

When Workers Shot Back

Class Conflict from 1877 to 1921

By

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BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

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Introduction

If I fall by the hand of such, I shall fall the victim of the noblest of causes, that of maintaining the just rights of my country. I aspire to the honest ambition of meriting the appellation of the preserver of my country, equally with the Chiefs among *you*, whom, from acting on such principles, you have exalted to the highest pitch of glory. And if, after every peaceable mode of obtaining a redress of grievances proved fruitless, a recourse to arms to obtain it be a mark of the savage, and not of the soldier, what savages must the Americans be, and how much undeserved applause have your Cincinnatus, your Fabius, obtained.

HOBOI-HILI MIKO (ALEXANDER MCGILLIVRAY), 1787¹

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As the domination and arrogance of the ruling class increased, the capacity of the lower classes to resist, within the limits of law and constitution, decreased. Every avenue, in fact, was blocked by corruption. Juries, courts, legislatures, congresses, they were as if they were not. The people were walled in by impassable barriers. Nothing was left them but the primal, brute instincts of the animal man, and upon these they fell back, and the Brotherhood of Destruction arose.

IGNATIUS DONNELLY, 1890²

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In July 1877, as the remaining troops were pulled out of the South and Reconstruction brought to a premature end, railroad workers went on strike, shutting down nearly the entire country for about two weeks. The strike opened up nearly a half century of violent class conflict, an ‘uncivil war’ between capital and labour. The railroad workers, unemployed workers, and their supporters soon responded to the use of state and local militias with rocks, sticks, fire

1 Creek leader Hoboi-Hili Miko’s (also known as Alexander McGillivray) letter to James White, superintendent of the Creek Indians appointed by Congress, 8 April 1787.

2 Donnelly 1960 [1890], pp. 95–6.

and guns. As they would do time and again in the coming decades, workers shot back in the face of the combined repressive force of capital and government. The 1877 railroad strike set the pattern for class conflict over the next half century: with little or no political space in which to organise and present grievances for redress, workers and their supporters took up arms in self-defence and to pursue their interests. By the 1940s, such armed class warfare became rare, and since the 1970s has become virtually non-existent. It would be foolhardy to mistake the lack of overt violence in class struggle today for its disappearance; there are many present parallels with the socio-economic and political conditions that dominated the era explored here. Today's corporate domination of the two party duopoly, elite control of the political process, the widening chasm of income and wealth inequality, and suppression of dissent are ominous precursors to the tactical use of violence. As Creek leader Hoboi-Hili Miko observed in 1787, after all efforts at peaceful redress of grievances are ignored, co-opted, blocked, diffused, deflected, or repressed, the dissident will become an armed revolutionary. Nearly a century later, Ignatius Donnelly wrote a novel warning of the explosive outcome made inevitable when all avenues of peaceful change are blocked. In the class struggle, workers will shoot back.

Trajectory of Violence

While much studied, the violence that characterised this half century of class conflict has rarely been examined other than from historical³ or moralistic⁴ perspectives, which serve to either document or judge.

A third, less common approach to analysing class struggle focuses on the self-organisation of workers in order to situate class struggle within the existing class composition.⁵ Nearly half of this book deals with the 1877 and 1894 railroad strikes, as they illustrate an organisational and strategic transition in class struggle. But rather than understanding such experimentation as an

3 Bernstein 1960; Boyer and Morais 1955; Brecher 1972; Burbank 1966; Foner 1947, 1965, 1973, 1977; Gage 2009; Green 2015; Haring 1983; Lens 1973; Shoup 2010; Smith 2006; Stromquist 1993; Yolen 1936; and Zinn 2013.

4 Adamic 1931; Adams 1966; Bellesiles 2010; Bimba 1950; Grant 1915; Ross and Taft 1969; Sandine 2009; and Taft 1966.

5 Alquati nd; Bell and Cleaver 2002; Bologna 1976; Cleaver 1979, 1989, 1992, 2016; Glaberman 1965, 1973, 1984, 1991; Glaberman and Rawick 1977; Holloway 2005; Lindsey 1942; Montgomery 1974, 1977, 1980, 1989; Ramirez 1978; Rawick 1969; Silver 2003; Stone 1973; Tilly and Tilly 1998; Tronti 1962; and Watson 1971.

'attempt to impose some order on a chaotic and deteriorating labor market that undermined their wages and the rules that governed their work', these strikes demonstrated the potential for a perpetually disruptive working-class to trigger a systemic crisis of capitalism.⁶ That these strikes were resolved through the lenses of wages and control is a manifestation of the search for new mechanisms of discipline to harness and manage class struggle.

While this later class composition approach has greatly influenced my thinking, it lacks the essential element of how workers' self-organisation within the context of the existing class composition shapes their tactics and strategy. For this reason, I propose a 'trajectory theory of political violence', which does two things. First, it seeks to explore both the tactics and strategies workers use to self-organise in order to recompose working-class power in light of the existing composition of capital. Second, it examines how capital designs its tactics and strategies in response in order to restore its class power.

Variably portrayed as the rationalisation of the labour process, consolidation of capital, government regulation, collective bargaining, and arbitration, each descriptor reflects capital's groping for a strategy of restoring control. The focus on the 1877 and 1894 railroad strikes is intentional. As Shelton Stromquist observed,

Rationalization of the railroad labor process ultimately came through the intervention of the federal government and the consolidation of the industry. But it was the persistence and growth of railroad labor conflict during the last three decades of the nineteenth century that fueled the search for a systemic corporate labor policy.⁷

Beginning this book with a focus on the 1877 and 1894 railroad strikes is intentional. I have taken up Stromquist's call for a 'study of the evolving patterns of strike activity that would link and help make sense of the individual episodes' in order to analyse how these strikes drove development in the railroad industry as demonstrated through industrial work, class composition, and the relations between workers and capital.⁸ I seek to widen the focus of Stromquist's project even further, recognising each of the discussed strikes as currents in a cycle of class struggle and the transformation of class composition that lasted nearly half a century.

6 Stromquist 1993, p. xvi.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 25.

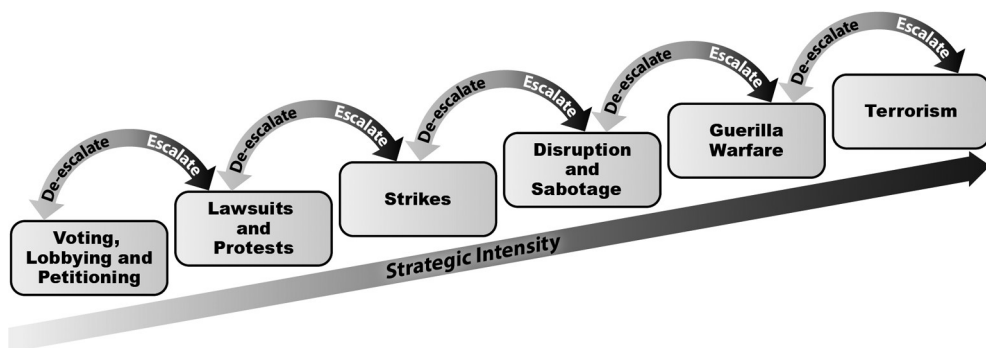


FIGURE 1 *Trajectory of political violence*

My examination of class composition seeks to understand why workers were more likely to shoot back – under what conditions were workers engaged in class struggle likely to become violent? To answer this question, violence will be explored through the lenses of tactics and strategy. In the face of repression and with widespread mass support, workers and their allies move along what I call a ‘trajectory of political violence’. As shown in Figure 1, the trajectory begins at the point of accepted and legal political activity, escalating in force and tension until workers and their allies begin to deploy varying types of violence to achieve objectives. With all avenues of redress for their grievances blocked, unions virtually prohibited, organising criminalised, and collective bargaining and arbitration resisted, workers quickly move along the trajectory, deploying tactics of striking on the job, sabotage, strikes, and eventually armed struggle for the dual purposes of self-defence in an offensive war of manoeuvre to realise their objectives.

