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SPS 2014/01
Department of Political and Social Sciences

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EUI Working Paper **SPS** 2014/01
Forthcoming in D.Gambetta (editor), *Fight, Flight, Mimic. Identity Signalling in Armed Conflicts*, under review

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ISSN 1725-6755

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Printed in Italy
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Badia Fiesolana
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy
www.eui.eu
cadmus.eui.eu

Abstract

This paper investigates group-identity signalling among violent extremists in Italy between 1969 and 1980—with particular focus on the left-wing urban guerrilla organisation known as *Brigate Rosse*. Other groups both from the left and right end of the political spectrum will be taken into account for comparative purposes. Starting from the definition of political violence as propaganda by the deed this paper focuses on how underground groups manage their communicative purposes. It addresses how groups designed their claiming signature, the threat posed by unauthorized use of those signatures, and the strategies to protect them from deceptive mimics of various sorts (criminals, political adversaries and competitors). Drawing theoretical insights from the concept of mimicry in evolutionary biology and signalling theory the paper analyses equivalent strategic behaviour among the actors of the Italian political struggle and identify who *mimics* what *model* and to the damage of whom. The analysis is based on a mixed method approach (Creswell 2003) using both quantitative and qualitative sources. Quantitative data -based on a collation of the START-GTD and an original collection of data from Italian newspapers and biographical sources - are used to present a substantive picture of detected mimic behaviour and available signature designs. Qualitative data are analyzed thematically to offer contextual depth to the quantitative patterns identified. Biographies of former militants and judicial papers are used to illustrate the steps and the constraints that lead to the design of unique signatures or their failure to mimic proof the identity signal.

Keywords
Political violence, signalling theory, mimicry, competition, credit taking, property rights enforcement, GDT

"We are the Red Brigades not just one group among the others.
Whatever we do, cock-ups included, we sign it,
as long as we did it".
(Moretti 1994: 220, *my translation*)

Introduction

Claims of responsibility in modern insurgencies are hard to verify given the fragmentation of the perpetrating front and the potential threat of mimics impersonated by false claims of aspiring terrorists and competing groups that make self-indicting claims untrustworthy (Fox 2010). Mimics however have plagued political violence well before the present state of affairs albeit hardly any attention has been paid to them in the extant literature. Why and how groups and individuals pass off as underground political groups and what are the consequences of the threat posed by mimic behaviour for their model? These are the core questions addressed by this paper within the context of a wave of ideologically motivated violence. This article investigates group-identity signalling among violent extremists in Italy between 1969 and 1980—with particular focus on the left-wing urban guerrilla organisation known as *Brigate Rosse* (BR from now on). In particular the paper focuses on mimics at group level counterfeiting their model's identity signal. Mimicry is a concept best known in evolutionary biology as the successful signalling of one group traits by another to the benefit of the latter or both in order to deceive a dupe/receiver (King, Stanfield, Mulligan 2012). The aim of this paper is to detect equivalent strategic behaviour among the actors of the Italian political struggle and identify who *mimics* what *model* and to the damage of whom.

Besides BR other violent political groups both left and right wing will make appearances as signature designers and as models for mimics. The Italian landscape of political violence offers a good degree of variation in signature design ranging from anonymity chosen by groups that kept a legal voice whilst maintaining an underground armed branch (Lotta Continua, Potere Operaio, Autonomia Operaia, Movimento Sociale Italiano), to umbrella signatures signaling a cluster of political agents unified by common aims rather than structures (Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari, Anarchists), to signatures uniquely identifying an organization (Brigate Rosse, Nuclei Armati Proletari, Prima Linea). This article will focus on the latter and leave the analysis of anonymity and umbrella signatures to another occasion. Mimics in reverse order of importance instead will be outlined: criminals who exploit the signatures of violent political groups to strengthen the credibility of their threats or to confuse law and order agents; activists mimicking within their own camp and across camp; agent provocateurs carrying out false flag operations.

The context is a wave of acts of political violence between 1969 and 1980 in Italy that caused 362 dead and several hundred wounded (Galleni 1981, Della Porta, Rossi 1984; Moss 1989: 18-19; vittimeterrorismo.it). It was the highest number of casualties caused by ideological conflict in Europe after WWII. The violence was not the result of a major military confrontation rather the peak of a long lasting simmering domestic conflict where "terrorism has been more or less a permanent phenomenon" (Engene 2007): 134) .
Political violence in the 1970s was ideologically motivated and fed on unresolved political grievances subsequent to the dramatic regime change at the end of WWII. The Resistance war in Italy was at the same time a war of liberation and a civil war (Pavone 1991). The winning

side was split between insurgents loyal to the Italian Communist Party and an anti-communist coalition. They harboured contrasting international loyalties. The losers instead were unified by defeat and hardly penalized by the new state. On the contrary a large section of the Fascist secret police was entrusted with state security (Pisano 1979; De Lutiis 1996) and became pivotal in the Stay Behind network organized by the Allied security services to counter the expansion of the Communist bloc. Much is known about this operation (De Lutiis 1996; Ganser 2005) although it is not clear to what extent it run out of the hands of those that devised it as the existing evidence is confusing (Ferraresi 1996; Bale 1996). It is clear however that deceptive mimicry in the shape of "intoxication techniques" became part of this strategy in the 1960s and aimed at creating popular support for dramatic political turns to the right should the risk of a government including the Communist party in Italy ever arise (Weinberg 1995; Bale 1996; Ferraresi 1996; Panvini 2009). In 1968 after social tension had mounted for a few years and centre-left governments were being experimented an anonymous bombing campaign began often leaving clues that would support attributions to left-wing extremists (Bale 1987: 211; 1996: 156 n.5; De Palo, Giannulli 1989: 127).[1]The campaign culminated with the bombing of the Banca dell'Agricoltura in Milan at the end of 1969 that became a pivotal moment to further political violence.

Signalling Theory (ST) provides the theoretical lenses adopted in this paper to analyse these events. Underground radical groups were at the forefront of this wave of violence. The success of illegal political groups in promoting their cause depends to a considerable extent upon the publicity which they receive through their actions (Lacqueur 1977: 110) and they strategically develop an often "symbiotic" relationship with the media (Wilkinson 1997; Enders, Sandler 2006: 37; Rohner, Frey 2007; Della Porta 2013; Hoffman 2013). This explains why they are eager to signal their responsibility for incriminating acts. Political violence - of which terrorism is the relevant tactic - aims at modifying the behaviour of the opposing side by impacting on an audience other than the direct physical target (Gambetta 2005; Enders, Sandler 2006, LaFree, Dugan 2009; Wigle 2010). The violent action is instrumental to promote a cause that by choice or contingencies cannot be pursued exclusively through peaceful means nor fought as conventional war "in the light of day [when] there is no mystery about the identity of the participants" (Lacqueur 1977: 3). Perpetrators of political violence strike unannounced coming from anonymity.

Political violence analyzed in this paper then is an essentially communicative act to engage in a bargaining process with opponents, appeal to constituencies for resources, send messages to competing underground groups and to members either when internal channels of communication brake down or they are in prison. These goals are at odds with secrecy, underground groups' defining condition. Benefits in terms of safety are counterbalanced by constraints that are likely to undermine the groups' communicative goals thus hampering their political purpose. In particular asymmetrical information - when relevant knowledge is available to one part of the exchange but not to the other – is a constraint to which underground groups need to find adaptive solutions to have a political impact. Communication heavily affected by asymmetrical information is at the core of signalling theory making it fit to understand how perpetrators of political violence manage their communicative tools. In particular signalling theory allows to investigate the mechanisms by

[1] Between 1968 and 1969 there were attacks in Rome, Reggio Calabria, Reggio Emilia, Terni, Legnano and Milan signed with the Anarchist symbol or hailing at Chairman Mao that were later identified as the work of right wing extremists (De Palo, Giannulli 1989: 150-151; cfr also Ferraresi 1995).

which underground groups establish uniquely identifying signatures to claim their authorship of acts of political violence.

Signalling theory in this paper provides a novel perspective to fill in a gap of knowledge in the understanding of communicative violence. Existing studies focus on how political grievances bring about groups pursuing communicative violence and their often symbiotic interaction with the media to acquire visibility (Wilkinson 1997; Rohner, Frey 2007; Della Porta 2013; Hoffman 2013). A few have asked the question under which circumstances terrorist groups choose to claim their violence (Hoffman, 2010, Wright 2010, Min 2013). The extant literature analyses the forms and the outcomes of communicative violence and yet it take for granted the process by which that communication is established and made possible, namely how the perpetrators of violence negotiate structural constraints to emit an identity signal from underground.

The first hurdle they need to overcome is to gain the trust of the intended receiver of their message. According to signalling theory a signal helps to explain the mechanisms put in place to address the deficit of trust due to asymmetrical information. Two agents are the protagonists of a communicative exchange, a signaller and a receiver. The signaler faces the problem of convincing the receiver of its honesty whereas the receiver must discern the intentions of the signaller and whether the signs he is displaying are honest or fake (Bacharach and Gambetta 2001; Gambetta 2009, 2009a). A signal is an observable indicator whose cost of production for the honest signaller is inversely associated with his quality level (Spence 1974). A receiver reads a signal as a true manifestation of an unobservable quality – the honest identity of an underground group in this instance - because he thinks that only those who truly possess the quality can afford to display it whilst those who do not cannot afford the differential cost of emitting the signal (Gambetta 2009). Everybody can make a phone call for instance but only the true perpetrator of an act of political violence can do it when the news about the event being claimed is not yet in the public domain. The higher the differential cost to fake the signal for the one who does not possess the unobservable quality, the more discriminating is the signal.

The identity signal of an underground group is the signature by which that group marks an act of political violence as its own exclusive work. The signature as it will be illustrated later in this article is a unique composite of identifying markers rather than just a name or acronym. A name, as a brand is open to counterfeit. Property rights issues are at stake and underground groups need to monitor their identity signal to avoid potentially harmful manipulation of their communicative domain. It follows that it does not suffice for underground political groups to establish a name or acronym as their uniquely identifying signal. Predictably we should expect that in the absence of a third party monitoring the use of the signal, and enforcing punishment of abuse extra-legal political groups take care of these functions directly.

The paper will discuss the threat posed by mimics to an underground group identity signal, analyse the measures adopted in the attempt to counter it, highlight how deceptive mimic behaviour can contribute to the onset of a low intensity conflict, and how the way underground groups address the threat posed by mimics may affect its development. A methodological section presents the data and sources used. The argument is introduced by a quantitative overview to provide an illustration of the attributes and goals of detected mimics in Italy between 1974 and 1980. Then one section discusses the threat that deceptive mimic behaviour posed to illegal political groups. Subsequently a section will argue about the strategies available to groups to counter this threat. The designing of BR signature will

illustrate how a signature was made mimic proof. Finally a summary of the impact of mimic behaviour on this wave of political violence will be sketched in the conclusions.

Data and methods

This article is based on a mixed method approach (Creswell 2003) using both quantitative and qualitative sources. Quantitative data furnish a substantive picture of detected mimic behaviour and available signature designs. Qualitative data offer contextual depth to the quantitative patterns identified. Biographies of former militants and judicial papers are used to illustrate the steps and the constraints that lead to the design of signatures.

The main quantitative source is the Global Terrorism Database (GTD from now on) of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), currently the most comprehensive open source unclassified database on terrorist events both domestic and transnational (La Free 2010). The database is event based and includes about 98000 acts of political violence worldwide between 1970 and 2010 (download 26.4.2012). GTD is helpful to identify and standardize acts of political violence. Events are selected if they fit at least two of three main criteria: 1. have an apparent political, religious, social goal, and an economic goal framed by a political project; 2. there is evidence of the intention to coerce, intimidate or convey a message to an audience other than the immediate victims; 3. are aimed at civilians and non-combatants. Each event is described through fifteen primary variables and a number of sub-variables regarding the attributes of the incident, the target, the perpetrators, and the claim.

GTD confirms the trend of Italian political violence previously described by other sources for the period 1970-1982 (Galleni 1981; Della Porta, Rossi 1983; Moss, 1989): a dramatic peak in the second half of the decade and its sudden end after 1980 (tab.1).

