

This article was downloaded by: [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]

On: 13 March 2013, At: 16:51

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Studies in Conflict & Terrorism

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uter20>

A Day Among the Diehard Terrorists: The Psychological Costs of Doing Ethnographic Research

Alessandro Orsini ^a

^a Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, USA

Version of record first published: 12 Mar 2013.

To cite this article: Alessandro Orsini (2013): A Day Among the Diehard Terrorists: The Psychological Costs of Doing Ethnographic Research, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 36:4, 337-351

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.763601>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

A Day Among the Diehard Terrorists: The Psychological Costs of Doing Ethnographic Research

ALESSANDRO ORSINI

Center for International Studies
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, MA, USA

This article describes the experience of a sociologist who made contact with a group of diehard terrorists responsible for multiple murders in order to conduct an ethnographic study. After outlining the sociological profile of the diehard terrorists, the author—making reference to the ethnographic studies of Jack Douglas, Martin Sanchez Jankowski, and Laud Humphreys—describes how he followed their traces. The aim of the article is to analyze the psychological costs that the sociologist must pay when he interacts with men and women who, in addition to proudly claiming credit for the homicides they have committed, affirm the importance of continuing to kill in order to salvage humanity's future.

Diehard terrorists are terrorists by vocation: men and women who have decided to sacrifice their lives principally in order to satisfy a spiritual need.¹

They kill, but they are also willing to die.

Meeting diehard terrorists is not easy. They have stopped killing not by choice but because they were arrested and still proudly lay claim to the murders for which they were responsible. The feeling of being engaged in a permanent war—as well as the worry of being surrounded by contempt—renders diehard terrorists particularly detached from the outside world. What strategies can a sociologist adopt in order to connect with their company and collect information useful for furthering sociological understanding? What psychological costs must the sociologist pay when he or she interacts with diehard terrorists who, in addition to proudly claiming credit for the homicides they have committed, affirm the importance of continuing to kill in order to salvage humanity's future?

These are the questions that this article will attempt to answer.

First we must reconstruct the profile of this particular anthropological type, which has four key features.

Received 28 October 2012; accepted 1 November 2012.

Address correspondence to Alessandro Orsini, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Center for International Studies, E40-455 MIT, 1 Amherst St., Cambridge, MA 02139, USA. E-mail: orsini@mit.edu

Diehard Terrorists

The principal characteristic of diehard terrorists is faith in violence. In some cases, they have stopped killing due to being in prison, while in others they have been released after serving a long sentence but are under continuous surveillance by counterterrorism forces. If they could, they would kill again, and they express solidarity with those who, being free, continue to shoot in the name of a shared ideology. Although many years, sometimes decades, have passed since their last murder, they continue to assert that it is right and proper to put an end to the lives of those who express a contrasting view of the world to their own.

On 14 May 2012, Red Brigades member Roberto Morandi, who was sentenced to life imprisonment for having participated in the murder of Massimo D'Antona (20 May 1999) and Marco Biagi (19 March 2002), published a letter on the "Soccorso Rosso Internazionale" website to honor the memory of Red Brigades member Mario Galesi who was killed in a gunfight with police on 2 March 2003. From the jail where he is serving his term, Roberto Morandi expressed his pride in the history of the Red Brigades, including its killings, and invited his readers to have faith in political violence as a means of realizing the communist vision of the world.² For the diehard terrorist Roberto Morandi, Mario Galesi, who had participated in the murder of Massimo D'Antona and Marco Biagi, was a hero to be celebrated and an example for teaching the younger generation. After the ambush of Roberto Adinolfi—the CEO of Ansaldo Nuclear who was shot in the leg on 7 May 2012 by a group of anarchist terrorists of the Informal Anarchist Federation (IAF)—diehard Red Brigades member Claudio Latino, currently in prison, expressed his solidarity with the anarchists and stated that violence was the only way to realize communist ideals.³ The diehard terrorist typically believes that, without violence, humanity would lose any hope of progress: "If you don't kill, you're not going anywhere, you won't change anything."⁴

The second characteristic of the diehard terrorist is consuming hatred toward a group of people they consider to be the representatives of evil. All diehard terrorists have a group of people whom they despise and blame for all humanity's greatest sufferings and who they attempt to eliminate through both words and actions. This cognitive process has been called "identification of evil."⁵ In the case of extreme left-wing terrorists, evil is represented by capitalism and by all those who oppose the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the abolition of private property.

During the trial of the new Red Brigades, Pietro Ichino—a well-known professor of labor law identified by the terrorists as an agent of evil—was repeatedly insulted and threatened. The Red Brigades members explained that they hated Pietro Ichino because he acted knowingly to consign humankind to pain and misery. Ichino—the diehard terrorists shouted from behind the bars of the dock—was one of the main contributors to the exploitation of workers on behalf of the capitalists and must be eliminated. More precisely, "Ichino is a murderer of workers."⁶ During the trial dealing with the attempt to recreate the Red Brigades, Alfredo Davanzo, considered the ideologue of the group, shouted the following words from his cage: "This gentleman [Pietro Ichino] represents capitalism, he is the executor of this system and we will perform the duty of ridding ourselves of this system"⁷ (28 May 2012).

