

**Safe Territories and Political Violence:
the Persistence and Disengagement of Violent Organized Political Groups**

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Abstract: This article assesses how the concept of safe territory can expand our understanding of the persistence and disengagement of violent organized political groups. The explanatory utility of this concept is demonstrated through an analysis of the cycles of political violence perpetrated by the Red Brigades in Italy and the Provisional Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland. In addition to these two main cases, I provide illustrative evidence from other violent organized political groups to further support the hypothesis-building discussion. This work offers two main illustrative hypotheses. First, the opportunities provided by safe territories are not necessarily conducive to the continuation of political violence forever, although they facilitate its persistence over a long period of time. Second, the presence of safe territories, regardless of the ideology of the violent organized political group, tends to impose disengagement from political violence at the group level. Finally, the analytical intent in introducing the concept of safe territory is to contribute to spatial understandings of political violence.

Keywords: safe territories, social movements, political violence, civil war, persistence, disengagement.

It is generally known among scholars of terrorism,¹ policy makers and indeed the general public, that the persistence over time of violent organized political groups depends, among other factors, on the existence of safe territories. But while the importance of the safe territory concept has not been overlooked, we still know surprisingly little about how safe territories affect violent organized political groups' continuity over time and their disengagement processes.² This despite recent academic works from different disciplines that have begun to question how militants' commitment endures over time³ and how social movements and political violence decline.⁴

By safe territories I mean nearly self-sufficient physical concentrated spaces where social networks develop over time shaping formal and informal infrastructures of support that maintain affective, familial, and personal relations between armed activists and the radical community. In these locally bounded homogeneous radical communities violent organized political groups are able to "safely" manage legal and/or illegal activities, to recruit, train, obtain resources, communicate and foster oppositional collective action consciousness. Obviously, few physical territories in the world are completely safe from the ideological, repressive and co-optive tactics of the authorities and different degrees of safeness exist, depending on the capacity or willingness to legally control or govern these particular territories as well as on the strength of the violent organized political group.⁵ State governance is in these cases substituted over a certain period of time by the alternative authority of violent organized political groups, built on the provision of a whole range of services for policing and providing welfare to the local community. Socially intertwining with the local population through the provision of social services, violent organized political groups challenge first the legitimacy of the state, highlighting "the failure of the state to fulfill its side of the social contract", and, second, ensure their continued existence by proposing to the local "population an alternative entity in which to place their loyalty",⁶ legitimating this in terms of common identity and/or implicit and explicit coercion. In this regard violent organized political groups exploit the services they provide to create a radical community⁷ indoctrinated with counter-hegemonic attitudes, but also bound to the organization via the provision of services.

This article takes up and elaborates on the concept of safe territories from the literatures on civil war, social movements and terrorism, and political violence. Part of the explanation for the complexity involved in addressing this topic stems from the fact that different scholars in these three fields of research use different labels to refer to similar or at least apparently related concepts: "abeyance structures";⁸ "black holes";⁹ "bounded spaces";¹⁰ "halfway houses";¹¹ "havens";¹² "free spaces";¹³ "safe havens";¹⁴ "save spaces";¹⁵ "semi-autonomous community institutions";¹⁶ "spatial imaginaries";¹⁷ "social movement scene";¹⁸ "spatial preserves";¹⁹ "submerged networks";²⁰ "territorial sanctuaries";²¹ "third spaces";²² "ungoverned areas";²³ "ungoverned spaces".²⁴ Here I build on these works and suggest new formulations that I believe will lead to more robust analyses of the relation between safe territories and political violence. The concept of safe territory, as Aurélie Campana and Benjamin Ducol have suggested in their work in referring to "safe havens", helps to "create a bridge between a given territorial space and its social dimension. This notion emphasizes the relational strategies of actors, their inter-subjective perceptions of the social reality, and the social links on both the normative and symbolic levels, which unite as well as divide them. Moreover, this conceptualization focuses on the rules that govern these spaces throughout the different modes of legitimization and domination. Each type of alternative governance is therefore a structuring mechanism that contributes to define the social relations and social practices in a given territory".²⁵ Authority over a determined space is not, then, deployed only by the state, but can also be seen as a geographic strategy by oppositional forces, whether violent organized political groups, non-violent movements, gangs or organized crime groups, in an effort to challenge state authorities. O'Dochartaigh and Bosi remind us that "the implications of this exercise of power through space are that the processes of mobilization are intimately bound up with the particular context for action, not simply because context shapes action, but because actors use spatial context to exert power. Space itself is a source of power, a resource for mobilization, central to agency and social structure and therefore central to the mechanisms and processes of contention".²⁶ Space is not a "natural" unit

to which individuals adjust, but a social artifact, structured through the interactions of people, groups, and institutions that are embedded in specific social relations. By providing a whole range of services and using explicit and implicit coercion, violent organized political groups impose their authority on certain physical concentrated spaces (what I call here safe territories). Residents in the local community are aware of this and use it to guide their everyday social interactions.

