



The Contribution of Social Movement Theory to Understanding Terrorism

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Abstract

The study of terrorism and political violence has been characterized by a lack of generalizable theory and methodology. This essay proposes that social movement theory can contribute a necessary conceptual framework for understanding terrorism and thus reviews the relevant literature and discusses possible applications. Terrorism is a form of contentious politics, analyzable with the basic social movement approach of mobilizing resources, political opportunity structure, and framing. Cultural perspectives call attention to issues of collective identity that allow for sustained militancy, and movement research recommends alternative conceptions of terrorist networks. Previous research on movement radicalization, repression, and cycles of contention has direct bearing on militancy. Emerging perspectives on transnational collective action and the diffusion of tactics and issues informs an understanding of contemporary international terrorism. Research on movement outcomes suggests broader ways of considering the efficacy of political violence. Finally, methodological debates within the study of social movements are relevant for research on terrorism. In sum, a social movement approach to terrorism has much to contribute, and research on terrorism could have important extensions and implications for social movement theory.

In recent years, social science scholarship in diverse areas has begun to contribute to an understanding of the origins, dynamics, and outcomes of terrorism in the contemporary world. However, research on political violence has been characterized by fundamental disagreements about what constitutes terrorism and a reliance on case studies that often lack generalizability. The result is a distinct lack of theoretical and conceptual tools for analysis. Social movement theory, due in part to its integrative and interdisciplinary nature, is uniquely positioned to contribute a necessary conceptual framework for the study of political violence and terrorism. This essay reviews some basic approaches and concepts from the study of social movements that have direct bearing on the issue of political violence and outlines what a movement conception of terrorism might look like. In short, a social movement approach to terrorism would consider it as one form of contentious politics, analyzable within the existing framework of social movement theory.

There is still much debate as to what actually constitutes terrorism. So much, in fact, that Brannan et al. (2001, p. 11) observe that the field is in a 'perverse situation where a great number of scholars are studying a phenomenon, the essence of which they have (by now) simply agreed to disagree upon'. Among common definitional elements of terrorism are: the use of violence or threat of violence for political purposes (see Gibbs 1989; Hoffman 1999); a differentiation between the victim of an attack and the ultimate target that terrorists seek to influence (see Bergesen 2007; Schmid 1982); and the indiscriminate targeting of civilians (see Goodwin 2006a). Yet, political violence in the real world does not fit neatly into conceptual boxes: does the killing of noncombatants during wartime count as terrorism?; does the suicide bombing of army barracks count as terrorism?; does state torture and repression count as a terrorism? Rather than continue to debate a universal definition, it may be best to consider terror as one mode of contentious politics.

Recent syntheses of social movement theory stress an integrative approach to all forms of political contention (McAdam et al. 1996, 2001; Tarrow 1998). In this view, challenges from below, those of social movements, are one form of contention, while the actions of states, elites, and counter-movements constitute other dimensions. The contentious politics approach sees tactics, movements, and actors arrayed along a spectrum of related phenomenon rather than boxed in by formal, discrete categories. Terrorism, given that it makes political claims and seeks to influence political processes and outcomes, should be seen as one such mode of collective action (Oberschall 2004). Terrorism is a tactic (Tilly 2004) and a type of contention that may or may not appear in a political struggle. Furthermore, political violence is often conducted by organized groups that undertake, to borrow Tarrow's (1998, p. 4) definition of a social movement, 'collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities'. No matter the precise definition, it is reasonable to suggest that terrorism includes: (1) violence or the threat of violence; (2) unconventional targets (e.g. civilians); and (3) political goals or political claim making. Specifically, in this review, I consider groups who employ this tactic and 'mobilize from below'. This criterion excludes state terrorism and lone wolves as they may not be best analyzed from a social movement perspective. Terrorist groups are first and foremost movements with political claims and can be analyzed as such.

