

BREAKDOWN THEORIES OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

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ABSTRACT

Historically, breakdown theory dominated the sociological study of collective action. In the 1970s, this theory was found to be increasingly unable to account for contemporaneous events and newly discovered historical facts. Resource mobilization theory displaced breakdown theory as the dominant paradigm. Yet the evidence against breakdown theory is weak once a distinction is made between routine and nonroutine collective action. Several recent contributions affirm the explanatory power of breakdown theory for nonroutine collective action. Breakdown theory also contributes to an understanding of the use of governmental force against protest and of the moral features of collective action. Breakdown and resource mobilization theories explain different types of phenomena, and both are needed to help account for the full range of forms of collective action.

INTRODUCTION

Breakdown theory is the classic sociological explanation of contentious forms of collective action such as riots, rebellion, and civil violence. The crux of the theory is that these sorts of events occur when the mechanisms of social control lose their restraining power. Breakdown theory was expressed in the mainstream of sociology by its standard-bearers: Comte through Durkheim, Gustave LeBon, and Gabriel Tarde in the European tradition; Robert Park and his student Herbert Blumer, Talcott Parsons and his student Neil Smelser in the American tradition.

Breakdown theory's dominance ended during the 1970s. Researchers claimed that breakdown theory could not account for societal events as they were then unfolding—the social movements and collective violence of the 1960s and 1970s, nor for newly collected historical data. A new theory emerged to explain the anomalies. Resource mobilization (RM) theorists posited that collective action flows not from breakdown but from groups vying for political position and advantages. Rebellion is “simply politics by other means,” stated William Gamson (1990 [1975], p. 139).

Resource mobilization theory gained quick acceptance, becoming by 1980 the dominant paradigm (Zald 1992, p. 327). Breakdown theory fell so far that a study could be criticized by merely pointing out that it left variation to be explained by breakdown processes. As an example, Anthony Oberschall (1973, p. 120) classified collectivities to greatly emphasize organizational ties within a community: whether they are organized along traditional/communal lines, or have little or no organization of any kind. He argued that in a segmented social structure (that is, the lower orders are not effectively integrated with the elite), collective action may arise under all three forms of horizontal organization. However, when the horizontal ties are weak or nonexistent, we should expect “short-lived, but violent... outbursts devoid of leadership, organization, and explicitly articulated goals” (Oberschall 1973, pp. 122–23).

Charles Tilly (1978, p. 83), one of the architects of resource mobilization theory, portrayed this as an escape clause and implied that Oberschall had not emphasized strongly enough the influence of prior organization. Tilly would later affirm that

solidarity, rather than insufficient integration, provides the necessary conditions of collective action, and... rebellions, protest, collective violence, and related forms of action result from rational pursuit of shared interests (1984: 51–52).

As used by Tilly and others, solidarity refers to dense social networks and a strong collective identity. Breakdown (malintegration) refers to weak networks and a diffuse collective identity often created by chronic unemployment, family instability, and disruptive migration.

Recent scholarship, however, suggests a need to reconsider RM theorists' monopoly over the field. The thesis of this essay is that breakdown theory and RM theory analyze different phenomena, and that the sociological terrain needs to be opened up for breakdown theorists' insights.

RM RESEARCH: THE NEGATION OF THE NEGATION?

Few resource mobilization theorists have backed away from the claim that breakdown theory has been falsified by the evidence. The key research said to

refute breakdown theory can be divided into (a) the work by Charles Tilly and his collaborators on collective action in a European setting; (b) studies of the organizational bases of social movements; (c) analyses of the urban disorders of the 1960s; and (d) work on the connection between collective action and crime.

Collective Action In European Setting

The work of Charles Tilly and his colleagues has been pivotal in the swing away from breakdown theory. Tilly's group undertook a daunting task. They counted the incidence of collective action in several European countries over a 100-year period, against which they sought to test breakdown and RM models. Few would challenge the enormous contributions (methodological, historical, and theoretical) made by this impressive body of research. Yet *pace* Tilly, the refutation of the breakdown theory is not one of them.

That Tilly's research is not a crucial test of breakdown theory has been argued by Frances Piven and Richard Cloward (1992). To back up for a moment, in his theoretical work, Tilly (1978, pp. 14-15, 23) recognizes that the heart of breakdown theory is a distinction between "routine collective action" (e.g. electoral rallies, peaceful protest) and "nonroutine collective" action (e.g. rebellion, collective violence, riots). The difference, to expand on this point, is not so much that participants in riots and rebellion injure people and destroy property. Boxers, armies, and wrecking crews are paid to do physically similar things. Rather, it is that participants must free themselves from the restraints on behavior, both moral and physical, that society normally makes strongest and is most concerned about. Breakdown theory posits that only nonroutine collective action flows out of breakdown processes; routine collective action is said to arise from and reinforce solidarity.

Yet when Tilly and associates measured the incidence of collective action, the routine/nonroutine distinction was lost. In one study, Shorter & Tilly (1974) sought to explain the timing of strikes in France over the period 1865-1965. Piven & Cloward (1992, p. 306) point out that strikes became legal in France in 1865 and thus presumably were more akin to routine collective than nonroutine action. Shorter & Tilly made no additional effort to distinguish between "routine" and "nonroutine" strike activity. The same problem occurs in the other key studies claiming to disprove breakdown theory, including those by Lodhi & Tilly (1973) and Snyder & Tilly (1972).

Piven & Cloward (1992, p. 306) maintain that the flaw is fatal: "Taken as a whole, this corpus of research does not answer the question of the conditions under which ordinary people do in fact resort to violence or defiance, and the findings cannot be taken to refute the [breakdown] perspective." This criticism has gone un rebutted and is, in my opinion, fair.

