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0521473969 - Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany

Donatella Della Porta

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## *Social movements, political violence, and the state*

The rise of social movements in the late 1960s in the industrialized West posed compelling questions for social science: Why did political conflicts radicalize precisely in those societies that seemed to have been pacified by the promises of the welfare state and the institutionalization of the labor conflict? Why did a generation socialized to politics in the calm and affluence of the early sixties resort to violence? Why, in the “First World,” were police forces ordered to fire on political demonstrators?

This book presents empirical research on the nature and structure of political violence. While most studies of social movements focus on single-nation studies, Donatella della Porta uses a comparative research design to analyze movements in two countries – Italy and Germany – from the 1960s to the 1990s. Through extensive use of official documents and in-depth interviews, della Porta explains the actors’ construction of external political reality. The empirical data are used to build a middle-range theory on political violence that incorporates an analysis of the interactions between social movements and the state at the macro-level, an analysis of the development of radical organizations as entrepreneurs for political violence at the meso-level, and an analysis of the construction of “militant” identities and countercultures at the micro-level.

By studying the social movement families from within which violence emerges, linking social movements to institutions, and, finally, providing a systematic analysis – firmly grounded in history – of the nature of political violence, the author has created a masterful synthesis that will help secure a place for the study of political violence in the study of systemwide politics.

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violence, and the state*

*A comparative analysis of Italy and Germany*

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## Foreword

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SIDNEY TARROW

Donatella della Porta's *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State* crosses four important thresholds in the comparative study of political conflict: the violence/social movement threshold, the movement/institutions threshold, the comparative politics/sociology threshold, and the history/social science threshold.

Beginning with the attacks on Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics, a virtual cottage industry of terrorist studies developed. Rooted in the international system, largely innocent of theoretical apparatus, and often conflating terrorism with other forms of violent conflict, these studies produced much new knowledge, but drew little on the social movement field that was undergoing a renaissance at the same time. The first major virtue of della Porta's book is that she has grounded her analysis of political violence in Italy and Germany in both European and American social movement theory. This allows her to show how the organized violence of the 1970s and 1980s in these two countries related to the social movements that appeared during the previous decade.

Della Porta's second contribution is to root the study of social movements within political institutions. Research on social movements languished in the backwaters of sociology and social psychology until the late 1960s and was largely ignored by political scientists. But the flowering of the civil rights and student movements in the United States and of the "new" social movements of Western Europe in the 1970s led to a resurgence and "normalization" of this field. Della Porta situates her study in this tradition, relating the movements she studies to the political process. In particular, she uses the key concept of the structure of political opportunity to show how some of the movements that emerged in the late 1960s were integrated within the political process, while others gravitated toward political violence.

Not only that: della Porta enlarges the focus of the political process approach to the state and to its most relevant contributor to the dynamics of political violence – the police. Following Tilly's injunction that a movement is a sustained interaction between challengers and opponents, she focuses on how the

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repertoire of the movements and the tactics of the police affect one another, and how each is affected by the balance between civil rights-oriented groups and law and order-oriented groups. Much of the difference in the frequency and strategies of politically violent groups in the two countries is explained by this intersection between the police and protesters.

Della Porta also makes an original contribution to the intersection between political sociology and comparative politics. In the past, the social movement field was largely built on one-nation case studies (and that nation was almost always the United States), while studies of comparative politics were mainly occupied with the study of formal institutions. Della Porta's book will help to break down this boundary. By choosing two similar cases – Italy and Germany – both of which emerged from defeat in World War II and were building new democracies at the time when widespread social insurgency appeared, and by using a variety of methods drawn from political sociology and comparative politics, she builds an effective bridge between these two fields.

One of the methods she employs relates the organizational ecology of terrorist organizations to the movements' life histories. Rather than interpreting terrorism as the result of personal deviance, she sees it as a possible outcome of a tree of possibilities resulting from organizational choices and constraints. Thus, just as not every movement becomes violent, not every violent movement gives rise to a clandestine terrorist organization. Perhaps the signal contribution of the book is to add an organizational perspective to the analysis of the dynamics of violent political movements.

