



Class Struggle and Terrorism

How the Political Exclusion of the Poor Fostered Social-Revolutionary Terrorism in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

What is the link between the political exclusion of the poor and the emergence of anarchist and leftist terrorism in the 19th and early 20th centuries? In his contribution to the *Online Mitteilungen*, Daniel Meierrieks draws on historical data to show that the exclusion of the poor, the monopolization of political power by wealthy segments of the population, as well as class antagonism favored the emergence of a social-revolutionary terrorism, but not terrorism associated with other ideologies, such as extreme nationalism. There is a systematic link between the social forces that were dominant from the mid-19th century onward (e.g., urbanization, industrialization, and the emergence of the working class), social-revolutionary ideologies formulated in response to these developments (notably anarchism and Marxism), and political violence. Prior to this study, researchers had to rely mostly on anecdotal evidence to derive this link.

Modern terrorism emerged in the second half of the 19th century. Its emergence was facilitated by technological advances, including the development of dynamite and handguns, which could be operated by military laymen, as well as advancements in communication and transportation (e.g., the emergence of mass media, telegraphing, and extensive railroad networks), which multiplied the propagandistic reach of terrorist attacks. At the same time, the second half of the 19th century was marked by extensive social and economic upheaval, especially in the forms of rapid urbanization and industrialization, which contributed to the emergence of a new social stratum: the working class.

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Is there a link between the emergence of modern terrorism and the socio-economic and political upheaval of the second half of the 19th century, which mainly affected the working class? We will look into this in more detail below, while taking into account some of our own [research findings](#).

Terrorism refers to non-state actors using violence in the pursuit of political aims. From a theoretical point of view, how can we systematically link the emergence of social-revolutionary terrorism to the exclusion of the poor that predominantly belong to the working class? One answer to this question is rational choice theory. According to this approach, potential terrorists are rational actors who choose between violence (terrorism) and non-violence (e.g., participation in the ordinary political process) in such a way as to maximize the expected utility of their actions. The marginalization of the poor in the second half of the 19th century, resulting from the socio-economic and political conflicts of the period, made a rational use of violence rationally more likely. The exclusion of the poor was accompanied by a monopolization of political power; policymaking predominantly served the interests of the rich. As a result, the political process took insufficient account of the grievances of the poor and, at the same time, made it more difficult for the poor to organize politically. In the struggle to draw attention to the situation of the poor and to improve it by working towards a social revolution, violence as a means of political influence thus became more attractive compared to non-violence via political participation.