The third characteristic of the diehard terrorist is love for a social category which s/he identifies with goodness and of whom feels s/he is the only legitimate representative. The diehard terrorist is convinced of killing for the sake of humanity and thinks that when love for the exploited is sincere and deep, it can only lead to the physical elimination of enemies. Filled with compassion when they think about the plight of the workers, diehard

terrorists claim to kill their victims without feeling the slightest remorse. During the book presentation of the memoirs of a Red Brigades member, one diehard terrorist said: "Are Red Brigades members murderers? Yes, we are murderers. Morally, this fact does not cause me any problems of conscience."⁸

The fourth characteristic of the diehard terrorist is faith in the ideal, whatever that may be: a profound faith that remains unchanged despite prison and, sometimes, torture.⁹

During an interview with the author, a diehard Red Brigades member who has served a sentence of thirty-two years and six months in prison for murder explained in these words the reason why his faith was not weakened despite the collapse of communism:

Communism has collapsed, it is true, but I'm sure it will be reborn. The true communist society will be built, even if it takes a thousand years. Capitalism too took hundreds of years to establish itself. As you know very well. Bourgeois society slowly dug into the bowels of medieval society. Capitalism grew a little at a time, step by step, and now we are all crushed by its inhumane laws. It might even take many centuries, but communism will triumph. I told you; it might triumph in a thousand years. The ideal never dies and humanity is moving in that direction, even though we live in a society which wants to make us think the opposite because it wants to convince people that we must resign ourselves to capitalism. I am a Red Brigades member, and my job is to keep alive the hope of a better world in which there is no place for the middle classes and the capitalists. I would do everything that I've done again. I regret nothing. The history of the Red Brigades is a glorious history."¹⁰

"For the good of our civilization"—to recall the words of another Red Brigades member interviewed by Xavier Raufer—"we must rediscover the true value of socialism."¹¹

This glorification of violence, hatred, and love and absolute faith in their ideals complicates the work of the sociologist interested in meeting diehard terrorists, who, due to their feeling constantly at war, tend to see enemies everywhere. With few exceptions, they are unwilling to be interviewed. The conviction of being engaged in a permanent war against bourgeois society makes them distrustful of and hostile toward university professors, who are considered members of a morally corrupt society, unless they display a compliant attitude or are perhaps themselves on the side of the terrorists. Fearing that the sociological interview might be used against them, they avoid talking about the most violent aspects of revolutionary militancy, such as the organization of murders. They call themselves "revolutionaries" or "freedom fighters" and argue that the real terrorism is that which the bourgeois State exerts on the most vulnerable sections of the population.

In my work as a sociologist, I have tried several times to meet with diehard terrorists. Along with some successes, I have also collected numerous refusals. Some of these refusals have been filled with contempt. My last failed attempt to interview a group of diehard terrorists is fairly recent: after having submitted a request to the Minister of Justice to enter the high-security wing of an Italian prison, where five extreme left-wing multiple-murdering terrorists are held, I received a letter from magistrate Roberto Calogero Piscitello, the Director General of Italian Prisons, who informed me that the terrorists had rejected my proposal to interview them in prison in the strongest possible terms. They would never speak to me—wrote the judge—for any reason (23 February 2012).

Given the difficulties in convincing diehard terrorists to be interviewed, how can a sociologist make contact with them and meet them?

Looking for Terrorists

Since the so-called official channels did not permit me to make contact with diehard terrorists, I decided I would meet them by doing what the terrorists themselves are expert at doing when they are preparing to kill their victims: secretly trailing and observing them. Many diehard terrorists have served their time and live in freedom and I therefore started to plan how to enter the places where they meet.

The question I asked myself was: What would terrorists do if they wanted to gather information about their victim and his movements? First of all—I thought—they would turn to the Internet, and they would probably enter the name of the person to be killed into Google Alert to receive, via handy e-mails, any information that the Web had to offer on their “representative of evil.” I therefore entered the words “Brigate Rosse,” “Prima Linea,” and “Italian terrorism” into Google Alert and, as expected, my inbox began daily to receive dozens of links related to the Red Brigades and extreme right- and left-wing terrorism in Italy.

Google Alert provided me with news about books, interviews, trials, convictions, terrorist’s and sympathizer’s Blogs, newspaper articles and television and radio broadcasts, and in a few days I had identified the publishing houses engaged in disseminating terrorists’ ideas through the publication of autobiographies as well as organizing of debates chaired by terrorists who had been released from prison. Google Alert also allowed me to discover the names of several diehard terrorists of whom I had been unaware. The public knows only the names of those terrorists who have appeared frequently on television and in the newspapers. In reality, the world of terrorists who proudly lay claim to their history is a large and active one, and in Rome there is even a radio station that provides a platform for the thoughts of some diehard Red Brigades members who have recently been released from prison.

After twelve months I had collected enough information to act, and a good opportunity soon presented itself. Having subscribed to the newsletter of an Italian publisher, I was informed of the launch of the book by a diehard Red Brigades member who had been released after thirty two years in prison. The event would be held at a community center in the outskirts of [name omitted]: an area where the Red Brigades had once had strong roots.