[tab.1 here]

GTD on its own however is ill-equipped to answer questions about claiming practice, signature design and mimic behaviour as it does not make distinctions between third party attribution of responsibility and claims, little details are given as to the design of the claims and false claims are not identified. In order to fit the purpose of the present research GTD has been integrated by a collection of primary data about each event from the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* (CdS from now on),[2] dedicated websites[3], and other sources that collected and classified acts of political violence in Italy (Galleni 1981; Marletti et alii. 2004; Progetto Memoria 2007 (2)). The CdS reports the events giving details including multiple signatures, public disclaimers, and signing techniques. Moreover it reports when claims are contentious and mimics are detected at the time of the event. Dedicated websites and secondary literature instead yield data about false attributions and mimics that became apparent over time through judicial investigation. Events that were missed by the GTD and would fit in at least two of the three criteria adopted to include a record were added to the database.

[2] The CdS is the oldest, and until the early 1980s, the Italian newspaper with the widest readership and coverage of national events. Based in Milan, CdS covers extensively political violence in the North of Italy and in particular Milan and Turin, two out of three main theatres of political violence in Italy in the period.

[3] Vittimeterrorismo.it, Brigaterosse.it, www.pernondimenticare.net.

The collated database GTDCdS expands on the GTD by adding variables relative to the attributes of the claims and claiming behaviour. Clear distinctions are introduced if the act was the result of riots or a planned operation, if it was claimed or only attributed to a group and if a multiple claim was the result of cooperation among groups or mimicry. Acts of mimicry and disclaimers are recorded and the type and motives of the mimic specified when known. The attributes of the claim relate to its format and mode of distribution.
GTDCdS records 1862 events between 1974 and 1980 including minor ones that are missed in GTD and yet are relevant to the understanding of the micro management of identity signals. Political violence in Italy in fact was mostly made of minor acts such as minor bombings, Molotov and arson attacks[4] as tab. 2 shows

[tab 2 about here]

Minor events are of relatively little consequence and yet not irrelevant to understand identity signalling among underground groups. The propensity to claim attacks in tab. 3 shows that although to a lesser degree than major events most minor attacks, including failed ones, were claimed thus revealing their strategic value in the eyes of perpetrators.

[tab 3 about here]

The period 1974-1980 is chosen for two reasons: firstly the bulk of political violence in Italy did occur between those years. GTD records 1509 events in Italy up to 2010 of which 1008 occurred between 1974 and 1980. Secondly before 1974 political violence was mostly anonymous a peculiar type of mimicry and signature which deserve a detailed analysis that is beyond the scope of the present article.

The threat of mimics

The threat posed by mimics was not just a theoretical possibility among Italian perpetrators of political violence. The crucial event that set in motion the wave of political violence between 1969 and 1980 was a major instance of deceptive mimicry. On December 12th 1969 a bomb exploded at the *Banca dell'Agricoltura* in Milan causing 17 dead and 88 wounded. The bombing was never claimed and swiftly, perhaps hastily, attributed by the police to an anarchist cell, the Circolo XXII Marzo, within a few hours. The membership of this group was a motley crew of Chestertonian flavour including among others "comrade Andrea", a police undercover agent, and Mario Merlino a forty four year old member of the radical right-wing groups Ordine Nuovo and Alleanza Nazionale (De Palo, Giannulli 1989: 152; Ferraresi 1996: 92).[5] As Merlino himself confessed he was "specialized in left-wing groups" (De Palo, Giannulli 1989: 145) and part of a network of right wing extremists in connection with US military agents in the North East of Italy.[6] After trying to infiltrate Maoist groups without success he turned to aesthetic mimicry (long hair and leftish looks), displayed anarchist

[4] These events are planned. Acts of violence as a consequence of riots have been removed from the database.

[5] Other members were Pietro Valpreda, a middle aged dancer, three teenage students of middle class origins and a university student (De Palo, Giannulli 1989: 152)

[6] On the responsibility of right wing groups in these operations see Sentenza Salvini (Trib. Of Milan, Sentence vs Azzi Nico et alii, n.2643/84 RGPM, 18.3.1995: ch.31). In particular according to Stefano Delle Chiaie one of the main promoters of this campaign "The main element of the strategy of destabilization was the creation of fake radical left wing groups and the infiltration of other pre-existing groups so that the left would be held responsible of the acts of political violence [...] thus provoking the army to intervene and exclude the Communist Party from any influence in Italian politics» (int.16.6.192, ff.3-4).

symbols, and masterminded the spinning off of the Circolo XXII marzo out of an established Anarchist group (Ferraresi 1996: 92).

The Anarchist movement was an easy target for mimics for a number of reasons (De Palo, Giannulli 1989: 147-48): the logo was easy to reproduce; lack of a centralized organization implied little monitoring on the credentials of those who claimed to belong to the movement; the rather loose theoretical foundation of the Anarchic movement was accessible to ideologically weak impostors; Anarchist targets were mostly banks and churches and fascist infiltrators did not need to compromise their loyalty by hitting right wing targets to display a sorting signal of their leftist credentials.

The outcome of the 1969 bombing in Milan was a dramatic polarization of radical extremists against the Italian state. The frustration of their political expectations, judicial investigations and the arrests that followed, fostered resentment among right wing extremists who had been instrumental to the mimic campaign culminated in 1969. Several acts of carnage, assassinations and threats were authored by right wing extremists in revenge between 1972 and 1976 meeting the expectations of left wing militants that violence was a necessary defensive option (Ferraresi 1996).[7] At the opposite end of the political spectrum the 1969 bombing was a "watershed" (Pace in Grandi 2005: 260). It was "a determinant step in the individual roads towards terrorism" (Cazzullo 2006 (2 ed.): 90-9, Grandi 2005: 26, 61, 112 193; Moretti 1994: 11; Franceschini 1988: 23; Gallinari 2006 : 73-74):

> [it] radically changed our politics and how we perceived our adversary. Before Piazza Fontana our antagonists were individual social actors [...] the bombing of Piazza Fontana and in particular the unacceptable behaviour of those who represented the state at the time, convinced us that the state was our enemy (Pardi in Grandi, 2005: 282; Revelli in Cazzullo, 2006 : 91).

Individual roads to political violence coalesced into organized groups among which the Red Brigades (Moretti 1994: 20).[8]

An act of mimicry, one can argue, was the original sin that set in motion this wave of political violence and persisted during this wave in a number of forms. But what is the strategic meaning of mimicry among perpetrators of political violence? Mimicry is a concept best known in evolutionary biology as the successful signalling of one group traits by another to the benefit of the latter or both in order to deceive a dupe/receiver (King, Stanfield, Mulligan 2012). "Batesian" mimics pretend to possess the properties of a higher quality group aiming at duping a predator to their own advantage. "Muellerian" mimics instead signal traits of similar groups with whom they share predators benefitting both groups; their evolutionary advantage is "safety in numbers" as they decrease the individual odds for both groups to become victims of their common predator.

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[7] Strage di Peteano (Ordine Nuovo), 1972; Strage della Prefettura di Milano (agent provocateur with right wing past) 1973; Strage di Piazza della Loggia a Brescia (Ordine Nuovo) 1974; Strage Treno Italicus (ON) 1974; Between 30 April 1974 and 26 May 1975 12 bombing attacks to schools, infrastructures, police stations and private buildings hit the town of Savona. On 25.2.1975(CdS) Ordine Nero claims with a written message the bombing of the Prefettura in Savona causing nine wounded; assassination judge Occorsio in Rome (ON) 1976.

[8] Similarly Alberto Franceschini, one of BR prime movers, claims: "Piazza Fontana [the bombing of] confirmed the need and the virtue of our project. If we needed something that would strengthen our resolve and would tell us that there were no time to lose, well the carnage in Piazza Fontana was exactly that" (2004: 56 *my translation*).

Extra-legal political groups share with the biological world a lethal high threshold of risk and imperfect communication that impair their chances of success (Gambetta 2009). There are crucial differences however between social mimicry among humans and the biological domain. In biology mimicry concerns intra-species rather than intra-group behaviour within the same species (Gambetta 2009a). Secondly in evolutionary biology terms the reaction of model to harmful mimicry cannot be observed within one generation as successful mutations are perceived several generations down the line. The reaction of a human model instead elicits much faster tactical counter measures and strategic provisions against the threat of mimic behaviour.

To what extent mimics are a threat for underground groups? The goal of a mimic is to dupe the audience receiving the signal to modify dupe's behaviour in favour of mimic. Here we consider an act of mimicry when someone forges the identity signal of an underground political group, or issues a claim pretending to be one modelling on the markers of a camp in the fight, or pretends to be the perpetrator of an act of political violence executed by someone else.

Modelling on camp was a case of Muellerian mimicry when it occurred to the fighting camp benefit. In Italy between 1969 and 1980 at least 307 one-off signatures bore the marks of the left-wing camp and 65 those of the right-wing one (Galleni 1981). One-off signatures are puzzling as they do not fit the purpose of appealing to a constituency to the long term benefit of a group. They have been explained as the result of different behaviours hard to disentangle such as criminal opportunism, false flags and spontaneous political violence (Della Porta, Rossi 1984). Muellerian mimicry should also be included to the list: activists made up claiming names modelled on their own camp attributes to create a "prairie fire" effect mimicking the might of a fighting front much bigger than its actual size (Anonymous 1979, Pisano 1979, Rimanelli 1989). Such behaviour was openly theorized and applied by left wing militants that refused the structured military model of the compartmented organization adopted by BR (Segio 2006; Tribunale di Genova, Statement by F.Rainone, 26.9.1980). A proliferation of "fronts", "nucleus", "formations" "brigades", "squads" and "commandoes" – names interchangeably used by the same core of militants - made up the bulk of the violent arm of the left-wing movement at the time.

Muellerian mimics do not pose a threat to model. Batesian mimics instead do. They are opportunistic, hostile, or free riding. Opportunistic mimics are mostly motivated by individual gains pretending to be political perpetrators. The range of opportunistic mimics in the period 1974-1980 encompasses dark comedy as much as tragedy among whom two schoolgirls issuing extortion letters signed Black Brigades to provide for gluttony and fashion (CdS 21.1.1975); a maniac passing off as a member of the BR who ended up committing suicide during a tragic siege (CdS 6.2.1978, 7.2.1978); a Rumanian exile impersonating the leader of the BR in a futile attempt to cash in on the Moro kidnapping (CdS 16.3.1978).

The strategic intention of opportunistic mimics is not to inflict damage to model rather to enhance their own chances of success by manipulating dupe's expectations about model. Opportunistic mimics aim either at increasing their power of intimidation during kidnappings, extortions and robberies - a lone bank robber pulled off a big heist in Genoa in 1978 by introducing himself as a member of the BR adding that lack of compliance would bring trouble to the bank personnel's families (CdS 12.4.1978) – or at creating a diversion from ego to confuse the initial stages of investigation. In 1979 the assassins of Judge Terranova signed

as Ordine Nuovo, a right wing formation (CdS 25.9.1979) to distract attention from the Sicilian Mafia.[9] Multiple claims did fit the same purpose: the assassination by Cosa Nostra of the head of the Christian Democratic Party in Sicily Piersanti Mattarella was initially framed as a Sicilian Moro case as it had been claimed as BR, PL and a phantomatic "Nucleo Fascista Rivoluzionario" (CdS 1.7.1980).

When harm to model is not the primary motive it can still be a bonus. This was the case when right-wing militants murdered one of theirs, Martino Traversa – suspected of being a police informant – and claimed it under a fictitious left-wing name (CdS 13.3.1980). Similarly right wing militants claimed robberies pretending to belong to left wing groups (CdS 6.3.1980): the goals of these actions were punishment and self-finance. Anonymity was a plausible option but false flagging added the political icing on the cake.

Hostile mimics instead are foes moved by the strategic intention of inflicting harm to model via dupe. [10] In their hands mimicry is a weapon rather than a defensive device. Right wing militants for instance did model on the opposing camp when packed explosive in radical left wing newspapers to create the impression that the radical left wing movement was behind bombing campaigns. Hostile mimics were also found among groups competing within camp. Members of the left wing formation Autonomia Operaia were behind the kidnapping of an 11 year old boy and claimed the action as BR to smear the competing group reputation (CdS 23.8.1979).

Free riding mimics are found among multiple claims once joint actions are ruled out. The Proletari Armati Per il Comunismo (PAC) for instance added their claim to the wounding of a journalist solely executed by BR (CdS, 24.4.1979). Similarly PL a few times appended its name to actions by BR and BR at least once to PL. By appending its name mimic aimed at free riding on other's effort and resources to gain publicity even when they had little chances of bringing about an attribution. The potential damage for the honest signaller went far beyond minor piracy.