In an attempt to explain why insurgents use political violence, I have decided to ask why workers resorted to political violence in their struggles with industry, business, and the state between 1877 and 1921. In this study of nearly a half century of relentless class warfare I have asked two questions. First, when do workers escalate their tactics to use political violence to achieve their objectives? Second, did the use of political violence succeed in helping workers achieve part or all of their objectives?

To answer these questions, I test the trajectory theory by using it to analyse the conflicts of the period from 1877 to 1921. In testing trajectory theory, my objective is to not only retroactively understand why and when violence was used tactically in class struggle, but also to identify the determinant factors that increase the likelihood of its use. My hope is that in re-examining the historical record of a past period of violence in class struggle, we may be able to understand and analyse the determinant factors in the study of class struggle today.

While this approach could be potentially subject to misuse, my aim is to anchor it in a study of class composition, so as to understand when violence is more likely to occur and why it becomes a poor substitute for the absence of a recomposed working-class power.

The premise of trajectory theory is that in a struggle between capital and workers (interchangeably referred to as elites and insurgents, respectively), each side will deploy the appropriate tactics to engage their adversary based on their reading of the level of their own, and their opponents', power (or class composition), their level of support from the rest of the population, the existing opportunity to make gains, and the benefits and costs of deploying tactics of greater intensity. Trajectory theory contests the notion that political violence is a form of 'madness of the crowd', or a desperate, random, spontaneous, or undirected act. Rather, because tactical violence takes many forms – from sabotage and strikes to revolution and terrorism – its use and escalation depends on power, support, opportunities, gains, and costs to those that deploy the tactic.

Violence as Ideology and Psychology

While the literature on the political use of violence is bulging at the seams, the theoretical literature on the political use of violence in class conflict is far less developed. Since the urban rebellions and uprisings of the 1960s, almost no work has been done to understand when working-class insurgents resort to violence. The little that does exist suffers from the theoretical paralysis of the burgeoning cottage industry of anti-terrorism, plagued by flawed theories of violence as theological, ideological, or moralistically driven. Fuelled by exorbitant funding from governments and inter-governmental organisations in the perpetual war on terrorism, the field is far too vast to be explored here.

The anodyne days of thinking about violence in working-class struggle occurred between the first Russian Revolution of 1905 and the twilight of global colonialism. Spurred by the literary dramatisation of anarchism and the Russian Revolution in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and Jack London's *The Assassination Bureau, Ltd.*,⁹ a debate raged in the decades between V.I. Lenin and Frantz Fanon that is mostly forgotten today, relegated to the margins of anarchism and armed insurgent groups. The role of violence as a political tactic of the working-class suffered from the ideological remnants of Lenin's unsophisticated labelling of violence as 'terrorism' in sectarian tirades against the

9 Conrad 1907; and London and Fish 1963.

Bolshevik's tenuous Social Revolutionary allies. In 1905, Lenin distanced himself from terrorism as a tactic wielded by a vanguard elite, only to later advocate for its use against the Bolsheviks' class enemies during the 1917 revolution. He advocated that tactical terrorism was not separate from the mass movement, but grew organically from it. 'Its strength was the strength of the revolutionary movement of the people ... *That* terrorism was due, not to disappointment in the strength of the mass movement, but, on the contrary, to unshakable faith in its strength ...'¹⁰ Lenin's point was that the use of tactical violence could not be a substitute for the strength of the working-class, but his analysis was opportunistic. Because the 1905 revolution was defeated, Lenin could effectively denounce the use of terrorism by other revolutionary groups when the working-class was weak as premature, and later as 'infantile'.¹¹

Lenin's analysis of tactical violence is slim but remains influential, if hypocritical. After October 1917, he began to advocate its use in light of the Bolsheviks' relatively small size and limited mass support – exactly the conditions in which he had denounced his adversaries on the left for doing so twelve years earlier. While Lenin is credited as a key theorist of revolutionary terrorism, he really had little to say about it. His polemical commentaries lack a clear articulation of its tactical and strategic deployment. There is no subtlety concerning its use at certain moments when the balance of power shifts, or of whether it is to disrupt and destabilise or to advance and seize space. If Lenin argued that violence grew out of the mass movement, he seemed incapable of understanding how and why violence was deployed. Calling political violence 'terrorism' also muddied the waters and illustrated a lack of understanding of how tactical violence was tied to specific class strategies and objectives. Though a self-described 'communist', Lenin's theory of violence hints at but offers no class analysis. Rather, Lenin's reputation as a theorist of revolutionary terrorism has been exaggerated far beyond its scope because the Bolsheviks were one of the first to deploy it in order to actually seize state power and control of the economy.

The lasting impact of the Russian Revolution made armed struggle a legitimate strategy for contesting and seizing power. The Bolshevik use of armed struggle was increasingly emulated globally by independence movements, nationalists, anti-colonialists, and the left in the networks of European colonies and home countries across the globe. The next half century was perhaps the longest sustained period of global revolutionary activity in two millennia of

10 Lenin 1905, p. 161.

11 Lenin 1920.

human history. As anti-colonial movements escalated along the trajectory of political conflict by deploying armed struggle and terrorism, colonial militaries staggered to meet the challenge of a shift from a war of attrition to a war of manoeuvre against non-state actors, in what today are called 'small wars'.¹²

Though the scope of this critically important debate is far beyond the focus of this book, and was lacking a class analysis, the posthumous debate between Frantz Fanon and Hannah Arendt¹³ addressed key themes of the role of political violence used by insurgents. After Fanon had died, Arendt took issue with the psychological basis of his theory of the role of political violence in insurgencies. For Fanon, 'violence is a cleansing force' that frees the colonised (he called them 'natives') from the violence and resulting inferiority, fear, inaction, and despair of colonialism.¹⁴ In this way, Fanon saw that violence was used to wipe away blockages that impeded the revolutionary consciousness of the colonised. Because colonialism 'is violence in its natural state and will only yield when confronted with greater violence', Fanon observed that violence would be necessary to contest and defeat the greater power and violence of the colonist and end colonialism.¹⁵ All failed efforts by the colonised middle class for redress of grievances demonstrated the truth in the National Liberation Front's (Front de Libération Nationale) assertion that France 'will only yield when there is a knife at its throat'. The colonised, seeing all ways to peaceful resolution of their suffering blocked and repressed, will respond by escalating their tactics, using violence in proportion to the violence deployed by the coloniser, resulting in a spiral of conflict towards 'a point of no return'.¹⁶

Fanon's presumption that violence becomes a tactic of the oppressed when all other avenues were closed was confirmed by the historical record. It is no accident that his works and the film *The Battle of Algiers*,¹⁷ which is based on his theory, have been used by the U.S. military as counter-insurgency training materials. Fanon viewed the role of violence as one tactic among many, and warned that it is more likely to be used when the insurgent is dehumanised and denied access to existing political spaces in order to fight for political power according to the normative rules of politics. In this way, Fanon peered into Lenin's mass to uncover the conditions of the insurgency when violence is deployed. But, like Lenin, Fanon added further confusion by hinging the use of

12 Boyd 1987.

13 Fanon 1963; and Arendt 1971.

14 Fanon 1963, p. 94.

15 Ibid., pp. 61, 70 and 80.

16 Ibid., pp. 88–9.

17 Pontecorvo 1966.

violence as a tactic on the psychological predisposition of the insurgent, rather than the composition of class forces.

