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Italian Political Violence 1969–1988

The Making and Unmaking of Meanings

David Moss

UNRISD Discussion 41

February 1993

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ISSN 1012-6511

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Preface

In liberal democratic societies, political violence - that is to say, violence which is organised clandestinely and intended to have political consequences - cannot accomplish its ends simply through utilising force to cause physical harm to opposing groups. To be effective, those who engage in political violence must also give broadly intelligible meaning to their actions, so that episodes of violence communicate a relatively coherent message within the society at large.

For this reason, our understanding of the dynamics of political violence can be greatly enhanced by focusing on the struggle waged between supporters and opponents of clandestine movements (as well as among groups within clandestine organisations) to control the interpretation of violence. This is the approach taken by David Moss in the following paper, as he provides a highly original and provocative explanation of the emergence, evolution and decline of political violence in Italy between 1969 and 1988.

The political identity of extremist groups within postwar Italian society was first established with relative ease, as an extension of the struggle between Fascist and Resistance forces during the Second World War. A boundary of hatred between clearly distinguishable camps provided the necessary definition of friends and enemies, as well as a plausible justification for violence as a tool of politics during the early period of political and economic reconstruction in Italy.

Over the years, however, the development of liberal democratic institutions, facilitating collaboration between parties of the left and right, posed a fundamental challenge to this early legitimisation of political violence. It became increasingly difficult to justify violence as a means of action and to present a sufficiently convincing definition of what distinguished the goals of extralegal groups from others now drawn into the normal political process.

Moss stresses the extreme complexity of Italian political violence under these circumstances, and the need to move away from common misconceptions which bestow too great a degree of organizational strength and ideological coherence on groups engaged in terrorist activity in Italy. Through careful analysis of material culled from judicial and police proceedings, as well as other sources, he reconstructs a picture of disparate sets of actors, often sustained by conflicting interpretations of their roles and justification for their activities. The public discourse of violence, created by an intellectual elite, was only partially assimilated by the limited number of people who actually carried out terrorist attacks. And the latter, in turn, were sustained by wider networks of friends, neighbours and family members who acted primarily out of personal solidarity. For many of them, violence was only a peripheral feature of a broader political process.

Although the magnitude and frequency of terrorist activities increased during the latter 1970s, in a concerted attempt to retain a voice and a constituency for extremism, the groundwork of political violence in fact continued to weaken. By the mid-1980s, it had virtually collapsed. In Moss's opinion, the response of the Italian government to political violence reinforced the internal structural difficulties of extremist factions by systematically refusing to accord the latter any recognized status as interlocutor and by treating each terrorist incident as an isolated act -- thus denying any claim to broad national standing. The fragmented and localised nature of Italian politics further hindered efforts to associate violence with a clear political message.

The reader will find much in this paper to stimulate debate, both on the concrete characteristics of the Italian experience with political violence, and on the analytical insights to be gained from interpreting that experience in terms of the creation and destruction of “discourse communities”. The study has been prepared within the framework of the UNRISD research programme on Political Violence and Social Movements, directed by David Apter.

Dharam Ghai, Director
February 1993

Acknowledgements

My understanding of political violence has been very greatly deepened by the discussions at the UNRISD Workshops on Political Violence and Social Movements in November 1990 and May 1992 and by the extremely stimulating papers and comments of the participants: David Apter, Paul Arthur, Malcolm Deas, Carlos Iván Degregori, André du Toit, Bruce Kapferer, Elizabeth Picard, Jagath Senaratne and Michel Wieviorka. It is a great pleasure to acknowledge how much I owe to fellow-members of the Workshops, in particular the Convener, David Apter, and to express my gratitude to Dharam Ghai and UNRISD staff for the very efficient and hospitable organization of our meetings. The range and excitement of our discussions at the Workshops have provided me with a strikingly memorable example of intellectual collaboration and exploration.

