

RECRUITMENT PROCESSES IN CLANDESTINE POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS: ITALIAN LEFT-WING TERRORISM

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I. RECRUITMENT IN TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS: AN INTRODUCTION

Of all the phenomena that characterized the history of Italy in the 1970s, terrorism has had the most dramatic impact on the collective memory. At that time many questions arose about the causes of such a widespread and lasting wave of political violence. The peculiarity of the political culture and the gravity of some social problems were singled out as the environmental preconditions for its emergence. Some legal organizations were accused of offering structures and legitimation to terrorist groups. The fact that a large number of people were believed to be involved increased the need to understand the motivations that led to the violent behavior of individuals who had been politically socialized in a consolidated democratic regime.

International Social Movement Research, Vol. 1, pages 155-169.
Supplement to Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change
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ISBN: 0-89232-955-6

Many of these questions remained unanswered at the time. It is only recently, with the change in the political climate and the availability of new sources of information, that it has become possible to analyze this phenomenon with a greater degree of historical precision. As part of a wider research project on Italian left-wing terrorism (della Porta in preparation), this essay deals with one aspect of individual motivations for engaging in noninstitutional forms of political behavior: recruitment into clandestine organizations.

In the sociological literature the most radical forms of protest have often been explained by the assumed pathology of the militants. In the case of clandestine political groups, participation has been related to personality dependence, low intelligence, egocentrism (Livingstone 1982), and frustrated attempts to build positive identities (Billing 1984; Ivianski 1983; Russell and Miller 1983; Knutson 1981; Steinoff 1976). These interpretations, however, have never been proven true by empirical research. In the few cases in which former terrorists were given personality tests, the tests were administered after their arrest, that is after the individuals involved had passed through at least two total institutions, the clandestine organization and the prison system.

Considering terrorist groups as forms of political organizations, albeit with particular characteristics, may suggest alternative hypotheses about individual participation. As I have attempted to show elsewhere (della Porta 1985 and 1986), left-wing underground groups originated inside a wider social movement sector (Garner et al. 1983) whose dynamics should be taken into account in explaining terrorism and its development. What I assume, therefore, is that the motivation to join terrorist groups can be understood within the framework of categories used for other types of political organizations, especially those which are less well-equipped with institutional resources.

The main suggestion in the sociological literature on protest movements is that one should look at recruitment as an interactive process. The decision to join an organization has been explained as a result of a calculation of costs and benefits within the framework of *exchanges* (Homans 1958) conducted between the individual and the organization. Following Olson's well-known analysis of the logic of collective action (1968), many studies have taken the risks and rewards of participation into account (Wilson 1973). It has already been suggested that the different actors in conflict try to influence the determinants of the "participation function." Political activists try to increase the value of the collective good by using propaganda; to foster loyalty by strengthening moral cohesion; and to reduce costs by finding new allies (Oberschall 1973). Moreover, the value of costs and benefits cannot be objectively defined. On the contrary, it is largely dependent on the perceptions of the actors (Pizzorno 1978a; Hirschman 1982). Thus it is necessary to analyze the characteristics of the people who participated in the activities of terrorist groups in order to understand their specific evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of their militancy.

In this context the main question is why some persons are mobilized, why some show greater sensitivity than do others to the incentives political organizations offer. It would be possible to answer this question by saying that this inclination derives from the structural characteristics of some groups of individuals. From this perspective, the militants of the less institutionalized forms of political participation would be marginal—or alienated—and looking for alternative rewards (Kornhauser 1959). But they could just as well be individuals who are very strongly rooted in the social system. A high social status could be considered conducive to collective action since it implies that an individual has more specific skills as well as a greater probability of success (see for instance, Walsh et al. 1973; Wood et al. 1984). More free time and a smaller risk of social sanction have been mentioned to account for the higher propensity for mobilization among young people.

All these hypotheses about the structural preconditions that could facilitate individual mobilizations are plausible. But none is able to explain why a person—however marginal or influential she or he may be—decides to join a political organization rather than a voluntary association, nor how she or he chooses from among different political groups. This problem can be dealt with by relating political participation to the characteristics of the primary groups to which individuals belong (Pinard 1971; Rogers et al. 1975; Aveni 1977 and 1978; Rochford 1982) and, especially, to their positive affective ties with valued others (Gerlach et al. 1970).

