1

Political Violence and Social Movements

An Introduction

11 September 2001:

The September 11 attacks, often referred to as September 11th or 9/11 (pronounced "nine eleven"), were a series of coordinated suicide attacks by al-Qaeda upon the United States. That morning, nineteen al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four commercial passenger jet airliners. The hijackers intentionally crashed two of the jets into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, killing everyone on board and many others working in the buildings. Both towers collapsed within two hours, destroying nearby buildings and damaging others. A third airliner was flown into the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C. The fourth plane crashed in a field in rural Pennsylvania after some of its passengers and flight crew attempted to retake control of the plane, which the hijackers had redirected to target either the Capitol Building or the White House. There were no survivors from any of the flights. Nearly three thousand victims died in the attacks, along with the nineteen hijackers. (Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks, accessed 15 February 2012)

5 September 2010:

Armed Basque separatist group Eta says it will not carry out "armed actions" in its campaign for independence. In a video obtained exclusively by the BBC, the group said it took the decision several months ago "to put in motion a democratic process." The Basque interior minister called the statement "insufficient." Madrid has previously insisted that Eta renounce violence and disarm before any talks. Eta's violent campaign has led to more than 820 deaths over the past 40 years. It has called two ceasefires in the past, but abandoned them both. This latest announcement comes after the arrests of numerous Eta leaders and during an unprecedented period of debate within the Basque nationalist community over the future direction of policy. (BBC News Europe, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11191395, accessed 3 April 2011)

31 December 2010:

Italy has reacted with fury to the Brazilian president's decision on his last day in office not to extradite an Italian former left-wing militant. The Italian foreign ministry recalled its

ambassador to Brazil, while the defence minister said Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva had shown a "lack of courage." But Brazil's government said the move was not an "affront" to another state. Cesare Battisti has been convicted in absentia of murdering four people in Italy between 1978 and 1979. The 56-year-old has maintained his innocence, saying he is the victim of political persecution in Italy and that he risks being killed if extradited. "I am guilty, as I have often said, of having participated in an armed group with a subversive aim and of having carried weapons. But I never shot anyone," he wrote in a book published in 2006. Battisti has been on the run since escaping from an Italian jail in 1981 while awaiting trial. He spent the intervening years in France – where he started a career as a novelist – Mexico and finally Brazil. (BBC News Latin America and Caribbean, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-1209847, accessed 3 April 2011)

2011:

The second decade of the twenty-first century began with some most dramatic instances of right-wing, racist violence. On 22 July, a militant from the extreme Right killed eight people in the bombing of governmental buildings in Oslo and shot another sixty-nine, mostly teenagers who were participating in a camp run by the Labour Party Workers' Youth League (AUF) on the island of Utøya. In November 2011, German authorities found evidence that a right-wing, clandestine cell was responsible for the killing of nine migrants (eight from Turkey and one from Greece) and a policewoman; all of these crimes had been committed in the last thirteen years. On 13 December 2011, a member of the extreme right-wing group Casa Pound shot and killed two Senegalese street vendors and wounded another three in two crowded markets in Florence. Two German right-wing militants as well as an Italian were found dead by police, apparently having committed suicide.

What do these episodes have in common? Of course, they all refer to political violence in one of its most extreme forms: the perpetration of killings by small, underground groups (or even single individuals) oriented to (more or less clearly stated) political aims. I refer to this phenomenon as *clandestine political violence*. Yet there are of course many differences among these instances. September 11th is the most dramatic episode of what has come to be known as religious fundamentalism. The actions by Cesare Battisti belong to the story of a left-wing, ideological violence, which was particularly aggressive in Italy in the 1970s but has since disappeared. The right-wing radical who killed two migrants in Florence was part of a long-standing Italian fascist tradition. Finally, the cease-fire in Spain is not the first proclaimed by Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (Basquen-land and Freedom [ETA]), one of the longer-lasting and most active ethnonationalist clandestine organizations in Europe.

