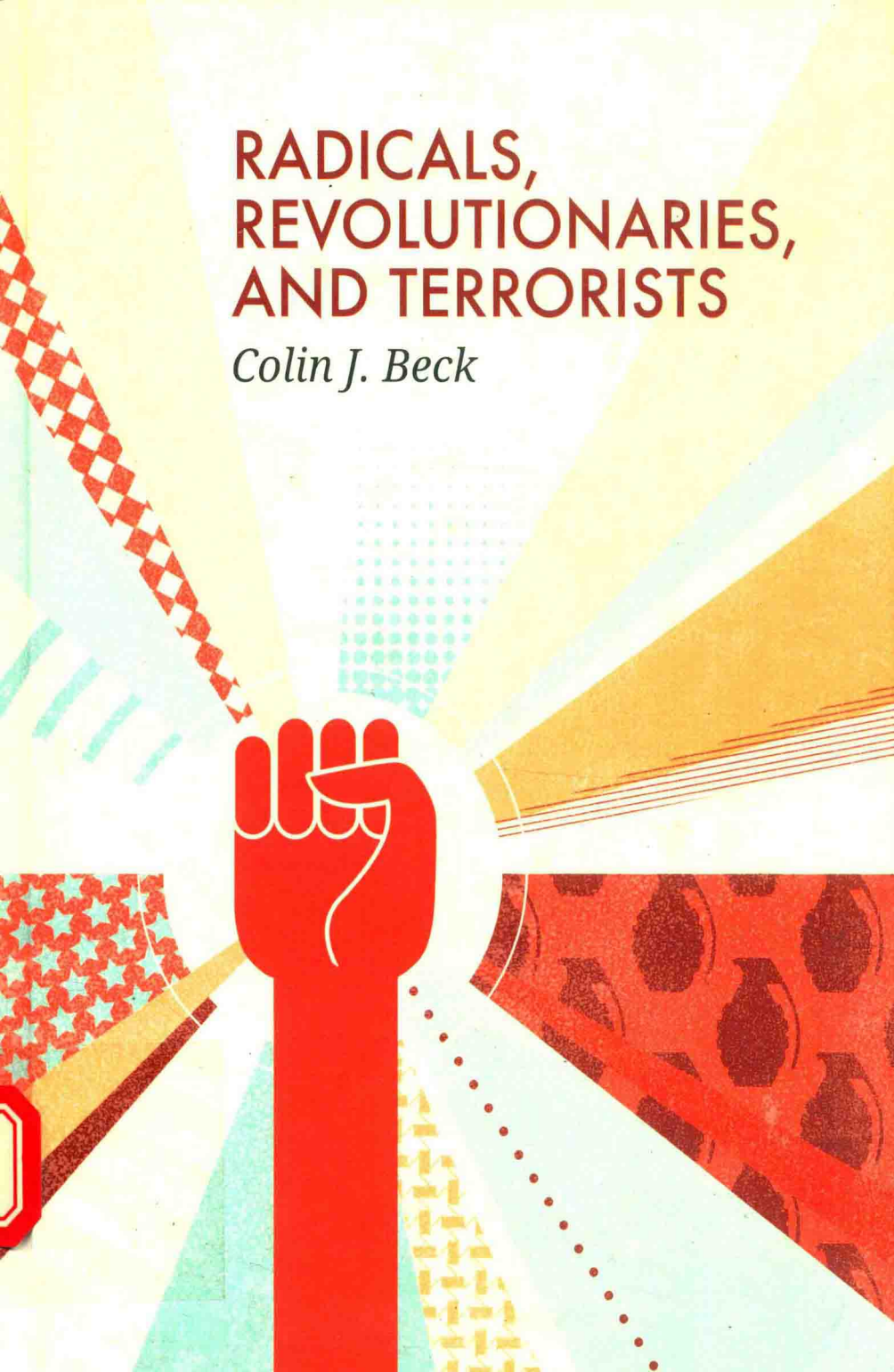
RADICALS, REVOLUTIONARIES, AND TERRORISTS

Colin J. Beck



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Acknowledgments

When Emma Longstaff of Polity first approached me about writing a book on radical social movements, I thought that a work focused on movement theory alone would be both boring to read and boring to write. So I suggested that I might model the manuscript after a course I had developed at Pomona College, Sociology 121: Radicals, Revolutionaries, and Terrorists. When Polity agreed to the scheme, I was delighted – here, the curriculum I dreamed up while getting a cup of coffee a few years previously would now also be a book. I am appreciative of all the good people at Polity, including Emma Longstaff, Elen Griffiths, and Jonathan Skerrett, for their help in bringing this to fruition and their patience with my delays during a particularly difficult time.

