



Donatella della Porta

**SOCIAL MOVEMENT STUDIES AND  
POLITICAL VIOLENCE**

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Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation (CIR)  
Department of Political Science  
Aarhus University, Denmark  
September 2009

## **Islamism and Radicalisation – *the Denmark School***

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# SOCIAL MOVEMENT STUDIES AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

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## Introduction

What I planned to do was to talk about my own research on Italy and the Italian case and then look for some linkages between this, by now, quite old research and recent events. Then I read Thomas Olesen's paper from the presentation he gave in this same series of lectures and I realized that he had already covered some of what I wanted to say. So in order not to be too repetitive, I'll try to go a bit beyond my previous analysis and try to reflect more on to which extent the research I have done in the past could live up to a comparative perspective also with forms of political violence and terrorism in other historical and geographical contexts.

## Social Movement Studies and Political Violence: A Review and a Proposal

I will also, as Thomas Olesen has done, reflect on the ways in which social movement studies can be helpful for the research on political violence. Social movement and political violence seem, especially nowadays, to be two very near concepts, to be in relation with each other. But certain forms of political violence have been in the past only very rarely addressed within the perspective of social movement studies. They have instead been addressed mainly within another perspective, the so-called perspective of terrorism studies which has emerged inside security studies as a branch of international relations. And the relationship between social movement studies and terrorism studies has been almost non-existent. Jeroen Gunning, an international relations specialist, has counted that

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among 1,569 articles on terrorism published in the two main journals on political violence and terrorism, only 17 articles dealt with the social movement perspective. So it seems that these two types of literature developed quite apart from each other.

The first approach within security studies tended to consider political violence and terrorism mainly as a sort of pathology linked either to micro-individual pathologies or to macro conditions, geo-political developments or also conjunctural types of conditions. These types of explanations have been criticized from several points of view.

A main criticism has been linked to a lack of empirical evidence. The main problem with research on terrorism – as it is the case with my other field of research, political corruption – is the fact that we lack reliable data on the dependent variable: violence. We want to explain political violence and terrorism, but have a very little solid empirical basis for analyzing the type of events of political violence and terrorism that happen in different periods and around the world. Also, research done at the micro level on individuals who have been accused of participation in terrorist events has usually been considered as based on shaky empirical ground because, also in that case, the amount of evidence that can be analyzed is only a part and sometimes not representative of the total.

Another criticism which has been addressed towards this type of perspective is that it tends to isolate violence from the context: It tends to look for general explanations that very often de-contextualize violence and terrorism from the historical context in which they take place. Additionally, there has been a lack of attention to the organizational meso level. This type of research has usually addressed either the conditions at the macro level in the society or the political system or the conditions at the individual level, but until now, research on the organizations that carry out political violence has been limited.

Charles Tilly, one of the few political sociologists who have been looking at political violence from a social movement perspective, has also criticized terrorism studies' approach to political violence as tending to reify terrorism. According to Tilly, you can define events as terroristic on the basis of the degree and type of violence, but when you consider individuals or organizations as terroristic you tend to over-emphasize an element, or at least emphasize only an element of a more complex identity which is sometimes the identity of a social movement organization that also uses violence, or a political party which also uses violence or a state which also uses violence. So, from the point of view of the conceptualizations of political violence and terrorism, this has been considered also one of the limits of this type of approach.

Another, final criticism which has been leveled at a lot of studies in this perspective, is that they have tended to be very much policy-oriented and that this

policy-orientation has jeopardized neutrality and a scholarly perspective in the field.

I do not want to be partial and only tell about the limits of this type of perspective, but also address some limits on the other side, the side I can say I belong to, which is social movement studies.

Jeff Goodwin, who is one of the few social movement students who has engaged with research on terrorism, wrote that “Social movement scholars, with very few exceptions, have very little to say about political violence and terrorism”. I would subscribe to this statement for several reasons. Social movement scholars have been more interested in the making of the “good” social movements than in the bad side of them, and they have also been more likely to address social movements which they liked and which developed mainly peacefully in peaceful societies. One of the limits of the social movement approach more in general has been in fact its focus on western democracies in which phenomena of political violence and terrorism seem to be quite marginal.

So, if we look at the few studies which have been done on political violence and terrorism within a social movement approach, one of the limits is that attention has been very episodic and focused on very few cases, such as Italy, Ireland, the Basque country, something in Japan, in the United States with the Weather Underground. But altogether, I can count the number of social movement scholars who have engaged with the topics on my two hands. And especially, most of this research has been non-communicative in the sense that it has remained within the attempt to understand specific developments in specific contexts, but with little dialogue between scholars who worked in the field.

In part, this is related with the fact that different approaches have been used for the analysis of different forms of political violence – when they have been used. So, left-wing political violence, in my own work and in the work of a few others, has been perceived and has been addressed especially using categories from the social mobilization approach, which is dominant in social movement studies looking at the way in which organizations which were considered as rational and instrumental tended to find resources in their environment.