Furthermore, these episodes refer to the activities of clandestine organizations of varying size (from a couple of militants to a few hundred people), life duration, structure (from hierarchical structures to loose networks), and degree of clandestinity of structures and activists, as well as to organizations with very different motives and ideologies. The groups in question employed political

violence of very different intensities, with 9/11 representing the most deadly case. In addition, their choice of targets was widely different, as was the context – national and/or international – in which they operated.

In fact, the phenomena to which these four episodes refer have been studied in the social sciences using very different approaches, and within different subdisciplines. The separatist political violence of the ETA has been addressed especially by scholars of nationalism, with a focus on the dynamics of the long history of (tense) relations between the center and the periphery in Spain. Left-wing political violence has also been located within long-standing conflicts, but in this case it is commonly – or, at least, more often than it is the case for other types of violence – addressed within a social movement approach looking at the political and social transformations that affect class cleavages. Although the use of violent means has often been stigmatized and considered as ultimately ineffective, research on both left-wing and nationalist forms has tended to stress their links with legitimate (even if escalated) conflicts. In contrast, the radical Right has been analyzed more often as an (irrational) reaction to the breakdown of existing social ties and/or normative systems. Similarly, contemporary religious fundamentalism has been seen mainly as a consequence of failed attempts at modernization.

Furthermore, political violence by Islamic fundamentalists has been considered as distinctive in several ways:

- New, religious forms of terrorism are considered not only more lethal but also more indiscriminate, evil, and cruel. They use the most lethal means (e.g., suicide bombers or weapons of mass destruction – not only nuclear but also chemical, biological, or radiological weapons).
- Its loose, networked (rather than hierarchical) structures and the use of new communication technologies make this "new terrorism" more dangerous (Simon and Benjamin 2000). Goals are absolute and not negotiable. According to David Rapoport, "the transcendent source of holy terrorism is its most critical distinguishing characteristic: the deity is perceived as being directly involved in the determination of ends and means" (2012: 19). The assumed radicality of religious beliefs has been seen as responsible for some assumed characteristics of the "new terrorism." Samuel Huntington (1996) infamously stressed the particular tendency of conflicts involving Muslims to turn violent.
- Because of their focus on the destruction of the adversary – Western civilization (M. J. Morgan 2004: 30) – Islamic fundamentalists are said to use not only radical but also global strategies. The weakening of state sponsors is in fact seen as implying fewer constraints on violence (Simon and Benjamin 2000).
- New, "religious" terrorists have been attributed motivations such as fanaticism, rage, sadism, and paranoia (Laqueur 2003), as religious ideas are seen as based on different value systems from those of the West and as not dependent on other people for their legitimation (Hoffman 1999).

How the aims of these fundamentalists should be assessed and the extent to which their aims determine the form of their organizations are, however, topics that should be addressed empirically, and many of the aforementioned statements about the new forms of terrorism have been contested.

First, some have questioned the assumption of increasing lethality. The consequences of terrorist attacks tend to be small: only a few have exceeded 100 deaths, and still fewer have exceeded 50 (Guelke 2006). In addition, past incidents vary in focus and range: the massacres in Madrid in 2004 (191 deaths) and London in 2005 (52 deaths) are not so different from previous attacks; take, for example, attacks by the radical Right such as the bombing in the Bologna railway station in 1980, which involved about 100 victims. Additionally, there are illustrations of strategic discrimination by fundamentalist Islamic groups. For instance, Islamic underground organizations have made no use of weapons of mass destruction (chemical or biological): the sarin gas used in Tokyo in March 1995 was the work of the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo (ibid.). Of the twenty most lethal attacks, only nine are classified as exclusively religious (Crenshaw 2011). Religion is, in fact, not always the explanation for suicide terrorism. As Pape (2005) recalls, of the Lebanese suicide bombers he studied, only 21 percent were Islamist, whereas 71 percent were communist or socialist and 8 percent were Christian.