If Fanon attributed the use of violence to the psychology of the oppressed, Herbert Marcuse, writing about the revolts of the 1960s, entirely disconnected tactics from the balance of power. Portraying it as a desperate act of last resort, Marcuse wrote that ‘as long as the opposition does not have the social force of a new general interest, the problem of violence is primarily a problem of tactics’.¹⁸ Mistaking the lack of mass support as a rationale for resorting to the tactics of violence was to prove a tragic strategic blunder, as many left wing armed insurgencies formed out of the mass movements of the time to speed up the revolutionary conditions. Not only did these armed groups mistake strategy for tactics, they also cut themselves off from the mass movements that birthed them, and helped to undermine them, by substituting a clandestine tactic for the recomposition of working-class power.¹⁹

What few realise is that Fanon’s influence on armed insurgencies such as the Black Panthers was parallel to his influence on social scientists tasked with theorising a new strategy for urban counter-insurgency. Over the next decade, several federal commissions, congressional investigations, and private foundations delved into the causes of political violence in the aftermath of Malcolm X’s assassination, waves of urban revolts and riots between 1963–8, and the rise of armed struggle groups at home alongside the counter-insurgencies being fought abroad. What emerged from these exhaustive investigations has dominated the thinking of social scientists and the anti-terrorism industry to this day. So-called ‘relative deprivation’ theory covertly drew on Fanon’s ideas to argue that political violence is a tool deployed by the urban masses (read: people of colour in poor neighbourhoods) in response to frustrated attempts to share in the promises of affluent capitalist America.²⁰ The theory of political violence has not progressed very far since Le Bon’s ‘psychology of the crowd’ in which the faceless mass of automatons are swept up in a contagion of fury and violence.²¹

Relative deprivation theory argued that individuals and groups will revolt when they perceive that they have been denied their share of society’s afflu-

18 Marcuse 1967.

19 D’Arcy also observes that clandestine armed struggle, in contrast to a citizen’s militia for self-defence, presents itself as a ‘self-appointed counter-elite’ that usurps authority over a mass movement and replicates the same dynamics of power the movement seeks to struggle against. See D’Arcy 2014, pp. 179–81.

20 Davies 1970; Feierabend, Feierabend and Gurr 1972; Gurr 1972 and 1989; Kerner Commission 1968; Rubenstein 1970 and 1989; Skolnick 1969; and United States Senate 1974.

21 Le Bon 1896, pp. 1–35.

ence and are locked out from access to the polity, generating emotional turmoil that leads them to commit irrational violence.²² The theory gained prominence in its explanation of the urban insurgencies of the mid-1960s that transformed into armed struggle groups such as the Black Panthers, Weather Underground, Brown Berets, Young Lords, White Panthers, the Symbionese Liberation Army, and the Black Liberation Army. While relative deprivation theory has lost its explanatory power and has withdrawn from the academic spotlight, its undue influence over counter-insurgency theory in the age of an endless war on terrorism continues under the guise of ‘winning hearts and minds’, and in the deployment of democratisation and NGO-led development as a weapon. Few disputed this social science consensus that eventually informed the decades-long legislative, police, and military counter-insurgency that underlies what Michelle Alexander today calls the ‘new Jim Crow’.²³

Arendt not only equated the contrapuntal violence of states and insurgents, but inextricably linked violence to the struggle over state power. For Arendt, states that lose authority, legitimacy, and obedience increasingly resort to the use of violence or terror. States resort to terror because they lack the numbers and, thus, the power. But this dynamic feeds back on itself as the lack of power continues to require the resort to terror, which further erodes power and ultimately erupts into a revolutionary situation:

Where commands are no longer obeyed, the means of violence are of no use; and the question of this obedience is not decided by the command-obedience relation but by opinion, and, of course, by the number of those who share it. Everything depends on the power behind the violence. The sudden dramatic breakdown of power that ushers in revolutions reveals in a flash how civil obedience to laws, to rulers, to institutions – is but the outward manifestation of support and consent.²⁴

Arendt put the tactical violence of insurgents in counter-point to the violence of state power while remaining doubtful about existing theories of revolutionary violence. “Textbook instructions on “how to make a revolution” in a step-by-

22 While ‘polity’ ordinarily implies the institutions of politics including governmental and extra-governmental institutions, Tilly’s use of the term can be understood more broadly as the political processes in which contending forces, including workers and capital, struggle for power.

23 Alexander 2010.

24 Arendt 1971, pp. 48 and 49.

step progression from dissent to conspiracy, from resistance to armed uprising, are all based on the mistaken notion that revolutions are “made”.²⁵ She simultaneously refuted both Fanon and relative deprivation theory for essentialising violence as an automatic response of the oppressed. ‘Violence is neither beastly nor irrational’, Arendt posited.

Under such conditions [concentration camps], not rage and violence, but their conspicuous absence is the clearest sign of dehumanization. Rage is by no means an automatic reaction to misery and suffering as such; no one reacts with rage to an incurable disease or to an earthquake or, for that matter, to social conditions that seem to be unchangeable.²⁶

Rather, Arendt agreed with Fanon’s notion that violence is a tactic deployed when reform is impossible. Insurgents that deploy violence must be sensitive to the legitimacy of their grievances and the terror arrayed against them while using non-violent tactics to prevent their redress. Arendt acknowledged the tactic of violence while dismissing its objective as incompatible with state power and governance: ‘violence can be justifiable, but it will never be legitimate’.²⁷ For Arendt, violence is justifiable when the political system is closed to insurgents’ pursuit of peaceful redress. ‘Violence does not promote causes, neither history nor revolution, neither progress nor reaction; but it can serve to dramatize grievances and bring them to public attention’.²⁸ In this way, Arendt argued that violence cannot be the end goal or objective, transforming the irrationality of violence into the rational, a means through which to achieve a short-term goal.²⁹ As D’Arcy similarly argues, the use of militancy, including political violence, can be a legitimate tactic if it serves the objectives of democracy and social justice by bringing attention to unmet grievances.³⁰

While much has been written about political violence as a weapon in anti-colonial struggle between the Russian Revolution and the 1970s, it remained primarily framed as an ideological rather than tactical premise: whether or not to use it, rather than when, how, and by whom. What Lenin, Fanon, and Marcuse all missed is that political violence can be explained by social conditions, not individual consciousness. Since we still live in a capitalist class society, it

25 Ibid., p. 48.

26 Ibid., p. 63.

27 Ibid., p. 52.

28 Ibid., p. 79.

29 Ibid., pp. 66 and 80.

30 D’Arcy 2013.

is necessary to look at the struggle of class relations to find the source of violence. According to Tilly and Tilly, 'The formulation tells us where to look for explanations and their confirmation: not in the abstractly conceived interest or motivation of an average individual worker, but in the social relations and culture laid down by previous interactions of work and contention'.³¹

In contrast, military counter-insurgency theory has made great strides in addressing the question of violence as a tactic. As Lawrence Freedman documents in his exhaustive book *Strategy*, after the Russian Revolution and during the anti-colonial movement, military strategists shifted their focus so as to understand when insurgents resort to violence as a tactic in order to learn how to counter it.³²

John Boyd was one of the foremost military strategists articulating a 'conceptual spiral' in which insurgents deploy guerrilla warfare to 'disintegrate existing regime's [sic] ability to govern'.³³ The aim of a 'war of manoeuvre', according to Boyd, was to apply the strategy to the military in order to 'generate many non-cooperative centres of gravity, as well as disorient, disrupt, or overload those that adversary depends upon [sic], in order to magnify friction, shatter cohesion, produce paralysis, and bring about his collapse'.³⁴ In his wide-ranging historical overviews of evolving strategies of armed violence by the military and insurgents alike, Boyd's theoretical work illustrates how the military has come closer to conceptualising the tactical and strategic role of violence by insurgents than anything by Lenin, Fanon, and other theorists of revolutionary armed struggle during the bulk of the twentieth century.

Theory of Contention: Steps in the Spiral Staircase

What is widely missing from both the anti-colonial and military theories of political violence is a nuanced conceptualisation of how, when, why, and by whom violence is used to achieve a political objective. Their approaches are roundly ahistorical, attempting to construct a grand unifying theory without providing the theoretical tools to examine the political conditions under which violence is ultimately deployed as one tactic among others.

