This is probably one of the most comprehensive books that have been written on political violence and terrorism in recent years in the sense that the author is able to combine rich theory, empirical data about insurgent groups, and even first-hand experience of the phenomenon of terrorism. In his preface, Dipak Gupta who is professor of Peace Studies at San Diego State University, recounts his own brief encounter with the Naxalites, the Maoist insurgency in India. At one point, he was given a gun and instructed to shoot a village moneylender. He declined the “honour” of being selected for this task, left Calcutta and headed for the United States where he enrolled in a PhD program. This personal experience explains the interest that Dipak Gupta shows in the motivations that bring people to engage in some forms of political violence. After a theory review chapter, the author presents, with a high degree of sophistication, his own theory of action. Basically, he suggests that human action is driven by dual motivations, self-interest and collective identity. An appendix at the end of the book contains a simple formalization of the model and here, in the discussion of the economics of terrorism, lies its main strength. Gupta sees the forging of collective identities as the work of political entrepreneurs and charismatic leaders. They have the organizational and inspirational capabilities to transform a latent grievance into a political demand that may be framed, depending on its nature, in religious, nationalist or class terms.

It follows from this model that contingency plays a considerable role in the emergence of political violence. The creation of identities, and the subsequent formation of a movement or an organization, depends on the emergence of political entrepreneurs, a process that is almost random and not determined by structural factors. Gupta finds some evidence in favour of his argument by means of a statistical analysis of the MIPT dataset, demonstrating that neither poverty, GDP per capita, or degree of democracy are related to the deaths and injuries resulting from terrorist conflicts. In the view of this reviewer, however, the empirical analysis is not entirely convincing, based, as it is, on a single data source. The now defunct MIPT database mixes highly heterogeneous forms of violence; this might have something to do with the apparent lack of strong correlations in Gupta’s analysis. Without making any distinction between types of violence and conflict, or without testing his thesis with some other datasets (from TWEED to ITERATE), it is risky to conclude that such violence cannot be accounted for by structural variables. Moreover, there is a sizeable literature, not discussed in this book, about the economic and political determinants of civil wars and their occurrence, duration, and lethality. This literature, mainly empirical, goes against the argument of Gupta, showing for instance that there is a strong, robust negative linear relationship between civil wars and economic development.
In another section, the author analyses birth, escalation, and endgame of violent groups. This occupies the three central chapters of the book. In the middle of them, Gupta has another chapter about the similarities, differences and connections between terrorist groups and organized crime. This chapter breaks the rhythm of reading and should have been put somewhere else, perhaps in one of the appendices. For the analysis of the life cycle of violent groups, the author focuses on three cases, the IRA, Al Qaeda and the Naxalites in India. While much has been said on the IRA and Al Qaeda, the information Gupta provides about the Naxalites will be novel to many Western readers. These are three different groups indeed. The IRA is nationalist and largely domestic; it was an underground group unable to liberate territory from the state’s control. Al Qaeda holds a religious doctrine and militants claiming adherence to it operate in many countries, without a definite territorial base. The Naxalitis, by contrast, are a revolutionary group acting in a poor country and possess a capacity to liberate some territory from state control in the countryside.

Despite these differences, Gupta finds common dynamics in all three groups. There is a grievance in every case that is exploited by political entrepreneurs. Most terrorist groups die in their earliest stage (90% of all groups are said to disappear after one year of activity). The ones that are able to survive are those that take roots in their constituencies. It is popular support that accounts for the resilience that surviving terrorist groups have. The popularity of the insurgents is often boosted by counterproductive state repression. If the state commits excesses in its war on terror, the effort often backfires, increasing the legitimacy of the terrorists.

The terrorists, however, also make important mistakes, carrying out attacks that may put great pressure on the state but which are rejected by their support community. Loss of support inevitably leads to isolation and marginalization, eroding the offensive capacity of the violent group. Terrorists then become more vulnerable. If the state then finds the right mix of repression and accommodation, the end is in sight. The book closes with a general discussion about the effectiveness of the terrorist strategy and some policy implications. Taking a middle position in the debate between Robert Pape and Max Abrams, Gupta holds that terrorists very seldom reach their long-term, maximalist goals, though some of them often succeed in reaching short-term objectives.

‘Understanding Terrorist and Political Violence’ is well written, references are exhaustive and the author manages to bridge disciplinary fields, connecting the analysis of terrorism with economic, psychological, and organizational theories. Its main contribution lies in the way it is tackling the most relevant issues: the social and political mechanisms that underlie the emergence of terrorist groups, the role of collective identities, the life cycle of these groups, the response of the state, the relationship between the terrorists and their supporters, and their degree of success. (Reviewed by Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, Juan March Institute, Madrid)