I acknowledge the existence of the so called host-state sanctuaries, where state sponsored violent organized political groups are extended hospitality by states willing to support refugees, manage logistics and organize violent political operations (such as Libya in the 1980s under Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, Sudan in the early 1990s when it hosted Bin Laden and a few hundred jihadists, the border between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay (Tri-Border area), or more recently the Iranian-Syrian and Afghan-Pakistani borders). However, this article focuses mainly on those cases where states fail to govern such areas. Safe territories can exist in developed and underdeveloped countries. They can be of different sizes and vary from urban neighborhoods to villages (for example the *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA) in Spain or the *Provisional Irish Republican Army* (PIRA) in Ireland), cities (*Hezbollah* in south Lebanon, the *Worker's Party of Kurdistan* (PKK) in south Turkey and *Hamas* in the Gaza strip), or regional rural areas (such as those areas that experience persistent insurgencies, including among others *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) in El Salvador, *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) in Columbia or *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka* (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, or to a lesser extent even south Armagh in Northern Ireland if we look again at the PIRA).²⁷ Safe territories are both places of resistance and a spatial structure from which to plan and launch armed operations. They provide all of this, but it is worth noting that they are not necessarily the only vehicle of demands for change and mobilization. In fact, not all violent organized political groups have safe territories. We can look for example here at *Action Direct* in France (AD), *Brigate Rosse* and *Avanguardia Nazionale* (AN) in Italy, *Grupos de Resistencia Antifascista Primero de Octubre* in Spain (GRAPO), *Rote Armee Fraktion in Germany* (RAF), or *Weather Underground* and the *Animal Liberation Front* in the US (WU and ALF respectively). In this article I focus on how safe territories can expand our understanding of the persistence and decline of violent organized political groups, rather than investigate the circumstances under which safe territories arise.²⁸

The qualitative approach of this article combines the discourse analysis of interview data; content analysis of historical records (newspapers, government documents, autobiographies, and documents from organizations); and the systematic consultation of secondary sources. It is based on field research on the PIRA in Northern Ireland and on the BR in Italy.²⁹ These are two violent organized political groups that have rarely been discussed in connection in the scholarly literature.³⁰ It is important to note that I am not attempting to provide an exhaustive historical overview of these two cases, nor to systematically compare them. My concern, rather, is to explain how the presence of safe territories influenced, among other factors, the persistence of the PIRA's armed struggle as contrasted with the "brief history"³¹ of the BR and their divergent endings.³² In this article, I move in a direction which has more to do with hypothesis-building than hypothesis testing. The limited empirical scope of the study only allows for hypotheses, which point toward causal relations between the existence of safe territories and the persistence of political violence and disengagement at the group level. At the very least this offers a 'baseline' which later studies might use as a reference point. In addition to the two main cases, I provide illustrative evidence from other violent organized political groups.

The article is divided as follows. In the first part, I will engage with some of the relevant literature on how militants' commitment endures over time and how social movements and political violence declines. Then I will present a brief history of the two organized political violent groups. Without aspiring to be either exhaustive or conclusive I will discuss the discoveries I make with the aim of showing how safe territories impact the persistence of political violence and how it declines.

Persistence and Disengagement from Political Violence

Research on terrorism has usually addressed issues of how and why political violence unfolds, but has paid less attention to the post-emergence period, and conversely to its decline.³³ As I noted in my introduction, persistence and disengagement from political violence have only recently begun to emerge as a prominent phenomena for study. They both appear to be affected by the amount of support (symbolic and material resources)³⁴ violent organized political groups enjoy from the radical community from which they come, remain social and symbolically linked to and from which they get help. However, there seems to be a lack of attention to the ways in which violent organized political groups interact with the radical community. With some exceptions (Waldman 2005; Malthaner 2011), scholars do not generally examine the patterns of change and continuity of violent organized political groups and radical communities over time.

