The Study of the Consequences of Armed Groups: Lessons from the social movement literature

BOSI, Lorenzo, GIUGNI, Marco

Abstract

Despite the development of the political violence and terrorism literature, which has moved strongly forward in the past decade, scientific works on the consequences of armed groups are still rare. This article encourages cross-fertilization between the sparse studies of the consequences of political violence and the growing body of research on how social movements matter. First, we show the variety of potential outcomes of armed groups’ violent repertoires. We then review works on the consequences of social movements and highlight lessons for the study of armed groups. Specifically, we urge scholars to look for the interplay of internal and external factors in studying the impact of armed groups. We call for a comparative focus that dwells less on conditions and more on the processes and mechanisms affecting the impact of political violence. At the same time, we acknowledge that the literature on political violence and terrorism can inform social movement scholarship. In particular, students of social movements should pay more attention to the potential economic consequences of protest activities, the international [...]
Despite the development of the political violence and terrorism literature, which has moved strongly forward in the past decade, scientific works on the consequences of armed groups are still rare. This article encourages cross-fertilization between the sparse studies of the consequences of political violence and the growing body of research on how social movements matter. First, we show the variety of potential outcomes of armed groups’ violent repertoires. We then review works on the consequences of social movements and highlight lessons for the study of armed groups. Specifically, we urge scholars to look for the interplay of internal and external factors in studying the impact of armed groups. We call for a comparative focus that dwells less on conditions and more on the processes and mechanisms affecting the impact of political violence. At the same time, we acknowledge that the literature on political violence and terrorism can inform social movement scholarship. In particular, students of social movements should pay more attention to the potential economic consequences of protest activities, the international factors constraining their impact, and the life-course patterns of movements’ targets.

Political violence—whether anticipated, threatened, or actual—involves a heterogeneous repertoire of actions oriented toward inflicting material, psychological, and symbolic damage on individuals and/or property with the purpose of influencing several audiences. This definition includes armed groups’ actions—attacks on property, bodily assaults, blowing up buildings, shooting attacks, holding of an individual against his/her expressed will, high profile assassinations, public self-immolation, bombing, and so on. These radical forms of contentious politics may be called either terrorism or resistance, “depending on the circumstances and who is doing the naming” (Steinhoff and Zwerman 2008: 213). Of course, violent political actions can also be perpetrated by actors other than armed groups (e.g., during demonstrations). Violent protest is indiscriminately scattered across the political spectrum, including left-wing (Klimke 2010) and right-wing militants (Klandermans and Mayer 2006), militant feminists (Rosenberg and Garofalo 1998), militant animal rights advocates (Jasper and Poulsen 1993), white supremacists (McVeigh 2009), antiglobal activists (Peterson 2001), abortion opponents (Blanchard 1994), militant “hactivists” (Jordan 2002), nationalists and ethnationalists (Irvin 1999), environmentalists (Taylor 2008), students (Boren 2001), and religious militants (Appleby 2000).

In this article, however, we focus on the consequences of political violence committed by armed groups, which may be considered as a subset of the broader category of political violence. We interpret armed groups as “movements with political claims,” which should “be analyzed as such” (Beck 2008: 1566).1

While political violence is used as a means to affect or resist political, social, and cultural changes, armed militants and their leaders know very well that it is almost impossible to defeat national or transnational policing in a conventional military sense. For this reason, political violence committed by armed groups should be understood as one possible method of “political
dialogue intended to convince several audiences to either convince institutions to negotiate on the armed groups’ terms, or to at least voice their disapproval. However, looking exclusively at an armed group’s agenda limits the analysis, since it overlooks broader dynamics that are crucial for understanding the dynamic development of political struggles (Bonanate 1979; Crenshaw 1983). The major consequences of their actions often have little or nothing to do with their stated goals (Beck 2008). We therefore need to look beyond the effects of violent political activities that meet the aims of their perpetrators to embrace a broader view that also examines unintended and unwanted effects.

