

Radically Democratic Extremism: An Interview with Joel Olson

By Charles I May 26, 2010

Many readers of this blog are probably familiar with Joel Olson, author of *The Abolition of White Democracy*. Back in the day, Joel was a member of the Love and Rage anarchist federation. He was a founding member of Phoenix Copwatch, and is currently involved with Bring the Ruckus and the Repeal Coalition. He also finds time to be a professor at Northern Arizona University.

A while back, I heard that Joel was doing research on “fanaticism” and “extremism.” Knowing his work, this sounded pretty exciting to me... a project likely produce some interesting and useful political/strategic angles. Then, a fellow AK collective member sent me a web link to a talk Joel gave on the subject at the Phoenix Class War Council’s “Beer and Revolution” series. Almost a year later, I finally sat down with a beer of my own to listen. Like the fanatics and zealots he studies, Joel manages, in a little over an hour, to uncompromisingly reconfigure the map of political possibilities available to revolutionaries today.

You, too, can listen. I’ve pasted the multi-part audio link at the end of this post. Between here and there, you’ll find an interview I did with Joel after I heard the talk.

Read/listen on...

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AK: How did you first become interested in studying, fanaticism, extremism, and zealotry?

JO: In 2001, I was writing the last chapter for my first book, *The Abolition of White Democracy*, on what a world without whiteness might look like. I was reading up on the original abolitionist movement, particularly its main philosopher, Wendell Phillips (in *The Lesson of the Hour*, edited by Noel Ignatiev). I was intrigued by how Phillips openly embraced the label “fanatic” that anti-abolitionists threw at him. Then 9/11 happened, and I was struck by the contrast: on the one hand every media outlet was discussing the problem of “extremism” and “fanaticism” and what to do about it, while on the other hand I’m reading about this radical abolitionist who embraced the term, and even outlined a theory of fanatical politics. I got to thinking that maybe Phillips was right; maybe extremism is useful for those of us seeking a free society, and not just those seeking religious tyranny. (By the way, I consider the terms extremism, fanaticism, and zealotry to be functionally equivalent, and use them interchangeably.)

AK: One of the things I liked best about your talk was how methodically you differentiate between mainstream (i.e. pejorative) definitions of “fanaticism” and the way you use the term. Could you break that distinction down for us?

JO: For most of its critics throughout Western history, fanaticism is an ideology of irrationality, intolerance, fundamentalism, and terrorism. Certainly many fanatics are irrational, intolerant, fundamentalist, undemocratic, and/or terrorists. But Wendell

Phillips and his comrades were none of these things. They were fanatically opposed to slavery, but they were also radical democrats who opposed racial oppression, supported women's rights, defended free speech, and believed in liberty and equality for all. The pejorative notion of extremism clouds our ability to understand radically democratic extremism.

From this, I came to conclude that extremism is not an ideology but an approach to politics. That is, it is not a set of specific ideas about how the world is run or how it should be run, like liberalism, conservatism, communism, or anarchism. Rather, it is a way of engaging in politics, and it is a method that can be used by any ideology or cause.

I define fanaticism as the unconventional, extraordinary political mobilization of the refusal to compromise. Fanaticism is an approach to politics, driven by an ardent devotion to a cause, that seeks to draw clear lines between friends and enemies in order to mobilize friends and moderates in the service of that cause. It is willing to use direct action or other unconventional means to achieve this.

AK: Fanatics draw clear lines between friends and enemies. But the "enemy" camp seems a lot bigger, because it includes moderates in some sense. In your talk, you say that one of the main features of fanaticism is its attempt to "squeeze and put pressure on the moderate middle." In your paper "The Freshness of Fanaticism," you dissect the concept of "moderation." In that same essay, and in "Zealotry and the Jeremiad in American Political Thought," you critically tackle terms like "consensus," "compromise," and "concession." Could you talk about that a bit?

