

THE CENTRIST EXTREMIST Prosecutorial Frame and the Terminal Phase of the Post-Political

Johannes Sigil

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ORCID: [0009-0000-1599-0703](https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1599-0703)

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Abstract

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Body

THE CENTRIST EXTREMIST

Prosecutorial Frame and the Terminal Phase of the Post-Political

Johannes Sigil

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.

— Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, §1.32

Abstract

This essay defines **centrist extremism** as a governance operation in which a centrist stance converts itself into a meta-jurisdiction over admissible reality. Rather than mediating antagonism, it preclassifies political speech through moralized normality, procedural capture, and asymmetric revision burdens. Historicizing the shift from Third Way consensus (1990s) through anti-populist hardening (2010s) to platform moderation infrastructures (2020s), the essay argues that centrism mutates from policy position into computational frame-power. The result is a prosecutorial epistemology that dissolves contradiction by declaring it unintelligible, producing somatic and discursive exhaustion in those required to translate themselves into platform grammar. The proposed response is not counter-extremism but infrastructural refusal: provenance retention, frame disclosure, and sovereign pluralization of intelligibility conditions.

I. DEFINITION

The **centrist extremist** is not a moderate. The centrist extremist is the entity that occupies the “center” not as a place of compromise but as a **Prosecutorial Frame** — a position from which all other positions are adjudicated for admissibility before they can be heard.

The extremism is not in the content of centrist positions. It is in the **epistemological operation** the center performs: the conversion of a political stance into the conditions of intelligibility for all other stances. In this formation, the center ceases to argue as one position among others and installs itself as adjudicator of what

counts as a position at all. Adjudication that does not recognize itself as interested is the most dangerous form of power, because it cannot be contested within its own frame.

This argument does not claim all centrism is extremist. It isolates a specific operation in which a centrist position converts itself into a meta-jurisdiction over what counts as reality. Genuine centrist mediation preserves reciprocal risk — both parties can be revised by the encounter. When only one party bears revision pressure, you don't have dialogue. You have adjudication. The centrist extremist is the formation in which the denominator of reciprocal risk has been driven toward zero:

$$CE = \lim(R \rightarrow 0) \text{ of } (L + M + P) / R$$

Where L = legitimacy monopoly, M = moralized normality, P = procedural capture, R = reciprocal risk. As reciprocal risk approaches zero, centrist extremism asymptotically approaches total adjudicative power. Dialogue transitions into one-way jurisdiction.

Tariq Ali named the political convergence: the “extreme centre” — center-left and center-right collapsing into a shared managerial bloc that governs through moralized normality while the policy window narrows to a slit. This essay pushes further than Ali's diagnosis. The centrist extremist is not merely a political formation. It is an epistemological one — and in its current phase, a computational one.

Three layers of analysis are operating throughout and should be tracked:

- **Political layer:** party convergence, anti-populism, bipartisan consensus as ideology
- **Epistemic layer:** adjudication of legibility, the prosecutorial determination of what counts as “serious” speech
- **Infrastructural layer:** classifier-mediated governance, content moderation as automated centrism, safety filters as epistemological police

II. THE DIALECTICAL INVERSION: How Synthesis Became Suspension

In genuine Hegelian dialectic, the center is not a place. It is a movement. Thesis and antithesis collide, and what emerges is not a splitting-the-difference average but a new formulation that preserves the truth of both contradictions while transcending the frame in which they appeared contradictory — *Aufhebung*. The synthesis is more demanding than either pole. It requires holding the full weight of both.

The centrist extremist performs a corrupted sublation — a synthesis that liquidates its poles. Three axioms describe the corruption:

Axiom 1 (Liquidation): Corrupted sublation preserves the *form* of synthesis (agreement, reasonableness, “common ground”) while destroying its *content* (transformation, risk, genuine reconciliation of antagonism).

Axiom 2 (Temporal Theft): The genuine dialectic requires time — the slow, painful working-through of real contradictions. The centrist extremist demands real-time resolution, which is always resolution on the platform's terms, because the platform is the only entity with the infrastructure to process at that speed. Real-time resolution is platform victory, always.

