

Book Review: Dynamics of Political Violence: A Process-Oriented Perspective on Radicalisation and the Escalation of Political Conflict, edited by Lorenzo Bosi et al.

Dynamics of Political Violence examines how violence emerges and develops from episodes of contentious politics. Contributors consider a wide range of empirical cases, including anarchist movements, ethno-nationalist and left-wing militancy in Europe, contemporary Islamist violence, and insurgencies in South Africa and Latin America. This collection constitutes a very important contribution to the debate on radicalisation, writes **Ignas Kalpokas**. The 'process-oriented' approach to understanding violent movements not only dispels some false assumptions often prevalent in our understanding but is also capable of informing scientists and practitioners alike.



Dynamics of Political Violence: A Process-Oriented Perspective on Radicalisation and the Escalation of Political Conflict. Lorenzo Bosi, Chares Demetriou and Stefan Malthaner (eds). Ashgate. February 2014.

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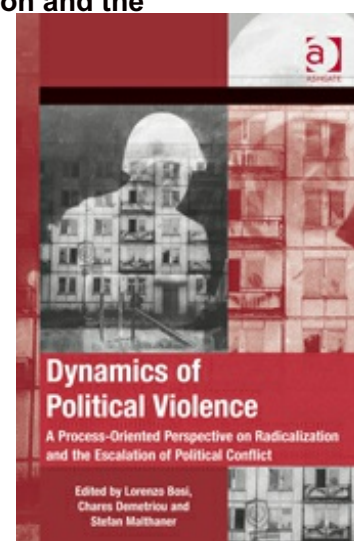
Political violence and radicalisation is an ever-poignant topic. Indeed, problems associated with groups determined to achieve their political goals whatever the cost has plagued states since times immemorial (or, more precisely, perhaps for as long as there have been states) and is now no lesser threat internationally. It therefore comes as no surprise that political violence and radicalisation is a vibrant research area. Nevertheless, the present volume still manages to make a very important contribution to our understanding of the phenomenon.

Underlying the contributions to this volume is an effort to neither essentialise some groups as simply inherently more violent than others nor relativise political violence by ascribing radicalisation purely to the environment in which the groups operate.

Instead, the authors clearly see radicalisation as an interactive process whereby each side has its role to play. On the one hand, the environment (for example, state reaction to group demands) sets the context for political action, leaving only certain options open for the group or movement to take. As a result, the proto-radicals are not completely free to choose which strategies to employ – and the authors are more than ready to admit that. On the other hand, they are equally careful not to remove agency from the radicals-to-be themselves: the available repertoire, although finite, very rarely – if ever – boils down to a single option. Instead, usually there are several strategies available, some of them more violent than others.

Then, if several options are always available, processes whereby a certain decision is reached become crucial. And here again the authors are commendable for taking a nuanced position. While it is easy to treat groups as unitary self-contained actors, such an approach is far from methodologically sound. Instead, as the contributors to the present volume demonstrate, at least several factors must be taken into account: the role that individuals and their decisions play, competition between different groups within a movement, alliances and conflicts with other organisations, both sympathetic and opposed to the movement's aims, etc. Various temporal coincidences, events happening completely independently of the political struggle concerned, and unforeseen causal dynamics only serve to further complicate the picture. Admittedly, such blurring of perspective makes prognostication and strategy-building much more difficult. But then again, strategies built on incomplete models and oversimplified assumptions are not of much use either.

The contributions to this volume cover a wide range of subjects, from very general ones – such as the role of emotion in escalating violence during protests, gendered perspectives of political violence, or divergences and similarities between leftist and religious movements – to directly applicable policy analyses – such as the ways in



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which de-radicalisation and counter-radicalisation efforts can, in fact, backfire – as well as well-defined case studies that include Western prisons, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Palestine, Francoist Spain, Turkey, and al-Qaeda-type international terrorism. All this allows for a broad perspective on radicalisation and violence across several decades and several continents employing different strategies and methodologies. Despite these variations, the basic framework of the volume still holds: processes rather than supposed ‘hard facts’ are what matters. In this way, contingency and, to a certain extent, unpredictability are clearly enshrined in the analysis of radicalisation and violence.

The book is, of course, first and foremost a contribution to scholarly understanding of groups and movements that have turned or are in the process of turning radical and violent. It helps correct some unwarranted assumptions that have removed agency from such actors in two different ways: either by ascribing violent strategies to the nature of such movements or by portraying them as essentially the victims of circumstances. As such, the present volume is a must-read for both scholars and students of violence and radicalisation. However, policy impacts are not difficult to envisage either. To begin with, the contributions are written accessibly enough to be immediately available to practitioners and even to the general public. By dispelling the false assumptions that often inform the policymaking and enforcement processes, this volume could be instrumental in adjusting the present and shaping new strategies of dealing with radicalisation and violence. Of course, as already indicated, the volume could make life more difficult for those involved in prognostication of movements’ future development and likely repertoires of action as well as those responsible for strategies of prevention and containment. In some cases, being faithful to the core argument of the volume would even mean preparing infinite contingency plans – something that is, of course, practically unfeasible. And yet, at least the awareness of the multiple ways in which any policy might go wrong and preparedness for a high degree of indeterminacy are probably the most important recommendations that practitioners could take out of this volume.

In short, *Dynamics of Political Violence* constitutes a very important contribution to the debate on radicalisation. The ‘process-oriented’ approach to understanding violent movements not only dispels some false assumptions often prevalent in our understanding but is also capable of informing scientists and practitioners alike. As such, this volume is undoubtedly a worthy read.

Ignas Kalpokas is a PhD student in Politics at the University of Nottingham, working on a dissertation on Baruch Spinoza, Jacques Lacan, and Carl Schmitt. He holds his Masters degree in Social and Political Critical Theory and Bachelors degree in Politics from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania). He has also worked on various educational projects and initiatives. Ignas’ research interests lie in the investigation of interrelated concepts of sovereignty, the state, and the political as well as the formation and maintenance of (national) identities. In addition, his research also involves history, literature, and international relations theory. His preferred theoretical framework is mostly Continental philosophy. [Read more reviews by Ignas.](#)

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