The fourth contribution of the book is to situate the study of collective action within history. In recent years, many political scientists have turned their attention to collective action, building upon public choice theory. Although this strand of theory has led to significant advances in knowledge, its distance from history has made it somewhat abstract and, at times, disembodied. Della Porta's book shows that research on social movements and political violence can be both theoretical and in history. She not only traces the rise and dynamics of organized violence in these two countries from the 1960s through the 1980s, but roots her findings in the larger political developments of each system since World War II.

In situating her study of political violence, first, among the social movement families from within which violence emerges, then in relating social movements to institutions, and, finally, in providing a systematic analysis of what we know about violence – much of which she herself has contributed – Donatella della Porta has produced a masterful synthesis that will help to secure the place of the study of political violence and social movements squarely within the field of the systematic study of politics.



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## Abbreviations

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AO	Avanguardia Operaia (Workers' Vanguard)
APO	Außerparlamentarische Opposition (Extra-Parliamentary Opposition)
AStA	Allgemeiner Studenten Ausschuss (General Committee of Students)
B2J	Bewegung 2. Juni (Movement of the Second of June)
BC	Brigate Comuniste (Communist Brigades)
BKA	Bundeskriminalamt
BR	Brigate Rosse (Red Brigades)
CC	Comitati Comunisti (Communist Committees)
CCPO	Comitati Comunisti per il Potere Operaio (Communist Committees for the Workers' Power)
CDU	Christlich-Demokratische Union (Christian Democratic Union)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPM	Collettivo Politico Metropolitan (Political Metropolitan Collective)
CPO	Collettivo Politico Operaio (Workers' Political Collective)
CPOS	Collettivo Politico Operai e Studenti (Workers' and Students' Political Collective)
CSU	Christlich-Soziale Union (Christian Social Union)
DC	Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democracy)
DKP	Deutsche Kommunistische Partei (German Communist Party)
FAC	Formazioni Armate Combattenti (Armed Fighting Formations)
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FCC	Formazioni Comuniste Combattenti (Communist Fighting Formations)
FDP	Freie Demokratische Partei (Liberal Democratic Party)
FGCI	Federazione Giovanile Comunista Italiana (Italian Communist Youth Federation)
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany

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GDR	German Democratic Republic
Jusos	Jungsozialisten (Young Socialists)
<i>K-Gruppen</i>	<i>Kommunistische Gruppen</i> (Communist Groups)
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany)
LC	Lotta Continua (Continuous Struggle)
MCR	Movimento Comunista Rivoluzionario (Communist Revolutionary Movement)
MS	Movimento Studentesco (Student Movement)
MSI	Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement)
NAP	Nuclei Armati Proletari (Armed Proletarian Nuclei)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NPD	Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (National Democratic Party of Germany)
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
PAC	Proletari Armati per il Comunismo (Armed Proletarians for Communism)
PCI	Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party)
PCImI	Partito Comunista Italiano marxista leninista (Italian Communist Marxist-Leninist Party)
PdUP	Partito di Unità Proletaria (Proletarian Unity Party)
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PL	Prima Linea (Front Line)
PO	Potere Operaio (Workers' Power)
POS	Political Opportunity Structure
PSI	Partito Socialista Italiano (Italian Socialist Party)
PSIUP	Partito Socialista Italiano di Unità Proletaria (Italian Socialist Party for the Proletarian Unity)
RAF	Rote Armee Fraktion (Red Army Fraction)
RC	Republikanischer Club (Republican Club)
RCA	Reparti Comunisti d'Attacco (Communist Unities for the Attack)
RH	Rote Hilfe (Red Help)
RZ	Revolutionären Zellen (Revolutionary Cells)
SDS	(American) Students for a Democratic Society
SDS	(German) Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (Socialist German Student League)
SH	Schwarze Hilfe (Black Help)
SMO	Social Movement Organization
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
SPK	Sozialistisches Patientenkollektiv (Socialist Collective of Patients)

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UCC	Unità Comuniste Combattenti (Communist Fighting Units)
UCIml	Unione dei Comunisti Italiani marxisti leninisti (Union of the Italian Marxist-Leninist Communists)
UGI	Unione Goliardica Italiana (Italian Goliardic Union)
UNURI	Unione Nazionale Universitaria Rappresentativa Italiana (Italian National Universitarian Representative Union)