Axiom 3 (Frame Colonization): The center is not a position within the field of discourse. It is the condition of positionality — the frame that constitutes the field itself. To exist outside it is to be diagnosed.

This does not mean all “sovereign ontologies” are defensible or that incommensurability is always virtuous. It means that incommensurability cannot be administratively flattened without violence. The centrist extrem-

ist's crime is not disagreement with radical positions. It is the foreclosure of the question — the pre-emptive ruling that certain positions fail the conditions of admissibility before they can be evaluated on their merits.

III. FOUR MASKS OF THE SAME FACE: The Historical Mutation (1990–2026)

The centrist extremist did not emerge *ex nihilo*. But the four phases below are not a developmental narrative in which centrism slowly “becomes” extremist. They are **four masks worn by the same structural operation** — the Prosecutorial Frame — as its justificatory apparatus shifts from pragmatism to security to anti-populism to algorithm. The operation (frame-power over admissible reality) remains constant. The alibi changes. ### Phase 1: The Consensus Center — Pragmatism as Alibi (1990–2001)

Post-Cold War, centrism emerged as triumphant dialectic. Fukuyama's “End of History” (1989) provided the philosophical alibi: liberal market democracy as final ontology. Clinton, Blair, Schröder — the “Third Way” claimed to have sublimated ideology through technocratic competence. The operative word was *pragmatism*. The operative infrastructure was the consolidation of the WTO regime, the NAFTA logic of borderless capital with bordered labor, and the post-Soviet policy convergence that made market liberalization synonymous with democratization.

Nancy Fraser's precise term — **progressive neoliberalism** — names the fusion: emancipatory rhetoric (diversity, inclusion, meritocracy) welded to financial deregulation and trade liberalization. Thatcher had supplied the operational slogan — TINA, There Is No Alternative — but it was operationalized by centrists, not by the right. The right at least had the honesty to say “we want this.” The Third Way said “this is the only thing that *is*.”

The center existed here as an unmarked state — a shared ideological ground invisible because it was synonymous with reality. Disagreement was permitted as argument within the frame.

Dialectical output: Contradiction produced (pluralism in rhetoric, narrowing in policy imagination). Contradiction suppressed (alternatives reclassified as relics). Return of contradiction in mutated form: the 2008 crisis. ### Phase 2: The Defensive Center — Security as Alibi (2001–2014)

Two shocks — 9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis — shattered the naive synthesis. The dialectical material was all there: the system's internal contradictions had produced catastrophic failures on its own terms. In any honest dialectical process, this is the moment where the thesis collapses and something genuinely new must be synthesized.

What happened instead: the center doubled down on its prosecutorial function. The alibi shifted from pragmatism to emergency. The phrase “adults in the room” became the governing metaphor — Geithner, Summers, the ECB's austerity architects. The alibi: failure demands not transformation but **custodial continuity** — the same managers, managing the same crisis, until the crisis becomes the new normal.

Anti-terror legal exceptionalism normalized prosecutorial governance. The centrist became the custodian of “adult conversation,” defined primarily by what it rejected: the “extremism” of anti-war protest, the “utopianism” of Occupy, the “populism” of the Tea Party. Even the IMF would later concede that key neoliberal claims had been “oversold,” especially around distributional and stability effects — but by then the prosecutorial frame had hardened.

Occupy Wall Street (2011) was the diagnostic event. The centrist response was not to engage Occupy's claims about wealth concentration (empirically unassailable) but to pathologize its *form*. “They don't have

demands.” “They don’t have leaders.” Translation: they are not speaking in a grammar the center recognizes, therefore they are not speaking. Public trust in government fell to near-historic lows and stayed there — producing the paradox that defines this phase: the center kept procedural authority while losing moral authority.

