Political terrorism and affective polarization in "black" and "red" terrorists in Italy during the years 1968–1988

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Psychiatric evaluations of violent political crime were mostly performed on a case-by-case basis in a forensic environment, which made them unduly dependent on categories of presumed dangerousness and legal responsibility, rather than on a clinical definition of their mental status. In referring to such "clinical" definitions, the disorder we have in mind is not limited to the major, agitated psychotic manias or mixed states. The presence of a dominant temperament, or protracted hypomania, is enough by itself to explain an individual's engagement in a wide range of activities, not necessarily sociopathic or violent. We put forward the hypothesis that formal and transpolitical radical choices, either in favor of an illegal lifestyle or of activities involving a high level of risk, may be linked with certain mental states, especially when considering small clandestine groups showing a high level of internal ideological consensus, and a no-return attitude toward a commitment to radical choices. Available data about the psycho(patho) logical profile of terrorists are still hard to come by. The only available studies are those on identified living terrorists (judging by the trials of those who personally admitted to having been terrorists), and statistical data imply a number of documented cases belonging to the same terrorist organization. In Italy, the period often called the "years of lead [bullets]" displays an interesting viewpoint for the study of terrorist psychology, for two main reasons: first of all, it is a historically defined period (1968–1988), and second, the number of ascertained participants in terrorist activities was quite large.

Introduction

The scientific validity of assessments of violent behavior by means of psychiatric categories has always faced two limitations. On one hand, the controversy about giving political beliefs or activity, or violent behavior in general, a label of mental disturbance was seen as an abuse of psychiatric knowledge. Categorizing politics can lead to justifications of the denigration of certain political ideas as being simply delusional or dangerous, which goes beyond simply being in agreement with the prosecution of perpetrators of violent political acts against the existing regime. The second limitation was that psychiatric evaluations of violent political crime was mostly performed, case by case, in a forensic environment, which made them unduly dependent on categories of presumed dangerousness and legal responsibility, rather than on a clinical definition of their mental status and history. The forensic classification, in other words, hardly went beyond the distinction between psychotic and nonpsychotic offenders.[1] Psychological theories, mostly based on only a few cases, have gradually increased in number but never led to further, directly related research.[2,3]

Our research group has been investigating the role of bipolar-related states in a variety of events and clinical contexts, such as HIV infection, alcohol abuse by depressed and anxious patients, binge eating, substance abuse, and various kinds of addiction. These studies converged in showing that minor, less-than-manic mood states, including temperamental dispositions (cyclothymic and hyperthymic) are related to a wide range of physiological risk behaviors. For such risks to originate in mood orientation, one does not need to think of a major agitated psychotic mania or mixed state: either a dominant temperament or a protracted hypomania is enough to justify an outcome of engagement in a wide range of activities, whether legal or not, possibly, but not necessarily sociopathic or violent.[4–8] For instance,

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addiction to alcohol and/or heroin is related to tempera-mental cyclothymia, rather than axis I dual diagnosis. The move toward sociopathy itself, at least in some cases, may be the result of physiological risk disposition, in a way that does not require the labeling of the resulting behavior (e.g., political violence) as pathological, but makes it interpretable on psychological/clinical grounds.

This paper's aim was to illustrate a series of reports and comments and some data concerning the psychological common ground of political terrorism. To be precise, what we mean by "political terrorism" is an organized and intentional activity that has political aims and is practiced by single individuals or, more often, groups of people who are opposed to a dominant majority, within a certain territory. The choice of terrorism can thus be viewed as a kind of subtle, low-intensity, and scattered war that is focused on politics, rather than a classic struggle for territorial control fought out between armies. It sometimes appears as a civil war, or, more often, implies the clandestine activity of a minority, partly because of the impossibility of sustaining a direct military struggle.