About a month before the meeting, I began to reread ethnographic studies on deviant groups. I reflected at length on the work of Martin Sanchez Jankowski,¹² author of a landmark study of gangs in New York, Los Angeles, and Boston. Equally important were the ideas of Ulf Hannerz on role-discriminatory attributes,¹³ Jack D. Douglas’s manual on investigative techniques and his ethnographic research into nudist beaches with Paul K. Rasmussen and Carol Ann Flanagan,¹⁴ John Lofland’s studies of the so-called emotive sustainability of relationships that engage the ethnographer when interacting in the field¹⁵ and the work of Laud Humphreys, who decided to observe homosexual men having sex in public restrooms by pretending to be one of them.¹⁶

Gaining entry to the social/community center was not problematic, since there were no checks at the door. The meeting took place outdoors in a large courtyard on a beautiful summer day and the space was furnished with benches and chairs. The meeting was scheduled to begin at [date omitted] pm.

As it was summer I had only had to decide on three garments to wear. I chose a pair of dark unbranded jeans, a pair of brown shoes and a plain brown t-shirt, and was carrying a small rucksack. I parked my car about two kilometers away and traveled by bus, arriving in front of the community center at 6:30 pm.

Upon entering, I counted about forty people and had to face the problem of introducing myself into an unknown environment in order to establish useful contacts for my research. My most ambitious goal was that of returning home with the phone number of a diehard

terrorist in order to initiate an exchange with him, interview him and gather material for my studies. In the case of my venture being unsuccessful, I would settle for being present at a meeting organized by diehard terrorists and hearing them talk in public.

The size of the courtyard allowed me good freedom of movement. People continued to arrive and the flow of visitors around me allowed me to wander about the area in search of a place where I could escape from view and take notes in the notebook in my backpack. The only hidden space was a latrine with a small cabin located in an isolated area of the large courtyard. After identifying a place where I could take notes, I decided to buy the book written by the Red Brigades member, the real star of the evening. The books, resting on a small wooden table, were on sale at a discount to participants, but I persuaded the vendor to give me a further discount in order to draw attention to myself and to the gesture of a reader willing to spend what little money he had on buying an apparently valuable object, as well as to gain a little time to identify the author of the book. I had tried to memorize his face from a photograph found on the Internet, but unfortunately this was a picture that was more than thirty years old and was of no help. As I was paying, I asked the man who sold the books if he could point out the author to me so that I might ask for an autograph. The terrorist was roughly twelve feet away from me, talking to a man in his forties and observing the people who bought his book. Mindful of Douglas's lesson that the ethnographer should strive to be liked by the people he or she wishes to study,¹⁷ I approached with a smile on my face and asked for an autograph while I offered my hand in introduction, and the terrorist greeted me with a smile that expressed his pleasure at my request. We shook hands, and having caught his attention, I pretended to rummage in my backpack for a pen in order to get his signature. After a few seconds of fruitless searching, I asked the diehard terrorist if I could see him at the end of the presentation: "Of course," he replied in a kind and friendly tone, "that way we can have a chat and get to know each other."

This Red Brigades diehard was convicted of having committed one of the most brutal murders in the history of Italian terrorism: the killing in prison of Marco [not his real name] a young terrorist who was held down and strangled by six fellow inmates on suspicion of having collaborated with the police in exchange for personal benefits. Marco, who before becoming a terrorist had been a builder and craftsman, had revealed some information to the police under torture and immediately afterward had attempted to tell his friends what had happened to make it clear that he remained a revolutionary ready to sacrifice himself for the communist cause. Marco refused the opportunity of being transferred to a more secure prison because he did not want to cut the bond with his companions, who had, however, decided to kill him. During the exercise hour, Marco was overwhelmed and immobilized. Before he was strangled, he said these words: "Please, make it quick."

According to a ruling by the judiciary the man I had asked for an autograph was the one who, with the help of five other people, had taken the life of Marco by squeezing the victim's neck.¹⁸

I moved away from the book's author in accordance with Douglas's instruction: do not be hasty!¹⁹ Before asking questions, the ethnographer must gain the trust of the people he or she intends to study. Hurry and you may become annoying, arousing suspicion and irritation, which frustrate your work.

I selected a wooden chair at the rear of the courtyard and placed my rucksack upon it. I thought that once the meeting started this position would ensure a view that would allow me to count the number of people present. After securing the place I considered best for the purposes of my research, I took care to hold the book tightly with the cover facing outward so that everyone could see that I had bought a book by a diehard Red Brigades member. I felt much like Preedy, the vacationing Englishman mentioned by Erving Goffman in his

book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, who wanders around the beach with a Spanish translation of Homer hoping to give a positive image of himself.²⁰ I then discreetly approached a group of young people who were having a conversation. The mood was relaxed and the atmosphere was characterized by a strong willingness to interact in an open and friendly manner. In a courtyard area, some benches with large wooden tables had been set up where one could socialize and consume food at a reasonable price. In the large courtyard—I thought—there were certainly other Red Brigades members, but I did not know who they were and my only chance for identifying them depended on what evidence I could find through intuition and with the help of some fortunate circumstance. My task would have been much easier if I had attended in the company of a colleague or friend, but I did not wish to involve other people in what might be a dangerous undertaking. However, the festive atmosphere worked in my favor.

As I approached one of the tables, I had a stroke of luck. A woman, who looked a little under fifty and who I will call Maria, approached the author of the book and greeted him warmly. From their gestures, I could see that they were good friends.

Before trying to approach Maria, I was seized by worry, which turned into emotional tension as I considered that if my approach failed I might arouse suspicion, throwing away many months of work, so I waited a few seconds in order to observe her movements. After moving away from the author of the book, Maria started talking with a man who looked around twenty-five. I thought it might be a good idea to try to exchange a few words with Maria instead of with her friend, and rather than making direct overtures I adopted a strategy of gradual approach.