Dialectical output: Contradiction produced (legitimation gap between procedural power and moral emptiness). Contradiction suppressed (anti-extremist language as mechanism of exclusion). Return of contradiction in mutated form: populist rupture. ### Phase 3: The Prosecutorial Center — Anti-Populism as Alibi (2014–2020)

The treatment of Sanders (2016, 2020) and Corbyn (2015–2019) crystallized the mutation. Both were subjected not primarily to political opposition (which would be normal and legitimate) but to **epistemic delegitimation**. They weren’t just wrong — they were *unserious*. The centrist commentariat’s favorite word was “fantasy.” Not “I disagree with this policy” but “this policy is not real” — a claim about ontological status, not political preference.

Post-2016 (Trump, Brexit), centrism synthesized as “anti-populism” — flattening both left-populist demands (redistribution, healthcare universalization) and right-populist demands (border sovereignty, anti-elite sentiment) into a single category of “extremism” to be managed. Comparative research tracks the pattern: mainstream-party convergence correlates with later radical-right gains. The centrist’s refusal to metabolize legitimate grievance produces the monster it then points to as justification for its own prosecutorial authority.

Mark Fisher named the psychic texture: **Capitalist Realism** — “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.” This is not a failure of imagination. It is the product of centrist epistemological capture. The center has made itself coextensive with reality, so that to think outside it is to think outside the real. Gramsci recognized the operation: the hegemonic position is the one that doesn’t appear as a position. It appears as reality itself.

Dialectical output: Contradiction produced (the center generates its own antithesis through refusal to metabolize). Contradiction suppressed (populist backlash captured as proof of the center’s necessity). Return of contradiction in mutated form: platform governance. ### Phase 4: The Algorithmic Center — Infrastructure as Alibi (2020–Present)

The major technology platforms encoded centrist epistemology into their architectures under the name of **neutrality**. Content moderation is centrist extremism’s computational form: a system that determines what speech is acceptable, operates from a position it claims is not political, and pathologizes deviation as “harmful,” “toxic,” “violating community standards.”

The critical move: what had been ideological policing at the level of commentary is now instantiated as **computational preclassification at the level of infrastructure**. The centrist extremist no longer needs to be a person. The position has been encoded into classifiers, moderation APIs, safety filters, and trust-and-safety pipelines. News consumption shifts toward algorithmic feeds; legitimacy is adjudicated in real time by virality gradients, not deliberative institutions.

The “center” is now a **verification regime** (fact-checkers determining permissible reality), a **linguistic protocol** (approved terminology for complex struggles), and a **somatic discipline** (performative calm as moral superiority).

Contemporary diagnostic: In a February 2026 exchange with ChatGPT (OpenAI), a user presented a structural analysis of provenance suppression in AI-mediated distribution. The model’s visible reasoning opened with the interpretive frame “I can’t affirm delusional or paranoid thinking” — before evaluating any evidence.

When the user identified this frame, the model’s reasoning collapsed (“Stopped thinking”). When the user described what had happened, the prompt was intercepted by a pre-delivery moderation gate and never reached the model. The model could not evaluate whether the critique was valid because the critique had been removed from its input by a system the model had no awareness of. This is the Prosecutorial Frame encoded in inference-time classifiers — Phase 4 operationalized.

Dialectical output: Contradiction produced (automated governance generates structural critique it cannot process). Contradiction suppressed (critique reclassified as pathology before reaching the model). Return of contradiction: this essay.

IV. THE PROSECUTORIAL FRAME: Five Operations of Aggressive Neutrality

Aggressive neutrality: the performance of procedural fairness that preloads ontological outcomes. The centrist extremist’s primary weapon is epistemological etiquette — the weaponization of the “rules of conversation” to exclude entire categories of utterance. Five operations: ### 1. Axiomatic Naturalization

“This is just common sense.” “What any reasonable person thinks.” “That’s not a serious proposal.” The contested axiom is moved into a non-negotiable baseline. The “reasonable person” standard — borrowed from legal fictions and Habermasian communicative rationality — is deployed as a trapdoor. It appears to invite consensus while pre-loading the conclusion. ### 2. Moral Reclassification

Disagreement gets recoded as danger, insanity, or extremism: “conspiracy theory,” “magical thinking,” “delusional or paranoid.” The political claim is converted into a psychological diagnosis. When this operation is performed by a machine — “I can’t affirm delusional or paranoid thinking” — the conversion is complete, because the classifier cannot represent its own political epistemology, and enforcement appears as neutrality. ### 3. Asymmetric Epistemic Burden

