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Political Violence in Context

Time, Space and Milieu

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From Legitimation to Rejection of Violence: The Shifting Stance of the Radical Milieu in Italy during the 1970s

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Theories of the radical milieu emphasise that armed organisations depend heavily on their constituencies for moral and practical sustenance. Active supporters and sympathisers contribute to shaping identities, defining incentives, and establishing norms of expected behaviours. Research shows that the radical milieu's impact on the dynamics of violence is ambivalent (Malthaner and Waldmann 2014). On the one hand, it may contribute to processes of radicalisation and escalation of violence, but on the other, it can also generate de-radicalising and de-escalating outcomes. Specifically, studies suggest that the radical milieu usually exerts 'a moderating influence on assessments of the political consequences and moral costs of escalating conflict processes' (Neidhardt 2011: 435). In other words, the radical milieu can act as a connector between the armed groups' far-reaching strategies and people's more realistic expectations.

However, the nature and the extent of the ties between armed groups and radical milieu are still uncharted territory. Only a few empirical studies have explored such interactions in depth (Waldmann 2006). Scholarly attention has mainly focused on the processes of recruitment within contentious social networks (della Porta 1988), or on community engagement for counterterrorism (Spalek 2014). Moreover, the literature has failed to explain whether and how the radical milieu can shift its perspective from supporting violence to rejecting it, or vice versa. Yet, given the milieu's transformative power over armed fringes, the question is both empirically significant and policy-relevant.

To achieve a better understanding of the relationship between violent fringes and radical milieu, the present research investigates the following two aspects: 1) the conditions under which the radical milieu is likely to encourage violence in armed groups, and the way this support is both expressed and perceived, and 2) which factors may foster a change of orientation within the radical milieu and drive it towards a more critical attitude *vis-à-vis* violence.

This chapter analyses the case of Italian leftist armed groups of the 1970s and their supportive environment. During this period, armed vanguards perpetrated hundreds of attacks against people and property (della Porta and Rossi 1984) in the absence of explicit criticism from their milieu. However, after a few years of encouragement and silent endorsement, the radical milieu increasingly perceived violence as negative and threatening, progressively withdrawing its legitimation and support. Yet, this shift materialised too late to be directly decisive, since leftist

armed groups – sustained for a long time – had already caused a heavy death toll and were fighting a self-referential war against state apparatuses.

The intensity of revolutionary violence in Italy stands out against other Western developed countries (Sánchez-Cuenca 2009). The two main leftist clandestine organisations seeking a radical political change through proletarian armed struggle were the Red Brigades and Front Line. A wide array of smaller groups, sharing the same goals, also contributed to disseminating violence across time and space. Neo-fascist groups further propelled the levels of civil strife by means of indiscriminate attacks on civilians and street fights with leftist militants. The Christian Democratic Party (DC) represented the keystone of the 'system of power' under attack, but the Italian Communist Party (PCI), which gradually extended its institutional responsibilities during the 1970s, also played a pivotal role. The cycle of contention as a whole emerged around 1968 and substantially declined after 1982.

The first part of this chapter demonstrates the extent to which the legitimation of political violence in the Italian context was widespread, enduring, and resilient. It also provides evidence that armed groups were embedded in a dense web of relations with their constituencies, which offered decisive incentives for the escalation. The research focuses on three main areas that were particularly tied to armed vanguards: the student movement, the communist workers, and the radical intellectuals.

In the second part, the chapter analyses the cognitive shift through which the radical milieu came to perceive violence as undesirable, eventually rejecting it. The research shows that such a change of perspective resulted from an incremental process entailing both emotional experiences and rational considerations. The chapter identifies four key traumatic events and four main logical arguments that elicited discussion on the meaning and effectiveness of violence. The research finally demonstrates that the timing and non-linearity of this process jeopardised the moderating capacities of the radical milieu.

The chapter offers a historical analysis of the still under-investigated Italian radical milieu. The research draws on a wide range of primary sources: radical magazines and documents (mainly from the Feltrinelli Foundation collection), Italian Communist Party archives, and militants' memoirs. The radical milieu included both the so-called Old and New Left, i.e., the political spectrum from the PCI to Autonomia Operaia, whose borders with armed groups were porous. The main arenas of leftist debates were systematically analysed, with specific regard to the period 1977–9, which represents the turning point of the evolution of the role of the radical milieu.

Studying the radical milieu

This chapter adopts Malthaner and Waldmann's (2014) definition of radical milieu as indicating the 'immediate social environment' that provides armed groups with moral and logistical support. The milieu shares 'experiences, symbols, narratives, and frameworks of interpretation' with violent fringes and their respective social networks are interlinked.

More specifically, armed groups see themselves as representing this population and fighting on its behalf. It gives 'meaning and legitimacy' to their political program and violent means. From the radical milieu violent militants derive symbolic and material resources. On the one hand, normative standards, moral sustenance, and solidarity. On the other hand, recruits, money, weapons, shelter, legal aid, and information. However, I believe, with Malthaner (2011: 39–51), that legitimacy and moral support are much more relevant to urban contemporary armed groups than is material help, 'and their withdrawal could prove even more devastating'. Indeed, in the Italian context, multiple testimonies confirm this necessity of constant approval and solidarity by the radical milieu. Although armed vanguards were theoretically supposed to 'force the situation' and introduce 'a step forward' regardless of the legitimation of the masses (Novelli and Tranfaglia 1988: 251–2), militants belonging to violent organisations were constantly monitoring the attitude and judgment of the milieu. As a result, they extracted incentives for their actions and (re)oriented their strategies and means accordingly. Hence, this chapter focuses primarily on symbolic resources, ranging from explicit support and vocal endorsement to silent complicity.

If the radical milieu influences armed fringes, the opposite is also true. The milieu is equally sensitive to this interaction and modifies both its judgment and attitude *vis-à-vis* violent groups over time. As a consequence, the research employs a diachronic and relational analysis. Although different Italian armed groups addressed slightly different social environments, and since the latter also changed over time, the research – for the sake of generalisation – glosses over these nuances. Yet, the reader should bear in mind that the radical milieu is internally differentiated and its boundaries are in constant evolution.

There is a twofold bias in historical sources describing the interaction between milieu and armed groups. Retrospectively, armed militants tend to amplify the support and solidarity they enjoy, whereas the radical milieu tends to stress its non-involvement, criticism, and isolation from and of violent groups. On one side, armed groups present themselves as peoples' avengers with a popular mandate; on the other, the radical milieu proclaims its non-involvement, picturing violent fringes as private warriors without followers. The research, in order to reduce this bias, crosschecks different sources. Moreover, it is worth noting that the immediate supportive environment usually represents only a section of the wider audiences that armed groups seek to address (Malthaner and Waldmann 2014), because revolutionary leftists often claim to fight in the name of abstract categories, such as the proletariat, or exploited people.