Furthermore, the empirical case in favor of resource mobilization as a replacement for breakdown theory is also problematic. I focus on one study because it raises a theoretical issue discussed below. In building the RM model, Snyder & Tilly (1972) argue that high levels of governmental repression should increase the cost of collective action and thus reduce the likelihood that groups will be able to mobilize and make demands. To test this hypothesis, they regressed the number of collective action participants for each year in France between 1830 and 1960 on three separate indicators of repression: (a) size of the national budget, measuring the “bulk” of the government; (b) person-days in jails for each year, including for ordinary crime; and (c) “excess arrests,” a five-year lagged variable measuring whether, in a given year, there were more arrests than would otherwise be expected from the number of collective action participants in that year and the overall pattern of arrest/participants for the entire 131-year period.

The regression coefficient for the national budget is in the predicted direction; the one for person-days in jails is also in the predicted direction but weak; and the one for excess arrests is in the opposite of the predicted direction and weak. One could argue (although Snyder & Tilly do not) that excess arrests is the only direct measure of governmental repression; the other two are so distant from government repression as to be irrelevant. If so, the results seem to suggest not only that repression does not work, but that it may slightly increase collective action. In fairness, though, Snyder & Tilly note that the three measures of repression are less than ideal, each presenting “some difficulties” (1972, pp. 527–28).

The point here is the tenuous nature of evidence assembled by the Tilly group with regard to the causes of nonroutine collective action. The point is not trivial, given the impact of the research on the field.

Secondary Groups and Social Movements

RM theorists argue that preexisting organization, both formal and informal, facilitates collective action. Organization provides resources, such as pooled labor and leadership; it schools participants in civic cooperation and public mindedness, and extends the interpersonal bonds through which recruitment takes place. Resources, public spiritedness, and social bonds, in turn, help make possible the hard work often needed to sustain collective action. Organization also permits the “bloc” mobilization of preexisting groups directly into movements.

The finding of a positive association between organization and collective action has been replicated in dozens of studies and is irrefutable—at least in regard to certain forms of collective action. These forms include (a) community-based protest movements, such as those over abortion (Luker 1984, Staggen-

borg 1991), property taxes (Lo 1990), and school busing to achieve racial integration (Useem 1980); (b) elite-supported protest movements, such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (McCarthy et al 1988, Weed 1987), and social movements employing disciplined civil disobedience, such as the US civil rights movement (McAdam 1986, Morris 1984). Yet this research contradicts breakdown theory only if the collective action being studied falls into the non-routine category.

While no one has been able to define exactly what “routine” and “nonroutine” mean, some cases are easily classified. By almost anyone’s standard, the riots that occurred in US cities in the 1960s were nonroutine. They entailed massive looting, widespread violence, and direct defiance of orders by law enforcement agencies to disperse. If the evidence on these disturbances runs against breakdown theory, the position is damaged. (This evidence is reviewed in the next section.)

Other collective action noted above just as clearly belongs to the routine category. Mothers Against Drunk Driving, for example, looks a lot like the other pluralist interest groups that routinely vie for political influence. MADD’s tactics include public and youth education, lobbying for tougher laws against drunk driving, assisting victims of drunk drivers, and urging police to beef up their enforcement efforts. Breakdown and RM theorists alike would anticipate that MADD would be a product of something other than social breakdown. The evidence bears this out. For example, Frank Weed (1987, p. 264–65) reports that, based on a 1985 survey of local chapter officers, the typical MADD activist was 41 years of age, married, had attended college, held a high-status job, and was involved in one or more other community organizations. John McCarthy and colleagues (1988) found that counties with more affluent and highly educated residents were more likely to have MADD chapters than counties with less affluent, less educated residents.

There are also hard cases. Eric Hirsch (1990) tested breakdown and resource mobilization theory against data on student involvement in a 1985 anti-apartheid protest movement at Columbia University. On the one hand, the students’ defiant tactics—they blockaded the administration building for three weeks demanding that the University sell its stock in companies doing business in South Africa—suggest nonroutine collective action. On the other hand, these were students at one of the country’s elite universities, far from the sort of setting or population that breakdown theorists have in mind.

Indeed, Hirsch’s quantitative data, derived from a survey of undergraduates, seem to support a middle-case interpretation. Hirsch regressed a measure of protest participation on ten independent variables. Five of the ten measured either general ideological orientation or attitudes specific to the situation itself, such as the belief that divestment would influence the South African government. None of these five variables appears to have a direct bearing on the

breakdown and RM positions. The other five independent variables do. They include membership in campus political action organizations, membership in other types of campus organizations, and a dummy variable for freshman status.

All five of the general variables have a significant impact on participation, together explaining 59% of the variance. None of the five breakdown/RM variables has significant regression coefficients. In other words, student protestors were neither more nor less likely than other students to be a member of a campus political action organization, any other type of campus organization, or a member of the freshman class. If the results can be interpreted as failing to support the breakdown theory, as Hirsch (1990, p. 251) argues, so too for the RM position.

In sum, resource mobilization theorists have demonstrated that prior organization has a great deal to do with the ability of a group to act. Intuitively it makes sense that routine social movements draw on the resources embedded in their communities such as trust, information, and skills in civic participation. But that does not exhaust the question of what conditions generate nonroutine collective action.

Revisionist Studies of Urban Riots of the 1960s

Resource mobilization theorists commonly assert that the same forces that generate social movements are also responsible for the outbreak of urban collective violence. The Tillys (1975, p. 290) state that “no matter where we look, we should rarely find uprooted, marginal, disorganized people heavily involved in collective action.” This expectation, they continue, is borne out by the evidence on the urban riots of the 1960s (1975, p. 291–94). If this assessment holds up, the breakdown position is damaged.

Research on the urban riots of the 1960s took one of two approaches. Some studies explained riot participation by determining the characteristics that distinguished rioters from nonrioters. Other studies compared cities that had riots to those that did not.

STUDIES USING INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL DATA The most important individual-level data were collected in connection with the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (NACCD 1968a,b). The data sources included: (a) a survey conducted in the first three months of 1968 in 15 cities under the direction of Angus Campbell and Howard Schuman; (b) surveys conducted in Newark and Detroit after major riots in those cities in 1967; (c) police records of individuals arrested during the riots in a number of cities.