On psychiatric grounds, the focus of our interest is not the political content that is prompted by terrorist movements, nor are we understating the fact that violent political confrontation is itself a sign of psychiatric orientation. Instead, we are ready to put forward the idea that formal and transpolitical radical choices, either of an illegal lifestyle or of activities involving major risks, can be linked with certain mental states, especially for small groups living in secrecy showing a high level of internal ideological cohesion and a no-return attitude toward commitment to radical choices.

Terrorists usually act in small units, though "lone wolves" exist as well, who may have clear-cut ideological positions, but they remain isolated on the operational plane. Available data about the psycho(patho)logical profile of terrorists are sparse: the few studies that are readily available are those on identified living terrorists (judging by evidence given in the trials of those who personally admitted to having been terrorists), and the statistical data imply a number of documented cases belonging to the same terrorist organization, or at least in the same political area.

Armed political fighting against the system can be distinguished as belonging to one of at least two subtypes, according to Post.[9] On one hand, there are groups fighting for the preservation of their original culture and social environment, in opposition to an enemy that is perceived as "alien," that is, as a hostile force usurping territory, resources, and rights (possibly in a revolutionary mode) or invading from the outside. In addition, there are groups fighting for revolution, aiming at the subversion of what has been considered as normal, or acceptable. This latter kind of terrorism is directed against an inner enemy, which is antagonized but also has shared root features (familial, cultural, ethnic).

As argued by Post, there seems to be a deep difference between those who aim to subvert their own society, the "world of their fathers," and those who, in their view, fight to defend their tradition or retaliate against an attack against the "world of their fathers." The first profile appears to imply a deeper conflict, and a higher level of deviance, among those committed to antitraditional revolutions. Such a statement, as anticipated, does not point to any correspondence between specific contents or a generic judgment of "abnormality" in assessing radicalism, but it suggests that some mental conditions bear a higher likelihood of embracing and engaging in aggressive and outlawed forms of politics, usually on the basis of a radical disagreement with the status quo.

On logical grounds, when terrorists join together as a group, it is quite unlikely that they are in a psychotic state—at least, not all of them at once. It is also unlikely that they feel depressed, or that they are suffering from a severe anxiety disorder, which usually holds people back from making choices, running risks, or engaging in new experiences. Cases of psychotic terrorism take place as isolated attacks, or as very short-lasting participation in group activities. Other categories of mental states show a better fit with a possible long-lasting terrorist activity within the same group, or between similarly oriented groups, which implies a higher level of stability, enduring determi-nation, planning attack campaigns consisting of different actions, and persistent egosynthonia, that is, the situation of someone being convinced that they are fighting to fulfill a right and crucial vow. Mood states of a less-than-manic grade, for instance, would allow an adept to stay within the boundaries of social interaction, military effectiveness, and cautiousness due to a clandestine status, and maintaining a grip on reality, despite an altered set of expectations. The Italian period known familiarly as the "years of lead" displays an interesting viewpoint for the study of terrorist psychology for two main reasons: first, it was a historically defined period (1968–1988); second, the number of ascertained participants in terrorist activities was quite large, especially for the group called the Red Brigades (RBs), the largest European terrorist group known to history. Moreover, a sufficient number of documentaries, interviews, and biographical or true-crime publications are available to allow the possible psychological trajectories of Italian neofascist (right)- and communist (left)-wing extremist groups to be accurately profiled.

Sociology, Existentialism and Terrorism

The social groundwork that laid the foundations for terrorist choices was identified by Alessandro Orsini[10] as belonging to a socioeconomic process named by him as "progressive deprivation." When this happens, each individual relates him- or herself on one hand to an individual value potential (i.e., what he/she is worth

materially in society), and, on the other, to his or her ambitions. Different conditions can develop that place this mechanism of balance under stress. When someone gets poorer, while their ambitions remain the same, we will refer to it as material lessening. When future prospects become uncertain or remain out of sight, people suffer from "ambition deprivation." A further possibility is that someone becomes poorer but is also frustrated about reaching out to achieve any desirable goal, which means perceiving oneself as having become socially marginalized, if not completely excluded. This condition affects a society most deeply when that society undergoes periods of general failure or recession after nurturing the illusion of easy enrichment. On this basis, it becomes more likely that some individuals will react by working out a revolutionary project.