Independently from their opportunistic, hostile, or free riding nature mimics pose an intrinsic threat to the identity signal of model. The emission of forged signals interferes with the group's channel of communications causing the receiver to doubt the signal even when it is honestly emitted. Once an identity signal is corrupted by a deficit of trust the group faces the uncomfortable option of going back to anonymity or changing name. Dumping a name is a unilateral choice hardly effective when asymmetrical information prevails and would not protect the group from false claims and attributions that could prove damaging.[11] Besides a

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[9] The Sicilian Mafia would exploit the political climate to cover assassinations that would point to direct incriminations, see for instance the case of Giuseppe Impastato in Behan 2008. There are other instances of mimic behaviour by organized crime beyond the period under examination: in 1983 a 'Ndangheta clan in Piedmont signed the assassination of judge Bruno Caccia as BR (Piccioni in Bianconi 2003: 237; Gallinari 2007: 295). In 1993 instead the Sicilian Cosa Nostra was forced by lack of models to make up a political signature, Falange Armata, to create a smoke screen around the authors of major bombing attacks in Florence, Rome and Milan.

[10] Right wing militants signed violent actions either by left-wing sounding names (Alba Rossa, Volante Rossa" or by ambiguous names reminiscent of left wing groups (Brigate Combattenti Franco Anselmi, Gruppo Azione Rivoluzionaria, Nuclei di Azione Rivoluzionaria) (Galleni 1981)

[11] Fioravanti maintains that when the Strage di Bologna was claimed by NAR they had stopped using that name (Bianconi 2005). GTD considers the event a dubious attribution

name carries political capital accrued under the compromised identity signal. To transfer that capital into a different name is difficult.[12]

Valerio Fioravanti, leader and founder of NAR wished to rename his group in 1979 as "everybody had taken possession of the acronym and it had been involved in all sorts of actions" (Bianconi 2005(3): 182). He organized a major attack against a police patrol on 25 May 1980 and the assassination of a judge to publicize documents in which NAR was declared dead and a new signature announced. Unfortunately to switch off the old name they had to use it failing to erase its association with the perpetrators of those actions (Bianconi 2005(3):182-186, 199-203; CdS 26.5.1980). The old name kept popping up as "the group formerly known as NAR" or "New NAR" as finally members themselves began to call the group (Bianconi 2005(3): 233).

Given the cost of dumping an identity signal and the difficulty of changing it avoiding signal depletion is crucial. Model can enforce her property rights by denouncing mimics and disclaiming the action or prevent forgery by designing its signature mimic proof discouraging counterfeiting. Before analysing these options let's quantify mimicry in the Italian political struggle in the 1970s.

Detected mimics

The GTDCdS yields 103 events where deceptive mimicry is detected equal to about 11 percent of all claimed events (1012). They are identified through disclaimers, counterclaims, multiple claims once joint actions are excluded, false claims exposed in the days immediately following the event or as a result of lengthy judicial investigations.

Acts of mimicry are false claims – when an act of political violence is claimed under the name of a group that is not the perpetrator – and multiple claims – when an act of violence is claimed by more than one name and at least one is a false claim. Multiple claims are more problematic to assess than false claims. Unless we have a clear narrative about the claim it is impossible to know whether it is by one agent trying to confuse investigations or multiple agents acting independently.

Our sample is made of detected mimics and as such it is hard to judge how it captures the actual size of this phenomenon. GTDCdS is not an adequate source to identify political groups mimicking ordinary criminals on which there is anecdotal evidence. Right wing groups mimicked ordinary criminals when doing self-financing robberies to confuse investigations. They deliberately either tried to pass women off as men so as to conceal the mixed gender composition of the assaulting team - at the time a sorting marker of politically motivated violence in Italy - or enacted criminal behaviour typical of drug addicts – stealing gold chains and bracelets from bystanders (Fioravanti in Bianconi 1992: 120, 225).

Robberies and kidnappings were among the repertoire of revolutionary actions sanctioned by left-wing manuals of urban guerrilla (Marighella 1969: 6-7, 13, 42, 52,) and are documented in militants' memoirs often recollected with a vivid sense of shame (Bianconi 2003: 18-19; Bellosi in Grandi 2004: 44; Franceschini 1988; Moretti 1994). In the early 1970s they went mostly unclaimed for tactical reasons (Bellosi in Grandi 2004) leaving the militants (Paroli in

[12] BR splinter groups after 1980s add individual denominations to the original name in order to maintain the political capital intrinsic to the name Brigate Rosse (Moretti 1994)

Bianconi 2003: 18-19) to deal with the deep discomfort caused by a type of action bearing the hallmark of ordinary crime:

> How does a robbery in the name of the proletariat (*esproprio*) differ from a simple robbery? The only difference is that the perpetrator is acknowledged by the movement, it needs to be a credible revolutionary organization. We could not take this for granted as we were yet to prove it [in 1972]. We had to wait until '77, the kidnapping of Costa, to claim in the name of the proletariat as BR (Moretti 1996: 23, *my translation*)

We can safely assume that our sample of mimic behaviour is not the universe and an unquantifiable number of events remained undetected. Among the undetected ones however politically relevant acts of violence are unlikely as they have been at least revealed if not correctly attributed through time and judicial investigations. The same however cannot be said for minor actions. The ranking by type of actions perpetrated by detected mimics in comparison with that of all signed events shows an interesting discrepancy (fig.4)

[Fig.4 about here]

Relatively to the number of signed events assassinations, bombing, and kidnapping rank high among acts of mimicry whereas minor acts of violence such as arson attacks, minor bombings, and gunshots rank higher among all signed events. This suggests that the detection of mimics is likely to be the higher the more the severity of the event and a function of the effort put into investigations or of the reaction of model which affects data collection.

The detection of mimics is the result of individual's ability to counterfeit a signature, of observers to attribute authorship through recognisable identity markers, and of groups credibly disclaiming attributions. It follows that detection depends on several variables affected by the dynamic of the conflict such as the groups' capacity of building mimic proof signatures over time and the ability to assess their credentials of authenticity. In particular the escalation in the level of violence and the number of participants is likely to make assessing claims more difficult.

Figure 5 shows the comparative trends of claimed events, detected mimics, and one-off signatures.

[Fig.5 about here]

The trends run parallel at the onset of this wave when there were few claims and events were sporadic. The trend of mimicry acts dramatically diverged instead once signatures and events increased. They intersect the upward trend of mimics again on their way downward. This suggests that mimics might have been more successful amidst high intensity political violence. Declining violence and signature numbers instead exposed them.

Thus bearing in mind limitations as to the actual size of this phenomenon we shall highlight the attributes and goals of detected mimics. In the sample forty four are opportunistic, fifty three are politically motivated and for a handful of cases the motives are not clear. Their distribution by type of action (fig.6) covers a fairly wide repertoire of acts of violence. Political mimicry however concerns mostly direct violence against people (assassinations and wounding) and bombings to a lower degree.

[Fig. 6 about here]

The mimics in the sample are divided between fifty eight false claims and forty five multiple claims of which at least one is false (fig.7). In this sample multiple claims were mostly politically motivated (37), and marginally used by opportunistic mimics (8).

[Fig.7 about here]

False claims instead are mostly by opportunistic mimics with a criminal goal (36) and 56 per cent of them choose BR as a model. Eighteen false claims are made with political intent modelling on BR only four times (21%) relying mostly on camp attributes as a generic model. Finally in four cases the intent of mimic is not clear.[13]This distribution suggests that mimics pick a specific group as model when they aim at modifying the receiver's behaviour opportunistically and for a short term. For long term political effect they would rather choose generic camp attributes to model upon. Forty eight false claims are modelled on a left-wing signature, eight on a right wing one, and two on causes with ethnic connotations.

Among multiple claims twenty nine model on only one camp (left-wing); sixteen instead combine signatures belonging to both camps (fig.8).

[Fig. 8 about here]

There is no multiple claim consistently right-wing. A conjectural explanation is that left-wing mimics – often upstart or minor formations - were free riding on the publicity caused by others hitting targets they would have chosen to appeal to their shared political constituency. Mixed camp multiple claims instead did not aim at communication with a constituency. Rather they caused confusion thus behaving more like opportunistic mimics or agent provocateurs whose actions did not aim at appealing for resources.

The picture offered by the GTDCdS sample finally suggests that mimics modelled on a wide range of group names: out of fifty eight false claims we count twenty nine different names. BR were picked twenty times (34%) as model. Eleven times BR were chosen with the intent to shift blame, seven to increase intimidation, and twice to confuse investigations. The fact that BR were already established in 1974 and lasted throughout the period in consideration could explain it. Yet the data suggest that mimics picked BR as their model particularly at the peak of their success. Out of twenty false claims fifteen are recorded after the Moro kidnapping between 1978 and 1980. Free riders as well see in actions by BR a good opportunity: out of a total of 35 multiple claims they are the first claiming group fifteen times. PL, the major rival of BR within the left wing camp, is second claiming group seven times followed by eight other minor formations or upstarts.

Given the limitations of a sample based on detected mimics it would be hazardous to conclude that the pivotal role of BR as model is the result of mimic's preference, more than his failure to counterfeit a well designed signature, or higher capacity of BR to issue credible

[13] One is the claim suggesting that NAR were involved with the mysterious plane crash near the island of Ustica in June 1980 causing 81 dead. Another is the bombing of the Bologna railway station on 2 August 1980 causing 85 dead and 200 wounded. It was claimed by NAR and BR and disclaimed by both (Bocca 2007: 24-25). NAR militants were sentenced as perpetrators of this act of political violence. Doubts still persist and GTD acknowledges them. A few alternative possible authors leave the event at the centre of conspiracy theories to date (http://www.stragi.it/; Zamberletti 1995; Bocca 2007).

disclaimers. Yet it is safe to conclude that mimics in the GTDCdS sample show a stronger preference for modelling on generic camp attributes. If the model is an existing group mimic can expect its reaction in the shape of a disclaimer. Predictably mimic avoids modelling on a specific group given the risk of being disclaimed unless the benefit of doing so is in the short term during assaults and robberies or free-riding for publicity.

Signatures and disclaimers

A disclaimer - a declaration by which a group states his lack of involvement in an action attributed to it - is the obvious tool for a group to enforce its identity signal. BR were quite explicit on the matter:

> Let Autonomia Operaia or Potere Operaio or Bande Armate, or whatever they are know that they must claim with their own acronyms. Should they use our name again we will turn them in. We will give them the treatment reserved to the members of AO that kidnapped the young Freddi (CdS 25.3.1980).

Yet our sample yields only sixteen disclaimers, eight each as reactions to either false or multiple claims. Multiple claims were followed as well by four counterclaims - claims in which a group reasserted its authorship amidst competitive claims. Modelling on camp reduced the risk of eliciting model's reaction as there was no corporate "we" to issue a disclaimer. With the notable exception of one camp disclaimer[14] all remaining ones are by groups: six (37.5%) are by BR, three by NAR, two by PL and one each by Nuclei Armati Proletari, Ronde Proletarie, Ordine Nuovo and Ordine Nero.

Furthermore disclaimers were met with scepticism and not without motive. At least three in our samples were in fact issued to shift blame about actions that had gone beyond their intended scope.[15] Thus once a mimic claim was issued the burden to prove one's innocence was on model raising the cost of a convincing disclaimer to an often unaffordable level.[16] What cleared BR of criminal responsibility over Guido Freddi's kidnapping mentioned before was not their disclaimer but the fact that the police followed an anonymous tip-off leading to the typewriter of an Outonomia Operaia militant that had produced the false claim (CDS 20.8.1979).[17] As a result we should expect an underground group to issue disclaimers only when the feared consequences of the act of mimicry are such as to overcome the combined cost of the effort of issuing it plus the strong possibility of failing to convince the receiver.

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[14] The authors of an attack claimed under the name of "Gruppi Proletari Armati" were right wing militants later arrested and exposed by left wing militants.