The Campbell/Schuman (NACCD 1968b, p. 12) survey obtained data from 2800 African Americans in 15 cities. While too few respondents admitted to

riot participation to allow for analysis (1968b, p. 54), the questionnaire did include a number of items concerning attitudes toward rioting and other types of collective action. Abraham Miller and colleagues (1976) have reanalyzed these data in a way that is particularly useful for present purposes.

Miller distinguished among four groups: apathetics, nonviolent protestors, violence-prone protestors, and the riot prone. He found that "violent protestors" were a "hybrid" group, with very mixed attitudes and demographic characteristic. For this reason, Miller focused on two "pure" groups: nonviolent protestors (seemingly akin to actors engaged in routine collective action) and the riot prone (seemingly akin to actors engaged in nonroutine collective action).

The data indicate that riot-prone respondents, compared to the nonviolent protestors, tended to have relatively low levels of education and income, to be socialized in a broken home, to be unmarried, and to be relatively young (Miller et al 1976, p. 361). For example, 71% of the respondents at least 44 years of age and in the highest occupational category were protestors, but less than 3% of the same group were rioters. In contrast, 22% of the 16–19-year olds who had unskilled occupations were rioters, but only 15% of this group were protestors (Miller et al 1976, p. 362-363). Miller concludes,

If such measures as being married, being reared in an intact family, and attaining the relatively upper rungs of occupation, income, and education ladder can be justifiably considered as measures of social integration then it is clear that rioters... emerged from the least socially integrated and lower elements of the community (Miller et al 1976, p. 361).

These findings are consistent with a breakdown explanation of nonroutine collective action.

The results of the surveys conducted of residents in Detroit and Newark yielded results less favorable to breakdown theory. The Detroit sample were interviewed two weeks after a major riot in that city; the Newark sample about six months after the riot there. From these data, the National Advisory Commission reported that "there are no substantial differences in unemployment between the rioters and the noninvolved" (NACCD 1968a, p. 75).

While this finding continues to be widely cited as evidence against breakdown theory (e.g. Skolnick & Fyfe 1993, p. 76), it should be regarded cautiously. First, the tables have small N's: 154 and 189 for the Detroit and Newark samples, respectively. For the Detroit sample, there were only 27 rioters interviewed, to be distributed into the employed or unemployed cells; for the Newark sample, 84 rioters were distributed to the two cells.

Second, the Newark respondents (but not the Detroit respondents) were asked if they had been unemployed for at least a month during the previous year. Fifty-four percent of the rioters, compared to 37% of the nonrioters,

stated that they had been so unemployed, a difference that is statistically significant. If the rioters were more likely than nonrioters to have been unemployed in the previous year, it is not clear why this is not reflected in rates of current unemployment.

Third, the overall levels of unemployment were “extremely high” (NACCD 1968a, p. 75)—about a third of both samples. Apparently, Detroit and Newark were communities in which work had already begun to “disappear” (Wilson 1996). One could argue that these high levels of unemployment made rioting more likely in those communities, compared to communities with full employment, even if unemployed individuals were no more likely to riot than were employed individuals. This community-wide effect of unemployment should show up in city-level data. It does, as we see in the next section.

The Commission (NACCD 1968b, p. 247) also reports data from nine cities on the proportion of riot arrestees who had been previously arrested. This proportion ranged from 39% (Buffalo, New York) to 100% in two cities (New Brunswick and Elizabeth, New Jersey). The Commission discounts the significance of these findings, pointing out that “50 to 90 percent of the Negro males in the urban ghettos have criminal records” (1968b, p. 237). From this and other considerations, the Commission concludes that “the criminal element is not over-represented among the rioters” (1968b, p. 237). This conclusion has also been widely cited by resource mobilization theorists as part of the readily available evidence against breakdown theory.

Still, these findings can be reconciled with breakdown theory. If there is any realism to the upper-end figure of 90%, this would suggest that prior criminality could not predict which inner-city residents rioted (because there is little variation), but it might still be able to explain why riots occurred there and not elsewhere. One could argue that in areas in which the arrest rates are as high as 90%, the stigma of arrest loses its inhibiting effect, including for the criminal act of rioting. This remains speculative.

STUDIES USING CITY-LEVEL DATA The most influential research using the city as the unit of observation was reported in a series of papers by Seymour Spilerman (1970, 1971, 1976). Spilerman found that only two city-level characteristics were significantly related to riot occurrence and intensity: (a) the numerical size of the African-American population, and (b) location outside of the South. All other community characteristics, including unemployment, education, and income, had no independent effect. Spilerman argues that the factor most responsible for riots, overshadowing any effects of community conditions, was the “widespread availability of television and its network news structure” (1976, p. 790). Television brought scenes of the civil rights movements into “every ghetto.” This, in turn, “contributed in a fundamental way to

the creation of a black solidarity that would transcend the boundaries of community.”

The theoretical significance of these findings for breakdown theory, as well as the findings themselves, remain open to challenge. First, with regard to the region effect, Piven & Cloward (1992, p. 312) argue that rioting may have occurred outside the South because “northern ghettos were less cohesive than southern black communities.” This does not show up in the analysis because “cohesiveness” is not measured directly by Spilerman. The same point could be made about the effect of black community size: large black communities, compared to smaller ones, may have had weaker social controls, especially under conditions of high unemployment. Additional evidence on these points is needed.

Second, Spilerman adduces no evidence that television had the impact he said it had, that is, to create greater solidarity among inner-city African Americans. His argument is plausible, but not self-evident, especially in the absence of an independent measure of solidarity. An indirect measure is the crime rate. If black solidarity was increasing in this period, there should have been a corresponding decline in the crime rate. Yet the crime rate for African Americans increased rapidly in this period (LaFree & Drass 1996, p. 622). Even if we were to assume that television was a key independent variable, the causal mechanism may differ from the one Spilerman identifies. Robert Putnam (1995) argues that television viewing (which is concentrated among the less educated sectors) fragments communities and reduces solidarity. Perhaps that effect was present too, or instead.