Introduction: Failed Reconciliation

In August 1991 Italy's President Cossiga announced his intention to grant a Presidential pardon to Renato Curcio, one of the founders of the Red Brigades, who had served sixteen years of a cumulative forty-year sentence. Cossiga made explicit the practical and symbolic consequences that his initiative was designed to achieve. Pragmatically, he proposed to redress a perceived injustice whereby, thanks to the combined results of the introduction of harsh penalties for political violence and the so-called 'repentance' legislation of 1980, 1982 and 1987, several multiple killers from the former organizations of armed struggle were free citizens while Curcio and some other early participants, who had not themselves committed any woundings or murders but who had refused explicitly to abjure their past support for violence, remained in prison. Curcio's release would not only remedy the inequitable consequences of the so-called 'emergency legislation' - for which Cossiga himself, as Minister of the Interior (1976-1978) and Prime Minister (1979-1981) in the worst years of violence bore a major responsibility - but also prompt Parliament to repeal the measures which had increased the penalties for politically-motivated crimes. Symbolically, the pardoning of Curcio was designed as a public act of closure of the *anni di piombo*. Since the early 1980s, only a small number of tragic but isolated and politically wholly inconsequential murders (the last in 1988) had punctuated the return to peaceful politics in Italy; and the Presidential pardon was to be the formal sign of reconciliation and completed expiation. The darkest period of the Republic's history would be ceremonially brought to a close with a magnanimous concession by the representative of the victorious Italian state to the leading member of its best-known, unsuccessful, left-wing assailants.

Cossiga's initiative, however, aroused a storm of dissent and had quickly to be abandoned - temporarily, the President indicated. Some difficulties were technical: no pardon could be granted to anyone still awaiting a definitive judicial verdict, as was Curcio over his responsibilities for two Red Brigades murders in 1974. Constitutional problems were also raised by Cossiga's intention to give an explicitly political motivation to a Presidential pardon - traditionally an act of individual clemency for which the government takes no political responsibility, even though the Minister of Justice is required to countersign the Presidential act. A public dispute immediately broke out between President, (Christian Democrat) Prime Minister and (Socialist) Minister of Justice over the proper institutional paternity for any pardon, aggravated by different interpretations of the rules for its concession introduced by the new code of penal procedure in 1989. The difficulties raised by constitutional experts and politicians were accompanied by hostile declarations from the direct and indirect victims of violence. In protests issued individually and through the National Association for the Victims of Terrorism, they strongly condemned any further concessions to their aggressors, particularly to a leader who had given no public sign of contrition for either the political or personal damage he had helped to cause.

Some of the most passionate objections were, however, directed less to the content of Cossiga's proposal than to the accompanying reinterpretation of political violence by which he justified his initiative. In a publicly circulated letter to the Minister of Justice to argue the case for a pardon, Cossiga offered his own contribution to 'a more correct historical, political, ideological and social reading of this tragic phase of our national life' (**La Repubblica**, 17 August 1991). He made three major points. First, 'subversion' was a more appropriate term than 'terrorism' for the phenomenon, at least in its left-wing variant. Second, the origins of violence lay at least in part in the failure of the political parties and state institutions to ensure that the post-1968 social conflicts were articulated and addressed on the terrain of ordinary politics and political representation. Third, the principal responsibilities for violence must be at least equally attributed to the doctrinaire

ideologues (*cattivi maestri*) whose teachings had persuaded idealistic youths that violence was one of the appropriate methods for attaining political objectives.

All three points were forcefully contested. First, Cossiga's redefinition of 'terrorism' as 'subversion' reopened the long-standing disputes over the proper characterization of the phenomenon of political violence. His preference for the term 'subversion' - on the grounds that the terrorist components of the years of violence were less a consistently exclusive strategy than a tactical means of detonating a general insurrection - was resisted because, ironically, it selected the very description that many of those same culpable ideologues of violence had used to defend their activities morally, politically and judicially. Equally controversial was Cossiga's suggestion that, since similar socio-political factors underlay the emergence of the apparently contrasting phenomena of left-wing and right-wing violence, both kinds might be better analysed in symmetrical rather than separate terms. By exempting from his analysis the responsibilities for the bomb massacres (*stragismo*), which he held to be a 'qualitatively and quantitatively distinct' type of violence, Cossiga offered a further invitation to reopen the simple, and exhaustive, allocation of all violence to the extreme Left and extreme Right. And he provided reason to re-examine the very difficult question of deciding how the classificatory boundaries around and between the actions and agents of political violence should be drawn, as a necessary prelude to their satisfactory explanation.