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## Preface

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*West Berlin, June 2, 1967. An official visit in Germany by the Shah of Iran and his wife coincided with the peak of a long-lasting student mobilization. Because of rumors of a possible attack against the Shah, the federal government declared the "highest security level." The state government mobilized 4,240 policemen to guarantee the security of the guests. Since the early morning, organizations of Iranian refugees and student groups had staged protests everywhere the imperial couple was expected to appear during its Berlin visit. Several times during the day, demonstrators and the Shah's supporters – later said to be organized by the Iranian secret services – clashed with each other, and the police charged the demonstrators. The first confrontations took place in front of the city hall. About four hundred protestors carrying placards calling for "Freedom for Iran" were attacked by a group of about a hundred pro-Shah demonstrators. Once over the police barriers, the attackers advanced on the crowd, armed with iron bars. The demonstrators called on the police to stop the attack. The police charged the anti-Shah demonstrators. Skirmishes continued throughout the day: "12.40 smoking bombs in front of the city hall . . . 15.50 egg-and-paint bombs thrown in front of the castle . . . 17.00 a demonstrator throws an egg . . . 19.47 firecrackers were thrown at the cortege of the Shah" – so the chronicle of the Berlin daily Morgenpost. But the most violent confrontations took place in the evening in front of the opera house, where the Berlin authorities and their guests were to attend a concert, protected by about one thousand policemen. Before the beginning of the performance, members of the Shah's escort had thrown stones at the students, who had retaliated with rotten eggs, bags of flour, and tomatoes – the typical "arms" of the student movement. A few minutes after the performance began, the police charged the demonstrators with truncheons. Employing what the chief of the police described as the "sausage" tactic, some police units pushed the demonstrators at the front of the "sausage," while others charged them from behind. During the ensuing fights between the police and demonstrators, a plainclothes policeman shot and killed the student Benno Ohnesorg. Besides this death, the final toll of the fights amounted to twenty-*

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*eight injured among the policemen, at least twenty-two injured (some of them seriously) among the demonstrators, and a total of forty-seven arrests.*

*June 2, 1967, represented a climax. Professors, assistants, and researchers from many universities issued statements stigmatizing the “brutal repression of fundamental democratic rights,” labeling police brutality a legacy of the Nazi past and proof of the weakness of democracy. But if the protestors and their allies advocated “Widerstandsrecht” – the right to resist unjust authorities – the political parties and part of the press accused the students of demonstrating “against democracy.” The demonstrators were, in fact, stigmatized as “Radikalinskis financed by the East,” as an anarchist minority, as professional revolutionaries (Berufsrevoluzzer), or simply as bloodthirsty, hysterical rioters. The red flags of the students were considered symbols of the subordination of the protestors to the German Democratic Republic: “Red flags.” wrote the conservative and sensationalistic Bild, “the symbols under which the popular rebellion of June 17 [1953] was repressed and the wall was built. Communist slogans in front of the city hall, after that, just yesterday, another human being was killed at the border.” As puppets of the communist regimes, the demonstrators were then accused of producing chaos in West Berlin in order to provide the Soviet Union with an excuse for military intervention. The street violence evoked, in fact, the phantom of the Weimar Republic and the breakdown of democracy: “All of us, who lived in the period before 1933,” proclaimed a social-democratic member of the Berlin Parliament, “we know how it starts and how it ends.” At least part of public opinion seemed to share the prevailing comment of the authoritative daily Frankfurter Allgemeine, which stated that “political demonstrations are the most stupid and useless means of political participation.”*

*Rome, March 1, 1968. At 10 a.m. several thousand students converged on Piazza di Spagna to protest against the police intervention to clear the occupation of the Roman university buildings by students. The Roman occupation and its counterparts all over Italy were part of a massive mobilization campaign for a reform of the university system. The march, joined by high school students, passed the headquarters of the RAI (the Italian public television broadcasting network) and the Christian Democratic daily, Il Popolo, and then reached Valle Giulia, where helmeted policemen armed with truncheons had garrisoned the faculty of architecture. The two sides confronted each other for a few minutes; then the fights, later known, in the movement’s mythology, as “The Battle of Valle Giulia,” started. The clashes lasted for over three hours, in a dramatic escalation of violence. The police attacked with tear gas and water cannons; the students retaliated with eggs and stones. The police received reinforcements, and so did the students, while an enormous traffic jam blocked the entire city center. According to the police, the students built barricades with cars and destroyed police Jeeps. According to the demonstrators, the police acted with great bru-*