31 Tilly and Tilly 1998, p. 237.

32 Freedman 2013.

33 Boyd 1986 and 1987. Boyd achieved substantial influence in military strategic thinking as a mid-level US Air Force officer without publishing a book. His highly influential works are in the form of slideshows in which text was written as phrases not sentences.

34 Boyd 1986 and 1987.

Existing theories of political violence suffer from what I call the 'origination fallacy'. In other words, without an analysis of the conditions in which violence is deployed by insurgents, the appearance of violence is perceived to be the starting point of the insurgency. In reality, violence often appears as a tactic in later stages of a mature insurgency after it has already churned through a repertoire of other tactics of escalating intensity. By perceiving insurgents to have launched their campaigns with violence, methodically understanding when and why they choose to use violence becomes moot, if not impossible. As a result, violence becomes conflated as ideologically, rather than tactically driven – and studying when and why violence is used becomes further conflated, seeking to justify its existence rather than explaining it.

Avoiding the origination fallacy makes it necessary to analyse the political conditions in which violence is used. For this we can turn to the sociologist Tilly's 'theory of contention', which guided his study of French peasant uprisings and the French Revolution.³⁵ Tilly examined the political conditions and changing mode of production under which insurgents operate in order to surmise when insurgents deploy violence as a tactic from a 'repertoire of contention'. He insightfully explored how insurgents will study the conditions in which they struggle, their level of mass support, and the balance of power between 'contenders' to decide on which tactic to deploy.

The period from 1877 to 1921 was an exceptionally tumultuous and bloody time in American history, not merely because capital resorted to political violence in an attempt to assert its dominance, but because its power was being contested while the balance of power shifted dramatically. Workers had found vulnerable links in the industrial production process, distribution, and the movement of capital and goods. They were willing to use all available means to disrupt individual companies, entire industries, and even the entire country during wartime as leverage to have their demands met. Emerging from immigrant and indigenous mutual aid and cultural organisation, the working-class was able to parlay its new power into new forms of organisation to expand mass support and new tactics to assert their power. These tactics spanned a continuum of force from constitutionally protected rights to assemble, speak and petition to coordinated military assaults by worker armies. In a spiralling of action and reaction between workers and capital, an escalation of tactics from pressure to threats and ultimately political violence took place in an environment in which legal political action was blocked, repressed, or co-opted. In

35 Tilly 1977, 1978, 1989, 2003, and Tilly and Tilly 1998.

order to defeat the insurgencies and diffuse their potential to launch new insurgencies in the future, capital itself underwent a reorganisation and introduced new forms of social control both inside and outside of the workplace.

As insurgents present demands for redress of grievances, they must take into consideration the factors of support, threats, and opportunities to achieve gains. When the political system is closed while elites manoeuvre so as to block insurgent access to the available political space, the latter must escalate their tactics in order to pursue their objectives. The question is: what kind of tactics will they use to carry on their struggle? What causes political violence to take so many different forms? These questions present what Tilly describes as the ‘problem of explaining variation in the character and social organization of violence.’³⁶ What occurs, and when, can only be answered by addressing the great variation in political conditions, balance of power, and the sometimes rapid shifts from one form of political violence to another.

The point is not to establish general laws for all sorts of violence but rather to identify crucial causal processes: those that operate similarly in the short run across a wide range of circumstances yet produce dramatically different forms of collective violence depending on their settings, combinations, and sequences.³⁷

Identifying the complex causal factors that produce political violence in class struggle is the objective of this book. The trajectory theory of violence is based on a careful examination of tactics and strategy in the context of the available political space, balance of class power, and class composition. Each step along the trajectory is the *tactic*, and movement to a higher intensity tactic is determined by the *strategy* to achieve the *objective*. The relationship between tactics and strategy is elusive, especially on the left, even while it has been conceptually mastered by the theoreticians of war.³⁸ The legendary British intelligence agent Thomas E. Lawrence, i.e. ‘Lawrence of Arabia’, succinctly linked tactics to strategy while working with the Arab guerrillas who harassed and blunted the superior Turkish army during WWI. He wrote:

the task was to analyze the process, both from the point of view of strategy, aim in war, the synoptic regard which sees everything by the

36 Tilly 2003, p. 13.

37 Ibid., p. 23.

38 The one exception is Sharp 2005.

standard of the whole, and from the point of view called tactics, the means toward the strategic end, the steps in the staircase.³⁹

Gene Sharp, the pre-eminent theorist of tactics and strategies of non-violent struggle, fills in the crucial elements of tactics and strategy missing in Tilly. He explains that 'tactics describe how particular methods of action are applied, or how particular groups of resisters shall act in a specific situation'.⁴⁰ In contrast, strategy is

the conception of how best to achieve objectives in a conflict (violent or nonviolent). Strategy is concerned with whether, when, or how to fight, and how to achieve maximum effectiveness in order to gain certain ends. Strategy is the plan for the practical distribution, adaptation, and application of the available means to attain certain objectives.⁴¹

By understanding the interplay between tactics and strategy, trajectory theory can also help analyse when insurgents use a strategy of tension in which each new tactic is chosen with the intent of gradually ratcheting up the tension that provides leverage to achieve one's objectives. In this way, as the intensity of tactics rises and falls in relation to strategy, political conditions, opportunity and costs, Lawrence's staircase could be better described as a *spiral* staircase.

The categories of tactics along the trajectory allow us to distinguish between types of tactical violence, the conditions under which they are likely to be used, and whether elites or insurgents use them (although our focus here is on the latter). Tilly explains that they

result from an interaction between challengers and other groups. In the terms we have been using here, they result from the interplay of interests, organization, and mobilization, on one side, and of repression/facilitation, power, and opportunity/threat, on the other.⁴²

This interplay of contestation to counter-contestation to response to counter-contestation can spiral about one another infinitely in a *danse macabre* until one contender is defeated, disbands, disarms, de-escalates or both sides disarm,

39 Lawrence 1929.

40 Sharp 2005, p. 459.

41 Sharp, 2003, p. 21.

42 Tilly 1978, p. 138.

de-escalate, and negotiate. Each preparation for the deployment of tactical escalation signals movement along the tactical trajectory of violence.

The use of Tilly's calculus of contestation for elites and insurgents to move along the trajectory of political violence also raises issues of splits, pairing, or switching. Insurgents may not exclusively deploy a single tactic but put several into the terrain of struggle at the same time. Facing a rising threat of repression and costs, insurgents may open negotiations to pursue de-escalation and disarming while also holding the level of tactical escalation, or even increasing its intensity. In this way, insurgents may simultaneously deploy tactics at different points along the trajectory. Doing so offers them the leverage of ramping up the intensity of tactics if they are perceived to be weak at the negotiating table, or if their offer to negotiate is spurned entirely. Insurgents will sometimes be willing to unilaterally de-escalate to negotiate if elites also exhibit the willingness to do so according to an absolute gains strategy.

When the threat of repression and costs are extremely high, and offers of negotiation need to be tested, insurgents may replicate a parallel 'above ground' organisation while continuing 'underground' tactical escalation. In such cases the amoebic split-off is subordinate to the underground challengers. This pairing of de-escalation and escalation may also create a split in the insurgency as the above ground group gains recognition, authority, concessions, and is integrated into the elite coalition, while the underground group continues to mobilise and escalate.

If insurgents demobilise and de-escalate in order to obtain concessions, reforms, compromises, and access to the polity, they risk abandoning the disruptive tactics that made them effective in the first place. For this reason insurgents face the Sisyphean task of attempting to move an insurgency forward as tempting concessions appear from behind and storm clouds of repression mass on the horizon.

Cycles of Struggle

Unfortunately Tilly only gets us part of the way, as, like the anti-colonial and military theorists, he lacks a class analysis. Although his theory of contention operates in the context of the relations of production, he did not provide a class analysis of the struggle between capital and workers.

