotry dehumanize the enemy? The tendency of a friends/enemies framework to depict the enemy as incurably evil and inhuman is a problem Schmitt acknowledges but is never able to address satisfactorily. Schmitt strongly opposed

such dehumanization because for him the enemy is a category or a criterion and not a definition that is “indicative of substantial content.”⁹⁸ Yet as Gopal Balakrishnan argues, the process of intensification of conflict that is typical in politics frequently leads to disrespect for the enemy (rendering it ugly, immoral, inhuman, etc.) and tempts a desire to annihilate it. Thus, the respect that is implied in Schmitt’s concept of “enemy” is difficult to maintain in actual political struggle.⁹⁹ Phillips and the Garrisonians, however, never dehumanized their enemy because they did not see slave owners as personal enemies whom they wished to destroy but a collectivity they sought to defeat—by conversion if at all possible. The Garrisonians always saw their enemies as potential brethren and believed in the possibility of his or her moral transformation, even as they refused to compromise with them. (Phillips demonstrated this, for example, when he cordially gave an Arkansas slaveholder a tour of Boston when he showed up at Phillips’s door in 1856.)¹⁰⁰ Second, does the zealotry suppress free speech? Free speech in an inclusive setting preserves space for perspectives that a zealot, in his or her fervor, might otherwise seek to close off. (As the Garrisonians recognized, it also protects the zealot’s own right to speak.) A commitment to free speech makes it difficult for any zealous political struggle to descend into fundamentalism or terror. It also ensures that any argument for zealotry is itself always subject to critique. Third, does the zealotry expand the ability of ordinary people to participate in those affairs that affect their daily life? While Islamist zealots such as the Taliban may seek to silence opinions that veer from “the truth,” democratic zealots like Phillips seek to overwhelm opposing opinions through vigorous debate and agonal participation in a diverse public sphere.

Reform is a commotion, Garrison liked to say. It is not a neat and clean process of rational minds coming together to settle on a more just polity. It is a struggle between antagonistic forces over the future of existing political and social arrangements. In such struggles, zealotry sometimes emerges, for it is a strategy for political and cultural hegemony. Undoubtedly, many forms of zealotry are anti-democratic, particularly in an age in which religious fundamentalism increasingly challenges the basic principles of liberal democracy. Perhaps it isn’t wise to theorize a democratic zealotry when suicide bombers explode themselves in crowds, when the levees between church and state show signs of breaching, and when polarizing pundits lambaste their opponents as treasonous dupes of totalitarianism who “always take the side of savages against civilization.”¹⁰¹ Ultimately, however, failing to analyze zealotry critically undermines a full understanding of its impact on the twenty-first century. The fervor to denounce extremism in the post-9/11 era, to build a “moderate Islam,” and to wish for a “purple” American politics between red and blue rests on a pejorative notion of zealotry that, as Phillips shows, can actually undermine opportunities to expand

democratic participation rather than secure them. Voltaire once wrote, “There is no faction that doesn’t have its fanatics.”¹⁰² In the tumult of politics there is always the potential for zealous partisans to be drawn into the fray. For this reason, it is necessary to theorize zealotry. A democratic politics must account for the zealot in its midst and recognize that she occasionally may even advance democracy. Sometimes it is necessary for even democrats to pray to be preserved in the freshness of their fanaticism.

Notes

- 1 Pillsbury 1883.
- 2 Robertson 2000.
- 3 Mayer 1998.
- 4 Quoted in Sterling 1991, 157.
- 5 Sterling 1991, 335.
- 6 Hartz 1955, Hofstadter 1965.
- 7 Mayer 1998, Fladeland 1964.
- 8 I prefer the terms “zealotry” and “fanaticism” to “extremism” because extremism implies a *place* on the political spectrum and behaviors or dispositions associated with it, while zealotry and fanaticism connote *action*. Otherwise, I consider the three terms to be essentially synonymous, and will use them interchangeably throughout the text.
- 9 “Blair: We Must Be Prepared for the Terrorists to Strike,” *Independent on Sunday* (London), 14 March 2004, p. 2; “An Irishman’s Diary,” *The Irish Times*, 22 September, 2004; “What Pim and Diana Had in Common,” *The Guardian* (London), 14 May 2002; “Like Communism, EU Will Eventually Collapse,” *The Herald* (Glasgow), 31 October 2002, respectively.
- 10 “About Us,” §1.
- 11 Exceptions to this tradition in academic scholarship include a handful of abolitionist historians such as Aptheker 1989, Mayer 1998, Kraditor 1989, and Robertson 2000, who understand its role in the antislavery struggle, and a few commentators from the 1960s and 70s, such as Wills 1977. For a recent but mild defense of extremism, see Haimain 1999.
- 12 Plato 1992, 442c–444a.
- 13 Plato 1992, 444a–e.
- 14 Aristotle 1980, II.6.
- 15 Aristotle 1980, III.6–7. Aristotle acknowledges that not every act allows for a mean, such as spite, theft, or murder. Further, as Deneen 2005 notes, for Aristotle the golden mean lies somewhere between the excess and the defect, but it need not lie in the exact middle between them, and may lie closer to one “extreme” than the other. For example, courage is closer to rashness than cowardice (II.8).
- 16 Montesquieu 1989.