Faced with the risk of infiltration, arrest, increasing abandonment by their own members, and the dismantling of militant networks due to changes in the socio-political environment and/or state repression, violent organized political groups can strategically choose either to further isolate themselves from their own radical community or to become more inclusive. In this choice, violent organized political groups are constrained by both external (political opportunities and public support) and internal dynamics (resources and intra-group dissent). Those groups which are weaker in symbolic and material resources and confronted with closed opportunities might be keener to further radicalize their ideology and tactics in order to foster their continued existence and shore up their organizational integrity. This strategy helps to keep armed activists in the short term, even under unfavorable circumstances. In turn, however, it risks producing further isolation, transforming the violent organized political group into a sect, out of touch with political reality, and provoking revulsion among its own radical community. Ultimately a lack of resources together with poor social support can weaken the commitment of engaged armed activists (disengagement at the individual level).

In a different scenario, by listening to the radical community's negative perceptions of the future of armed struggle, violent organized political groups progressively move away from radical forms of action (disengagement at the group level). Similar shifts underpinned by violent organized political groups may provoke individual disengagement in different ways. The same violent organized political group can decide to disengage or this decision may lead to the voluntary disengagement of those armed activists who experience a discrepancy between their own feelings and the views and values professed by the changed organization or by warring factions where a split develops. Armed activists themselves might perceive that political violence, in the changed political scenario, is no longer worthy of inclusion in the repertoire of action since it does not achieve the desired results that induced mobilization in the first place, or because changes in personal orders of preferences might emerge, "such as commitment to family, educational, and career objectives"³⁵. In the armed militant's view, when considering the possibility to disengage a socio-psychological barrier must be jumped by breaking strong ties of friendship and loyalty, and a possible situation where the militant risks ending up in a social vacuum with no future whatsoever is faced. In other words, commitment to political violence is maintained in part because abandonment carries a very high psychological price given the costs already incurred for participation in armed action, and because militants come to feel that what they have believed in and fought for is wrong, morally or politically. So, while activists might perceive that political violence is no longer viable or might not agree with a new turn underpinned by the organization, this does not mean that they are able to disengage. Feelings of belonging, the incapacity to see another possible future apart from that in the armed group, and the fear to live with the bad consciousness of having believed in the wrong ideas, all these keep activists inside armed groups - at least until something happens to make it possible to disengage with other comrades, or when latent tensions over the perceived possibilities of success of the armed struggle, triggered by a transformative event, make the need to disengage more

important than feelings of belonging attached to the armed group and loyalty to the previous system of values and beliefs (“burnout”).

Political violence may end with the victory of the insurgents (for example the *African National Congress* in South Africa (ANC); the *Irgun Zvai Leumi* in Israel, the *Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston* in Cyprus (EOKA), and the *Front de Libération Nationale* in Algeria (FLN)); it may see state victories with the vanishing of the violent organized political group due to a voluntary decision to abandon political violence, or to group disintegration due to increasing costs and decreasing benefits (for example *17 Noemvri* in Greece (17N), AC, AN, BR, LTTE, *Prima Linea* in Italy (PL), RAF, or *Sendero Luminoso* in Peru (SL)); it may see a negotiated settlement resolution between the state and violent organized political groups that perceive new options after realizing that neither side can win (for example the PIRA or FMLN); or, to complicate matters further, political violence may end in any possible combination of the aforementioned trajectories. For sure, political violence does sooner or later decline at the individual or group levels, whether this is voluntary or forced by conditions both internal and external to the violent organized political groups.

The Red Brigades

Left wing political violence in Italy originated in the wave of international protest of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the state’s indiscriminate repression. In the left at the time the conviction that the state was part of an anti-communist “strategy of tension” conspiracy, facilitated by the Italian secret service, parts of the army and the US CIA existed. This had a strong impact on the decision of some extra-parliamentary left-wing groups to resort to violence as a means to resist and stay on the offensive.³⁶ From among these groups the BR emerged to become the leading organization in terms of longevity, numbers of militants (four hundred full-time members, plus an unknown number of supporters, operating in city columns in Milan, Turin, Genoa, Rome, Naples, and the Veneto Region) and degree of political violence employed during the 1970s and the early 1980s.

The BR was almost extinguished in the early 1980s due to a lack of armed activists. Most of its militants were either dead, in prison, or had decided to quit, and no new recruits were available to enter the violent organized political group.³⁷ In the late 1970s and early 1980s, state anti-terrorist measures had been increased through repressive ‘emergency policies’ (the Parliament amended the Criminal Code allowing the police to collect limited information from suspects and detainees without warrants and mandatory identification, it also introduced stiffer sentences and organized a new intelligence unit responsible for co-coordinating the counter-terrorist efforts of all the police forces, the Central Directorate for Crime Prevention)³⁸ and the price of getting and remaining involved in violent organized political groups was raised (what is usually understood as “pre-emption” and “deterrence”). In addition, selective incentives (sentence reductions, preparation for re-entry into society and the possibility to meet with other former armed activists in prison) were offered to those individuals in prison who began to feel unsure of the possibilities of success of armed struggle. This applied first to those who were ready to help the authorities in their investigations (‘repentance’ laws of 1980 and 1982) and later also to those who admitted their own participation and declared their intention to leave the violent organized political group (‘dissociazione’ law of 1986). For example, Enrico Fenzi would retrospectively justify his exit from the BR in these terms: “Certainly there is a desire to get out of jail, there is the feeling of defeat and repulsion about what you have done. There is a different political opinion. There is the perception of a reality different from what you thought ”³⁹.