Finally, Spilerman’s key empirical finding—that community conditions were irrelevant to the outbreak of violence—has been challenged. In one study, Susan Olzak and Suzanne Shanahan (1996, p. 946) found that “cities with higher rates of unemployment for blacks had significantly higher rates of unrest,” at least under conditions of heightened inter-minority competition. In another study, Daniel Myers (1997, p. 110) reported that the number of non-whites unemployed in a given city had a strong effect on riot rates, although he cautions that further research is needed to determine “exactly how unemployment contributes to civil unrest.” These two studies, relying on data that are more complete than were available to Spilerman, help shift the burden back to the critics of breakdown theory.

Collective Action, Crime, and Age

From its founding, breakdown theory has hypothesized links between riots/rebellion and other signs of breakdown, such as crime. One strategy to test this link has been to examine whether rates of collective action and rates of crime track together over time. The Tillys (1975) found that crime and collective ac-

tion varied independently in France, Italy, and Germany from 1830 to 1930. In contrast, Ted Gurr (1976) established that crime waves tended to occur during periods of high levels of civil strife in the four areas he studied (London, Stockholm, New South Wales, and Calcutta).

In a more recent study, Gary LaFree and Kriss Drass (1997) examined the covariation between rates of crime and collective action in the United States over the period 1955 to 1991. They found that crime rates and collective action rose in tandem from 1955 to the early 1970s but, after that, crime rates and collective action were negatively related.

LaFree & Drass (1997, p. 849) argue that the first half of the time series supports breakdown theory: Crime and collective action seem to “spring in part from the same social forces.” The second half of the time series, though, is more consistent with RM theory, the authors maintain. They argue that the two rates departed because collective action, but not crime, requires organizational resources, which ostensibly became tighter in the post-1974 period. Also, beefed-up law enforcement had a stronger effect on riots than on crime. Additional work needs to be done on the first point, because LaFree & Drass do not show there was an actual decrease of resources. “Resources,” of course, must be measured independently of the incidence of collective action.

Another strategy would be to examine the pattern of correlations between (a) crime and collective action (routine and nonroutine) and (b) other relevant variables such as age. The premise here is that like phenomena correlate in like ways.

It is ancient criminological wisdom (supported by a large body of evidence) that young people commit crime at relatively high rates. For most crimes, rates of commission peak in the late teen years and then fall to half their peak level by the mid-twenties (Blumstein 1995, Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990, p. 123–126). If crime shares properties with rioting, but not routine collective action, we would anticipate that age would correlate with rioting in a similar way but not with routine collective action. This is what we find.

From its multiple data sources, the 1968 National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders concluded that rioters were predominantly “late teenagers or young adults” (NACCD 1968b, p. 74). For example, in the Detroit survey noted above, 61% of the self-reported rioters were between the ages of 15 and 24, and 86% were between 15 and 35. Moreover, this correlation appears to be stable over time. A study of the rioters arrested in the 1992 Los Angeles riots found that their age distribution was almost identical to the age distribution of those arrested in the 1965 Los Angeles riot (Petersilia & Abrahamse 1994, p. 140–144). This suggests that the impact of age on rioting is a life-cycle effect (that is, rioting is something that people do when they are young but not older) rather than a period or generational effect.

In contrast, a similar pattern of correlations is not found between age and participation in routine forms of collective action such as voluntary organizations and voting. Affiliation with voluntary organizations is greatest among the group between the ages of 30 and 49, somewhat lower for those over 50, and much lower for the group 17–29 (Verba & Nie 1972, p. 181). And, controlling for additional demographic variables, age increases the likelihood of voting (Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980, p. 47). Of course, many phenomena are correlated with age (playing volleyball, for example) but have nothing to do with crime. Still, the point is that crime and nonroutine collective action seem to share a similar place in the life-cycle, one not shared by routine collective action.

RECENT ADVANCES

The resource mobilization consensus notwithstanding, a number of recent studies have contributed to the development of the breakdown position. The most fully developed of these, by Frances Piven and Richard Cloward (1977), argues that the leading social movements of the 1930s and the 1960s were products of social breakdown: for the former, the dislocations produced by the Great Depression; for the latter, the uprooting migration and modernization that followed World War II. Along the same lines, Jack Goldstone (1980) found that protest groups being active during periods of social crisis or breakdown is a better predictor of success than their organizational strength or tactics. Finally, Useem and colleagues link breakdown in institutional effectiveness to the spread of the 1992 riot in Los Angeles (Useem 1997) and to the occurrence of the US prison riots (Useem 1985, Useem & Kimball 1989, Useem et al 1996). Here I highlight several additional recent contributions.

Spiral of Ethnic Conflict

Two recent studies of ethnic collective violence come to similar conclusions, which in turn are broadly consistent with a breakdown model. Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar (1996a) examined collective violence between Muslims and Hindus in the Indian city of Hyderabad. Sociologist Anthony Oberschall (1997) analyzed the collective violence that followed the breakup of the Yugoslav state. In both studies, the explanandum is not ethnic conflict per se, but its form of unrestrained violence. In Hyderabad, the Hindu-Muslim riots took anything but a ritualized form. Rather, they were infused with deadly intent, accompanied by the destruction of temples, mosques, and shrines and the burning of houses. The vocabulary, on both sides, was victory with honor and defeat with humiliation and deep emotional wounds. In the former Yugoslavia, the conflict entailed the expulsion of a quarter of the population from their

homelands (“ethnic cleansing”), torture, mass executions and rape, and the sniper-killings of civilians.

Both Kakar and Oberschall argue that extreme collective violence emerges out of a spiral of conflict, polarization, and ultimately bloody, mutual recriminations. In both case studies, breakdown elements permitted the polarization to begin and to continue.