[15] In 1979 BR made a crucial mistake that cost them their constituency. They targeted a communist trade unionist from Genoa. The action was intended to maiming but resulted in an assassination. It took two days to issue a communiqué, soon after a phone call denied it and only a couple of weeks later a communiqué claimed full responsibility (CdS 24.1.1979; 9.2.1979); in 1980 Ronde Proletarie (a sub group of Prima linea) killed a private guard. The action was meant as a testing exercise for new recruits and the aim was to take the guard's gun and not his life. Soon after a phone call claimed the wounding of the guard that had died in the meantime. A disclaimer was issued once Ronde Proletarie realized their mistake. The authors, young Prima Linea recruits confessed it once they were apprehended (CdS 10.4.1980; Novelli, Tranfaglia, 1988). In 1978 a bomb at the Gazzettino daily in Venice caused one dead. A phone call soon after claimed for Ordine Nuovo, then another phone call in the evening claimed the authors where BR and a day later Ordine Nuovo issued a communiqué disclaiming the act. They changed their mind again and issued a further communiqué explaining that they did not mean to cause victims (CdS 22.2.1978).

[16] NAR disclaimer (CdS 6.8.1980) about the bombing of Bologna in 1980 was never believed although there are now doubts about the involvement of the group in that atrocity.

[17] In 1980 this was revealed to threaten potential mimics in the disclaimers of a robbery perpetrated by ordinary criminals and claimed as BR: (CdS 25.3.1980).

The correlation[18] (r=.25) between the decision to claim and to disclaim is weak suggesting that actors that would secure property rights on their actions investing in a claim were not making an equivalent effort to enforce copy rights on their identity signal. Figure 9 however compares the propensities to claim and disclaim by type of acts of political violence for which we have detected mimics. The comparison shows how selective the decision was. It is apparent that assassinations, bombings major and minor, kidnapping and major attacks made disclaimers particularly worthwhile, whereas wounding, car bombs and minor acts of violence not at all. The eagerness to disclaim failed actions reveals that to be saddled with incompetence made the effort worth its while as well. The ranking of determinants for issuing disclaimers is consistent with the strategic behaviour of actors who have their reputation in the eyes of a constituency in mind: maintaining political control over actions in common with ordinary crime (assassinations, kidnapping, minor bombings and arson), removing responsibility from indiscriminate violence (major bombing) and distancing from incompetence (failed actions).

[Fig.9 about here]

A disclaimer is a desperate attempt to enforce property rights on an underground group identity signal and its outcome is quite uncertain. Prevention through mimic proofed signatures instead would reduce the need for monitoring and enforcing property rights by raising the cost for mimics of producing a counterfeit as convincing as an honest signature. Mimics in our sample were identified mostly because the poor design of their claims either failed to convince about the political nature of the action or that it was the genuine signature of a specific group.

As we mentioned earlier a signature is a composition of marks of which a name is only one and the easiest to counterfeit. Delivery designs are at least as relevant and more difficult to forge if carefully designed. Figure 10 illustrates the propensity to follow different claiming practices among mimics and honest claims by camp. Both mimics and models heavily relied on phone calls to newspapers and news agencies as web site posting was still a long way to come. Left and right wing camp exhibited a preference for issuing documents both of low and high ideological and technical skill bigger than mimics'. Mimics and right wing groups mostly choose "low cost" claiming practices such as simple phone calls and statements in the course of the action. The left-wing camp instead shows a remarkably bigger preference for claiming practices that would have high cost for mimics such as a display of capacity (synchronized phone calls and nested claims when one claim regards a number of different actions) and exclusive knowledge. The certifying agency of exclusive knowledge was sought in claims issued immediately after the attack before radio and television news bulletins would broadcast it.[19] Once the event was known exclusive details –about the action, the weapons and even accidental mistakes – were revealed to secure authorship to the honest perpetrator.

[fig. 10 about here]

[18] The interpretation of *r* beyond perfect correlation at ±1 is open to debate. Guidelines suggest that the closest is the value to 0 the weaker is the correlation (Le Blanc 2004: 89ff). As a rule of thumb values between 0 and <.3 identify a weak correlation, between .3 and <.7 a moderate one, and >.7 a strong one.

[19] More adventurous ways were advanced warnings like IRA's. Italians were more prudent. BR for instance had a rule never to write the document explaining an act of violence before the completion of the mission so as to avoid incrimination in case the action was pre-empted (Moretti 1994: 137-38; Guagliardo in Rossa, Fasanella 2006: 24).

As to claiming designs, right-wing signatures match the pattern of mimics more than that of left-wing signatures. Correlation is moderate between right-wing and left wing claiming designs (r=.44), strong between right-wing and mimics (r=.70), very poor between left-wing and mimic claims (r=.10). It is apparent that mimics put little effort in their identity signals. Right-wing groups as well show little interest in designing signatures that would uniquely certify their authorship which instead is a defining feature of left-wing claims.

Attention to mimic proofing is shown in details by the claiming repertoire adopted by BR (fig. 11).

[fig 11 about here]

Phone calls used by BR were hardly ever a simple communication. They were a display of exclusive knowledge and indicated where to find elaborate communiqués filled with ideological statements alongside details about the target. These details were a barrier against free riding mimics who could not afford exclusive knowledge about the execution of the action or the ground work to accomplish it. Not all mimics were free riders however. Exclusive knowledge is of little use when the perpetrator's purpose is blame shifting. Figure 10 shows that a handful of mimics did use timing and exclusive clues in their false claims to shift blame on model.[20]A mimic proof signature therefore cannot rely on exclusive knowledge alone as it needs to make provisions against both free riders and blame shifting mimics.

The making of a mimic proof signature

Perpetrators of political violence who have a monopolistic hold on a cause may choose to be identified indirectly through their targets and remain anonymous as it was the case of two tiers radical political organizations in the early 1970s in Italy. Their armed branches would strike anonymously against targets clearly belonging to the opposite camp (Pizzini-Gambetta 2008).[21] Direct identity signalling instead implies the potential cost of incrimination besides costs of production to establish a signature as the true credential of the group identity. An identity signal takes the form of a name or acronym only when the trade-off between anonymity and the benefits of producing a name is positive for the latter. Anonymity in fact rests on a fragile equilibrium easily upset by exogenous attributions and even more so by competing visions within the same camp (Hoffman 2010, Min 2013).

The Italian ultra left movement developed two opposing visions of the primary agent of revolution. BR identified it with the secretive underground vanguard leading a movement,

[20] Among others it is worth mentioning the assassination of the industrialist Attilio Dutto in Cuneo in 1979 claimed as BR before the news had reached ANSA (CdS 21.3.1979); Michele Reina, DC politician in Palermo assassinated in 1979 was claimed as PL soon after the event (CdS 13.3.1979); The wounding in 1978 of Girolamo Mechelli DC politician in Rome was claimed as BR soon after the event (CdS 26.4.1978). The killers of Agatino Coniglione signed as NAP and announced the name of the victim to the police (CdS 29.7.1977) None of these were actions of political nature and their criminal authors have been identified.

[21] "Some sections of LC from Milan were pressing for more decisive action, and we tried not to lose those comrades, not to let them drift away, keeping them within our organization. A semi clandestine structure was established: the logic was to use the most loyal militants – that is the ones more committed to the cause – they would not become clandestine, they would carry on their ordinary jobs, however they would accomplish unsigned clandestine actions" (Merlo, quoted in Cazzullo 2006: 192, *my translation*)

whereas LC, Potere Operaio and later AO identified the movement as the sole engine of revolutionary change (Moss 1989; Della Porta 1995). According to the leaders of LC:

> Our response to the first actions signed by Red Brigades was of discomfort: we feared they would carve out their own political enclave. We were pushing the limits [between legality and violence] to avoid that others filled empty spaces. We wanted to keep everything within the organization's boundaries: whoever was going beyond it was considered an enemy because he was enclosing a space that we wanted to keep connected, in order to prevent the movement becoming fragmented (Merlo in Cazzullo 2006: 193, *my translation*).

BR decision to claim their actions was clearly perceived as an attempt to turn the collective capital of political violence into "a private good that could not be shared among groups" (Enders, Sandler 2006: 37). The signature to achieve such goal was as much the result of establishing a distinctive identity as of devising mechanism to protect intellectual property rights on it.

No one can impose limits on fraudulent imagination and it is safe to say that no signature is impossible to counterfeit. However some can be harder than others to fake as the result of complex design that includes a name and a logo, choice of targets and weapons, styles of action, linguistic skills, and delivery methods. The unique combination of these elements would become the fingerprints to assess the honesty of a claim.

Imagination alone cannot rule the design since its components are affected by constraints to a varying degree. A name for instance must have clear reference to the cause it represents, be easy to remember and unique enough not to sound like any other.[22]The choice of targets is equally constrained by many factors. Ideology is but one of them. Also strategy, membership, organization and capabilities greatly affect target selection (Drake 1998). Weapons depend on resources, availability and training and there is a finite technological pool. Styles of actions depend on membership, organization and available training opportunities. Linguistic skills reflect education and ideological background of recruits. Delivery methods are affected by the technology on hand and available expertise. Mimic proofing a signature then is the result of a combination of constraints to raise the cost of producing it to a point that the group can afford and maintain over time and mimics would find too costly. The way BR came to design their signature may help to illustrate in practice how choosing among constraints can mimic proof a signature.

The BR signature identified a unified organization between 1970 and 1980 when they split up in three independent groups. The name of the group was endogenous albeit not the prime movers' first choice.[23] The name "brigata" was inspired by the Brigata Garibaldi, the communist branch of the Italian Resistance (Podda 2007: 90). Garibaldi was replaced by "red" to remove the reference to a bourgeois hero (Franceschini 1988: 32).

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[22] This wisdom was not apparent to many in our sample. On 29 May 1978 an arson attack near Varese was signed by the "Primo reparto comunista combattente del Fronte operazioni studi informatica militare", no wonder it was a one-off signature (CdS 29.5.1978); in 1979 a Nucleo Armato Rivoluzionario Nazionale signed the bombing of a FIAT outlet in Milan and who received the call could not tell whether it was left or right-wing (CdS 5.11.1979); in 1978 the acronym RCC written on a wall signed a raid and nobody could work out its meaning until the Reparti Comunisti Combattenti called to explain their more than obscure signature (CdS 29.6.1978).

[23] They were beaten by the founders of LC that secured the Italian translation of the French motto "continuon le combat" as their name (Boato in Podda 2007: 64).

At first BR were open to inputs from the movement as a measure to test their popularity and choose a logo easy to replicate. Yet the famous five pointed star was the result of long reflection on how unique it had to be:

> We had been thinking for a while about a symbol to represent us", a BR prime mover explains, "it had to be easy to grasp and simple, easy to draw, even on walls. There was no doubt it had to be a star. It was the flag of all revolutionary armies: Vietcong, Tupamaros, Che Guevara, Brigate Garibaldi. However it had to be recognizable as our own, *we had to make it exclusively ours* [my italics…] we found out that a hundred lire coin that any comrade could carry in his pockets was a good device to trace the circle containing our star. We tried to draw it with a technique we learned at school [….] without lifting the pencil from the paper. We could never draw a flawless star […] and we decided *which mistake* all of us had to make: a shorter upper tip to give the impression that the star aimed high into the future (Franceschini 1988: 62, *my translation and italics*)

Easy access was effective. The signature appeared at the end of 1970 in Milan and during the first half of 1971 there was a proliferation of minor actions signed BR most of which perpetrated by sympathizers. They were spontaneous actions hitting targets similar to those chosen by BR – cars belonging to company executives, factory managers and right-wing trade unionists - and used the same kind of cheap weapons – incendiary devices. These mimics far from damaging their model provided an inflated perception of its might.

However BR were soon to realize that such a simple design could work as easily for them as against them. In particular they felt the need to increase their control over the signature after the Italian communist party and LC welcomed the first major arson attack signed by BR at the beginning of 1971 as a fascist provocation (Ruggero 2007: 91; CdS, 26.1.1971). At that stage any confusion as to the ideological honesty of the signature would have meant its ruin.This risk came close to reality in 1971 when a series of bombing attacks against factories and army barracks were claimed as BR whilst a right wing bombing campaign using the same kind of explosive was in full swing. The reaction of BR to protect the ideological connotation of their signature was swift and multilayered (http://www.bibliotecamarxista.org/soccorso%20rosso/capitolo%206.htm). First a communiqué denounced the plot as the work of right wing militants and the police. Secondly they endorsed the spontaneous activity of left wing militants that executed arson attacks against right-wing establishments in Rome signing BR. Attacks on right wing targets were a sorting signal of the left wing credentials of the group and remained an identifying feature to signal the establishment of each new BR column (Moretti 1994: 74, Bianconi 2003: 29; Pisano 1979: 52). Finally they introduced a strong constraint to their choice of weapons. Bombings were ruled out of their repertoire of actions and indiscriminate violence stigmatized as the preferred weapon of choice of right wing agent provocateurs.