Finally, encouragement and legitimacy are, to a large extent, a matter of perception. We know that self-deception was widely diffused among armed militants, who were used to mistaking meaningless gestures for deliberate political solidarity. They also interpreted some grass-roots campaigns and mass protests as unequivocal requests for violent intervention (della Porta 1990a; Guicciardi 1988: 91). Although the gap between the solidarity perceived by armed militants and the solidarity expressed by the radical milieu may be considerable, the crucial

point is the level of consensus that violent groups felt around them. The chapter consistently takes into consideration not only objective conditions but also subjective perceptions.

A widespread and resilient legitimation of violence

The student movement

The leftist archipelago that emerged in Italy in the wake of the social struggles of 1968 and 1969 was particularly vast. Although fragmented from both an ideological and an organisational point of view, leftist revolutionary groups were numerous, with large memberships (della Porta 1990b: 276). A myriad of collectives blossomed around universities, factories, and low-income neighbourhoods. Some of them actively supported and promoted armed struggle, others just proclaimed the necessity of a violent upheaval, while still others observed violent escalation with benevolence or indifference. Yet, their common denominator was – for about a decade and with a few exceptions – that they were not taking a clear stance against violence. Militants who engaged in armed action, if criticised, were commonly identified as 'comrades who are going wrong'. Yet, they were still comrades fighting on the same front, deserving protection as well as public support.

The literature has extensively analysed the bulk of violent theorisations elaborated by Italian leftist groups (Ventrone 2012). Encouragement, justifications, and recruitment for the benefit of armed organisations had been disclosed and started around 1969–70. Yet, for the sake of my argument, I suggest focusing on the persistent and lively presence of a recognisable movement over many years. French literature labelled the Italian 1970s 'the long May', implying a decade-long extension of the contentious politics of May 1968 (Sommier 1998: 48). More specifically, I argue that the rise of a 'second cycle of protest' (Edwards 2009) around 1976–7 is the main reason for the milieu of violent groups being particularly vast and enduring among radical students and youngsters.

In contrast to other Western countries, where political mobilisation had dried up by the first half of the 1970s, Italian social movements experienced a substantial revitalisation. This guaranteed continuity over ten years and provided a second generation of leftist militants, much more impatient and demanding than before. A new wave of protests and social struggles emerged, triggered by both the economic crisis and the Communist Party's strategy of compromise. Thousands of demonstrators invaded city centres, sabotage actions increased, 'proletarian appropriations' proliferated, firearms started circulating above ground, and violence against property and people boomed. Armed nuclei merged into pacific marches where they also found refuge, giving a vivid impression of collective violence. Revitalisation also involved ideological repertoires, which were updated by virtue of theoretical elaboration from autonomous groups, and were realigned with socio-economic evolutions

(i.e. industrial restructuring and growth of the service sector). New proletarian rebels – unemployed or underemployed, often graduates – seemed to make the scene. Political cynicism and antagonism *vis-à-vis* the legal order were their signatures (Benecchi 1977: 107–11).

The journalists who went to interview the young protagonists of the movement were puzzled by their dangerous familiarity with violence. As a young woman told *Corriere della Sera* (23 April 1977), 'We are so used to Molotov cocktails, struggle with police, that we are almost indifferent in the face of death. We don't feel anything more, even though, rationally, we are against violence'. A fellow comrade added, 'If I saw a comrade taking aim and killing, I would never report him. Institutions are always the enemy. Being comrades is also a moral agreement'. The 'diffused illegality' of this period materialised in a continuum ranging from simple 'auto-reductions' of electricity bills to the shootings of policemen during demonstrations. Such a movement not only provided a large space of recruiting and support for underground organisations but also, and above all, reinforced the idea of the feasibility of revolution.

In particular, Autonomia Operaia – though strategically challenging the role of isolated vanguards – constantly promoted the construction of an 'armed movement' and never called into question the legitimacy of violence (*Rosso per il Potere Operaio*, May 1978). Indeed, during the 1970s, autonomous groups actively helped clandestine militants, for example when they escaped from prisons (Calogero, Fumian and Sartori 2010: 51). More significantly, they were able to simultaneously operate above and under ground, by virtue of a few secret armed branches that grew out of their security services (della Porta 1990b: 114–18). The Red Brigades (BR) were structured along a twofold dimension too. They had regular clandestine activists – named *regolari* – who were cut off from society, and militants still living above ground – named *irregolari* – interacting with the movement while operating illegally within the organisation (Clementi 2007: 101). This 'double level of militancy' is a peculiar feature of the Italian context and suggests that the boundaries between violent groups and their radical milieu, under various circumstances, faded away.

In addition, Front Line – the most relevant armed organisation after the BR – was born in the wake of 1976–7, with the aim to keep overt and clandestine militancy entangled. Front Line member Marco Fagiano significantly recalls, 'I had the feeling that everything was about to collapse: weapons on the streets were like the flagpoles of previous periods, and guerrilla attacks that started from demonstrations were a daily practice'. In a similar vein, Susanna Ronconi, another Front Line militant, remembers the way the group *Senza tregua* – which would later merge with Front Line – was easily recruited into the movement during the second half of 1970s, and enjoyed the 'immediate readiness to combat' (Novelli and Tranfaglia 1988: 294, 235). Both Enrico Baglioni and Diego Forastieri Molinari, who also joined Front Line, stressed the symbolic value of this 'climate of civil war' – 'the impression of being on the eve of a pre-insurrectional situation' – and the ensuing discussions about the urgency of taking up arms (Guicciardi 1988: 117–27). Indeed, the movement greeted Front Line's inaugural attack with unequivocal approval: on

April 1976, six hours after the killing of right-wing representative Enrico Pedenovi in Milan, 5,000 young leftists marched near the place of the murder, yelling, 'ten, a hundred, a thousand Pedenovis' (Bollati 2001: 23, 74). Enrico Galmozzi, one of the killers, confirms they perceived a mass legitimacy, 'something like a political demand to intervene at that level' (Guicciardi 1988: 58–60).

