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from freedom fighters to terrorists: women and political violence

Paige Whaley Eager, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2008, 248pp.,
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From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists is one of a number of recently published studies on women's participation in political violence and terrorism. Rather than presenting the findings of new field research, the book provides a collation and survey of widely dispersed existing literature, analysed through a welcome comparative perspective.

The prime merit of the volume is the insightful, methodical and accessible introduction, which sets out some of the main concerns for academic consideration of women's involvement in political violence. A brief consideration of issues of terminology ('political violence' vs. 'terrorism') precedes an excellent outline of a range of theoretical frameworks that seek to explain the rationale for participation in political violence. We learn, for instance, that according to rational choice theory, an individual decides whether or not to participate in political violence on the basis of a cost/benefit analysis of the situation; structural/societal theory tells us that groups choose political violence as a strategic response; psychological theories assume that individuals primarily engage in political violence in response to distinct psychological mechanisms, such as trauma, sociological and pathological influences; while collective action theory views political violence as an extreme manifestation of wider social movements. This section is followed by a similar discussion of the diverse schools of feminism (liberal, difference, radical, Marxist and postmodern) and of the insights each provides with respect to women's participation in political militancy.

Each subsequent chapter deploys 'a combination of the Collective Action model, with insights from various strands of feminism' (pp. 21–22) and addresses a distinct form of political violence in a number of cultural contexts. The scope of the survey is vast, spanning left-wing political violence in Italy, Germany and the USA; right-wing violence in the USA, Great Britain, Spain and Germany; wars of national liberation in Kenya, Algeria and Vietnam; ethnonational violence originating in Sri Lanka, the Basque country and Ireland; and suicide bombers from Kurdistan, Palestine and Chechnya. Each case study involves an informative exploration of the macrolevel factors underlying the political conflict (the historical and structural environment); mesolevel factors relating to the ideological goals of the organization; microlevel factors specifically addressing the contextual involvement of

women; and, finally, 'state' responses to the violence. The scope is therefore broader than the title might suggest.

The analysis is ostensibly informed throughout by a desire to 'recognize the agency of these women, even though we may be appalled by the violence they support and perpetrate' (p. 216). There is occasional recourse to patriarchal phrasing (e.g., pp. 36, 193), but this is outweighed by judicious feminist critique providing particularly perceptive insights. Among these are a comparison of the treatment of male and female suicide bombers in the media and in academic studies (pp. 192–195); reference to the influence of the feminist movement on militant organizations in the USA (p. 44); acknowledgement of the centrality of women's issues in the Vietnamese context (p. 120); and of the questionable liberation of women in the context of suicide bombing among Palestinian (p. 177) and Tamil (pp. 140–141) women.

A serious criticism relates to the author's expertise over the entire range of political contexts studied. As an Italianist, I found the case study of women's participation in left-wing militancy in Italy quite problematic. Incorrect uses of terminology include a misleading conflation between the distinct legal categories of 'pentiti' and 'dissociati' (p. 37), and the plurals 'brigatisti' and 'pentiti' (pp. 35–37) being consistently deployed as if in the singular. Despite the intention to 'provide the reader with a snapshot of some of these women (via their own words)' (p. 213), no reference is made to any of the Italian language publications written by or in conjunction with the women of the Red Brigades; instead, rather dated English language sources are cited. Argumentative weaknesses include the untenable exemplification of Margherita Cagol as 'a woman who was prepared to kill others in the furtherance of her political motives' (p. 35); not only did Cagol never kill anyone, but her death pre-dates the Red Brigades' legitimization of murder as a political strategy. While my knowledge of the other political contexts examined is more limited, conspicuous factual errors include a reference to the British policy of 'internment' (p. 133) and the assertion that 'in the 26 counties of the south [of Ireland] Catholics constituted a minority of the population' (p. 154). Such inaccuracies reveal the limitations of a broad-sweep approach, and undermine the reader's confidence in the authority of the text.

A final criticism relates to the substandard editing of the volume. It is riddled with errors of grammar, spelling, syntax, sequence of tenses, placement of commas and clarity of referencing. Such errors tend to cluster in quick succession, resulting in an intermittently difficult and frustrating reading experience. Consequently, although there is much to recommend this book in terms of its comparative and feminist analysis, its inaccuracies demand that it be approached with a degree of caution.

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