This hypothesis will be discussed in greater detail in the first part of this chapter. Individual participation in tight-knit social networks will be singled out as a very important precondition for joining clandestine organizations. Consequently it will be necessary to specify which kind of interpersonal network has positive effects on the kind of political militancy we are trying to explain, and this effort will lead us to look at recruitment as an interactive and cumulative process (Lofland et al. 1965; Gerlach 1970; Snow 1980; Snow et al. 1983) that brings about deep personal transformations. Individual recruitment into a clandestine political organization will therefore be examined as a stage in the collective identity building process (Pizzorno 1978a; Melucci 1985).

I will analyze the recruitment process by presenting original data on the social origins and political background of terrorists. Information has been collected on members of most of the left-wing clandestine groups active in the Italian political system during the seventies. The data refer to the four most important organizations; the Red Brigades (*Brigate Rosse*), the Proletarian Armed Groups (*Nuclei Armati Proletari*), the Front Line (*Prima Linea*), and the Communist Fighting Formations (*Formazioni Comuniste Combattenti*)—and to "minor" groups such as the Armed Fighting Formations (*Formazioni Armate Combattenti*), the Communist Fighting Units (*Unità Comuniste Combattenti*), the Communist Attack Division (*Reparti Comunisti d'Attacco*), the armed Proletarians for Communism (*Proletari Armati per il Comunismo*),

the Red Guerrilla (*Guerriglia Rossa*), later called the 28th of March Brigade (*Brigata 28 Marzo*), the Lo Muscio Brigade (*Brigata Lo Muscio*), the Revolutionary Communist Movement (*Movimento Comunista Rivoluzionario*), the For Communism (*Per il comunismo*), and the "Nuclei". The trial records referring to judicial proceedings for crimes of political subversive association and membership in paramilitary groups were my main sources for this research. Additional reflections are the product of interviews with former terrorists which I conducted in the framework of the research on political violence in Italy carried out at the Carlo Cattaneo Institute.

II. TERRORIST MILITANCY AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

The available biographical information on terrorists shows that recruitment took place within homogeneous groups aggregated on the basis of multiple ties. Table 1 presents some quantitative data on the number of personal ties between new recruits and the members of the underground groups that they eventually joined. Some caution is needed in analyzing this table. The existing ties are, in fact, more numerous than those which can be deduced from judicial sources. Indeed the category "no ties" has been dropped, since it is very likely that personal ties existed even when they were not revealed by my source. Nevertheless, the data yields at least two important results. The first is that, in at least 843 cases out of 1,214, the decision to join an underground organization was taken by people who had at least one friend already involved in that organization. Second, in 74% of these cases, the recruit had more than one friend and in 42% he or she had even more than seven.

My data reveal some qualitative characteristics of these ties. They show, for example, that they were both multiple and strong. Decisions to join underground organizations were taken by clusters (Barnes 1969) or cliques (Burt 1980) of people connected to each other by joint involvements in more than one activity. For example, quite frequently new recruits were next-door neighbors who worked in the same department of a big factory; school friends who used to spend their vacation together; cousins who belonged to the same voluntary association. Moreover, the intensity of the relations is also shown by the high frequency of kinship ties: in 298 cases of my quantitative sample, militants in underground organizations had at least one relative—usually a husband/wife or brother/sister—who shared their commitment. These statistics thus confirm the hypothesis, which has already been suggested for the analysis of other kinds of high-cost commitment (Erickson 1981), that participation in clandestine groups is more likely when it is strengthened by previous affective ties.

Examinations and interviews allow us to understand the role of solidarity with peer groups in the decision to become a terrorist. First, they indicate how this decision is influenced by the peculiar dynamics of face-to-face relations

Table 1. Number of Personal Ties inside the Terrorist Organizations for the New Recruits

No. of personal Ties	N	Percent of responses	Percent of cases
One	220	26.1	28.6
Two	123	14.6	16.0
Three	40	4.7	5.2
Four	64	7.6	8.3
Between 5 and 7	45	5.3	5.9
8 and more	351	41.6	45.6
Total Responses*	843	100.0	109.6
Missing values:	371		
Valid cases:	769		

*Some people were active in more than one clandestine organization.