Regarding organizational decentralization, the development of a loose global network (also known as "franchising") has been mentioned only in the case of al-Qaeda (AQ), and this structure has been in place only for part of its history; the group started with a quite centralized organizational structure. Scholars have also recalled that older clandestine organizations have been far from homogeneous. Anarchist groups, for instance, have also promoted loose networks of autonomous cells. As for the aims of these new terrorist groups, the very definition of their actions as religious is contested. In general, "religion is a problematic label because it implies a monocausal explanation that does not do justice to rich practices of terrorist activity" (Duyvesteyn 2012: 34). What is understood as religious (and nonreligious) varies in time and space: the actual construction of a myth of religious violence helps in creating a stigmatized religious other (Cavanaugh 2009). Even though the language of these groups might be archaic, their rationale tends to be secular: because Middle Eastern regimes (such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt) cannot be overthrown by force, al-Qaeda turns to the far enemy (Gerges 2005). Based on an in-depth empirical analysis, Pape stated that "there is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism" (2005: 4), as suicide terrorist campaigns are "directed towards a strategic objective. From Lebanon to Israel to Sri Lanka [the secular, Marxist-oriented Tamil Tigers – or LTTE – of Sri Lanka are responsible for the greatest number of suicide attacks] to Kashmir to Chechnya, the sponsors of every campaign have been terrorist groups trying to establish or maintain political self-determination by compelling a democratic power to withdraw from the territories they claim" (ibid.). Suicide terrorism is

used when perceived as the only successful weapon, as Americans are seen as weak, frail, and cowardly (ibid.: 123). In fact, the overwhelming majority of suicide bombers come from the Muslim countries where US combat troops are located (ibid.: 125).[1] Recent forms of political violence, just like older ones, have local roots. In the beginning, al-Qaeda stated that its aim was to expel the American military forces from Muslim territory, citing Vietnam or Lebanon as examples (Crenshaw 2011).

Given the very different interpretations that dominate studies on different types of political violence, research that compares various types of clandestine organizations is needed to identify similarities and differences. But does the problematization of such statements regarding the inherent peculiarity of Islamic violence and the search for comparative knowledge take us too far? Are we, metaphorically, comparing apples with oranges? Does this endeavor push us to look for too high a level of generalization, neglecting historical developments? Does it bring about conceptual stretching?

This chapter introduces the potential advantages and challenges of a cross-type, global comparison of a specific form of political violence: in this case, clandestine political violence. It first conceptualizes the phenomenon I address in this volume, explaining why I prefer this term to the more widely used term "terrorism." I suggest that the concept of clandestine political violence has the analytic advantage of singling out a more specifically sociological phenomenon, pointing toward the implication of the choice to go underground. I then develop some ideas about how to approach it. The chapter continues with a critical assessment of social science literature in the field of studies of clandestine political violence. Some contributions from social movement studies are then presented as particularly valuable not only for addressing the meso (organizational) level, which is considered to be of fundamental relevance, but also for linking it with the macro and micro levels. After developing these considerations, the chapter presents the main characteristics of the proposed approach, as follows:

- Relational: It locates political violence in the radicalization of conflicts that involve the interactions of various actors, both institutional and noninstitutional.
- Constructivist: It takes into account not only the external opportunities and constraints but also the social construction of experiential reality by the various actors participating in social and political conflicts.
- Emergent: It recognizes that violence develops in action, and it aims at reconstructing the causal mechanisms that link the macrosystem in which clandestine political violence develops, the mesosystem formed by radical organizations, and the microsystem of the symbolic interactions within militant networks.

[1] According to Pape (2005), this form of altruistic suicide is based on (1) a response to occupation in which the occupied people suffer from a (2) conventional inferiority of power, against (3) an enemy vulnerable to coercive pressure and in a situation in which the group receives support from the population (social approval).