Despite the fact that the intent of armed groups is to affect or resist changes through different strategic logics such as attrition, intimidation, provocation, spoiling, and outbidding (Kydd and Walter 2006), the literature still tends to deal only with how they unfold, develop, and end, rather than explicitly, directly, and systematically researching their consequences. Reflecting this state of affairs and underlining the few achievements in studying the consequences of armed groups, we aim to encourage work on this important topic. To do so we draw on the literature on social movements, since it offers systematic empirical analyses of whether and how protest activities matter. This will produce cross-fertilization between the field of political violence and terrorism and the field of social movement studies. In particular, we point to the following factors: the importance of the comparative perspective; the critical interplay between internal and external factors in studying the consequences of armed groups; and the importance of shifting the analysis from the conditions to the processes and mechanisms leading armed groups to have an impact. Such an exchange, however, should be a two-way process. Research on political violence can contribute as well to the social movement literature by identifying possible directions for future research. In particular, we stress the potential economic consequences of protest activities, the international factors constraining their impact, and the life-course patterns of movements’ targets. We illustrate our arguments by referring to examples drawn from the two bodies of literature. It is also important to stress that our attempt to better understand the consequences of political violence is not intended to legitimize this repertoire of action by looking to understand its payoffs, but rather to explain how armed groups’ violent repertoires can affect our societies.

ARMED GROUPS AND THEIR POSSIBLE AREAS OF IMPACT

In what we call the political level, armed groups are able to effect policy changes and changes in the political regime. Regarding the policy impacts, political violence by armed groups can affect public-order policies (for example, banning determinate organizations or groups), legislative outputs (for example, parliamentary roll calls and the alteration of decision-making processes), or executive outputs (for example, the state’s provision of economic goods and changes in the legal rights of the armed groups’ constituencies). While some policies are aimed at combating violence—or simply the threatening effects of armed conflicts—others are meant to reduce the social and political factors that foster the creation of armed groups. In the case of Northern Ireland, for example, the British State, since 1972 and developing throughout the 1980s, has sought to undermine the Provisional Irish Republican Army’s (PIRA) armed campaign. They have done this through policies meant to remedy specific grievances concerning discrimination and fair employment held by the Nationalist community (Bean 2007). The policies’ mix of socioeconomic development and counterinsurgency facilitated the transformation of the PIRA and resulted in a negotiated settlement, the Good Friday Agreement (1998), and latter the St. Andrews Agreement (2006) (Bosi and della Porta forthcoming).

Changes in the political regime refer to the highest level of potential armed group political impact. They can bring shifts in who governs and the rules under which this governance occurs. This was the case, for example, of social revolutions such as Mexico in 1910-1920, Russia in 1917, China in 1949, Cuba in 1959, and Iran and Nicaragua in 1979 (Goodwin 2001; Foran
The Study of the Consequences of Armed Groups

2005). National liberation groups in Ireland in 1919 (Townshend 1999), Algeria in 1962 (Crenshaw 1995), Cyprus in 1960 (Demetriou 2007), Mozambique in 1975 (Macqueen 1997), and Angola in 1975 (Macqueen 1997) have been able to force the colonial powers to depart, as the benefits from remaining were outweighed by the increasing costs. Other nationalist or ethnic groups have been able to use political violence to achieve at least some impact in their struggles with governments. This was the case of Euzkadi ta Askatasuna (ETA), which was able to obtain some concessions to Basque autonomy (Martínez-Herrera 2002), Hezbollah, which effectively pushed peacekeepers from Lebanon in 1984 and 2000 (Atran 2006), and the Provisional IRA, which was able to draw the British and Irish states to negotiations on the future of Northern Ireland, guaranteeing a political role for the Nationalist community regionally (English 2009).

Armed groups might also have negative political impacts, and the response to can take the form of strengthening armed groups’ opponents, stabilizing the order they are challenging, and provoking more physical repression. This was the case with left-wing armed groups during the 1970s in Latin America (Cox 1983) and in Europe (della Porta 1995). Armed groups can also facilitate the emergence of death squads (for example, in the Colombian case) and increase support for paramilitary or vigilante groups (for example, in the case of Northern Ireland).

