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Comparative research on political violence

In Western democracy, the social movements of the eighties and early nineties have generally been very pragmatic in their aims, moderate in their tactics, and well connected to political authorities and policy makers – so much so that several scholars have asked whether they can still be called social movements. There are indeed many impressive differences from their counterparts of the late sixties and the seventies. Social movements have often been defined by their use of unconventional strategies and loose organizational structures, but both characteristics have changed a great deal since the sixties – especially in the use of political violence. As mentioned in the Foreword, the movements of the sixties and the seventies often ''encountered'' violence: they used violent tactics, and they faced violent repression. If in the mid-sixties political activists advocated nonviolent protest, by the end of the decade, in most Western democracies, several emphasized the need for ''self-defense.'' In the seventies, violence became more and more organized in some countries. Radical, sometimes underground, organizations emerged and engaged with the state in a military struggle that they eventually lost. Their negative example probably contributed to the tactical moderation of protest in the eighties.

From our historical point of observation, the nineties constitute the end of a cycle of protest that began in the sixties: new actors emerged, encountered severe reactions, fought back, and finally found their way into ''normal'' politics. Several questions, however, remain about the dynamics of the emergence and institutionalization of new collective actors, and the escalation and de-escalation of their action repertoires. What brought about a new explosion of political violence after the conservative tranquillity of the fifties and the reformist hopes of the early sixties? How can we explain why a generation socialized to democratic values resorted to political violence? Why, in the ''First World,'' were the police ordered to open fire on political demonstrators? This volume is an attempt to answer these questions by drawing on research on social movements, political violence, and the state in Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany from the late sixties to the nineties.

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This introductory chapter describes the theoretical approach, explains the choice for the cross-national comparison, identifies the methods and sources used, and summarizes the scheme of the volume.

SOCIAL SCIENCE AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Political violence does not belong to the established, mainstream areas of research in either sociology or political science. Whereas scholars who work on parties or interest groups, the government, or public administration can rely upon relatively well defined concepts and choose between already formulated theories, the social scientist wishing to focus on political violence needs to develop, first of all, a definition of political violence per se and, then, to construct a set of categories and research hypotheses borrowing from different fields of research.

In search of a definition

In order to be useful for scientific purposes, a concept has to meet certain requirements: it must be neutral and univocal, communicable and discriminating. As a concept ''imported'' in the scientific jargon from everyday life, political violence – as generally understood – lacks these requisites: it is ideologically loaded and its meaning varies according to social and political groups, geographical area, and historical period. In its everyday use ''violence'' refers to ''acting with or characterized by great physical force, so as to injure, damage, or destroy; [or] . . . force unlawfully or callously used'' (*Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language,* 2nd college edition, 1979). *Violence* is therefore the use of great physical force to inflict damage. In the same way, the standard social science definition of violence refers to ''behavior designed to inflict physical injury on people or damage to property'' (Graham and Gurr 1969:xxvii), 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 in order to damage a political adversary. If we leave aside state or state-sponsored violence, political violence comprises ''collective attacks within a political community against a political regime'' (Gurr 1970:3–4).[1] In these situations, violence may emerge intentionally or accidentally: '' [as the] deliberate infliction or threat of infliction of physical injury or damage for political ends,'' or as violence ''which occurs unintentionally in the course of severe political conflict'' (Wilkinson 1986:30). In general, political violence consists of those repertoires of collective action that involve great physical force and cause damage to an adversary in order to impose political aims (della Porta and Tarrow 1986:614).

This definition is, however, not easy to operationalize since the understanding of both ''great'' and ''damage'' is highly subjective. A certain degree of physical force is involved in forms of collective action that are usually not considered

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violent per se; moreover, all collective actions seek to damage a more or less visible adversary. For example, a picket line displays physical (sometime great physical) force and seeks to damage the factory owner's interests; but it is debatable as to whether picketing per se constitutes violent action. In order to make the definition of violence fully operational, we need to find some thresholds beyond which the use of physical force and consequent damages suffered may be considered as violent. The second part of the Webster's definition only partially resolves the problem by introducing the terms as ''unlawful'' or ''callous use'' of force or power. Political violence is generally understood to mean behavior that violates the prevailing definition of legitimate political action. Operationally, however, the degree of legitimacy is not easy to measure. If ''callous'' is too vague a term to define illegitimacy, ''unlawful'' is questionable. Protest actions are, for instance, by definition uninstitutionalized, disruptive forms of collective action, and some of them – including picketing – have long been unlawful, even if tolerated and semi-institutionalized. In the prevailing political culture, however, not all unlawful protests are considered violent.