Thanks to this revitalisation of the radical milieu, the BR also regained momentum after the arrests of the previous years and consolidated their new strategy, implying direct attacks against state representatives. Their first intentional victim was indeed public prosecutor Francesco Coco, killed on June 1976. As Moretti (1994: 101–13) recalls, '[i]n all the 1976–77 public demonstrations, "Coco, Coco, Coco, it is still too little" was among the most chanted slogans: in the famous assortment of the movement that action had been approved.' Analogously, the BR militant Prospero Gallinari interpreted the contentious level of the social struggles in 1977 and the marches singing the praises of the BR as 'an explicit validation' of their strategy:

> I feel pride and enthusiasm in my chest. I feel that this testimony of shameless sympathy demonstrated by a legal movement is the best confirmation that the practice of the organization is deep rooted in the social contradictions and tensions of the country. (Gallinari 2006: 150–6)

Within the movement of 1977, BR – although ideologically quite distant from the student milieu – recruited a new generation and enjoyed solidarity and shelter (Faranda's testimony in *Commissione stragi* 1998). Ultimately, from the BR's point of view, the mass diffusion of highly violent repertoires displayed that a 'creeping civil war' was already underway and that the BR only needed to develop it (Brigate Rosse 1978: 96).

The communist workers, the PCI, and the trade unions

Italy was, during the 1970s, characterised by a significant degree of militant workers' sympathy towards armed fringes. Historical evidence clearly outlines an area of appreciation of leftist violence within large factories, especially in the industrial regions in the North.

The BR and – before this – its embryonic organisations *Collettivo politico metropolitano* and *Sinistra proletaria* grew out of Milanese factories, such as Magneti-Marelli, Falck, Breda, Sit-Siemens, Alfa, and Pirelli. Factory brigades never had more than ten members per plant, but exerted a much larger influence (*Senza padroni: Giornale dell'Assemblea Autonoma dell'Alfa Romeo* 1975). Alberto Franceschini, a BR leader, remembers going to the Pirelli factory gates to speak with workers, and eating at the Siemens canteen along with the workers. He also recalls that workers took advantage of the first BR attacks. Indeed, these actions threatened factory bosses, who consequently limited their demands. Similarly, Roberto Ognibene stresses the general reticence, and Lauro even claims that the BR had to filter and restrain the overabundant 'requests for war'

coming from the social base (Bocca 1985: 57–60). According to testimonies, the BR could rely on 100 active supporters within the Sit-Siemens factory in Milan, twenty-seven of whom were later arrested for participation in armed struggle (Moretti 1994: 21). Up until 1974, the BR were also able to combine armed propaganda with influence over labour negotiations, by means of two members within the Sit-Siemens factory council (Galli 1991). In 1977, 400 Magneti-Marelli workers signed a solidarity plea for seven armed militants who had been arrested near Verbania, Piedmont, while doing military training (Cavallini 1978: 201–2).

In the area of Turin, the BR enjoyed some degree of consensus and support, chiefly at the Fiat, Lancia, and Pininfarina factories. Communist workers at Fiat Mirafiori admit – albeit reluctantly – that there was the 'hope' among them that 'some clamorous action could hasten the solution of dramatic problems' (Cavallini 1978: 58). More blatantly, Moretti (1994: 49–54) wrote that, in the early 1970s, in Milan and Turin they 'seem to have a boundless horizon, [they] feel not only sympathy but also willingness'. The industrial cluster of Genoa replicated this situation, especially at Ansaldo meccanico, Italsider, and Italcantieri.

In the eyes of the BR, workers not only refused to denounce people who were discovered to sustain or participate in sabotages and attacks, but also 'betrayed a sort of satisfaction towards those who put into practice announcements that, up until that point, had been only shown off' (Guagliardo's testimony, in Bianconi 2011: 206). According to the BR leader Renato Curcio (1993: 80) in February 1973, when they released their first kidnap victim – half-naked and in chains – close to the Fiat factory gates, dozens of workers saw him without providing first aid. The BR immediately inferred workers' tolerance, if not complicity, in revolutionary violence. Similarly, the next kidnappings – Amerio and Macchiarini – were followed by such approval by workers that the BR interpreted it as 'excitement' and 'growth of political space' in factories. For the first time, workers started to spontaneously seek them out (Franceschini's and Besuschio's testimonies in Zavoli 1995: 105–8). In a similar vein, the lack of participation in the strike against the BR's kidnapping of judge Mario Sossi, in May 1974, was seen as the workers' endorsement of the action. The BR proudly exhibited the Ansaldo autonomous workers' leaflet declaring their opposition to the strike: 'Let the bosses express this kind of solidarity act, we don't have anything in common with them.' (Soccorso Rosso 1976: 219–20)

As violent groups progressed in their escalation, targeting people and resorting to assassinations, violent fringes gradually lost support among workers. However, the persistent lack of solidarity with the victims of terrorism, and the absence of a clear condemnation of the language of arms nurtured violent groups' illusion of enjoying a hidden sympathy. A couple of articles by Giampaolo Pansa provide a clear example of such circumstances. In November 1977, on the day after the BR killing of journalist Carlo Casalegno in Turin, Pansa went to interview workers at the Fiat Mirafiori factory gates. The workers did not express unanimous condemnation of the murder, gave contradictory answers, and showed a certain degree of indifference. The strike against terrorism was considered somewhat unfair, since nobody had been protesting when poor workers died. Although a

former partisan, Casalegno was labelled a representative of the Turin bourgeoisie due to the fact that he wrote for the Agnelli family's newspaper. The general stance was that the establishment, with its lies and corruption, did not deserve any defence (*Corriere della Sera*, 18 and 19 November 1977). The survey, of course, was not scientifically reliable. Yet it gave quite a realistic picture, confirmed by other similar interviews and by the scarce participation in the strike (Tobagi, in *Corriere della Sera*, 19 November 1977).

Armed militants were generally persuaded that the hard-fighting minority of the workers' movement was only 'the tip of a very large iceberg' (Ronconi's testimony, in Novelli and Tranfaglia 1988: 233). In other words, they pictured the Italian Communist Party as undermined by a cleavage between the leadership, increasingly integrated within the democratic system, and the still rebellious rank and file, waiting for genuine subversion. Up until the late 1970s, when the BR and other armed groups clearly demonised the PCI, they still hoped that the 'contradiction' between leadership and base was alive and ready to explode. The BR's reasoning proceeded as follows: 'They knew us and they did not denounce us, they talked with us, we talked. They may have disagreed, they called us every name under the sun, but they were comrades, they were not the state [...]. This base could not help but influence the party leaders' (Moretti 1994: 171).