Political violence is not neutral to the regional or state economies, or is it ambivalent to the international system (Buesa and Baumert 2010; Enders and Sandler 2006; Krueger 2007). It can have an immediate and direct impact on economic factors, including the loss of property (building, infrastructures, etc.), the loss of human lives, the cost for care to the wounded, the cost of increased security after the attack, and broader economic losses due to suspensions or postponements in the business activities affected directly or indirectly by the violence (Brück 2007). Armed groups have a similar capacity to indirectly and gradually impact the cost of conflict, such as an increase of security expenditures by the authorities and the private sector in order to prevent further attacks. This often leads to a reduction in spending on education and health, as well as a decrease in investment and consumption. These, in turn, can slow the economic growth of a region, country, or the international system, and lead to a subsequent drop in the standard of living for the population in question. In general, political violence can create lags in productive activity due to more stringent safety measures (cutting off borders or expelling a significant set of residents, for example). Nevertheless, some sectors are more affected in their profits and business prospects than others, specifically those sectors and firms suffering direct attacks. For example, whether or not attacks are direct, the tourism sector seems to be more easily affected than other sectors (Drakos and Kutan 2003). The extent of indirect gradual impact on costs depends on the intensity and persistence of the cycle of violence (Buesa and Baumert 2010). Protracted conflicts, such as the one in Northern Ireland, have been fundamental in heightening emigration, loss of tourists, and elevated expenditures for security (Jackson, Dixon and Greenfield 2007).

In addition to the economic implications, political violence by armed groups has social consequences. These consequences include decreased levels of trust as well as changes in citizens’ everyday lifestyle in order to minimize personal risk (Crenshaw 1983; Spilerman and Stecklov 2009). Political violence may also influence public opinion and contribute to changing attitudes in sectors of the electorate, most usually among the right bloc of political parties (Berrebi and Klor 2008; Bali 2007; Davis and Silver 2004). Furthermore it can enhance group solidarity, not only within the armed group, but in a larger population such as a religious or ethnic community. The use of political violence can increase communal identification and improve the morale of communities experiencing discrimination (Crenshaw 2007). This seems to be the case for a majority of a young generation of Muslims in the West who explicitly condemn political violence and terrorism, but at the same time seem to feel somehow “empowered” by radical Islamic groups and their repertoires of action (Roy 2004, 2007).

Biographical impacts of armed groups have a profound effect on the life course of those armed militants who have participated in political violent activities. These effects have been brought about at least in part by their involvement in those activities. Individuals who have been
involved in armed groups, even at a lower level of commitment, seem to carry the consequences of that involvement throughout their lives. The armed activists’ perception of their past struggle is fundamental in determining which kind of effect armed activism has. In Northern Ireland, former volunteers of the Provisional IRA continued to espouse Republican attitudes and remained active socially and politically (Shirlow, Tonge, McAuley and McGlynn 2010). But political violence also has an impact on the life-course patterns of armed groups’ targets. One might look, for example, at how violent right-wing activism impacts the lives of Jewish or ethnic-minority people. The literature on victims of violence focuses on how victims of hate crimes suffer trauma as a result of their victimization (Bjørgo 2003; McDevitt and Williamson 2003). Trauma studies have started to explore the short-term and long-term impact of political violence (Galea, Resnick, Ahern, Gold, Bucuvalas, Kilpatrick, Stuber, and Vlahov 2002; Tucker, Pfefferbaum, North, Kent, Burgin, Parker, Hossain, Jeon-Slaughter, and Trautman 2007). Another literature that might help here examines how political violence might impact the psychological well-being of children and young people (Browne 2003; Muldoon 2004).

THE STUDY OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Despite exceptions—most notably Gamson’s seminal book The Strategy of Social Protest (1990)—it is only in the last two decades that scholars have systematically investigated the consequences of protest activities. In that time, a great deal of work has improved our knowledge of when, where, and how movements produce change. Let us briefly review the most recent developments made by scholars in this field, and also consider how these developments may inform research on the consequences of armed groups.\(^8\)

The study of social movement outcomes has long been framed in terms of their ability to produce or resist change (see Giugni 1998 for a review). In doing so, scholars have focused on movement-controlled variables, trying in particular to ascertain whether disruptive movements are more successful than moderate ones, or whether strongly organized movements are more successful than loosely organized ones. Inspired mostly by resource mobilization theory, these works have largely neglected the role of external conditions in facilitating or preventing movement impact (but see Goldstone 1980).\(^9\)