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*tality, charging to the command: "Kill them." The struggle, in which about 3,000 demonstrators and 2,000 policemen were involved, resulted in 211 injured (158 of them among the police), 228 arrested, and 4 imprisoned.*

*The Battle of Valle Giulia triggered an embittered debate, which polarized the political system. The students found a strong ally in the Old Left, which called for the formation of a large reformist and progressive front. On the next day, the Roman leftist daily Paese Sera, openly referring to the resistance movement against the Nazi occupation, ran the headline: "Unarmed they faced chains, clubs, Jeeps, and guns. The young courage of the students humiliates the brutality of the police." For the students and their allies, the enemy was the antidemocratic forces that responded to the demands for reform with "fascist repression." As a leader of the Socialist Party (then in government) put it, the "barbarian methods of the police" were paralleled only by the German rounding-up of members of the resistance in occupied Italy. Although the students found allies in the political system, for the conservative political spectrum and a large part of the press they were nothing else than left-wing extremists, agitprops, and political troublemakers. Instigated by the communists, they were said to produce chaos in order to destroy democracy: "The disorders at the university," stated the Roman daily Il Tempo, "are provoked for political reasons by those Moscovite or Chinese communists who found the way to unhinge, even for the future, the scientific institution, hitting the nation in one of its more essential parts." Praising the police, Minister of Home Affairs Taviani recalled that "the weakness and uncertainty of the forces of law and order were among the components of the decline of democracy and the advent of fascism."*

The two episodes summarized here had a high symbolic impact on social movements and the political systems in the Federal Republic of Germany and Italy. On the one hand, they triggered a violent escalation in the interactions between protestors and the police, destined to continue well into the seventies. On the other hand, they polarized the political arena between those who conceived protest as an essential part of the democratic process and those who saw it as a danger. If in the early nineties, most observers consider social movements to be peaceful actors in the democratic system, in the sixties and the seventies, protest appeared to many as synonymous with disorder and violence.

Has the reality of protest changed so much over the past three decades? Or do we observe – and judge – social movements from a totally different perspective? Certainly a shift in both positions has occurred. Now, activists who challenge the establishment have access to the polity through channels that were simply unavailable to their counterparts thirty years ago. Moreover, challengers are better organized and can draw on a repertoire of collective action that has broadened considerably over the past thirty years. Generally, then, the social movements that emerged during these years achieved some substantial success. After each wave of protest, new collective actors were accepted into the arena

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of “normal” politics. Indeed, the cycle of protest that began in most Western democracies – and elsewhere – in the mid-sixties produced profound changes in the institutional system, contributing in particular to a more liberal conception of democracy and citizens’ rights.

But social movements themselves have changed over the past decades, especially in their attitudes toward the use of violence as a means of exerting political pressure. In the sixties, although attitudes differed somewhat from one country to another, movement activists were generally ambivalent as to the use of violence. In the seventies, however, a variety of circumstances transformed this ambivalence, at least for a good portion of movement activists, into a positive attitude. In several countries, the forms of protest then radicalized, state repression increased, and the escalation on both sides often lasted for several years, before the vicious circle of violence–repression–violence–repression was interrupted. When political and social conflicts became radicalized, terrorist organizations emerged in several representative democracies, including the United States, Japan, and various European countries. For a while, in the seventies and early eighties, the political elites perceived political violence as a serious threat to the stability of several Western European countries.

This dramatic evolution raises several questions. Why did political conflicts radicalize precisely in those societies that seemed to have been pacified by the development of the welfare state and the institutionalization of the labor conflict? Why did movement organizations, which originally emphasized spontaneity and grass-roots democracy, transform themselves into small, often “armed,” sects? Why did a generation socialized to politics in a democracy and in the calm and affluence of the early sixties resort to violence? The social sciences were slow to provide answers to these questions. On the one hand, reliable sources were scarce; on the other hand, the tense political climate of the years in which violence peaked was not conducive to objective scientific research. The sociological contribution therefore consisted of rather abstract, deductive theories on the nature of conflict and violence. More recently, various case studies on radical political organizations have improved our knowledge of the phenomenon. But we still lack an empirically based explanation of the escalation and de-escalation of political conflict. Only a historical and cross-national comparison of the characteristics and dynamics of political violence will, I believe, allow us to combine the detailed information provided by the case studies with a broad explanation that is the aim of sociological theory. Through my research on the roots and manifestations of political violence in Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany from the end of the sixties to the end of the eighties I attempt to analyze radicalization processes in a comparative perspective, with the hope of bridging this gulf between abstract theories and case studies.