Right-wing political violence and racist groups, when they have also been addressed within the social movement perspective, have instead been addressed through the so-called break-down type of approach looking at them as irrational reactions to different types of societal pathologies. And additionally, when social movement research has been used for the analysis of ethnic violence in the Irish case or the Basque case, this has been done very often remaining within area specialists and so with little dialogue with other types of perspective.

Another point I always make, at the risk of being boring, is that explanations tended to address three separate levels of a complex phenomenon looking at the macro, environmental conditions for the development of political violence, or at the meso level, the type of organizational characteristics, or at the micro level, the individual characteristics. They paid little attention to the interaction between the different levels – what James Coleman called ‘causal mechanisms’ – the meso-macro and micro-meso-macro links.

I think that there are, nevertheless, some more positive inputs in these two fields of research which tend to facilitate now what seemed to be quite difficult to do in the 1970s and the 1980s. Especially worth mentioning are the developments in security studies and in social movements.

In security studies, within a new trend in international relations there has been the development of what has been called ‘critical terrorism studies’. This was in parallel with critical security studies with a critical approach to international relations, which supports a contextualization of knowledge and brings in international relations’ other actors than just the nation state. So within this type of approach, social movement studies have been considered as relevant. Here, I can also quote Jeroen Gunning and all the other members of the Aberystwyth school of critical terrorism studies as a point of reference.

In research on social movements which, as I mentioned, has been very much focused on the European and North American case, recently there has been a shift or a broadening of the field with the so-called ‘contentious politics agenda’ that has been launched by American scholars such as Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow and Doug McAdam. Their attempt is to bridge the analysis of social movements with analysis of other contentious forms of politics such as revolutions or civil wars or democratization processes. This means two things which are relevant for our field of research. On the one hand, the fact that they tend to consider phenomena which are indeed more often violent than social movements are, and on the other hand, the fact that they tended to address areas, geographical areas which had been usually excluded from the attention of social movement scholars.

These developments would help us to move beyond this sort of gap, cleavage between the two fields of study and open ways for possible dialogue. In fact, by now there is much more attention also to social movement research by people who have focused on phenomena like political violence and radicalization.

Now I want to say something about my own agenda in this encounter of the different perspectives and the type of analysis of political violence which I think would be necessary in order to understand a complex phenomenon. In an extreme synthesis, what I think we can learn from past research is the fact that phenomena like political violence and radicalization may be better understood if we look at them as *relational*, *constructed* and *dynamic* types of phenomena.



By *relational* I mean that usually, when you look at processes of radicalization, they are not the performance of an individual actor or even of an organization, but they usually develop relationally in the sense that they involve different actors. And, as I am going to say in the following, very often research on terrorism has focused on oppositional groups, without considering the radicalizing effects of the interactions with the state as well as with violent counter movements.

The second element I want to stress is the *constructed* nature of the process. If we want to understand phenomena of radicalization, we have to look at the macro conditions, but also the macro conditions in the way in which they are perceived by the different actors. So that political opportunities, which is one of the main concepts in the analysis of social movements, are indeed relevant, but they are filtered by different groups and different actors in different ways. So, political opportunities are not perceived by all the different groups in the same way and it is especially here I think that cultural and symbolic politics play a role.

Finally, I think that we are to consider that all these phenomena are *processes* so that causal types of analysis are very difficult to develop because we have to face and to analyze situations in which macro conditions have an impact on radicalization processes, but radicalization processes also have a feedback on environmental conditions. So it is important, I think, to consider that, in time, these different actors interact with each other and that the way in which they perceive the situation produces different dynamics of escalation.

In what follows, I want to pick up these elements at the three levels which I have mentioned, the macro, the meso and the micro level, and try to suggest some mechanisms which could help understand phenomena of radicalization in the different situations. I will depart in each of these illustrations (see PowerPoint show below) from the Italian case, but will also add some references to other cases which I have analyzed in a comparative perspective.

When I wrote my PhD, back in the 1980s, it was on left-wing political violence in the Italian case which I analyzed within the case studies perspective. I then moved to a comparative analysis within a most similar research design, comparing it with left-wing terrorism in Germany. Later on, with two other colleagues, Patricia Steinhoff and Gilda Zwerman, we broadened the perspective a bit by introducing more different cases, comparing two Italian and German cases with the Japanese and the American ones. And then I did some other research on other cases such as radicalization of ethnic conflicts in the Basque country, radicalization of right-wing groups in Italy and in Germany, urban riots in France and the politicization of religious conflicts in Italy. I will not refer systematically to all this research, but just say that my reflections today will be based upon this type of empirical knowledge.

## Political Violence and Political Opportunities

The first level that I think is relevant to address is the level of the environment. If we want to summarize the mechanisms which I think are in place in this variegated phenomenon of radicalization and political violence that we have been looking at, I think that there are three main elements which are worth addressing. If we want to put violence in context according to social movement research, the first thing to look at is political opportunities. Political violence has been addressed in social movement research especially looking at the choice of repertoires of actions by the different actors. And a lot of empirical research has confirmed that social movements interact with political institutions and that they tend to be sensitive towards the evolution of the political opportunities.

