



The historical roots of political violence: revolutionary terrorism in affluent countries

by Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press,
2019, 296 pp., £ 29.99 (UK) (Hardback), ISBN 9781108482769.

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BOOK REVIEW

The historical roots of political violence: revolutionary terrorism in affluent countries by Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 296 pp., £ 29.99 (UK) (Hardback), ISBN 9781108482769.

One of the most common criticisms of terrorism studies is its pervasive “a-historicity”; namely, the tendency of the field to study political violence without taking into account the broader historical context that facilitated the rise of the phenomenon in the first place. In fact, a significant part of the literature has often ignored the social and political circumstances that predated the emergence of violence, to such an extent that the latter seems to have appeared out of nowhere. In stark contrast to this literature, Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca highlights the role of history in the understanding of political violence by firmly grounding his analysis in the study of macro-processes of political and economic change. More specifically, *The Historical Roots of Political Violence* provides a compelling argument for the rise of revolutionary terrorism in affluent countries in the 1970s, by drawing connections between left-wing extremism, the developmental path that countries followed during the interwar period and the level of conflict they experienced within the process of modernisation.

Drawing on a number of different research traditions – from comparative politics and political economy to cultural psychology and social anthropology – Sánchez-Cuenca studies 23 affluent countries (pre-1994 OECD), in order to explain the cross-national variation of revolutionary violence in the developed world. Through a mixed-methods approach that makes use of statistical, historical and comparative analysis, the author demonstrates that the countries that adopted a non-liberal path during the interwar period were more prone to left-wing extremism during the protest cycle of the late 1960s. The countries in the non-liberal cluster were those that – due to democratic breakdowns, land inequality and/or late industrialisation – failed to successfully integrate the working class in the capitalist economy after the end of WWI, which resulted in the polarisation of the class cleavage, the radicalisation of the Left and the rise of state repression. In these countries, according to the author, the 1968 mobilisations acted as a spark that triggered the emergence of lethal revolutionary violence. On the other side stand those countries in which a compromise between capital and labour was reached during the interwar period, which led to the relative pacification of class cleavage and to the establishment of a liberal tradition. By comparing the two clusters, the author observes that in the countries with an authoritarian past the Left was bigger and more radicalised, while the legitimacy of the state was lower. In fact, the issue of state legitimacy holds a central place in the book’s narrative, as it was the legitimacy deficit in the non-liberal countries that made the conditions more favourable for the intensification of left-wing violence and the justification of lethal attacks during the protest cycle of the long 1960s.

Committed to his decision to study the long-term historical processes behind the rise of revolutionary terrorism, Sánchez-Cuenca makes a bold proposition regarding the manifestation of interwar strife and left-wing extremism in non-liberal countries. In particular, the author interprets the two phenomena as late symptoms of the modernisation path that these countries pursued. By using the concept of individualism, he claims that societies in

which individuals enjoyed greater autonomy experienced a less conflictual modernisation process, exemplified by the relatively peaceful spread of industrialisation, capitalism and liberal democracy; at the same time as in more collectivistic societies, modernisation caused major instability and conflict. To test this hypothesis, the author measures individualism across his sample by instrumentalising two cultural variables, namely family types and grammar rules in national languages. Turning first to the types of families, he maintains that the less egalitarian a family is in terms of inheritance rules, the more incentives are created for those excluded to look after themselves; while families with liberal parent-children relationships stimulate flexibility and entrepreneurship. Regarding grammar rules, it is argued not only that the use of personal pronouns can be identified as a cultural marker, but also that languages where pronouns are mandatory and cannot be dropped signify a society with a strong individualist tradition. The association of both the family type and the pronoun-drop rule with the interwar factor, leads the author to argue that individualism is equally relevant to account for the developmental path in the interwar period and the emergence of lethal revolutionary violence in the 1970s.

The Historical Roots of Political Violence is definitely one of the most accomplished studies on left-wing extremism to date, as – in a field that is often recognised as lacking theoretical and methodological rigour – it is both theoretically-grounded and methodologically elaborate. While terrorism studies are heavily dominated by single case studies or small-N comparisons, the book dares to extend the scope and to put under examination a variety of countries. At the same time, the analysis of panel data on the cross-national variation of lethal violence, is contemplated with in-depth discussion of the most critical examples of revolutionary terrorism (Germany, Italy, Japan and Spain) and the investigation of negative cases (USA and France). What can be seen, though, as the most important contribution of this book, is the reinstatement of the historical context as one of the most important factors in the emergence and persistence of terrorism. Hence, while academics often tend to overlook the role of history and focus on the prevailing sociopolitical conditions in order to explain the occurrence of political violence, this book identifies revolutionary terrorism as a result of both short-term events and long-term processes of political and economic development.

Despite the book's obvious merits, there are a couple of points that are in need of clarification. First of all, the choice of Sánchez-Cuenca to focus only on affluent countries is not adequately justified. Especially since several non-affluent countries not only experienced revolutionary terrorism during the 1960–1970 period (e.g. Uruguay, Argentina), but also conform to his narrative regarding the developmental path of the interwar period and the distinction between liberal and non-liberal countries. Through this decision, the author gives the impression that this kind of violence was either somehow expected to occur in non-affluent countries, or that was instigated by different processes, an issue that he should have addressed more effectively. Moreover, in his attempt to provide a coherent account of revolutionary violence in affluent countries, the author ends up overemphasising the role of the 1968 mobilisations and downplaying the role of the dictatorships in the cases of Greece, Portugal and Spain, countries where lethal left-wing groups had their origins in the anti-dictatorship movements and the 1968 mobilisations had only a secondary role in the rise of violence. Then again, the book's limited weaknesses do not affect its overall impact to the field.

To sum up, *The Historical Roots of Political Violence* provides a comprehensive and innovative approach to the study of revolutionary terrorism. It is an indispensable and highly-suggested book for scholars and students of political violence and terrorism studies.

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