(Verba 1961; Coombs 1979), governed by the desire to conform and to avoid disagreements that would create cognitive dissonance. All the interviewees stressed a sense of harmony as one of the more positive aspects of the phases of their life which preceded or coincided with their recruitment into clandestine groups. A temporary lack of agreement, on the other hand, is a reason for doubts and changes of mind. The subjective perceptions of the importance of friendship network support are confirmed by the evidence of a series of choices made together with the same small groups of people. The decision to enter terrorist organizations seems to have been motivated, at least to a certain extent, by the desire to obtain the approval of friends who had made or were going to make the same decision.

The interviews yielded some data that could be used to support previous analyses of cognitive dissonance when applied to political groups. Not only solidarity with friends was in general valued very highly, but there is also a second kind of explanation: the social network in which the individual was embedded was the main source of political information. Indeed, the life histories of former terrorists show the development of a kind of oral culture of which the peer group served as the main means of diffusion. The hypothesis that interpersonal relations are a powerful communication channel through which information is passed and acquires meaning and relevance (Smith et al. 1946; McPhail et al. 1973) is therefore confirmed also in the case of Italian terrorists I interviewed, whose responsiveness to external stimuli was particularly low.

A third explanation of the role of personal ties is related to activities that involve high personal risks. For terrorist groups, and secret societies more generally, recruitment is less risky when the recruiter can trust the recruit, and vice versa. In such cases networks help to ensure a general base of loyalty.

Table 2. Relationships Between Terrorist Recruits and their Recruiters

Relationship with recruiter	N	Percent of responses	Percent of cases
Unknown	42	11.6	12.3
Wife/husband	51	14.0	15.0
Other kin	22	6.1	6.4
Friend	159	43.8	46.6
Work mate	34	9.4	10.0
Political comrade	55	15.2	16.1
Total Responses*	363	100.0	106.4
Missing cases: 799			
Valid cases: 341			

*Some people were active in more than one clandestine organization.

The relevance of personal contacts in recruitment into the Italian terrorist organization is confirmed by the data on the relations between recruiters and recruits. As Table 2 reveals, in as many as 88% of the cases in which the nature of the tie with the recruit is known, she or he is not a stranger to the recruiter, in 44% of the cases she or he is a personal friend, and in 20% she or he is a relative.

These results are confirmed by a militant of Front Line. Speaking of the recruitment process during an interrogation, he said, "[it] happened . . . through personal ties. In this way the comrades of the *Squadre* contacted people whom they had known for a long time, who would have entertained the idea of joining the *Squadre* or at least would not have been shocked by the proposal or have not created problems for the security of the comrade who made the contact" (quoted in the Court of Turin 1980, pp. 66-69). The presence of reciprocal affective ties is therefore essential for the reducing of the risks a clandestine organization takes in contacting a potential militant.

III. TERRORIST MILITANCY AND POLITICAL CAREERS

The presence of strong affective ties is thus a powerful explanation of individual motivations. But, quite obviously, not all the cliques of friends or the friends of terrorists joined clandestine groups. It is therefore necessary to specify which kinds of personal relations are more likely to incentivate some forms of political participation. The research on social movements has singled out the importance of such variables as ideological affinity (Wallis et al. 1982; Stark et al. 1980), common structural positions (Tilly 1978; Snow et al. 1983), or previous membership in voluntary associations (Parkin 1968; Walsh et al. 1973; Stark

Table 3. Legal Political Organizations to which Terrorists Belonged before Joining Underground Groups.

