CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-82428-6 - The Politics of Collective Violence
Charles Tilly
Excerpt
More information

1

Varieties of Violence

Three Violent Vignettes

1. Cowboys Shoot Cowboys "Cowboys used their guns," reports David Courtwright of the American West,

> to act out any number of roles, the deadliest of which was *nemo me impugnit,* "no one impugns me." Harry French, a Kansas railroad brakeman, witnessed a fight between cowboys riding in the caboose of his cattle train. It began during a card game when one man remarked, "I don't like to play cards with a dirty deck." A cowboy from a rival outfit misunderstood him to say "dirty neck," and when the shooting was over one man lay dead and three were badly wounded. (Courtwright 1996: 92)

Whenever young, single men like the cowboys congregated for long periods under other than stringent discipline, Courtwright argues, violence ensued. Where the congregation had access to liquor, gambling, and guns, violence became more frequent and more lethal. American history featured an exceptional number of such congregations. Most of them resulted from the rapid migration of young men to new opportunities such as frontier settlements, expanding cattle ranges, railroad building, and gold mines. But their equivalent has arisen recently in major cities, as drugs and unstable households have interacted to put large numbers of young men on the street in each other's company. So, reasons Courtwright, virulent violence in major cities stems from their resemblance to frontier towns; both places harbor uncontrolled, armed concentrations of young, single males.

2. Villagers Attack Combines and Landlords Political ethnographer James Scott has been following social life and social change in a Malaysian village since the 1970s. Early in his studies, he observed an episode of violence quite different from the gunfights of America's Wild West:

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-82428-6 - The Politics of Collective Violence
Charles Tilly
Excerpt
More information

> When, in 1976, combine harvesters began to make serious inroads into the wages of poor villagers, the entire region experienced a rash of machine-breaking and sabotage reminiscent of the 1830s in England. The provincial authorities called it "vandalism" and "theft", but it was clear that there was a fairly generalised nocturnal campaign to prevent the use of combines. Batteries were removed from the machines and thrown into irrigation ditches; carburettors (*sic*) and other vital parts such as distributors were smashed; sand and mud were introduced into the gas tanks; various objects (stones, wire, nails) were used to jam the augers; coconut trees were felled across the combine's path; and at least two machines were destroyed by arson. Two aspects of this resistance deserve emphasis. First, it was clear that the goal of the saboteurs was never simple theft, for nothing was actually stolen. Second, all of the sabotage was carried out at night by individuals or small groups acting anonymously. They were, furthermore, shielded by their fellow villagers who, even if they knew who was involved, claimed total ignorance when the police came to investigate. (Scott 2000: 200)

Most of the time, Scott emphasizes, the same peasants maintained decorous, deferential public relations to the same landlords despite incessantly muttering among themselves, dragging their feet, stealing rice from the landlords' fields, and otherwise deploying what Scott calls "weapons of the weak." Although landlords would not have hesitated to prosecute a machine breaker or thief caught red-handed, landlords found themselves caught in a confining set of relations that would cost them standing, influence, and access to labor if they engaged in vindictive violence or generated open rebellion.

3. Rwandans Slaughter Each Other Neither of these episodes matched Rwanda's bloodletting of 1994. In July 1973, Rwanda's senior military officer, General Juvénal Habyarimana, had seized power by means of a relatively bloodless coup. Soon he was establishing a one-party regime that lasted for two decades. A Hutu from the northwest, Habyarimana ruled with the help of his wife and her powerful family. But they faced opposition from Tutsi-based military forces in Uganda and along Rwanda's northern border as well as from Hutu political leaders based in the south. Since 1990, the primarily Tutsi Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) had been advancing from its base near the Ugandan border, Hutu peasants had been fleeing the Front's advance, and Hutu Power activists had been organizing local massacres of Tutsi in response to the threatened return of the previously dominant Tutsis to power.