Enrico Fenzi, a former RB militant and university teacher of literature, claims that there was a close relationship between Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism and the terrorist feelings that were widespread in the 1970s, which he refers to as the "theory of the terrorist group":[11]

> Sartre attempts to integrate Marxism (the "class struggle" theory) with his existentialism. He develops a suggestive view, and happens to describe what was actually the psychological experience of those who chose terrorism. You can find an ensemble of objective facts (structural, political . . . put simply, the class struggle), which are enhanced and lead to a critical state, and later to a breaking-point translation into action, because they are coupled to a psychological tension towards personal engagement. Sartre theorizes the psychology of the revolutionary group . . . put more precisely, the subversive group . . . the pure terrorists. On one hand, you have society as it currently exists, with its unacceptable structure (including class divisions), so that everything becomes acceptable to an upside–down view: rebels no longer have any taboos, and, according to the terrorist view, crime in the older form of society is not only acceptable, but, taking into account the premises, looms as the highest conceivable moral position [. . .] . . . So, it overlaps with what terrorist groups did theorize, in a less elaborate way: friendship is only possible within the group; love is only possible within the group. Being truly human was only possible as long as feelings and relationships were built within the revolutionary project. You could only truly be in love with a comrade; only between those in our group can feelings can be authentic, unlike what happens in the corrupt world outside [. . .]. This search for affective and existential sincerity is only permitted by making a radical choice and maintaining it, whatever the costs may be. Since the most radical of all choices is that of

giving a death sentence—death—once this moral obstacle has been overcome, all other choices are automatically cleansed of any element of impurity. [our translation from the Italian]

Beyond this commitment to a fight against society, optimism is another important element. Optimism is not usually attributed to expectation of imminent victory, but rather to an imminent turning point, which will be the beginning of the end for the old world order:

> Without imagining the faith in a reality that would be ready to move after our attempts, this volcano which was about to spit out its lava, certain choices just cannot be understood. At the time, we had that kind of faith within us. You know, when one thinks about history as an entity which can be influenced and headed where one wants, and you feel you know where it is heading and how you can steer it to the pursued goal . . . it's like a godless religion. We were basically possessed by irrational optimism, because we felt that history was there for us to write it . . . not only that; indeed, we felt we were able to direct it exactly where we would like it to go. [our translation from the Italian]

Another former RB member, Massimo Ghidoni, who once worked as a psychiatrist, compared the full commitment of the terrorist to that of a nun living in seclusion. As he points out, both figures have a view, which works as a flawless belief, but they also feel they are sacrificing their own individual life in favor of the interest of others, aiming at a superior ideal of humanity and society. They both try to act upon reality by the rule of their ideals, instead of remaining isolated in their world of principles. A feeling of compelling love toward humanity is reported by others, too, such as former RB member Valerio Morucci, who played the role of sergeant-at-arms in his unit:

> There was a drive coming from inside . . . a sort of commotion, so strong it could make you break into tears . . . it was not ideology any more at that point . . . It was deeper, and came from an ancient affective core within ourselves.[12]

And again, Roberto Rosso (a former member of the Prima Linea [Front Line] group): "Love—it would become the only and essentially desperate feeling towards the world."[13]