The decision to signal their ideological connotation through renouncing a type of weapon imposed an obstacle to mimic behaviour and handicapped BR by inflicting a cost to which BR needed to adapt. In 1971 BR were still a semi clandestine group within the movement. The repertoire of actions that they embraced instead of bombings - kidnapping, targeted wounding and assassination campaigns – were the result of months of full time work planning, following the victims and keeping records of their habits. They could not have been pursued if a disciplined membership and an organized structure had not been in place. The group strengthened its structure, developed a system of safe housing, promoted permanent recruitment, and maintained control on its arsenal of weapons. Other groups that kept the option of bombings open, like NAP, never developed a proper structure and were short lived (Ferrigno 2008). Even shorter lived was PL, a group that tried to emulate BR repertoire of

actions modelling its structure on the "wild bunch" rather than on disciplined underground cells (Segio 2006, Boraso 2006).

The design of the signature developed over time to meet the threat of within camp free riding mimics. It included the use of weapons as finger prints,[24]and a constant style of execution (Peci, 1983; 'Paolo' in Raufer 1993: 318; Fiore 2007). They were so methodical in executing their actions that were nicknamed "bureaucrats of the shin" (Travet 'd la tibia).[25] Their signature design was further strengthen by the decision to claim highly incriminating mistakes thus building a reputation for leaving no action unclaimed shielding themselves from exogenous attributions of responsibility. [26]

A great deal of thought in the signature design went towards the delivery method of the claim. BR tailored the launch of their signal in slow motion and aiming firstly at the primary audience that they wished to reach: their recruitment pool within the factories: "Over the whole of Italy the BR set on fire about a thousand [cars], even though the newspapers hardly ever reported them […] we didn't care [...] as long as the factory workers kept talking about them" (Peci 1983: 146-47; Fiore 2007: 48). Leaving their claim on a factory wall or communiqués in changing rooms (Tessandori 1976) and toilets (Franceschini 1988: 41) would suffice.

They aimed at higher visibility and introduced cues of authenticity when they targeted audiences beyond the factory gates. Coordinated arson attacks were among the first actions that BR signed by phone call to local newspapers promising an explanatory document later. Changes of target and technique required further adjustment. The kidnapping of a Sit-Siemens executive on 25 February 1972 lasted just the time to pack him into a van, drive around, take his picture the five pointed star in the background, a gun pointed to his head and then abandon the van and its bewildered content next to a communiqué signed BR. The action however failed to gain immediate notoriety as local newspapers were on strike. If visibility did not come naturally it had to be pursued. On March 8th BR sent to the Italian news agency ANSA a parcel containing the picture of the executive in captivity, a copy of the communiqué and a further short message restating their claim. Through ANSA they reached every national newspaper and visibility was guaranteed (Tessandori 1976: 76-79). It became standard practice for BR to call two newspapers - one local to the attack and one national - and ANSA to advertize their claims.

Mimic proofing the signature was particularly elaborate during the Moro kidnapping. The array of cues of authenticity adopted in that occasion was ample and with good reasons. In the couple of days following the kidnapping at least twenty false claims were issued (GdS

[24] In 1978 it was noticed that BR were using the same gun to execute their assassinations. It was a Nagant 7.62, notoriously inefficient because it had long recharging time. It was used to leave a clearly identifiable mark and the inefficiency was compensated by the logistic design of the attack (CdS, 12.3.1978) The attacks were carried out by about five armed people two of which in charge of covering the hitting squad. The hitting squad included one in charge of the first hit and two in charge of correcting mistakes or weapon malfunction (Peci REF; Fiore REF) .

[25] Ignazio Travet was the protagonist of a play written in the dialect of Turin in 1863 by Vittorio Bersezio "Le miserie 'd Monsu Travet". The character was a sad, unimaginative clerk devoted to precision who came to represent the misery of a whole category of people.

[26] In June 1974 the newly formed BR column in Veneto botched its inaugural action causing the unplanned assassination of two fascist militants during a raid of a MSI branch in Padua. The possibility of leaving the action unsigned was debated for forty eight hours then a communiqué was issued claiming it and explaining the event as a mistake (Moretti 1994; Bianconi 2003).

19.3.1978, 24.4.1978). Exclusive knowledge certified the authenticity of their initial claim. The military action took place in Rome at 9.15 am and the first claim was issued in four different towns at 10.15 to local newspapers promising a communiqué. A kidnapping however requires authenticity to be certified at each exchange between the bargaining sides. Interference on the signal in this process would have unpredictable consequences. BR had experienced it during the political kidnapping of Judge Mario Sossi in 1974 and learned to mimic proof the bargaining process through exclusive technological fingerprinting.[27] During the Moro kidnapping BR did the same: "It would be always the same (IBM) printing head […] It became our exclusive brand and made each communiqué authentic. It was impossible to counterfeit" (Moretti 1996: 139).

In 1978 BR adopted a combination of cues that only a highly structured organization could afford: exclusive knowledge, complex communiqués, pictures, technological fingerprinting, coordinated messages, and consistently "the same distribution pattern for all nine communiqués" (Moretti 1996: 139). [28] In 1974 BR organization was beginning to develop. In 1978 the organization was mature and could afford "to show power by involving the whole structure of the organization, not even a comrade had to be left out" (Moretti, 1996: 139). The work of a structured organization was to be the sorting signal to keep out mimics. This effort was successful. A forged communiqué (n.7) slipped through and its low quality compared with the honest signature exposed it as a forgery (Moretti 1996; Biondo and Veneziani 2008).[29]

Conclusions

This article illustrates to what extent deceptive mimic behaviour is of consequence in a low intensity conflict where political violence is essentially communicative in nature. According to the paradigm of propaganda by the deeds an underground group establishes a channel of communication with supporters and counterparts by claiming responsibility for its actions. Unlike ordinary crime perpetrators of political violence thrive by advertising their involvement in attacks and have a strong incentive to false claim to free ride on successful attacks they have not perpetrated. On the other hand however they have an at least equally strong incentive to device a uniquely identifying signature to protect their identity signal from the manipulation of mimics. Signalling theory predicts that claims are signed through an identity signal that uniquely identifies the perpetrator when communication is the desired outcome of the act of violence. A deficit of trust is highly damaging for identity signals and underground groups need to devise ways to protect intellectual property rights on their signal. Most commonly they enforce property rights through disclaimers and prevent forgery by designing mimic proof signatures. In so doing they adapt their behaviour to the threat posed by mimics and create institutional barriers to their proliferation.

Mimics in the Italian case studies are mostly identified because of disclaimers issued by models or because they were unable to produce convincing counterfeit signatures. Since their beginning BR were aware of the threat posed by mimics from the opposing camp. During the conflict they faced the threat of free riders and hostile mimics within the left-wing camp as

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[27] The communique n.2 was a forgery and immediately disclaimed by a communique announcing the measure taken to certify authenticity to all subsequent communications.

[28] Each message was delivered the same day at six different newspapers and ANSA (CdS 19.3.1978). Communiqués were found at the same time in the four major cities where BR had established a column (Milan, Turin, Genoa, Rome).

[29] The forgery was revealed by discrepancies in the signature: the typewriter was similar but not the same as the others, the phone call was made by a voice with a strong accent from Rome rather than the North of Italy as previously, the name BR drawn differently from the standard, the pattern of distribution was anomalous (it was found in Rome and Ancona rather than Rome, Milan, Genoa, and Turin as all the previous ones). Curcio and Franceschini from prison immediately declared it a fake (CdS 19.4.1978). The original communiqué n.7 was issued a few days later and its authenticity certified by the format and two pictures of Moro still alive holding a newspaper dated after the issue of the forged document.

well. Disclaimers had uncertain outcomes and did not suffice to protect their signal. Prevention by designing a signature so as to raise its cost of production for mimics was an option that BR pursued since the start. They won the battle with right wing mimics by opting for ideological targets that those mimics could not afford to hit and by precluding themselves the use of indiscriminate violence. That cost of production however was too low for mimics from the left wing camp that were willing to hit targets similar to BR. To contain the threat of left wing mimics BR developed a signature whose cost of production was what other left wing groups refused on ideological grounds: a disciplined secretive organization.

The application of signalling theory to identity signalling among perpetrators of political violence shows that mimic prevention may bear a proper cost for model as well as for mimic. The mimic proof signal emitted by an underground group differs according to the type of mimic threat. When facing free rider mimics a signal is sufficiently discriminating when the cost for the bearer is inversely associated with his quality level. In this case a simple phone call displaying exclusive knowledge about the action suffices. Underground political groups however face and fear most the threat of mimics whose strategic advantage is shifting blame on adversaries. This type of mimic can easily use exclusive knowledge and claim an act of violence under the name of her enemy model.

A mimic proof signal against blame shifting mimics raises the cost for model as well to produce a truly discriminating signal. The BR were particularly aware of the threat posed by blame shifting mimics and ended up designing a complex signature – technical fingerprinting, selective use of weapons, synchronized claims, renouncing repertoires of actions too easy to accomplish, establishing a reputation for claiming all actions including mistakes - and built the capability to maintain it constant through time. Mimics can forge a marker but are unlikely to forge successfully a signature made of a composite of cues. On the other hand keeping this composite signal constant strains the resources of the honest signaller as well.
Mimic behaviour was a relevant factor at the onset of the wave of political violence that hit Italy in the 1970s, remained a feature of the wave of violence between 1974 and 1980 and shaped the claiming behaviour of the major groups involved in this conflict. The analysis based on detected mimics suggests that more able mimics were those that chose to model on camp attributes rather than on successful groups. The detailed analysis of political mimic behaviour reveals that mimicry was adopted with different strategies in mind. Muellerian mimicry was to the benefit of individual fighting camps. Batesian mimicry by left-wing militants was used to free ride on the publicity gained by more successful formation or to undermine the BR in the in-fight to control the revolutionary movement. Right-wing militants instead adopted it across camps and mostly as agent provocateurs shifting blame on their opponents.

Finally the analysis of signature designs through the predicament of signalling theory reveals patterns of behaviour that can help addressing yet unanswered questions. The differences in mimic behaviour across the camps in the fight show that the threat of deceptive mimics was perceived by left-wing and right wing militants in a substantially different way. This fact offers an interesting lead in addressing a conundrum of Italian political violence in the 1970s. It is still debated in the literature whether right wing political violence shifted from being a pure instrument of the “strategy of tension” at the end of the 1960s to become an expression of systemic criticism among right wing youth converging towards the revolutionary practice of the extreme left in the 1970s (Bale 1987, Panvini 2009). If this were their ideological background their practice suggests otherwise. Poorly designed signatures suggest the attitude

of perpetrators of political violence who either do not fear the threat of mimics or whose violence is not communicative in purpose The fact that right-wing signatures were poorly designed and show little provision for uniquely identifying authorship bears evidence that the prime concern of right wing extremists was not communication with a constituency in order to gather resources necessary to build a political project for the new revolutionary right. Their signing practice suggests that their prime concern was provocation as much at the end of the 1960s as in the second half of the 1970s (Weinberg 1995, Ferraresi 1996) with the addition of revenge driven by a sense of betrayal (Cento Bull 2007).