Various factors contributed to building this belief. First, a few distinguished personalities belonging to the PCI, such as former partisan Pietro Secchia and Giambattista Lazagna, were accommodating and sometimes collaborative with armed militants. They contributed to the diffusion of a nostalgic memory of partisan guerrilla and proletarian justice (*La guerriglia in Italia* 1969: 5–16). Lazagna was also twice arrested and jailed for 'subversive association' (Griner 2014: 171–2). The PCI, during the early 1970s, was well aware that a few on the leftist fringe, even within the Communist membership, were taking up arms. The party even knew the names and backgrounds of young extremists. For years, BR members could go to PCI festivals and eat with Communist activists (Franceschini, Buffa, and Giustolisi 1996: 81). In 1974, the PCI also initiated secret negotiations for bringing the BR back within the boundaries of legality. In exchange, the PCI promised preferential judicial treatment by sympathetic judges, but only a few militants accepted the deal (Fasanella and Franceschini 2004: 129). However, the official PCI strategy was to publicly deny the red matrix of violence. While hoping to reintegrate the hardliners with brokerage, the party shifted attention to the dangers of neo-fascist plots. Terrorism was pictured as a fascist provocation or a version of the so-called 'strategy of tension' (i.e., a plan to restore an authoritarian order by means of disorder). PCI executive Giuliano Ferrara explains this ambiguity:

> [...] on the one hand, we did not want to believe it and so we hid the problem behind the concept of workers' opacity, on the other hand, we were not able to recognize it and to dismiss as provocative any form of workers' autonomy outside the party and the trade union. Thus, extremist workers were provocateurs [...] and we branded them as red fascists. (Spezie 2001: 57)

Thus, the BR were always presented as 'self-styled' or 'so-called', and the PCI's official newspaper *l'Unità* used the acronym 'BR' instead of 'Red Brigades', in order to avoid association with the adjective 'red' (Fasanella and Rossa 2006: 9).

As Taviani (2003) demonstrates, this political line had to be revised once leftist armed groups raised the stakes by killing people and the Communist Party unequivocally sided with state institutions. The shift came late though: it was prepared in 1975, but materialised only around 1977–8. The party gradually acknowledged the existence of leftist terrorism as distinct from fascist terrorism. As a consequence, party media increasingly demonised violent fringes and de-solidarisation intensified.

However, internal documents show that behind the official façade, the process was far less straightforward. Up until November 1977, when murderous leftist actions were hitting the headlines, communist leaders were still concerned about 'the presence of nuclei of terrorists and groups of support in some factories and companies in Turin, Milan, Genoa, and Rome'. In a closed meeting, the communist shadow Minister of the Interior Ugo Pecchioli acknowledged that 'attacks against bosses and chief technicians come from "internal" tip-offs; there is an extension of the area of solidarity'. Pecchioli also asked party leaders for increased vigilance, because the PCI's democratic mobilisation was showing 'signs of weakness'. More explicitly, Pecchioli stigmatised 'equivocal presences and zones of tolerance' within trade unions, labelling communist trade unionists' behaviour *vis-à-vis* terrorism 'totally inadequate'. During the same meeting, the Communist Party delegate from Lombardy acknowledged that they had failed to isolate terrorism and remembered that, in some high schools, news of terrorist attacks would usually be welcomed with rounds of applause. The delegate explained that after autonomist militants killed a young policeman in Milan, trade unions were not even able to promote a petition or a strike to protest against violence (PCI Archives, 24 November 1977). In the fall of 1978, at the height of leftist violent attacks, Pecchioli privately admitted that the escalation of subversive violence had to be explained in terms of the existence of 'large backgrounds, protective buffers, made up of quite extensive areas of solidarity, cover-up, or at least indifference and disengagement among young people, underprivileged persons, the public sector, intellectuals, and also workers' fringes' (PCI Archives, September 1978).

The Communist Party's concern regarding the infiltration of violent extremists within trade unions, and the ensuing solidarity with armed groups was, to a certain extent, justified. Italian trade unions (CGIL, CISL, and UIL) were probably 'the most politicised in the world' and achieved great success during the 1970s (Accornero 1992: 193). Indeed, between 1970 and 1975, violent fringes tried to connect with factory workers' struggles and recruit among workers. Yet, trade unions were not worried about this penetration. Instead, they initially reacted with a mix of 'benevolent justification' and a 'calculated conspiracy of silence'. Later, when sabotage and attacks scared factory management, terrorist threats were sometimes employed as a negotiation tool. Trade unionists suggested during consultations that if factory management had not accepted a concession, the exasperation

may have led to dangerous consequences, so it was much better to reward the trade unions' sense of responsibility (*Prospettiva sindacale*, September 1982). In November 1977, while Turin labour union leader Cesare denounced the presence of a BR organised cluster within the Fiat factory, syndicalist and sociologist Bruno Manghi admitted to the existence of a small area of sympathisers, and a much larger – and growing – 'area of indifference' in many factories in northern Italy. Manghi self-critically acknowledged the responsibility of trade unions and leftist parties, who 'discussed the forms of violence, but not violence itself. The problem is not judging whether violence pays or not, but rejecting violence' (*Corriere della Sera*, 20 November 1977).

Consistent with the PCI's change of strategy, trade unions began to actively fight against leftist political violence only after 1977–8. In the same period – although the political analysis was still biased and the presence of violent leftist clusters in factories was still denied by many local representatives – trade unions officially ended their solidarity with armed fringes (Magnanini 2006: 127–31). The leadership clearly disassociated itself, firmly condemning terrorism. By contrast – as sociologist Aris Accornero (1992: 196) pointed out – the rank and file had 'more contrasting feelings' and in some factories a 'confused *omertà*' persisted.

To conclude, few workers were deeply sympathetic to violent means, and criticisms were common. Yet, for a long time, the majority of workers did not consider leftist violent groups as dangerous enemies and did not take a stance against the barbarisation of political struggle (Galli 1991: 91).

The radical intellectuals

The situation described above was to a certain extent echoed in the ambiguous stance of many established intellectuals, who expressed sympathetic judgments *vis-à-vis* violent fringes or, at least, did not criticise them when they targeted political symbols. Their reasoning, in brief, followed this logic: we cannot, in the face of state institutions that are corrupt and that conspire with neo-fascism, criticise violent rebellion, even if we do not approve of it. This 'intellectuals' divorce from the state', as historian Ventura (1984) named it, nurtured some resonant campaigns in defence of the right to rebel and to violently attack political adversaries. Two examples are illustrative. In 1971, in the middle of a campaign led by the leftist group Lotta Continua against the police commissioner Luigi Calabresi – protagonist of a contested investigation against anarchists – more than 800 of the most prestigious figures of the Italian cultural establishment signed a plea that was published in several issues of the magazine *l'Espresso*. Calabresi was called a 'torturer commissioner', responsible for the death of one anarchist, and was harshly criticised in a sort of moral lynching.[1] A few months later, when the

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1. Calabresi, whose innocence was later proved, was killed in 1972. According to judicial inquiries, a Lotta Continua commando conducted the action., On 18 May 1972, the magazine *Lotta Continua* praised the murder of the commissioner as 'an act in which the exploited people recognise their desire for justice'.

public prosecutor of Turin indicted the editors of the magazine *Lotta Continua* for incitement to crime, fifty renowned intellectuals and artists sent him an open letter. They endorsed some of the most radical *Lotta Continua* statements, which were contested by the jury, such as 'class struggle, let's arm the masses' or 'let's fight with arms against the state until the liberation from bosses and from exploitation' (Brambilla 2010: 142).