In general, also looking at the history of the labour movement, the assumption has been that social movements tend to be more tamed, civilized, non-violent, moderate in countries that are inclusive, that is countries that tend to include the opposition into the institutional system. Instead, social movements tend to be much more radical and sometimes violent in countries which are more exclusive. Typically, the comparison has been made between the development of the labour movement in Great Britain, considered as a case of inclusiveness, and countries like Italy or other southern European countries where there has instead been more closure. Closing opportunities have in fact been quite clearly a very relevant dimension in cases of radicalization.

In Italy, radicalization developed in two steps. First of all, it developed at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, at the end of the years of the centre-left governments and the beginning of what was considered to be a turn to the right, with centre-right kind of governments, and also a perception by a broad part of the oppositional forces, not only of the radical ones, that the democratic state could not be trusted too much because part of it was considered to be involved in a dirty war. There had been massacres (the responsible actors of which have never been found), and a widespread perception that the state or part of the state, including the civil services, had been involved in this process. The second step was in the second half of the 1970s with another closing-down of the political opportunities for some oppositional forces. From this comes the hypothesis that the closing-down of opportunities is a precondition, especially the disillusionment after moments of apparent opening-up of opportunities for the opposition. Another case which fits very well in this image is the Irish case where the civil rights movement developed in a moment of apparent, increasing opening of political opportunities and radicalized in moments of declining opportunities.

Another thing that seemed to be relevant in the Italian case (e.g. in my own research with Herbert Reiter) and confirmed in the German case is the fact that escalation was reciprocal in the sense that it involved the social movement groups,

but at the time also the style of policing of these groups, the policing of protest as well as the interaction with radical right-wing groups. So that very often the radicalization processes went through practices and direct experiences of violence in the street which was related with this type of escalation. And especially in the Italian case it was related to a tradition of the policing of protest which was, especially in the 1970s, still influenced by the experience of the Fascist regime and which was using a lot of quite corrective forms of intervention. It was what historians called a typical 'police of the kings' which has been opposed to the 'police of the citizens in the British case. In Italy, the police was indeed highly dependent on the political system and it had a tradition of tough intervention in social and political conflicts. Additionally in Italy, the radicalization of the repertoires of actions was very much related to a period of very tough conflicts in the streets between radical left-wing and radical right-wing groups which escalated from the use of just fists to the use of arms and guns in this sort of youth gang-like conflict.

So when I studied political violence in Italy and in Germany, and also when, with other colleagues, we looked at the United States and Japan, radicalization processes emerged as determined especially by these two elements: closing political opportunities and experiences of violent interaction in the street, in what Doug McAdam has called the process of reciprocal adaptation of repertoires of action.

There was in social movement studies research on cycles of protest – I had done for instance with Sidney Tarrow on the Italian case – which tended to describe the development of political violence as something almost naturally occurring in declining phases of protest. Cycles of protest, so went the argument, tend to develop especially when, after a moment of high intensity, mobilization declines and so resources tend to be reduced and so the groups which are still active are frustrated by what they perceive as a lack of success of peaceful means of protest, and turn into violence.

When I started to reflect on more recent forms of violence, I realized that these types of explanations were partial in the sense that other types of situations in which there were perceptions of closing opportunities and tough intervention by the police did not escalate, did not produce radicalization. For instance, I was studying the global justice movement, in particular I was looking at the policing of protest of the anti-G8 demonstration in Genova in 2001 when the police intervened in very tough ways with very brutal forms of policing, but the cycle of protest did not escalate. There was no violence afterwards.

Which are then the additional dimensions at the macro level which have to be taken into consideration? Here, I was inspired by work by Chares Demetriou who had been looking at the radicalization process in Cyprus and had looked at the

ways in which violence was certified by some relevant actors, in this case it was the Catholic church. And I thought that this was indeed a relevant dimension in the sense of the presence of the type of actor at the macro level which certifies violence as a form of accepted, normatively, ethically acceptable type of repertoire. This did not happen very often in the Italian or in the other cases through a legitimization of terrorist forms of violence. But there was a legitimization of different forms of violence, “defensive” forms of violence, and this created a sort of symbolic space for the development also of more radical conceptions of political violence.

I started with the research we are doing on the politicization of religious conflicts and recent forms of radicalization to find out to which extent these three levels could be interesting for an analysis of the most recent forms of political violence: Islamic terrorism or more generally, contemporary forms of violence. What they can tell and what they cannot tell. In which direction should we develop in order to understand this new form?

Closing political opportunities seem indeed a relevant concept to understand also the development of recent forms of terrorism. Research by Jeroen Gunning or Quentin Wiktorowicz have indicated that also in the countries in the Middle East forms of radicalization of Muslim and then Islamist groups have been linked with moments of closure in the political opportunities at both national and transnational level. This is something social movement scholars were not very well equipped to look at because we considered democracies as very differentiated forms of government, but autocratic or non-democratic countries as just one type of political system which represses any form of protest.

