

Breakdown V. Resource Mobilization Theory in the case of the Baltimore Riots

“BREAKDOWN THEORIES OF COLLECTIVE ACTION” Bert Useem

Collective action can range from lobbying to violent chaos. To explain why collective action occurs and why it can formulate itself in some many different ways, social theorists offer two opposing explanations: breakdown theory and resource mobilization theory. At the heart of breakdown theory is a distinction between “routine” and “non-routine” collective action. Therefore, by definition, “non-routine” action is catalyzed by a breakdown of societal norms. To begin to delve into these distinctions of collective action, one must create organizational boundaries between the two forms of action. The peacefulness of the protest, the goal of the civil disobedience, and the organization of the collective action are three of the essential dividers between “routine” and “non-routine” action. According to Useem, in terms of peacefulness, routine action could manifest itself as electoral rallies or peaceful protests, whereas as non-routine action includes acts of violence, rebellion, and rioting. Futhermore, these acts of “non-routine” violence are objections to usual social and moral restraints. However, it is the organization and goal of the non-routine actions that distinguish breakdown theory from resource mobilization theory. Breakdown theorists and Resource mobilization theorists seek to reveal the societal causes and individual decisions that erupt into non-routine collective action, but their explanations differ drastically. In order to distinguish the differences in these theories, I have chosen to examine the Baltimore riots of 2014 from both a breakdown theorist’s perspective and a resource mobilization theorist’s perspective.

In the eyes of a breakdown theorist, Baltimore had incredibly weak social networks at the time of the April 2015 riot eruption. Residents of Baltimore, spinning from the news of the murder of Freddie Gray, the 25 year old man who died while in police custody from a spinal injury, were stunned into riots and rebellion because of the already weak social networks of the city and a diffuse collective identity manifesting from “chronic unemployment [and] family instability” (Useem 216). According to Marc Levine, the founding director of the Center for Economic Development at the University of Wisconsin-

Milwaukee, “42.5 percent of working-age black males were not employed in 2010” in Baltimore (Johnson). The societal pressures of institutional inequality and unemployment create pent up frustration and anger leading to a deep sense of isolation, according to breakdown theorists. Then a trigger, like the death of Freddie Gray stimulates a breakdown, where people lash out in riots and rebellion. Breakdown theorists would argue there is no set goal, no articulated desires for policy reform or organized demands for what needs to be changed. These riots are simply a passionate reaction caused by deep frustration and isolation, and their goal is not outcome oriented, but rather their goal is to simply be heard when their voices have been swallowed by weak social networks and a lack of collective identity.

In contrast, resource mobilization theorists argue that collective action “flows not from breakdown but from group vying for political position and advantages” (Useem 216). Therefore, the distinction between “routine” and “non-routine” is far less significant. Instead of arguing that deep feelings of isolation stimulate collective action, resource mobilization theorists would suggest that it is solidarity that stimulates collective action. In terms of the title, resources references a variety of things, such as labor, leadership, or social networks. Pre-existing social media networks, facilitated by modern day computers and cell phones, stimulate collective action. For residents of Baltimore, resource mobilization theorists would argue the growing anger and heated national debate over police brutality towards minorities, with infamous cases such as Tayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner and others, had been able to shape the social climate of cities throughout the country, with Baltimore as a prime example. With a large black population, Baltimore residents watched and read about incidences of unjust brutality, often ending in death for victims and acquittal for police officers. Their frustration grew along with their passionate disgust for a national problem. Then with the murder of Freddie Gray, solidarity and organization formulated the eruption of the Baltimore riots. Social media acted as the connecting force for the community’s condition. Despite the fact that many of these protestors had not been direct victims of police brutality, it was the climate of solidarity of which many felt the same frustrations that caused the organization of protests and riots. Their goal was to put an end to police racism and brutality. Social media was also crucial in the organization of the riots. City officials of Baltimore received word of the impending riots

from word that had spread “on social media of a massive student gathering at Mondawmin Mall” (Yan & DiGiacomo). This organization was crucial, and differs from breakdown theorist’s idea of riots lacking organization or planning.

In the two weeks that followed, rioters destroyed the city, allegedly costing the city millions. A 10:00pm curfew was enforced, businesses were devastated, and employees of restaurants, entertainment venues, and bars lost income (Yan & DiGiacomo). Small businesses were destroyed or were victims of arson. “By the time the protest violence stopped, more than 480 people had been arrested and more than 110 officers had been injured, Baltimore police said” (Yan & DiGiacomo). According the Useem, the Baltimore riots would be seen as indistinguishably “non-routine.” However, it is to the reader’s discretion to decide what exactly caused the riot’s to erupt, let it be the #Blacklivesmatter movement’s sentiment spread through social media in terms of resource mobilization, or was is the built up anger from repression in terms of a social breakdown theory?

Works Cited

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