Given the wide diversity and reach of social movement theory, any brief review must be partial (for other recent contributions, see Goodwin 2004; Oberschall 2004). In the following sections, I thus highlight some basic approaches and emerging frontiers of research that are most applicable to research on terrorism and political violence. First, the dominant social movement paradigm of mobilizing resources, political opportunities, and framing suggests some basic ways of conceptualizing terrorism as a social movement. Second, cultural perspectives on movements call attention to

underlying issues of identity in terrorist groups. Next, a movement approach to the study of terrorist networks recommends going beyond structural description by considering commitment and recruitment. Fourth, research on radicalization as a product of movement cycles and the constraints imposed by state repression has direct bearing on militancy, while, fifth, emerging conceptions of transnational movements suggests ways of thinking about international terrorism. Next, research on movement outcomes encourages a broader view of the effects and efficacy of political violence. Finally, research on terrorism can benefit from methodological concerns and debates in the study of movements.

The tripartite social movement approach

In the past 15 years, social movement theory has coalesced around a 3-fold framework of theoretical perspectives, which can be called mobilizing resources, political opportunities, and framing (see McAdam et al. 1996). These perspectives developed out of the experience of the 1960s in the United States and Western Europe and primarily seek to explain when and why movements emerge. Prior to the 1970s, the study of social movements was dominated by collective behavior accounts that focused on movements as products of grievances or social strain (see Marx and Wood 1975; Smelser 1962). For example, Gurr (1970) views the relative deprivation of a group as a central factor in the emergence of contention, and Kornhauser (1959) argues that alienation from mass society motivates individuals to participate in collective action. These classic models primarily posit a psychological process whereby social conditions affect individuals and motivate them to challenge the status quo (McAdam 1982). Thus, a crucial problem was deemed to be the costs and incentives for individual actors to engage in risky collective action where the promise of success was not assured (see Olson 1965). In the study of terrorism, grievance and strain accounts continue to play a central role: terrorism is argued to be motivated by threatened values or idealized religious doctrine in contradiction with society's practice (see Juergensmeyer 2003), reactions to the strain of modernization in society (see Bendle 2003), foreign military occupations and external influence (see Ayoob 2005; Pape 2005), or other broad grievances (see Stern 2003).

However, structural perspectives on social movements have roundly dismissed the causal importance of grievances in explaining the emergence of political contention. McCarthy and Zald (1973, 1977) argue that grievances alone are not enough to explain contention as most individuals at most times have complaints. Grievances are thus a necessary, but insufficient explanation, of why some motivations become organized into sustained contention and movements and others do not. For sustained collective action, movements depend on material resources and a base of supporters. The resource mobilization perspective therefore proposes that

the fundamental problem for collective action is the resources available for mobilization and the methods by which they are marshaled (for an early review, see Jenkins 1983). One solution to the problem of resources is the establishment of an organizational capacity that can rally supporters, seek material contributions, and formalize collective action into a movement. While Piven and Cloward (1977) see the development of formal organizations as a hindrance to the implementation of the powerful weapon of disruptive action, others deem organizational capacity necessary for sustained contention (Jenkins and Perrow 1977; McAdam 1982; Oberschall 1973; Tarrow 1998). Furthermore, emerging movements can appropriate existing organizations for collective action (McAdam 1999). For instance, Black churches were crucial in the development of the civil rights movement (Morris 1984), and the Catholic Church provided a protected space for Solidarity's mobilization in Communist Poland (Osa 2003). Once established, organizations tend to formalize themselves, resulting in a highly professionalized core that manages and directs collective action (McCarthy and Zald 1977), which allows them to persist and adapt to changing environmental conditions (Minkoff 1999).