On 6 April 1994, President Habyarimana's aircraft was approaching its landing at the Rwandan capital, Kigali, when someone using sophisticated missiles shot it down. In that crash, not only the president but also Rwanda's army chief-of-staff General Nsabimana, Burundian president Cyprien Ntaryamira, and several others died. Habyarimana and Ntaryamira were returning from a

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-82428-6 - The Politics of Collective Violence
Charles Tilly
Excerpt
More information

meeting of African heads of state in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where participants had discussed (and perhaps agreed upon) installation of a broad-based transitional Rwandan government. Both inside and outside Rwanda, a number of power holders had reasons to oppose such a settlement.

Whoever instigated Habyarimana's killing, within a day one of the twentieth century's greatest massacres had begun. From the start, military men and Hutu Power activists targeted not only members of the Tutsi minority but also prominent rivals among the Hutu. "At first," in the words of Alison Des Forges,

> assailants generally operated in small bands and killed their victims where they found them, in their homes, on the streets, at the barriers. But, as early as the evening of April 7, larger groups seized the opportunity for more intensive slaughter as frightened Tutsi – and some Hutu – fled to churches, schools, hospitals, and government offices that had offered refuge in the past. In the northwestern prefecture of Gisenyi, militia killed some fifty people at the Nyundo seminary, forty-three at the church of Busogo, and some 150 at the parish of Bursasamana. A large crowd including Burundian students and wounded soldiers took on the task of massacring hundreds of people at the campus of the Seventh Day Adventist University at Mudende to the east of Gisenyi town.
>
> In Kigali, soldiers and militia killed dozens at a church in Nyamirambo on April 8 and others at the mosque at Nyamirambo several days later. On the morning of April 9, some sixty Interahamwe [members of a Hutu militia originally formed by the political party of dead president Habyarimana] led by Jean Ntawutagiripfa, known as "Congolais," and accompanied by four National Policemen, forced their way into the church at Gikondo, an industrial section of Kigali. They killed more than a hundred people that day, mostly with machetes and clubs. (Des Forges et al. 1999: 209–10)

Eventually several hundred thousands of Rwandan civilians took part in massacres of Tutsi and of Hutu accused of siding with Tutsi. Between March and July of 1994, assailants slaughtered perhaps 800,000 Tutsi as well as 10,000–50,000 Hutu. But the bloody victory of Hutu supremacists did not last long. Genocide mutated into civil war in Rwanda that spring; after the massacre, the RPF drove Hutu leaders out of the country or into hiding, then took over the government. Tutsi Paul Mugabe became Rwanda's head of state.

American gunfights, Malaysian sabotage of combines, and Rwandan massacres do not greatly resemble each other, but they all involve *collective violence*. They have in common episodic social interaction that:

- immediately inflicts physical damage on persons and/or objects ("damage" includes forcible seizure of persons or objects over restraint or resistance);
- involves at least two perpetrators of damage; and
- results at least in part from coordination among persons who perform the damaging acts.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-82428-6 - The Politics of Collective Violence
Charles Tilly
Excerpt
More information

Collective violence, by such a definition, excludes purely individual action, nonmaterial damage, accidents, and long-term or indirect effects of such damaging processes as dumping of toxic waste. But it includes a vast range of social interactions.

Critics could plausibly raise any of three quite contradictory objections to using the same term for this range of phenomena. First, could such disparate events possibly have anything in common? Second, aren't all of them expressions of a general human propensity to inflict damage on others, and therefore indistinguishable in principle from individual violence? Third, why make such a big deal of direct physical seizure and damage? Shouldn't collective violence also include totalitarian regimentation, environmental degradation, exploitation, and injustice, whether or not anyone damages persons and objects in the short run?

Could such disparate events possibly have anything in common? Although no universal law governs all episodes of collective violence, similar causes in different combinations and settings operate throughout the whole range. Collective violence resembles weather: complicated, changing, and unpredictable in some regards, yet resulting from similar causes variously combined in different times and places. Getting the causes, combinations, and settings right helps explain collective violence and its many variations. More than anything else, this book organizes around an effort to identify relevant causes, combinations, and settings.

