

# A multi-level approach

## How and when Italy has disengaged from left-wing political violence

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates how and when left-wing armed groups disengaged from political violence in the Italian case. Analytically, bridging recent trends in social movement studies with those in political violence, it grounds its understanding of the how and when political violence ends in the dynamic relational interplay between socio-political context, organisation dynamics, and individual motivations. Empirically it does not challenge previous readings on the Italian case, but aims to suggest how and why some particular legislative measures worked in the way they have been designed to do from the state including a focus on internal organizational dynamics and societal changes, as well as on political actors responses. This article suggests that there is no single best solutions in order to reduce political violence, as state anti-terrorist policies can have different effects in different social context and different armed groups. Furthermore, the attempts to reduce violence require the involvement of non-state actors as well.

**Keywords:** left-wing armed groups, Italy, political violence, disengage

### RESUMEN

En este artículo se investiga cómo y cuando los grupos armados de izquierda se desligaron de la violencia política en el caso italiano. Analíticamente, tendiendo puentes entre tendencias recientes en estudios sobre movimientos sociales con aquellas relativas a violencia política, se fundamenta su comprensión sobre cómo y cuándo la violencia política finaliza en la interacción entre el contexto socio-político, las dinámicas organizativas y las motivaciones individuales. Empíricamente no cuestiona las lecturas anteriores sobre el caso italiano, sino que pretende sugerir cómo y por qué algunas medidas legislativas particulares trabaja-

ron a partir de la forma en que fueron diseñados desde el Estado, incluyendo un enfoque en la dinámica de la organización interna y los cambios en la sociedad, así como sobre las respuestas políticas de los actores. Este artículo sugiere que no hay soluciones individuales óptimas con el fin de reducir la violencia política, puesto que las políticas estatales de lucha anti-terrorista pueden tener diferentes efectos en diferentes contextos sociales y diferentes grupos armados. Por otra parte, los intentos de reducir la violencia requieren también la participación de los actores no estatales.

**Palabras clave:** grupos armados de izquierda, Italia, violencia política, desactivación

## RESUM

En aquest article s'investiga com i quan els grups armats d'esquerra es van deslligar de la violència política en el cas italià. Analíticament, tendint ponts entre tendències recents en estudis sobre moviments socials amb aquelles relatives a violència política, es fonamenta la seva comprensió sobre com i quan la violència política finalitza en la interacció entre el context sociopolític, les dinàmiques organitzatives i les motivacions individuals. Empíricament no qüestiona les lectures anteriors sobre el cas italià, sinó que pretén suggerir com i per què algunes mesures legislatives particulars van treballar a partir de la forma en què van ser dissenyats des de l'Estat, incloent un enfocament en la dinàmica de l'organització interna i els canvis en la societat, així com sobre les respostes polítiques dels actors. Aquest article suggereix que no hi ha solucions individuals òptimes per tal de reduir la violència política, ja que les polítiques estatals de lluita anti-terrorista poden tenir diferents efectes en diferents contextos socials i diferents grups armats. D'altra banda, els intents de reduir la violència requereixen també la participació dels actors no estatals.

**Paraules clau:** grups armats d'esquerra, Itàlia, violència política, desactivació

For a long time, the issue of how and when political violence ends has been largely ignored. Apart from a few works<sup>1</sup>, until the 2000s the focus was rather on the onset of political violence and radicalization. In recent years, with the rapid growth in publication of research on political violence since September 11, 2001, the demise has received increasing attention<sup>2 3</sup>.