This book is dedicated to the students of my course on which it is modeled. They were the first audience for these ideas and shaped their presentation in many ways, both large and small. Robert Chew may recognize his influence on my definition of radicalism. In addition, the students of my social movements class in the spring of 2014 helped reinvigorate my interest in collective action and gave me the energy to finish the manuscript. And I am thankful for several talented research assistants over the years: Emily Miner, Eli Kaplan, Kuniko Madden, and Megan Pritchett.

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May 30, 2014
Claremont, California

Contents

Part I

The Known Knowns

1

What is Radicalism?

In the course of a couple of decades, the world was riven with conflict that occurred not between states but between states and organized movements, where individual citizens became both participants in and targets of contention. A loosely organized international movement placed bombs in crowded, public places, staged assassinations and made the overthrow of the global order their goal. At the same time, organized oppositions overthrew autocratic rulers and instituted new, democratic governments in their societies, and radical mass movements struggled against economic inequality and corporate systems of production.

The reader contemporary to the publication of this book might suppose that I am describing the wave of international Islamic terrorism of the last two decades, the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011, and global justice groups like the Black Bloc or animal rights activists. But in fact, I am describing the turn of the twentieth century, when anarchists used terrorism to create "propaganda of the deed," republican movements in Turkey, Persia, Russia, Portugal, and elsewhere sought constitutional monarchies, and labor activists formed new international unions that were sometimes suppressed violently by governments. As this book demonstrates, radicalism, revolution, and terrorism are a recurrent feature of world history.

The basic premise for this book is the interchangeability of mass movements. This idea, drawn from Eric Hoffer's (1951) philosophical reflections on Nazism and Stalinism in *The True Believer*,

is that all movements share many features. Rather than consider the goals of social movement radicalism, the occurrence of revolution, and the use of terrorism and political violence separately, I consider them here conjointly. Each is a form of collective action, which can be defined as coordinated action by two or more people to change the conditions for a group. Imagine a Venn diagram with three circles. While each circle – radicalism, revolution, and terrorism – has some aspects that are uniquely its own, there is a space where the three overlap. Thus, to understand radicalism or revolutions or political violence, we must understand all three.

This is not an entirely new view. Besides Hoffer, scholars of social movements and revolution have long spoken to each other and found many commonalities. However, the study of social movements, which we can define as "collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities" (Tarrow 1998: 4), tends to focus on a particular western and democratic form of politics in the model of well-known 1960s cases like the civil rights movement, women's movement, and anti-Vietnam War protest.[1] Revolution scholars, in contrast, have tended to focus on the environments in which governments fail to quash their challengers, particularly in famous cases like France in 1789, Russia in 1917, Cuba in 1959, and Nicaragua in 1979. And the study of terrorism tends to operate in isolation from theories of movements and revolution, focusing on contemporary examples like nationalist-separatist groups of the twentieth century or recent terrorism by Islamist extremists. The reason for these tendencies has much to do with how each field has developed over time. Before I more precisely define radicalism, revolution, and terrorism, it is helpful to briefly introduce the history of scholarly work on the subjects.

The study of movements, revolution, and terrorism

Revolution has been a central concern of social scientists ever since the discipline's origins in the nineteenth century. Famously, Karl Marx (1848) placed revolution as the ultimate endpoint

of his theories of economy and society, and other early social scientists and historians also wrote on the subject. Notably, Alexis de Tocqueville published what can be considered the first social scientific study of revolution in 1856, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, in which he used comparative-historical analysis to examine the fall of the French monarchy in 1789 (Tocqueville 1856). This legacy was drawn upon by early twentieth-century social scientists of revolution. "Natural historians" of revolution, such as Crane Brinton (1938) and George Pettee (1938), primarily thought of revolution as a process that had distinct stages in which different groups, like elites, intellectuals, or the military, played crucial roles (see Goldstone 1982).