JO: Moderation (not tolerance or reason) is the true antithesis of fanaticism. While the essence of the fanatical approach to politics is a) the refusal to compromise, b) the desire to mobilize others based on that refusal, and c) the use of extraordinary means to mobilize them, moderation is an approach that regards compromise as the essence of political engagement. A moderate approach to politics seeks to negotiate a "common ground" that all parties can agree on. The fanatic divides the world into friends (those who are with you), enemies (those who are against you), and moderates in between (those who need to get off the fence); the moderate believes that with a little bargaining, we can all be friends. Extremism seeks combat, moderation seeks consensus.

Now, I don't believe that extremism is always the better approach. If there is a potential to find common ground between you and your adversary, then you should seek it. But when compromise would violate your most closely held principles, or when your opponent refuses to compromise, or when your opponent claims to be helping you but really is oppressing you, then it makes sense to consider an extremist approach to politics rather than moderation.

Slavery is a good example of this. Phillips argued that any compromise with the slave masters perpetuated slavery, since any such compromise would have to acknowledge the master's right to own slaves—precisely the principle that the abolitionists rejected. Thus any "moderate" position regarding slavery, Phillips argued, was objectively proslavery. The master must either free his slaves immediately and unconditionally,

without asking for compensation, or abolitionists must fight against the slaveholders. Anti-abortion militants use the same logic: you cannot compromise with baby-killers, they say. In fact, the right uses this logic all the time, and it's one of the reasons why they win so often. I think the left would do well to consider this logic sometimes, too. Why should we compromise over the destruction of our environment? Why should we compromise over the exploitation that is inherent to capitalism? Why should we compromise over people's right to live, love, and work wherever they please?

AK: Could we say that left-wing fanaticism is an attack on what would normally be seen as liberal "allies" (in the same way that right-wing fanaticism is an attack on moderate conservatives)?

JO: Not necessarily. The goal is to push the liberals to your side, not to push them away. But sometimes the way to do that is to yank them off the fence rather than gently invite them down. The anti-abortion movement, for example, doesn't focus its energy on the pro-choice movement so much as it does on the "moderate" pro-lifers, i.e. those who believe that abortion is murder but won't act like it. They use guilt, argumentation, pleading, scolding, and all sorts of other tactics to push the moderate middle to act as if abortion really is murder.

Left extremists could learn from this approach. Let's take immigration and the debate over the recently passed Arizona law SB 1070, for example. (I'm a member of the Repeal Coalition, an organization that seeks to repeal all anti-immigrant laws in Arizona.) The current debate is between nativism ("Kick them all out and militarize the border") or reform ("Let a few of them stay, kick the rest out, and militarize the border"). You can see that despite all the huffing and puffing in the media, it's actually a very narrow debate. An extremist approach would create a third pole: the only moral option in a global economy is to let all human beings live, love, and work wherever they please, and let all humans participate in those affairs that affect their daily life. This approach places reform uncomfortably between nativism and open borders. Then, the extremist needs to relentlessly attack reform, showing how its "moderate" approach is objectively the same as nativism: it breaks up families, weakens workers' power, and threatens the liberty of all people (for example, liberal New York Senator Charles Schumer's plan for a biometric national identity card in his immigration reform bill). The extremist wants to show that there are really only two options in this struggle: nativism or freedom, "baby-killing" or "life," slavery or abolition.

AK: OK, in your talk you said fanaticism 1) refuses to compromise on basic principles; 2) divides the world into friends and enemies; 3) puts pressure on the moderate middle; 4) tries to build a constituency; 5) engages in legal and illegal direct action; and 6) seeks to build a new cultural hegemony or common sense. I'm on the same page when I think about who we can call a fanatic, but things get a little cloudy for me when you start talking about who isn't a fanatic. You mention that the insurrectionary anarchist tradition doesn't fit the bill, and I get the sense that you think the same about the "propaganda of the deed" tradition in general. So let's take an example:

In 1892, Alexander Berkman tried to assassinate Henry Clay Frick, in retaliation for Frick's use of murderous Pinkerton guards to break the Homestead Steel Strike. Berkman was part of an organized movement and, I think, he fits all of your criteria for

effective fanaticism. As he explained : “The chief purpose of my Attentat was to call attention to our social iniquities; to arouse a vital interest in the sufferings of the People by an act of self-sacrifice; to stimulate discussion regarding the cause and purpose of the act, and thus bring the teachings of Anarchism before the world. The Homestead situation offered the psychologic social moment.”

