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Alessandro Orsini, "Anatomy of the Red Brigades: The Religious Mind-set of Modern Terrorists". Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011, 317 pp.

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Book reviews

Alessandro Orsini, *Anatomy of the Red Brigades: The Religious Mind-set of Modern Terrorists*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011, 317 pp.

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Perhaps due to the 1978 kidnapping and cold-blooded assassination of former Prime Minister Aldo Moro, the Red Brigades remains the best-known among the cluster of extremist groups associated with the *anni di piombo*, the period of heightened mobilization and violence by revolutionary leftists and neo-fascist activists in Italy from the late 1960s until the early 1980s. In examining the Red Brigades, this book aims to answer three questions: “1. Who are the Red Brigades? 2. Why do they kill? 3. Where do they come from, what is their historic-political tradition?” (p. 285). The answer offered here is that the Red Brigades were animated by a quasi-religious conception of politics that combined utopian goals with acceptance of violent means.

Drawing on primary and secondary sources, in particular this book argues for strong cultural continuities between the Red Brigades on one hand, Marxism, Leninism and Italian Communism on the other: all envisioned a socio-political utopia, approved of violence as a political means and dehumanized their opponents. Primary sources consist mainly of texts attributed either to individual Red Brigades members (such as court testimonies or autobiographical statements) or to the organization itself (including texts written for internal purposes as well as those for outside audiences). The author contextualizes the rise of the Red Brigades by emphasizing the social disruptions produced by Italian postwar industrial capitalism (unregulated urbanization; inadequate housing and public utilities; erosion of family ties; alienating factory work; authoritarian relations on the shop floor; change in secular and religious beliefs, values and mores; and internal migration – from South to North, from countryside to big cities). Accordingly:

The political socialization of the first Red Brigades occurred in a context of extreme anomic breakdown, with wretched living conditions, radical inequalities, exploitation, discrimination [against Southerners living in the North], and collective distress, in which there were also episodes of harsh repression against the working classes, prompted by the continuous obsession of a fascist military coup d'état (p. 104).

Drawing from history, sociology and comparative political science, Orsini buttresses his argument by showing close parallels between the Red Brigades and other promoters of political violence. The scope is vast: selections from over four centuries of history in various parts of Europe and Asia.

The central argument is that the Red Brigades belong to a political family that includes thinkers, movements, parties and regimes that seek to purify the world. Its two distinguishing characteristics are a revolutionary Gnosticism and pedagogy of intolerance:

To destroy, eliminate, purify, hate, execute, and terrorize. This was the Red Brigades' plan. This is the plan of all purifiers of the world. The fundamental message

is always the same: the world is a putrid and nauseating place. Every single aspect of it must be razed. It is only through the massive use of the pyre, the guillotine, or the gun that humanity can be redeemed and live in the kingdom of absolute happiness (p. 255).

After explaining “revolutionary Gnosticism” and “pedagogy of intolerance”, the Introduction proposes that an inflexible and blinding preoccupation with ridding this world of impurity distinguished the Red Brigades. Chapter 2 asserts the Red Brigades were animated by a “political-religious vocation” (p. 38) whose characteristics include group conformity, relentless hatred, social segregation, acceptance of violence and intolerance of internal dissent. Chapter 3 argues the discipline imposed by the formal organization of the Red Brigades ensured its members’ compliance when ordered to engage in violence. This chapter also presents Orsini’s DRIA (Disintegration, Reconstruction, Integration, Alienation) model (p. 67):

1. Social marginality (*Disintegration of social identity stage*)
2. Acquisition of “binary code” mentality (*Reconstruction of social identity stage*)
3. Entry into a political-religious group or “community of absolute revolution” (*Integration in the revolutionary sect stage*)
4. Detachment from reality (*Alienation from the surrounding world stage*)

After describing the social dislocations of postwar Italy, Chapter 4 draws on relative deprivation theory in attributing the genesis of the Red Brigades to frustrations with the established order prior to the upsurge in neo-fascist violence marked by the 1969 Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan. Reaching back in time, this chapter then documents the “strictly gnostic concept of progress” (p. 125) in the thought of Antonio Gramsci and its continuation in the postwar *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI): “most of the founding members of the Red Brigades paid the price for basing their political practice on the revolutionary education received in the Communist Party” (p. 129). But for the blessing of Moscow, in 1947-48 the PCI might have led a violent coup d’état; the Party’s revolutionary rhetoric continued through the 1960s, when PCI leaders did not call for violent revolution but did not rule it out either. Chapter 5 shifts to alleged predecessors of the Red Brigades: Thomas Müntzer and the German peasant revolt of 1523-25; John of Leiden and the Anabaptist takeover of Münster in 1534-35; Oliver Cromwell and the English Puritans; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Jacobins and the French Revolution; “Gracchus” Babeuf and the Conspiracy of Equals (1796); intolerance, hatred and violence in the personality and ideas of Karl Marx; and utopianism and extremism in the tradition of Russian populism exemplified by Alexander Herzen, Mikhail Bakunin and Nikolay Chernyshevsky. Chapter 6 identifies the same quasi-religious syndrome in Communist totalitarian regimes: the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin, China under Mao and Cambodia under Pol Pot. A concluding chapter re-asserts the initial thesis: “a professional revolutionary is a particular anthropological type who possesses identical features in all places and times” (p. 255). The Appendix summarizes the ideas of Julius Evola (an intellectual inspiration for Italy’s neo-fascists) in arguing that behind their apparent differences the revolutionary leftists and neo-fascists of *the anni di piombo* shared the same important traits: alienation from party politics, obsession with purity, hatred of the bourgeoisie and readiness to bring down the existing order. A brief, con-