Not dissimilar from those on other cases, research on left-wing armed groups in Italy-- such as the Brigade Rosse (BR), Prima Linea (PL), Nuclei Armati Proletari

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<sup>1</sup> Weinberg and Eubank (1987); Ross and Gurr (1989); Crenshaw (1991)

<sup>2</sup> Zartman (2005); Bjørge (2006); Cronin (2006, 2008, 2009); Jones and Libicki (2008); Bjørge and Horgan (2009); Horgan (2009); Reinares (2011); McCauley (2011); Weinberg (2012); Doudouet (2013); Altier, Thoroughgood and Horgan (2014)

<sup>3</sup> Following Horgan (2008), in this article we distinguish between disengagement and deradicalisation processes. With deradicalisation we mean an ideological process which leads an individual or a group to change his/her/its attitude about the appropriateness of the armed struggle repertoire of action. Disengagement, differently, implies a behavioural modification. The individual or collective withdrawal from armed groups does not necessitate a change in values or ideals, but requires relinquishing the objective of achieving change through violence (Horgan and Altier 2012)

(NAP), Unita' Comuniste Compattenti (UCC), Formazioni comuniste combattenti (FCC), among others--has mainly addressed issues of how and why political violence has emerged<sup>4</sup>, but has paid less attention to the how and when left-wing political violence declined. Such a silence, at least until a few years ago<sup>5</sup> ( ), has been quite surprising given that the Italian case has been internationally considered as an exceptional case where the state has been able to facilitate the disengagement process through the adoption of particular legislative measures (pentitismo and dissociation legislation). Our article empirically does not challenge such reading, but aims to suggest how and why these legislative measures worked in the way they have been designed to do from the state including a focus on internal organizational dynamics and societal changes, as well as on political actors responses. Analytically, bridging recent trends in social movement studies with those in political violence<sup>6</sup>, our purpose in this article is to ground our understanding of the how and when political violence ends in the dynamic relational interplay between socio-political context, organisation dynamics, and individual motivations. As we will see, all three levels of analysis, the macro, meso and micro, provide useful explanations, but it is especially their repeated interactions that need to be studied in detail, since each level compounds and complicates the others.

The article is organized as follows: first, we discuss the possible paths for leaving and the environmental (the macro dimension), organisational (the meso dimension), and individual (the micro dimension) processes; second, we elucidate how and when left-wing political violence ended in the Italian case<sup>7</sup>; finally, the conclusion stresses the need for a multi-level approach in order to study processes of disengagement from political violence.

## How and when political violence ends: a multi-level approach

The socio-political context has a bearing on individuals commitments in armed groups<sup>8</sup>. While anti-terrorism literature has focused mainly (or exclusively) on the state, following the relational approaches in social movement studies, we

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<sup>4</sup> For a review: Ceci (2013)

<sup>5</sup> DeLutis (1990); Della Porta (1995, 2009, 2013); Bosi (2012); Bull and Cook (2013); Galafre' (2014); Bosi and Della Porta (2015)

<sup>6</sup> della Porta (2013), Bosi and Malthaner (2015)

<sup>7</sup> Several sources and data-gathering techniques are used in this research: discourse analysis of interview data with former armed militants; content analysis of historical records (newspapers, government documents, autobiographies, and documents from organisations); and systematic consultation of secondary sources.

<sup>8</sup> Bosi, O'Dochartaigh and Pisiu (2015)

emphasize the importance of other actors, such as the social milieu radical activists rely upon for logistic support but also, and even more, for legitimating their actions<sup>9</sup>. Although armed groups and armed activists tend to progressively isolate themselves from the world around them and to propose an increasingly elitist vision that highlights the successes of their struggle, they also look in their surroundings, at specific social milieus, for confirmation of their own choices. So when negative expectations emerge, due to changes in the socio-political environment, armed groups might adapt their strategies in order to keep the commitment of their activists, get new recruits and address the logistic need of their struggle. In this way, the socio political environment shapes not only activists' expectations (macro->micro), but also the organisation's evolution (macro->micro), which strategically counters the threat of declining recruitment, increasing abandonment from their own members, as well as increasing isolation.

The state remains of course a determinant actor in shaping the socio-political context, in particular through repressive actions, which might vary from severe forms of violence to covert surveillance, and counterterrorist operations, such as arresting or killing of leaders and surveillance of entire communities. Repressive operations in general aim at increasing the costs of joining and remaining inside armed groups and those oriented to reduce the costs of exiting from armed groups. Additionally, we can distinguish measures that target individuals from those that target the armed group as a whole. While maintaining high levels repression (military strikes against armed activists' bases, killing of key leaders, collective punishment) in order to increase the costs of getting involved and remaining committed to armed groups ('pre-emption' and 'deterrence'), an option for the state is to offer a way out to individual armed activists if they cooperate with the state authorities or a reduction of prison sentence if they break with the armed struggle. Another option is to militarily diminish political violence gains in order to make it almost unworthy as a repertoire of action and then to bring the armed group and its broader constituency as a whole back into the institutional political process by showing them a different way forward from the armed struggle type of repertoire of action.