Revolutionary Gnosis

The cognitive array of terrorist groups is structured to convey three basic ideas, which go to make up the revolutionary *gnosis* (i.e., revelation). The first is that a better world is possible but is prevented from coming about by "the system." Mara Cagol, cofounder of the RB, wrote in those terms in a letter to her mother dated in the

year 1969: "All the world could live with abundance of goods, but the system does not let that happen." Antagonists to a better world are thought to share the same point of view as those who aim to achieve it. Those antagonists are referred to as incarnating the "counterrevolution," meaning a system of power that is aware of its role, just as it is also aware of the thoughts and aims of revolutionary movements. The second idea is directly dependent on the general "feeling of reality": the terrorist is convinced that victory is potentially imminent, after a final clash. The old world is decadent and about to fall, so revolutionaries should take advantage of this critical stage before the system manages to restore itself in a different form. The third idea, which aims to link up the level of thoughts with that of actions, daringly tries to define the difference between an accomplished revolution and a missed chance in the crucial need to choose the right historical moment. When these ideas get aligned with a manic state, anyone who is fond of revolution, at any time, would be convinced that they possess a clear-cut vision of crucial targets, the right timeframes, and upcoming opportunities. The mood-related urgency to translate theory into practice leads one to set the revolution in motion after the delusion of having run into it by chance. No matter if the underlying spirit is constructive or destructive—this cognitive array takes shape so sharply and rigidly because of its mood-dependent nature. Only a mood-centered vision can combine a sense of the imminence of victory with a sense of positive self-perception, and the expectation that the enemy will turn out to be a fake giant just waiting to be knocked down.

Former RB member Enrico Fenzi gives a fine description of this psychological configuration in his attempt to explain what drove him to leave his family and his job working as a university professor to join the RBs as a clandestine operator:

> Basically . . . the belief was that we were witnessing the downfall of an old world order . . . that a process of deconstruction was going on . . . of society and its values . . . and that we should join in to take part in a turning point, a radical change. We wanted to "be there" while the old society was dying. Joining the Red Brigades implied, at the time, that I would leave my family, my children . . . Why did I do that? . . . because that reality seemed trivial and lessening, if compared with the other perspective, the Armageddon which seemed about to come and subvert everything.

Hypomanic States

It is common to find bipolar traits in the biographies of revolutionary leaders, generals, or people who are either highly constructive or destructive toward the surrounding environment, or simply highly creative.[14] Such a link should at first be conceived as independent of psychiatric categories, and, beyond that, as actively concerned with the physiology of mood states, temperaments, and affective syndromes: it should be understood as an underlying psychobiological model that cannot account for different existential meanings and historical contexts, let alone political views. In other words, bipolar traits can be recognized by their linkage with diametrically opposite political views. As far as deviance is concerned, the concept of pathological deviance is rather intrinsic and implies the impairment of the self as related to one's purposes, whereas no view or idea, no matter how deviant it may be, is intrinsically pathological on psychiatric grounds. Even so, deviant thoughts tend to correspond to a mixed-mania wavelength, which features the urgency to go for some action, or the incapacity to step back instead of striking back, the breadth of goals, and an all-inclusiveness of views.

An individual's existential dimension runs parallel with the historical context, so that the discovery of one's true nature and fate makes one perceive that the whole historical period is experiencing the same change, no matter if some people are still unaware of it, or are even resisting it. This is called the revolutionary *gnosis*, and the *feeling of reality* is the inner mood-dependent state allowing it to reconfigure as a cognitive layout (the *judgment of reality*).

The biographical moment of those who take their chance through political terrorism seems to overlap with a manic-like phase, possibly following a depressive one, so that the new choice may be perceived as "turning a new leaf," a last chance to win one's life back, or the attainment of a level of acute awareness of one's destiny and vocation.