A subsequent methodological section then justifies the use of historical comparative analysis, as well as addressing some more specific choices in the research design of this study. It presents the empirical studies to which I refer in the rest of this volume, discussing the use of in-depth interviews and organizational documents and judicial sources, as well as secondary analysis of historical and sociological studies. The chapter closes with an introduction to what follows.

CLANDESTINE POLITICAL VIOLENCE: CONCEPTUALIZING THE OBJECT OF STUDY

Conceptualizing clandestine (oppositional) political violence is no easy task. Not only is the operationalization of political violence complicated, but the empirical phenomena that are placed under the label of political violence are so broad that they jeopardize the very search for causal explanations. In this section, I define my concept, pointing at the relevant expected consequences of the choice to use repertoires of harsh violence and clandestine organizational forms.

Political violence consists of those repertoires of collective action that involve great physical force and cause damage to an adversary to achieve political aims. The classical social science definition of violence refers to "behavior designed to inflict physical injury on people or damage to property" (Graham and Gurr 1969: XVII), or "any observable interaction in the course of which persons or objects are seized or physically damaged in spite of resistance" (Tilly 1978: 176). *Political* violence, then, is the use of physical force to damage a political adversary. If we leave aside state or state-sponsored violence, oppositional political violence therefore consists of "collective attacks within a political community against a political regime" (Gurr 1970: 3–4).

This definition is far from easy to operationalize, however, as the understanding of both "great" and "damage" is highly subjective as well as historically bound (della Porta 2002). A certain degree of physical force may be involved in forms of collective action that are usually not considered violent per se; moreover, all collective action seeks to damage a more or less visible adversary. We can add that political violence is generally understood as behavior that violates the prevailing definition of legitimate political action, but the degree of legitimacy is not easy to assess empirically.

Operationally, however, there is certain agreement that, at least in contemporary democratic countries, violent forms of collective action include attacks on property, rioting, violent confrontations between ethnic or political groups, clashes with police, physical attacks directed against specific targets, random bombings, armed seizure of places or people (including armed trespassing), holdups, and hijacking. In all of these forms of action, the main objective is to display a high degree of physical force.

If we accept this broad operationalization, however, we need typologies that help us to identify sociologically homogeneous sets of phenomena. Various types

of political violence can be distinguished: for instance, lethal versus nonlethal, indiscriminate versus targeted, and high-scale versus low-scale violence are some relevant dimensions. In a comparative research study on Germany and Italy between the 1960s and 1980s (della Porta 1995), I suggested the following dimensions as most relevant for a typology: (1) the intensity of violence (low-level violence, usually not enacted against people, versus high-level violence, including political assassinations) and (2) the organizational form of violence (open versus underground). On the basis of these two variables, I formulated a fourfold typology including the following: (1) *unspecialized violence* – low-level, less-organized violence; (2) *semi-military violence* – violence that is also low-level but is more organized; (3) *autonomous violence* – violence used by loosely organized groups that emphasize a "spontaneous" recourse to high-level violence; and (4) *clandestine violence* – the extreme violence of groups that organize underground for the explicit purpose of engaging in the most radical forms of collective action.

I consider the concept of clandestine political violence as particularly useful because the choice of clandestinity brings about quite specific sets of constraints. The very choice to go underground of a relatively small group of activists is heuristically relevant, as it triggers a spiral of radicalization, transforming political organizations into military sects. Therefore, in this volume, I focus especially on clandestine violence – a form of violence that has often been considered under the label of terrorism.

Although I refer to the literature on terrorism, for several reasons I prefer not to use the term "terrorism," as I believe it too plagued by conceptual stretching to be kept as a social science concept. "Terrorism" is a much-contested term. Definitions of the phenomenon have variously addressed means, aims, and effects. Attempts at producing a shared definition have taken different paths, focusing on the amount of violence (high), the characteristics of the victims (civilians), the characteristics of the actors (clandestine), and the purpose and effects of the action (terrorizing) (Buijs 2001: 9; della Porta 1995). The many social science definitions of terrorism have indeed stressed elements such as