My first exchange of words with the young man who was with Maria was the following: “Excuse me, do you know what time the presentation starts?”

My interlocutor seemed relaxed and replied without hesitation: “It should have already started. We’re late. Let’s hope they start soon . . .”

In order to keep the conversation going, I replied, “It’s always the same. Book presentations never start on time.”

At this point, Maria joined in, saying, “It’s normal to be a bit late. People are still arriving . . .”

I showed the book to both and said: “It looks very interesting. I’ve read a few pages of it.”

Maria appeared relaxed, talkative, and willing to put forward her point of view on terrorism. An extremely articulate speaker with considerable critical faculties, she spoke for about five minutes without ever revealing her identity or making any reference to her personal history. As she spoke, I still did not know who she was. Maria knew nothing about me and I knew nothing about her, despite seeking clues among her words. The only certain thing was her friendship with the author of the book, whom I will call Antonio.

Without giving my own name, I tried to keep the conversation going for as long as possible without revealing my identity as a sociologist. The discussion about terrorism continued on a more generic level and I was unable to gather useful information. I then asked a question that threatened to undermine my efforts. I asked Maria if, in addition to the author of the book, there were other Red Brigades members present at the meeting. She replied with the tone of someone who wants others to know they are firmly inserted in the world of terrorism, “The entire Roman column of the Red Brigades is here!” Picking up on her pleased tone, I decided to try to exploit her vanity and asked her if she personally knew any Red Brigades members: “Of course I know them. I know them all!” I thought that luck was on my side and that I would not have a second opportunity to identify a diehard Red Brigades member, but without realizing it I was violating the same recommendation

of Douglas that I had earlier followed. I asked, in the tone of voice of those who wish to express appreciation and enthusiasm at the idea of shaking the hand of a terrorist, "Do you really know them?! Could you introduce me to one of them?" Mary looked at me and remained silent for a few moments before replying drily, "You don't introduce some people to the first comer." Then she dropped the subject and moved away from me.

For the second time in a few minutes, I felt my emotional tension rise. Maria had reacted brusquely to my request and had moved away. Had she perhaps realized that I was trying to connect with her world in order to collect information? As we saw at the beginning of this article, diehard terrorists, feeling at war with the bourgeois world, see enemies everywhere. This psychological condition cannot be explained simply by the fact that they put their lives at the service of a radical ideology, but also by the pressure to which they are constantly subjected by the forces of antiterrorism: even after having served their sentences, diehard Red Brigades members are kept under surveillance. All these considerations led me to fear that Maria might have thought that I was an undercover policeman. If such a rumor spread, I would have lost any chance of making contacts with other Red Brigades members and interviewing them. Was I in danger? Should I make it clear to everyone that I was a sociologist and not a policeman? Or should I perhaps vanish, losing forever any chance of meeting the author of the book I had encountered a few minutes before? I reflected upon what to do and in the end decided that I would reveal my identity as a sociologist during the discussion that was tabled for after the presentation of the book. This choice forced me to move rapidly from covert to open observation: the distinction between the two types is well known to ethnographers.

Observation is "covert" when none of the people involved in the study are aware of being observed by a social researcher; it is instead "open" when the sociologist has revealed his or her identity and the reasons for their presence in a given context.²¹

When the event began, the attendees took their seats and the climate suddenly became very serious.

Antonio focused his speech on the value of revolutionary militancy. "The world has changed," he explained, "but not too much. Capitalism is still alive and the need for a communist revolution is more alive than ever." Soon after, the moderator gave the floor to the public. I requested the microphone and, after revealing my name and my profession, I made some observations on the relationship between poverty and terrorism. Had I revealed what Erving Goffman calls "destructive information"?²²

At the end of the debate, I went over to Antonio to give him my compliments, but I did not ask him for an autograph. His response was: "I'm glad to hear that you are a sociologist. I'd very much like to hear your opinion on my book. Let me know what you think. It's important to me. If you want we can exchange phone numbers. This is my e-mail." Evidently, the choice of revealing my identity had had a positive effect on him. I decided not to give Antonio my contacts. I would contact him, but I did not want him to contact me. As long as I was able, I would try to be in control, deciding when and how the meetings would take place.

The effect upon Maria was, however, negative. Once she heard my name, she became even more suspicious and hostile. She had read a review of one of my books on terrorism that had received some coverage in the Italian press and on television, going into its second printing in the space of a few months. After discovering my identity, she said: "I recognized you. You are the author of a book that demonizes the Red Brigades. You wrote a lot of crap about us, muddying our history." She added that she had read a critical review of the book on the blog of a Red Brigades member.

I tried to reply to Maria, saying that the Red Brigades were not demonized by my book, which, in contrast, placed the Red Brigades for the first time in a revolutionary tradition that boasted at least two hundred years of history. Unmoved by my reply, Maria concluded with these words: "Your book makes us look like savage murderers. You wrote a lot of crap. Why don't you talk about the bombs that the Fascist state put on trains? Who's paying you to write this shit?" Her tone of voice was forceful and hostile, and even her body had assumed a closed, defensive position: her arms were crossed and she spoke to me without looking me in the eyes. The community center was full of cheerful people. Maria moved away from me and started another conversation.

