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Radical Politics and Political Radicals: A Cognitive-Moral Interpretation

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**Psychology of Morality &
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Abstract

There is a basic ambivalence in the relation between radical politics and political radicalism. On the one hand, decision making in democracy requires firm politico-moral principles and decisiveness. On the other hand, extreme moral-based political attitudes may not only result in an unbridgeable split between different political camps, but also by a tendency to use violence as a means of political interaction. The present empirical analyses of the relationship between moral values, judgment competence, and political orientations and tries to resolve this Ambivalence. As a result of the study of 708 German high school graduates who have responded to the New Left Scale and to the "Moralisches Urteil Test" (MUT; English: Moral Judgment Test, MJT), we find

(a) that there are two clearly distinct kinds of political attitudes: 'old leftism' which the one is associated with radicalism and 'new leftism' which is opposed to using violence in politics;

(b) that the advocacy of violence is not correlated with the adherence to moral principles but with a lack of judgment competence, that is the ability to make integrated and differentiated judgments on the basis of moral principles.

Taking a firm stand in political issues does not necessarily imply to use radical or violent means to enforce these. Rather, supporting democratic interaction which is free of violence can in itself be an aim of truly democratic policy. Democracy suffers when its citizens are politically indifferent and apathetic. Rational decision making, that decision making based on equal human rights, assumes that there are shared moral and political principles to which everyone can refer. Violent actions may be caused if either people do not share such principles or if they are not sufficiently capable of applying them to concrete social dilemmas in an appropriated way. On the grounds of the cognitive-developmental theory of Piaget and Kohlberg we can assume latter to be true. Our findings validate this assumption. This means that the promotion of ethics in political life is indeed not a matter of indoctrinating new or old moral values, but a matter of fostering the competence to apply these values to everyday life.

Method

The present study is part of an encompassing longitudinal study into the process of university socialization (1976 - 1984) being conducted by the research

group "Hochschulsozialisation" at the university of Konstanz, West-Germany. Its members are, besides the author, Tino Bargel, Barbara Dippelhofer-Stiem, Gerhild Framhein, Hansgert Peisert (director), Johann-Ulrich Sandberger, and Hans Gerhard Walter. The research is supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (SFB 23) and by the university.

Instruments.

For measuring political attitudes, a shortened version of the New Left scale by Christie et al. was taken (cf. Robinson & Shaver, 1973; Gold et al., 1976). The items were selected to reflect 'new' and 'old' left philosophy and political radicalism (revolutionary tactics).

The structural-cognitive and the affective aspect of moral judgment was assessed through the Moral Judgment Test (MJT) which was developed by our research group "Hochschulsozialisation." This test is an 'Experimental Questionnaire' designed on the basis of Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental theory of moral judgment. The main index of the cognitive aspect is the C-score, formerly called "factor STAGE." The MJT is described in detail in Lind & Wakenhut (1985) and Lind (2002).

Subjects.

The instruments were administered in 1976 to 708 graduates from German "Gymnasium" which is about equivalent to the college preparatory section of the American high school. They were answered in classes.

Comments on the Tables

Table 1: The factor analysis shows clearly two factors (scree test; criterion: Eigen-value of 1.0) which describe three groups of attitudes:

A. 'Old' left attitudes (and their respective counterparts) which are associated with radical action.

B. Anti-establishment attitudes which have little relation to an ideological system.

C. 'New' left attitudes which are dissociated from radicalism and the use of violence for enforcing particular political aims.

Table 2: The "agree"-group (participatory democracy) has a more marked profile of Stage acceptance which indicates a more "morally" structured judgment, and hence a higher moral judgment *competence*.

This correlation is also reflected in the degree of determination of an individual's moral judgment by the factors STAGE (C-score) and PRO-CON, that

is, the degree to which the individual's responses are determined by moral concerns, or by the by the concern for keeping up one's own opinion (Pro-Con).

Table 3: The "agree"-group (disruption preferable to dialogue) has a less marked profile of Stage acceptance which indicates a less "morally" structured judgment, and hence a lower moral judgment *competence*. This correlation is also reflected in the degree of determination of an individual's moral judgment by the factors STAGE and PRO-CON, that is, the degree to which the individual's responses are determined by moral concerns, or by the by the concern for keeping up one's own opinion (Pro-Con).

