

**Vincenzo Ruggiero, *Visions of Political Violence*, London: Routledge,  
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*Review by Marius Ioan TĂȚAR*

Political violence can take many forms, which are at times more subtle or even hidden and at times unsettlingly manifest. While political violence typically affects policy, the degree of political change brought about by violent political contention varies greatly. Some forms of political violence may target the transformation of the state or the political community itself, while other violent acts might more modestly aim to simply oppose or change specific policy outputs. The book *Visions of Political Violence* by Vincenzo Ruggiero aims to show how the analysis of violence can explain power formation and distribution within society and how such distribution can be altered (p. 1). The book starts from the assumption that political violence plays a central role in the theoretical debates on identity formation and the shaping of political authority.

From a theoretical perspective, the author argues that it is hard to think of a general theory that can explain various forms of violence. On the one hand, micro-situational theories assume that violence is a structural property of situational fields, and not a property of individuals or groups (p.2). However, as the authors pinpoints, this perspective encounters some difficulty when examining collective violence in the form of popular resistance. Ruggiero asserts that what leads to action is not merely the situational context but also the motivations to act derived from a culture, a repertoire of action, a vision of the world, a historical memory and, in general terms, an optimistic appreciation of human agency (p.2). On the other hand, macro-sociological and historical theories often view violence as an effective leveler. For instance, Ruggiero shows that the two world wars caused enormous destruction of accumulated wealth, but at the same time reduced inequality. The author highlights the idea that effective levelling often requires violent shocks that at least temporarily curtail and reverse the iniquities brought by economic development (p.3).

Ruggiero explains that the notion of violence addressed in this book is characterized by political objectives and communicative content. While political conflict is typically settled through negotiations and vote, it often takes violent forms and is performed by a variety of actors to defend or consolidate their social position or to improve it. This book embraces a wide range of violent state and non-state actors and it offers a typology of the different forms political violence takes, linking them in a continuum and in an interdependent field of forces. The forms identified are systemic violence, institutional violence, group violence, armed struggle, terrorism and war (p.4). As the author explains the word 'visions' in the title of this book alludes to the diversity of the perspectives adopted and the sources utilized derived from disciplines such as criminology, social theory, political science, critical legal studies, literary criticism and fiction (p.4).

The chapters of this book examine in detail various forms of violence. Chapter 2 looks at violence as the consequence of the rules governing the distribution of power and resources. This is dubbed by the author as systemic violence and it reproduces inequality, immobility, injustice and misery in the society. Ruggiero argues that this type of violence is implicit in the ordinary functioning of economic and political systems. Chapter 3 deals with institutional violence that targets groups of people who are regarded as dangerous or infective for a national, ethnic or religious community. Institutional violence can also be directed against internal enemies who contest unfair distribution of wealth. To both systemic and institutional violence people can react through collective action to express grievance, make claims and attempt to produce change. Chapter 4 focuses on crowds and group violence, namely those forms of social ensemble powered by resentment which may turn violent. Ruggiero shows that the members of a group share a condition and a purpose, and their fusion leads to action. As the author notes, processes of radicalization among group members are relevant here although their outcome is not always immediate violent action. Chapter 5 that deals with conspiracy and the contemplation of crime and suggests that radicalization does not necessarily lead to immediate violent action but can be expressed through feelings of revenge and homicidal ideation. Chapter 6 focuses on armed struggles and civil war illustrating the emotional aspects of joining these forms of political violence with cases spanning centuries, from ancient Greece and Rome to the African National Congress in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chapter 7 defines terrorism as deliberate killing of innocent people,

of non-combatants, then analyzes random killing and martyrdom, attempting to capture the causes and the logic of this extreme form of political violence. Chapters 8 and 9 deal with war and sexual violence highlighting specific forms of crime against women, as bellicose productions of masculinities. Chapter 10 examines the relationship between religion and violence concluding that even faithless individuals, groups and states can in reality adhere to their principles in a very religious fashion. Chapter 11 examines the connection between violence and social change, specifically questioning political ideologies positing that only a massive, regenerative avalanche of violence could put an end to the invisible and manifest violence characterizing unjust systems.

This book brings a welcome contribution to the study of political violence. It develops a typology of different forms of political violence, linking them in a continuum and in an interdependent field of forces. The different types of violence listed and discussed in this book affect each other and determine their respective evolutions, shapes and intensity. As the author optimistically concludes, a general reduction of all types of political violence could be produced first of all by limiting systemic violence, refocusing on the vulnerability of ordinary citizens and attempting to minimize their deprivation and precariousness (p. 199). This could be achieved through a fairer distribution of resources and the provision of political space for contention and negotiation.