In contrast, in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, movements and terrorism received much less attention. The form of political action that we now recognize as a social movement had its origins in the mid-eighteenth century in Europe but had yet to be thought of as a rational form of political participation. Thus, collective action was thought to be the product of crowd behavior and mob psychology rather than a distinct feature of social life (see Le Bon 1896). And terrorism generally meant the repressive actions of states, like the Great Terror that occurred during the French Revolution, rather than the actions of groups and movements. This remained the case until the mid-twentieth century, when the "collective behavior" tradition of the study of social movements emerged. Drawing on their scholarly predecessors, collective behavior theorists still saw collective action and social movements as inherently irrational and risky rather than as a calculated political strategy. So scholars looked for the psychological strains that would lead to spontaneous contention and thought that participants must be isolated from larger society (Kornhauser 1959; Smelser 1962). Revolution studies at this time also drew on strain theory, arguing that contention occurred when social systems were disrupted by rapid change and came from groups that were relatively deprived of economic resources (Davies 1962; Gurr 1970; Johnson 1966). In short, protest and revolution were thought to emanate from the grievances of marginalized social groups.

This view of contention was challenged by the social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. It quickly became clear that participants in the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement were not just isolated or psychologically strained individuals. Further, grievances no longer seemed to be a sufficient cause of contention and revolution – many activists and revolutionaries came from relatively privileged and educated social classes. Since everyone has some sort of complaint most of the time, grievance theory was unable to explain where and when movements would emerge (see McAdam 1982: ch. 2). Scholars thus emphasized the structural conditions in which movements and revolutions occur. "Structure" refers to larger social patterns and factors that persist over time and are outside of the thoughts and actions of individuals. For example, religion, forms of government, and economic systems are types of social structures. The first structural theory was resource mobilization, where the key idea was that some groups had access to the money, skills, and other resources that enable them to mobilize a group of participants in an organized fashion (see McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tilly 1978). Resource mobilization theorists thus focused on professional organizations that form the core leadership of movements. While resource mobilization did a good job of explaining the capability of movements, it was less able to identify the times in which protest or revolution would break out. So a second key idea was introduced – political opportunities. Political opportunities are moments in time when a social and political system relatively opens up to a movement's demands. For example, the civil rights movement was able to find success when it did because the Cold War made the American government want to lessen racial inequality as its enemy, the Soviet Union, claimed communist societies were more equal (McAdam 1982). Structural theories of revolution, in particular, also became popular in the 1970s. Most famously, Theda Skocpol (1979) introduced the state breakdown theory of revolution. Skocpol argues that revolutions occur not as the product of a revolutionary movement but because a government becomes relatively weak and begins to fall apart under competing demands. State-centered theory of revolution was very influential and remains so today.

In the 1980s and 1990s, social science in general began to undergo the "cultural turn," where scholars moved away from solely structural theories to examine how culture, ideas, and individuals affect social processes. In the study of movements and revolution, these ideas penetrated deeply. David Snow and his colleagues (1986) introduced the idea of framing, which is how movements use rhetoric strategically to recruit participants and make successful claims by linking their goals to larger ideas about justice and politics. European scholars also emphasized what they called "new social movements" based on identity and solidarity rather than social and economic classes (Kriesi et al. 1992; Melucci 1980). In revolution studies, social scientists began to reconsider the role of leaders, ideology, and identity (Moghadam 1995; Parsa 2000; Selbin 1993), and how histories of resistance against government could be a resource for contention (Reed and Foran 2002). In contrast to objective structural conditions, scholars in both fields began to emphasize subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals and how these affect the mobilization process (Foran 2005; Kurzman 1996; Sewell 1996). Most recently, "relational" views of mobilization have become popular (see McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Here scholars emphasize that movements exist in relationship to other actors, like governments and counter-movements, and explanation rejects general theories that apply to all instances in favor of specific mechanisms that combine and operate differently in different social contexts.

The astute reader will have noticed that this brief history has left the study of terrorism mostly aside and said nothing at all about radicalism. This is because the study of terrorism developed on its own parallel track to the study of movements and revolution. Like social movement theory, terrorism studies also emerged as a reaction to the experience of the mid-twentieth century. The earliest social scientific studies explored campaigns of terrorism by national liberation groups, inspired by anti-colonial revolutions and groups like the Irish Republican Army, Basque Liberation Front, and Palestine Liberation Organization (e.g., Bell 1971; Crenshaw 1978). In the 1970s, highly visible instances