

Time, place and milieu: an 'in-between' approach to political violence

Book reviewed

Political Violence in context: time, space and milieu, by Lorenzo Bosi, Niall Ó Dochartaigh, and Daniela Pisoiu (eds). Colchester: ECPR Press, 2016, 324 pp., ISBN 9781785521447, £52.00 (hardback).

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This thoughtful and well-organised edited collection originated in the ECPR annual conference at Sciences Po, Bordeaux, in September 2013. Two of the editors, Lorenzo Bosi and Niall Ó Dochartaigh, are convenors of the ECPR standing group on political violence, and organised the conference panel in France on 'Political Violence in Time and Space'. Appropriately enough, the subtitle here is 'time, space and milieu'. The third editor, Daniela Pisoiu, wrote the introduction to the third part, 'Political Violence in its Milieu'. Ó Dochartaigh, contributes the introductory piece for Part Two, 'Spatial Contexts in Political Violence, as well as an individual chapter on the radical *milieu* in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and 1970s. Lorenzo Bosi wrote 'Political Violence in Time' for Part One.

The significance of this important book is largely theoretical. It recommends and refines the contextual approach to the study of political violence; in doing so it draws largely on social movement theory as the means of 'bringing context back in'. While much of the literature on violent conflict has been concerned with exploring variation across cases, an argument is made here for richer contextual explanations mediated by the three dimensions of time, space and milieu. The internal organisation of the book reflects this ambition: Part One is on Time, Part Two on Space and Part Three on Milieu. Each section is introduced with short (less than ten pages) introductions by the individual editors. This is a welcome approach: every edited book has to face the problem that its individual chapters might not be linked thematically; this is one way of limiting the fragmentation of the *oeuvre*. These introductory essays have a double function: they introduce the reader to existing scholarship on the three dimensions and they also introduce the individual chapters.

The book has a wide geographical range. Part One covers Ireland, Northern Ireland, the Basque country, Macedonia, Japan, the United States, Italy and Spain. Three of its chapters are comparative in nature; the first is on the 1916 Rising in Dublin. Chapter two contains two thematic essays and two case studies: the latter focus on Peru and China. Part Three has two chapters on Egypt, one chapter on Northern Ireland, and one on radical politics in Italy during the 1970s. In

other words, the internal organisation of each part reflects thematic issues, not geography. In terms of actors, they range from student movements in Spain and Italy to militant Islamic groups in Egypt. Jovana Carapic's chapter on 'armed urbanism' compares gangs to urban organisation more concerned with challenging state power. There is also a strong Irish flavour with each section containing a chapter on contemporary Ireland.

The editors claim that context matters can be understood in two ways. The first is that explanations of political violence in terms of the characteristics of a polity at the national level cannot capture the dynamic nature of conflict process, where the roles of time space and milieu are crucial. At the same time, rather than these three dimensions being simply contextual factors the claim being made is that they are causal in themselves, or to quote Koopmans, time, space and milieu are not simply dimensions on which to sample 'cases', but variables 'that are an intrinsic and central part of the analysis of contention'. Existing studies, such as Mark Bessinger's work on the collapse of the Soviet Union have already shown that the dynamics of nationalist movements 'had all been shaped by the temporal, spatial and milieu contexts of the broader mobilisation of which it formed a part'. Moreover, 'individuals become specialists in violence in specific temporal and spatial contexts, and in specific milieus'.

Put simply, more attention to time, space and milieu is a way of getting closer to the actors in violent movements: of paying attention to micro-dynamics without applying the general (culturalist or rationalist) models of human behaviour that figure in some studies. In the language of democratic theory, we move from causes to causers in all their complexity. The introduction makes clear the authors' general debt to the contentious politics literature, and the tradition which can be traced to McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly. The book thus builds on earlier findings. For example, it is a truism that patterns of mobilisation tend to be 'jaggedly uneven in both spatial and temporal terms'. It is also accepted that political violence seldom gains effectiveness when it is unrelated to other forms of contentious politics. The authors define political violence as a choice 'for a particular

tactic within the context of strategic ambitions and the other tactical choices made from that repertoire (p. 9).

The case studies can be evaluated in terms of the theoretical recommendations that foreground each part of the book. The chapter on the 1916 Rising by Donagh Davis in Part One (on time) is very much in line with Bosi's recommendation, (citing William Sewell's work on the French Revolution), that scholars focus on 'transformative events'. The 1916 Rising – a small-scale and rather theatrical event – can be compared to other singular events in the sense that it left little unchanged, or as W. B. Yeats wrote, 'a terrible beauty' was born. Davis's article is a fluent and insightful demonstration of how insights from social movement theory can explain these changes and also provides an explanation which combines different temporal perspectives. At the heart of this episode was the experience of provocation (by the rebels), repression (by the British army) and escalation (in the form of a nationalist war of Independence, 1919-1921). The Rising was transformative because this cycle of provocation and response took place at the meeting-point between *longue durée* processes spanning decades and centuries, a medium term conjuncture (called 'the Home Rule crisis'), and 'the catalytic injection of short-term contingency'.