To understand how the composition of class forces shapes the decisions about which tactic to deploy from the workers' repertoire of contention, we must draw upon autonomist marxists like Alquati, Bologna, Cleaver, Glaberman, Holloway, and Tronti. Cleaver identified the necessity of a 'strategic deci-

phering ... which helps to clarify and develop working class struggle' from the perspective of the working-class.⁴³ Workers study what the autonomist marxists call the class composition to decide what tactics to deploy, which shapes the outcomes of their struggle. By fusing Tilly's theory of contention to autonomist marxist theory of class composition, my trajectory theory illuminates why class conflict between 1877 and 1921 was frequently characterised by violent armed struggle, as well as the conditions, factors, and balance of power that can confidently assess not only its use but also the potential responses to it.

Trajectory theory tells us that the use of tactical violence was neither a start nor an end point during these four decades of class struggle. Rather, as Arendt asserts, violence was used tactically as a means to overcome blockages, to counter threats of diffusion and co-optation, to exploit the weakness of elite power, and to achieve short-term goals. Faced with a closed political system dominated by elites, judicial, police and military repression, and efforts to deflect, divert, and co-opt their struggles, workers escalated their tactics to deploy violence to achieve their objectives. This book offers an alternative perspective to labor historians, political scientists, and sociologists who found the use of political violence by workers who had not articulated an explicit class consciousness or theory of revolution or socialism to be pursuing economic and conservative objectives.⁴⁴ Self-organised workers whose efforts to unionise had faced violent repression leapfrogged over these impediments to attempt to disrupt capital accumulation in order to achieve their objectives. When they were successful in doing so, it was because they had successfully managed to recompose their class power, providing them with the necessary leverage to extract concessions. In cases where they were defeated, it was because the new composition of capital had tilted the balance of class forces against them.⁴⁵

This book will apply the trajectory theory to five phases of class struggle during this period. Rather than seeking to uncover new historical documentation of these insurgencies, although some previously unused primary documents are used, this book seeks to use the existing documentation to rethink why

43 Cleaver 1979, p. 10.

44 The lack of class, revolutionary, or socialist consciousness is the dominant current running through many of the works of this era. See Adamic 1931; Bernstein 1960; Bimba 1950; Boyer and Morais 1955; Brecher 1972; Burbank 1966; Foner 1947, 1965, 1973, and 1977; Grant 1915; Green 2015; Lens 1973; Smith 2006; Yolen 1936; Ross and Taft 1969; Stromquist 1993; and Taft 1966.

45 Among the accounts of class struggle during this era that embrace this approach see Davis 1975; Harring 1983; Montgomery 1974, 1977, 1980, and 1989; Ramirez 1978; Savage 1985; Smith n.d.; and Stone 1973.

workers were more likely to deploy violence as a tactic. In doing so, this book will not be episodic, focusing only on the 'big strikes'; rather, it will explore the context in which these strikes were waged. The key element in understanding why and when workers deployed certain tactics hinges upon the composition of class forces at the time.

For this reason, strikes are situated in phases of struggle in which the conditions both leading up to and following the strike are recounted. This is intended to help illustrate how they fit into the cycles of class struggle and the give and take between capital and workers over this half century. These cycles can be seen as points in which the recomposition of working-class power tilted the balance of power towards the workers, who were then able to extract tremendous gains from capital and the state. At other points, a new composition of capital was deployed to defeat working-class insurgents and increase control and domination on the shop floor and throughout society.

This book is not intended to posit a theory of revolution, but to convey that revolution is something hammered out in the interplay of the composition of class forces. For this reason, a discussion of whether this was a period of civil war or revolution will be avoided, although an 'uncivil war' would seem to be more appropriate, considering the high level of force and violence common at the time. Rather, the interplay between capital and workers will be explored in order to answer the question of what role tactical violence played in achieving or failing to achieve concessions, reforms, and other objectives. The ebb and flow between repression and reform throughout this period can be best explained by the changing tactics deployed by workers according to the existing composition of class forces. The rising intensity of tactics so destabilised the accumulation of capital that the arrival of the Great Depression, itself an outcome of class conflict, ushered in a wide-ranging revision of the social contract between capital, the state, and workers that we now know as the New Deal. While this book ends a decade earlier, these cycles of struggle are essential for understanding the basis for the New Deal, and what may characterise other efforts to fundamentally revise the social contract and alter the balance of class forces or entirely rupture it. In order to understand what provoked the New Deal, this book will explore five cycles of class struggle between the 1877 Railroad Strike and the decade long Redneck Miner's War in West Virginia that ebbed in 1921.

1877 Railroad Strike

At about the same time the remaining US troops were being pulled out of the South and sent West to fight Native Americans, railroad workers in Baltimore and West Virginia refused to run their trains, sparking a nearly nationwide strike. Within days, workers spread the word of the strike across many railroad lines and dozens of states, shutting down much of the country and the economy. The strike was launched and spread without a union, as an earlier effort to form the Trainmen's Union (TU) was infiltrated by agents hired by the railroad companies and smashed. Drawing on the budding connections of the Trainmen's Union, much reduced membership of the craft unions, and the regional linkages from working on the railroads, the workers circulated their struggle, not only across vast distances and to other lines, but also throughout local communities suffering from high levels of unemployment and poverty due to ongoing depression.

Local police and local and state militias were unreliable, defected to the crowds, or were overwhelmed by strikers and their supporters. With few sympathetic local officials, workers and their supporters organised self-defence patrols, engaged in hit-and-run street battles, and sabotaged rail lines, round-houses, and other equipment. Ultimately, the workers lacked an organisational capacity to coordinate the disparate points of action. Federal judges issued injunctions to protect bankrupt railroad companies, obtained federal troops to deploy against the strikers and the supporters, and managed to force the trains back into motion. The intervention of federal troops transformed the insurrection from a struggle against the widely unpopular railroad companies into one against the federal government with the memory of the Civil War still fresh in many people's minds.

The 1877 strike is evidence that, despite a lack of unions, workers and their supporters self-organised in the midst of one of the worst depressions of the later nineteenth century. The symbiotic bonds between the railroad companies and government, the end of Reconstruction, and the shrinking of the US Army with the end of the Civil War had left many workers alienated and shut out from a political system that was locked under plutocratic control. As the political system became increasingly closed to them, politics became illegitimate. Workers had little option for addressing their grievances or expecting their demands to lead to effective change. With their fledgling union crushed, workers expanded their struggles with the railroad company to the broader community which blamed unbridled financial speculation for the crash that was sparked several years earlier by reckless financial speculation by the railroads. The strike had widespread support in the streets of local communities because it expressed simmering unresolved class tensions.

In contrast to the working-class recomposing its own power, the railroad companies were disorganised, engaged in bitter competition with one another, lacked sufficient investment capital to weather the shutdown, and were dependent on government even as it had few effective local, state, and federal government institutions to rely on. Making matters worse, the existing composition of capital had manufactured a critical vulnerability: the railroads. Although fragmented into many competing systems, the railroads brought workers together in the centralised train depots that provided ideal choke-points at which they could disrupt the entire capitalist economy.

Although the federal courts had begun intervening to protect bankrupt roads from their creditors, the companies had never expected to need to call upon government to intervene on their behalf against their own workers. The 1877 strike would forever change that. The insurrection ushered in a reorganisation and municipalisation of police, state militias were reorganised into the National Guard by Congress, Congress funded and expanded the US Army, and the railroads began to rapidly consolidate, financed by new types of investment capital, to meet the threat of a newly recomposed working-class. Capital embraced an expanded role of government in managing class conflict, relying on court injunctions, police, National Guard, and the military to repress workers and break strikes. New technologies such as the telegraph, telephone and police wagon, new principles of management, innovative policing strategies, and counter-insurgency tactics used in the Indian Wars thoroughly transformed state power into a more effective weapon in the class struggle. These new technologies and strategies were evidence of a new composition of capital that emerged out of the strike in order to meet the threat posed by the strike to decompose the power of the working-class and prevent the potential for disruption. The 1877 strike ushered in a new composition of capital that would be deployed effectively in the 1894 railroad strike, and provided a model emulated in the mining, manufacturing, steel, transport, and finance sectors until World War I.