Does Berkman qualify? Why or why not? Also could you elaborate a bit about why most contemporary anarchist direct-action groups don't qualify?

JO: No, I absolutely regard insurrectionary anarchists and other anarchists who engage in “propaganda by the deed” to be fanatics. (And again, I do not use the term as an insult, but as a description of how they engage in politics.) Anyone who engages in extraordinary, unconventional means in order to mobilize people according to an absolute, uncompromising principle is an extremist. That includes anarchists, militant pro-lifers, Earth and Animal Liberation Front cells, militant white supremacists, self-immolating Buddhist monks during Vietnam, the Weather Underground, guerrilla armies, and many in the anti-globalization movement.

My beef with the insurrectionary anarchists is twofold: their specific way of engaging in extremism fails to build a constituency, and they turn “direct action” into a revolutionary strategy itself rather than seeing it as but a part of an effective strategy. I discuss both of these more below.

AK: One way to measure the effectiveness of a fanatical act is, you say, “by the fanatic’s own criteria, did the fanatic change the common sense of society? Did they build a new hegemony?” You see John Brown’s attack on Harpers Ferry as effective because he “just knew his moment. John Brown...caught his historical moment correctly and his tactics fit perfectly with the time.” Regarding insurrectionary anarchists, you say “I’ve seen a lot of shit blown up. I’m willing to see more, but I have yet to see those bombs produce the free society.”

To what degree, then, is our assessment of such acts limited to historical hindsight? Let’s say that, tomorrow, a fanatic powered by a clear (for her) vision and strategic plan, does something extreme that she sees as an attempt to change society’s common sense, to win hearts and minds. How, in the here-and-now, do we evaluate the act?

JO: I don’t think historical hindsight has much to do with it. Brown knew immediately that he had sparked a civil war over slavery. Paul Hill, who murdered abortion provider Dr. John Britton in 1994, believed until the moment of his execution in 2003 that his action would spark a similar revolution against abortion. He was deluded, and everyone but him and his small band of supporters knew it.

To understand her historical moment, the fanatic needs an analysis of the key contradictions of this society and a strategy for how her actions will dramatically ratchet up those tensions. A fanatic seeks to blow open a conflict that is bubbling just beneath the surface. To do this, she must understand the nature of the conflict and she should have some sense of how her action will lead people to rise up. Too often extremists just wing it and hope people will spontaneously react. For example, attacking a fur farm in 2010 might be a morally righteous action, but to think it will lead to an anarchist revolution (or even a movement against fur) is based on naïve hope rather than political

analysis.

I think there's always a bit of luck involved, too—Brown was lucky to be the right person at the right time—but effective extremism should rely on strategy and judgment more than hope and luck.

AK: For me, the central aspect of your model of effective fanaticism is the question of building a constituency. It's the one element that makes or breaks the deal (since so many groups/individuals can fulfill your other criteria). Could you define "constituency" a little better? In some places, you seem to mean something similar to "cadre," a small group of devoted activists. In others, it seems to refer to the broader public, winning over the masses. Also, do you mean the same thing by "base" as you do by "constituency"?