- 17 These three forms of equilibrium are from *Federalist* Nos. 31, 47–51, and 10, respectively (Madison et al. 1987). For the tension Madison faced between republicanism and private property, see Nedelsky 1990.
- 18 Madison et al. 1987, No. 49.
- 19 Carrese 2004.
- 20 Locke 1975.
- 21 Hume 1985. Yet Hume also notes that the enthusiast is generally a “friend to civil liberty” because he opposes ecclesiastical power.
- 22 Nicholis 2002.
- 23 Voltaire 1962, 267.
- 24 Burke 1967, 231–246.
- 25 Craiutu n.d.
- 26 A Lexis-Nexis search of the term “democracy” (which I used to restrict the sample to political usages) plus “fanatic,” “fanaticism,” “extremist,” “extremism,” “zealot,” and “zealotry” resulted in 500 articles from 12 September, 2001 to 7 July, 2005. In the articles, the terms (less “democracy”) were used to refer to a person or group as irrational 53 times, as intolerant 52 times, as a religious fundamentalist 225 times, and as a terrorist 211 times. I found 29 positive or indifferent mentions of the term and 13 that did not fit any of these categories.
- 27 Newman 1986, 43.
- 28 Newman 1986, 24.
- 29 Jewett and Lawrence 2003, 8.
- 30 Oz 2002.
- 31 Goldberg 2003, 236.
- 32 Passmore 2003, 219.
- 33 Hamilton 1995, 56.
- 34 Wirth 2003.
- 35 Juergensmeyer 2000.
- 36 Weber 1921.
- 37 Mayer, 1998, xix.
- 38 While Weber’s analysis of the ethic of “absolute ends” is useful in understanding the pejorative tradition, I do not mean to imply that Weber himself had an entirely pejorative understanding of fanaticism. “Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards,” he writes. “It takes both *passion* and *perspective*” (Weber 1921, emphasis added). Weber recognizes that it is legitimate for a political actor to refuse to compromise when, following the ethic of responsibility, she comes to the conclusion that, “Here I stand; I can do no other.” Indeed, “every one of us who is not spiritually dead must realize the possibility of finding himself at sometime in that position.” Thus, there is no necessary contradiction between the ethic of responsibility and of absolute ends. He continues, “In so far as this is true, an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility are not absolute contrasts but rather supplements, which only in unison constitute a genuine man—a man who can have the ‘calling for politics.’” It seems to me that the Garrisonians took a very similar approach in their fanatical opposition to slavery.
- 39 Quoted in Sterling 1991, 86.
- 40 I am not persuaded by arguments that claim that Marxism and anarchism are essentially religious devotions. (See Billington 1980 for an example of this.) Rather, I am inclined to accept social revolutionaries’ professed atheism or agnosticism at face value. I am grateful to Mike Kramer for helping me work through the relationship between zealotry and sacrifice.
- 41 I want to emphasize that zealotry is an unorthodox approach to politics but it is not necessarily a “paranoid style” of politics (Hofstadter 1965). The Garrisonians, for example, did not engage in conspiracy theories. Slavery was evil but not the product of a vast, insidious, international plot. They did argue that the South dominated the nation’s political institutions but this was a political critique based on an analysis of how the institutions worked publicly, not how they “really” worked behind closed doors. Their style of politics was blunt, impassioned, and often outrageous, but it was not suspicious, conspiratorial or otherwise paranoid.
- 42 Schmitt 1996, 26.
- 43 Sánchez-Cuenca 2004.
- 44 Wickham 2004.
- 45 Craiutu 2001, 2005, n.d..
- 46 Craiutu n.d.
- 47 I draw the following account of Phillips’s life largely from Stewart 1986.
- 48 Stewart 1986, 271.
- 49 Kraditor 1989 technically argues that there were four factions of abolitionism: Garrisonians, anti-Garrisonians, radicals, and reformists, and that while there was considerable overlap between the Garrisonians and the radicals and the anti-Garrisonians and the reformists, they were not completely coterminous. Nevertheless, she generally employs the radical/reformist dichotomy in her analysis, which I follow. The reformists officially split with the Garrisonians in 1840 over the question of women’s participation in the antislavery movement, which the Garrisonians supported but the reformists opposed because it violated traditional social norms.
- 50 Bishop 1981.
- 51 “Philosophy of the Abolition Movement,” in Phillips 1863, 98. Hereafter “Abolition.” Phillips’s major speeches are collected in two series of *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters*, published in 1863 and 1891, respectively. A selection of his speeches appears in collections edited by Filler and Ignatiev (Phillips 1965, Phillips 2001, respectively). The collection