Research by area specialists has indicated instead that when you look at non-democratic countries you have to be very careful to understand also the different forms that repression can take, the different dynamics that can develop. And so, the fact that even within authoritarian states you can have moments of opening up and moments of closing down of the political opportunity structures. And the evolution of the Muslim Brothers or Hamas or other groups indeed indicated a sort of sensitivity by many of these groups towards the closing or opening of political opportunities in cases like Algeria, Egypt, Palestine, Bahrain and other cases of recent development of political violence.

Of course, reciprocal adaptation was very relevant there as well. We had been accustomed to look at the policing of protest in democracies and to consider the policing of protest in authoritarian regimes as quite brutal by definition. This is true, but research by scholars like Vincent Boudreau and others has singled out differences between the policing of protest within authoritarian regimes with different strategies in different moments and with different types of effect. Very often, also the presence of counter movements is relevant also in these cases.

Finally, also in these cases some actors (religious and non-religious) emerged as relevant in terms of certification of violence as a legitimate form of intervention. So, also in this direction, at least some of the knowledge and previous ways of protest can help contextualizing the research also on recent forms of political violence.

For students of social movements, the challenge is here at two levels. The one I mentioned: The level of understanding the differences within non-democratic countries, in areas and towards political systems, geo-political systems which we know very little about, and which are usually much better known by area specialists, international relations scholars, anthropologists and so on.

Another challenge, I did not mention, but which is very relevant, relates to the characteristics of the political opportunities for violence which social movement scholars have always considered as being rooted in the national political system, with national political opportunities. What recent research on contemporary forms of radicalization indicates is that political opportunities, especially for sort of cosmopolitan groups, tend to be much more multi-level so that violence in, e.g., Spain is not just the results of what is happening in Spain, of the political opportunities in Spain, but it is also influenced by political opportunities in other areas of the world. Very often, processes of radicalization are also multi-level in the sense that they are linked to feelings of repression or discrimination which put together considerations on home countries and considerations on migration countries. And this is another area in which social movement scholars need a lot of interaction with experts of migration and anthropologists and so on in order to understand the complexity of the situation.

## Political Violence and the Mobilization of Resources

The second level I want to look at is what I call the meso level, the intermediate level, the level of violent entrepreneurs: the mobilization of resources by the different types of organizations. Here again, I shall use the same type of narrative, going from the Italian case towards a comparative analysis and then reflect on how much we can learn from it and apply also to other recent cases. I want to mention three dimensions which I think emerge as relevant in the Italian case and which could be useful also for understanding different forms of terrorism.

The first one is what I call *competitive* violence. Violence does not only emerge in the interaction between social movements and the state or the police or other actors, but very often it develops also from conflicts inside the social movement sector, between organizations that belong to the same areas. This is something which is usually not taken into account on strategies of counter terrorism or of counter violence: the fact that the choice of violence is a normative choice, usually very much discussed, within the social movement environments, with very

different positions developing on it. Legitimizing violence in certain contexts does not imply legitimating violence in other contexts. Legitimizing some forms of violence does not mean legitimating all forms of violence. The typical example is suicide bombings, which seem to be a very effective form of terrorism which has, however, only been used very rarely, as only very few groups justify it.

So, my point is that violence is also a result of internal conflicts between organizations belonging to the same broad area which disagree on the use of violence. In this complex interaction there is very often also competition for getting support from the potential sympathetic audience, and some of the radical groups opt for more violent forms of action. In Italy this was very clear. The radicalization was here linked to the development within some of the social movement organizations of marshal bodies that were formed in order to defend the marches from the police or from the neo-fascists and then tended to gain a life of their own. The military skills that had developed within these marshal bodies became a sort of asset for a specific type of leadership that conflicted with the more political leaders of some of the organizations and then lead the process of going underground.

Very similar was the process in Germany, in the United States; and similar also in the Irish or in the Basque case, similar in Latin America and so on. So there was also in these cases a development of violence in a sort of internal competition, not because violence was used against the internal opponents, but because it became a sort of logo, or an asset, a specific resource. And specific organizational structures developed, very often from those militants who had most skills in the use of violence.

The second element I call the *encapsulation* of movement organizations, once they go in the underground. Going underground contributed to a specific organizational adaptation. Having to survive in an underground environment, organizations tended to change their forms of action, structures and frames. Typical here is the history of the Red Brigades. They went underground in 1970, but until 1974 did not kill anybody, being critical of the use of killing as an instrument of political action. They had carried out actions such as car arson, minor things (especially minor in the context of the Italian radicalized social-movement atmosphere of that period). In 1974, they killed, they said by mistake; in 1976, their first planned attack, and in 1978, they kidnapped the president of the Christian Democratic Party and killed him and his bodyguards. There were in fact a few years of very frequent bloody attacks by the Red Brigades.