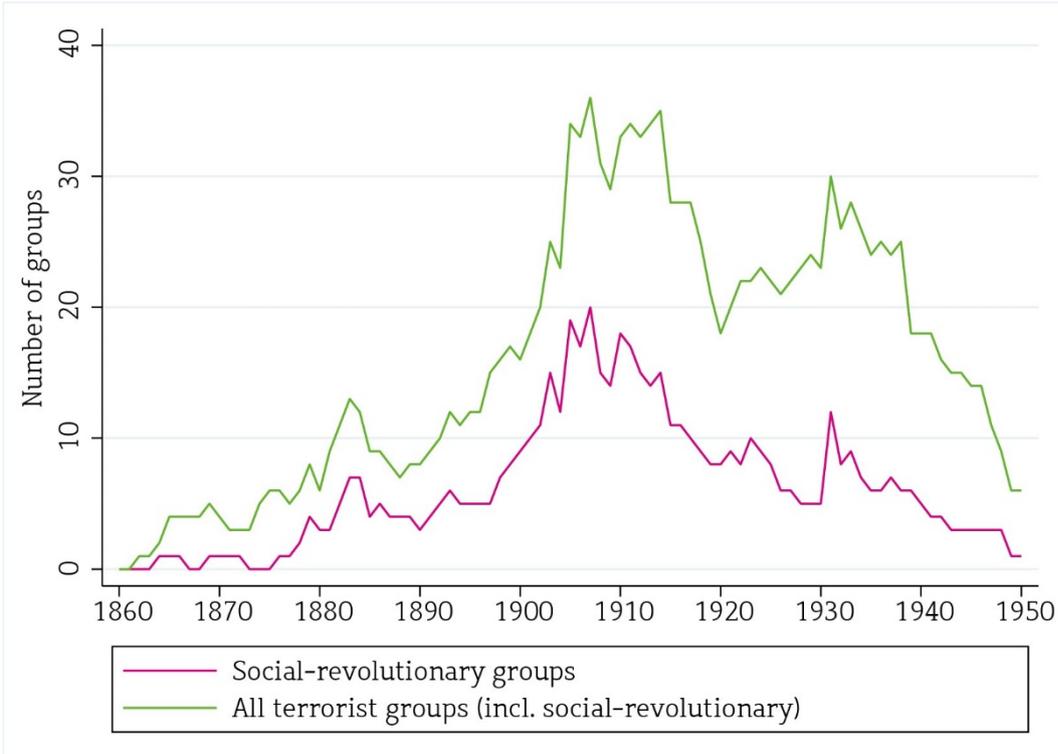
Social-revolutionary Terrorism

A closer look at the socio-economic and political conditions of the second half of the 19th century reveals that these conditions match our theoretical expectations. The working and living conditions of the working class were characterized by low wages, poverty, exploitative working conditions, social alienation, and a lack of political representation. In response, ideas and ideologies emerged that sought to conceptualize and interpret the

ordeal of the working class and offered solutions, with [anarchism and Marxism](#) being particularly important. Both ideological movements shared an opposition to the existing social order, which privileged the rich over the poor. Their goal was to overcome this order, either by eliminating social hierarchies altogether (anarchism) or reversing them with the working class on top (Marxism). Neither ideology rejected the use of revolutionary violence to achieve these goals. And indeed, numerous terrorist groups subsequently took up anarchist or Marxist ideas to justify their attacks. Representative examples of this social-revolutionary terrorism of the 19th and early 20th centuries include the attacks by the Russian anarchist terrorist group Narodnaya Volya, which assassinated Russian Tsar Alexander II in 1881, the assassination of French President Carnot by the anarchist Caserio in 1894, and the bombing of New York’s Wall Street in 1920 by the Galleanisti.

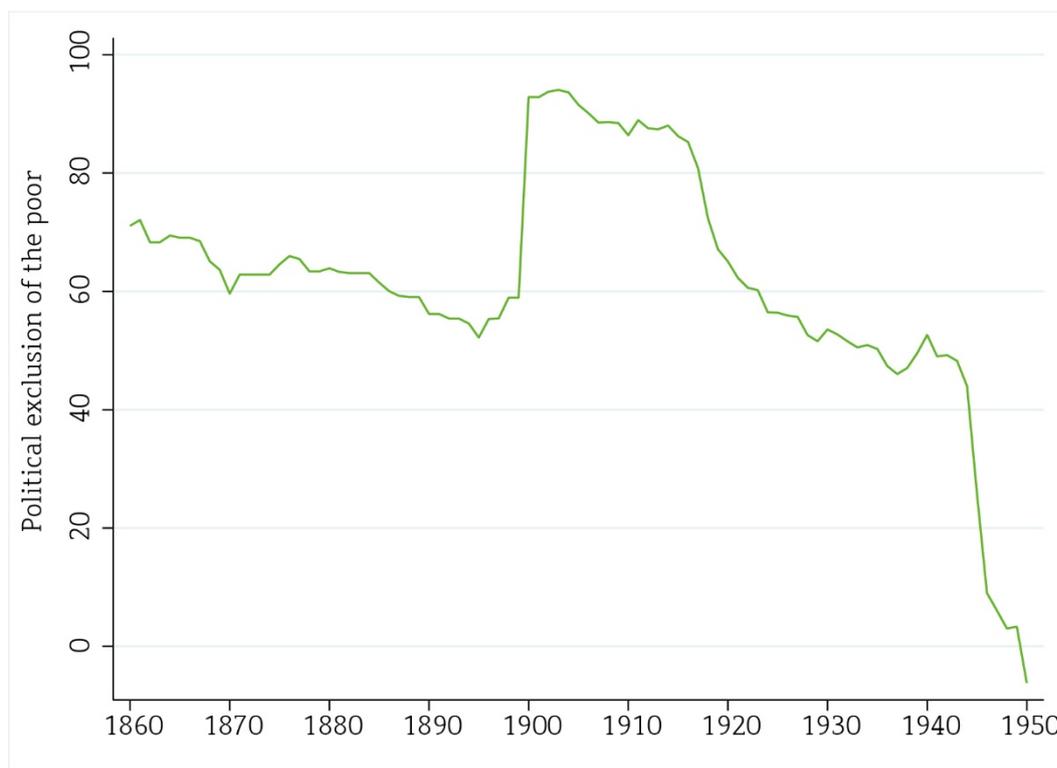
Inspired by this historical, albeit anecdotal, evidence, our empirical study investigates the impact of the poor’s political exclusion on the emergence of social-revolutionary terrorism using a dataset of 99 European, American, and Asian countries, for which sufficient data are available for the period between 1860 and 1950. Our dependent variable measures the number of social-revolutionary (i.e., anarchist, Marxist, and other leftist) terrorist groups that were active in a given country during a given year. As shown in Figure 1, a wave of social-revolutionary terrorism started in the 1880s, peaked just before World War I, and then petered out in the 1920s and 1930s. In our analysis, we explain this dynamic by the exclusion of the poor from power during those decades. We measure this exclusion using a special index of political exclusion of the poor. This variable describes the extent to which wealth and income translated into an unequal distribution of political power.