cluding “Note on Method” explains why the author did not rely on participant observation or survey methods. It also presents a hypothesis: “The greater the level of integration of the gnostic activity of the revolutionary sect, the higher its propensity to give and receive death” (p. 286). In sum, violent extremists are not mad but rather “normal people who, through a gradual interaction process (DRIA model), become murderers” (p. 287).

This English translation of *Anatomia delle Brigate rosse: Le radici ideologiche del terrorismo rivoluzionario* reads smoothly, even when it grapples with such challenges as the reproduction of Italian sentence structure. The translator, Sarah J. Nodes, also succeeds in conveying the subtle differences of register in language that is alternately colloquial, propagandistic or academic.

As a sociologist with no vested interest in praising or denouncing the Red Brigades, nonetheless I found this book puzzling and frustrating to read.

Its “Note on Method” raises a worthwhile question: What explains variation in the violent action of a revolutionary sect? Moreover, the proposition that the extent of violence depends on a sect’s level of integration seems plausible given the assumption that ideological conformity is encouraged by closed social networks that isolate members from cross-cutting influences. Why, then, is such a promising hypothesis buried in a note at the back of the book rather than emphasized at the beginning? Just as important, why is it not tested against relevant evidence? Minimally, to do so would have required a search for covariance in, respectively, the Red Brigades’ levels of integration and violent activity.¹ This the book never offers: instead, it treats both a high level of integration and a high level of violent activity as *constants* in the history of the Red Brigades. A good question evaporates; a promising hypothesis remains untapped and untested.

Contrary to its “Note on Method”, *Anatomy of the Red Brigades* advances an explanation whose persuasive power depends on parallels between certain ideas of the Red Brigades and: (1) those of the PCI, Gramsci, Lenin, et al.; and (2) the ideas and practices of certain illiberal sects, movements, parties or regimes in Europe and Asia. In subtle but profoundly important fashion, the main hypothesis thus changes from that articulated in the book’s “Note on Method”: not variation in integration explains the likelihood that a revolutionary sect will engage in violence, but instead violence is either inevitable or more probable (I am not sure which) wherever one finds revolutionary Gnosticism combined with pedagogy of intolerance.

The evidence marshalled to make this argument lacks power because of cherry-picking: there is no sign that possibly disconfirming evidence may exist or has been examined. Yet consider that even if the PCI did not always disapprove of violence, it *did* accommodate itself to the multi-party regime of postwar Italy. As Orsini himself mentions (pp. 131-147), it was precisely the PCI’s *deviation* from any single-minded, anti-system

¹ I write “Minimally” to avoid an unreasonable standard. It is a commonplace that aside from establishing covariance, other features of good explanation include ruling out spuriousness; sifting through and weighing the effects of multiple factors; and tracing out causal pathways, processes or mechanisms. Achieving more than one or two of these desiderata does not seem usual in sociology, however.

quest for political purity and a socialist utopia that helps to explain why the Red Brigades emerged in the wake of the 1960s student movement.

So, unlike the vision of historical sociology prescribed by Max Weber – which conceives of the ideal type as a heuristic for bringing out the individuality of the past – examples are here squeezed into a pre-existing mould. As Weber writes, the confusion of history with theory

expresses itself firstly in the belief that the “true” content and the essence of historical reality is portrayed in such theoretical constructs or secondly, in the use of these constructs as a procrustean bed into which history is to be forced or thirdly, in the hypostatization of such “ideas” as real “forces” and as a true “reality” which operates behind the passage of events and which works itself out in history (Weber, 1949 [1904], p. 94).