JO: I borrow the term from Phillips, who argued that the goal of abolitionist fanaticism was to build a constituency, or a group of supporters who believed that slavery was a sin, that it must be abolished immediately, and who were willing to make it so. But what kind of supporter is the extremist trying to attract? A constituency can mean a small cadre of dedicated activists, a larger group of people willing to act occasionally on behalf of one's cause (a "base"), or public opinion generally. Effective fanaticism, in my opinion, wants all three, but its main goal is to transform the "common sense" of society, or what Gramsci calls hegemony. The abolitionists, for example, sought to change the "common sense" notion that slavery is a "necessary evil" or that Black people are "naturally fitted" for slavery. Radical environmentalists seek to change the "common sense" that capitalism can save the environment. Extremists are engaged in struggles for hegemony. They are striving to change the very notion of what is politically possible. One problem with insurrectionary anarchy, the ELF, and similar groups is that their approach to politics, while admirably extremist, does little to transform public opinion. When you rely on a cell structure like the ELF does, for example, you might make it difficult for the police to infiltrate you (though a lot of historical evidence suggests otherwise). But you also make it nearly impossible for your movement to grow, since cells aren't really able to create other cells. (Advocates of the cell structure like to think that one successful cell will inspire others to form spontaneously, like mushrooms in a cow pasture, but that has never happened historically.) When you rely exclusively on spontaneous uprisings, as the insurrectionists favor, you deny the need for organizations and other structures to take that insurrectionary fervor and use it to build free institutions.

Both of these approaches assume that inspiring the masses will lead them to action. But inspiration is not enough. Effective extremism connects the fiery sparks of direct action toward a strategic purpose—to squeeze the moderate middle, push most of it into the "friends" camp, and spark a battle between friends and enemies—the outcome of which will redefine society's notion of what is politically possible ("common sense"). Too many anarchist groups fail to put pressure on the moderates. They attack them in their publications (often in a sectarian manner), but their political activities rarely focus on squeezing them. I'd like to see that change.

AK: For me, there's a bit of a disconnect between the fanatical act and the nuts-and-bolts efforts to build a constituency/movement. You say the latter "is hard work,

knocking on doors and saying ‘Can I talk to you?’ or going into car washes or going into church and talking.” Now, this is the sort of work that liberals do as well. Greenpeace does it; countless moderate reform groups do it, NGOs and non-profits do it. I’m confused about how the two link up. Is it simply that fanatical groups combine traditional reformist tactics with non-reformist “principles?”

JO: It’s important to distinguish extremism as an approach to politics from political tactics or actions that people often regard as “extremist.” Extremism cannot be reduced to a tactic; it is a way of engaging in politics that seeks to draw sharper lines in society (friends vs. enemies) rather than blur such lines. In doing this, the fanatic can and should draw on a variety of strategies and tactics, some of which includes direct action, like battling cops, and some of which includes hum-drum stuff, like organizing meetings. Knocking on doors is done by Greenpeace and the Repeal Coalition alike, true, but Greenpeace does it to “raise awareness”—and raise money. The Repeal Coalition does it to boil down all the opinion on immigration in Arizona into two camps—those for the freedom to live, love, and work wherever you please, and those who are against that freedom.

AK: That makes sense. In a way, I think I’m somewhat seduced by the idea that fanaticism simply means some sort of bad-ass, dramatic, sensational act—or maybe that I’m defining “act” too narrowly. You seem to be saying that the uncompromising “message,” and how/where it is delivered, is just as important, just as fanatical. As are the organizational structures fanatics set up to do something with the fervor they inspire. Is that right?

JO: Yes, I think so. Fanaticism is an approach to politics, and any approach involves strategy and style as well as tactics. We all get seduced by the dramatic act—that’s the extremist’s objective. But we should be careful not to reduce extremism to just the dramatic act.

AK: In a number of recent “insurrectionary” uprisings—for instance, the actions protesting UC budget cuts and the privatization/rationalization of education in general—there has been a lot of criticism from within the (moderate) left about the actions of (radical) activists who sought to push things in a more conflict-oriented direction through occupations, confrontations with cops, alleged attacks on ruling-class homes, etc. These radicals, largely anarchists, are often labeled “elitist,” “vanguardist,” and “anti-democratic” in relation the broader movement they are a part of. How do you respond to similar arguments against fanaticism?