Table 4: The structure of moral judgment behavior (cognitive aspect), as reflected by the Det. STAGE-scores (calculated by an individual analysis of variance components), is not linearly related to political positions. This has been found by Emler et al. (1984), but was not investigated by a purely structural measure like ours.

Table 5: The content of moral judgment (affective aspect), as reflected in the highest stage preferred, is neither linearly correlated with political self-rating, though there is some relation with regard to conventional moral reasoning (Stage III and IV). The correlations are curvo-linear.

Table 6: However, there is a marked correlation between political *radicalism* (advocacy of revolutionary tactics) and moral judgment *competence* (the cognitive aspect of moral judgment). Table 6 juxtaposes the various findings regarding the relationship between political philosophy and tactics on one side and content and structure of moral judgment on the other side.

Table 7 and 8: A differentiated analysis of the relation between radicalism and the structure of moral judgment shows that latter is less related to radical politics (democratization) than to political radicalism. The structural measure "Det. PRO-CON" gives the degree to which a respondent is defending his initial opinion in a discussion of social problems instead of orienting toward the "moral quality" of the arguments put forward (cf. Lind & Wakenhut, 1985; Lind, 2002). This degree is clearly having more impact on radicalism than the political philosophy.

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Table 1:

Factor Analysis of New Left Scale: 'New' and 'Old' Left Attitudes and Their Relationship to 'Revolutionary Tactics' (Political Radicalism)¹

	Factor 1 Philosophy	Factor 2 Revolutionary Tactics	Agreement ² % (N=708)
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<i>Leftism and Radicalism Correlated Positively</i>			
5. The (B undesrepublik) needs a complete restructuring of its basic institutions.	.65	.45	22.1
8. A mass revolutionary party should be created.	.54	.39	7.5
11. Authorities must be put in an intolerable position so they will be forced to respond with repression and thus show their illegitimacy.	.33	.43	11.4
4. "The Establishment" unfairly controls every aspect of our lives; we can never be free until we are rid of it.	.61	.27	25.9
13. While man has great potential for good, so ciety brings out primarily the worst in him.	.39	.21	38.6
12. Representative democracy can respond effectively to the needs of the people.	-.50	-.40	65.2
15. Radicals of the left are as much a threat to the rights of the individual as are the radicals of the right.	-.36	-.36	74.0

¹ This is a subset of the original item-pool; the original item-numbers in parentheses. According to Robinson & Shaver (1973, S. 470), "interested researchers may find that the first 10 or 20 items will be sufficient for their research purpose."

² The *Scale* (Strongly agree = 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 = strongly disagree) has been dichotomized: "Agreement" means scale value 5 to 7.

Leftism and Radicalism Un-correlated

9. The structure of our society is such that selfalienation is inevitable.	.58	.07	48.9
19. The economic concerns of the big money contradict general social concerns. ³	.67	-.00	56.6
20. The bureaucracy of (deutsche) society makes it impossible to live and work spontaneously.	.58	.07	59.5
3. Traditions serve a useful social function by providing stability and continuity.	-.49	-.04	36.2
7. Police is often compelled to use force to maintain law and order. ⁴	-.51	-.01	54.0
17. The very existence of our long-standing social norms demonstrates their value.	-.50	-.03	24.5
1. Disruption is preferable to dialogue for changing our society.	.10	.49	23.5
2. Extensive reform in society only serves to perpetuate the evils; it will never solve problems.	.16	.52	16.9
14. Change in our society should be based primarily on popular elections.	-.09	-.39	61.8
6. A minority must never be allowed to impose its will on the majority.	.10	-.34	82.0
18. There are legitimate channels for reform which must be exhausted	-.02	-.59	84.9

³ New item, originally not in the New Left-scale.

⁴ In the original scale worded differently: "Police should not hesitate for use force to maintain order."

before attempting disruption.