Legal organization	N	Percent responses	Percent cases
Italian Communist Party	17	2.1	2.8
Trade Unions	40	4.9	6.5
New Left	232	28.5	37.7
of which:			
<i>Lotta Continua</i>	75	9.2	12.2
<i>Potere Operaio</i>	52	6.4	8.5
"Autonomous" Collectives	518	63.6	84.2
of which:			
<i>Comitati Comunisti</i>	56	6.9	9.2
<i>Senza Tregua</i>	32	3.9	5.2
<i>Rosso</i>	42	5.2	6.8
Others	7	0.8	1.2
Total of Responses*	814	100.0	132.4
Missing cases: 525			
Valid cases: 615			

*Some people were active in more than one clandestine organization.

et al. 1980; Oberschall 1973 and 1980) in determining the capacity of a social network for influencing the political behavior of its members. My research on the members of terrorist groups stresses the particular importance of participation in other political organizations. A widespread motive for joining was the desire to show solidarity with a network of friends who all participated in small legal political groups.

The quantitative data on the political origins of clandestine militants allow us to make some initial observations. Table 3 provides information on the legal organizations to which militants belonged, before joining terrorist groups. With regard to this table it is important to remember that the data refer only to those cases in which information about a terrorist's previous legal militancy was gathered. Nevertheless, it is still striking in how many cases terrorists had been committed to legal political activity before joining the underground groups. The data indicate that recruitment to terrorism involved "political" people, that is people who already had a political identity.

Other considerations must be taken into account in analyzing the internal distribution of legal political involvement. First, the percentage of people coming from the traditional left is very low: only 3% for the Communist Party and a slightly higher 6.5% for the trade unions. Simplistic hypotheses that refer to the disillusion felt by "hard" communist militants when faced with the softening of their party would not fit reality. By contrast, 38% of the terrorists

had been involved in the New Left. In this group the percentage of people who had participated in *Potere Operaio* (Worker Power) and *Lotta Continua* (Continuous Struggle) is quite high. These organizations have often been accused of having provided the structures for the emerging terrorist groups, in particular by forming semi-legal bodies that have been defined as "strategic articulations of an organic terrorist project" (Ventura 1984). My data show that the breakdown of *Potere Operaio*, as well as the almost contemporaneous crisis of *Lotta Continua*, had important effects on the fortunes of the Italian radical left. But the careers of individual militants show that very few people shifted to terrorism directly from these two groups. Rather, the breakdown of these groups gave rise to a process of "autonomization" of *Comitati di Base* (Rank and File Committees) and *Collettivi Operai* (Workers Collectives) from under the guardianship of the more structured groups of the New Left (Palombarini 1982). It was in these small political nuclei, characterized by radical ideologies and violent repertoires, that many future terrorists continued their political involvement.

But the number of late 1960s militants who chose a radicalization of the conflict was quite small. The sharp increase in recruitment came about only when the entrepreneurial efforts of these people found a large potential base in another group of violence-prone political militants. While the breakdown of *Lotta Continua* and *Potere Operaio* occurred in 1973, only after 1976 did a large number of people, as many as 78% of all the recruits, join terrorist groups. Too young to have been involved in the first phases of the late 1960s protest cycle, the members of the "second generation" of terrorists began their political socialization in those groups which had their origins in the crisis of the New Left. As many as 84% of the terrorists had been active in the nuclei that formed around 2 magazines called *Rosso* (Red) or *Senza Tregua* (Without Truce), in the *Circoli del Proletariato Giovanile* (Circles of Youth Proletariat), or in the small *Comitati di Quartiere* active in the working-class neighborhoods of the largest cities.

One characteristic of these groups was their very small size. In Table 3, the category "Autonomous Collectives" combines 93 sub-categories. In at least 89 of these sub-categories, the size of the organization was small enough to suggest that strong personal bonds developed among all the members. In 65 of these sub-categories the frequency is more than 1; in other words, within these groups, at least 2 future terrorists were sharing the same legal political experience. Very often the decision to join a clandestine organization involved an even larger network of "political" companions: 47 of these groups produced at least three future terrorists; 35 at least 4; and 112 more than 5. Decisions to join the "armed struggle" were, in all these cases, collective ones.

In-depth interviews and examinations allow for a better interpretation of these quantitative data. As the testimony of former members reveals, membership in the small legal political group was of great importance in their

daily lives. Even where friendship ties external to the political milieu did exist, their importance tended to diminish as political socialization developed. In a spiraling series of interrelationships, as the amount of time a member spent in political activities increased, so did his contacts with political companions. At the same time, the strengthening of friendship ties inside the political environment increased the value attached to political involvement and encouraged people to dedicate more and more time to political activities. In this way, other ties lost their power to exert countervailing effects on the formation of the personality. As Keniston (1968) has suggested is typical of other kinds of political socialization, commitment among the militants involved a process of isolation from the outside world, and this isolation reinforced loyalty to the new group. Political friends became the most important peer group, capable of influencing any individual choice.