Armed groups can strategically choose (or being forced into) either to further isolating themselves from their own broader constituency, by accentuating their ideological purity that functions to keep armed activists inside even under unfavourable circumstances, or to become more inclusive, by accepting the broader constituency's negative perceptions on the future of the armed struggle and then progressively moving away from radical forms of action. In this choice, armed

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<sup>9</sup> Malthaner (2012); O' Connor (2014)

organisations are constrained by both external (political opportunities and public support) and internal dynamics (resources and intra-group dissent). Organisations that are weaker in material resources and that are confronted with a stronger opposition from the socio political environment might be keener to further radicalise their ideology and tactics in order to foster their continued existence and shore up their organisational integrity. This, in its turn, risks producing further isolation, transforming the political group into a sect, out of touch with political reality, and provoking revulsion among its actual or potential constituency. These types of shifts in the organisational strategy may then provoke organisational disintegration. Armed groups, on the other hand, can decide to disengage or lead to a voluntary disengagement of those armed activists, who suffer a discrepancy between their own feelings and the view and values professed by the changed organisation or by the warring factions, in case a split has developed. In these cases, some armed splinter armed groupings often decide not to stop their violent campaign despite the voluntary ending of the armed group.

Mechanisms are indeed at playing, linking the macro and meso—level to the micro one-- which may discourage exit (Bosi and Della Porta 2012; della Porta 2013). In considering the possibility of disengagement, armed activists feel they have to overcome a socio-psychological barrier by breaking strong ties of friendship and loyalty, and confronting a possible situation where they risk ending up in a social vacuum with seemingly no future whatsoever. In other words, commitment is maintained in part because abandonment would carry a very high psychological price, given the costs that have already been paid for participation in armed action and because activists have to confront the possibility that what they have believed in and fought for is wrong, morally or politically. Thus, while armed activists might perceive that political violence is no longer worthy as a repertoire of action or they might not agree with the new turn underpinned by the armed group, this does not mean that they are able to disengage. Feelings of belonging, the incapacity to see another possible future apart from that in the armed group, and the fear of living with a bad conscience of having believed in wrong ideals, all keep armed activists inside armed groups at least until something happens that makes it possible to disengage with other comrades or when latent tensions, over the perceived possibilities of the success of the armed struggle triggered by a transformative event, make the need to disengage more important than the sense of belonging to the group and the loyalty toward the previous system of values and beliefs (*'burnout'*).

In sum, as we are going to see in the Italian case, anti-terrorist state strategies play an important role as they fundamentally affect an important field of interactions, at military level. Their effects are, however, filtered through other fields of interactions, as the one between underground political organizations and their

social milieus of reference. Additionally, the micro-effects of state repressive strategies are influenced by the organizational characteristics and conditions at the meso level.

## The disengagement from left-wing political violence in Italy

In Italy, left-wing political violence in the 1970s was rooted in the massive upsurge of the student movement and the workers' struggle of 1968–69, and their perceived failure to bring about broad social and political change. In the left at the time, many were convinced that the state was part of an anticommunist "strategy of tension" conspiracy, facilitated by the Italian secret service, parts of the Army and the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). This had a strong impact on the decision of some left-wing groups to resort to violence as a means to resist and stay on the offensive. Political violence arose then on the Left, from the radicalization of networks of social movement activists that had felt peaceful protest had proved unsuccessful. It was in this tense socio-political atmosphere that left-wing armed groups were founded (1969–1974)<sup>10</sup>. Initially, the left-wing armed groups main activities implied only low levels of violence. They did not go beyond damage to company properties, setting fire to numerous automobiles owned by business executives, security staff, heads of sections, or brief kidnappings of industrial managers and right-wing trade unionists. The development of the left-wing armed groups towards the adoption of more violent repertoires came about gradually. By the mid-1970s, the focus of these armed groups had shifted to attacking and destroying capitalist power by striking at the heart of the Italian State<sup>11</sup>. If from 1969 to 1974 there have been 356 violent attacks from left wing armed groups, in the following period from 1975 to 1979 there have been 4440 violent attacks<sup>12</sup>.