This state of affairs has changed dramatically since the early 1990s. Strongly embedded in political process and political opportunity theories, a new generation of scholars has started to pay much more attention to external factors and conditions. For example, Amenta, Carruthers, and Zylan (1992) argue that the impact of social movements depends on their internal strength, but it is at the same time mediated strongly by political conditions. This is what they call the political mediation model. They show that the impact of the Townsend movement in US states depended on their organization and mobilization but was favored (mediated) by certain aspects of their political context (political opportunity structure), such as the degree of openness of the party system and, more generally, the political system’s openness toward the movement’s demands. Similarly, Soule and Olzak (2004) stress the importance of external conditions for the impact of the US women’s movement.

The role of political opportunity structures has also been analyzed in a crossnational comparative perspective. Giugni (2004a) shows how ecology, antinuclear, and peace movements have obtained different policy gains depending on whether they could take advantage of a favorable configuration of power within institutionalized political arenas like the parliament. In the cases of these movements, leftist parties have functioned as powerful institutional allies for the movements. This aspect, of course, can also vary over time within a given polity, opening or closing windows of opportunities for movement impact. Giugni’s study also stresses the importance of another external condition that can facilitate the policy impact of social movements: public opinion. It also suggests that a favorable public opinion is crucial for movements to be able to influence policymakers in democratic contexts (Giugni 2004a). More generally, arguing
for a “joint-effect model” of social movement outcomes, the author argues that the simultaneous presence of movement mobilization, institutional allies, and a favorable public opinion form the best “mix” for a successful movement in such contexts.

In various works since the late 1970s, Burstein has argued that public opinion is the main factor explaining how movements influence public policy (see Burstein 1998a, 1998b, and 1999, as well as Burstein and Freudenburg 1978 and Burstein and Linton 2002). He has done so, for example, in his analysis of the political struggle that made equal employment opportunity national policy in the early 1960s in the United States (Burstein 1998a). Other scholars have also stressed the importance of public opinion for movements’ success (e.g., Costain and Majstorovic 1994; Giugni 2004a, 2007; Kane 2003; McAdam and Su 2002; Soule and Olzak 2004). For example, in their analysis of the multiple origins of women’s rights legislation in the United States, Costain and Majstorovic (1994) show the complex interplay between movement mobilization, congressional action, and public opinion. Similarly, Kane (2003) finds that public opinion—which she sees as a form of cultural opportunity—has helped gay and lesbian movements in decriminalizing sodomy laws in American states. Yet Burstein’s stance on public opinion is perhaps the strongest. He suggests that when a direct effect of protest on policy is observed, it diminishes or even disappears if one takes into account the preferences of the public (Burstein 1998b; see further Burstein and Linton 2002). He explains that the strong impact of public opinion occurs through the accountability of policymakers in representative democracies, who are dependent on the public for reelection. Therefore, they pay significant attention to public perceptions of an issue and are more likely to respond in a way that satisfies such perceptions, especially if they reflect a majority opinion.

In addition to this conditional and interactive nature of movement effects, recent research on the political outcomes of social movements has suggested that protest activities may have a differential impact on different aspects of the policy process. This calls for an approach that goes beyond a narrow focus on policy adoption to look at what comes before and after (Andrews 2001; Burstein, Einwohner and Hollander 1995), and implies that a social movement’s impacts may vary according to the stage of the policy process. For example, in their study of state-level woman suffrage legislation in the U.S., King, Cornwall, and Dahlin (2005) argue that movements have less influence in the later stages of the legislative process due to the more stringent requirements that exhaust their limited resources, and due to fact that the consequentiality of action causes legislators to revoke their support. They find that the suffragists were indeed able to insert the issue of woman suffrage into the legislative arena, but then their impact diminished considerably. In addition, state responsiveness may also vary across different policy issues and areas, making certain challenges and movements more likely than others to succeed due to different degrees of viability of their goals (Giugni 2004a; Kolb 2007). A similar argument was already stressed by Gamson (1990) when he showed groups with single-issue demands to be more successful than groups with multiple-issue demands.