However, these state victories in Italy were only made possible in the context of the unfavorable socio-political environment which the BR’s leaders and armed activists perceived from the late 1970s onwards (i.e. the stability of political alignments and government coalitions, minimal support from public opinion, and the absence of any potential ally in view of the end of the protest cycle).⁴⁰ Italian trade unions and the Italian Communist Party been running proactive campaigns aimed at

cutting off any kind of social complicity with left-wing violent organized political groups in the radical counterculture since the mid-1970s. The historian Roberto Bartali has suggested that by the late 1973 to early 1974 the leaders of the Communist Party started to intervene against the BR “making its own information network available to the police, both in factories and in local residential areas, and even going so far as to have the militant members of the so-called *Vigilanza Democratica* apparatus carry out nightly patrols to examine the handwriting of the Red Brigades’ publicity which appeared on the walls of the city”⁴¹. In a spiral of political violence and tough repression, its support network quickly disappeared. The perception of weakening bonds of solidarity due to growing, if limited, “repentance”, was added to growing awareness of the BR’s military and political isolation and alienation.⁴² This was, in turn, accentuated by the impossibility of resisting arrests and finding new recruits and by the realization that the armed struggle and its goals did not have any popular support, even within the radical community the BR saw itself as a member of.

The Provisional IRA

In the late 1960s, a social movement campaign emerged in Northern Ireland demanding expanded civil rights and the end of the systematic socio-political exclusion of the minority nationalist community. The civil rights marches were met with harsh state repression and open violent confrontation from the Loyalist counter-movement. This socio-political situation opened up a space for extreme communal violence during the summer of 1969, and then for the emergence of the Provisional IRA at the end of 1969, a result of a split within the IRA. The PIRA adopted a three-track strategy. First they sought to defend nationalist enclaves from state repression and loyalist violence. At the same time it progressively secured a strong socio-political authority and legitimacy in both urban and rural areas, using a blend of propaganda and social services to win people’s loyalty. Third, from 1971 the PIRA embarked on a full offensive military campaign, aiming for British withdrawal from Northern Ireland.⁴³

By the mid 1980s both the leadership of the Provisional IRA and the British establishment came to realize that a military solution was not a winning option for either side. The conflict was stalemated, with the Provisional IRA far from being defeated, but its ‘Long War’ campaign of attrition, aimed at wearing down the British will to remain in Northern Ireland, was increasingly effectively contained by a multilevel response from the security forces (a more sophisticated intelligence war involving informers to penetrate the organization; extradition treaties, increased surveillance, and the development of anti-terrorist technology)⁴⁴ and by British urban, social and economic development policies.⁴⁵ In fact, the armed struggle did not appear to deliver any progress to a tired and isolated northern nationalist constituency which was starting to look elsewhere for a solution to its socio-economic grievances (the start of a process of “backlash”).