Figure 1: Active terrorist groups in the dataset, 1860–1950, Source: Tschantret (2019)



One example of the impact of economic power on political participation is the Prussian three-class franchise system, in which the wealthy segments of the population were heavily overrepresented at the expense of the poor. As shown in Figure 2, the political exclusion of the poor was quite significant until the end of World War II.

Figure 2: Political exclusion of the poor, 1860–1950, Source: Varieties of Democracy Dataset



The results of our empirical study may be summarized as follows. First, we show that higher levels of political exclusion are indeed associated with increased terrorist activity by social-revolutionary terrorist groups. Second, this finding is robust to a battery of robustness checks. It persists, for example, even when we account for the influence of economic development, political institutions, colonial history, and the two world wars on social-revolutionary terrorism, or when we use alternative measures of class cleavages. Third, our analysis shows that the political exclusion of the poor did not affect other types of terrorism that emerged between 1850 and 1950. For example, there is no systematic relationship between the political exclusion of the poor and anti-colonial separatist terrorism (e.g., by the Irish Republican Army in the context of the Irish War of Independence and Civil War) or right-wing extremist terrorism (e.g., by the Ku Klux Klan in the United States). This result is consistent with our expectation that class cleavages are particularly important for militant (social-revolutionary) groups whose ideology targets economic inequality and the lack of political participation among the poor.

Our empirical findings reveal the systematic interactions of socio-economic and political conditions (in the form of inequality and political exclusion), political ideology, and the emergence of terrorist violence in the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Yet these findings are not only valuable from a historical perspective. For example, the decades since the end of the Cold War have been marked by a renewed concentration of income and wealth in the hands of a few super-rich individuals, as well as a [discussion](#) of the potential undermining of democratic institutions due to this concentration. At the same time, the social-revolutionary ideas of the 19th century, especially [socialism](#), are gaining popularity among young people. These developments may indicate that terrorism influenced by social-revolutionary ideas may re-emerge in the future as a “response” to re-emerging a class antagonism.

The illustration shows the allocation of fields for growing potatoes to poor families in Prussia in the 19th century.

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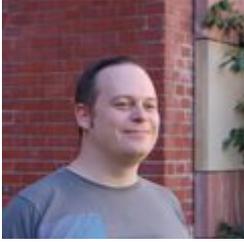
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