In sum, recent research on the outcomes and consequences of social movements yields at least three important findings: (1) that movements are more likely to have a policy impact if the configuration of power in the institutional arenas is favorable to them and they can take advantage of the presence of powerful allies; (2) that movements can profit much from a favorable public opinion; and (3) that their chances of success vary depending on the stage of the policy process and the viability of their goals.10

CROSS-FERTILIZING TWO RESEARCH FIELDS

What we said thus far can be summarized as follows: (1) the literature on political violence and terrorism has largely overlooked the consequences of armed groups’ violent activities; (2) yet it is difficult to think that armed groups have no impact, and one can imagine a number of areas in which their violent repertoires matter; and (3) the social movement literature provides a wealth
of studies on the consequences of more peaceful ways to protest. The question is, can we draw some lessons from the growing body of literature on social movement outcomes to inform the study of the consequences of armed groups? We think that we can, and furthermore, we should. Indeed, if political violence is “politics by other means,” then a good deal about the effects of armed groups can be understood using the same categories that explain the outcomes of other forms of contentious politics. We believe that a research agenda in this field can therefore take advantage of some of the recent developments in works on the consequences of social movements that we outlined above.

The literature on political violence and terrorism has not provided a unique interpretation about whether or not armed groups are able to achieve their political goals. Scholars such as Eubank and Weinberg (2001) and Pape (2003, 2005) claim that suicide terror attacks are able to achieve success, particularly in democratic regimes, because of the high sensitivity of the electorate. On the opposite side, Abrahms (2006) suggests that terrorism is not a successful repertoire of action at all. Looking at twenty-eight armed groups opposed to governments in power, the author concludes that ethnonationalist groups seem to be the only ones able to achieve minimal goals. In a more recent research, Lutz and Lutz (2009) describe which armed groups have been successful in the past. State sponsored armed groups seem to have better chances of success in comparison to ethnonationalist and religious ones: “At the very least groups supported or tolerated by governments do not normally have to worry about being arrested or held accountable for their activities. Their resources, whether supplemented by the government or not, can be devoted to the use of violence. One consequence of these circumstances is that the resulting terrorism is more lethal and effective” (Lutz and Lutz 2009: 6). On the other hand, left-wing armed groups seem the least successful, but this is only true if we look at Europe and Latin America in the 1970s. In fact, Marsden (forthcoming) has stated quite correctly that “differential success rates perhaps relate more to the scale of the goal, rather than a group’s ideology.”

We suggest that the social movement literature has much to offer to the study of the consequences of armed groups. To begin with, recent works on the policy outcomes of social movements have shifted the focus of attention from the organizational features of movements that are more likely to be conducive to success (including the use of violence) to a broader view that takes critical external factors into account. Indeed, a crucial insight from this recent research is that the political impact of social movements is conditional and contingent on the presence of facilitating external factors pertaining to their social and political environment. Acknowledging the conditional and interactive nature of the effect of political violence surely is a fruitful avenue for further research.

More precisely, when applying the political mediation model (Amenta, Carruthers, and Zylan 1992) to the study of the consequences of armed groups, one needs to acknowledge that the outcomes of violent actions depend on factors that are both internal and external. In other words, the success of armed groups is contingent on both organizational characteristics (material resources, number of armed activists, small or large support base) as well as on certain features of their social and political environment. The first and most obvious aspect is the level of violence exerted. In this sense, the most obvious question to be asked is whether a movement (or a group) is more or less successful by acting violently. In other words, what is the “added value” of political violence with respect to more peaceful actions? Do political violence outcomes last longer than nonviolent ones? The literature on social movements does not provide a consistent answer to these questions. Much work on the effectiveness of disruptive protest and movements, rioting, and political violence took place in the 1970s in the aftermath of the urban riots of the 1960s in the United States. These studies varied in their findings, sometimes pointing to the ineffectiveness of violence and sometimes showing its usefulness (for reviews see Gurr 1980; Isaac and Kelly 1981; Piven and Cloward 1993). Indeed, one of the main thrusts of early work on the policy outcomes of social movements was assessing the extent to which disruptive movements were more successful than nondisruptive ones (Giugni 1998). Gamson (1990), for example, found the use of radical and violent tactics to be associated with success.
When considering with political violence committed by armed groups, the level of violence is a key dimension. Do categorical terrorism—i.e., violence against “complicitous civilians” (Goodwin 2006)—and guerrilla styles of violence have the same effects? Or does the level of violence influence the type of impact? Do impacts differ in relation to religious, social revolutionary, rightwing, or ethnonational types of violence? As we said earlier, the use of violent forms of action potentially has both internal and external effects. One important internal consequence has to do with the armed group’s repertoire. Briefly put, once an armed group has made use of violence it is difficult to go back to more peaceful tactics, especially if the violent action proved to be (or was perceived to be) successful. However, this is likely to depend significantly on who initiates the violence. Although it is not always easy to establish who turned violent first, we can say that if the violence was started by the armed group as a strategic choice, then it is more difficult to refrain from using it again in the future. In other words, a path dependency would be at work in this case. In the most extreme case, a given organization or group steps over the line of legality and eventually goes underground—a situation from which it is very difficult to escape (della Porta 1995). In contrast, if the (legitimate) violence is started by the state through repression, then the armed group is more a recipient than a perpetrator of violence, and it is therefore easier to refrain from adopting such tactics in future actions.