What then is gained by treating the Red Brigades as quasi-religious? No doubt the use of metaphor may yield new and valuable insight into a familiar phenomenon. Here, however, words used in a different context by Barrington Moore Jr. (1953, p. 131) apply: some degree of success in classifying the facts according to the author’s DRIA model “is more or less automatically guaranteed, since the facts can be classified by this system, or by a hundred other ways.” This explains the paradoxical lack of weight of those substantial parts of *Anatomy of the Red Brigades* (Chapters 5, 6 and the Appendix) that seek to buttress the main argument by drawing historical parallels. The parallels seem too tight to be true. The reader cannot help but wonder what historical detail and context are missing.²

In judging whether a political-religious approach to the Red Brigades yields valuable insight, consider what Drake (1989) writes:

The protean variousness of Marxism is reflected in the history of Italian communism. While many Marxists today minimize the importance of the revolutionary project, the repeated assertions in the classic texts of Marxism-Leninism regarding the necessity of a violent anticapitalist revolution have always been highly suggestive to a certain type of fanatical left-wing mind of which the Red Brigades are the latest and most ferocious expression in Italy. Between Marxism-Leninism and contemporary terrorism there does exist a group of mediating intellectuals, of self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist provenance, who themselves cannot always be shown to have direct links with the terrorists but whose ideas and preachments have reinforced and glamorized the mystique of proletarian revolution (Drake, 1989, p. xviii).

Like Orsini, Drake sees strands of Italian communism as well as “classic texts of Marxism-Leninism” as influences on the Red Brigades and their use of violence. Yet Drake also recognizes the “protean variousness of Marxism” both within and outside

² As illustrated by the following passages, this book addresses its reader in a peremptory tone that seems to betray an insecurity over its evidentiary and theoretical bases: “The Red Brigades do not act, they react” (p. 107); “For the victims of modernization, the search for ‘meaning’ is an anguished daily challenge” (p. 258); “All revolutionaries are actually impenitent reactionaries, people angry and resentful about everything that Western modernity represents” (p. 268). Why not a more dialogical tone in considering the evidence, to say nothing of the scholarly literature?

Italy. Whereas Orsini defends a “political-religious conception”, moreover, Drake sees a “revolutionary mystique” that draws some of its moral and emotional spark from the Partisan myth:

the *brigadisti rossi* see themselves as a new generation of partisans. They claim to be at war with democratic capitalism in the moral sense exemplified by the partisans during World War II. Expressly calling themselves the heirs of the Resistance, the Red Brigadists describe Italy as an occupied country under the effective control of capitalists, with Christian Democratic puppets performing the same role for their American masters that the Italian Fascist government eventually performed for Hitler. In their minds the historical parallel, despite superficial differences, is exact in almost all its essential points (Drake, 1989, p. xiv).

Anatomy of the Red Brigades contains the following quote from a letter written by a Red Brigades member, Margherita Cagol: “What I’m doing is just and sacrosanct, history will prove me right as it did for the Resistance in ’45” (p. 15). This quote stands out in a book otherwise silent about the ongoing legacy of the civil war that pitted Italians against each other during 1943-45. Another look at the *anni di piombo* suggests the myths of the Partisans as well as those of their neo-Fascist antagonists – who admired the die-hard Fascists of the 1943-45 *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (see Chiarini and Corsini, 1983) – should be taken into account.

This becomes clear when reading interviews with left-wing extremists carried out by the Carlo Cattaneo Institute (Bologna).³ For example, activists who originated from the Val di Susa and later belonged to sister organizations of the Red Brigades such as *Lotta Continua* and *Potere Operaio* cite “the weight of the Resistance. [...] not a single family, not one family including mine, does not have its name among the dead listed on the memorials to the Partisans”. The Cattaneo interviews also show some revolutionary leftists came from non-Communist milieus (e.g., families, neighbourhoods, schools) open to the social doctrines of the Church. Yet in *Anatomy of the Red Brigades* the historical influence of the Italian Church is either discounted (p. 40) or hardly mentioned (p. 258).

In sum, the “political-religious” metaphor distorts because it overstates the homogeneity of Italian Communism and filters out non-Communist elements (such as the influence of religion, ironically) of the complex socio-historical mix that gave rise to the Red Brigades.

The book’s theoretical apparatus dates largely from the 1950s and 60s. A kind of Robinson Crusoe on a desert island, Orsini ignores the significant developments in non-Italian social movement research (e.g., resource mobilization theory, political process theory, networks theory, framing theory, new social movements theory) that have emerged alongside persisting criticism of the major theories on which he relies: strain

³ *Anatomy of the Red Brigades* neglects almost entirely the fine, detailed study of the life course of left and right activists from the *anni di piombo* conducted by the Carlo Cattaneo Institute of Bologna in 1984-85 (Catanzaro 1990a, 1990b). Surprisingly, it also neglects previous work on the social background of these activists (e.g., Weinberg and Eubank, 1988).

theory and relative deprivation theory (see pp. 112-118). Surely, over the past four decades this branch of sociology has produced at least some ideas worth taking seriously.

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