In Oberschall’s account, the fall of the Yugoslav state was followed by a disintegration of the other institutions, including the economy. In the void, extremist leaders formed militias, targeted moderates for refusing to go along with them, and recruited members from large pools of unskilled men. As the economy further deteriorated with the start of the war, a criminal economy took its place, fueled by widespread looting, ransom of captured civilians, and seizure of property from those expelled from their homes and homeland.

On a theoretical level, Oberschall’s analysis is instructive for two reasons. First, classic breakdown theory pictures collective violence as a by-product of impersonal, structural change. But Oberschall shows that, in this case, human agents were causing the breakdown, decisively and purposefully. Breakdown of the social order was part of the strategy of conflict escalation, which then fed on itself.

Second, Oberschall’s analysis suggests that the distinction between breakdown and solidarity is too simplistic. Much depends on the kinds of groups that are breaking down and the kinds that are forming. The place, timing, and mood of these processes are also important. Francis Fukuyama (1996, p. 15) makes a relevant point: “It is as if there is a natural, universal human impulse toward sociability, which, if blocked from expressing itself through social structures like the family or voluntary organizations, appears in the forms like criminal gangs.” In Bosnia, social decomposition was a precursor to the solidaristic groups that came to dominate the situation. These groups, moreover, appear to have been closer to Fukuyama’s “criminal gangs” than the sorts of community groups and networks of solidarity that RM theorists have in mind.

In explaining Hindu-Muslim violence, Kakar (1996a,b) distinguishes community identification from communalism. The latter as used in the Indian context refers to a dominating sense of community identification, in which a sense of “we-ness” is replaced by “we are.” This exclusive attachment to one’s community is accompanied by hostility toward those communities that share a political and geographic space. Riots originate not only in the minds of men and women, according to Kakar, but early in their childhoods. Drawing on the work of Erik Erickson, Kakar finds that communalism becomes imprinted during the same developmental stages in which a child acquires a sense of self.

For ethnic/religious conflict within limits to turn to murderous ethnic conflict without limits, two shifts have to occur. At the cognitive level, the com-

munal identity must take on overwhelming salience in a large number of people at the same time. Social identity comes to dominate if not to displace personal identity. At the affective level, love for one's group and hatred toward out-groups must be rekindled from feelings first developed in childhood. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Karkar (1996a, p. 43) refers to the preoccupation with minor differences, which cause greater hostility than do wide differences, as a key source of hateful representations of the other side. In Hyderabad, an initial attack by one side triggered fears of group annihilation in the other. Fueled by rumor and stoked by religious extremists, these fears generated a spiral of attacks and counterattacks.

Kakar's analysis is particularly instructive because he contrasts it with an explanation more consistent with the resource mobilization position: The Hindu-Muslim riots flowed out of group struggle over territorial control and political power (1996a, pp. 21–23, 194–196). The problem with this explanation is that it cannot account for the extraordinary nature of the riots: people, often neighbors, killing and maiming one another, rarely experiencing shame or guilt for the violence inflicted.

Disruption of Quotidian

David Snow and colleagues (1998) have recently advanced a version of the breakdown model that incorporates two other sets of theoretical insights into the model: prospect theory, as developed by Kahneman & Tversky (1979), and cultural theory, as developed by Bourdieu (1975), Schutz (1962), and Snow & Benford (1992). Prospect theory maintains that people frame their decisions in terms of gains or losses from their status quo or zero point, and losses loom larger than corresponding gains. The relevant element of cultural theory is the concept of "quotidian," the taken-for-granted attitude of everyday life and habituated routines. The quotidian normally keeps life stable and operating on an even keel. Examples of the quotidian include middle-class people going to work and making mortgage payments and homeless people making do with a meager but steady supply of provisions.

The synthesis of prospect and cultural theories is this. Social breakdown both (a) generates losses which, in turn, are experienced as highly salient deprivations (prospect theory), and (b) undercuts actors' confidence that their accustomed routines can continue to provide a satisfying future (cultural theory). It is this conjuncture of suddenly imposed deprivations and an uncertain future that gives rise to anger, indignation, and revolt. Snow and colleagues flesh-out (and to a degree, test) their position with several case studies, including work on homeless mobilization in eight cities, the mobilization of citizens following the 1979 accident at the Three-Mile Island nuclear power plant, peasant rebellions, and a prison riot.

In sum, even if one were to agree that breakdown theory has been an intellectual “straightjacket” (Gamson 1990, p. 130), this impressive paper by Snow and colleagues demonstrates that this need not be the case. It shows that breakdown theory can be stretched in different directions, here to incorporate recent advances in phenomenology and cognitive psychology. The key argument—that the collapse of everyday routines changes the cognitive and affective content of actors’ minds, setting the stage for rebellion—seems plausible, if unproven. This refreshing analysis should open up new avenues of research.

GOVERNMENTAL “REPRESSION”

The reader might suspect that the wedge between breakdown and resource mobilization theories runs deeper than the causes of collective action per se. One issue concerns the properties of governmental force against protestors and rioters. A second issue, contrasting moral sentiments, is discussed in the next section.

As is often the case, Tilly provides the clearest explication of the logic of the RM position. He challenges the breakdown position that there exists a meaningful distinction between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” force.

The very same acts, indeed, switch from illegitimate to legitimate if a constituted authority performs them. Killing appears in both columns, but with very different values. The values depend on whether the killer is a soldier, a policeman, an executioner, or a private person. (1984, p. 56)

Tilly adds that, as a practical matter, he would call the police if someone stole his wallet. Still, he believes that the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate force “should never have entered the world of systematic explanation” (1984, p. 56). Finally, Tilly seems to discount the possibility that riots are genuinely frightening to the public. The term “riot” itself, Tilly argues, is merely a “legal device” that authorities use to justify the use of force against assembled citizens.