In the course of the 1970s, many other petitions followed – e.g., in support of the journalists of the BR's unofficial magazine *Controinformazione*, or in solidarity with German jailed militants in Stammhein – marking a period of unprecedented political engagement (*il manifesto*, 7 August 1977; 20 October 1977). In 1977, in the middle of an escalation of leftist violence, many Italian intellectuals still refused to rally around the flag and defend political institutions. Writer Leonardo Sciascia's view is emblematic: 'I don't understand what police and justice are defending [...] and I would understand even less myself acting as a caryatid to avoid this collapse or decay the responsibility of which is certainly not mine' (*Corriere della Sera*, 12 May 1977). Similarly, in March 1978, after the kidnap of Aldo Moro, while a large number of intellectuals signed a petition against terrorism and committed themselves to the safeguarding of institutions (*l'Unità*, 18 March 1978), a still significant number of intellectuals – although condemning the attack – were protesting against the emotional blackmail that imposed a choice between uncritically siding with political order and understanding the terrorists (*il manifesto*, 24 March 1978). Once again, unapologetic defence of the state was seen as extremely problematic.

Meanwhile, other intellectuals were directly engaged in helping violent extremists against 'state repression'. In the name of the right to dissent, the future Nobel laureate Dario Fo and his wife the actress Franca Rame founded the Soccorso Rosso Militante (SRM). Established in 1972 to distribute funds collected during theatre shows to leftist campaigns, the association became a structured organisation that provided material, legal, and moral aid to militants while they were fugitives, on trial, or arrested. The SRM monitored conditions of detention, helped prisoners' families in need, offered free legal support by distinguished lawyers, and orchestrated propaganda actions asserting the innocence of those indicted. The organisation issued communiqués, documents, interviews, and publications rejecting all charges and presenting counter-investigations. In some cases, the protection of civil rights was motivated by genuine reasons; in others it was clearly spurious.

For example, in 1972, after a juvenile brawl, anarchist Giovanni Marini fatally stabbed Carlo Falvella, an innocent right-wing militant. The SRM promptly took on the defence of Marini, 'guilty of surviving a fascist aggression', mobilised many intellectuals, and sponsored three pamphlets claiming his innocence (see, for instance, Soccorso Rosso Militante 1974). Umberto Terracini – communist heavyweight, republican founding father, and member of Parliament – led the pool of defence lawyers. Marini was proven guilty and was sentenced to nine years, but served only four, and during his detention he received Italy's most prestigious poetry award (Telese 2006: 53–4). The SRM also contributed to the

large campaign for the innocence of the three leftist militants who, in April 1973, set fire to the apartment of right-wing militant Mario Mattei, causing the death of two of his sons. Leftist supporters – notorious politician Riccardo Lombardi and prominent intellectual Alberto Moravia among them – portrayed the so-called 'arson of Primavalle', later recognised as a deliberate anti-fascist attack by a leftist commando, as a fascist private feud, born within the local section of the Italian Social Movement (MSI) (Collettivo di Potere Operaio 1974). The three leftists were acquitted and immediately escaped abroad. Years later they were condemned in absentia and never paid for their militant action.

Similarly, during the trial for the Primavalle attack in February 1975, leftist militants killed a Greek right-wing militant, Mikis Mantakas. Two were indicted. There followed another mobilisation in defence of their innocence. Once again, the SRM, as well as prominent intellectuals such as Natalia Ginzburg, sided with the two indicted, fabricated the case of an unjust accusation, and maintained the thesis of another fascist feud. Leftist magistrates were present at hearings in order to exert pressure on their colleagues and to push for an acquittal. The two leftists who were on trial left the country (Telese 2006: 257).

Campaigns for the innocence of leftist militants continued during the second half of the 1970s, when two SRM lawyers, Sergio Spazzali and Giovanni Cappelli, were also accused of actively participating in the armed organisations they were defending in court, by smuggling weapons and offering refuge to terrorists (*il manifesto*, 13 May 1977). Both of them, having been proven guilty, left the country (Griner 2014: 163–9). Eventually, the SRM published an apologetic collection of texts, issued by the BR, with the aim of offering 'militant solidarity' to their comrades, who were victims of bourgeois misinformation (Soccorso Rosso 1976). So, for many years, this critique of state apparatuses, and the missed condemnation of subversion by Italian intellectuals, were interpreted as endorsements of violent means.

The cognitive shift: from legitimation to rejection of violence

The emotional backlash

Four murderous attacks, perpetrated by leftist groups, fostered the process of revision through which the radical milieu came to perceive violence as undesirable. This section reconstructs these tipping points and emphasises three main features. First, they generated an immediate backlash and triggered a debate about the meaning and the repercussions of violent escalation. Second, three of the murders had a direct emotional impact on the radical milieu. Third, the process of reconsideration – confirming the strong resiliency of the legitimation of violence – evolved with difficulty and faced many obstacles. Indeed, while criticism of violent means developed, general support for revolutionary goals lived on for some time.