Several people and institutions helped me in this enterprise. First of all, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation generously supported my comparative re-



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search with a three-year Career Development Award. For my work on the German case, the research unit on Social Movements and the Public Sphere at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung provided me with a most stimulating environment for three years. For the Italian case, I used in part the materials I had collected during a research project at the Istituto di Studi e Ricerche Carlo Cattaneo, in Bologna; the research for my doctoral dissertation at the European University Institute in Florence; and a Visiting Fellowship at the Western Societies Program at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Moreover, I continued my research as a Visiting Scholar at the Faculty of Political Science in Florence. The actual writing of this book began when I was a Visiting Scholar at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut.

Finding original sources for empirical research on political violence is not an easy matter. I am most grateful to all those who trusted me enough to help me in my search for information in both countries. I am particularly obliged to the Italian judges Gian Carlo Caselli, Rosario Minna, Armando Spataro, and Pierluigi Vigna; the Istituto di Studi e Ricerche Carlo Cattaneo in Bologna; Peter Katzenstein at Cornell; and the President of the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin, Friedhelm Neidhardt. Moreover, I am grateful to all those activists who agreed to narrate their often painful experiences with political violence.

The list of sociologists, political scientists, and historians with whom I had the good fortune to discuss parts of my research is simply too long to cite. I presented partial results of my research at the International Meeting on Comparative Social Movements at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin in December 1989; the Joint Sessions of the European Consortium for Political Research in Bochum in April 1990; the World Congress of the International Sociological Association in Madrid in July 1990; the International Conference on Social Movement Theory in Berlin in June 1990; the International Conference ‘‘European–American Perspective of Social Movements’’ in Washington in August 1991; the Tagung of the *Neue Soziale Bewegungen Forschungsjournal* in Bonn in 1991 and 1992; the ‘‘First European Conference on Social Movements’’ in October 1992 in Berlin; and the World Congress of the International Sociological Association in 1994 in Bielefeld. During these workshops I was able to discuss various pieces of my work with colleagues and friends: Robert Benford, Karl-Werner Brandt, Mario Diani, Bill Gamson, Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi, Juan Linz, Doug McAdam, John McCarthy, Alberto Melucci, Dieter Rucht, David Snow, Sidney Tarrow, Leonard Weinberg, and Mayer Zald are among them. From all of them, I have learned much more than I could acknowledge in my footnotes. Colleagues at my research unit at the Wissenschaftszentrum – Barbara Blattert, Dieter Rucht, Friedhelm Neidhardt, Birgit Peters, Dieter Fuchs, Thomas Ohlemacher, and Jürgen Gerhard – all assisted me, with kindness and patience, in the various steps of learning German and getting accustomed to the German political system. Friedhelm Neidhardt and Dieter Rucht – as well as Martha Crenshaw, Mario Diani, Bert Klandermans, and Nicola

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*Preface*

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Lacey – read drafts of the chapters and offered much welcome comment. An article I wrote with Dieter Rucht constitutes the basis for the second chapter of this volume. I am most grateful to Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow, who had the courage and courtesy to read the whole – unedited – manuscript. Although the responsibility for what I have written is, of course, mine, this book benefited greatly from their comments.

Martha Linke edited, with competence and care, the entire manuscript, struggling to make my English readable. Clare Tame skillfully reedited several chapters that I had drastically revised after the first copyediting.

Finally, my gratitude goes to Herbert Reiter. I cannot be sure that this book would have not been written without him, but I am sure that my understanding of Germany would have been much more superficial and my life in Germany less exciting without his presence. Even if we do not always agree on our judgments of our native countries – which is normal between historian and a political scientist – I hope he will learn as much about Italy from me as I have learned from him about Germany.

*D.d.P.*  
*Florence*  
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