These arguments, in turn, permit Tilly to define “governmental repression” as any governmental action that raises the “costs” of collective action. As noted earlier, Tilly used this definition of repression in his work on European collective action, and it has been adapted widely by others in the resource mobilization tradition (Opp & Roehl 1990, Tarrow 1994, p. 92–93, McAdam 1982, p. 218–229). RM analysts now routinely refer to the “repression works” hypothesis.

Breakdown theorists believe that the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate force is valid even, indeed especially, in regard to governmental use of force. In this view, “repression” is reserved for governmental action that violates legal rights and/or political norms. The supposition is the existence of a set of stable political standards (*a*) against which public officials are held ac-

countable, (b) from which departures are exceptional rather than routine, and (c) that permit citizens to know, with some certitude, the circumstances in which the government will use force against collective action (Allen 1996, Hayek 1944). At the extremes, cases are easily distinguished: police shooting peaceful protestors (repression) versus police arresting looters or even using deadly force when needed to protect an innocent third party from a murderous assault (lawful exercise of state authority).

Furthermore, breakdown theorists would insist that government action against rebellion may involve more than an attempt to “raise its costs.” Fundamental to virtually all legal systems—modern and premodern, East and West—is a distinction between criminal and civil law (Cooter 1984, Robinson 1996). Civil law “prices” or raises the costs of certain behavior, either to dissuade it, provide a remedy to an injured party, or facilitate an equitable distribution of losses. The priced behavior may warrant reproval, but its wrongfulness does not rise to the level of a criminal act. Criminal law, in contrast, entails more than raising the costs of certain behavior. It attempts to convey society’s moral condemnation for the prohibited behavior, sometimes in the most unequivocal and dramatic manner possible: imprisonment or even death.

RM theorists use the vocabulary of civil law, rather than criminal law, as if to assume away the possibility that government action against rioters/protestors represents a moral consensus within a community. Breakdown theorists would look for variation across situations. The concept of a general state of fear and the rights of potential riot victims provides a normative basis for government action against rioters. From the point of view of breakdown theory, “repression” cannot be measured by counting the number of protestors arrested and shot by police. One must determine, as well, the existence of a moral consensus and/or legal justification behind those arrests and shootings. While this makes governmental repression hard to isolate and measure, it also argues against supposing that all governmental action against rebellion is repression.

These arguments are open to empirical testing. To illustrate, one sort of evidence would be effects of riots on handgun ownership. By way of background, criminologists have found that handgun purchases and crime rates covary over time. While in principle the causal direction could go either way, the bulk of evidence supports the “fear and loathing” hypothesis: when crime rates rise, people buy handguns out of fear (McDowall 1995). Thus, if riots have the effect of generating handgun purchases, then it could be reasonably inferred that they strike fear into the public.

The evidence supports this argument. David McDowall and Colin Loftin (1983) found that requests for handgun permits rose dramatically after major riots in Detroit in the mid-1960s. Charles Clotfelter (1981) found the same effect in the six states that he studied. By Clotfelter’s calculation, a 50% increase in civil disorders increased handgun purchases by 5%.

Figure 1 extends these analyses. It plots handgun production for domestic sales, homicide rates, and a measure of total riot activity per annum in the United States between 1964 and 1994.¹

A visual inspection of the graph suggests, first, that homicide rates and handgun rates track together closely, per the fear-and-loathing hypothesis. Second, in certain years, handgun production jumps above what would be anticipated from homicide rates alone; these years, in turn, seem to correspond to periods in which there are upsurges in rioting.

Both observations are confirmed by regression analyses, in which riot intensity and homicide rates in one year were used to predict handgun production in the subsequent year. Riot intensity per annum was recoded to a dummy variable: Each year was coded as one of, or not one of, the top fifth of the riot-intense years. Results from standard OLS regression indicated (via the Durbin-Watson statistic) significant autocorrelation. Further investigation suggested that the error structure could be characterized by a first-order autoregressive process. In a subsequent regression both coefficients were statistically significant ($p < .001$) and in the predicted direction.

In sum, both increased homicides and widespread rioting appear to strike fear into others at a level sufficient to generate gun purchases. This speaks to the variable role that collective action plays in democratic societies, depending on its form. Ronald Dworkin (1985, p. 104–116) has argued that civil disobedience has earned a legitimate if informal role in the US political system. Few now regret nor condemn the Civil Rights movement and its most celebrated uses of civil disobedience, for example. Yet if civil disobedience is no longer a “frightening idea in the United States,” as Dworkin (1985, p. 105) argues, the evidence above suggests the same is not true for urban riots.

MORAL SENTIMENTS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

Breakdown and resource mobilization theorists also differ on moral features of collective action. Useful in describing these differences is Peter Gay’s (1993) point that aggression implies “attack” which, in ordinary language, has two meanings. Attack may refer to a setting upon another in a hostile way. Examples include a criminal attack, an attack from ambush in warfare, or a scathing attack by a literary critic. But attack can also refer to an adaptive mastery: A scientist may attack a puzzling problem of nature; an orchestra can attack a challenging composition; or a university may aggressively pursue a program of equal employment opportunity. In Gay’s account, the aggressiveness of the

¹The data sources for Figure 1 are described in Appendix A. Riot activity was measured by transforming into z-scores the per annum number of arrests, injuries, deaths, days rioted and arsons, and then summing those scores for each year. A year could have a negative intensity score if it fell below the mean on one or more of these measures.