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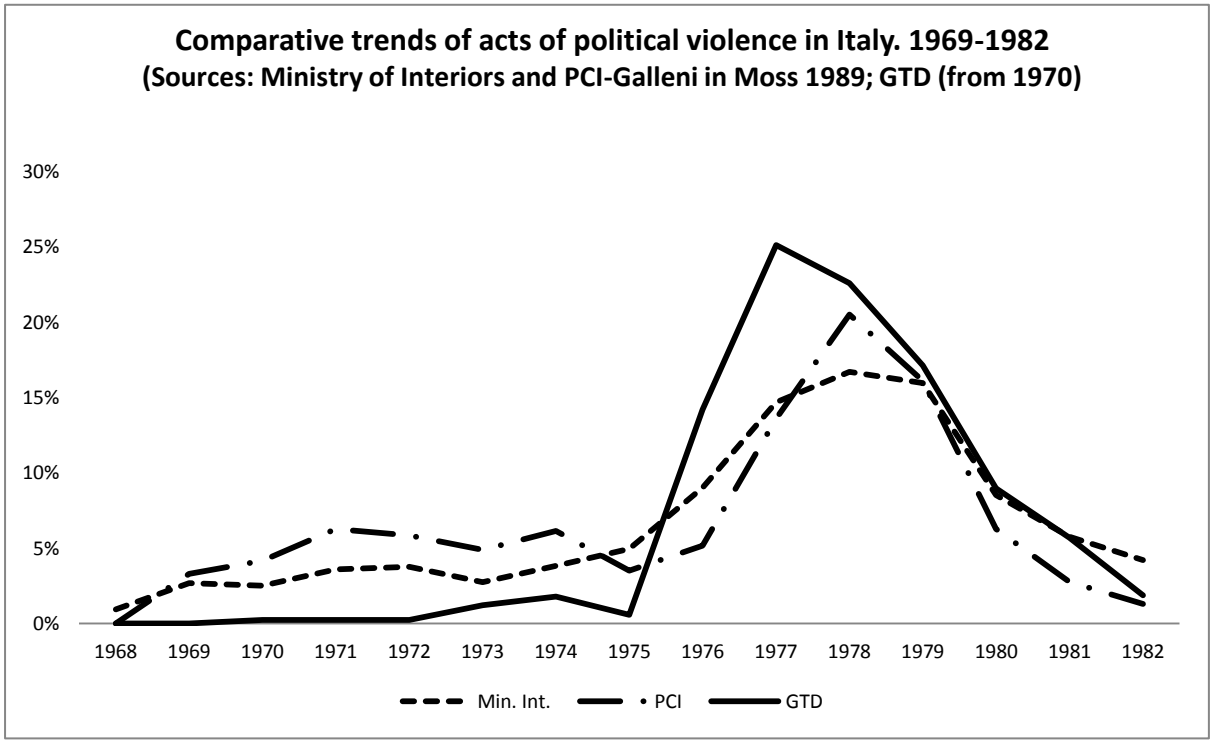
Tables

Fig. 1:



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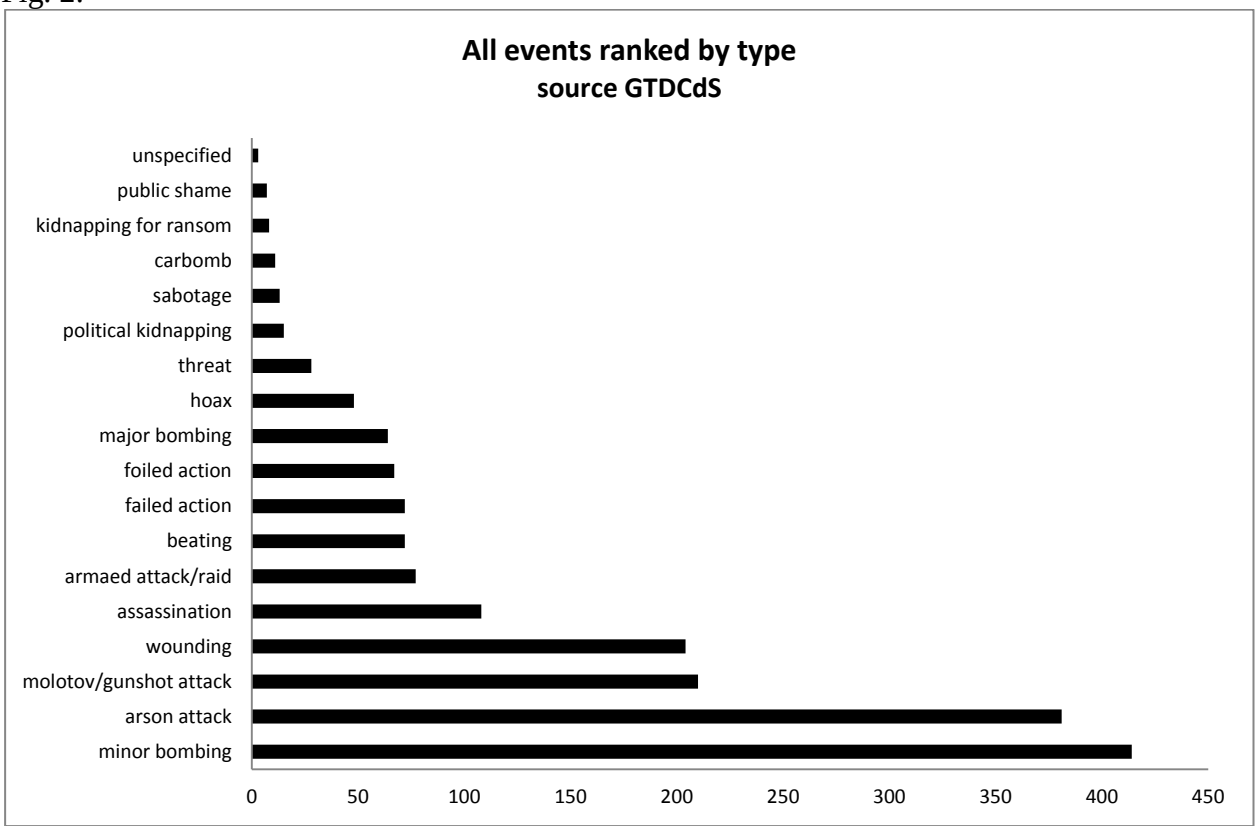

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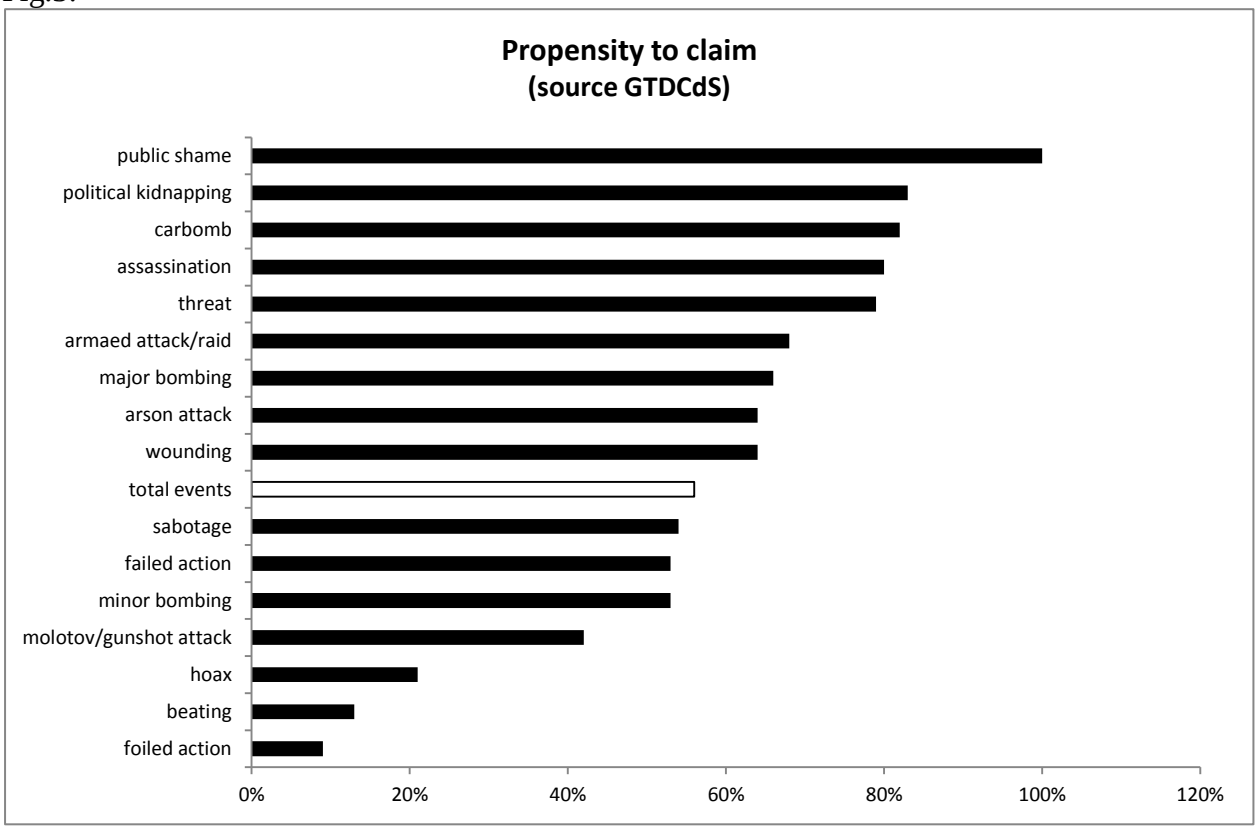

Propensity to claim
(source GTDCdS)
public shame
political kidnapping
carbomb
assassination
threat
armaed attack/raid
major bombing
arson attack
wounding
total events
sabotage
failed action
minor bombing
molotov/gunshot attack
hoax
beating
foiled action
0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%
120%

Fig.4

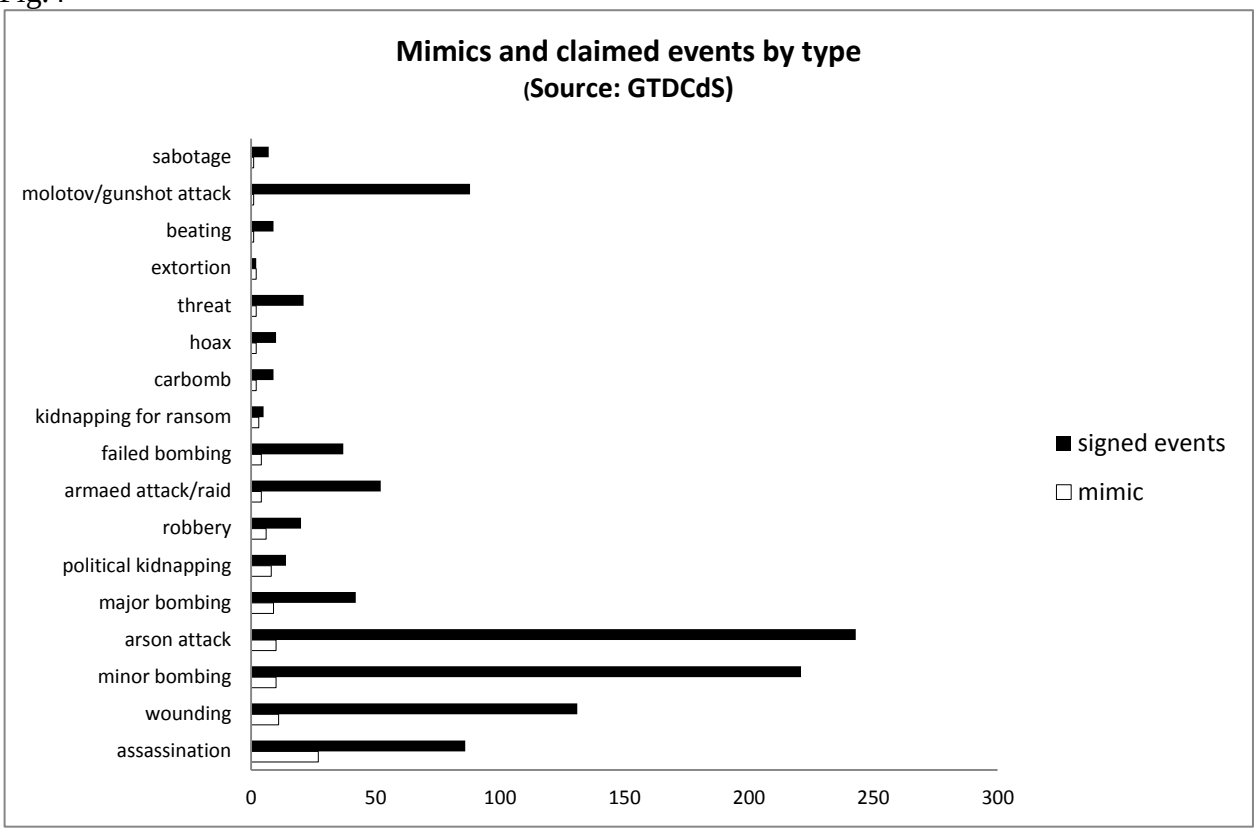

Mimics and claimed events by type
(Source: GTDCdS)
sabotage
molotov/gunshot attack
beating
extortion
threat
hoax
carbomb
kidnapping for ransom
failed bombing
armaed attack/raid
robbery
political kidnapping
major bombing
arson attack
minor bombing
wounding
assassination
0
50
100
150
200
250
300
signed events
mimic