IV. TERRORIST MILITANCY AND POLITICAL IDENTITIES

To summarize what has been said so far, Italian clandestine organizations recruited their militants from tight-knit networks of social relations in which political ties were strengthened by primary solidarity based on friendship and kinship relations. These networks offered loyalty channels of communication to the underground groups. Individual motivations can be traced, to a large extent, to solidarity with groups of people with whom an individual shared a political identity. But the understanding of personal motivation requires a deeper analysis of the process of political socialization that helps to build a collective identity.

Examinations and interviews with former terrorists support the hypothesis that the formation of collective political identities is influenced by the political climate in which sectors of the population have their first political experiences. Specific political sub-cultures influence both the degree of importance political identity has in a person's life and the specific meaning that political activities have for an individual.

Life stories of Italian terrorists confirm that a characteristic of people recruited to clandestine organizations is previous experience of using violence as a political means. Many of the members of armed groups had previously belonged to the semimilitary structures of nonclandestine organizations. They had been involved, for example, in the *servizio d'ordine* (marshall body) of *Lotta Continua*, in the semilegal structures of *Potere Operaio* and of the groups organized around the review *Linea di Condotta* (Line of Conduct), and in the military body of *Rosso*, the so-called *Brigate Comuniste* (Communist Brigades), appointed for the armed defense of public demonstrations and illegal activities. Some of the militants of *Nuclei Armati Proletari* and of *Proletari*

Armati per il Comunismo were experienced in illegal activities, though, in the case of ordinary delinquents who became involved in politics during their stay in prison, for nonpolitical aims. Many of the small clandestine groups that arose after 1979 were founded by terrorists from the major armed organizations. And, conversely, many people recruited into the larger terrorist organizations had previously been involved with illegal groups active in some working class neighborhoods.

The relevance of the previous use of violent repertoires in the political socialization of Italian terrorists is indicated by other data as well. Previous legal convictions for violent crime were traced in 67 cases. Moreover, many of the younger terrorists of the late seventies had been charged with the "proletarian expropriations" and "armed demonstrations" carried out by semilegal groups. A number of others had been prosecuted as members of the most violent groups of *Autonomia Operaia* (Workers Autonomy), the *Collettivo di Via dei Volsci* in Rome, for instance.

The importance of previous experiences with violence is often stated in former militants' accounts of their lives. The political episodes most frequently mentioned are squattings, confrontations with police, fascist assaults, and use of "Molotov cocktails" to "defend" marches and arrests. The use of violence by right-wing activists and police is cited as a justification for personal involvement in illegal and violent activities. The militants' emphasis on their participation in violent events is, therefore, often a device to justify choices that were seen as a necessary response.

To conclude, previous experience in violent political activities predisposes individuals to involvement in terrorist groups. My analysis suggests that participation in violent practices produces a kind of militant for whom political commitment is identified with physical violence rather than with negotiation. The lack of possibilities for concrete gains through bargaining activities increases the need for symbolic substitutes, which are often found in radical ideologies that maintain that social changes can be obtained only through a long war against the enemy.

The spread of terrorist organizations in Italy was, therefore, connected to the presence of political militants whose political socialization took place in the long protest cycle of the late sixties-early seventies. In this period, political activities were characterized by strategies aimed at the formation of new collective identities, rather than at the use of already existing solidarity bonds for bargaining (Pizzorno 1978b). When the protest cycle was over, networks of militants—more accustomed to physical violence than to mediation—constituted a potential base for violent political groups. This group of people interacted, then, with other militants who were politically socialized during periods of identity building and high violence rates. This interaction produced the base from which the second generation of terrorists would emerge. For these people, the use of physical violence preceded rather than followed the

joining of terrorist organizations. The threshold of clandestinity was often passed involuntarily and sometimes even unconsciously.