This evolution was an evolution in the forms of action, but also in the type of organizational structure because the group, that in the beginning hoped to be able to continue to leaflet in front of the factories, then realized that it was not possible because the very choice of some sort of violence brought about repression and so

they had to go underground. Moreover, gradually they had lost their supporters, and so they needed to organize robberies and kidnappings in order to raise the money necessary to survive in the underground. In parallel, also their discourse evolved in order to account for new strategies and structures. So my point is that going underground then produced a specific dynamics for these entrepreneurs of violence.

Finally, there is a *narrative* construction of violence. It was important that also in their discourse, these violent organizations tended to legitimate violence by a reference to a past. And a reference to certain elements of an ideology which was, for these groups, a left-wing type of ideology. In my view, the main point of interest, also for the understanding of other forms of political violence, is that it was not so much the presence of a violent past, it was not so much the presence of a violent support in the ideology. The same past was there also for several groups that didn't turn to the underground and the same ideology was available for other groups that did not use it in order to legitimate violence. But the narrative of violence developed with a sort of discourse that identified targets as absolute enemies and identified the group as a heroic elite, a heroic vanguard would be the term they used, an elite that would lead the revolution and mobilize the masses. In a similar way, the Italian resistance against Fascism and the German lack of resistance against Nazism, or at least what was understood as a lack of resistance, was used to legitimate the development of violence in that specific context.

These types of explanations seem once again relevant also for the understanding of more recent forms of political violence and terrorism. There, even though the analysis of the organizations and the analysis of the ideology came back, I think it came back in a quite risky way: as a causal dimension, an explanation per se of processes of radicalization. While I think that also in these recent conflicts, the process at the meso level is complex and long-lasting. So it is not automatically an ideology and it is not automatically the presence of a violent past, being ethnically motivated or class-motivated, that produces violence. But it is more a process in which the terrorist organizations, the violent organizations act themselves to frame and to construct in a way their own resources.

I think that this processual view could be, and has in fact been used also by scholars who started to reflect on the most recent ways of protest and their political violence, on the competition within the social movement sector. Studies such as those by Karagiannis and McCauley, by Gilles Kepel and others, seem to indicate that also when you look at Islamic forms of mobilization you have to look at the competition between the different groups. The story of the Muslim Brotherhood is a story of a lot of internal divisions about the use of violence, a lot of internal competition for acquiring control of other forms of movements. The encapsulation of the movement organizations, once they are in the underground, is also a relevant part of the explanation of the development in Algeria, or in Egypt, and

scholars like Mohamed Hafez have addressed these elements. And the same can be said about the narrative construction of violence since also in contemporary forms of violence, groups that are oriented towards violence tend to find ways to bridge some concepts, to reinvent them and bend them in order to legitimate some types of choices. This does not mean that these concepts or broader ideologies are inherently favourable to violence. But they are the object of a sort of symbolic struggle also within terrorist or militant types of organizations.

## Militant Identities and Political Violence

I move to the last element of my presentation which addresses the micro level. There has been a lot of criticism by scholars of political psychology, such as Martha Crenshaw for instance, of the idea that activist or underground organizations are or have pathological personalities. The criticism especially stressed the fact that, on the one hand, organizations would not like to have pathological personalities among what they consider to be their soldiers. And, on the other, empirical research did not show much evidence of the presence of specific types of personalities.

The first point I want to highlight here is this activation of militant networks. A lot of research in many different fields has stressed that most of the choices are not individual ones. We are sociologists, or social scientists, also because we believe in the fact that a lot of explanations for individual behaviour are to be rooted in relational processes.

This has emerged very clearly in my own research on the Italian case where the process of radicalization, recruitment in militant groups or in the underground was very often, not in all the cases, but in most of the cases, a process of group conversion. So, it was not the conversion of a single individual, but very often a conversion of small groups, e.g. from the same high-school collectives or squatted youth centres. In fact in a population of organizations with similar ideologies and forms of action, only some of them provided recruits for underground groups. Very often it was through the development of informal types of network. Similar processes have been analysed in the accounts on forms of ethnic violence where you also, very often, find brothers, brothers and sisters, relatives in the history of the IRA or of ETA, the political, military Basque organization, the same history is also relevant. So, the choice was not an individual choice, but was very often related with the participation in networks that the same activists described as networks of friends and comrades. So networks in which political commitment and friendship tended to overlap.

To which extent can networks explain the commitment to radical choices? I think, here as well, it is not so much a causal link, but more a sort of process in the sense that the networks were constructed over long periods. The type of selection of the



group that became then the peer group, the most relevant peer group for the activists, happened during the process in which some people were entering the group and some were not. So, the activation of militant networks is relevant, and their characteristics can vary for different forms of terrorism in terms of age, ideological commitment, forms of norms and so on. But this, I think, is also relevant for the other type of terrorism and terrorist groups I have addressed.

Also, going a bit back to the question of how much causality there is, what I have observed looking at the Italian case, is that within these networks there were two sorts of mechanisms. In this case, there was a proper mechanism working at the individual level which went on. One I called *affective focusing* and the other *cognitive closure*.