1894 Railroad Strike

After several smaller strikes during yet another devastating depression, workers at Pullman Palace Car Company not only struck, but managed to quickly circulate their strike across much of the country. What made this possible was the American Railway Union's (ARU) vote to boycott any train pulling a Pullman car. This was no re-enactment of the 1877 strike. The ARU demonstrated how workers had recomposed their power through their efforts in the preced-

ing few years to devise new organisational and strategic innovations. The ARU was organised according to the principles of industrial unionism opening it to membership of all railroad workers regardless of their employer, workplace, skill or craft although not race. The ARU provided a crucial organisational infrastructure for circulating and coordinating the strike to all of its affiliated locals that was missing in 1877. Driven by the membership, the ARU leadership used the telegraph to coordinate a masterful war of manoeuvre for about a week in which workers struck capital from numerous points, probing and penetrating its weaknesses to great advantage. Simultaneously, the boycott provided a strategy for spreading the disruption across corporate and geographical boundaries. Workers had closely studied the new composition of capital that emerged in response to the 1877 strike and devised a new means to meet that challenge.

The increasing consolidation of railroads only amplified their vulnerability to disruption. The railroad was the internet of the late nineteenth century, through which much of the economy ran under the control of a few highly integrated corporations. By paralysing virtually the entire rail system, the ARU threatened to disrupt the accumulation of capital nationwide. The response by the railroad companies was not merely expanded use of court injunctions, local police, private agents, the National Guard, and US Army. The railroad companies relied on their interdependence to coordinate their response to the strike. Chicago-based lines coordinated their efforts to break the ARU through their recently formed General Managers Association (GMA), which used its connections in government by bringing it to bear on the ARU. The GMA was indistinguishable from the federal courts and the US Attorney General which were deployed to repress the strike. US troops were called out to move the trains and the courts enjoined and arrested the ARU top leadership, thereby cutting the lines of communication that made it possible to coordinate the strike across the country.

Facing an unusually well-coordinated railroad industry response to the strike, the ARU membership quickly escalated its tactics by circulating the strike. It escalated into a general strike in New York, and nearly did so in Chicago, until AFL President Samuel Gompers threatened to throw any AFL local out of the federation if its members joined the strike. The AFL's position was bolstered by the Railroad Brotherhoods craft unions, some of which released their members to scab the ARU. The AFL exercised what would become the most prominent role of unions in a capitalist economy: disciplining workers and harnessing, managing, and even blunting class struggle. With the AFL tamping down on its membership, few sympathetic local and state elected officials, and facing direct federal military intervention to break the strike, ARU

strikers and their supporters took up arms and carried out sabotage in self-defence to maintain their leverage, and to attempt to expand their power.

Much like the 1877 strike, capital and workers deployed ever more forceful tactics to meet the challenge of their adversary. The strike, mostly without violence or property damage during its first few days, spiralled in a *danse macabre* in which each side deployed ever more force and soon armed violence to hold or extend their position. Despite the defeat of the strike, workers demonstrated their capacity to self-organise across an entire industry, and the strategic need to circulate their struggle beyond it in order to disrupt the accumulation of capital.

Iron Workers Bombing Campaign

The new composition of capital that emerged after the 1877 railroad strike transformed the mining, manufacturing, steel, transit, and banking sectors. Capital consolidation was financed by new financial investment strategies, holding companies, and corporate debt. These new financial strategies made it possible not only for larger companies to drive out smaller and weaker competitors, but also to centrally coordinate production, distribution, and consumption across a single industry as well as all related sectors.

Such horizontal and vertical industry consolidation was much celebrated in 1900, when J.P. Morgan famously created the first \$1 billion corporation by taking over a significant minority of the coal, steel, mining, and bridge-building industries and fusing them into US Steel. US Steel illustrated the strategic value of capital consolidation. The railroads were the backbone of the economy, but railroads need coal, iron, and steel just as coal, iron, and steel need each other. US Steel provided an organisational capacity for the integration of recently distinct sectors of industrial capital.

By making explicit what had long been implicit, US Steel also provided a strategic capacity to counter the growing threat of organised steel and mine-workers that had been disrupting their respective national industries, but had not yet succeeded in circulating their struggles beyond their sectors. US Steel demonstrated the strategy of using a holding company to deflect and diffuse class conflict across subsidiaries in and across entire industrial sectors while providing the necessary capital and political influence to weather storms. Capital had introduced a new composition that was quickly muting the strategic advantage of industrial unionism in a single industrial sector.

The consolidation of the coal and steel industries had ramifications for the iron fabrication and assembly industry which consumed its products. Seem-

ingly overnight, US Steel had become the dominant corporate power by gaining control of several of the largest companies. Despite a contract that covered workers in some US Steel shops and departments, the International Association of Bridge and Structural Iron Workers (IABSIW) was unable to attain its long sought-after objective of an industry-wide contract. US Steel refused to allow further organising of unorganised workers and blunted several limited strikes by using its new integrated corporate management structure to shift work to unaffected shops.

The IABSIW met the blockage presented by US Steel's refusal to expand collective bargaining by rapidly escalating its tactics. Rather than attempt to expand their strike to other related sectors due to long-brewing hostilities with other unions, and lacking mass support or local sympathetic elected officials, the IABSIW launched a campaign of sabotage operated by a small secret cell. For several years it covertly financed a group of saboteurs travelling the country to carry out attacks that captured headlines and tightened the commitment of their members to the struggle, but created little power, leverage, or even monetary damage.

The industry organised itself through the National Erectors' Association (NEA) to infiltrate and provoke much of the ironworkers' sabotage campaign. Infiltrated by an *agent provocateur* paid by a private agent who would later head up the early precursor of the FBI, the ironworkers' cell and other unidentified provocateurs dramatically escalated the bombing campaign in terms of targets, lethality, and property damage. Demonstrating Arendt's dictum that the 'loss of power becomes a temptation to substitute violence for power ... and that violence itself results in impotence',⁴⁶ the ironworkers' sabotage campaign was exposed, its cell members prosecuted, convicted, and sentenced to prison, and the union wrecked for a time. The combined power of the new composition of capital and the state affirmed Arendt's supposition that 'Violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it is power'.⁴⁷ Ironically, although nearly bankrupted by the financially draining civil and criminal trials, the union's membership stepped up to finance the union, while its membership soon grew.

Nevertheless, lacking mass support, the sabotage campaign was bound to fail. But the campaign provided further stimulus for expanding state power into

46 Arendt 1971, p. 54.

47 Ibid., p. 53.

the economy. No longer was government expected to merely intervene once the crisis had erupted, but a new federal domestic intelligence and police agency was organised to meet and pre-empt the emerging threat. The new Bureau of Investigations, soon to become the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), became a device to gather intelligence about potential and emerging threats to capital and use it to counter the threat by disrupting, blocking, diffusing, deflecting, or suppressing it before it could disrupt the economy. The founding of the FBI made another vital contribution to the existing composition of capital. As the FBI eclipsed widely hated private police, such as the Pinkertons, it transferred the costs and responsibility for fighting the class struggle from the owners of capital to the public financed by taxes on incomes paid primarily by workers. By absorbing the tactics and strategies of the widely hated and reviled private police into government police, power became the shank at the tip of the pilum. Federally coordinated counter-insurgency as a strategy for conducting the class struggle had now arrived.

wwi Wildcat Strikes

The rapid wwi build up gave workers in critical war industries powerful leverage. They resisted the AFL president Gompers's wartime no strike pledge, pro-war propaganda, and the appeal to nationalism, to disrupt production and make significant gains. Women workers had just successfully struck against Taylorist rationalisation and bonus schemes and for an eight-hour day in the Northeast. Male manufacturing workers soon followed by circulating the struggle to the arms manufacturing sector. While the IWW was disrupting critical mining and timber sectors in the West, arms workers defied their own unions to extract wage and hour concessions, compelling the federal government to intervene in the struggles and arbitrate temporary settlements.