Terrorism, even more than participatory collective action, is a high-cost enterprise. A terrorist group, if it seeks to be more than the singular actions of a lone wolf, needs resources and support to undertake sustained campaigns. For some terrorist tactics, like suicide bombing, the cost is even higher – the group requires a steady influx of participants who are willing to die for a cause. Thus, terrorist groups face organizational and resource dilemmas similar to social movements, if not even more acute. In fact, many terrorist groups seem to be structured like modern social movement organizations – a highly professionalized core that directs and manages attacks, assembles resources, and provides overall leadership to a broader base of supporters. The applicability of resource mobilization theory is also apparent for long-standing terrorist groups. Hamas, the Tamil Tigers, and Hezbollah have all organized themselves into quasi-governments in the territories they control, while still undertaking militant actions. Terrorist groups that sustain action for a long period of time are thus formal organizations and are likely constrained and enabled by the same dynamics of resources and organization as social movements.

The second aspect of the tripartite model of social movement theory is the structure of political opportunities and constraints external to organizations. Originally coined by Eisinger (1973), the concept of political opportunity emerged as a way to place movements in the wider political environment in which they operate. Movements arise not only because they are able to successfully mobilize resources, but because overall political or social conditions are ripe for successful and sustained contention. Political process theory thus argues that political opportunities combine with the organizational capacity for mobilization to allow social movement emergence (McAdam 1982). On one hand, the opportunity for mobilization may

result from large shifts in the overall political structure. For instance, Jenkins and Perrow (1977; see also Jenkins 1985) find that the wider political environment was key to the mobilization of farm workers after 1963, and Meyer (1990) argues that the anti-nuclear movement was dependent on external conditions. On the other hand, events may also provide specific opportunities for an instance of contentious action. Khwaja (1994), for example, finds that Palestinian collective action in the West Bank is contingent on actions by the Israeli authorities. Even the perception of an opportunity may motivate collective action, as Kurzban (1996, 2004) argues in the case of the Iranian Revolution. Recent research on Islamic mobilization in the Middle East has also used a political opportunities approach, seeing an opportunity for Islamic movements in the opening of participatory politics in some countries (Hafez 2003; Schwedler 2006). There is still debate as to what constitutes a political opportunity, and why one would generate a movement and another not (Meyer 2004); yet, it is clear that movements are shaped by wider political environments.

Terrorism also depends on the external environment in which the group operates rather than solely internal processes. For example, in an unstable environment without effective central authority, militants are able to seek safe-haven, attract recruits, cage resources, and carry out attacks. Al-Qaeda in Iraq and other militant organizations arose not just from grievances or the mobilization of resources but because the American invasion demolished centralized authority, creating the opportunity for new mobilization and a threat to established power arrangements. It is also likely that political violence is dependent on specific event-based opportunities. The relative decline in violence in Iraq during the surge of American forces in 2007 clearly suggests that counter-insurgency operations have a direct effect on terrorism. It is also possible that Iraqi insurgent campaigns are responses to specific political developments and seek to affect the course of Iraqi politics. Could spikes in violence against civilians correspond to political events in the national government? Could the adoption or use of tactics, such as car bombings, suicide terror, kidnappings, etc., be dependent on external factors? The political opportunity model of movements thus has great implications for research on terrorism, focusing on the environments that make terrorism and types of violence more or less likely.

The final approach of the tripartite model comes from a focus on the rhetorical and symbolic side of political contention. Based on Goffman's (1974) research, the term framing is employed to describe the justifications and appeals movements use to mobilize support. The basic observation is that movements need to make claims that resonate with wider social narratives to gain popularity (Gamson 1975, 1992), a process called 'frame alignment' (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 1986). Thus, the meaning participants ascribe to their actions is a central part of mobilization

(McAdam 1999; Polletta 1998, 2006). For many movements, the media can be a central disseminator of rhetoric and claims (Gitlin 1980). Mobilizing frames also change over time in interaction with state, elites, and counter-movements (Moaddel 1992) and opportunities for discourse (Koopmans and Olzak 2004). Framing has been found to be an important aspect of many instances of collective action including issue-driven movements like anti-globalization (Ayers 2004), mass riots (Snow et al. 2007), and Islamic militancy (Snow and Byrd 2007).