As for *affective focusing*, while we are usually considering choices of violence as moved by hate, anger, hostility and so on, the language I found, and the motivation I found doing my interviews were more suggesting and stressing a positive type of sentiment oriented towards the proximate group. So, I heard very often the activist who was interviewed, the militant who was interviewed saying, “I remain in the underground because I was committed to my friends in prison”. “I joined the underground because it was a period of very intense relationships.” A phrase I heard very often is: “They were my family.”

And in this, I think there was and is an aspect that tends to be understressed in research on forms of political violence which is the fact that we have at the same time, negative sentiments, negative types of emotion oriented towards the outside, but also the positive impact in terms of keeping the group together of a positive type of emotion which is very often also constructed through the small-group dynamics, of a small group of people who live very intense forms of relationships with each other.

So, I called it *affective focusing* also to take into account this processual dynamics: The fact that it is not just that your friend goes in the underground and you follow him, but it is the fact that through actions of opposition, through violent forms of action, you have an investment in terms of your own identity and in terms of your emotions that tend to create very strong linkages with groups, intense linkages within small groups of individuals. And there is, that is why I said *focusing*, the fact that other individuals tend to be excluded instead. So, it is a process in which some individuals acquire value and others lose value. There are also the stories of militants who abandoned a daughter or others who abandoned their families. And it is a process in which a family is abandoned, also in symbolic terms, in metaphorical terms, groups that were relevant are abandoned and the focus is, in terms of *affective rewarding*, more and more moved only on a small group of individuals who tend to support the ideological and practical choices of the people.

*Cognitive closure* is linked with this because relational processes have an emotional and cognitive character. So, what I have observed in the Italian case and also in the other cases I have looked at is the fact that when people in the underground tended to focus their emotional experiences more and more on a small group of individuals, this was also the group of individuals they trusted. And which contributed to the type of vision they had about the world outside. When I interviewed the Italian, former activists of underground organizations, when they told me the accounts of their life histories, they recounted things like, “Maybe it was not true that when there was a killing by the Red Brigades all the workers in the big factories were happy about that. But this is what we believed because this is what our organizations told us and we told each other.” And this was the world they constructed.

Here, I have learnt a lot from symbolic interactionism and the tradition in research on the social construction of reality. I think that it was very true for my groups that the cognitive sources for their knowledge, their visions of the external reality made a certain reality true for them and it was this reality they were acting upon. Their hope for a revolution was based upon the fact that the situation they saw was a situation that was almost going to explode into a revolution. And this type of construction of the external reality was made within this circle of recognition, circle of peer groups with whom the group tended to interact. I think that here it is also relevant to take into account the fact that there is a cognitive closure so that the reality they construct tends to be more and more distant from the reality constructed by others.

But at the same time, very often there is some resonance with reality as it is perceived by others. So for instance, the Italian activists who believed that the Italian state was non-democratic and a Fascist state and so they gave a different type of appreciation than the broader social movement. But also in the broader social movement there were some elements, some cognitive elements which made this construction of reality resonant. For instance, there was the idea that in Italy, part of the state was planning a coup d'état. It was in 1974-75, a moment in which Spain, Portugal and Greece were still dominated by authoritarian regimes, there had just been the coup d'état in Chile. So there was a construction of a reality different from the one which was broadly accepted, but at the same time, it resonated with a broader construction, which gave it some credibility, so to say. And then in the underground there was an evolution.

I'm going to finish with some remarks or reflections on radicalization, in particular on how all this could be useful for the analysis of recent forms of escalation, and what should we as social movement scholars learn if we want to apply this model to new forms of political violence and terrorism?

The activation of militant networks has been recognized as relevant also in recent forms of fundamentalist types of violence. Some studies on mobilization of Muslim groups in authoritarian regimes have stressed the role of informal ties and informal public spheres as particularly relevant to keep a sort of opposition alive and so potentially also the role of informal ties and informal public spheres in providing stages for the escalation.

Recent forms of networks which we have not considered in our research on western type of radicalization are linked to the presence of people with experiences in the values war that has been fought. In Italy or in Germany, the terrorist groups, the groups that went in the underground, were dreaming about wars they had not fought in, while many of the entrepreneurs of violence who are active in these networks have very special skills in military thinking, which have been built during the recent episodes of violence – what in international relations is called a ‘new type of war’ in Chechnya, or before in Afghanistan or in former Yugoslavia. So, this brings in this movement, in the language of social movement theory, *resources for violence*, because it brings about military skills, but also cognitive skills, ways of perceiving the situations as battles that can be fought and won on the basis of the amount of gun power which is going to be used.