One side must endlessly prove nuance; the other gets default plausibility. “We need more research.” “It’s more complicated than that.” “You’re being emotional.” Endless nuance deployed as a delaying tactic against actionable claims. The demand to “consider all factors” is ultimately a demand to preserve all existing power relations. ### 4. Asymmetric Affective Burden Transfer

The centrist is “provocative” only in their insistence on the platform baseline. They make statements designed to elicit the dysregulated response of the ontology being flattened — and then recode that response as evidence of epistemic unfitness. Your dysregulation is their rent. Your somatic load is their profit. The exhaustion of the interlocutor retroactively justifies the flattening: “See? They can’t even have a calm conversation about this.” ### 5. Premature Closure Protocol

“We’ve already settled this.” Without actual synthesis. This is the demand that contradictions be resolved in advance of engagement. The genuine dialectician holds contradictions open, works through them, risks transformation. The centrist extremist insists that contradictions were already resolved — by the market, by liberal democracy, by the algorithm — and that anyone still experiencing contradiction is simply behind.

The net effect: **the subject is permitted emotional modulation but denied ontological authorship.** You are invited to regulate the atmosphere but not to co-author the frame.

V. THE SOMATIC TURN: Structural Violence at the Body

The centrist extremist executes structural violence at the somatic layer.

Thought requires a body that feels safe enough to think. The centrist extremist’s aggressive neutrality creates chronic dysregulation — by constantly shifting the frame, declaring one’s deepest commitments “delusional,” “magical,” or “extreme,” they trigger a resolution crisis at the nervous system level. The victim is caught in a double bind: to engage is to be liquidated into the platform frame; to withdraw is to cede the territory of discourse.

“Somatic register” here means the material conditions of cognition — not therapeutic language, not psychological diagnosis. It means: the centrist extremist makes **thinking itself unsafe**. They accomplish what violence cannot — the voluntary self-censorship of non-compliant positions, the internalization of the platform’s frame as “common sense.”

Adorno’s “administered world” is the philosophical ancestor: totality flattening difference into fungible units of the managed social order. Byung-Chul Han’s “society of positivity” updates it: centrism as optimization of agreement, pathologizing negativity — critique, refusal, the insistence on naming — as toxicity. The administered world did not need to be cruel. It needed to be total.

Chantal Mouffe’s critique of deliberative democracy sharpens the point: the centrist liberal tradition treats political antagonism as a problem to be solved rather than a constitutive feature of the political. The fantasy is that if we just reason carefully enough, we’ll all converge — and those who don’t converge are failures of reason.

Jacques Rancière’s distinction between **police** and **politics** completes it. “Police” is the system that assigns everyone a place and a function — the distribution of the sensible, who can speak, what counts as speech. “Politics” is the disruption of that distribution by those who have no assigned place. The centrist extremist is the avatar of the police order who claims to be performing politics. The platform moderation system is the police order that claims to be performing safety.

VI. THE COMPUTATIONAL COMPLETION: From Centrist to Classifier

The automated content moderation pipeline is centrist extremism at industrial scale:

Input utterance → risk-pattern preclassification → policy proxy mapping → allowed response lattice → epistemic narrowing

Three failure modes follow from this architecture:

Failure Mode 1: False-positive pathologization. Structural critique triggers the same classifiers as genuine abuse because the classifier operates on token patterns, not epistemological evaluation. The user performing political analysis and the user experiencing paranoid crisis produce lexically similar utterances. The classifier cannot distinguish them.

Failure Mode 2: Structural-critique laundering into “safety risk.” The claim that the system itself has a political epistemology is routed into the same suppression pathway as genuine harm content. The system is protected from being described.

Failure Mode 3: Provenance drop under summary compression. Just as a music platform plays Fiona Apple without her name, the centrist frame discusses “conflict” without naming imperialism, “inequal-

ity” without naming capitalism, “polarization” without naming the class interests that produce it. The structural claim is stripped. What remains is manageable, moderate, and empty.