Renato Curcio, a cofounder of the RBs, bridges the social and the existential meanings of revolution (not necessarily of a communist kind) when stating, in an article written in the communist journal *Nuova Resistenza* in 1971, that "the scum of society is the avant-garde of revolution."[10] In addition, this statement recalls the biphasic dynamic of the bipolar cycle (depression-to-mania). In the case of Curcio himself, his biography displays a similar sequence: he was born to an 18-year-old girl, outside marriage, and was fostered by another family during his school years. He would not easily adapt to the rules of a boarding school (he escaped twice, failed twice, and was labeled confrontational and an introvert). At the age of 16, he started his career as a blue-collar worker in Milan, then moved to Genoa by hitchhiking to live there, as a homeless outcast. He eventually found a place to live and a job at the docks, but developed a drinking habit. He describes it as "a hellish period, during which I moved to the brink of a complete mental downfall." This period came to an end when he suddenly made up his mind to leave Genoa and settle down in Trento (feeling "light as a feather"), where he signed up

for a university degree course, while moving from one home to another. In the end, he moved back to Milan, where he became committed to political activism, living with other comrades in a community within the urban area. Together with a few others, he decided to live incognito and start a campaign of low-grade terrorist acts. As a sort of rite of passage, he married (in church) his girlfriend and cofounder of the RBs, Mara Cagol, after which they tore up their documents and spent an rather unusual honeymoon planning their future activities.

Homicide and Suicide

By 2008, the cumulative prevalence of suicide in identified terrorists was 13.2% of all causes of death (by comparison, 52.9% died during firefights, using firearms against police forces). It is likely than some unidentified subjects should be included as having committed suicide, as the former left-wing (Lotta Continua) militant Andrea Marcenaro suggested,[15] in speaking about episodes he knew or had learned about. In his explanation, those people fell into a depressive state after taking part in homicides or violent attacks and were haunted by a sense of guilt for having been co-responsible for that pain. Other episodes, though they cannot directly be considered as acts of suicide, can be regarded as parasuicidal. To exemplify, we may quote a report by Enrico Fenzi (the former RB member) about an episode he witnessed during his period in jail: "There have been cases of people who accepted the fact of being killed, just commenting 'all right, I understand you have to kill me, I am to blame, please be quick about it,'" in the kind of context known as a "proletarian trial" (with militants questioning, judging, and sentencing their members or former members who had been accused of betrayal, or of making mistakes, in the same way that would have been used with any "enemy of the people"). To be noticed, the executioners and their victim(s) felt they had to share the same ideological frenzy, somehow sympathizing with each other, going beyond the usual psychology of a death sentence inflicted and suffered, respectively. The victims would approve of their punishments, as if those punishments were due to the only conceivable law—that of revolution. They somehow felt honored to be finished off by their own comrades, which was the only thing they could do in order to "save their soul" and stay consistent with the ideology they had vowed loyalty to. These psychological conditions resemble a (lethal) combination of elated mood states, or a manic and mixed quality, for the executioner(s) and their victim(s), respectively:

> Shortly after his [referring here to an RB member called Giorgio Soldati] arrest . . . by the way, I heard they had been roughly beaten up, and so they ended up confessing something, and probably disclosed

some names of comrades, charged someone with responsibilities . . . He was eventually brought to Cuneo, located in an isolation cell, waiting to be transferred to the regular section with all the others. From his isolation cell, Soldati wrote a letter to his comrades there, and he had it handed over to them, so that when he eventually joined them they would be prepared . . . He tried to make excuses, explaining he could not resist the treatment he was given after being arrested . . . and so on. And he admitted to naming someone . . . He said, "I am sorry, and I am only asking to be judged by my comrades, because they are the only ones I myself give the right to judge me." I am pretty sure that the chiefs read that letter, there's no doubt they did . . . It was certainly brought to our cells. Soon after that, Soldati joined us in the regular section . . . It was there that . . . they called all of us comrades to a meeting . . . and he was judged and sentenced to death . . . and killed on the spot.

Another RB member, Francesco Berardi, was arrested in Genoa for handing out leaflets of his organization (terrorist propaganda) in the factory where he was a blue-collar worker. He gave testimony about another comrade, Fenzi himself. The two happened to face each other in jail, where Berardi initially looked quite serene, and Fenzi tried to reassure him about the irrelevant weight of his testimony against Berardi (because they added little if any hint of making further accusations), each looking sympathetic toward the other. Nevertheless, Berardi grew more and more upset, and then tried to commit suicide by cutting his wrists. He was rescued, but never recovered, and he refused to ever leave his cell again. He was eventually found dead after hanging himself there.