JO: Sometimes these criticisms make sense and sometimes they don’t. They make sense when activists come to fetishize a certain tactic—occupying a building or marching in the streets, for example—without a plan for how this will transform public opinion. They just want to do it because it’s “radical.” Their main point is to let the world know, “We are anarchists, we’re radicals, we’re not liberals or Stalinists.” It’s an expression of identity politics rather than a political strategy. Such action is often in fact elitist because it’s a way of saying, “Do it our way or else you’re a reformist, an authoritarian, etc.” But there is nothing inherently revolutionary or anarchist about any

particular tactic. Communist parties throughout Latin America (and in Nepal today) used armed struggle, for example, but they used this “radical tactic” in order to change government policies, not bring about a new society.

But these criticisms of radical activism are wrong when they condemn any sort of direct action or violence. Moderates are wrong to assume that reform is better than radical change, that nonviolence is always superior to violence (or militant self-defense, as some prefer to call it), or that the goal of political activism is to bring all sides to the table to make a compromise. Sometimes the most effective way to get things done is to refuse to compromise and to play by the rules of the system—especially since these rules are typically rigged in favor of the powers that be. The effective extremist seeks to break up these rules in a way that creates political space for more action from the grassroots, and that closes space for the moderate and the enemy.

You can see that I’m critical of insurrectionary tendencies, but my intention is to be constructive, not dismissive. Frankly, I’d much rather see people engaged in unselfconscious direct action than build vanguard parties. Even direct action that’s not very well thought out can sometimes create new political opportunities that no one could have predicted. It can also lead to disasters, of course, but vanguard parties pretty much only lead to disasters.

AK: That makes me want to rephrase the question I asked earlier about Alexander Berkman. I realize now that my question isn’t so much “Who qualifies as a fanatic?” as “Who qualifies as an effective fanatic?” I’d like to hear who, other than the abolitionists, you think has pulled off effective fanaticism on the left. I ask because I think that successes and failures are equally instructive in terms of strategy, but I’m not clear about what you consider successful on the left since the abolitionists.

JO: The early Wobblies come immediately to mind, as well as some of the nineteenth and twentieth century anarchist and communist groupings. I’d also include Malcolm X and the early Panthers as effective fanatics. The civil rights movement is an interesting case to consider—the Deacons for Defense were quite militant and SNCC used a political approach that is similar to extremism, and even Martin Luther King Jr. called himself an extremist in “Letter from Birmingham Jail”—but I need to give this more thought. I’ve mentioned the group I belong to, the Repeal Coalition, though that’s a modest effort and most of our tactics have been fairly conventional so far.

Of course, we have to take “effective” with a grain of salt. These groups or persons were effective in that they drew sharp lines and mobilized others based on those lines, and were willing to engage in unconventional politics to do so. But they ultimately failed to bring about a free society. (If they were effective in this sense, then AK Press would be as big as Amazon and beer would be free.) But then again, no one has done that.

AK: Why does the left need fanaticism? Where does the left need fanaticism?

Regarding immigrant issues, you say in your talk, “I guarantee you, if someone comes in and does some act of extremism at the border or elsewhere, that doesn’t just shock the nation but that galvanizes people into action, we will see this movement grow by leaps and bounds in a way we haven’t seen.” Could you be more specific—if not about the nature of the imaginary act itself (though that would be a fun thought exercise), then at least about the contours of acts that successfully “galvanize” people? Any other

critical nodes or fulcrums you see out there?

JO: The left is stuck between long-term efforts for “progressive reform” on the one hand and spectacular but largely one-off expressions of direct action on the other. A fanatical approach to politics justifies and defends taking action—including direct action—in defense of principles that cannot be compromised. But it uses that action to build a constituency and transform public opinion, not simply to “inspire” people. Effective extremism provides people with an entrée into a movement where they can put their inspiration into practice. Again, the abolitionist movement and hopefully the Repeal Coalition are examples of this.

The journal *Race Traitor* once ran an editorial titled, “When Does the Unreasonable Act Make Sense?” In this time of ecological crisis, new forms of apartheid, and a global economy that is spinning out of control, I think it’s time for the left to seriously ask that question, as well as this one: “What kind of unreasonable act makes the most sense”? These questions are the essence of the fanatical approach to politics.

Original article: <http://www.revolutionbythebook.akpress.org/radically-democratic-extremism-an-interview-with-joel-olson/>