Like other movements, terrorist organizations spend much time and effort in justifying and explaining their actions. Ideological manifestos, calls to action, speeches and communiqués to supporters and potential supporters are routine aspects of terrorist campaigns. Since the invasion of Afghanistan, the Al-Qaeda leadership engages in framing work as a primary activity, with bin Laden and al-Zawahiri issuing new statements regularly. Like social movements, these statements are then diffused and modified by media attention. In addition, while political violence can be directly tactical, as in an attack on military forces as part of guerilla war, terrorism is often symbolic in nature (Juergensmeyer 2003). Terrorists sometimes select targets for the larger resonance and psychological effects that an attack may have, such as the World Trade Center in both 1993 and 2001. Symbolic targets could be considered part of terrorist framing work and the ascription of meaning. Furthermore, terrorist attacks present groups with the opportunity to announce their claims and goals. Imagine a significant terrorist attack without a clear claim of responsibility. We would be left, as we were immediately following the Madrid train bombings in 2005, wondering who was responsible and why they did it. Rhetoric and meaning making are thus basic features of terrorism and presents an opportunity for research that uses the tools of social movement framing theory.

The cultural turn and collective identity

Framing theory can also be considered part of a larger cultural turn in the study of movements. Resource mobilization and political opportunities structure have been criticized for being overly structural and leaving out cultural and relational factors (see Goodwin and Jasper 1999). One alternative approach that takes culture seriously is new social movements theory (for a review of its origins, see Buechler 1995, and important later formulations by Kriesi et al. 1992, 1995). Originally developed in the context of European movements since 1968, new social movements theory has been criticized for not actually identifying new processes (see Bagguley 1992), but it has brought attention to non-structural factors in movement mobilization and dynamics. Cultural perspectives have broad implications for terrorism research. For instance, Sutton and Vertigans (2006) argue that new social movement processes are evident in radical Islamic groups. In

particular, collective identity is important for understanding how contention is sustained in the absence of formal organizations. Lichterman (1996) finds that movements with identities that stress equality may eschew hierarchy and collapse. For Gould (1995), a crucial aspect of mobilization is the creation of an identity that allows for a broad and motivated base of participants. Jasper (1997) argues that activists may acquire tactical preferences as part of their identity formation, even to point of seeming irrationality. And emotional commitments to collective action and movement issues can have profound effects (see Goodwin et al. 2001).

In the study of terrorism, cultural factors clearly have a role to play. For terrorism with religious motivations or ideologies, cultural factors may be especially crucial. For instance, religious commitment has been used to explain the seeming irrationality of some tactics and the justification of violence against civilians (see, e.g., Bendle 2003; Juergensmeyer 2003). However, a movement approach could stress terrorism as a method for creating and maintaining a collective identity. For instance, militant groups often make overt appeals to a broad identity to justify their actions and seek sympathy (e.g. al-Zawahiri's famous cry 'We are Muslims!' from an Egyptian prison cell in 1981). Such a claim is both an identity and political statement. Identity statements can be more than cultural expression in that they link potential supporters to a cause and implicitly suggest political goals. The old adage that one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter may actually only be an observation of the effect of identity on contention; militant action perceived to be in defense of a reified social group is more legitimate. The commitment that identity politics spawn may help explain terrorism's persistence, even when outside observers view it as irrational or ineffective. Further work that includes relational and cultural factors is a fruitful area for understanding terrorism.

A movement view of networks

Another way to understand how movements mobilize and sustain themselves outside of formal organizations is to consider the role of social networks. A network approach to terrorism has been given great currency by recent research on terrorism (see, e.g., Sageman 2004). Modern international terrorism seems to take a network form, where participants exist in independent operational cells linked by connections between just a few key operatives. Thus, network researchers have stressed understanding the structure of networks (e.g. Pedahzur and Perliger 2006) and the possibility of points where connections could be broken as part of counter-terrorist efforts (e.g. Carley 2006; Farley 2003). The study of networks has also been an integral part of social movement research. McAdam's (1982) political process model stresses the importance of network connections in mobilization and the recruitment of participants. McAdam and Paulsen (1993) find that individuals are more likely to join a movement if their

friends and family and other acquaintances are already participants. And Gould (1991) argues that network ties among participants increase solidarity and the intensity of contention.