On the second point, Cossiga's determination to link the origins of political violence closely to the social inequalities and injustices produced by Italy's tumultuous development in the 1960s seemed to credit the Red Brigades and others retrospectively with exactly the status of quasi-representatives of disadvantaged social groups that they had earlier been forcefully denied by all political parties. Indeed, the refusal of the government and the Christian Democrat party to negotiate with the kidnappers of Aldo Moro in 1978 had been explicitly justified by the dangers of conceding the kind of political recognition for the Red Brigades which would be symbolically entailed by any direct negotiations. Cossiga's reading thus rekindled a set of fundamental interpretive controversies. What connections could plausibly be drawn between the socio-political contexts in which political violence appeared and the content and evolution of the violence itself? Was subversion the (distorted) expression of genuine social conflict so that its protagonists could be seen, as Cossiga indicated, as the direct, even if self-appointed, 'representatives' of marginalized social groups which did not receive the attention that they should have received from the political parties? Or were its activists simply a conspiratorial élite, motivated exclusively by the strictly political ambition to damage Italy's two major parties, Christian Democrat and Communist, and perhaps clandestinely supported by other groups, national or international, with an interest in maintaining or altering the balance of Italian politics? Finally, was armed struggle most accurately characterized as the unintended product of Italy's cultural revolution of 1968-1969, or, in longer-term perspective, as the tragically anachronistic final attempt to take the possibility of Western communism seriously?

On the third point, Cossiga's attribution of direct responsibility to politically-fantasizing intellectuals, many of whom - so he alleged - had never been brought to book for their malign influence, seemed to reduce very considerably the responsibilities of the active militants who devised and carried out the actual numerous attacks on people and property. What, therefore, was the real nature of relations and responsibilities within the world of left-wing armed struggle? How were the organizations of political violence stratified in terms of activity and belief? And, what responsibilities - penal, political or moral - could indeed be attributed to the sections of Italy's intelligentsia contiguous to that world?

The responses to Cossiga's revisionist readings not only illustrate how the general interpretations of Italian political violence remain extraordinarily controversial, despite the ending of violence, the vastly increased knowledge of its details, and the freedom from the tyranny of considering the immediate political and judicial implications of any and every statement about the nature of violence. Notwithstanding the extraordinary accumulation of evidence bearing on all of the above issues, gathered over the past decade in judicial investigations, Parliamentary Commissions of Enquiry and academic analyses, little public agreement on what the substantive answers actually were had been achieved. The conflicts unleashed by the proposal to pardon Curcio illustrate some of the aspects of Italy's own recent past that remain unmasterable. Cossiga's procedure for national reconciliation failed as completely to relieve the tyranny of the past as other, incomparably more significant, rituals of reconciliation (Maier, 1988).

Mastering the Understanding of Violence

Issues of evidence

At first sight the feature which distinguishes recent Italian violence from many other cases of political insurgency makes it puzzling why the Italian case should continue to arouse so much interpretive controversy. For the very proposal to pardon Curcio is a reminder that we are dealing with a case of violent subversion that has been concluded, and concluded as a failure. Its characteristics and consequences are largely known: they are neither still obscure nor already buried beneath the mythmaking which political success would have ensured. With the serious exceptions of the five neo-Fascist bomb massacres between 1969 and 1984, and despite the persistent but ever less plausible insistence that the full range of responsibilities for the Moro kidnapping has still not been uncovered, the judicial and Parliamentary investigations into all episodes of political violence since 1969 are now all but complete, ensuring that what can be known on the details of events and the social attributes of the men and women responsible for them is now known.¹ Indeed, the factual basis for an understanding of Italian political violence consists of a probably historically unique mass of insider accounts, provided by former 'repentant' participants in armed struggle, whose reduced prison sentences were secured by full confessions of past involvements. Since the benefits from turning state's evidence were rescinded in the event of false or incomplete confessions, the analyst of Italian political violence is presented with a vast number of truthful insider accounts of the details of even the least significant brute acts of violence, embedded in the self-interpretations and (retrospectively recounted) perceptions and motivations of participants. Yet the large number of accounts nevertheless generates as many substantive and methodological problems as it might initially appear to resolve.

Substantively, the very volume and range of variation of accounts raise important

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