Research Proposal, Preliminary Title:

The Devil You Don't Know

How Social Science Theory can deepen our understanding of Social Revolutionary Terrorism and what this means for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence

1. Aim and Research Question

On a first glance, European left-wing or social-revolutionary terrorism is above all a phenomenon of the past, even though self-styled revolutionaries from Greece and Italy recently re-claimed at least some headlines with letter-bomb attacks on various, above all financial, institutions (New York Times, 3 November, 2010, Sec. A: 3; New York Times, online edition, 1 April, 2011). This form of organised violent behaviour has been a major concern to the security community as well as to those parts of the academia that began dedicating their work to the research on terrorism as a distinct pattern of political violence in the 1970s. If studies of terrorism nowadays mention the social-revolutionary phenotype at all, it represents a mere contrasting layer to delimit the newness of the 'new' terrorism (Neumann 2009: 120). This mainstream view confronts students of political violence with an obvious question: is there any necessity of adding more to the already vast body of research literature on social-revolutionary, left-wing groups?

The proposal for a doctoral thesis presented here aims at answering it in the affirmative, addressing the well-known double desideratum of research on terrorism. On the one hand, it is often claimed that studies in terrorism lack a considerable momentum of conceptual or theoretical depth common to other subject matters of the social sciences (Schmid/Jongman 2008: 127). On the other hand, methodological sound empirical analysis that reaches beyond the realm of mere single case studies or sketchy, far-stretching overviews is rather the exception than the rule in this specific sub-discipline (Ilardi 2004: 226; della Porta 1995: 15). Instead of trying to treat these critical deficiencies as two distinct problems, it is argued here, that they just represent two sides of the same coin, thus are inseparably interwoven and should be tackled in this way. Theoretical work on political violence and terrorism needs empirical 'feed-back' to avoid dislodging itself from the subject matter and explaining more violence than actually exists (Wilkinson 1979a: 59). Equally, empirical research on terrorism requires a sound theoretical foundation to display analytically valid and significant results (Silke 2004: 209). In order to regain its potential explanatory power–not least as a tool of policy advice–studies in terrorism should dedicate more attention to basic research (Crelinsten 1987a: 6). The latter is understood here as conceptual grounded analysis of under-examined aspects of cycles of political violence which have already been concluded; it should operate along empirically testable hypotheses.

Hitherto, there is no approach which attempts to identify and analyse patterns of different levels of permanence and organisational survival of social-revolutionary terrorist groups on a comparative base focusing explicitly on the meso-level of analysis, that is, specific groups. Organisations of this type emerged in Europe during the breakdown of the great wave of nationally different though virtually continental-wide protest movements in the late 1960s and drew back on the radicalised fringes of these (Mommsen 1982: 396). Broadly speaking, most of

these started from a marginal social basis; whenever a considerable momentum of public support initially existed, it soon became marginalised. Yet, while several groups existed in adverse social environments for some decades, others quickly disappeared (Waldmann 2005: 159). Such obvious differences are usually explicated exclusively as an outcome of historically distinct social contexts and conditions of resource mobilisation, leaving aspects of internal auto-motivation, auto-propaganda and incentive structures out of consideration (Laqueur 1977: 211 et seq.). As the external prerequisites appear unique in each case and circumstance, such a focal point constraints all efforts to compare different dynamics (Cronin 2009: 96). In contrast, a comparative approach to internal conditions of continuity offers a perspective that enables the researcher to re-calibrate the influence of external strain. Using a comparative framework and the concept of social movements, this approach draws closely on the seminal work of della Porta (della Porta 1992, 1995, 2008). Systematically using Social Movement Theories in a comparative analysis of cycles of violent protest, della Porta pioneered an extremely fruitful and promising way of studying the development and dynamics of political groups and movements using violent means to address political and social grievances (Gunning 2009). This PhD Project thus aims at three central points: 1) in-depth analysis of concluded cycles of political violence, 2) bringing together discourses in the sub-discipline 'terrorism research' and in the wider field of sociological theory and 3) empirical practicability and applicability. Consequently, it raises the following research questions:

Which internal mechanisms that influence the probability of persistence of different social-revolutionary terrorist groups can be identified by employing a conceptual approach drawing back to critical sociological theory?

Is the impact of these mechanisms verifiable in a comparative empirical investigation of a broader sample of case studies?