As for the affective focusing and the cognitive closures, in the work by scholars like Olivier Roy and others, there is also attention to the fact that there are some ideological references which belong to religious traditions, too, but that these elements are invented and reinvented. In the reinvention of Islam, for instance, some elements acquire a power in terms of legitimating some types of choices, but as it was the case with the use of Marxism or Leninism as a sort of ideological tool kit from which to extract some type of frame, these concepts tend not to be inherently violent, but to be used and activated in different ways by different types of groups. So, the recent debates on some aspects of the fundamentalist groups or other, Jihad and so on, recall debates in the Italian or the German left about how much the situation was ready for the revolution and when mass insurrection was possible. And it was in these debates that some violent entrepreneurs could activate symbolic resources.

## Conclusion

I will just finish with this observation which could also be some reflection on perspectives for radicalization when looking at radicalization with the frame of analysis of social movement studies.

First of all, radicalization takes different paths. There is not a necessary development from political opportunities into violence, but there are very different paths and very often practical experiences are more relevant than the ideological

commitment which comes up as a sort of legitimization of actions which have been developed.

The second point, radicalization is a process of competition and imitation among groups which involves many collective actors. It is very important to contextualize it, looking at ways in which different types of groups, not just the radical organizations, intervene in them.

Finally, radicalization is not the effect of individual pathologies, but of complex group dynamics the understanding of which requires taking into account complex processes and a long-time investment in further comparative research, which we hope could help us assess contemporary challenges.

## Some Questions and Answers

(unfortunately only a few of the questions were audible)

*Question:* One of the concepts that is very much under debate or has been for a long time is Wiktorowicz' concept of 'frame alignment' that before joining an organisation you have a frame aligned; a view that is aligned with the organisation that you then join. And what you're saying here is that this is not necessarily the case. Do you think that in many cases that you have action or other parts which bring you into this organisation? Do you think that there's a difference in what kind of organisation that you look into whether Wiktorowicz' results are [valid]? Because it's a huge organisation he's been looking at, al-Muhajiroun, with at least 700 members as you said, and whether it's a small religious sect with, I don't know, 15-20 people or 3 or 4 people. Do you think that it's different, that in large organisations you have the kind of frame alignment and in smaller it's more a matter of affection or...?

*Answer:* I think that part is quite complex in both. I think that alignment itself is a concept which comes from social movement research which stresses the processual dimension. So usually, what you find is that there is a broad resonance of certain types of individual ideas with the organizational ideas and then the alignment often takes place afterwards, in the sense that with the longer interaction with an organization. But I feel that in my case studies, there is some difference in different countries. The German militants tended to be more, especially in the first generation, more ideologically oriented. It was in fact the big names, Ulrike Meinhof, Horst Mahler etc. But for the Italian teenagers who entered Front Line or the Red Brigades in the second wave, it was not the case that they had read the documents. They entered on the basis of a broad support for certain types of ideas, then very often, it was a practical experience and the meeting with, the encounter with some groups. What was also relevant some times were personal experiences with violence, being forced to go on hiding and then the underground organizations were the only logistic support that you could have. So you went in the underground not because you wanted to join the terrorist organizations, but you entered the terrorist organization because you were forced to go underground if you wanted to escape arrest. This was also a frequent – or if you were thinking that, it was the only way to escape arrest, this was past. But I think the past is different, also in different historical moments. But there was a long debate in the analysis of the Italian case and of the German case of how much the idea of Tony Negri was being arrested in the 70s for participation in an underground organization, how much were they the motivating factor in the recruitment of young people? And of all the young people I have talked with, none of them had read Tony Negri. When I myself read Tony Negri I cannot understand it. It's too

complex. So I mean, it wasn't usually the first motivation, the ideological reflection.

But then, frame alignment in the way in which it is used by David Snow and others in social movement theory, points at the fact that it is a process in which you tend to reduce the cognitive dissonance that there could be between your opinion and the opinion of a group which became more relevant for you and so you tend to align your frame to their own. But it's right, in the people I've interviewed it didn't happen before. It was very often either together, in conjunction with other revolutionary practices or even afterwards.

*Question:* It has been quite well documented in recent years that there was a quite active support for the Rote Arme Fraktion (RAF) from the German Democratic Republic. Is that a special case or is there anything more general to say about external support for these groups?

*Answer:* I think that external support is becoming more relevant now. It was relevant in the German case, but the intervention of the German Democratic Republic was especially after the decline of terrorism. In fact, they provided hiding for the former activists of the RAF who decided to quit. The international type of links that were more relevant for the RAF was with the Palestinian camp. The fact that they were trained in Palestinian camps, not by the main Palestinians, not by Fatah, but by other splinter-type groups. [You see] that underground organizations are often interesting for secret services and so on, so there is very often an attempt to play with them, but in the groups I have looked at there is also a lot of mistrust by the groups towards being connected with other secret service or other international organizations. So, I know that the Italian Red Brigades didn't want to have anything to do with the RAF because they considered themselves to be working-class people and they considered the RAF to be sort of spoilt kids going around with Porsches and so on. The Italians didn't want to go, and there wasn't even much support for the IRA or the Basque underground groups because the conceptions of the class struggle in the Italian left made it difficult to understand an ethnic or more definition of the conflict. So, I think that there are at the same time sort of opportunities and these are becoming more relevant, nowadays especially in terms of international networks, but with the forms of political violence that have started there are also a lot of limits. For instance, the Italian terrorists almost never went abroad, the eastern European countries were considered as traitors, and also with the RAF the interaction with real existing Socialism was difficult because it was not what they were looking for. Then there's also the anecdote that when the people from the RAF went into the Palestinian camp they realized that the life there was not what they were expecting and the relationship between western activists and activists from other areas of the

world was difficult. The anecdote is also that the activist women of the RAF wanted to sunbathe topless and this was not very well accepted in the Palestinian camp. Well, it could be just an anecdote, but it is telling about the type of tensions that there are also to be taken into account.