As I wanted him to remember me, before leaving I went back to Antonio to thank him again. I told him that I was going home and that I would contact him to let him know my opinion of the book. Then I went to the toilet, out of sight of prying eyes, to transcribe extracts of conversations with Maria and Antonio, as well as to record my mood.

The Psychological Cost of Doing Ethnographic Research

Once back home, I discovered via Google that the article criticizing my book really did exist, and it had been published by a diehard Red Brigades member who is currently in prison for having participated in a murder. The review, which can still be viewed online, appeared under the heading "Junk Library" to clarify that my book was nothing more than garbage. Maria had told me the truth. I realized that I had made a mistake in not having entered my own name in Google Alert: I had not anticipated that a diehard terrorist might attack one of my books, and had suddenly discovered that my name was circulating in the world of extreme left-wing terrorism, where it was held in contempt.

I then started to read the notes I had made just before leaving the community center and reflected upon my state of mind: "I'm tense. I am afraid that Maria might put it about that I'm an enemy of the Red Brigades and prevent me from getting in touch with other diehard terrorists."

There are two things about this short note I would like to examine.

The first regards the prediction, which in fact came true a few months later. A diehard Red Brigades member, currently in prison for taking part in a murder, circulated a long letter in which I was referred to as an enemy of the Red Brigades and, above all, as a morally corrupt person who writes books in the service of capitalism and bourgeois society. This letter, of which I am in possession, was sent seven months after my meeting with Antonio and was the consequence of a complex series of events related to my research into political violence that I cannot go into here for reasons of space.

The second point concerns the emotional tension that, once back home, began to grow within me with each passing day.

After leaving the community center and taking the bus to where my car was parked, I found the idea of requesting an appointment with and meeting a diehard Red Brigades member who had been convicted of murder stressful. Having for many years studied the ways in which the Red Brigades killed their victims, my mind was filled with the grisly details which I had analyzed in detail and as I drove I decided that for the next few weeks I myself would become my object of study and I therefore began to write down my thoughts and moods.

Upon arriving home, I decided to tell my girlfriend that I had been trying to make contact with diehard terrorists. I had thought that this might relieve the tension but instead it had the effect of worsening it. My girlfriend was extremely worried and after warning me of the dangers that could arise from contact with the world of terrorism she invited

me to desist from my study. She then went on to remind me that terrorism in Italy has never ceased to be active. As we have seen, Massimo D'Antona and Marco Biagi, two university professors, were killed on 20 May 1999, and 19 March 2002. The policeman Emanuele Petri was killed during a gunfight on 2 March 2003. After the Red Brigades had been dismantled, the terrorists of the Informal Anarchist Federation went into action and from December 2003 they carried out a series of attacks culminating in the wounding of Roberto Adinolfi, the CEO of Ansaldo Nucleare, who was shot in the leg on 7 May 2012 in Genoa. On 12 February 2007, fifteen militants of the new Red Brigades were arrested following an antiterrorism raid named Operation Sunset coordinated by the police in Milan, Padua, Turin, and Trieste.²³ Eleven of these people received a definitive sentence in September 2012.²⁴

This lack of serenity prevented me from immediately contacting Antonio to request an appointment. I clearly remembered John Lofland's teaching: one cannot carry out participant observation if one experiences a feeling of revulsion toward those who are its object of study.²⁵ Reflecting on this theme in his handbook on ethnographic research, Mario Cardano wrote that: "We cannot delude ourselves about controlling these [negative] feelings: discomfort shows eventually, with serious consequences on the relational level, and, in any event, the efforts involved in concealing one's feelings drain energy from the already weighty requirements of research."²⁶

My discomfort did not stem from the fact of having to meet a murderer. Like Jessica Stern,²⁷ what worried me were not the diehard terrorists, but my relationship with myself. The needs of ethnographic research required me to develop a strategy to make myself pleasing to a man who had brutally killed in the name of an ideology. I was experiencing the consequences of what Leon Festinger called "cognitive dissonance" or a state of psychological distress that comes from the contrast between our values and our actions.²⁸ To reduce this psychological distress, humans develop cognitive strategies. Those who continue to smoke despite knowing that smoking causes cancer can reduce cognitive dissonance by telling themselves that stopping smoking causes one to put on weight.²⁹ "But persons," Festinger explains, "are not always successful in explaining away or in rationalizing inconsistencies to themselves. For one reason or another, attempts to achieve consistency may fail. The inconsistency then simply continues to exist. Under such circumstances—that is, in the presence of an inconsistency—there is psychological discomfort."³⁰

My political culture, based as it was on the principle of the sanctity of human life, was an obstacle to my research. As Clifford Geertz taught, culture is not something that we can simply shake off through an act of the will.³¹ I had to confront my deepest values. Would I succeed in my task of winning the sympathies of a terrorist killer who proudly admits to his murders? Up to what point would I have to pretend in order to be pleasing to a terrorist and convince him to confide in me?

Ethnographers are split between those who turn to Kantian ethics and the so-called utilitarians. The first claim that in no case must individuals be considered as a means to an end: concealment, deception, and falsehood must always be rejected, even if the aim to be achieved is that of scientific knowledge.³² Utilitarians, instead, believe that it is permissible to hide one's identity and publish confidential information if one's goal is the advancement of knowledge or the exposure of behavior deemed unfair and harmful to the community. In this case, the achievement of a higher aim is used to justify the harm to persons who, unbeknown to them, have been involved in the study, as was the case with the famous experiments of Stanley Milgram,³³ David Rosenhan,³⁴ and Philip Zimbardo.³⁵ During my "hunt" for terrorists, I discovered that a sociologist can be a victim of his or her own research and can cause themselves harm.