Moreover, any understanding of a concept such as political violence is historically bound. An operational definition of political violence needs therefore to start from the historical forms of violence addressed by the research.

My research focuses on the political violence that emerged from within the left-libertarian social movement family during various cycles of protest. Before continuing with the search for an operational definition of political violence, let me briefly specify this statement. A *social movement* can be defined as ''an organized and sustained effort of a collectivity of interrelated individuals, groups and organizations to promote or to resist social change with the use of public protest activities'' (Neidhardt and Rucht 1991:450). More precisely, I deal with *political movements*, that is, those movements that ''make changes in power arrangements, especially those structured through the state, a central part of their program'' (Jenkins 1981:83). In each society, there are movements that, regardless of their specific or individual goals, have similar basic demands and a common constituency: these sets of coexisting movements constitute *movement families* (della Porta and Rucht 1991:4). Movement families emerge during periods of turmoil, when protest activity intensifies, new repertoires of collective action are created, and unconventional action spreads to different social sectors: these periods represent the peaks of *protest cycles* (Tarrow 1989a:13–14). Among the various movement families, I concentrated on what I define as the *left-libertarian* movement family: a set of movements that emerged during the cycle of protest that started at the end of the sixties and participated, then, in several protest campaigns in the seventies and the eighties. I will consider the political violence of the state or of other movements and countermovements only insofar as it interacts with the main object of research.

In this context, I saw political violence as a particular repertoire of collective action that involved physical force, considered at that time as illegitimate in the

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dominant culture. Operationally, I included forms of action such as attacks on property, when damage or theft of property is the main goal; rioting, when unorganized disorder leads to damage to property; violent confrontation, when members of opposing political groups fight with one another; clashes with the police, when protestors interact violently with the police; violent attacks directed against persons, when one political group attacks another group, or members of the elite or the public, causing injuries or deaths; random violent attacks, when organized violence is directed against persons, regardless of their political or social identities; armed seizure of places or people, including armed trespassing, holdups, and hijacking.[2] It is worth noting that, in all these forms of action, the main objective is a de facto display of physical force (della Porta and Tarrow 1986:614).

This operational definition provides a neutral and univocal, communicable and discriminating concept. For the empirical analysis, however, it proved, at least in some cases, too extensive. In the course of the research, it emerged that different types of violence followed different patterns of evolution. In particular, I identified low-level violence, usually not addressed against people, and high-level violence, including political assassination. Moreover, I distinguished between ''spontaneous'' and ''organized'' forms of violence. On the basis of the two variables – the degree of violence involved in a repertoire, and the degree of organization of the actor using it – I formulated a fourfold typology including:

- *unspecialized* violence – or low-level, unorganized violence;
- *semimilitary* violence – still low-level, but more organized;
- *autonomous* violence – used by loosely organized groups that emphasized a ''spontaneous'' recourse to high-level violence;
- *clandestine* violence – that is, the extreme violence of groups that organized underground for the explicit purpose of engaging in the more radical forms of collective action.

Finally, in order to formulate a concept that would describe the historically bound type of violence I wanted to study in a unique and discriminating way, I had to descend several branches in what methodologists call Porfirio's tree of concepts. I proposed a general concept that would only apply to a relatively limited historical and geographical context, that is, Italy and Germany in the period circa 1960–90. By increasing the connotation of the concept, I implicitly reduced its denotation.[3] As a consequence, my explanatory ambitions were limited: in rejecting a universal definition of violence, I also rejected a search for a global theory of violence and instead opted for a formulation of middle-range hypotheses, applicable to violent interactions between social movements and the state in Western democracies.

Approaches to political violence: a review

In contemporary social science, political violence has been studied inside two traditions that very rarely interacted with each other: terrorism studies (*Extrem-*

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Table 1.1. *Some explanations of the origins of violence*

Variables	Structural explanations	Conjunctural explanations
Economic	Economic inequalities	Intermediate steps in the economic growth
Social	Social cleavages	Rapid modernization
Political	Authoritarian regimes	Crisis of repressive apparatuses
Cultural	Tradition of violent conflict	Rapid changes in the value system

ismusforschung in Germany) and social movement studies. Curiously, while the former has enlarged its field of interest, to include even nonclandestine forms of action and low-level violence, the sociology of social movements tends, on the contrary, to exclude violent political behavior from its attention.