After an early period in which the Italian state has underestimated, at some stages even purposely, the threats posed by left-wing armed groups, since 1978, in the aftermath of the kidnapping and killing of the Christian Democrat leader and former Prime Minister Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades, heavy military repression was accompanied by new legal measures oriented at increasing the individual costs of participation in armed groups. These so-called 'award measures' provided for by the 1980 anti-terrorism law, varying from non-punishment to sentences reduced by half and the non-application of aggravating circumstances for members of armed groups who decided to collaborate with the investigating aut-

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<sup>10</sup> Della Porta (1990)

<sup>11</sup> Della Porta (1995, 2013); Alimi, Demetriou and Bosi (2015)

<sup>12</sup> Della Porta and Rossi (1984)

horities by denouncing their own comrades (*'pentiti'* or 'repenters'), accelerated the crisis of the left-wing armed groups<sup>13</sup>. In a similar direction, a new law in 1982 (Law 304/1982) established that reductions in sentences would be scaled in relation to the extent of collaboration and the importance of the contribution provided: life-sentences were reduced to between 10 and 12 years where decisive proofs leading to identification of accomplices were provided, and a further reduction by a third for exceptional contributions that led to the disbanding of entire armed groups<sup>14</sup>. It was, at least on the surface, especially thanks to these confessions that the state establishment managed to achieve its first consistent victories in the fight against left-wing political violence<sup>15</sup>.

However, such state victories in Italy were only possible due to the unfavourable socio-political environment left-wing armed activists found themselves since the late 1970s. If in the early 1970s the Italian Communist Party (PCI) fears of an authoritarian shift of the Italian regime moved the party to undertake a compromise with the Christian Democrats (DC) and this had surely an impact of the radicalization of left-wing armed groups<sup>16</sup>, over the long term such strategy of engaging itself in proactive campaigns against left-wing armed groups allowed to move large part of the left-wing constituency out of the hands of the armed groups propaganda<sup>17</sup>. Drawn into a spiral of political violence and tough repression (with the death of several militants during police charges, as well as of policemen during protests against policing actions), the 1977 movement quickly disappeared: while a few of its former activists joined new and existing armed groups, most developed a strong critique of political violence, which contributed to the social isolation of the left-wing armed groups.

Macro-conditions, and the mix of costs and benefits in abandoning the armed struggles they provided for, or anyhow affected, were filtered through individual perceptions of the various alternatives available. It was in particular the emerging awareness of the weakness of the armed struggle project, given its increasing stigmatization in the social milieu the armed groups aimed at addressing, which led to a transformation of the meaning of formerly accepted behaviour. For example, Enrico Fenzi, a former leader of the BR, would retrospectively justify his exit from the armed group in these terms:

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<sup>13</sup> Grevi (1984)

<sup>14</sup> Galfre' (2014)

<sup>15</sup> de Lutis (1990); della Porta (1995, 2009)

<sup>16</sup> Alimi, Demetriou and Bosi (2015): pp. 69-75

<sup>17</sup> Naccarato (2015)



'Certainly there is a desire to get out of jail, there is the feeling of defeat and repulsion about what you have done. There is a different political opinion. There is the perception of a reality different from what you [had] thought'<sup>18</sup>

Latent tensions exploded in face to some precipitating events. Among them, former supporters recall episodes they considered particularly cruel. Valerio Morucci, leader of the Roman 'Column' of the BR, claimed that his crisis began with the killing of former Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro and subsequently that of factory worker and trade unionist Guido Rossa, accused of having reported to the police a BR activist who worked in the same factory. As he recalled,

'The BR meanwhile were pursuing their path. And, obviously, I no longer shared it. The last straw was the killing of Guido Rossa in Rome... I wrote that the murder of Guido Rossa had been a serious mistake. All of us in the BR thought so – except the people who killed him'. The BR 'just continued killing and we couldn't take it anymore'<sup>19</sup>.