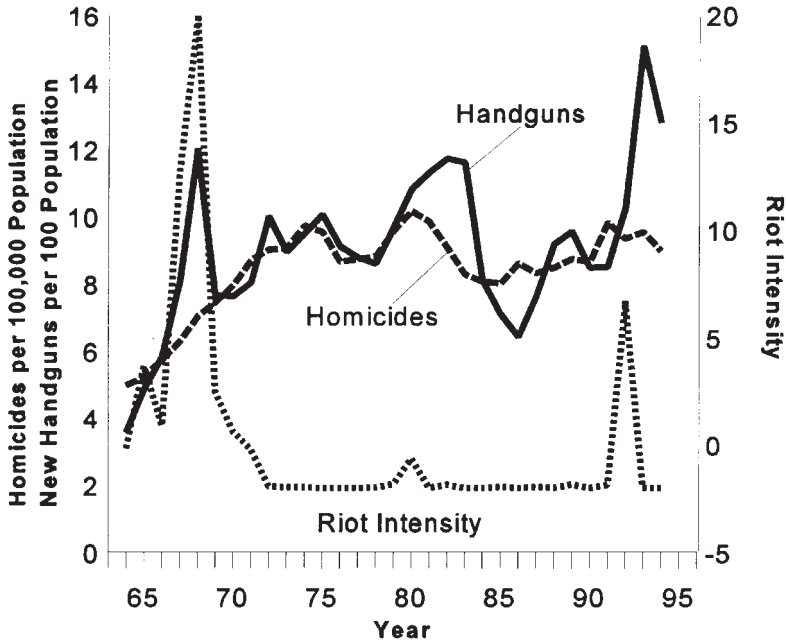


Figure 1 Homicides, new handguns, and riot intensity, United States, 1964–1994.

bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century exacted grievous costs, in the form of abused natives, exploited laborers, and discarded artisans, but it also permitted people to transform and shape their environment in ways unprecedented (1993, p. 6). Attack can, as well, be counteraggression: One can fight back against bullies, parry insults, and assert oneself against cutthroat competition.

Few would challenge that collective action is aggression. The disagreement is over the kind of aggression, or attack, it is. Resource mobilization theorists are mainly creatures of the 1960s and 1970s and, as such, tend to emphasize aggression's positive dimensions. Collective action is ordinary people taking control over their lives, in this view. For example, Charles Tilly (1978, p. 2) opens *From Mobilization to Revolution* by describing an attempt by English villagers in 1765 to pull down a workhouse, and he is at pains to point out that in the sense of "frenzy, confusion, or wanton destruction" the event was "not a riot"; on the contrary, both sides "knew what they were doing" and "did as best they could." These events, Tilly makes clear, were constructive aggression.

Breakdown theorists are more likely to see collective action as hostile aggression. They concede that collective action may secure immediate concessions and may even plant the seeds of a new social order. But they are far more

inclined than RM theorists to worry that collective action has another side. This concern permits James Q. Wilson (1993, p. 229–230) to refer to the events in Los Angeles in April 1992 not as a rebellion, but as the “terrible riots” that “racked the city I love.”

Indeed, only the most rigid and unreconstructed resource mobilization theorists would fail to see hostile aggressiveness when, during both the 1980 Miami riot and 1992 Los Angeles riot, passing motorists were pulled from their vehicles to be beaten, maimed, or even killed. Portes & Stepick (1993, p. 48–49) describe Miami’s “nightmarish” experience: “Whites were doused with gasoline and set afire in their cars; others were dragged out and beaten repeatedly with chunks of concrete and bricks, run over by cars, stabbed with screwdrivers, and shot. One was left dying in the street, a red rose in his mouth.”

But how is one to know if, in any particular instance of aggression, constructive or destructive impulses predominate? One problem is that the answer will depend upon whether one relies on statements by the aggressor or the party whose ox is gored. During the April 1992 riots, Korean businesses were targeted for looting and arson (Ong & Hee 1993, Tierney 1994). From the Korean merchants’ point of view, the riot was driven by destructive impulses, at best, by a mean-spirited revenge for perceived slights of honor and disrespect. But what target of aggression would agree that the blows against them are warranted?

Moreover, to continue with the example, what struck James Q. Wilson (1993, p. 230) most about the April 1992 riots was that the rioters felt an obligation to justify their behavior. From this Wilson makes an interesting observation: Individuals inevitably offer a moral justification whenever their actions, however destructive and purely self-interested, violate a moral principle. Thus, the fact that the Los Angeles rioters offered a moral justification for their action is not informative.

Yet how does Wilson know that the rioters’ complaints of injustice and discrimination were disingenuous, that their explanations of their own behavior were mere rationalizations, and that the firebombs and looting were not warranted by abuses of the past? There were plenty of observers willing to accept these justifications, who insisted that the events were a rebellion and not a riot (e.g. Johnson et al 1992).

The problem is that human complexity is not suspended when people pour onto the streets. Collective behavior is behavior. Certainly Kakar’s work on Hindu-Muslim violence suggests that surface discourse may imperfectly reflect underlying concerns. What actuates aggressors may be obscured by the defensive stratagems that Peter Gay calls “alibis for aggression”: beliefs, principles, and comforting bromides used to rationalize verbal or physical militancy against others (1993, p. 1–8, 35–38). Perhaps alibis for aggression are

what Wilson heard expressed by the Los Angeles rioters, although I know of no evidence that would prove this. The best we can do is carefully tease out the evidence, case by case. We are far from the last chapter on urban riots, far from even knowing what they are about.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

To recapitulate, breakdown theorists argue that defiant or “nonroutine” forms of collective action occur when the mechanisms of social control falter or everyday routines are disrupted. If this stance is accepted as plausible, future work should identify different ways in which breakdown processes may generate collective disorders. Possible formulations include these:

Social Capital/Breakdown Theory

Social capital theorists argue that economic prosperity requires strong networks of cooperation among people and high levels of interpersonal trust associated with such networks (Coleman 1990, Putnam 1993, Fukuyama 1995). For students of collective behavior, the social capital perspective puts two distinct causal arguments on the agenda.

One concerns the connection, if any, between social capital and rebellion. Fukuyama (1995, p. 295–306; 1996) asserts that US urban riots, both in the 1960s and 1990s, were an outcome of low levels of social capital in the African-American community: a predominance of single-parent families and weak larger groups. This lack of cohesion is a legacy of slavery, Fukuyama argues.