From a social movement perspective, terrorist networks are thus crucial not as much for their structure but for their effects on commitment and recruitment. Militant groups require the commitment of participants to undertake sustained campaigns of political violence. Perhaps such dedication is a product of other ties among participants. For instance, members of the Weather Underground had friendships and even romantic relationships that pre-dated the turn to political violence. A movement view of networks could also help explain avenues of recruitment to terrorist groups. Do terrorists, like movement activists, enlist their friends or family for the cause? Do new operational cells form from existing ties rather than directed establishment by a leadership? Could closer ties among terrorists explain the intensity of reprisals or retaliations against state actions? A movement network view of terrorist networks has the potential to go much further than describing the structure of militant groups and could provide additional explanatory leverage. Not only could network approaches explain the emergence of terrorism, it may help shed light on its dynamics.

Radicalization, repression, and cycles in movements

Consideration of the dynamics of movements is also relevant for understanding terrorism. Social movement research has established that radical militancy can be one outcome of contention (della Porta 1995; Koopmans 1993; Tarrow 1989). While still an emerging field, radicalization has thus far centered on two processes: the effect of state repression and movement cycles. If political opportunities can increase mobilization, then constraints on political action can dampen it (Tilly 1978). One such constraint is repression by governments, such as the use of physical violence or intimidation by police and clandestine services, which has important implications for collective action (see Earl 2003). While repression can suppress overall mobilization, in certain cases, it may also make militancy more likely. Rasler (1996) argues that the inconsistent use of force in the Iranian Revolution intensified mobilization, and della Porta (1995) finds that state repression actually suppresses moderate alternatives, radicalizes remaining supporters, and creates the martyrs and myths that militants use to justify their actions. Social movements also appear to have an organizational life cycle that makes radicalization most likely in the latter stages of a movement cycle. Koopmans (1993) finds that movements become more radical with time and a failure to meet initial goals; Minkoff (1997) concludes that more intense protest occurs with greater social movement organizational density; and Tarrow (1989) argues that radicalization can be a product of organizations competing for diminished resources. The adoption of certain tactics may also depend on movement cycles. McAdam (1983) argues that

movements must continually innovate new tactics as governments and counter-movements adapt to previous modes of contention. Radicalization may thus be one logical product of a movement's life cycle.

From a social movement perspective, it is thus no surprise that terrorism seems to have its own life cycle (Oberschall 2004). On the side of tactical innovation, Enders and Sandler (1993) find that transnational terrorists shifted from airline hijacking to other tactics as security was introduced to airports, and there is some evidence that suicide bombing is a tactic of last resort when other efforts have failed (Gambetta 2005; Goodwin 2006b; Pape 2005). Similar to protest and movement cycles, terrorism seems to become more indiscriminate and violent over time (Beck 2007; Bergesen and Lizardo 2004; Enders and Sandler 2000). These findings are strikingly similar to the results of social movement research. This indicates that the application of social movement conceptions of radicalization, repression, and cycles to the study of terrorism has great potential. It is also likely that research on terrorism has much to contribute to this aspect of social movement theory.

Transnational movements and the diffusion of contention

An emerging field in social movement theory is the study of transnational contentious politics. Considerations of transnational and international dimensions of movements often focus on dynamic and diffusive processes. There is, as of yet, no agreed upon framework for the study of transnational movements, but some concepts have direct utility for research on terrorism. Some, like Keck and Sikkink (1998, 1999), believe that transnational movements are best seen as networks of issue advocates. Rather than having a formal organizational structure, transnational movements, like new social movements, are linked by collective passion for an issue. Smith (2001), for instance, argues that mobilization is undertaken by existing local organizations, while framing and information exchange primarily takes place through transnational ties between activists. Others, particularly in the world system analysis tradition, see transnational movements as a product of global forces, be it economic relationships (Arrighi and Silver 1999) or the growth of transnational civil society (Tsutsui 2004; Tsutsui and Wotipka 2004).