2. Innovative Contribution, Theoretical and Methodological Background

The methodological approach of this research project combines central aspects of the epistemological discourse in 'terrorism studies' with critical sociological theory. It rests on two essential findings: firstly, research on terrorism hitherto lacks a concise and consensual definition of its very subject; almost all scholarly work on terrorism starts from this observation (Cooper 2001: 881). Thus, rather than creating a new, necessarily contentious definition of 'terrorism', this project considers the existing scholarly literature in itself an object of discourse analysis. Having developed at least since the late 1960s, the corpus of academic literature on 'terrorism' discusses the fundamental question of what constitutes the very 'essence' of 'terrorism'. Even though no definite answer to this ontological puzzle exists to date, various dimensions can be identified around which the scholarly discourse evolves. The most important of these dimensions, it is argued here, is the communicative aspect of terrorist violence which is stressed virtually unequivocally: the use of the term 'terrorism' implies that violence figures as a means of communication (Crelinsten 1987a: 6; Richardson 2006: 4; Thornton 1964: 73; Wilkinson 1979b: 99). Secondly, a perspective problematizing the notion of communication mostly fails to inform the conceptual foundation of investigations on terrorist groups or cycles of political violence. Communicative approaches to terrorism are usually confined to aspects of agenda-setting,

coercive bargaining, framing of grievances and the dysfunctional effects of communicating via 'illicit' violence (Berry 1987: 303; Crelinsten 1987b: 421; Gurr 1988: 53; Karber 1971: 532; Waldmann 2005: 156). Although these observations highlight important aspects of the communicative structure of 'terrorism', it is assumed here that far more potential explanatory power rests in a more thoroughgoing use of the concept of 'communication': terrorism and terrorist groups will be understood as essentially consisting of and resulting from communications. To bring this additional explanatory potential to the fore, critical sociological theory will be deployed that re-constructs the realm of the social from the observation that all social agents necessarily have to communicate. Specifically, the Luhmannian theory of social systems argues that society not only operates via interdependent communications but also consists of these (Luhmann 1987, 1998, 2000). Consequently, the conditions and problems of all social entities–even terrorist groups–result from the way in which they communicate.

The significance of this theoretical foundation will be tested in a content- and discourse-analysis of 'terrorist literature'[1] and 'official sources' making recourse to a sample of social-revolutionary terrorist groups; the sample combines features of 'most similar' and 'most dissimilar' case study designs. Beside (semi-)official documents, news media coverage and biographical sources, the analyse will especially emphasize 'terrorist' utterances in a stricter sense–i.e. communiqués, strategy papers, political statements and their perception in the radical left counter-hegemonic discourse. The central and most important choice in terms of methodology is to employ a comparative design for the empirical study. Combining 'most similar' and 'most dissimilar' approaches increases the probability to determine which specific similarities and dissimilarities in developmental patterns are significant. To that purpose, the study focuses on qualitative methods, but quantitative tools of content analysis will also be used where appropriate. I have ample experience in both methods and I have continued my research training since graduating with reference to the use of software for qualitative and quantitative analysis. The choice of the case studies results from a twofold consideration: on the one hand, there is sufficient reliable data of various origins on groups of the social-revolutionary type to evaluate mechanisms and effects of distinct communicative strategies. The collected papers of groups like the French 'Direct Action', Spain's 'First of October Anti-Fascist Resistance Groups', the 'German Revolutionary Cells' or Italy's 'Red Brigades' are accessible in various archives across Europe. On the other hand, in order to avoid premature conclusions, attempts to identify long-ranging, general patterns in the behaviour of terrorist groups should start from concluded cycles of political violence.

3. Objective and Relevance of the Project

Drawing on a historically and theoretically contextualized perspective, this project aims at identifying and testing general patterns of the behavioural, organisational and developmental dynamics of terrorist groups. The outlined approach is considered as potentially very fruitful in

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[1] The under-representation of this important source in the literature is frequently stressed (among others: Cordes 1988: 151).

adding a more conceptual perspective to the research agenda of studies in conflict and terrorism. In the second half of the 20th century, the term 'terrorism' and the qualifier 'new' have been combined in a quite curious manner. Nearly every time the perceived threat by means of this form of political violence had reached a certain level, commentators and scholars have been quick to declare it a fundamentally new manifestation with hitherto unknown characteristics (Laqueur 1977: 20). Stressing too strongly aspects of exceptionality and discontinuity in the structure of violent politics and in the dynamics of its authors' behaviour, terrorism studies tend to get re-invented every other decade (Crenshaw 1990: 259). Rather than continually building and refining a body of knowledge that helps to address new developments on an increasingly realistic base through informed comparison of different cases, in-depth research into specific configurations of violent politics is for the greater part suspended as soon as these very configurations are no longer perceived to be effectively dangerous (Ilardi 2004: 215; Silke 2004: 13). Bridging this gap is exactly what this research project aims at. In thoroughly designing a theoretical approach and testing it on a broad, comparative basis of cases, its capacity for further research will be analysed.

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