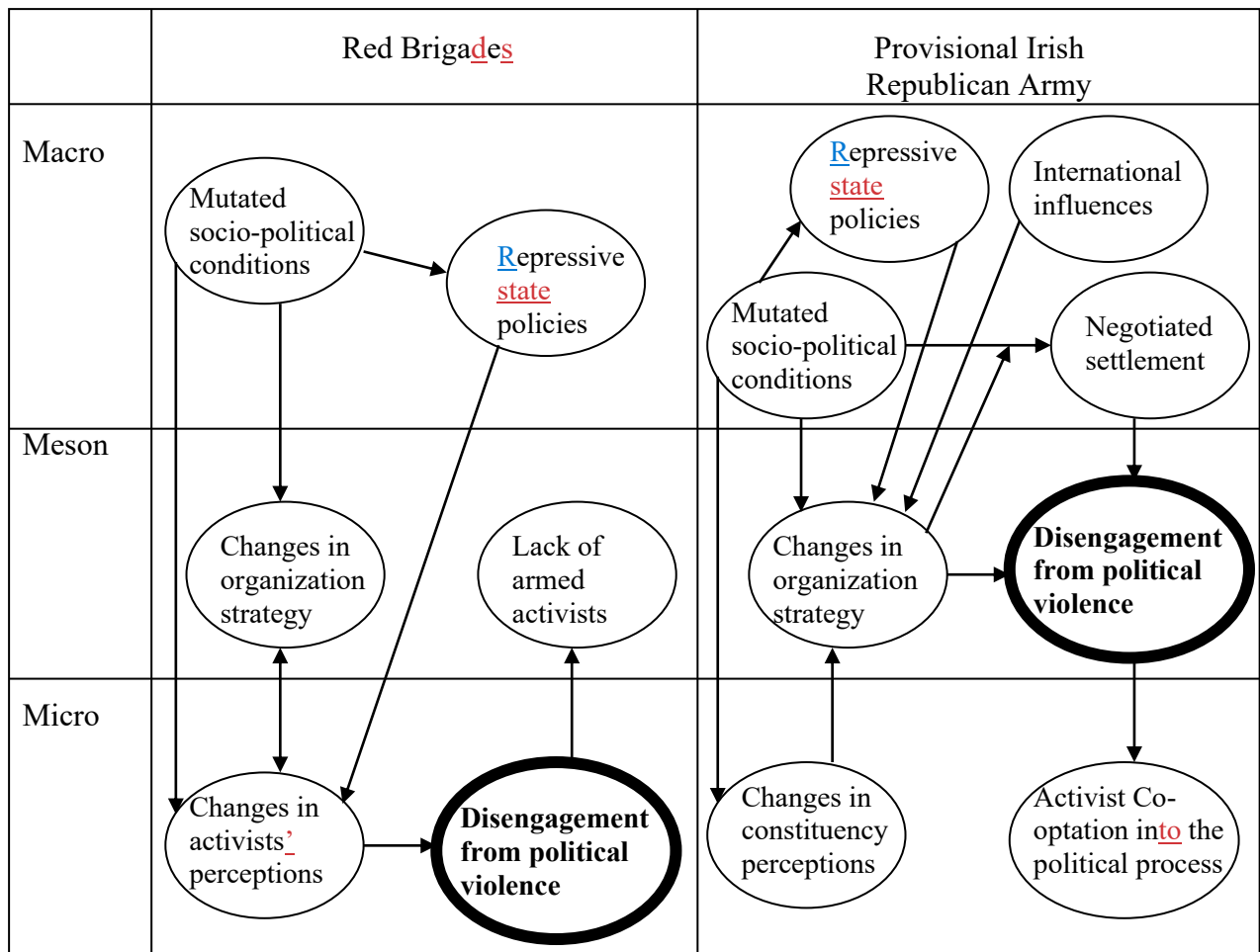
Within this situation, after 1985 leading republicans began to feel a sense of wariness regarding the counter-productive impact of the armed struggle strategy, confronted as they were with a situation where they were losing members (killed, imprisoned and few new recruits) and resources, and politically they were strongly isolated and demonized by all the political forces at both the domestic and international level.⁴⁶ In the view of the republican leadership, these new socio-political realities demanded a rethinking of strategy. The abandonment of abstentionism (1986); the talks between Adams and Hume (1988); and contacts with the Irish establishment as well as secret contacts with the British⁴⁷ were all alternative political strategies that the Republican leadership adopted in a bid to move out of the stalemate situation and towards the broadening of republican politics by ending its marginalization and pushing its leadership towards a diplomatic strategy.⁴⁸ These steps were taken, in fact, in the confidence that they offered an honorable way out of the stalemate situation and allowed republicans to obtain concessions for the broader nationalist community, but did not undermine in any way the ultimate ideal of Irish reunification. The political

drive for change was the need to end the loneliness of radical community. On 31 August 1994 the Provisional IRA announced a complete cessation of military activity, thus allowing Sinn Féin to take a seat at the ‘peace talks’ of the following years which led to the Good Friday Agreement of April 12 1998. The process of disengagement from political violence took years as the leadership wanted to maintain the movement’s unity. The great majority of armed republican activists were then integrated into the institutional political process through a peace process that resulted in a new negotiated settlement, the aforementioned Good Friday Agreement (1998) and later the St Andrews Agreement (2006), where the Provisional IRA took part together with other political forces present in the Northern Ireland conflict (the British and Irish states and Northern Irish political parties).