Another perspective on transnational movements focuses on the role of diffusion. Diffusion accounts stress the role of direct exposure to an issue or method of collective action and the structural equivalence or similarity across political situations which allows for the adoption of tactics and issues from another place. Some argue that movement diffusion occurs primarily through the media (Koopmans and Olzak 2004; Myers 2000), while Tarrow (1989, 1993, 1998) views the central problem to be the development of modular collective action – tactics and repertoires that are easily transferable from situation to situation. Markoff (1996) argues that

diffusion takes place as elites, movements, and the state all respond and adapt to insurgent activity from below. It is likely that both processes take place in most cases. For instance, in the Color Revolutions that swept the former Soviet and Eastern Bloc states, McFaul (2005) and Beissinger (2007) argue that the equivalence of political structures and fraudulent elections allowed the adoption of an electoral protest model, while training and direct ties between youth activists also spread contention (Kuzio 2006).

For transnational terrorism, it is easy to see how these approaches have relevance. International conditions may present the political opportunity for transnational terrorism to thrive. For instance, Robison et al. (2006) find that transnational Leftist terrorism was dependent on Cold War rivalry. And globalization may create the opportunity for terrorism directed at many states, like the Anarchists of the late 19th century or Al-Qaeda today (Bergesen and Han 2005; Bergesen and Lizardo 2004). Transnational terrorist organizations also seem to be loosely structured as networks or semi-autonomous cells, often linked by diffusive processes. Imageries of contagion and the diffusion of radicalism and militancy are common in official accounts and journalism, and are often given by governments as a reason to strike at states which are suspected of supporting terrorists. But there need not be direct connections or training between militants in different countries; rather, they can be linked together by sympathy for a cause, as were the perpetrators of the failed attacks on London and the Glasgow airport in 2007. Furthermore, the spread of transnational terrorism is a clear instance of modular collective action. One group innovates a tactic, such as the suicide bombing vest used by the Tamil Tigers, which is quickly embraced by other groups around the world. It is also likely that the adoption of tactics and the spread of transnational terrorist networks have something to do with structural equivalence. It may not be enough that a terrorist group has similar grievances or can adopt similar tactics as others in the world. External conditions for terrorism must be conducive, and it may be possible to identify similarities across nations that experience terrorism. A weak version of structural equivalence is present in the argument that democracies are the most likely to experience terror (see Li 2005; Pape 2003, 2005). However, further investigation of the broader environments and conditions that generate the diffusion of militancy is required.

Outcomes of contentious politics

It is also worth briefly considering what social movement research has to say about outcomes of contention. Recent research on terrorism has argued that it is rarely effective in achieving the terrorists' stated goals (Abrahms 2006). The classic view of outcomes in social movement research is that either a movement is successful in achieving its goals and is subsequently institutionalized (like the professionalization resource mobilization theorists

find), or that the movement fails and it disappears. Reality, as is so often the case, is more complicated. Recent research has found that protest can have effects on Congressional voting and policy making (McAdam and Su 2002), even if a movement is not wholly successful. Soule and Olzak (2004) also find that collective action can influence policy in interaction with public opinion and elite support. And as previously discussed, movements may have an internal life cycle and can have lasting effects in creating spin-off movements (McAdam 1999) or the introduction of new tactical repertoires (Tarrow 1998).