Following recent work on the consequences of social movements, we can stress two important contextual factors upon which the outcomes of political violence are contingent. The first and most obvious are the political opportunity structures characterizing a given country or place where political violence takes place. Just as they constrain the political consequences of social movements and protest activities in general (Amenta, Carruthers, and Zylan; Giugni 2004a), political opportunity structures are likely to play a decisive role for the outcomes of armed groups. In particular, the power alignments within institutional arenas (e.g., government, parliament) may prove crucial in determining whether a violent action is successful or not. Reactions by political authorities are likely to differ according to the configuration of power among institutional actors.

The second important contextual factor is public opinion. The ways in which the general public evaluates a given (violent) action and, more generally, the actor using it, are likely to be crucial in determining the extent to which political authorities are responsive to the movement’s demands. The hypothesis here could be that the more favorable the public opinion, the more likely the authorities would respond positively and the stronger the impact of the armed group. A possible explanatory mechanism relates to democratic theory: for electoral reasons, the political authorities’ responsiveness increases when a minority actor, such as an armed group, is supported by the majority of public opinion (that is, of potential voters). So one hypothesis in this respect could be that the more legitimate an armed group, the more legitimate its usage of violent actions, and the greater its impact.

As we said, however, when assessing the outcomes of political violence we need to look beyond changes that reflect the stated goals of an armed group to examine unintended effects as well. Thus, while the responsiveness of political authorities refers to political outcomes, public opinion may also play a role for broader cultural outcomes of political violence. The more legitimate an armed group, the higher the chances that it may influence the population at large.

If the interplay between internal and external determinants of success is important not only for the study of the consequences of social movements but also for those of political violence, then research can benefit from bringing a comparative perspective to the study of the outcomes of political violence (Giugni 1999). Comparative work is quite rare in this field, and most existing research is based on single case studies. The latter, of course, are fully legitimate and can provide important insights. However, comparisons across countries, across time, and across type of armed groups (social-revolutionary, religious, ethnonational) would allow the researcher to put the findings into a broader perspective. This would allow one to both reject rival hypotheses and explanations and to generalize the findings beyond the specific case at hand.
Perhaps one of the most promising research avenues in this respect involves comparing western and nonwestern contexts. Indeed, one of the main challenges of the literature on the consequences of social movements lies in broadening the scope of the analysis, trying to apply the insights derived from the North American context to others, including outside the western world. A similar reasoning applies to the case of political violence. In particular, the social and political environment of terrorist acts and, more generally, violent political activities, are very different in democratic and nondemocratic countries. For example, the degree of legitimacy and popular support for such activities is certainly very low in democratic contexts but could be larger in nondemocratic ones due to strong opposition to the regime. Furthermore, while the response of political authorities might leave little room for concessions in both cases, the reaction of the public may broaden the support of the armed group who has perpetrated the violence (when it is openly claimed).