A second key question concerns the connection among state intervention, social capital, and rebellion. Here the analysis is complicated by the fact that social capital theorists are divided between those who argue that state intervention crowds out social capital and those who imply a synergistic relationship (Evans 1996). The former position is that state intervention, including law, tends to destroy social trust and norms of cooperation (Coleman 1990, Pildes 1996, Cover 1983). The latter position is that effective state intervention promotes civic engagement and reshapes norms in a positive direction and, conversely, that high levels of civic engagement nourish state effectiveness (Putnam 1993, Sunstein 1996, Posner 1996).

While no resolution to this debate is in sight, adding rebellion to the equation is intriguing. The crowd-out theorist would argue that state intervention might have short-run benefits, such as the amelioration of specific grievances, but long-run costs: a decline of productive cooperation, pervasive cynicism, and disaffection that presage urban crime and disturbances. The synergists would argue that state intervention, when practiced skillfully and strategically, would increase a population’s attachment to society. Collective action would take primarily “routine” forms rather than “nonroutine” forms.

Routine-Disorder/Breakdown Theory

James Q. Wilson (1968) observed that, for every person, there is a public space in which his or her sense of safety, propriety, and self-worth are either affirmed or jeopardized by the events and people encountered. Hence, Wilson goes on to argue, routine disorders—vandalism, public drinking, graffiti, and corner gangs—corrode community morale, stimulate people and commerce to move away, and cause crime. Wesley Skogan (1990) verified key elements of Wilson's argument, based on data collected on crime, disorder, and residents' perceptions of disorder in 40 urban neighborhoods. He shows, first, that urban residents, regardless of racial, ethnic, or economic background, agree about what constitutes order and how much there is in their neighborhood; second, disorder both spawns serious crime and plays a key role in neighborhood decline. Subsequent researchers have also verified the routine-disorders argument as well as amplified theoretical aspects of it (Bursik & Grasmick 1993, Kelling & Coles 1996, Sampson 1995).

Wilson's insight and its verification suggest the possibility that routine disorders may also contribute to nonroutine collective action. For example, one would like to see if Skogan's objective and subjective indices of disorder could also be used to predict the occurrence of US urban riots. If this were shown to be true, the findings would fit nicely with the breakdown position.

Clash of Civilizations/Breakdown Theory

Samuel Huntington (1996a, 1996b) has argued that, with the end of the Cold War, the world is becoming increasingly divided along the lines of culture and religion rather than economics or ideology. Accordingly, the clash between the world's seven or eight major civilizations will be the basis of the most hostile conflicts, which pose the greatest risk of escalating into collective violence. Huntington goes on to predict that non-Western countries formerly united by ideology or historical circumstance but divided by civilization will tend to fall apart with a high potential for collective violence. In the Western context, countries that fall prey to multiculturalism and uncontrolled immigration will experience a disuniting of society, followed by decay and disintegration. Huntington's argument fits squarely within the breakdown tradition: Nonroutine collective action erupts when a mechanism of integration—in this formulation, a cultural core—is weakened.

In sum, social-capital, routine-disorder, and clash-of-civilizations perspectives may each serve as a launching pad to rethink the sources and dynamics of collective action. To the extent that these routes are taken, they will require us to relax the assumption that the nation state is the unit around which collective action revolves in all cases, to distinguish more clearly the causes of routine

and nonroutine collective action, and to look to cultural differences as sources of conflict.

CONCLUSION

Rebellion would be easier to understand, our theories of it more parsimonious and powerful, if it flowed out of one condition and toward one purpose: power politics. To be sure, much collective action does involve political contention and constitutes politics by other means. But to breakdown theorists, this does not exhaust the range of possibilities.

Ethnic and racial groups may attack one another in a spiral of hatred and revenge. From time to time, collective action appears to serve as the vehicle through which the dispossessed and those detached from and unconcerned about the welfare of society express their hostility, vent their rage, or secure short-term material advantages. While these goals are not irrational (nothing is more individually rational than crime), neither are they politics by other means.

The breakdown position is not an “intellectual weapon” concocted to “discredit mass movements of which one is critical,” as Gamson (1990, p. 133) alleges; nor is it cynicism. Rather, it is a recognition of the complexity and diversity of social life. To argue that all collective action is part and parcel of political struggle is to exaggerate the centrality of power and impute an ideology of social change where none may exist.

In my view, efforts to replace breakdown theory with resource mobilization theory are ill-founded. Both logic and evidence seem to suggest that the breakdown and RM theories explain different kinds of collective action. Each approach deserves recognition. Also, much of interest appears to occur in a middle ground, in some sort of amalgam between breakdown and RM processes.

In sum, breakdown theory was developed to explain collective action that involves a basic rupture of the social order. Breakdown processes do not destroy a community root and branch, producing a mass of atomized individuals, but they can cripple a community's ability to perform key functions. Such ruptures are rare. But they do happen.

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Appendix A

The data on riot intensity are from three sources: a data set provided by Gregg Lee Carter, covering the period 1964 to 1971; three major indexed papers (*New*

York Times, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*), for the period 1972 to 1985; and the Westlaw Inc. newspaper database, for the period 1986 to 1994. Carter collected his data from five key sources, including published and unpublished data from the Lemberg Center for the Study of Violence at Brandeis University, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, and compilations made by the staff of a US Senate committee (for a detailed discussion, see Carter, 1983, ch. 2). The Westlaw database permits a key-word computer search of 150 US newspapers.

In general, it would be preferable to use a single data source for the entire period. The problem is that the only data source that covers the entire period is the major indexed newspapers. A decision not to use the Carter and Westlaw data would have resulted in a significant loss of information for the periods they cover. Balancing the tradeoffs, I decided to make use of the data from Carter and Westlaw. Carter (1983, p. 75–78) argues, with supporting evidence, that a riot severity index is best constructed using five indices (arrests, injuries, deaths, arsons, and days rioted). I accepted this argument. The five indices for each riot were transformed to Z-scores, which were then summed for each year. The data on homicides are from the *Bureau of Justice Statistics* (1996). The handgun data are from annual reports of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (1991, 1995).

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