- edited by Ignatiev is still in print. It contains many of the speeches I analyze here, including “Abolition” and “Disunion.”
- 52 Kraditor 1989.
- 53 “Abolition,” 104.
- 54 “Abolition,” 106–107.
- 55 Garrison 1831.
- 56 Douglass 1852.
- 57 “Abolition,” 114.
- 58 Smith 1999.
- 59 Quoted in Smith 1999, 179.
- 60 Smith 1999. Smith actually uses the term “sympathy” favorably, but her notion of sympathy is much stronger than common usage and implies taking leadership from the fugitive slave: “To sympathize with the slave did not just mean feeling sorry for him or her, then, but accepting and submitting to the fugitive’s moral guidance and influence” (231).
- 61 “Abolition,” 111.
- 62 “Abolition,” 99.
- 63 “Abolition,” 106.
- 64 “Abolition,” 109–110.
- 65 Mayer 1998, 262.
- 66 Quoted in Mayer 1998, 262–63.
- 67 Smith 1999, 240–241.
- 68 “Disunion,” in Phillips 1863, 344.
- 69 “Disunion” and “Progress,” in Phillips 1863.
- 70 “Disunion,” 354–55.
- 71 “Disunion,” 368–69.
- 72 “Disunion,” 362. In another speech, Phillips explains that the abolitionists’ disunion is different from Southern secession because the former respects the rights of all humans while the latter only respects the rights of whites. According to the Declaration of Independence, Phillips argues, the people of a State have a revolutionary right to withdraw from a political compact if it is trampling their life, liberty and happiness. Thus, he acknowledges that South Carolina possesses a revolutionary right (if not a constitutional one) to secede if its people want to. But *all* the people of South Carolina must be part of this decision, not just planters. By disregarding the wishes of its Black citizens, South Carolina does not act according to the wishes of its people and has no revolutionary right to secede. Massachusetts, meanwhile, could secede because all of its (male) citizens could make such a decision. See “Under the Flag,” in Phillips 1863.
- 73 “Disunion,” 345.
- 74 One example of this is in the bipolar racial framework of Jim Crow segregation. There were always those who existed on the margins of the Black and white categories, such as mulattoes in Louisiana, Chinese immigrants in Mississippi, and Mexican workers in Texas. These groups uncomfortably straddled the borderlands of the Black-white duality. However, their existence confirmed the presence of the binary rather than disproved it, for those on the borderlands constantly felt pressure to join one side or the other. See Olson 2004 for an analysis of this.
- 75 Anzaldúa 1987. Anzaldúa is unusual among theorists for recognizing the third leg of the bipolar stool, although she conceptualizes it differently. For Anzaldúa, the borderlands represent an ambiguous space between two cultures that she wants to sustain in their contradictions. For the zealot, the middle is a position between two contending sides that must be attacked and eliminated because it is a site of conciliation with the enemy.
- 76 Lincoln 1953, 123, 130; italics in original.
- 77 “Disunion,” 345–46.
- 78 “Irish Sympathy with the Abolition Movement,” in Phillips 1891, 21–22.
- 79 “State of the Country,” in Phillips 1863, 540.
- 80 Quoted in Mayer 1998, 363.
- 81 Stewart 1986, 222.
- 82 “Under the Flag,” in Phillips 1863, 400.
- 83 “Letter to the Tribune,” in Phillips 1863, 464–65.
- 84 Aptheker 1989.
- 85 Quoted in Stewart, 234.
- 86 Sorin 1972, 144.
- 87 Ignatiev, “Introduction,” in Phillips 2001, 25–26.
- 88 “Abolition,” 153.
- 89 Quoted in Stewart 1986, 167.
- 90 Quoted in Peterson 2002, 77.
- 91 See, e.g., Sierra Club 2003.
- 92 Young 2002.
- 93 Young and Cherry 2005, 391.
- 94 Whooley 2004, 504, 507.
- 95 For example, Richard Bellamy’s book on compromise argues that slavery is beyond the pale of negotiating “because the racist presuppositions on which it rests prove incompatible with the moral presuppositions and spirit of a deliberative politics” (1999, 112). Yet such racism was perfectly consistent with the mainstream of nineteenth century moral and political discourse, in which theories of Africans’ biological inferiority abounded. The contradiction between deliberation and racism that is so obvious to Bellamy only became apparent with the passage of time—and after a civil war.
- 96 Clay 1843, Lincoln 1989.
- 97 The following discussion follows the overview of social movement theory in McAdam et al. 1996.
- 98 Schmitt 1996, 26.
- 99 Balakrishnan 2000.
- 100 “The Old South Meeting House,” in Phillips 1891.
- 101 Coulter 2003, 285.
- 102 Voltaire 1962, 252.

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