Discussion: Safe Territories and Political Violence

The BR and the Provisional IRA, as we have seen above, demonstrate very different processes in their respective exits from political violence. While in the first case the decline of political violence came about mainly at the individual level, in the second case it was the violent organized political group’s leadership that broke the stalemate situation for a new negotiated settlement). Table 1 helps us to illustrate these different paths as seen in the two cases.⁴⁹

Table 1 BR and PIRA processes out of political violence



What did make the exits from political violence so different in these two cases? The reasons are rooted neither in the different ideological backgrounds of the two violent organized political groups nor in the nature of the grievances involved in the socio-political conflicts in Italy and Northern

Ireland. Central to their explanation is the existence or absence of safe territories, which, among other factors, help to explain how the PIRA's cycle of political violence lasted twice as long as that of the BR and why in the latter case we see the disengagement process taking place at the micro level whereas in the case of the PIRA this is seen at the meso level. Safe territories, as I stated in the introduction, are spaces where the authority of the state is contested. However, their mobilizing power lies not just in the near absence of state authority, but also in the presence of self-sufficient physical concentrated spaces where tightly knit socio-political networks which organize and govern micro-social interactions allow the relational and symbolic solidarities that bind armed activists with the radical community to be strengthened. As Frank Burton suggests: "strong community bonds not only increase the likelihood of active resistance to external threat, they also simultaneously make it possible to absorb the consequences such confrontation results in".⁵⁰ Violent organized political groups' provision of policing and welfare services to the local community becomes the ordering principle of safe territories upon which daily individual routines are structured, and also of common knowledge and shared sets of norms and rules. Most of the beneficiaries of these services end up supporting the violent organized political group's struggle knowing and willingly, while others do so unintentionally or out of a sense of obligation for the services they receive. The skilful use of social services as vehicles of social cohesion allows violent organized political groups to generate radical communities within the boundaries of a determined territory where violence against the state is justified, actively and/or passively supported, and understood. In these ways they develop alternative forms of communities where social classes become diluted and counter-hegemonic consciousnesses arise, offering new cognitive lenses for interpreting reality. Therefore, armed activists are seen as those who protect and enforce the community in its opposition to the state.

In Italy the state policy of offering imprisoned BR armed activists a way out should they provide testimony against former comrades or dissociate themselves from the group was very effective in the changed socio-political conditions of the late 1970s and early 1980s. It offered a way out to those individuals who had suffered a crisis of allegiance to the armed struggle, in particular following the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro.⁵¹ A similar strategy was also tried in Northern Ireland in the early 1980s, but with different results. It was in any case unable to be a central factor in favoring the end of the Provisional IRA's armed campaign, as was instead the case for the BR. Supergrass trials have come to be seen as largely unfavorable because of the unreliability of some repentant activists, leading in some cases to the conviction of innocent people.⁵²

For armed activists in the PIRA it was, on the one hand, "easier" to disengage from political violence individually, as there was a network of social relations within the radical community that was ready to accept and help should a volunteer desire to disengage after having been involved in political violence activities for a certain amount of years. The PIRA armed activists I have met sustain that they have always felt free to leave at any time. In their view, as some like to recall, their involvement in the PIRA was perceived as a sort of "military service".⁵³ They justify their mobilization into armed activism as a duty they had to fulfill in order to serve their local community.⁵⁴ But this did not prevent them leaving when they felt that their time was over, for example when they felt an increase in life responsibilities.⁵⁵ On the other hand it was for the same PIRA armed activists much more difficult to disengage by cooperating with state authorities or publicly dissociating themselves from the group, because this would have meant not only letting down comrades and the organization, but an entire community. In a deeply divided society⁵⁶ like Northern Ireland this basically means no possibility whatsoever of reintegration in society. In safe territories the individual's private life takes place within the public context given and bordered by the violent organized political group. This is particularly true in relation to the fact that armed activists' families were grounded in these radical communities and benefitting from the social welfare provided by the republican movement. A collaboration with the state authorities would harm not only the single individual but possibly his/her family as well. In Italy, or in cases where radical communities are not based in a territorial community but a radical counterculture, this was

simply not the case.⁵⁷ In Northern Ireland the formal and informal social infrastructure systems of the PIRA were built up over time through the provision of rewards and preferential treatment in terms of services provided to armed activists and their families proved to have the capacity to resist strong repressive measures from the British state. In fact, strong affective, familial, and personal relationships between armed activists and the radical community which emerge in self-sufficient physical concentrated spaces (safe territories) hamper the process of disengagement from violent organized political groups.

The BR's armed militants were aided in disengaging from political violence once in jail, since they were able to build relationships with significant others who were not close to or even opposed such types of activism. After long periods of high activism where only closed relationships between armed activists were feasible for security reasons, time spent in jail represented a place where it was possible to have a rest, think, debate and enter into contact with other people outside the inner circle of the violent organized political group, then finally to dissociate themselves from it having found this more important than their feelings of belonging towards the group and loyalty to their previous system of values and beliefs.⁵⁸ BR armed activists were motivated to take this path by the belief that political violence was no longer worthy of a place in the repertoire of action in the changed socio-political conditions of the time, or because they did not agree with the new turn taken by the violent organized political group. Imprisoned PIRA armed activists found themselves in an active prison front able to maintain the motivations of political prisoners, since the violent organized political group was able to support the families of detainees through its social welfare system.⁵⁹ In comparison with the BR, the PIRA's armed activists knew that their families were still involved in the radical community and maintained by it.