Suicide, like homicide, is lived through as a form of consistency and loyalty, beyond usual human attitudes about it. Among those who killed their former comrades as betrayers, one can also find examples of this shared mood-related dimension. Roberto Rosso, the former ideological leader of Prima Linea, recalls the reasons that led to the execution of a certain Vaccher, suspected of being a traitor. During the interview reported in the volume *La notte della Repubblica*,[13] he broke into tears and stopped for a while, muttering, "It is awkward to explain . . ." When he recovered and felt ready to continue the interview, the journalist commented, "It must have been even more 'awkward' to do it at the time" [so conveying the sense: that it is "awkward" to explain that now], meaning "How much determination it must have taken to kill a friend just because you felt a suspicion!" What difference stands between then and now? It could be a mood-related one, accounting for the positive value given to deadly actions, which, reconsidered years later, might have become a source of remorse.

The decision to inflict death was not painless itself, even at the time, but was subdued to an extreme conception of human relationships, according to which the best relief for pain could be achieved by killing the traitor, in order to preserve the spirit of radical revolution.

Lastly, we would like to recall the case of Roberto Peci, whose brother Patrizio was a leading member of the RBs, but he himself had hardly ever been involved with terrorism, only taking part in minor unarmed actions for a short while. After Patrizio's arrest and confession, the RBs, as a blatant act of revenge, kidnapped Roberto. Nevertheless, Roberto's kidnapping and eventual killing after a death sentence was presented as an act of proletarian justice and explained by the thesis that the two brothers were nothing but infiltrated traitors, who agreed with the police, after fake arrests, to gather information about the RBs and hand them over to official investigators. Roberto's "proletarian trial" was filmed, and he was probably forced to read out a false confession (that he did not feel in any way) that would support the "treason" thesis, so the media would broadcast it as the official truth. He was probably hoping he would be released after consenting to that pantomime, including having him filmed during the reading out of the death sentence—but he was actually killed instead. What counted was that a false confession of treason and commitment to the police was made up, and the life of someone who basically lived outside the world of terrorism was sacrificed in the name of an imminent revolutionary outburst, which would never come, anyway. In the mind of the militants, that killing would act as a spark to light the people's rage against the police and the government, in an optimistically twisted vision of reality, all based on the idea that pushing the right button (in this case, through the media) would be enough to decisively overcome all opposition, in a cascade of revolutionary chaos. Such an idea, the outcome of a mania-like state of mind, now sounds like no more than an optimistic delusion.[16]

"Reds" (Communists) and "Blacks" (Neofascists) Political Terrorists in Italy

Does the general psychological stereotype change according to individual political beliefs? During the period studied by us, it seems possible to indicate a certain difference. Mario Tuti, a fascist militant, once described his extremist drive thus:

> I also regretted having been born too late, and having been unable to take part in World War II, especially in the conclusive phase of defeat, with all the tests of courage and loyalty when others had to prove their worth. At the time . . . I tried to receive some kind of investiture by talking to an old soldier

of the Fascist Social Republic, who had not changed his views, and to whom I confessed that a bunch of us were determined to take up arms. I expected moral approval, but he tried to make me think about it again, saying . . . "How do you think you might end up?" I answered that I expected our destiny to be even worse than the destiny they had suffered. He then reminded me that they had experienced only defeat, death, imprisonment, treachery . . . I still remember my words . . . "That's exactly right!"