Prompted by the new cycle of class struggle, the federal government established several wartime planning and labour arbitration bodies that used arbitration in order to minimise disruption of war production. Although the arbitration decisions often forced many companies to grant significant concessions to their workers during the war, the arbitration boards refused to grant recognition of plant level unions or enshrine collective bargaining rights. The arbitration boards issued rulings that drove a wedge between capital and the state during the war, serving as a trial run for a new federal role in using arbitration and collective bargaining to discipline and manage the class struggle.

Without union backing, the wildcat strikers managed to operate inside of what Boyd called capital and the state's 'observation-orientation-decision-

action time cycle or loop (O-O-D-A loop):⁴⁸ As workers discovered short sharp strikes could create enough leverage to bring in a federal arbitration board and extract concessions without a contract, they were under no legal obligation to avoid further disruption. The arms workers had learned that earlier gains could be used as a launching pad to push for more gains and generalise them throughout the industry.

Rapid tactical escalation had the effect of raising wages while reducing both working hours (absolute value) and productivity (relative value). But lacking sufficient mass support beyond their local New England communities, mostly limited to the arms industry, and arrayed against the united front of capital, government, and their own AFL unions, the wildcat strikers met a storm of repression once the wartime emergency passed. Once WWI ended, capital and the federal government abrogated the wartime arbitration awards and unleashed a post-war Red Scare under the direction of the Bureau of Investigations to persecute the militant strike leaders, anarchists, the IWW, and socialists. The fledgling experiment with federally sanctioned arbitration demonstrated the dangers and limits of relying on the intervention of the federal government in the class struggle.

The wartime wildcat strikes were effective, but lacking a recomposition of working-class power, they proved to be pyrrhic victories. Their disruptive impact was dampened by arbitration settlements that proved to be fleeting emergency measures. Although some wildcat strikes resulted in effective shop floor organisations of militant workers, their leadership was swept up in the post-war Red Scare and their power broken.

If the role of the AFL in helping to break the 1894 strike demonstrated the role of unions in disciplining class struggle, bringing the AFL into government wartime planning demonstrated the potential for harnessing organised labour to the capital accumulation process as a bulwark against disruptive and unruly workers. Capital and the state learned important lessons about how to use arbitration in a crisis to trade control over work, higher productivity, and stability on the shop floor and throughout industry for higher wages. The lesson is that the Keynesian wage-productivity deal was born not from the much-heralded New Deal, but rather from the wildcat strikes during WWI.

Seattle General Strike

The end of WWI brought about a reversal of wartime gains. As government contracts ended, unemployment skyrocketed, wages were ratcheted downward, and employers abrogated contracts and concessions forced upon them by workers. Wartime propaganda was transformed in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik seizure of power, the emergence of two communist parties in the US, and the pre-war threat of the IWW, into the Red Scare. Empowered by the wartime 1917 Espionage Act, 1918 Sedition Act, and numerous state criminal syndicalism laws, thousands of IWW members, militant and left wing workers, anarchist, immigrant radicals, union organisers, and elected and rank and file Socialist Party members were persecuted, driven out of their jobs and elected offices, arrested en masse, prosecuted, imprisoned, and deported. One of the exceptions to the wholesale combined repressive force of capital and the state was in Seattle, where port workers refused to work ships carrying arms for Russian counter-revolutionaries. With sanction from the leftist Central Labor Council, the boycott quickly turned into a city-wide general strike across manufacturing, services, street vendors, and transit that did not just shut down the city, but provided the means for the workers to take over and run it.

To launch the general strike, the port workers bypassed the established bargaining and grievance procedures, as well as most of their union leadership. Perhaps unexpectedly, their support was not merely in the form of petitions, marches and pickets but was inspired by news of Russian workers seizing their own workplaces to self-manage them democratically as soviets. For several days, workers, their families, and supporters turned a shutdown on the ports into a take over the city. The Central Labor Council set up self-management committees that, for the course of several days, coordinated essential services and organised self-defence for the democratic assemblies that ran them.

The general strikers escalated their tactics to immediately realise their objective of democratic control of the economy by seizing control of the city and running it themselves rather than engaging with those who controlled and owned it. In this way, the workers were engaged in a war of manoeuvre in which they attacked at multiple points of vulnerability to generate, as Boyd described, 'many non-cooperative centers of gravity' to 'disorient, disrupt or overload [sic] those that adversary depends upon'.⁴⁹ Rather than bring about the city's collapse, the workers transformed it by taking over the means of production and reorganising them to serve human needs. With the elite backed mayor

49 Ibid.

massing volunteer vigilantes and the National Guard, the Central Labor Council fragmented, and some affiliated unions called for ending the general strike out of fear of armed repression. The Seattle general strike demonstrated that workers could escalate their tactics to take over the work they already do, reorganise it themselves, and thus avoid violent confrontation that erupts in a direct contest over power at the point of production and reproduction. The thorough recomposition of working-class power in the area provided a rare illustration of how the escalation of tactics can transform leverage into control while avoiding armed conflict.

West Virginia Mine War

Organising the miners ran into the greatest opposition in West Virginia, and for good reason. The state was dominated by a plutocratic coal corporate elite, which used its economic and political power to repress nearly every nascent effort to organise. After a decade of organising efforts being met by the repressive apparatus arrayed against them, in the early 1920s the miners used their mass support to again escalate their tactics. They armed themselves both in self-defence in preparation for the inevitable repressive response, but also so as to launch their own strikes on critical mining infrastructure.

Despite having a few sympathetic local officials in several western counties, the miners were on their own. With limited resources from the national United Mineworkers of America (UMWA), they struggled to organise miners in the western sector of West Virginia. Miners in the UMWA state district deployed a strategy of pairing above and underground tactics. Once mines began to be organised, the coal companies forced the miners out of the mines and their families out of the company houses in which they lived. The UMWA organised tent camps for the displaced miners and their families, which quickly became base camps for self-defence against deadly armed assault on the miners' camps by hired agents, local and state police, and the assassination of a popular miner turned sheriff. The lack of influence in the state government and deadly repression demonstrated that all avenues to peaceful resolution to the strike were blocked.

The miners' camps became the centre for launching a hit and run sabotage campaign against the mine companies and ultimately fed into a Miners' Army identified by the wearing of red bandanas on necks and arms. Over the course of several pitched battles against the national UMWA leadership, and an array of police, National Guard, and even US Army troops dropping bombs on them, the miners reigned over several counties.

Unfortunately, the Miners' Army was unable to effectively circulate their struggle beyond the western counties of West Virginia. Despite widespread national media attention and mass support, the miners' escalation of tactics led them down the same road as the ironworkers' bombing campaign. Their ability to expand and circulate the struggle beyond West Virginia was blocked not only by the hostility of the senior UMWA leadership but also by the composition of coal capital and US Steel, the absentee owner of several significant mines. A remnant of the settlement following the 1898–1901 coal strike, the coal industry had emulated US Steel's strategy in the iron sector by signing an industry-wide contract with the UMWA that was limited to the anthracite fields of the neighbouring states while explicitly carving out the bituminous West Virginia mines. The UMWA was unwilling to circulate the West Virginia miners' struggle in order to protect their contract and diffused the effort to expand it into an industry-wide general strike. Escalating the strike into a mine war confined to a single sub-sector in a single region in a single state was insufficient to overcome the existing composition of capital. The coal companies had successfully manufactured conflicts between factions of workers in the same union which blocked the ability of the miners to expand their support and recompose their class power in order to disrupt the entire industry.

Class Composition

These six peaks in the cycle of working-class struggle hold many lessons for understanding why class conflict fails, extracts concessions, stimulates institutional and legal reform, and provides the conditions for an insurgency. Studying the class composition that underlies any class conflict is crucial for understanding these eventual outcomes. It provides a set of analytical tools to effectively assess the conditions in which workers struggle in order to deploy the appropriate tactics that can serve their strategy and move them closer to achieving their objectives. This is what lies at the heart of the class analysis of this book.