Other left-wing armed activists mention as "last straw the broke the camel's back" the violence produced from the very armed groups against their militants. What is significant is that the perception of social and political defeat, triggered by precipitant events, interacted with the opportunity offered by the new laws. According to BR founder Prospero Gallinari:

'It is certainly not new but it is not badly thought of either, the power strategy. Diverging treatment and prospects tears open the prison environment and subsequently encourage crises among political prisoners. Many comrades were already assailed with doubts and questions. The Ministry's prison policy required clear political horizons and impartial ethical motivations if it were to be handled with the necessary strength and patience. But this itself was increasingly lacking'<sup>20</sup>.

Thus, slowly, the perception of the increasing deterioration of bonds of solidarity due to growing, if limited, 'repentance' added up to the increasing awareness of the military and political isolation of the armed group, accentuated by the impossibility of avoiding arrests and recruiting from new social movements<sup>21</sup> (). This was compounded by the realisation that the armed struggle and its goals did not have much popular support, even from the social constituency of which they saw themselves as members<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Zavoli (1995): p. 226

<sup>19</sup> Morucci (2004): p. 203

<sup>20</sup> Gallinari (2006): p. 302

<sup>21</sup> della Porta (2009)

<sup>22</sup> Bosi (2013)



The macro-conditions also impacted at the meso-level, reducing at the same time the loyalty to their groups as well the potential for voice inside it. The socio-political conditions of the late 1970s and the new repressive 'emergency policies' measures, which constrained the organisational resources and the recruitment capacities, further radicalised the left-wing armed groups, leading to a form of 'encapsulation' from the outside world. This was a way to survive, keeping their organisational integrity, but at the cost of becoming more and more out of touch with political reality<sup>23</sup>. In this evolution of the armed groups, the increasing brutality of their actions ended up disgusting not only the broader public opinion, but also their own activists. Many of them afterward recalled their disappointment in perceiving that their group was changing from its original project. Alfredo Buonavita, one of the founders of the BR imprisoned in 1974, would leave the organisation still holding up the difference between the first historical nucleus of the BR (with a romantic perception of its 'Robin Hood' orientation) and the 'other BR', militaristic and murderous. Buonavita would speak of his 'disgust as regards a practice that was no longer suitable for me in simple human terms' and that 'a part always continues to want to break with this thing and yet there is an inability and impossibility to reach an agreement'<sup>24</sup>.

Macro changes in influencing the organisational shift of strategies also led to armed groups' fractionalisation. The BR from the end of the seventies, for example, witnessed a series of successive splits. Internal conflicts were the expression of different strategies to deal with organisational difficulties posed by the new socio political conditions and the first confessions by 'repentants'<sup>25</sup>. 'The struggle among the various factions fighting over the hegemony of the leftovers of the organization'<sup>26</sup> further increased the radicalisation of their repertoires of action. These splits, the further radicalisation strategy of the armed group, and arrests made relationships with other members outside the prison increasingly impersonal, destroying those affective ties that had been keeping activists in the organisations despite growing doubts over the future of armed struggle. Thus, leadership failures, ideological competitions, physical exhaustion and availability of attractive paths out of violence weakened the cohesion within the underground left-wing groups and finally increased disagreements on ideology and strategy and burnout doubts among armed activists on their existence and worldview. Dropping loyalty, facilitated the spreading of "betrayal" and this, at its turns, increased personal insecurity and frustration for the growing military defeats.