*Question:* Thank you very much for a very inspiring lecture. I was wondering what role the social movement has in relation to the terrorist organization because it appears that, as you stress, not all social movements turn into terrorist organizations. ... Is it just a matter of ... that some foster militants/terrorist groups and some don't? Or is it a necessary condition to create a terrorist group to have some sort of a social movement and is that also .... it's a very complex relationship there, I think, if you're trying to understand what .....

*Answer:* Yes. There's somebody who said, "The attempt to find a unique explanation for political violence is the same chance that you succeed in the attempt to find an explanation for holes!" I think that there are so many different types and since also political violence and terrorism could be the action of that very restricted group of individuals it would probably be too courageous to say that you always need a social movement at the basis of a radicalization process. But I think that most of the radicalization processes we have studied, they tend to have a relevant life so that it goes beyond the killing of one person or one single episode. Usually, radicalization develops within broader groups and in social movement studies, they usually link to the study of forms of action, and I think that the forms of action that are legitimated within different movements are a relevant part of the explanation for which social movements tend to be more prone to radicalization forms and which are not. The global justice movement, for instance, is a movement which has learnt from the past history to distrust certain forms of violence. It is usually very broadly non-violent. So these normative conceptions make the certification of violence very unlikely. So, there're moments of radical escalations like the Black bloc and so on, but they tend to be quite isolated, they tend to be also forms of violence which are mostly symbolic, they have a lot of constraint. When in Genova, the Black bloc burned cars, we were studying the process of the social movement there, the protest there, and we went to look at the website of the Black bloc organization. And there, the Black bloc themselves were criticizing the small groups that had burned the cars, because they said this is not part, especially because they had burned small cars which means that they were not attacking the symbols, those who were to be considered as responsible for the urban globalisation and so on.

What I mean is that I think that what is very relevant in order to explain why some movements are violent or at least have inside themselves groups that tried violent paths is to be found also at the level of the learning process among groups and on normative assumptions about violence.

And the other very relevant path, of course, I didn't want to point at just one element, because I think that it is this element of certification of lack of certification for violence is a role to be considered inside a relational process. So of course, also the movement that doesn't say strong repression is less likely to turn to violence because this process of legitimization for violence which has been developed in the Italian and German case .... that has developed. And also another element which I think is relevant is usually the legitimization of violence within the social movement always starts as legitimization of a defensive form of violence. The groups they want to recruit they have to find some resonance for a claim that they need to use violence in order to defend themselves against others that are accused of being violent themselves.



**Social movement studies and political violence.  
The Italian case in comparative perspective**



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## **Terrorist studies and their limits**

- Lack of sufficient empirical evidence
- Isolation of violence from context
- Lack of attention to meso level
- Reification of terrorism
- (too much of) a policy focus

## **Social movement studies and their limits**

- Episodic attention to political violence
- Different approaches for different forms of violence
- Explanations at three separate levels (macro, meso, micro)

## Some hopes:

- Critical terrorist studies: contextualization and “deexceptionalization” of explanations

And

- Recent developments in social movement studies: turns towards contentious politics

## Analysis of political violence as

- *relational*, as it locates political violence as developing from the radicalization of conflicts that see the interactions of various actors, institutional and non-institutional;
- *constructivist*, as it takes into account not only the external opportunities and constraints, but also the social construction of that reality by the various actors participating in the social and political conflict;
- *dynamic*, as it aims at reconstructing the causal mechanisms that link the macro system in which terrorism develops; the meso system formed by the radical organizations; and the micro system of the symbolic interactions within the activist networks.

## **Polarized environment: Violence in context**

- Closing opportunities
- Reciprocal escalation
- Certification of violence

## **Violent entrepreneurs: The mobilization of resources**

- Competitive violence
- Encapsulation of movement organizations in the underground
- Narrative construction of violence

### **Freedom Fighter Identities: The militant construction of external reality**

- Activation of militant networks
- Affective focusing
- Cognitive closure

### **Radicalization and social movements: some conclusion**

- First, radicalization takes different paths, often starting with practical experiences more than with ideas.
- Second, radicalization is a process of competition and imitation that involves many collective actors, not just radical organizations.
- Third, radicalization is not the effect of individual pathologies, but of complex group dynamics.

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