My dreams were unequivocal in regard to my mood. Between [date omitted] I had nine dreams related to the fear of death. Three of these can be classified as nightmares, since three times I awoke with a start. All my other dreams saw me involved as a helpless spectator of violent incidents.

I will here transcribe some memories of a nightmare which I had on the night of 3 July: "I enter my home at night and see the corridor lit by a faint light which seems to come from a candle. The corridor is very long and I walk slowly. The silence and the shadows scare me. Suddenly, I stop, paralyzed. Someone is crying. The sound comes from the bathroom and not from the kitchen. I spin around, ready to leave the house, but behind me there is a motionless man with an expressionless face who shows me the blood on his hands. I awake with a start."

On 7 July I had another nightmare: "I park my motorbike in the garage and take the elevator. An unknown voice shouts my name from the stairs. I get out of the elevator [confused and missing memories]. The voice desperately shouts to me to escape. I run to the door to enter the house. Once inside, I shut the door. The floor I am walking on is covered in blood. In the living room there are two men dressed in black who look me in the eyes. They walk towards me. I awake with a start."

In re-reading these notes I was struck by the fact that details that had particularly shocked me during my studies of the Red Brigades' methods of killing academics had returned in a disordered and fragmented manner in my nightmares.

The red terrorists harbored a special hatred for professors and attacked them with particular ferocity. Roberto Ruffilli, a professor of political science, was killed for his ideas on the Italian Constitution, which he wished to reform in order to ensure more stable government. On 16 April 1988, in Forlì, a Red Brigades hit squad disguised as postmen rang the doorbell of his house while he was eating a frugal meal after returning from a conference. Ruffilli opened the door and was immediately overwhelmed by his assassins, who carried out a highly symbolic execution. As he struggled with all his strength to break free, Ruffilli was first dragged into his study—the place where he meditated upon the development of his ideas—was forced to kneel—in submission to the moral authority of the Red Brigades—and finally, while still on his knees, was killed with three shots to the head. The Red Brigades destroyed his brain: the source of thought.

A perhaps even worse fate befell Sergio Lenci, a professor of architecture at the University of Rome *La Sapienza*, who was sentenced to death by the terrorists of *Prima Linea* for his work on various architectural projects designed to improve the lives of prisoners. According to the terrorists, Lenci was guilty of wanting to reduce prisoners' hatred of bourgeois society in order to ward off the day of the revolution.

On 2 May 1980 at 8:30 a.m. in the morning, Lenci was in the office of his architecture practice talking on the phone with his brother. When he heard the bell, he thought that the secretary had forgotten the keys and asked his brother to wait on the line. He opened the door and was rushed by three young men and one young woman. Lenci tried to resist, struggling desperately to close the door while shouting in the hope that his brother would call the police. It being four against one, the door was opened and, after having kicked him in the stomach, the terrorists taped Lenci's mouth closed, tied his hands behind his back, dragged him into the bathroom and put his head between the toilet and bidet. The terrorist *Ciro Longo* shot him once in the neck, but incredibly Lenci was not killed and remained fully aware of what was happening, despite the bullet lodged in his skull. According to the plan the group had been provided with, *Ciro Longo* was supposed to grab Lenci's head, turn it sideways and fire a second bullet into his temple, but he did not want to dirty his hands with blood and thus decided to shoot a second round into Lenci's neck, which

however passed through his hair. Convinced that they had killed Lenci and noticing that the telephone receiver was off the hook, the terrorists fled after covering the walls of the study with graffiti praising communism. Meanwhile, Lenci was bleeding from his eyes, ears, and nose, and the warm blood flowing from his mouth loosened the tape that covered it. This allowed him to breathe and prevented him from nearly suffocating on his own blood. Saved by the arrival of the *carabinieri* (Italian national police), Lenci died in 2000 after having lived for twenty years with a bullet lodged in his cranium, as he himself wrote in his dramatic autobiography: *Colpo alla nuca*³⁶ [Shot to the Back of the Head].

Some of these details entered my dreams in a scattered and disorganized manner: the danger inside the house, the cries of a man trying to save me, the tears audible from the bathroom, the bloody hands, being hunted down with no way of escape and the sense of impending doom.

The dreams of death decreased with the arrival of the summer holidays, and I decided I would request an appointment with Antonio when the dreams had completely stopped. With the passing of time I was learning to live with the cognitive dissonance that had afflicted me in recent weeks. I was accepting the idea of shaking hands and making friends with a diehard terrorist who continued to educate the younger generation to believe that it was right to end the lives of other humans in order to assert one's opinion. I felt that the time was ripe to meet Antonio but decided that I would not write directly. Being afraid that Antonio's e-mail address was being monitored by the police, I wrote an e-mail to his publisher's press office explaining that I had met Antonio a few weeks previously and had agreed to give him feedback on his book. If the police intercepted my e-mail, they would have some clues to assist in working out who I was, how I knew Antonio, and what I was doing:

Dear Friends,

I need to get in touch with Antonio, who asked me to give him some feedback on his book in order to exchange opinions on the Red Brigades, which I have touched upon involved in some of my books. I met Antonio during the presentation of his book in Rome.