There is no doubt that spatial dynamics are important to political violence. As noted above, Part Two is introduced by Niall Ó Dochartaigh who has written on the significance of local networks in the outbreak of the Northern Irish 'troubles' (I come back to this below). This section also contains a thoroughly researched chapter by Luis de la Calle about the Shining Path Insurgency in Peru. *Sendero Luminoso* fought on two fronts – a rural hinterland in which it could establish territorial control and exercise some form of governance, and a more limited terrorist campaign in cities like Lima. The author claims that his chapter is the first to focus on the spatial and temporal variation of the repertoire of violence produced by the *Sendero*. His dependent variable is the type of tactic used by the insurgents in a particular district; the independent variable is *Sendero*'s capacity to control territory. The hypothesis being tested is a classic staple of asymmetric warfare: 'in the districts where SP could challenge state authority, it resorted to guerrilla warfare; in those

where the state had a clear advantage, it was forced to rely on terrorist tactics' (p.128). La Calle points to the consequence this has had in terms of different and polarised views of the conflict in Lima and the Andean regions. Territory is obviously a resource in conflict, yet when people in the Andean corridor experience a civil war (as opposed to urban terrorism), and when it comes to the public interpretation of domestic conflicts, space also had a strong symbolic importance (p.141).

The introductory essay by PISOIU to Part Three argues (citing Malthaner and Waldmann), that there are two major functions of the radical milieu: as a pool of emergence, and, at a later stage, as ideational and logistical support for terrorist organisations. Interestingly, she goes on to say that three distinct relationships can exist – the group can emerge from a radical milieu during a process of gradual radicalisation; the two can emerge at the same time independently of each other; or the radical milieu can emerge afterwards as a consequence of a strategic move to create support groups (p. 210). Niall Ó Dochartaigh's analysis of the way an already existing group of republican leaders and their organisations lost control of the radical milieu in Northern Ireland illuminates a fourth pattern. The manner in which the old (later Official) IRA became overwhelmed in the early stages of the Troubles – largely because the newly emerged radical milieu wanted more ruthless defenders – constitutes this fourth pattern: the original republican elite grew hostile to the new radical milieu and their preferred defenders, the Provisional IRA.

Since a volume such as this makes theoretical claims and advocates a method for the study of political violence, the quality of the theory, rather than of the case studies, should be the object of evaluation. While in some chapters there is a very strong fit between the theme of the section and the subsequent chapters, this connection works better in some chapters than for others. When it comes to the standing of the theory the introduction stresses the 'in between' nature of the editors' collective project. It distances their work from the large N exercise in studying variation in political violence cross-nationally; at the same time it is not an endorsement of conventional history. This book is published as part of the ECPR series *Studies in European political science*. Yet how does such a contextual approach really differ from any standard history which would also embed

explanations in a narrative which pays attention to time, space and milieu in equal measure? A cynic would see the entry of a new and at times jargon-ridden vocabulary about causal mechanisms and processes into the field. Charles Tilly was both a great historian and a great political scientist: on page 19 he is quoted (from 2001) as writing that mechanisms are ‘the recurrent social dynamics over a variety of situations that concatenate over time to drive the process of emergence of political violence’.

The editors rightly stress the ‘in-between’ nature of their approach: between work that is interested in investigating the objective conditions that make political violence more or less likely, and that of historians who are, according to Bosi, not that interested ‘in these kinds of causal linkages’. Bosi suggests that the (social movement) approach means a focus on tracing mechanisms and processes over time ‘that transcend a single setting’ in how they explain the dynamics of political violence. This is both true and untrue since there are comparative minded-historians. Indeed, while the vocabulary is less insular, the procedure they collectively recommend is still much closer to history than to many positivist versions of social science. Were we to take the two chapters on Ireland as examples: not many historians would be surprised at Davis’s view of 1916 as a transformative event, or by Ruane and Todd’s stress on long-term patterns of conflict in the Basque country, Macedonia, and Northern Ireland. Indeed in its attention to long term structural legacies, their work is very much in the tradition of historical sociology and cites work from that tradition.

Obviously, the difference with history is that the authors are advocating a sub-field of comparative politics, which, while it may blur the boundaries between process-tracing and traditional narratives, is basically about theory building and eventually theory testing. We are at an early stage in that endeavour. For most of the last two decades the dominant approach to violent conflict has been a combination of structural explanations of where conflict occurs, with micro-level explanations of mobilisation and violence. The appearance of a careful and well-organised volume such as this is further proof of the fact that case studies – and small-N comparisons between

cases – are returning to the scholarly agenda. In terms of the concepts used, one fears a certain re-description rather than the discovery of new and surprising causal factors. Nonetheless, in their attention to time, space and milieu this approach does suit the dynamic and interactive nature of social movements very well, and more than compliments existing scholarship on political violence.

References