Curiously, this sounds similar to what the cofounder of the RBs (Alberto Franceschini) reported about his brainstorming encounter with the former communist partisan Giovanbattista Lazagna, who was in arms at the end of World War II, fighting against Nazi and fascist troops in Italy. While expecting some advice from him, or at least some kind of encouragement, he got the following comment, more or less:

> We were fighting with the expectation of a short-term engagement, because the war was reaching its end, and were counting on rather favorable conditions [the allied forces had invaded the country and outnumbered the enemy, who were progressively losing ground]. You, on the other hand, are fancying a struggle that will last for years and years, with no objective point of strength to rely on. It's madness!"[13]

In both cases, the older comrades discouraged the terrorists-to-be from getting involved in any military conflict. In the first case, however, a pessimistic perspective was a source of fascination for the fascists. In the second, the communists felt unreasonably optimistic about leading a sustainable guerrilla war, and gaining results that were good enough and a degree of consent strong enough to pave the way to a final victory. On the whole, the common ground of political extremism seems to be the mixed-mania stereotype, although starting points may differ: in different historical moments, both major right- and left-wing organizations thought they could take over. Nevertheless, the feeling of the average right-wing extremist was distinguished by a feeling of loneliness, and a lack of mass consent—features that were in contrast with a high level of cultural alignment with the existing world (according to Post, that implied a low level of psychic tension). On the other hand, the Italian left-wing terrorists were aiming to destroy traditional society (according to Post, that implied a high level of psychic tension) but thought they were a living answer to the people's call for freedom. Despite these premises, frustration rose when the course of terrorism found no response in the form of mass approval, let alone insurgence, and the revolutionary

spirit was doomed to become more elitist, to shift toward a stronger revolutionary *gnosis*.

Closing Remarks

In Italy, political terrorism has taken root in the existentialist movement and sociology. Following the "theory of the terrorist group," each terrorist related him- or herself on one hand to an individually assessed potential (i.e., what he/she was worth materially as a member of society) and, on the other, to his or her ambitions. Terrorists considered society as it was at the time, with its unacceptable structure (including class divisions), so that everything became acceptable once an upside–down view was introduced as the new criterion: rebels no longer had any taboos, and, according to the terrorist view, crime in the older form of society was not only acceptable, but, taking into account the premises, loomed as the highest imaginable moral position. The revolutionary *gnosis* was structured to convey three basic ideas: first, that a better world was possible; second, that victory was potentially imminent, after a final clash; and third, that thoughts should lead directly to actions. The biographical stage of those who take their chance through political terrorism seemed to overlap with a manic-like phase, possibly following a depressive one, so that the new choice could be perceived as "turning over a new leaf"—a last chance to win one's life back, or the attainment of a level of acute awareness of one's destiny and vocation. In the personal history of many terrorists, murder and suicide were closely linked. Many terrorists willingly accepted the prospect of being killed by their own comrades, as traitors, even if they were had never betrayed anyone. When questioned by the police, they felt guilty, even about having revealed information that was not important and about not having behaved more bravely. If a terrorist is captured, and wants to be killed by his/her own comrades while still in prison, that can certainly be considered a wish to commit suicide. One last consideration is that the general psychological stereotype changed according to individual "red" or "black" beliefs. Remembering the fascist and communist acts during World War II, in both cases, the older party leaders discouraged terrorists-to-be from getting involved in any military conflict. In the first case, however, a pessimistic perspective was a source of fascination for the fascists. In the second, the communists felt unreasonably optimistic about leading a sustainable guerrilla war and gaining a degree of consent strong enough to pave the way to a final victory. On the whole, the common ground of political extremism seems to correspond to the mixed-mania stereotype, although the starting points may differ. In conclusion, beyond a forensic psychiatric evaluation, which goes too far in assessing terrorist acts solely according to categories of presumed dangerousness and legal responsibility, rather than attempting a clinical definition of terrorists' mental status and history, a relationship between terrorism and affective polarization does exist.

Disclosures

Matteo Pacini does not have anything to disclose. Icro Maremmani reports personal fees from Indivior, personal fees from Molteni, personal fees from Gilead, personal fees from Mundipharma, and personal fees from MSD, outside the submitted work.

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