A fair conclusion would be, therefore, that an individual has a greater propensity to become involved in terrorist activities when she or he belongs to tight-knit political networks and has been socialized to accept violent forms of action.

V. THE RECRUITMENT TO CLANDESTINE ORGANIZATIONS AS A CASE OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: A CONCLUSION

Analyzing recruitment is not sufficient to give a full account of individual motivations in joining underground groups. We must examine other processes in order to understand the way in which the militants were integrated in the organizations and the evolution of their activities in them. In concluding, I will simply summarize my main findings, arranging them around three foci of attention: mobilization potential, consensus mobilization, and action mobilization (Klandermans 1984 and 1985; Tarrow 1985).

Consensus mobilization, that is, "the creation of network arenas and mentalities in which predispositions favorable to action mobilization are formed" (Tarrow 1985, p. 15) has been the main focus of my analysis. Our findings show that terrorist groups are able to recruit in homogeneous political networks. The reservoir for terrorist organizations is composed of people who share (1) strong political identities, that is, people whose personality-building process relies heavily upon a political commitment; and (2) a political socialization to violence, that is, people whose political ideology and, in particular, whose practice, admits the use of physical violence.

The high risks involved in terrorist recruitment may require a greater emphasis on personal networks in terrorist organizations than in other political groups. Moreover, the total commitment that a terrorist organization requires may dramatically increase the degree of personality investment in political participation.

Even allowing for important peculiarities, some general statements can be made here. First, the categories of social network and political ideology are only partially useful in defining consensus mobilization. Neither participation in a social network nor adoption of a certain ideological framework is indeed sufficient to foster political loyalties. They can, in fact, be important constraints on the formation of collective political identities. Second, solidarities that develop during the formation of these collective identities tend to persist and often to direct the groups of people they bind together toward political problem solving attitudes. Faced with crises in social movements, groups of friends keep their solidarity with each other by looking together for other political

involvements. Third, collective identities are formed during periods of regular contact, a fact that in turn helps explain why some individuals consider their political role so important to the structure of their personality.

Although this research concentrated on consensus mobilization, it also offers insights into the other two levels of analysis of political participation. As far as the mobilization of people into action is concerned, the main findings refer to the importance of symbolic incentives. Such incentives are somewhat specific to terrorist organizations, because the high risks involved in participation, diminish the importance of economic incentives. Actually, this situation seems to hold true for other kinds of social movement organizations as well. Indeed, social movements in general are rarely able to offer more than very low-paying and temporary jobs and rely heavily upon volunteer work.

The third subject for analysis, the structural factors that produce groups and individuals with a predisposition to left-wing clandestine organization has not been systematically reviewed. Nevertheless, my data suggest that left-wing groups emerged in Italy as the unforeseen consequences of harsh social conflicts (on this point, see Caselli et al. 1984; della Porta et al. 1986). The lack of a timely policy response to the late 1960s protest cycle, together with the relatively high level of police intervention, favored a gradual deterioration of the repertoires. In the second half of the seventies a very intense outburst of youth protest quickly gave rise to violence. One of the reasons for this outburst may be found in the repressive way through which the new demands were dealt with. In both cases, the environmental conditions encouraging the emergence of terrorism were characterized by the spread of violent patterns of political behavior. The presence of violent repertoires, indeed, creates the preconditions for political entrepreneurs to orient their efforts to a specific constituency formed by those who use radical forms of action.

While these structural preconditions may seem very specific to terrorist groups, nonetheless some general conclusions can be drawn on this point. First, political variables have to be taken into account in analyzing mobilization potential. This potential is defined not only by class position or economic variables but also by the structure of political opportunities (Tarrow 1983). Second, political variables are particularly necessary when the research addresses the potential constituency, not of a social movement in general, but of a specific social movement organization. The two problems have to be differentiated analytically. Third, the mobilization potential is not a naturally existing reservoir; rather, it is in some way shaped by the political organization. The organization's strategic choices define the boundaries of a certain constituency and in this way contribute, if not to the creation, at least to the exploitation of some structural preconditions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The information used in this paper has been gathered by the author as part of a wider research program on "Political Violence and Terrorism" coordinated by the Carlo Cattaneo Institute of Bologna, Italy.

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