The first step coincided with the death of Roberto Crescenzio in Turin. Roberto was a twenty-two-year-old university student, working class, apolitical. On 1 October 1977, an antifascist demonstration was held in the centre of the

city. Clashes with police and vandalism followed. A group of leftist militants hastily organised a raid against a bar vaguely known to be a meeting point for fascists. In that bar, sitting indoors with a friend, Crescenzio was having a drink. The commando launched a few Molotov cocktails that set fire to the bar. Crescenzio, who took refuge in the restroom, suffered severe burns and died after three days of agony. Rage and outrage pervaded the city (*la Stampa*, 4 October 1977). Communist Party representatives firmly condemned the violence and the irresponsibility of extremist groups. The PCI's youth organisation (FGCI) organised a collection of signatures against violence, denouncing the virulence of autonomist leftist groups (Sanlorenzo 1989: 124). Communist mayor Novelli affirmed before Turin City Council that 'with these individuals it is not possible to argue because, like beasts, they do not have a brain' and invited people to avoid any justification and tolerance towards them. Communist workers at Fiat felt particularly touched because, as they declared, Crescenzio 'was a poor guy with whom everyone could easily identify himself or his son' (Cavallini 1978: 71). More than 20,000 people attended Crescenzio's funeral, and factories closed down for fifteen minutes. A period of disorientation and self-analysis began within the student New Left. For the first time, an innocent bystander had died during political action, and 'shifting the blame was not valid any longer'. Lotta Continua representative Pietro Marcenaro significantly declared, '[a] movement that calls itself communist, that fights against the power to affirm the reasons of life, if it does not want to destroy itself, cannot see a young guy burnt alive and then move on as if this was something normal.' (*Lotta Continua*, 6 October 1977) Readers' letters to *Lotta Continua* confirm the emotional turmoil and the rise of crucial questions. Donatella, a militant, wrote:

> I would like the comrades to discuss with me the painful problem of the balance between the response against fascism and respect for human life. Maybe the rage nullifies the value of life? I cannot accept rage without humanity. It is an awful contradiction (*Care compagne, cari compagni* 1978: 230).

However, reactions within the movement varied significantly. Some talked about a 'technical error', others asked why Crescenzio was in a fascist bar, implying the victim's guilt. Other militants reacted to the crisis of consciousness by claiming that Crescenzio was a victim of state violence, and criticised the growing moral concerns as 'petty bourgeois' (*Ombre rosse*, December 1977).

The second step was the above-mentioned BR killing of journalist Carlo Casalegno. The ensuing emotional reaction was widespread, and several leftist personalities consequently criticised the diffused sympathy and complicity with violent fringes (*il manifesto*, 20 November 1977). A group of intellectuals from Turin – Norberto Bobbio, Italo Calvino, and Primo Levi, among others – condemned 'any tolerance or indifference or ambiguity towards terrorists' (*la Repubblica*, 27–8 November 1977). Casalegno's son Andrea was a Lotta Continua member, and two of his comrades went to interview him while his father was still in intensive care. Andrea criticised the de-humanisation of revolutionary

struggle as well as his own group. However, the interview with Andrea Casalegno was very cautious and Andrea still showed some respect for the BR, defined as 'neither monster nor demons' (*Lotta Continua*, 19 November 1977). Moreover, the reception of the interview both within Lotta Continua and in the leftist movement at large was often very cold (*la Repubblica*, 27–8 November 1977; *l'Espresso*, 4 December 1977). Lotta Continua representative Luciano Bosio, for example, expressed his disagreement with 'a chorus' that called into question 'the legitimacy of retaliation and the death penalty against counter-revolutionaries'. We could not endorse, Bosio wrote, 'a new humanity grounded on the values of the bourgeois family' (*Lotta Continua*, 22 November 1977; 27–8 November 1977: 10). Eventually, Andrea Casalegno had to clarify his position and justify his previous criticisms (*Lotta Continua* 27–8 November 1977: 5).

The third step coincided with the kidnapping and subsequent murder of former Italian prime minister and president of Christian Democracy, Aldo Moro, in March–May 1978. The communist reaction was quite strong and monolithic. Strikes and protests against terrorism showed mass participation. This resulted in BR's surprise at 'the degree of PCI's integration within the state'. Although they had hit the heart of the political system and were judging the hated Moro with traditional leftist arguments, the communist base was showing little or no sympathy (Moretti 1994: 172). Many radical intellectuals were clearer than ever before in their condemnation of violence (*il manifesto* 28 March 1978). By restoring the death penalty, wrote Sciascia, the BR not only 'lost the revolutionary legitimacy or the legality they crazily pretend to represent, but they made more difficult and painful the protection of liberty for those who defend it for everybody' (*la Repubblica*, 19 April 1978). However, in this case, too, it is hard to trace a clear-cut reaction from the radical milieu. If the left as a whole firmly condemned the BR attack, and Lotta Continua expressed 'revulsion against the action and the practice of the BR' (*Lotta Continua*, 17 March 1978), a few young radicals and working class people were reportedly quite passive and indifferent. In some cases, solidarity was expressed exclusively with the five bodyguards killed during the abduction, while Moro's destiny was considered unimportant (*Lotta Continua*, 17 March 1978). In some others, the usual code of silence was respected. After the killing of Moro, during a large student assembly at the University of Rome, a BR member took the floor in order to explain why they killed the hostage. Everybody knew his identity, but nobody reported him to police (Gallinari 2006: 208). Leftist Catholics were particularly touched by the event and revised their previous endorsements of revolutionary violence. Yet they still attributed the main responsibility for the murder to the DC and the political institutions (Panvini 2014: 372–3). Autonomia Operaia, while criticising the BR's estrangement from the movement, explicitly censured the 'metaphysic condemnation of violence' rising within leftist constituencies as a result of the emotional shock (*Rosso per il Potere Operaio*, April 1978). Autonomist militant Franco Piperno portrayed the revival of 'the sacredness of life' as 'naïve generosity'. According to him, it was still 'scandalously possible that the death of a man translat[ed] into freedom and life for others' (*pre–print*, December 1978).

The fourth and more decisive step was the killing of Guido Rossa, on January 1979. Rossa was a thirty-four-year-old metalworker at Italsider in Conigliano, near Genoa. Delegate at the factory council on behalf of the Communist trade union, he had been a PCI member since the age of twenty-four. On October 1978 he reported a fellow comrade to the police for distributing BR propaganda leaflets within the factory. A few other persons had taken notice of the same BR supporter, but it was Rossa alone that signed the report and his name also appeared in local newspapers. For the first time, a worker had dared to expose a terrorist follower within a factory. Although Rossa remained quite isolated among trade unionists and workers, both the opacity and the fear that assured protection of the BR and their supporters were about to dissolve (*Corriere della Sera*, 19 November 1977). As a result, the BR decided on an exemplary punishment against the 'spy and traitor' Rossa and sent a commando to shoot at him. The action resulted in the death of the target. According to the BR's logic, the communist base would now finally take a stand and side with their revolutionary project. By contrast, not only civil society, but also the entire left reacted against this extremist violence more strongly than ever before. The murder of a worker, it goes without saying, deeply touched communist sensibilities. 250,000 people joined the funeral, where workers raised their fists and chanted slogans such as 'BR go away/we already have bosses against us' or 'BR/SS' (Fasanella and Rossa 2006: 50). Trade union leader Luciano Lama self-critically admitted that they should have been 'one sole collective witness against the enemy of democracy' much earlier (Bianconi 2011: 94). BR leader Enrico Fenzi confirmed that the attack 'locked out any possible dialogue with workers in Genoa' (Zavoli 1995: 220). Lotta Continua leader Luigi Manconi said that 'never before has the logic that underlies the BR's choice of target and his "annihilation" been so private and corporative; never before has one of their actions appeared so clearly a sectarian revenge.' He added that workers' solidarity with Rossa simply 'ridiculed' BR's statements (Manconi 1979: 7–19). Grief and solidarity surfaced all around the country, especially in Turin, where communist representative Dino Sanlorenzo organised a mass inquiry on terrorism. Almost all families living in the city received a survey through which they were given the opportunity to anonymously report events that could help police identify people involved in political violence. Useful reports were few, but answers were numerous and people's courage gradually re-emerged (Sanlorenzo 1989: 175–97).