The same strategies adopted by the Italian state to fight against the BR were adopted to fight organized crime groups such as the Cosa Nostra mafia in Sicily. However, they did not guarantee the same results.⁶⁰ Although I do not seek to claim that violent organized political groups and organized crime groups such as these are part of the same phenomena, some interesting observations can be highlighted, particularly in relation to the fact that both need "to establish trustworthy relationships in an environment of secrecy".⁶¹ The existence of safe territories for organized crime groups in the south of Italy explains why, among other factors, the Italian state has been unable to defeat these groups.

Conclusions

This article seeks to contribute to an emerging literature on the persistence and disengagement from organized political violence by addressing interrelated research questions which stand at the heart of the scholarly debate: why are some violent organized political groups more resilient than others? Why do some decline at the micro and others at the meso level? The qualitative research presented is investigative and does not have a general application. However, I would argue that the indications arising from the two cases are significant enough to generate two illustrative hypotheses which merit future empirical testing via systematic comparative analysis. Only thus will we be able to determine whether the concept of safe territory can be added to others to reach a better understanding of persistence and disengagement from violent organized political groups.

First, violent organized political groups' safe territories provide physical settings in which political violence can survive over time. Safe territories, separated from the rest of the regional environment, provide an ideal place to experiment with, consolidate, actualize and manifest the counter-hegemonic consciousness upon which the violent organized political group builds the legitimacy that provides the rationale for its persistence, all the while keeping damage from disengaging by members cooperating with state authorities or publicly dissociating themselves from the violent organized political group to a minimum.

Second, the presence of safe territories, regardless of the ideology of the violent organized political group, tends to impose disengagement from political violence at the group level. Without safe territories violent organized political groups, over the course of time, become weak and insignificant—even though they may not disappear at once but instead further radicalize and remove themselves from their community of reference.

In introducing the concept of safe territories this article seeks to contribute to spatial understandings of political violence by underlining how spatial and social dimensions are closely intertwined; by better understanding the micro-dynamics of these spaces; by contributing to previous research on the decline of political violence by bringing together the structural features of networks and spatial dimensions in order to explain the persistence of violent organized political groups; by moving away from the a-spatial approach found in much of the terrorism and political violence literature. Thus, understanding organized political violence involves us accounting for space and social structure and shedding light on the nuances and complexities of the relational ties between armed activists and the radical community.

Notes

¹ Because the term ‘terrorism’ has doubtful heuristic value and descriptive utility, and has often been used to stigmatize rather than to explain the social phenomenon under examination, I prefer the term ‘political violence’ in this article. However, the term ‘terrorism’ is used with reference to those literatures and debates which do employ the term. With political violence, whether anticipated, threatened or actual, I refer to a heterogeneous repertoire of actions perpetrated by organized groups, whatever their ideological orientation or relationship to the state, and oriented at inflicting material, psychological and symbolic damage on individuals and/or property with the intention of influencing several audiences and influencing or resisting political, social and/or cultural change.

² It is important to state that the end of mobilization should not be understood merely as the reverse of its emergence. In this article I juxtapose persistence with disengagement, since they are both the result of the post-emergent period. With the term disengagement from political violence the reference literature denotes a behavioral change on the part of the militant or the overall violent organized political group. So disengagement, in comparison with what we call the deradicalization processes, does not necessitate any change in values or ideals but the relinquishing of the objective of achieving change through violence. Armed militants can, for example, gradually disengage from violence or leave violent organized political groups, but retain “radical” beliefs and attitudes.