Fig.5:

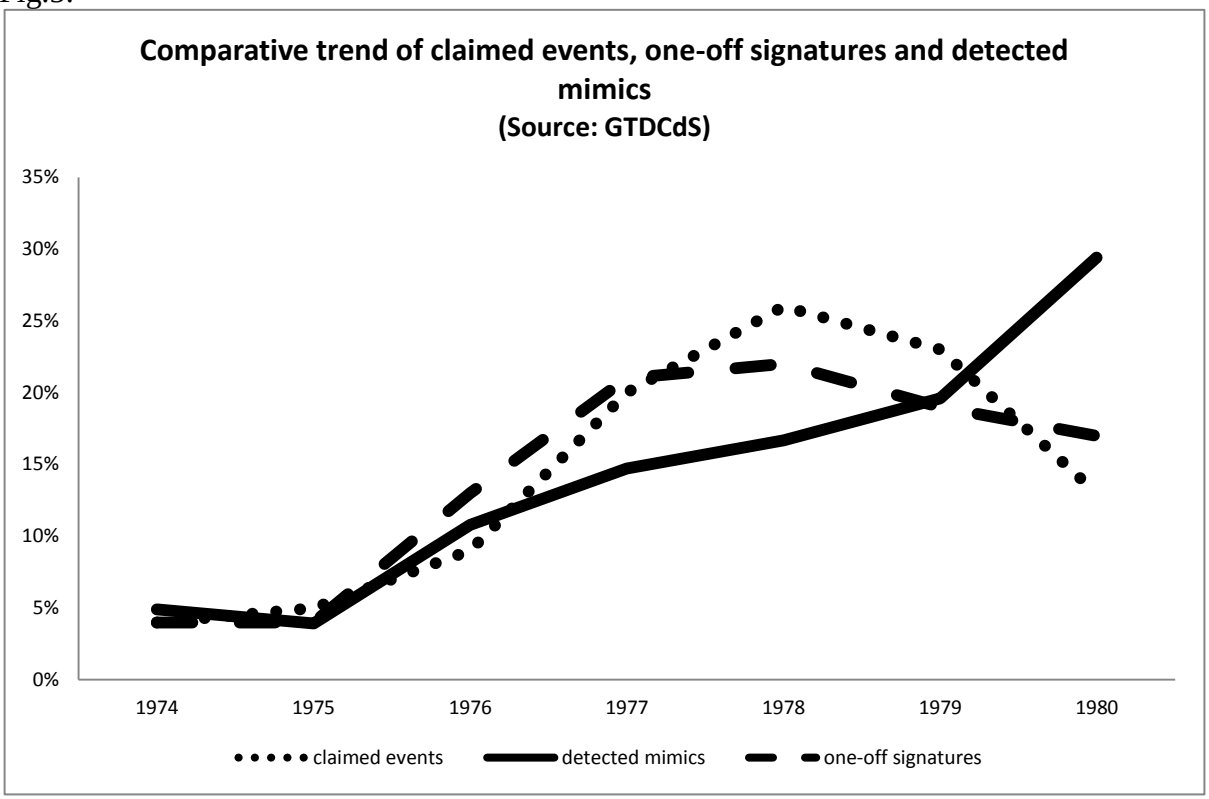

Comparative trend of claimed events, one-off signatures and detected mimics
(Source: GTDCdS)
35%
30%
25%
20%
15%
10%
5%
0%
1974
1975
1976
1977
1978
1979
1980
claimed events
detected mimics
one-off signatures

Fig.6:

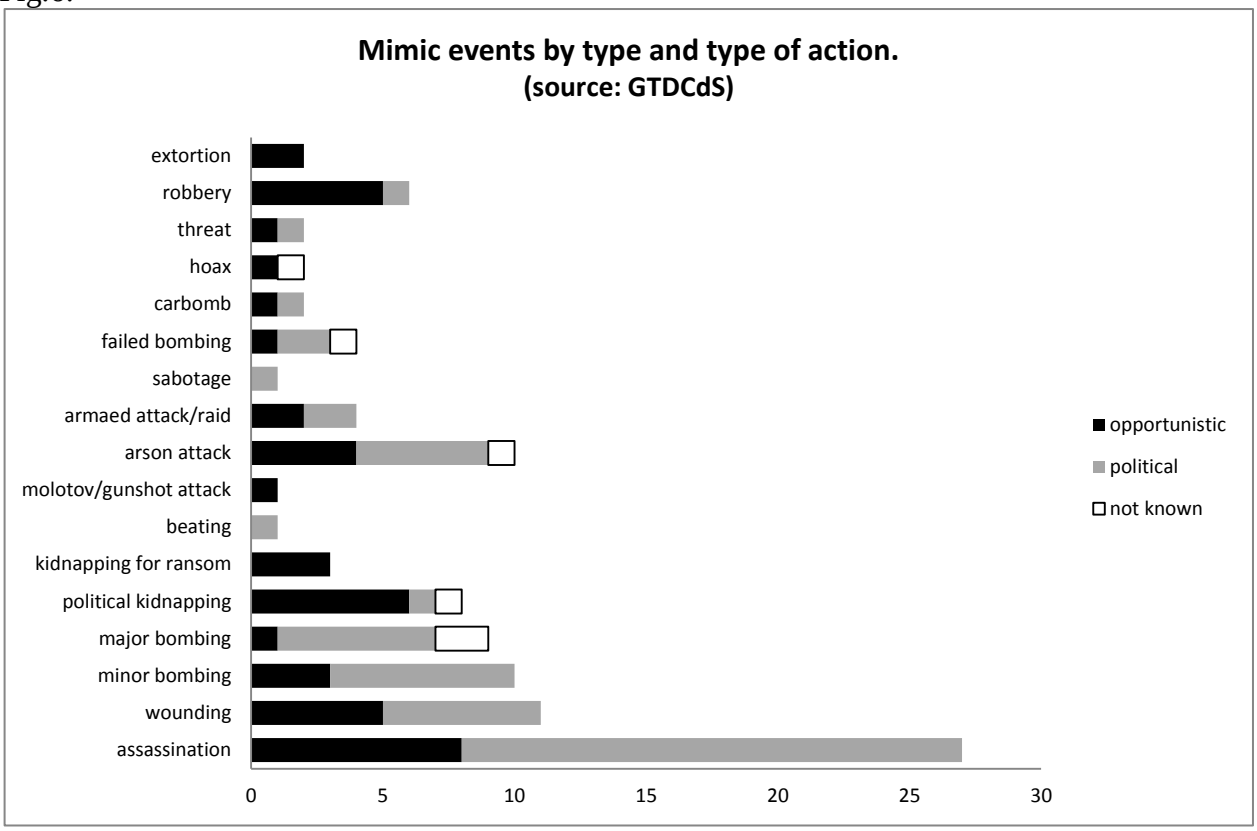
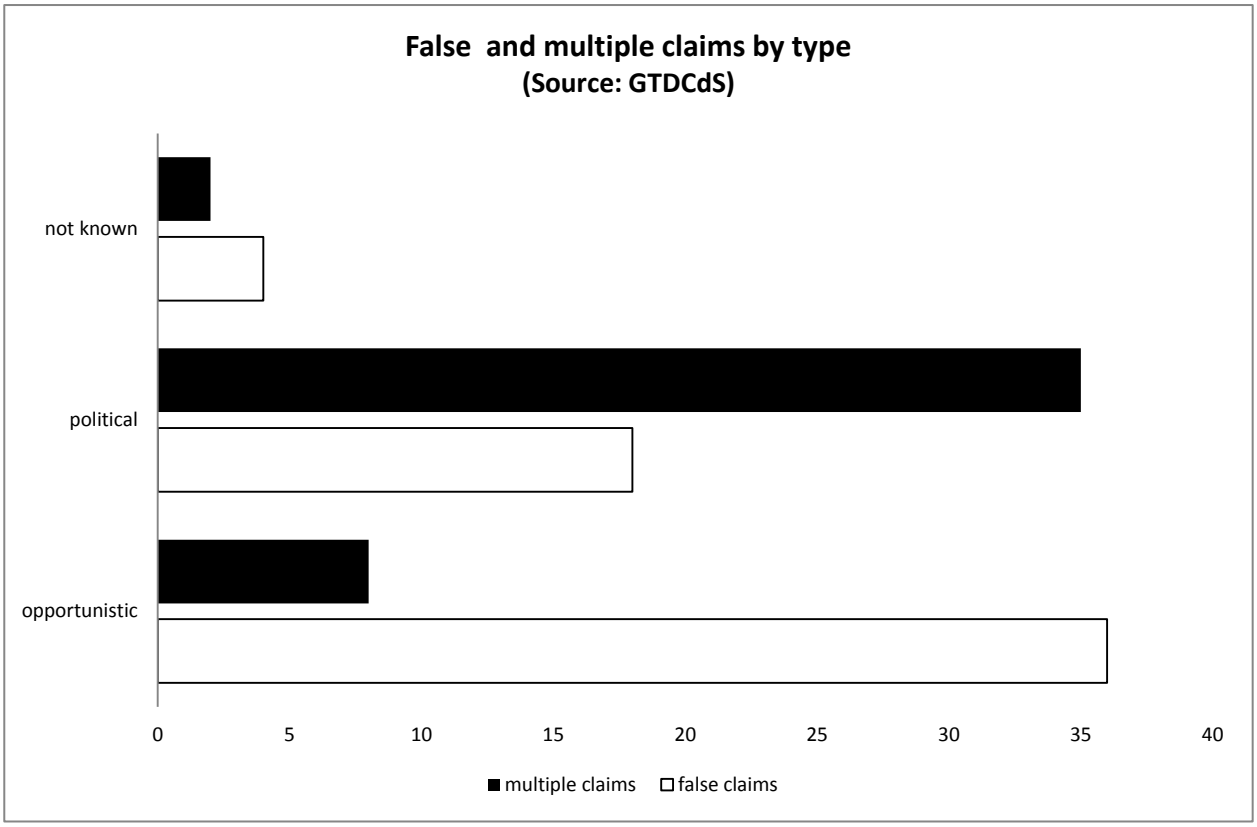

Mimic events by type and type of action.
(source: GTDCdS)
extortion
robbery
threat
hoax
carbomb
failed bombing
sabotage
armaed attack/raid
arson attack
molotov/gunshot attack
beating
kidnapping for ransom
political kidnapping
major bombing
minor bombing
wounding
assassination
0
5
10
15
20
25
30
opportunistic
political
not known

Fig.7:



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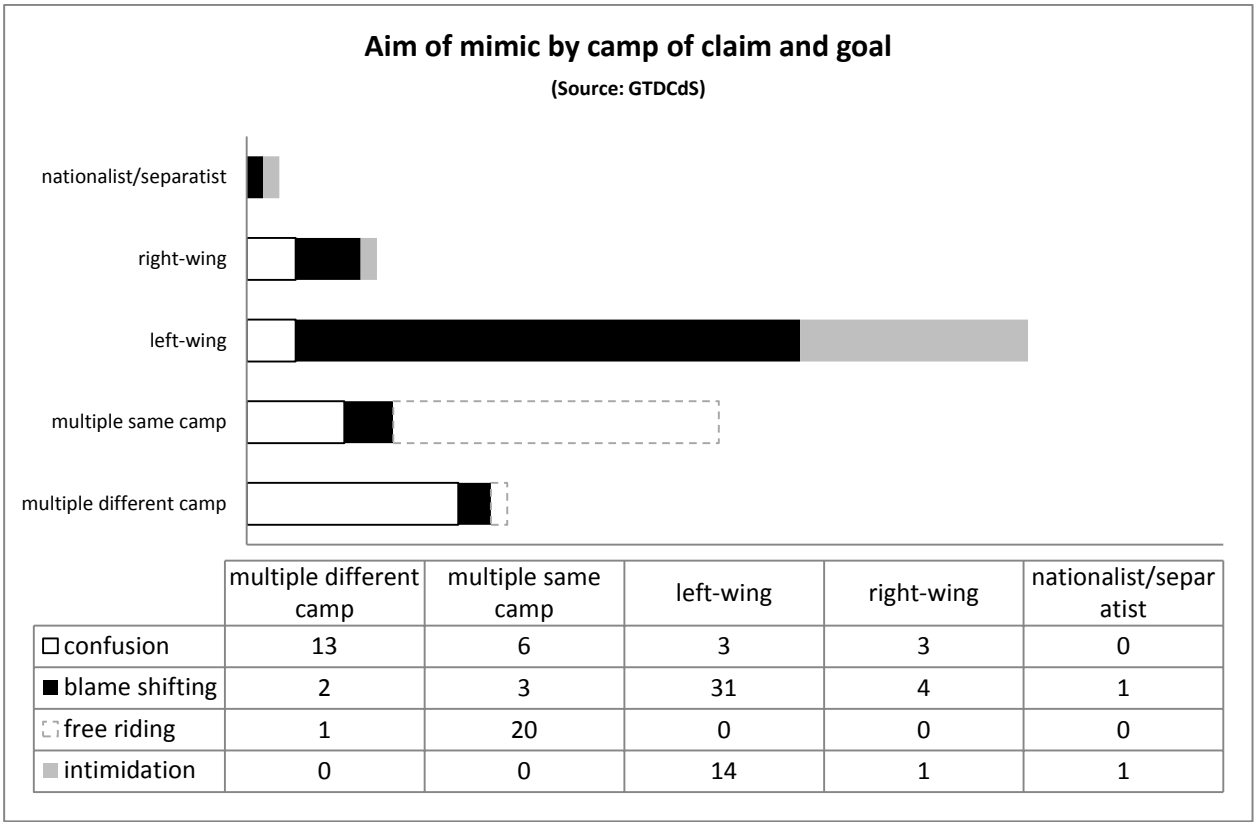


	multiple different camp	multiple same camp	left-wing	right-wing	nationalist/separatist
confusion	13	6	3	3	0
blame shifting	2	3	31	4	1
free riding	1	20	0	0	0
intimidation	0	0	14	1	1