Many thanks

The editor answered me and provided me with the address of Antonio, to whom I wrote an e-mail at 2:29 p.m. which I transcribe here in full:

Dear Antonio,

How are you? I hope all is well. I am the sociologist who spoke during the presentation of your book. Do you remember? You asked for my opinion on your book and I would be very happy to meet you to talk about it and ask you to explain further some passages which I found very interesting. I got your email address from the press office of your publishing house. Let me know if we can meet [text omitted] at the [text omitted], where I'm working on finishing my new book. If that's okay with you, we can agree on the time via email. Wednesday at 11 am would be perfect for me because tomorrow I have exams at University.

Antonio's answer arrived after a few hours, at 5:32 p.m.:

Dear Alessandro,

Of course I remember you. Wednesday [text omitted] would be fine, but not in the morning. I'm busy until 4 pm. I can be around the [text omitted] at 4.30.

Let me know, regards
Antonio

Dear Antonio,

ok for Wednesday at 4.30 p.m. I would like to meet you because I'm sure you were sincere when you told me you would like to hear my opinion and because your book, the way you wrote it and even your openness about our meeting (as well as during the public debate) have convinced me that I can learn a lot. I would like to ask you to tell me the story of your life, above all the period that precedes your revolutionary choice. Then if you like, we can also speak about the period of revolutionary militancy and afterwards.

However, if you do not want to talk about anything, that's fine too. I'll also give you my opinion on the book, hoping that it might interest you.

Wednesday I should be with my girlfriend in the centre of Rome. I'll leave her and come on my own to meet you at 4.30 p.m., at the [text omitted]. In case we can't find each other, this is my mobile number [text omitted]

Best wishes to you and see you soon.

Dear Alessandro,

I'm sorry to rob you of the occasion of spending time with your girlfriend. There's no problem for me if you'd like her to be present at our meeting. You decide. Anyway, I'll be in the centre of [text omitted] around 4.30. We can even go to a bar or anywhere to speak.

My phone number is [text omitted]

Regards

Antonio

After this exchange of e-mails, I presumed I was under surveillance by the police. Antonio was a diehard terrorist and convicted murderer who still claimed to be proud of the Red Brigades' killings, and who, moreover, expressed the hope in his public speeches that a new era of conflict would once again shake Italy. I considered writing an e-mail to a friend describing my mood and my desire to make new discoveries in the fields of sociology. Perhaps this would protect me. But who could I tell what I was doing? The forces of counterterrorism in Italy are well-trained and always on the alert. The country has been plagued by terrorists, who have never ceased to be a threat, and according to the comparative analysis of modern terrorism by Gérard Chaliand and Arnaud Blin: "Italy was the country by far most affected by terrorist activity between 1969 and 1985."³⁷ We have seen that from 1985 to the present day terrorists have continued to be active in Italy and the antiterrorism forces are highly trained.

To minimize the possibility of making mistakes, I began to live my life imagining that I was being followed and that my phone was tapped. I imposed various limits to my personal freedom and tried to use the telephone as little as possible, making sure that when I talked to members of my family I would bring the conversation to a close as soon as it shifted to private matters. I started to think that the meeting with Antonio would represent the beginning of an ever-closer approach to the world of diehard terrorists and an increased self-limitation of my personal freedom. For two days, I was beset by contrasting thoughts and emotions: should I cancel the appointment? The path that I had taken to make contact with the terrorists was different from that chosen by Jessica Stern, whom had met only those

terrorists who were eager to talk to her³⁸ and the same could be said for the excellent book by Mark Juergensmeyer.³⁹ I did everything in the light of day, but in diehard terrorist circles someone had started to rumor that I had “sneaked” into their world, that I had “tailed” them on the Internet, that I had tried to study them without their permission, and that I had analyzed their life stories and their murders through the rulings of the judiciary.

On Wednesday I woke up early. I had had no nightmares. The idea of acquiring new materials for my sociological research thrilled me. I was free of Kant, and thought I could make new discoveries to better understand the point of view of diehard terrorists and analyze more deeply their way of life and their worldview.

A few hours later, Antonio and I were facing one another.

Notes

1. On the concept of “terrorist by vocation,” see Alessandro Orsini, “Poverty, Ideology and Terrorism: The STAM Bond,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 35(10) (2012), 665–692.

2. “BR, Morandi scrive dal carcere: onore al compagno Galesi,” *la Repubblica*, May 14, 2012, http://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2012/05/14/news/br_morandi_scrive_dal_carcere_onore_al_compagno_galesi-35117358/

3. “Appello alla violenza del brigatista rosso Davanzo,” *la Repubblica*, May 15, 2012, http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2012/05/15/news/bersani_allarme_terrorismo-35168224/

4. These are the words of a Red Brigades murderer who was recently freed after spending 32 years and 6 months in prison. This Red Brigades member was interviewed by the author between 4 and 7 p.m., somewhere in Italy in September 2011. Before beginning the interview he asked that his voice not be recorded and that his name not be revealed, but did, however, allow the author to use a notebook to write down what he said. He had graduated from high school, and he entered the Roman column of the Red Brigades in 1977, abandoning his wife and daughter: he was part of the Brigades’s leadership during the most violent years of Italian terrorism (Aldo Moro was kidnapped in Rome 16 March 1978).