> its often symbolic character, its often indiscriminate nature, its typical focus on civilian and non-combatant targets, its sometimes provocative and retributive aims, the disruption of public order and endangering of public security, the creation of a climate of fear to influence an audience wider than the direct victims as well as its disregard of the rules of war and the rules of punishment. Some key elements of many definitions also refer to the fact that terrorism is usually an instrument through which its perpetrators, lacking mass support, attempt to realize a political or religious project. It also generally involves a series of punctuated acts of demonstrative public violence, followed by threats of continuation in order to impress, intimidate and/or coerce target audiences. (Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation 2008: 6)

Although various attempts have been made to build some common definitional ground, they are, I think, not sufficient to delimit a useful sociological concept.

Based on an expert survey, Schmid and Jongman have proposed a definition that bridges what they identified as the sixteen most recurrent defining elements. According to their analysis, the most frequently quoted elements are violence or force (present in 83.5 percent of the definitions); political goals (65 percent); fear or terror (51 percent); threats (47 percent); psychological effects (41.5 percent); victim-target differentiation (37.5 percent); purposive, planned, systematic, organized action (32 percent); method of combat, strategy, and tactics (30.5 percent); extranormality, in breach of accepted rules, without humanitarian constraints (30 percent); and coercion, extortion, and induction of compliance (28 percent) (2005: 5–6). Combining these aspects, they suggested that

> terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent actions employed by (semi-) clandestine individual, group, or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons, whereby – in contrast to assassination – the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators. Threat- and violence-based communication processes between terrorist (organization), (imperiled) victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audience(s)), turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought. (ibid.: 28)

Although a useful exercise in the sociology of knowledge, this catchall definition risks mixing up definitional elements that belong to different conceptualizations. Aspects such as the "anxiety-inspiring method" are also debatable because, as admitted in the very definition that is suggested, violent repertoires, like nonviolent ones, aim at producing many different emotions in various audiences.

Employing a similar aim but a different methodology, Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedahzur, and Sican Hirsch-Hoefler proposed a definition that is based instead on the lowest common denominator found in seventy-three definitions collected from some of the main journals in the field. They eventually suggested that "terrorism is a politically motivated tactic involving the threat or use of force or violence in which the pursuit of publicity plays a significant role." (2004: 786) This definition, however, seems to underconceptualize terrorism, as most violent forms of protest aim at publicity.

Furthermore, as has often been mentioned, a shared definition of terrorism becomes all the more difficult as the term "terrorist" is increasingly used to stigmatize an adversary. This is especially true during waves of political violence, when the discussion of terrorism is instrumentalized to justify restrictive security policies, and securitizing actors overemphasize the risks of terrorism to push for "securitizing moves" (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998). According to a judge of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), "terrorism is a term without any legal significance. It is merely a convenient way of alluding to activities, whether of States or of individuals, widely disapproved of and in which either the methods used are unlawful, or the target protected, or both" (Higgins 1997: 28).

It has also been noted that political violence, even when we focus on its "terrorist" forms, is an abstract concept, including very different empirical types. Jenkins warned, in fact, "not to think of terrorism or terrorists as monolithic. Terrorism is a generalized construct derived from our concepts of morality, law, and the rules of war, whereas actual terrorists are shaped by culture, ideology and politics – specific, inchoate factors and notions that motivate diverse actions" (2006: 117). Most fundamentally, there is a risk of reifying terrorism (and terrorists) based on the use of some forms of collective action. Even when means are easily definable as terrorist, it is tricky to talk of a terrorist organization, as this would hypostatize the use of one type of means over other types that the organization in question will very likely be using as well (Crenshaw 2011; Tilly 2004).

What is more, the multiplicity of forms included in the definition produces risks of conceptual stretching. As Tilly reminded us, with specific reference to political violence, in the social sciences the value of a concept is linked to its capacity to "point to detectable phenomenon that exhibit some degree of causal coherence" (2004: 8). Tilly therefore refused to use the term "terrorist" to describe actors that are actually characterized by complex repertoires of action – highlighting the need to investigate types of events that can in fact be included in the same social science category.