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<sup>23</sup> della Porta (1995, 2009)

<sup>24</sup> Catanzaro and Manconi (1995): pp. 148-149

<sup>25</sup> Moretti (2007): pp. 232-242

<sup>26</sup> Caselli and della Porta (1984): p. 102

If a substantial number of activists chose to 'repent', for many others breaking affective ties was still too painful. A sense of solidarity certainly slowed down the process of leaving the underground, especially as long as the only possible option was to choose between 'repentance' – and thus denouncing comrades – and unshakeable loyalty to the organisation. Many interviewees claim in fact that 'you don't leave alone', you 'wait for the others' so as not to 'tear apart internal relations with the other detainees', 'wait for a process of collective maturity' to 'reduce the weight of recognising mistakes'<sup>27</sup>. Vis-à-vis these activists, the process of disengagement in prisons was encouraged by the creation of 'homogeneous areas', i.e. areas where prisoners from armed groups who publicly distanced themselves from the armed struggle could assemble with those with whom they considered themselves ideologically (or emotionally) close and benefit from the more favourable detention conditions.

The '*dissociazione*' law of 1986, which facilitated breaking the associative pact by reducing the psychological costs of leaving as no denunciation of comrades was required in order to benefit from reduced penalty (a declaration of personal break with the organisation was sufficient), exploited these widespread doubts over the future of the armed struggle and facilitated the breaking with political violence of small groups of prisoners<sup>28</sup>. As Sergio Segio, one of the leaders of Prima Linea, has suggested in his biography:

'The dissociation has emerged for us from here, from the consideration – experienced, and not abstracted – of how much the practices of liberation through the use of arms were now reduced to be just 'fights between groups' against state security services, as they have contributed to suffocate of the movements struggles, rather than been in support of these'<sup>29</sup>

As it has been the case in other processes of exiting from the armed struggle<sup>30</sup>, voluntary associations, often in the Catholic milieu, were particularly important as well at this stage, as it has worked closely with armed activists in prison, encouraging their exit from political violence<sup>31</sup>. With few exceptions, activists of left-wing armed groups in prison successively and in various ways publicly declared that the 'armed struggle' in Italy was over<sup>32</sup>. The softening of the 'emergency policies' measures together with the preparation for re-entry into society ('pull' factors at the micro level) had the capacity to restore trust in nonviolent forms of

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<sup>27</sup> della Porta (1990)

<sup>28</sup> Galfre' (2014)

<sup>29</sup> Segio (2006): p. 247

<sup>30</sup> See: Itcaina (2011) on the Basque case

<sup>31</sup> Bull and Cooke (2013); Galafre' (2014)

<sup>32</sup> Moretti (2007): pp. 256-261

social and political commitment among some former left-wing armed activists, and thus to complete their disengagement process. For most, the disengagement from political violence did not impose a total fracture with their own history, but 'dissociazione' laws allowed these militants to maintain a continuity with their militant existence and the recognised failure of their experience in armed struggle.

## Conclusions

Our article does not aim to draw a definitive conclusion on how left-wing political violence has ended in the Italian case. The measures aimed at favouring dissociation from left-wing armed groups were successful when signs of failure were already perceived among the armed activists and when more and more critical views about the deeds of armed groups spread in the milieus that had previously provided logistic support. In this sense, state choices worked when they could facilitate already existing processes of disengagement. As the armed groups tried to address repression by further isolating themselves from the outside, more and more militants and sympathisers perceived that their political motivations could not be pursued through what had become more and more brutal military means. In sum, repressive state policies were not able to terminate political violence, but have facilitated some paths which were however strongly affected by the evolution of social and political conflicts. We believe these conclusions suggest that conflicts are complex phenomena, in which a broad range of actors intervene and interact with each other. Their relations, as well as their characteristics, are most relevant in influencing efforts to solve conflicts and establish peace. This also means that there is no single best solutions in order to reduce political violence, as state anti-terrorist policies can have different effects in different social context and different armed groups. Second, the attempts to reduce violence require the involvement of non-state actors as well.

Furthermore, this work has proposed integrating socio-political context (macro-level), organisation dynamics (meso-level), and individual motivations (micro-level) explanations in order to create a comprehensive and dynamic model of processes of disengagement that take into account the context of both structural and group dynamics, as well as psychological factors. This analytical choice, imported from social movement studies, reflects the attention given to the social construction of reality as a filter between environmental conditions and individual action<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> della Porta (2013); Bosi et al (2015)

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