³ See for example: Verta Taylor, "Social Movement Continuity." *American Sociological Review*, 54 (1989): 761-75; James Downton and Paul Wehr, "Peace Movements: The Role of Commitment and Community in Sustaining Member Participation," *Research in Social Movements, Conflict and Change* 13 (1991): 113-34; Bert Klandermans, *The Social Psychology of Protest* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1997); Robert Futrell and Peter Simi, "Free Spaces, Collective Identity, and the Persistence of US White Power Activism." *Social Problems*, 51 (2004): 16-42; Sharon Nepstad, "Persistent Resistance: Commitment and Community in Plowshares Movement." *Social Problems* 51 (2004): 43-60; Florence Passy and Marco Giugni, "Life Spheres, Network, and Sustained Participation: A Phenomenological Approach to Political Commitment." *Sociological Forum* 15 (2000): 117-144; Robert White, "Structural Identity Theory and the Post-Recruitment Activism of Irish Republicans: Persistence, Disengagement, Splits and Dissidents in Social Movement Organizations." *Social Problems* 57 (2010): 341-70; Gilda Zwerman and Patricia Steinhoff, "The Remains of the Movement: The Role of Legal Support Networks in Leaving Violence While Sustaining Movement Identity" *Mobilization* Vol. 17, No. 1 (2012): 85-98.

⁴ See for example: Olivier Fillieule (ed.), *Le Désengagement militant* (Paris, Belin, 2005); Audrey Kurth Cronin, "How Al-Qaida Ends : The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups", *International*

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⁵ On states' failures to govern and police safe territories, see: Em Korteweg "Black Holes: On Terrorist Sanctuaries and Governmental Weakness," *Civil Wars*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2008): 60-71; Anne Clunan and Harold Trinkunas, *Ungoverned Space* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2010).

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- ²⁵ Campana and Ducol 2011: 401-402.
- ²⁶ O'Dochartaigh and Bosi 2010: 407-408.
- ²⁷ Understanding how similar geographical characteristics of safe territories matter in the circumstances under which safe territories arise and in the development of conflict is beyond the scope of this article (on this see: Cullen S. Hendrix (2011): "Head for the Hills? Rough Terrain, State Capacity, and Civil War Onset", *Civil Wars*, 13:4, 345-370).
- ²⁸ See for example: Waldmann 2005; Kittner 2007; Korteweg 2008; Gray and LaTour 2010.
- ²⁹ Interviews on the Italian case were collected in the framework of a wider research program on political violence and terrorism led by the Carlo Cattaneo Institute of Bologna since 1981. I would like to thank the Istituto Carlo Cattaneo for providing access to its archive, in particular to the *Documentazione sul terrorismo* (DOTE) archive.
- ³⁰ Bosi and Della Porta, Forthcoming Qualitative Sociology.
- ³¹ Obviously the "brief history" of the BR is relative and brief only in a comparison with the more than thirty years of the PIRA. The BR lasted, despite splitting into various groups and wings, until the end of the 1980s, longer than any other socio-revolutionary armed group of its "generation" in Italy.
- ³² I do not intend to minimize the important role of international developments for both cases, but the focus here is on how the existence or not of safe territories at the national/regional level shaped the development of violent organized political groups.
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- ³⁴ Christopher Paul (2010): As a Fish Swims in the Sea: Relationships Between Factors Contributing to Support for Terrorist or Insurgent Groups, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 33:6, 488-510.
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⁴³ Lorenzo Bosi, “Explaining Pathways to armed Activism in the Provisional IRA, 1969-1972”. *Social Science History*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2012): 347-390.

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⁴⁸ Bean 2007.

⁴⁹ A fuller description of these two paths out of political violence can be found in “Patterns of Disengagement from Political Armed Activism: A Comparative Historical Sociology Analysis of Italy and Northern Ireland” (co-authored with Prof. Donatella Della Porta (EUI)); 'How Terrorism Ends' workshop, University of Wales.

⁵⁰ Frank Burton, *The Politics of Legitimacy. Struggles in a Belfast Community* (London/Boston, Routledge and Kegan, 1978): 3.

⁵¹ Della Porta 2009.

⁵² S. Greer, *Supergrasses: A Study in Anti-Terrorist Law Enforcement in Northern Ireland* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁵³ Interview no. 7.

⁵⁴ Lorenzo Bosi, “Explaining Pathways to armed Activism in the Provisional IRA, 1969-1972”. *Social Science History*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2012): 347-390.

⁵⁵ Interview no. 10.

⁵⁶ “By deeply divided societies, I mean regions where regimes lack full legitimacy and are prone to widespread political violence, repressive establishments, and subcultural divisions based on socio-political cleavages that are neither closed nor pacified.” (Lorenzo Bosi “Social Movement Participation and the “Timing” of Involvement. The Case of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement” *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* (2007): 39).

⁵⁷ It is interesting to note that another violent organized political group close to the BR, Prima Linea, thought of “setting up ‘red bases’ in the cities” (Tarrow, Sidney. *Democracy and Disorder, Protest and Politics in Italy 1965–1975*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1989: 303) in a bid to imitate the strategy of the republican movement in Northern Ireland (Grandi, *La Generazione degli Anni Perduti*, Torino, Einaudi, 2003: 267-280).

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