Terrorism studies developed especially from the shock of international terrorism. In the early seventies, actions such as the massacre of the Israeli delegation to the Olympic Games in Munich or the first airplane hijackings caused the alarmed attention of the Western public as well as Western social scientists. From international terrorism, and the field of international relations, ''terroristologists'' spread their net wider to include domestic political violence and non-underground groups – a trend testified for by the publication of several ''dictionaries of terrorism'' as well as multicountry comparisons of domestic violence based on standardized data sets.[4]

Concentrating on the most radical forms of political violence, terrorism studies tend to isolate their object of interest from the larger political system. In the tradition of collective behavior studies (Blumer 1960; Killian 1964; Gusfield 1968), they emphasize the discontinuities between ''normal'' political behavior and deviant political behavior. Within a functionalist perspective, the causes for high levels of domestic violence are singled out in various strains at the macro-level. Following Neil Smelser (1962), various scholars of domestic conflict had already tried to explain violence by looking at *imbalances in different subsystems*: economic, social, political, and cultural.[5] Some hypotheses on the development of terrorism and domestic violence refer to such structural conditions as the level of societal development, the strength of ethnic or class cleavages, the repressiveness of a regime, and cultural traditions (see Table 1.1).[6] Others cite such conjunctural conditions as the intermediate stages of economic development, the crises of modernization, periods of ineffective state coercion, and rapid cultural change.[7]

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For my empirical cases, most of these hypotheses are of little help. First of all, the empirical results were often contradictory. For instance, the explanations of political violence that emphasized the role of the political system have attributed violence both to too little repression and to too much, to the absence of reform and to abrupt change, to insufficient legitimation and to lack of opposition, to a delayed and a premature institutionalization of the new collective actors. Moreover, in emphasizing the systemic imbalance, they are not interested in (or able to account for) the collective actors that use political violence.

These problems are not solved by those meso-level explanations in terrorism studies which focus on the *ideological characteristics of some political organizations*. In his analysis of terrorism, Wilkinson (1986) referred to small and radical ''ideological sects'' whose aim is the suppression of individual freedom. Isolated in liberal societies that support the peaceful resolution of conflict, these sects understand that they cannot persuade citizens through legal propaganda. They therefore resort to violence in order to weaken democratic institutions, by preventing them from fulfilling their function: to produce social consent through political participation in collective choice. In an apparently opposite but in reality mirror explanation, other authors argued that violence is a product of the lack of opportunity for radical opposition in technocratic societies (Targ 1979; Wellmer 1981).

In both versions, the explanation of violent behavior as a last resort of antidemocratic or antisystemic groups is unsatisfactory. The simplified assumption is that there is a direct relationship between given aims and chosen means: if the aim is antidemocratic or antisystemic, then the means will be violent. By considering the aims as intrinsically antidemocratic or antisystemic, these hypotheses underestimate the influence of the context in shaping the aims and the integrative capacity of democracies. Leaving aside the questions as to what produces these radical interests, one then assumes that antidemocratic or antisystemic aims are produced by individual personalities.

Not surprisingly then, terrorism studies share various versions of the ''puppet theory,'' according to which the radicals are blind instruments in domestic or international plots. Some scholars have analyzed individual political participation at a micro-analytic level by examining the *psychological characteristics* of militants. According to the relative deprivation approach (Davies 1969; Gurr 1970), the activists of radical organizations are drawn from social groups that feel frustrated because of the gap between their expectations and their capabilities. Drawing on the so-called mass theory, several studies assume that individuals who resort to the use of political violence are likely to be socially uprooted (Kornhauser 1959). Radical personalities are defined – according to LeBon's description of the ''psychologies des foules'' (1896) and Hoffer's notion of the ''true believer'' (1951) – as frustrated individuals, blindly obedient to a leader or following the mass, content to lose their ''unwanted'' selves.