5. Orsini, “Poverty, Ideology and Terrorism,” p. 671.

6. “Nuove BR, al processo insulti a Ichino,” *la Repubblica*, January 23, 2009, <http://www.repubblica.it/2009/01/sezioni/cronaca/brigate-rosse/brigata-rosse/brigata-rosse.html>. The phrase “*massacratore di operai*” was shouted at Ichino by a group of Red Brigades members during an audience in the trial regarding the attempt to reconstruct the Red Brigades, which was held on 23 January 2009 in Milan.

7. “Nuove Brigate rosse, minacce a Pietro Ichino,” *la Repubblica*, May 28, 2012, http://milano.corriere.it/milano/notizie/cronaca/12_maggio_28/processo-nuove-br-davanzo-ichino-brigate-rosse-terrorismo-201362475728.shtml

8. This diehard Red Brigades member, sentenced to 22 years in prison for involvement in a murder, resentfully replied thus to the following reflection of the author: “Excuse me, I’m a sociologist. I’ve listened carefully to the discussion about the book and I would like to say something. I have the impression that in reconstructing the history of the Red Brigades, you have forgotten to say something fundamental: the Red Brigades were a terrorist group who killed people to achieve political objectives. Perhaps I’m wrong, but I do not believe it is possible to write the history of the Red Brigades without explaining the principal activity of its militants who, in fact, killed people to terrorize many others and impose upon all, through the strategic use of political assassinations, the communist vision of the world. If there was a young person in this hall who had never heard of the Red Brigades, they would go away from this meeting without understanding what the Red Brigades actually did.” The meeting was held in a public library located in the outskirts of Rome [date omitted].

9. On the use of torture against the Red Brigades, see Nicola Rao, *Colpo al cuore. Dai pentiti ai metodi speciali: come lo Stato uccise le Br* (Milan: Sperling & Kupfer, 2011); Marco Clementi, *Storia delle Brigate rosse* (Rome: Odradek, 2007), pp. 318–321; see also Progetto Memoria, *Le torture*

affiorate (Dogliani: Sensibili alle Foglie, 1998), which collects the testimonies of Red Brigades's members who were tortured.

10. See note 4.

11. Xavier Raufer, "The Red Brigades: Farewell to Arms," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 16(4) (1993), p. 325.

12. Martin Sanchez Jankowski, *Island in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).

13. Ulf Hannerz, *Exploring the City: Inquiries Toward an Urban Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

14. Jack D. Douglas, Paul K. Rasmussen, Carol Ann Flanagan, *The Nude Beach* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1977).

15. John Lofland, *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1971).

16. Laud Humphreys, *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970).

17. Jack D. Douglas, *Investigative Social Research: Individual and Team Field Research* (Beverly Hills, CA and London: Sage, 1976), p. 136: "If one does like someone, he usually gives that person a chance to establish trust and he finds reasons to trust the person, in spite of contrary evidence. Friendly, feeling, affection, feeling for, sympathy, intimacy—such are the emotional stuff on which human relations are built."

18. In order to protect Antonio's real identity, I will supply no details regarding his prison sentence.

19. Douglas, *Investigative Social Research*, p. 33.

20. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), p. 5.

21. Among the examples of covert observation in deviant contexts, we will, of course, recall the aforementioned Laud Humphreys study into sexual relations rapidly consummated by homosexual men in public toilets, with no emotional involvement ("instant sex"). To conduct his study, Humphreys, who was a Protestant minister, pretended to be a "voyeur" who was excited by watching homosexuals while they were having sex (see Humphreys, *Tearoom Trade*). A similar research was conducted more recently by an Italian scholar who hid his identity as an ethnographer to observe occasional encounters between homosexual men in a public park and a sauna. See Stefano Ramello, "Le regole del gioco. Il parco e la sauna: la struttura degli incontri occasionali fra uomini," *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia* LI(1) (January–March 2010), pp. 61–93.

22. Goffman, *The Presentation of Sels in Everyday Life*, p. 141. In Goffman's words: "Given the fragility and the required expressive coherence of the reality that is dramatized by a performance, there are usually facts which, if attention is drawn to them during the performance, would discredit, disrupt, or make useless the impression that the performance fosters. These facts may be said to provide 'destructive information'. A basic problem for many performances, then, is that of information control; the audience must not acquire destructive information about the situation that is being defined for them."

23. Orsini, *Anatomy of the Red Brigades: The Religious Mind-Set of Modern Terrorists* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 259.

24. "Nuove Brigate rosse. La Cassazione conferma la riduzione delle pene," *Corriere della Sera*, 11 September 2012.

25. Lofland, *Analyzing Social Settings*.

26. Mario Cardano, *La ricerca qualitativa* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2011), p. 105.

27. Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2003), p. xvi.

28. Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962).

29. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 51. In Geertz's word: "Men . . . every last of them, are cultural artifacts."
32. Rosaline S. Barbour, *Introducing Qualitative Research: A Student's Guide to the Craft of Doing Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 2007), p. 78.
33. Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (London: Tavistock, 1974).
34. David Rosenham, "On Being Sane in Insane Places," *Science* 179(4070) (1973), pp. 250–258.
35. Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (London: Rider, 2009).
36. Sergio Lenci, *Colpo alla nuca. Memorie di una vittima del terrorismo* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2009).
37. Gérard Chaliand and Arnaud Blin, "From 1968 to Radical Islam," in Gérard Chaliand and A. Blin Berkeley, eds., *History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to al Qaeda* (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2007), p. 236.
38. Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*, p. xxix.
39. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).