With these caveats in mind, I have operationalized clandestine violence with a view to specific forms, targets, and aims as well as organizational structures.

First, clandestine violence defines quite drastic forms of violence. These forms include the intention to cause death or serious physical harm to civilians with the purpose of intimidating and thwarting them, and the use of extranormal means – that is, means that go beyond societal norms. As mentioned in the report of independent experts:

> While there are grey zones and borderline cases of what is and what is not acceptable in certain political contexts, there are certain forms of peacetime political violence and wartime activities which are widely seen as totally unacceptable. These include unprovoked attacks on civilians and the taking of hostages and other forms of willful killings. Terrorism is considered extra-normal because the violence is usually one-sided, the victims cannot save their lives through surrender and unarmed civilians are often terrorism's main targets. (Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation 2008)

To distinguish clandestine violence from armed resistance, I also consider the characteristics of the targets, which include noncombatants. International legal definitions often include references to attacks against civilians. This aspect has also been used to try to focus the definition of terrorism for legal purposes. To cite just one illustration, in the European Union's Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism of 2002, terrorism is referred to as an intentional act that may "seriously damage a country or an international organisation where committed with the aim of seriously intimidating a population, or unduly compelling a Government or international organisation to perform or abstain from performing any act, or seriously destabilizing or destroying fundamental

political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organization." Actions that are deemed as terrorist offenses include attacks on a person's life, attacks on the physical integrity of a person, kidnapping, hostage taking, seizure of aircraft or ships, or the manufacture, possession, or transport of weapons or explosives.

In contrast to civil wars or revolutions, clandestine political violence has a strong and prevalent communicative, *symbolic aspect*. It has often been noted that "terrorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead" (Jenkins 1975: 4). Similarly, according to my conceptualization of clandestine political violence, communication is addressed to different groups to elicit fear in some of them and support in others. In fact, in general, the psychological effects include fear and horror, but also sympathy and admiration, as "terrorism is primarily an extremism of means, not one of ends" (Bjørgo 2005: 2).

Last but not least, the specific characteristics of political violence are linked to the actors that perpetrate them. Secrecy is included in some definitions of terrorism – for example, in Neil Smelser's recent one, terrorism consists of "intended, irregular acts of violence or disruption (or the threat of them) carried out in secret with the effect of generating anxiety in a group, and with the further aim, via that effect, of exciting political responses or political change" (2007: 242). As aforementioned, in my analysis, clandestinity acquires high heuristic value. Based on my previous work, I expect that, especially in democratic regimes, the very choice of going underground will bring about specific dynamics, allowing us to talk of a particular class of events. Clandestinity is in fact linked with a lack of territorial control, which many scholars identify as a particularly discriminating factor in the determination of the dynamics of specific forms of violence; that is, it distinguishes clandestine violence from civil wars (de la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca 2012). I focus on relatively small groups, those with limited military capacity and little or no control of territory. Although I draw from some of the interpretations developed to explain them, this work does not deal with civil wars, armed resistance, or revolutions.

Throughout my examination of political violence by small, clandestine groups, however, I also compare different types. Ideology has been a main criterion in classifying clandestine oppositional groups. Among others, Vasilenko (2004) has distinguished underground political groups, which struggle for political power; separatist groups, which aim at territorial secession; nationalist groups, which aim at excluding people of other nationalities and ethnic groups from political, economic, and cultural activities; religious groups, which aim at affirming the leading role of their own religion; and criminal groups, which are oriented toward material profit. Similarly, within the category of insurgent terrorism, Reinares (2005: 224) differentiated among sociorevolutionary, right-wing, religious, nationalist, and single-issue types. It has been suggested that these types tend to come in waves, with the religious type characterizing the most recent wave of clandestine violence. In this book I cover the left-wing, right-wing, ethnonationalist, and religious types.