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The more radical – or ''deviant'' – the forms of collective action, the greater the likelihood that scholarly analysis would concentrate on assumed psychopathologies (on terrorists' personalities, see, e.g., Knutson 1981; Livingstone 1982; Ivianski 1983; Russell and Bowman 1983). Theories about the ''terrorist personality'' in particular became central in the seventies and the eighties in research on domestic and international terrorism carried out in the United States (Zwerman 1992). The militants of underground organizations were described as infantile, mentally distressed, and terrorized by the external world; as defeated people seeking to compensate for their failures by excluding themselves from society or seeking for revenge (see, e.g., Servier 1979; Laqueur 1977:120–32; for a critical review, see Wilkinson 1979).

A main critique to this trend of studies addresses their empirical validity. First of all, as a critic observed, ''Much of the sociological work involved an ex-post facto examination of the outcropping of collective action, without systematically asking whether grievances at the individual or aggregate level had systematically changed'' (Zald 1992:328–9). Moreover, research at the micro-level – focusing on the biographical and psychological characteristics of *radical activists* – has indicated that political violence is *not* the consequence of pathological personalities or international conspiracies. Indeed, as Crenshaw has observed, ''[one of] the most relevant characteristics of terrorists is their normality'' (1981:390). Leaving aside their very much debated empirical validity, the relative deprivation and mass society approaches share a total disinterest in the institutional aspect of political life: in their theory, uprooting and psychological strain ''translate'' into political violence, which appears therefore as a spontaneous, unorganized phenomenon.

Thus, and with few exceptions, the way in which terrorism studies approach the explanation of political violence offered little for my research on the Italian and the German cases, where violence emerged from the gradual radicalization of political actors. In order to understand this process, one has to take into account the continuities between the different forms of political behavior, and the relationship between systemic characteristics and collective actors. In doing so, I drew insights especially from the social movement approach.

Considered for a long time as a residual, marginal field of research, social movement studies grew enormously in the past few decades. In particular, new approaches to social movement research flourished in the seventies, criticizing precisely those assumptions which were then absorbed by terrorism studies: the definition of social movements as unconscious reactions to temporary strains; the discontinuity between ''normal,'' legitimate, conventional actors and ''abnormal,'' illegitimate, and unconventional actors; and personal or collective frustration as the basis for individual commitment to protest. European sociologists defined ''new social movements'' as the actors of the central conflict in postindustrial societies, after the pacification of industrial conflict and the integration of the working class into the capitalist system.[8] In the United States, the ''re-

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source mobilization'' approach looked at social movements as rational collective actors.[9]

In the social movement studies of the seventies and the eighties, protest is considered as the product not of temporary strains, but of conflicts structurally inherent in society. These conflicts, however, do not automatically produce collective action. In order for collective action to take place, collective actors must emerge, create collective identities, and found organizations. As one of the proponents of the resource mobilization approach observed, ''behavior entails costs; therefore grievances or deprivation does not automatically or easily translate into social movement activities, especially high-risk social movement activity'' (Zald 1992:332) Like any other collective actor, social movements have to motivate their followers, and since the latter are rational beings, they need to distribute selective incentive.

As rational, instrumental actors, social movements attempt to mobilize both material and symbolic resources in their environment. In order to affirm their interests, they rely mainly on *protest activities*, that is, unconventional forms of collective action. Since they lack easy access to decision makers, they mainly address public opinion. In their activities, the social movements encounter other actors in the political system, some of whom are allies, and others opponents. Not only their mobilization capacity and chance of success but also their strategic choices depend on several characteristics of the political system. Radicalism or moderation would depend, in particular, on the response the movements meet in their environment, the reactions of the authorities, and the strength and postures of their potential allies and opponents.

Within the social movement studies, political violence can therefore be explained as an outcome of the interaction between social movements and their opponents. It is worth noticing, however, that the new approaches to social movements paid little attention to political violence. As was observed in a recent review of the literature, ''the relationships among levels of violence and conflict, types of grievances, and the key variables of resource mobilization (resources, organization, opportunities) remain underdeveloped'' (McClurg Mueller 1992: 18). As already mentioned, whereas terrorist studies tended to extend their range of interest, lumping together international terrorism and domestic radicalism, social movement studies proceeded in the opposite direction, focusing on the moderate and organized forms of collective action, so much so that some scholars talk of a tendency to ''normalize collective protest.'' ''Blurring the distinction between normative and nonnormative forms of collective action,'' Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward (1992:301) observed recently, ''is the most fundamental expression of this tendency, as if rule-conforming and rule-violating collective action are of a piece.''