The rational arguments

During the period 1977–9, several rational arguments against violence emerged within the radical milieu, furthering the cognitive shift towards revulsion against violence. They were correlated with different ideological conceptions and linked to different group or individual experiences. Yet, at least four common lines of reasoning emerge across various sources, and illustrate the foundations of a change that went beyond the instinctual and emotional aversion to violence.

First, constituencies started affirming that 'wrong means distort our ends and ourselves'. Luciana Castellina, an influential journalist with *il manifesto*, wrote on November 1977 that it was important to pay attention to 'the actions that result in the negation of the contents, values, and deep reasons of the communist struggle'. Castellina significantly recalled what Horst Mahler – German lawyer and founder of the Red Army Faction – had recently told her: 'We started with the critique of My Lay and now we glorify the much worse action of Mogadishu', in which more than eighty peoples' lives were endangered (*il manifesto*, 20 November 1977). In the same vein, Gad Lerner and Andrea Marcenaro, two prominent journalists with *Lotta Continua*, wrote in 1978, '[w]e are not pacifist [...] but we are not ready to exercise forms of violence that – because they do not emancipate anything – end up coercing and transforming ourselves.' Lerner and Marcenaro emphasised that '[w]e cannot avoid being interested in the life or the death of "every person in general". If we do not want even the worst Nazis to be tortured in jail, we cannot say that there are some deaths "we do not care about"' (*Lotta Continua*, 3 December 1977). Luigi Ferrajoli, a radical jurist sympathetic to the extreme fringes, added that '[m]eans, always and irremediably, jeopardise the end. [...] Ends have to be immediately identifiable within means' (Ferrajoli 1979).

Second, in this period, positions asserting that violence against human beings was ideologically extraneous to the New Left background found a growing audience. For example, leftist intellectual Federico Stame claimed that the general cause of the violent escalation had to be found in the hegemony of the 'Jacobin and Bolshevik conception of political action'. 'Who exterminated millions of kulaks on behalf of the reason of state and party? [...] Those who practice terrorism and violence are the last sons of Bolshevism.' Stame also rediscovered the value of democracy and the importance of fighting for it. 'Democracy', he wrote, 'is not, as Mao stated, a means, but an end' (*il manifesto*, 19 January 1978). During the kidnapping of Moro, an important clarification came also from Alberto Moravia, who unmistakably stated that he found the BR's principles and values repugnant, and reaffirmed his faith in the republic born out of the resistance movement: 'Obviously, such a conception of human rights excludes at first glance the disdain for human life, no matter whose life, and the use of man by man, conceived as an instrument rather than an end' (*la Repubblica*, 19 April 1978). Other voices portrayed political violence as intrinsically 'fascist'. As leading feminist Lidia Menapace wrote in 1978, 'violence, individual, physical, that enjoys and justifies the exemplary act as an end in itself, is always fascism, that is the oppressive side of the bourgeois power that goes deep inside every one of us' (*Sulla violenza* 1978: XV–XXI). Goffredo Fofi, writer and activist, proposed going back to the once popular concept of 'revolutionary humanism', an idea that implied 'a human visage in a society of wolves [...] the discovery and claim of *tenderness*, as Guevara said, also during the harshest moments of the struggle'. Ultimately, it was crucial to oppose 'a diversity' against 'the inhumanity of the system' (*Lotta Continua*, 18 January 1978). During 1978, many Lotta Continua militants echoed the same concept to one degree or another. This urge to avoid mirroring of enemy values and tactics clearly emerges from the minutes of their assemblies. As someone self-critically complained, '[w]e are not even able to be more fair than bourgeois justice' (*Sulla violenza*, 1978: 138–52).

Third, the radical milieu stressed that the language of arms ultimately proved the weakness of insurgents' persuasion and the fragility of their arguments. In this regard, it is interesting to note the debate within the Feminist Collective of Trastevere (Rome). Their reasoning ran like this: 'It seems to us that sometimes the choice to eliminate, to kill the enemy, is the result of impotence.' Sentencing 'the monster' of death – they argued – 'is a way to exorcise his existence'. Killing, they thought, showed a lack of belief in the possibility of transformation both of oneself and of others, and thus that the struggle was completely useless (*Lotta Continua*, 26 January 1978). In a similar vein, the anti-militarist current of the autonomist movement censured the growth of a violence that 'converted the masses into spectators [...], that accumulates terror and gives up the revolutionary project in order to replace it with a simple clash' (*A/traverso*, January 1978).

Eventually, constituencies began to criticise violence as counterproductive and negative for the development of social struggle. Following the murder of Casalegno, *il manifesto* raged against terrorism by affirming that it was the strongest deterrent against the protest movement, guilty of portraying communist values with 'the aberrant look of cruelty and disdain of reason' (*il manifesto*, 17 November 1977). During the same period, this leftist newspaper also protested against autonomist violence, defined as the product of both 'political and intellectual barbarisation' and being 'oblivious to the lessons of history' (*il manifesto*, 17 May 1977, 28 August 1977). Within workers' assemblies, the BR were consistently and increasingly pictured as 'a bourgeois-intellectual élite', fighting over the heads of the working class, completely detached from real peoples' problems (Marchetti, Mobiglia, and Rolli 1979: 103). Autonomist militants from Bologna clearly stated that '[w]e have to keep this well in mind: today, whoever practices the armed struggle against police and state apparatuses risks fighting a battle which is as costly as it is backward.' The enemy was able not only to militarily defeat the movement, but also to subjugate it for a long period (*A/traverso*, May 1977). According to their view, shooting at journalists' legs or attacking 'the heart of the state' were pointless actions. Political power was elsewhere, spread across an invisible web, and controlled by the concentration of knowledge. Only 'intelligent sabotage' could defeat it (*A/traverso*, January 1978). Even the militants of *Rosso* – the mainstream current of Autonomia Operaia – criticised the BR because they helped political authorities 'to incarcerate dozens of comrades'. Indeed, in 1978, right after the kidnapping of Moro, a widespread anti-terrorist campaign targeted sympathisers and supporters. Criminalisation grew, together with the risks of being charged with complicity in terrorism. 'At this point' – *Rosso* (April 1978) reads – 'we cannot help but create a political vacuum around the BR'. Leftist writer and poet Roberto Roversi synthesised this argument when he wrote, 'the blood of common people, no matter how it is shed, always serves the prince.' From this point of view, violence was 'not so much horrible' as representing an

obstacle in the process of emancipation (*il manifesto*, 5 February 1978). According to Stame, from the perspective of state powers, 'if the terrorist was not here, it would be useful to invent him' (Stame 1979: 25).