Leftism and Radicalism Correlated Negatively

16. Real participatory democracy should be the basis for a new society.	.46	-.43	72.2
10. We must strive for the democratization of decision-making bodies within the existing government.	.41	-.41	57.8

Table 2

Acceptability-profiles of the Six Kohlberg Stages of Moral Reasoning by 'New Left'-Philosophy: Participatory Democracy⁵

	Disagree (0-2) N = 38	Neutral (3) N = 101	Agree (4-6) N = 362
Acceptability of Stage			
I	12,5	13,6	10,4
II	14,3	13,2	11,9
III	15,2	14,4	13,2
IV	17,1	17,6	17,2
V	20,2	20,2	21,3
VI	20,1	20,5	21,5
C-score	26,5	30,8	41,2
Determination by Pro-Con (Mediane)	19,8	9,3	10,8

⁵ Summated rating: 2 to 34 ("completely acceptable"). The profile-differences are highly significant ($p \leq .001$; multivariate analysis of variance).

Table 3

Acceptability-profiles of the six Kohlberg types of moral reasoning by 'Revolutionary Tactics': Disruption preferable to dialogue.⁶

	Disagree (0-2) N = 281	Neutral (3) N = 98	Agree (4-6) N = 125
Acceptability of Stage			
I	10.2	12.2	13.4
II	11.9	12.1	14.0
III	12.7	14.1	15.5
IV	17.2	17.3	17.2
V	20.9	20.5	22.0
VI	21.1	20.9	21.8
C-score	40.7	36	10.9
Determination by Pro-Con (Mediane)	11	11	10.9

⁶ Summated rating: 2 to 34 ("completely acceptable"). The profile-differences are highly significant ($p \leq .001$; multivariate analysis of variance).

Table 4

The Cognitive-Structural Aspect of Moral Judgment Behavior by Self-Rating on the Left-Right Scale. (Median, quartile range)

Determination of Judgment	Left							Right
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	
C-score	21.0 (7.3)	35.5 (16.7)	43.5 (17.5)	40.1 (14.7)	34.5 (16.2)	40.0 (22.1)	38.5 (115)	
Pro-Con	328	215	733	114	80	139	70	
	-18.0	-22.3	-9.7	-10.9	-12.3	-7.8	-16.0	
N =	24	46	91	151	62	29	13	

Table 5

Moral attitude (Highest Stage Preferred) by Self-rating on the Left-Right Scale (Percentages)

Preference of Stage	Left							Right
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Stufe I - II	385	222	130	157	156	167	375	
Stufe III-IV	77	148	148	112	156	222	125	
Stufe V-VI	538	630	722	730	688	611	500	
N =	24	46	91	151	62	29	13	

Table 6

Politics and Morality: Correlations Between Political Attitudes and the Affective and the Cognitive Aspect of Moral Judgment (Product Moment Correlation)

Political Attitude	Cognitive Score	Affective Scores: Acceptability					
		I	II	III	IV	V	VI
Self-rating High value: left	-.07	-.07	+.05	-.10	-.15	-.01	-.01
New-Left-scale: Philosophy	-.09	-.09	+.04	-.11	-.12	-.04	.02
F2: Rev. Tactics	-.20	+.29	+.27	+.25	+.02	-.20	-.21
Pro Democratization	+.10	-.21	-.16	-.15	-.08	+.06	+.11

Table 7

Rejection of Radicalism (Disagree with Revolutionary Tactics) by Determination of Judgment Opinion (Pro-Con) and New Left-Philosophy (Median Factor Scores)⁷

	Group: 1	2	3	4	5	6	7
NL Philos.:	right	right	right	neut.	neut.	neut.	left
Determ.							
PRO-CON :	0-9	10-19	20-100	0-9	10-19	20-100	0-9
Rejection of Radicalism	0.0	25.0	-47.5	-4.3	5.0	-17.0	42.5
N =	99	29	50	101	39	47	50

Table 8: Rejections of Radicalism: Sorted Groups (see Table 7)

	NL-Phil. ⁸	PRO-CON
Group : In Favor of Revolutionary Tactics	right	20-100
	neutral	20-100
	left	20-100
	neutral	0-9
	right	0-9
	neutral	10-19
	right	10-19
	left	0-9
Against Revolutionary Tactics	left	10-19

⁷ The New Left-Phil. factor scores were trichotomized: -342 to -50/ -49 to 49/ 50 to 422.

⁸

The New Left-Philosophy factor scores were trichotomized: -342 to -50 vs. -49 to 49 vs. 50 to 422.