There are nevertheless a few exceptions to this general lack of interest in political violence. In his influential model of collective action, Charles Tilly (1978: 52–5, 172–88) related the use of violence to the emergence of new social

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groups. In his terminology, political violence increases when new challengers fight their way into the polity and old polity members refuse to leave. In a pivotal research on protest strategies, William Gamson (1975) observes that the use of violence increases the probability of success of the challengers. In a similar vein, in their well-known study on poor-peoples movements, Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward (1977) suggest that the existence of ''radical flack'' facilitates mobilization, insofar as the use of violence is a substitute for other resources.

These previous studies did not provide, however, a satisfactory explanation of political violence in Italy and Germany in the past three decades. Tilly's assumption that violent events are an indicator of protest events does not hold true for contemporary movements in Western societies: as Sidney Tarrow showed in his masterly reconstruction of the internal dynamics of protest cycles (1989a; see also della Porta and Tarrow 1986), violent repertoires have different dynamics than nonviolent ones. Moreover, in some contexts the use of violent repertoires favored the movement's success, whereas in both Italy and Germany political violence and terrorism endangered the development of the left-libertarian family.

The understanding of the dynamics and consequences of political violence therefore requires an analysis of the effects of different forms of political violence in different historical contexts. Although the problem of political violence is far from solved, recent studies on social movements provide the main categories for the explanatory model of political violence in Italy and Germany that I am going to develop here.

Social movements, political violence, and the state: some basic concepts and relevant questions

Most empirical studies on political violence refer to one of the three analytical levels: the system, the group, or the individual (corresponding respectively to the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of analysis). They address one of three questions:

- In what type of society is political violence most likely to develop – that is, what environmental conditions foster political violence?
- Which groups are most likely to use violent repertoires – that is, which characteristics of political organizations eventually lead them to adopt the most extreme forms of political violence?
- Which individuals are most likely to resort to political violence?

Although the existing macro-, meso-, and micro-analysis have generated interesting suggestions about the environmental preconditions for violence, the characteristics of violent groups, and individual commitment to violence, none provides a global explanation for the complex phenomenon of political violence.

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The macro-analysis fails to consider the intermediate processes between general structures and individual behavior. The meso-analysis gives us a voluntaristic interpretation of violence as a strategic choice carried out by single groups or organizations. And the micro-analysis tends to attribute this political phenomenon to purely psychological factors.

In order to attain a more complex explanation of political violence, I have tried to develop a model in which the systemic, organizational, and individual perspectives – in other words, environmental conditions, group dynamics, and individual motivations – were all taken into account. For although political violence, as a political phenomenon, is certainly influenced by the conditions of the political system from which it emerges, it is, at least in most industrial democracies, a phenomenon involving fairly small organizations, whose dynamics inevitably influence its development. Moreover, like other forms of deviant behavior, political violence generates changes in individuals' value systems and perceptions of external reality, which in turn affect the organization as a whole. Thus, different analytical levels may be said to "dominate" different stages of the evolution of radical groups.

The argument becomes somewhat less abstract if I identify the basic concepts underlying the integrated model employed in the research. The framework used was a complex set of concepts adopted from many disciplines, including organizational studies, symbolic interactionism, and – above all – social movement studies.

Turning first to the *macro-variables* that influence the evolution of political violence, various studies suggested that – besides the internal resources of the movement and the dynamic of the protest cycle – the most relevant explanations of movements' repertoire are to be found in the political process. In particular, strategic choices are influenced by the *political opportunity structure* (POS), that is, the set of environmental opportunities and constraints available to social movements. Developed in the research on the temporal evolution of protest actions, the POS concept referred mainly to the opening or closing of the political system (depending, in particular, on available alliances and strength of the opponents) (McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1983, 1994). When it was applied to cross-national comparison of social movements, the POS concept became progressively complex. In a comparison of Germany, Sweden, and the United States, Herbert Kitschelt (1986) suggested that action strategies and outcomes vary according to the *institutional* variables that define the openness–closure of the political system and its implementation capacity. Comparing movements' strategies in Germany, France, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, Hanspeter Kriesi and his collaborators (Kriesi 1991; Kriesi et al. 1995) added to the institutional aspects of the POS some *informal* elements, synthesized by the national strategy to deal with challengers. Studying the women's and ecological movements in France, Germany, and the United States, Dieter Rucht (1995) distinguishes between *historical* and *conjunctural* context structures. Most of these

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