For terrorism, it may be best to consider partial successes and unintended outcomes, rather than measure the efficacy of terrorist tactics based on the organization's own claims. The Tamil Tigers, for instance, have not established an independent homeland but have established the tactic of suicide bombing. In the Arab-Israeli conflict, militancy has not successfully created a Palestinian state or wiped Israel off the map, but has had a pronounced impact on the prospects for a lasting peace. Political violence in Northern Ireland has also had direct effects on the peace process, without achieving separation from Great Britain. Political violence has also certainly yielded short-term gains. Hezbollah's actions in Lebanon resulted, in no small part, in the pull out of American forces in the 1980s and the withdrawal of Israeli troops in 2000. Hamas and Islamic Jihad may have done the same for Israel in Gaza. An appraisal of the efficacy and success of terrorism should thus consider outcomes for an entire movement sector or issue, and not just the goals and claims of the terrorists themselves.

A note on methodology

Finally, it is important to reflect upon methodology in the study of terrorism. Previous terrorism research has been dominated by case studies with limited generalizability and ad hoc explanations (Goodwin 2006a). Micro-level theories of individual terrorist motivations and justifications prove difficult to validate given the lack of militants available for interviews and psychological experiments (Victoroff 2005). But the establishment of large-scale datasets on terrorist incidents, like ITERATE or START's Global Terrorism Database, allows for research that overcomes these limitations. Incident data, however, are often based on newspaper and journalistic reports. Social movement scholars have found newspapers and journalism to be valuable tools in protest research; yet, it is possible that news reports have systemic bias in their accounts (Ortiz et al. 2005). Others argue that the 'hard news' of an event is reliable, with missing cases a more likely problem (Earl et al. 2004). Since terrorism is by its very nature clandestine, it is also difficult to objectively estimate the support for and capability of organizations. To account for this, Beck (2007) suggests that the number of member cells in a terrorist group can be imputed from incident

data. Methodological concerns are an ongoing debate, and scholars of terrorism should take note of the objections and methods that social movement researchers have long considered.

A social movement theory of terrorism

In this essay, I have reviewed some of the theoretical and conceptual tools of social movement theory that can contribute to the study of terrorism. Research on terrorism is an important frontier, but has been limited by issues in its theoretical framework and methodology. Fortunately, however, researchers need not reinvent the wheel. While there are exceptions, for instance, millenarian or nihilistic groups that do not make primarily political claims like Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, lone wolf militants like Theodore Kaczynski the Unabomber, or violence organized by states, it is appropriate to view terrorism as one form of contentious politics analyzable with the conceptual framework of social movement theory.

A social movement theory of terrorism has much to contribute. Terrorist groups are organizations first and foremost, subject to similar dilemmas and dynamics of other movement organizations. Terrorism is rarely random, but takes place in the context of a wider environment with a political opportunity structure. Militants constantly engage in framing to justify their actions and articulate their goals. Terrorist groups also have collective identities, perhaps like new social movements, and often take network forms that could explain commitment and recruitment. Radical militancy can also be seen as one product of movement cycles and state repression. Transnational terrorism is affected by the innovation of modular collective action, movement diffusion, and international conditions. Finally, political violence has outcomes and effects which, like movement contention, are broader than the changes wrought by any one campaign. In short, a social movement theory of terrorism may look much like existing research on contentious politics.

However, I also believe that further research on terrorism has the potential to contribute to social movement theory. The study of social movements has been characterized and limited by the experience of the 1960s (McAdam et al. 2005) and needs to consider collective action in non-democratic settings and movements that are not oriented towards political participation alone. Research on terrorism and political violence thus could contribute significant modifications and extensions to existing social movement theory; and if done in a methodologically and theoretically sound manner, even originate new generalizable theories of collective action and social movements.

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Short Biography

Colin J. Beck is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at Stanford University, expected completion date in 2009. His dissertation research concerns the causal role of ideology and systemic factors in the onset of revolution and the spread of waves of political contention. He has previously researched ecoterrorism in the United States and the variation in Islamic political organization across the contemporary Middle East and North Africa. Current research projects include a comparative case study of eras of globalization and constitutional revolution, an examination of contention in 16th century Europe, and with John W. Meyer and Gili S. Drori the adoption of human rights language in constitutions of the world.

Notes

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