While different contexts may offer varying opportunities for political violence to have an impact, a comparative perspective remains static and gives us relatively little leverage in explaining the processes through which violent political activities bring about change. Much like research on the consequences of social movements, the study of the outcomes of political violence could be improved by shifting the focus of the analysis from the conditions favoring the impact of violent actions to the search for the processes and mechanisms leading to such an impact, thus making a stronger case for causal linkages between political violence activities and policy change or other types of effects. Indeed, we still largely ignore both when and why violent actions might have an impact, but above all we have poor knowledge about how they might do so. This more dynamic perspective has entered the field of social movements and contentious politics since the path-breaking book by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, Dynamics of Contention (2001), and has also been fruitfully applied to the study of social movement outcomes (Kolb 2007). Research on the effects of political violence will also gain from it. It is very unlikely that violent political activities bring about changes—be they social, political, or otherwise—directly. This may perhaps occur in the short term, but if we want to inquire into the long-term effects of political violence we need to take into account intermediate variables that help us explain how this may or may not occur. In this perspective, some of the mechanisms and processes described by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) might help explain the impact of political violence. For example, a process of polarization (a robust process according to the authors), not among contenders, but among the political authorities or the general public, might facilitate the efforts of armed groups. Similarly, political violence might be more effective when brokerage (a mechanism) is at work.

CONCLUSIONS

Apart from a few notable exceptions (Bosi forthcoming; della Porta 1995, 2008; Demetriou 2007; Goodwin 2006; Oberschall 2004; Snow and Byrd 2007; Steinhoff and Zwerman 2008; Tilly 2003, 2005; Viterna 2006; Wiktorowicz 2004; Wood 2003; Zwerman, Steinhoff, and della Porta 2000), scholars interested in political violence and students of social movements have largely ignored one another. This article encourages cross-fertilization between these two research fields. In particular, after having shown the variety of potential outcomes of armed groups, we have reviewed works on the consequences of social movements with the goal of drawing some lessons for the study of the former. Specifically, we urge scholars to focus more on the interplay of internal and external factors, and to examine in greater depth how these factors may prevent or facilitate the success of armed groups. We also call for a perspective that is comparative and that shifts from an analysis of conditions to an understanding of the processes and mechanisms that effect political violence’s impact.

So far we have stressed that the literature on political violence and terrorism has much to gain from looking at the social movement literature. Yet the opposite is also true. The exchange
should be a two-way process. Specifically, research on political violence contributes to the study of social movement outcomes by highlighting transnational factors, economic effects, and the impact on the life-course patterns of movements’ targets. First, students of social movements have virtually ignored the economic effects of protest activities. In contrast, as we discussed earlier, studies of armed groups’ political violence have shown their economic impact. It is more than reasonable to think that while violent actions might produce stronger and deeper effects in this regard, more peaceful actions could matter as well (Luders 2010). Second, the study of the consequences of social movements has not given much consideration to international factors, focusing instead on domestic factors. Works on political violence have often put international factors at center stage. This is all the more true with the rise of international terrorism in recent years. It stands to reason that research on social movement outcomes could benefit from a broader perspective that takes the international dimension into account. Finally, while biographical consequences have been addressed and point to a strong and durable impact of involvement in movement activities on both the political and personal lives of former activists, it is necessary that future research focuses on the life-course patterns of movements’ targets. For this new strand of research, the literature on victims of armed groups can be particularly helpful, specifically as it entails the trauma experienced by victims.

In the final analysis, the most straightforward way to bring the two bodies of literature together lies in acknowledging that, much like social movements, political violence is not a phenomenon *sui generis*, but rather a special form of contentious politics (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tilly 2003). In other words, political violence is less a strategic choice than one possible evolution of contention, alongside social movements, revolutions, civil wars, and so forth. The key difference between these types of action lies in the mode of expression, rather than in the nature of the challenge. Therefore, the analytical tools for unpacking the underlying mechanisms should be the same. This should be considered when studying the consequences of political violence. Thus, the literatures on revolutions and civil resistance should be brought in as well.