Although the autonomist marxist school has extended Marx's analysis of class composition, there are few case studies that apply the concepts to the details. There are several possible explanations for this dearth of case studies. First, it is extremely complex to thoroughly explore class composition. Class composition is not fixed or limited. One has to examine not only the dynamic movements of two classes and the state, but also their sub-groups, across borders, time and space both independently of and in response to one another. Class composition is an ever-shifting dynamic of relationships not merely between capital and workers but also between the capital and the state,

coalitions of allies, organisational and management strategies. It is further complicated by developments in the technological, managerial, and social and behavioural sciences that can be applied to production to manage conflicts in the workplace in order to dampen their disruptive impact. The existing capital composition may make it vulnerable to attack and disruption requiring a shift in allies, corporate structure and a transformation in the role of government in the economy. The data is also woefully incomplete, inconsistent, contradictory, and obfuscated by the complexities of capitalism such as changes in ownership, the appearance and disappearance of corporations, the creation of new state agencies, the secrecy of corporations and their advocacy groups, and the absence or presence of unreliable data. Working-class struggle is also notoriously difficult to study due to the anonymity of workers engaged in dangerous and risky struggle, the perils of disclosing sensitive information about tactics and strategy, and the euphemistic language of academia, capital, and the state in describing and documenting it.

On the flip side, working-class recomposition is also a function of the organisational dynamic both on and off the shop floor, the ubiquity of its support through the local community, its ability to circulate the struggle beyond corporate, legal and geographical barriers, to adapt to new challenges and setbacks and bypass new technological and managerial prerogatives that undermine workers' cooperation and power in the workplace. To the degree that a new composition of capital blocks, co-opts, diffuses, deflects, or represses the tactics and strategy of insurgent workers, their power is decomposed and previous gains are lost or transformed into new means of control, discipline and power over them.

This book is motivated by the need to explore the relationship between tactical violence and the relations of power in terms of both the economy and the character of the state. As Tilly observed, 'Let us not assume automatically that any social policy reducing violence is a good thing in itself ... [P]olitical regimes differ in the levels and kinds of violence they generate; in choosing political regimes, to some extent we also choose among varieties of violence.'⁵⁰ The level of intensity that characterised class struggle from 1877 to the 1920s not only informs our understanding of the character of the state, it also provides insight into other social movements for political change, reform and revolution. Because the Progressive and New Deal era reforms followed this cycle of struggle, it also informs the policies, conflicts, and tensions still present today nearly a century later.

50 Tilly 2003, p. 9.

These six peaks in the cycle of struggle are not meant to be archetypal, comprehensive, or exceptional. There are certainly other important struggles – such as the 1886 eight-hour day strikes and the 1898–1901 coal strike, among others – missing here. These six are the focus of this book because they managed to deploy a strategy of tension to disrupt the accumulation of capital in the dominant industrial sectors of the era, covering vast geographical areas. In doing so they illustrate a range of possible outcomes along the tactical trajectory of violence in class struggle. This cycle is itself a case study of how the class composition can set the tempo for the *danse macabre* of class conflict that can spiral off into destructive violent struggle or a peaceful takeover and democratic reorganisation of the economy and society. The outcome of class struggle was unknown during this era and it remains so today.

Notes on Research

This book has been a long-time labour of love. One of the reasons it has taken so long to write is that I was either busy teaching or looking for teaching work. In this way, my academic work appears analogous in many ways to the contingent and insecure workers whose struggles are explored here. As a full-time part-time professor, I frequently teach as many as eight classes at three to five colleges and universities on both a quarter and semester across four counties. As a result, my only time to work on this book was during the economic crisis (during which my teaching load fell so dramatically that my pay was just enough to cover my rent), on weekends and holidays, and during the summer and winter breaks.

These working conditions are shared by more than 70 percent of all faculty in higher education. In addition to my family life, these working conditions make it extremely difficult to conduct research, to visit and spend time at important archives, and to write and rewrite. While I have received generous travel grants from the institutions where I have taught, I was not allowed to apply for research support until 2016, too late to help with this book. Until I started teaching at a university, I also lacked online access to the more extensive editions of vital academic databases unavailable at community colleges. Also, as an adjunct I do not benefit from actively engaging in research, writing, and publishing, since most of my evaluations offer no credit and no reference to any of these scholarly pursuits (often they have to be added as an auxiliary attachment). Such scholarly pursuits are even actively and passively discouraged in the community colleges. Although it has not yet been acknowledged, I suspect that these working conditions are having a significant detrimental

impact on scholarly research that may not come to light for years and generations to come.

None of this is to excuse any inadequacies, absences, oversights, or mistakes in the book. It is intended to demonstrate that academia is a terrain of class struggle in which academic workers are losing – badly.

One comment I received on my proposal to publishers was that this book is neither sufficiently historical nor academic. This, however, misses the mark. Aside from unearthing Luke Grant's unpublished (censored?) 1915 report on violence in labour conflicts and the dusting off of long forgotten government commission investigations into several of the strikes analysed in this book, I never intended to write a book of original history. There are far too many excellent historical works on these strikes already. While the historical record has been well mined, it probably could use another once over to vacuum up what remains undiscovered or overlooked. I am not a historian and do not intend this book to be a work of history. This is a book of theory.

There were two motivations for me to write this book. One is the inadequate analysis of why violence has been used tactically by insurgents, which I discovered while preparing for and teaching a course on understanding terrorism. After decades of a growing global cottage industry jammed full of research, books, reports, commissions, films, journal articles, and encyclopaedias about terrorism, an analysis explaining how and why violence is deployed by insurgents is glaringly absent.

The other was that, of the historical accounts of political violence used by dissidents, rebels, strikers, revolutionaries, and protestors in American history, nearly all of them focused on recording the events while steering clear of analysing why and when it was used and by whom. The reasons for this are painfully obvious: working in this field is bound to result in the study of political violence being confused for its endorsement.

It is assumed, as discussed earlier in this introduction, that violence is used by those with ideological, psychological, or theological motivations. The few analyses over the past century of the use of political violence as a tactic, along the lines of the one found in this book, take us a few steps along the way, but only a couple of them see violence as one tactic among many, and few assess its use by workers in class struggle.

This book is intended to revisit the longer, virtually uninterrupted, period of bloody violence in American history, 1877 to 1921. While it is not intended to be a thorough historical account, I do provide a substantial amount of historical detail of each cycle of struggle in order to provide my analysis of why violence was used in them. This seems unavoidable for two reasons. First, few Americans, including myself until just a decade ago, know anything about this

period or the specific events that gripped the nation at the time. Secondly, since I am analysing the tactics, strategies and objectives of these struggles, it seems necessary to provide the reader with the essential details required to follow my analysis.

While this book, blemishes and all, is entirely my own responsibility, it would have been impossible without the unwavering support, encouragement, and friendship of Manny N. who embraced my book, then still in extremely rough draft, from the moment I told him about it. I am also deeply indebted to my mentor Harry C. and colleagues Cynthia K. and John M. for reading and giving feedback on the prospectus and a few early draft chapters. I am forever grateful to the editorial board of the Brill Historical Materialism Book Series who agreed to publish my book and to Danny H. for helping me bring it to completion. The Wisconsin State Historical Library, Catherine P. of the San Francisco State University Labor Archives and Research Center, and librarians from the Library of Congress provided invaluable help in tracking down the Luke Grant report that had been missing for a century. Lisa W. designed the figure in this introduction, Simon M. and Calin V.P. proofread the final versions of the manuscript.

Finally, I owe boundless thanks to my daughter Nisa who has put up with many years of me reading or disappearing for endless hours to research and write this book and filling up the house with books. She has taught me to remember to ask, 'Have you considered the lowly worm?'