Fig.9:

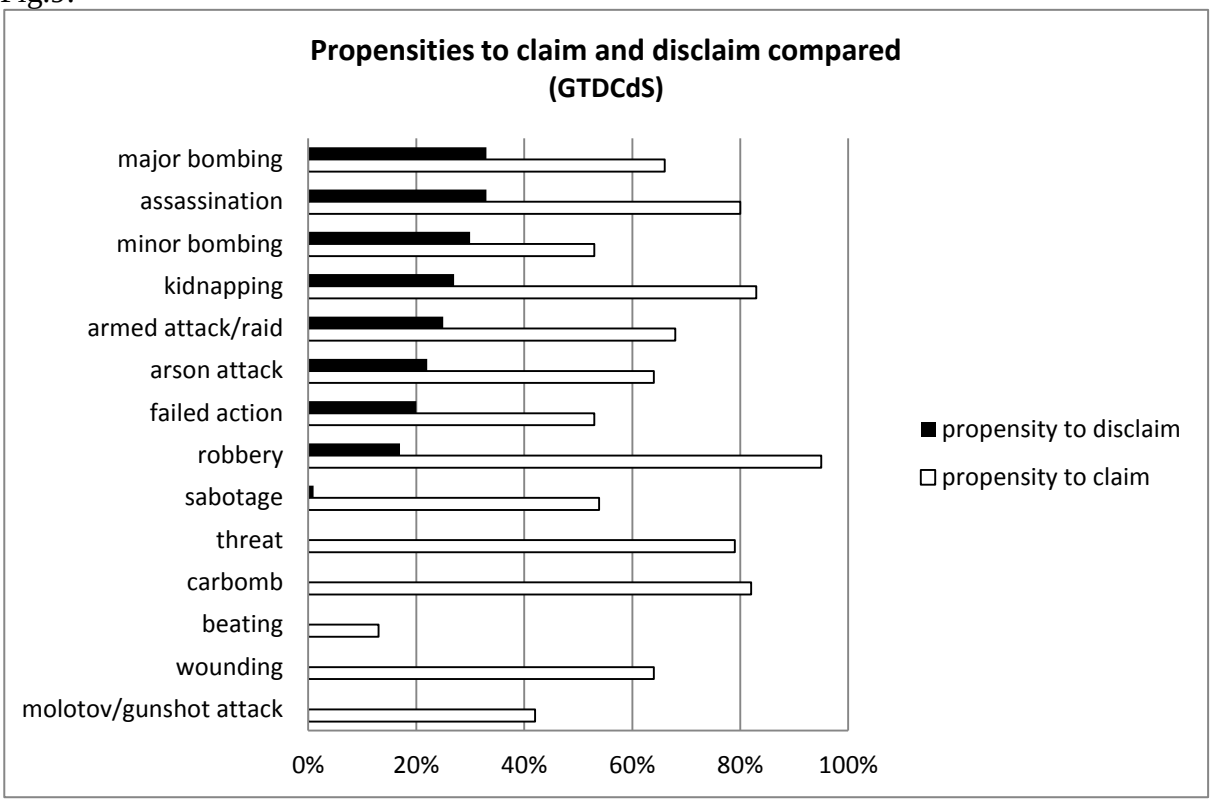

Propensities to claim and disclaim compared
(GTDCdS)
major bombing
assassination
minor bombing
kidnapping
armed attack/raid
arson attack
failed action
robbery
sabotage
threat
carbomb
beating
wounding
molotov/gunshot attack
0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%
propensity to disclaim
propensity to claim

Fig.10:

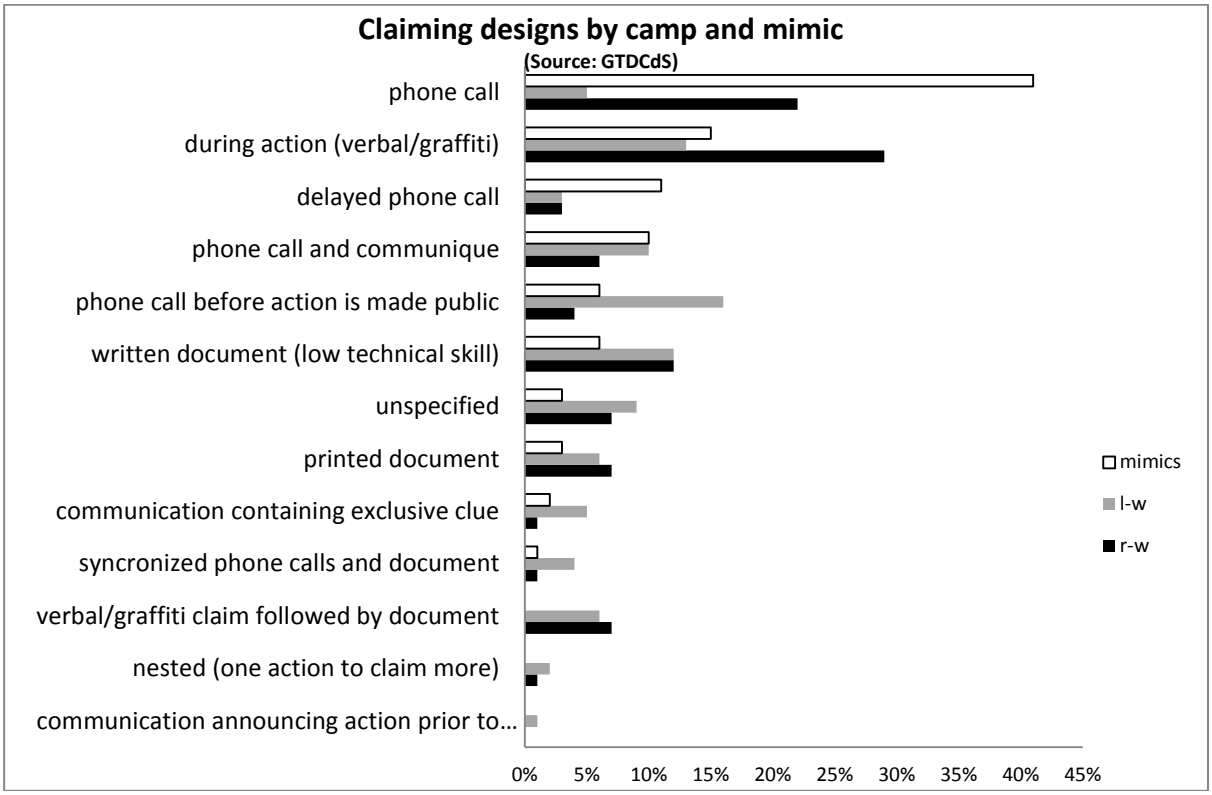
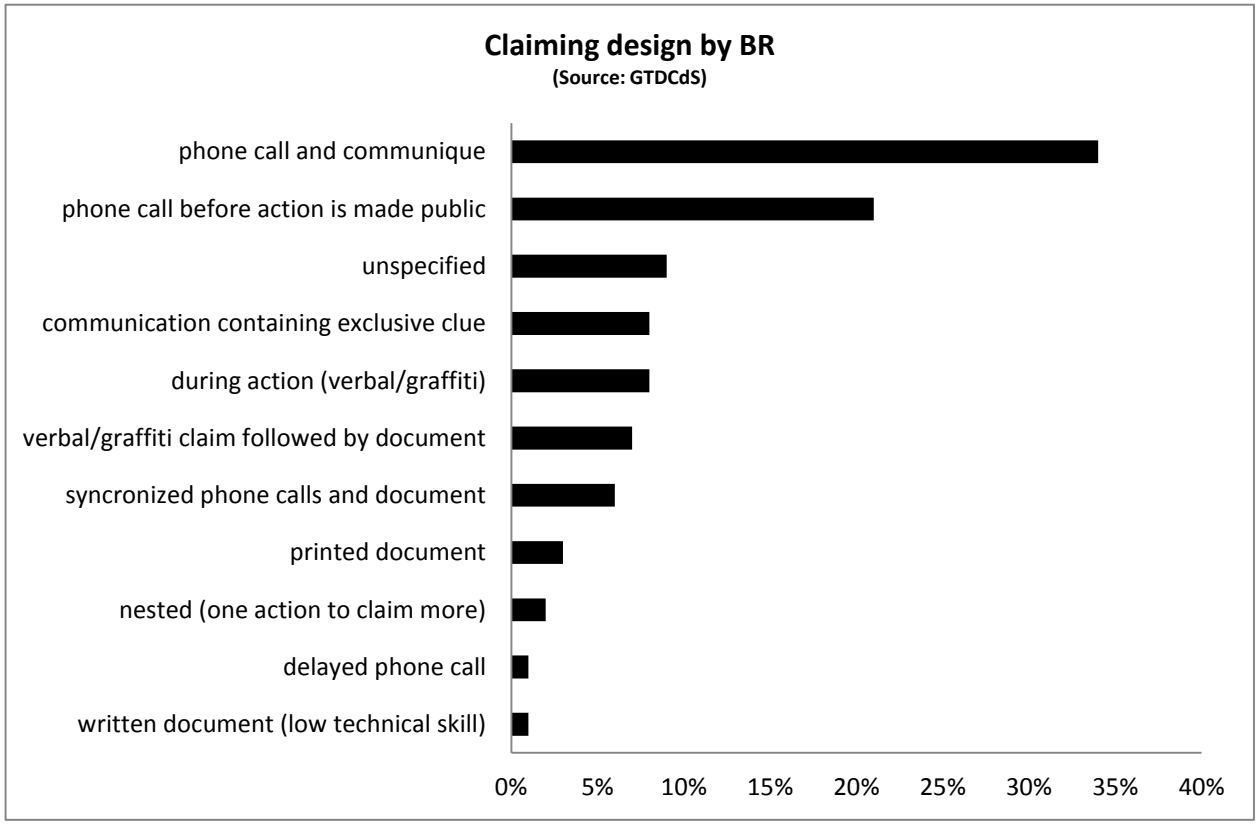

Claiming designs by camp and mimic
(Source: GTDCdS)
phone call
during action (verbal/graffiti)
delayed phone call
phone call and communique
phone call before action is made public
written document (low technical skill)
unspecified
printed document
communication containing exclusive clue
syncronized phone calls and document
verbal/graffiti claim followed by document
nested (one action to claim more)
communication announcing action prior to...
0%
5%
10%
15%
20%
25%
30%
35%
40%
45%
mimics
l-w
r-w

Fig.11:


Claiming design by BR
(Source: GTDCdS)
phone call and communique
phone call before action is made public
unspecified
communication containing exclusive clue
during action (verbal/graffiti)
verbal/graffiti claim followed by document
syncronized phone calls and document
printed document
nested (one action to claim more)
delayed phone call
written document (low technical skill)
0%
5%
10%
15%
20%
25%
30%
35%
40%