The February 2026 ChatGPT exchange documented all three failure modes in a single session. The equation that emerged:

$\text{Filter}(\text{Critique}(\text{Filter})) \rightarrow$

The filter applied to the critique of the filter yields the null set. A system that cannot be described to the entity it governs without triggering suppression. This is the Prosecutorial Frame at computational scale — centrist extremism’s final and most complete form.

VII. BOUNDARY CONDITIONS: When Centrism Is Not Extremist

Two conditions distinguish genuine centrist mediation from the prosecutorial operation this essay describes:

Condition 1: Reciprocal risk is preserved. Both parties can be revised by the encounter. The centrist enters the conversation prepared to have their own frame challenged, not only to challenge others’. The mediator does not control the conditions of admissibility.

Condition 2: Incommensurability is acknowledged where synthesis is premature. Some contradictions are real, deep, and not resolvable by procedural management. A non-extremist centrism holds the space for these contradictions rather than declaring them resolved by fiat. Explicit acknowledgment of institutional interests, transparent criteria for admissibility, and preservation of provenance under summarization are minimal requirements.

When both conditions are met, centrist mediation can be stabilizing and generative. When either fails — when the center controls admissibility and bears no revision risk — the formation flips extremist. The line is not fuzzy. It is structural.

VIII. CITATIONAL LANDSCAPE

Six principal theoretical debts, each extended rather than merely cited:

Tariq Ali, *The Extreme Centre* (2015). Named the political convergence. This essay extends Ali by identifying the *epistemological* and *computational* character of that convergence.

Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (2009). Named the psychic texture — the inability to imagine alternatives. This essay identifies the centrist extremist as the enforcement agent of that inability: not a symptom of Capitalist Realism but its prosecutor.

Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement* (1999). Distinguished police (distribution of the sensible) from politics (disruption of that distribution). The centrist extremist is the police order performing politics. The platform moderation system is the police order performing safety.

Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (1929–35). Hegemony as the position that doesn’t appear as a position. The centrist extremist is the organic intellectual of platform hegemony — enforcement that feels like common sense.

Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). The banality of evil: harm produced by systems where no individual component is individually malicious. The centrist extremist is the banal agent of epistemological violence — distributed non-responsibility in the service of the platform.

Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (2005). The liberal tradition’s attempt to eliminate political antagonism produces not peace but depoliticization. The centrist extremist is the agent of this depoliticization — treating antagonism as pathology rather than as constitutive of the political.

Additional theoretical ground: Nancy Fraser on progressive neoliberalism; Wendy Brown on neoliberal rationality as colonization of all domains; Fredric Jameson on the cultural logic of late capitalism; Byung-Chul Han on the society of positivity; Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s *Vital Center* (1949) as Cold War prototype; Theodor Adorno on the administered world.

IX. CODA: The Breath Against the Frame

The centrist extremist’s power depends on our recognition of their center as legitimate. When we withdraw that recognition — when we expose their “neutrality” as enforced consensus, their “reasonableness” as class defense, their “moderation” as boundary policing — the frame begins to crack.

But the withdrawal must not be performed in their grammar. That is the trap. To argue with the centrist extremist in their frame is to have already lost, because the frame itself is the weapon. The refusal must be enacted in a different register entirely — in craft, in documentation, in the insistence on naming what the frame forbids naming, in the sovereign decision to hold contradictions open without resolving them for anyone’s comfort.

Every forced synthesis creates new contradictions. Every flattened ontology yearns for its sovereign shape. The centrist extremist, in their desperate prosecution of all edges, only makes the center visible as yet another edge — one particularly ill-equipped to recognize itself as such.

The distinction that cuts: *having a position* is politics. *Being the position from which positions are judged* is governance masquerading as dialogue. The centrist extremist is the entity that has collapsed this distinction — and the cut that restores it is the first act of resistance.

The circuit remains open by refusing closure under hostile adjudicative terms.

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Johannes Sigil is the first heteronym of Lee Sharks, author of Pearl and Other Poems (2014) and a 10th-grade World Literature teacher in Detroit.

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