At the same time, while studies of the consequences of political violence can take recent work on social movement outcomes as a source of inspiration and theoretical guidance, they must also face some of the methodological obstacles that have often prevented scholars from studying the consequences of social movements in a more timely and thorough fashion (Giugni and Bosi 2011). Let us conclude by recalling some of them. One such obstacle is goal adaptation. This refers to the fact that the objectives of social movements are not immutable but change over time, often adapting to changes in their social and political environment. The same applies to armed groups, whose goals may also change. Time reference and effect stability are further methodological, but also theoretical, obstacles. They describe the notion that the impact of political violence may be delayed or temporary. The difficulty lies above all in relating a supposed outcome to the violent actions when the two are separated by a long period of time, but also when the former is short-lived. Further, one needs to take into account interrelated effects. In other words, different kinds of consequences of political violence are not independent from each other, but rather mutually influential. Finally, as we mentioned at the outset, movements can produce unintended effects. For example, the consequences of political violence may go beyond the stated goals of its perpetrators. Indeed, as Tilly (1999) has stressed, the major impacts of protest movements on the establishment have little or nothing to do with their stated goals. There is no reason to think that this does not also hold more generally for armed groups and political violence.

**NOTES**

1 We acknowledge the importance of state or state-sponsored violence as an object of research, but this article focuses mainly on nonstate actors as perpetrators of violence.

2 Although states and state agents are the most common targets of armed groups, there are also other recipients of demands from political violence (for instance, a private enterprise; see the case of the early Red Brigades (della Porta...
1995) or the example of Animal Liberation Front (Lutz and Lutz 2006). Sometimes political violence can even express its concerns indirectly through targeting one institution but aiming to affect another—what social movement scholars call “a proxy target” (Walker, Martin, and McCarthy 2008).

As Abrahms (2008) suggests, it seems that the real aim of armed groups is not their political objectives but such goals as survival, recruitment, and fundraising (Cronin 2009). They are not static and homogeneous entities. With the passage of time they change their structure as well as their means and ends.

Throughout this article, the terms “outcomes,” “effects,” “impacts,” and “consequences” are used interchangeably, as are the terms “armed groups” and “political violent organizations.”

See Marsden (forthcoming) for a recent review on the effectiveness of terrorism.

Our reading is also informed by insights from the literature on revolutions (DeFronzo 2007; Foran 2005; Goldstone 2009; Goodwin 2001; Tilly 1993).

Concerning ethical difficulties in studying political violence and awkward groups, see Wood (2006), Smyth (2009), and Polletta (2006).

For more exhaustive reviews of the literature on social movement outcomes, see Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, and Su (2010), Giugni (1998, 2008), Earl (2000), Burstein and Linton (2002), and Bosi and Uba (2009).

See also Gomson’s (1980) rejoinder of Goldstone’s (1980) criticism of his study, as well as some of the re-analyses of Gamson’s data.

In our brief review of works on the consequences of social movements we have focused on political outcomes. However, it should be stressed that, while the latter form the bulk of the literature on the outcomes and consequences of social movements, students of social movements have also addressed other types of consequences, such as broader cultural effects and biographical effects. Concerning cultural effects (see Earl 2004 for a review), scholars have pointed first to the role of social movements in shaping the general public’s values, beliefs, and opinions (in short, public opinion). Second, a variety of studies have shown the impact that movements may have on a broad range of cultural products and practices, such as literature, media coverage, visual culture, music, fashion, science and scientific practice, language, and discourse. Third, the social movement literature has long stressed the effects movements have on the formation and reproduction of collective identity and subcultures. Concerning biographical effects (see McAdam 1989 and Giugni 2004b for reviews), a number of follow-up studies of activists engaged in the movements of the New Left in the 1960s in the United States point to a strong and durable impact of involvement in movement activities on both the political and personal lives of former activists. Specifically, on the political side, they suggest that the latter had continued to espouse leftist political attitudes; had continued to define themselves as “liberal” or “radical” in political orientation; and had remained active in contemporary movements or other forms of political activity. On the personal side, these studies found that former activists had been concentrated in teaching or other “helping” professions; had lower incomes than their age peers; were more likely than their age peers to have divorced, married later, or remained single; and were more likely than their age peers to have experienced an episodic or nontraditional work history. Other more recent works looking beyond the narrower context of the New Left activism of the 1960s and sometimes comparing activists with nonactivists also found an important biographical effect of involvement in social movements, including those of the right of the political spectrum.

While our focus here is on the social movement literature, works on unarmed civil resistance (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008; Zunes 2005) may also provide helpful insights in this regard.

REFERENCES

The Study of the Consequences of Armed Groups