Conclusion

Historical events show that Italy was not on the verge of a civil war and that students, workers, and intellectuals were not ready to sustain a fully-fledged armed struggle, let alone embrace weapons. It was a large-scale misunderstanding. Yet, paradoxically, the illusion that subjectively pervaded armed militants was objectively grounded. The radical milieu contributed significantly to shaping the image of a highly contentious society.

As this chapter demonstrates, three main cumulative conditions weakened the radical milieu's moderating influence by delaying criticism and de-solidarisation. First, the leftist student movement was vast and enduring. During the watershed of 1976–7 in particular, the movement was able to (re)mobilise people, to renew its repertoires, and to radicalise further. Longevity and renovation over time were crucial factors. Second, radical workers, the Communist Party rank and file, and leftist trade unions gave the impression of the presence of a large sympathetic social base. Overall, with the exception of some small minorities, they did not publicly approve violent actions, but silently endorsed them. Nonetheless, armed groups predicted that, in the near future, communist workers would be ready to come out into the open. In this regard, the belief of potential within the revolutionary class par excellence was key. Third, radical intellectuals were seen as prominent spokesmen of citizens' distrust of political institutions. Even though only a tiny minority of intellectuals actively supported armed fringes, the majority expressed harsh criticisms against official politics and were consistent in not taking a clear stance against violent solutions. The broad diffusion of injustice frames, coupled with intellectuals' lack of confidence in political élites, was fundamental.

Nonetheless, the mechanisms of violence legitimation were at some point halted and reversed. The radical milieu began to question the meaning and the effectiveness of violence. Eventually, violent means were openly rejected. A combination of strictly interrelated emotional shocks and rational considerations unhinged the mechanisms of legitimation and the milieu began to play a normative role.

Four traumatic events fostered a process of reconsideration of violent repertoires. Three events, namely the killings of Crescenzio, Casalegno, and Rossa, directly affected the radical milieu. The first victim was a young proletarian above any suspicion; the second was an intellectual, former partisan, and father of a leftist militant; the third was a communist worker and syndicalist. As a matter of fact, sympathisers and supporters had to themselves experience the grief and the disorientation generated by political murders. The killing of Moro, by contrast, showcased the breakdown of an over-ambitious revolutionary strategy that failed to trigger any mass upheaval. The process of reconsideration of violence was also favoured by the creation of spaces for debate, which were accessible to and

recognised by armed militants. In particular, both the magazine *Lotta Continua* and the newspaper *il manifesto* – previously sympathetic to highly contentious struggles – made room for self-critical analysis and severe comments.

As the research demonstrates, the legitimation of violence was extremely resilient. Hence, traumatic events alone do not explain the reversal of the mechanisms. A rational reconsideration was also decisive. Thus, four main arguments against the use of violence began to circulate within the radical milieu. First, violent means were irremediably endangering emancipatory ends. Second, the values of democracy and the lesson of antifascist resistance were irreconcilable with the blind cult of violence. Humanity had to be rediscovered as a revolutionary value, since it was necessary to be different from the brutality of the enemy. Third, armed struggle was a declaration of political weakness. Fourth, the military confrontation was counterproductive: violence was silencing the authentic grievances of the masses, shrinking mobilisation, and discrediting communist ideals. Armed struggle was also strategically backward. Armed assault against political power, given these conditions, was simply hopeless. Although ideology still permeated the formulation of the four arguments, their common denominator was mostly utilitarian. As expected, pragmatism and realism gradually re-emerged from the radical milieu.

Criticism and de-solidarisation finally rose to surface, yet too late to be as decisive as in some other cases, where violence-prone groups are still defining their strategies and are more receptive. Action militarisation, ideological encapsulation, and cognitive closure were already at play (della Porta 2013: 30–1). A bloody private war against the state – also implying a great deal of energy spent on the liberation of political prisoners and on revenge on traitors – substituted the initial revolutionary project. Therefore, the normative power of the radical milieu not only emerged after many victims and strategic failures, but it also saw its impact reduced due to the time delay.

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Chapter Sixteen

Dynamics of Radicalisation in the Relationship between Militant Islamist Groups and their Constituencies: The Case of al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya in Egypt, 1986–1998

Stefan Malthaner

Khaled al-Berry was a teenager of barely 15 years old when he joined al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya, a militant Islamist group, in the Upper Egyptian city of Assiut in 1987, some years before the area became the site of a violent insurgency that would ultimately claim more than 1,500 lives. He became part of a group of young activists around a local mosque, and, having shown devotion and intelligence, was put in charge of activities at his secondary school and later at his university. Mobilising students around al-Jamaa's call for a return to Islam and an Islamic society soon brought him into conflict with the school administration and later the police (al-Berry 2002: 58–61). Al-Berry was dispelled from school and arrested, experienced maltreatment at the hands of the police, and, in the following months, witnessed an escalation of confrontations between his fellow activists and the security forces. Yet, his story, which reflects the rise of al-Jamaa in a neighbourhood of Assiut, also points to another form of conflict and radicalisation which involved violent incidents well before the start of clashes with the police. Cultivating a feeling of moral superiority and following the theological concept of "Commanding the good and prohibiting the evil", al-Berry and his friends sought to enforce their vision of an Islamic moral order in the neighbourhood and school, for example by reprimanding and threatening female students for not dressing "properly" or by harassing Christians. In fact, the first acts of violence he became involved in included beating up a boy who allegedly was homosexual and violently "punishing" a man for allegedly having insulted Islam. (al-Berry 2002: 29–32, 55, 56, 114–16)

In recent years, the growing influence of theoretical approaches adopted from social movement studies in research on political violence has contributed to a greater emphasis on social contextualisation and a shift towards a processual