Don't all sorts of violence express general human propensities to inflict damage on others, propensities that simply activate more people simultaneously in collective violence? Although regularities that determine individual aggression against persons and objects surely apply within complex interactions as well, collective violence is not simply individual aggression writ large. Social ties, structures, and processes significantly affect its character. A rough distinction between individual and collective violence therefore focuses attention on how social ties, structures, and processes affect change and variation in violent incidents.

What about nonviolent violence? Questions of injustice, exploitation, and oppression unquestionably arise across a wide variety of collective violence. What is more, physical seizure or damage often occurs as a contingent outcome of conflicts that greatly resemble each other, many of which proceed without direct short-term damage. Nevertheless, to spread the term "violence" across all interpersonal relations and solitary actions of which we disapprove actually undermines the effort to explain violence (for a contrary view, see Weigert 1999). It blocks us from asking about effective causal relationships between exploitation or injustice, on one side, and physical damage, on the other. It also obscures the fact that specialists in inflicting physical damage (such as police, soldiers, guards,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-82428-6 - The Politics of Collective Violence
Charles Tilly
Excerpt
More information

thugs, and gangs) play significant parts in collective violence. Their presence or absence often makes all the difference between violent and nonviolent outcomes.

Ideas, Behavior, and Social Interaction

These are, appropriately, contentious matters. Broadly speaking, observers of human violence divide into three camps: idea people, behavior people, and relation people. The three camps differ in their understanding of fundamental causes in human affairs.

Idea people stress consciousness as the basis of human action. They generally claim that humans acquire beliefs, concepts, rules, goals, and values from their environments, reshape their own (and each other's) impulses in conformity with such ideas, and act out their socially acquired ideas. Idea people divide over the significance of the distinction between individual and collective violence, with some arguing that individual and collective ideas inhabit partly separate domains, while others argue seamless continuity between individual and society. In either view, ideas concerning the worth of others and the desirability of aggressive actions significantly affect the propensity of a person or a people to join in collective violence. To stem violence, goes the reasoning, we must suppress or eliminate destructive ideas.

Behavior people stress the autonomy of motives, impulses, and opportunities. Many point to human evolution as the origin of aggressive action – individual or collective. They argue, for example, that among primates both natural and sexual selection gave advantages to individuals and populations employing aggressive means of acquiring mates, shelter, food, and protection against attack. Hence, runs the argument, propensities to adopt those aggressive means entered the human genetic heritage. Others avoid evolutionary explanations but still speak of extremely general needs and incentives for domination, exploitation, respect, deference, protection, or security that underlie collective violence. Still others adopt resolutely economistic stances, seeing violence as a means of acquiring goods and services.

Behavior people often take a reductionist position, saying that ultimately all collective phenomena sum up nothing but individual behaviors or even the impacts of particular genes. Because motives and impulses change at a glacial pace, runs this line of argument, violence rises or falls mainly in response to changes in two factors: socially imposed control over motives and socially created opportunities to express those motives.

Relation people make transactions among persons and groups far more central than do idea and behavior people. They argue that humans develop their

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-82428-6 - The Politics of Collective Violence
Charles Tilly
Excerpt
More information

personalities and practices through interchanges with other humans, and that the interchanges themselves always involve a degree of negotiation and creativity. Ideas thus become means, media, and products of social interchange, while motives, impulses, and opportunities operate only within continuously negotiated social interaction. For relation people, collective violence therefore amounts to a kind of conversation, however brutal or one-sided that conversation may be. Relation people often make concessions to the influence of individual propensities but generally insist that collective processes have irreducibly distinct properties. In this view, restraining violence depends less on destroying bad ideas, eliminating opportunities, or suppressing impulses than on transforming relations among persons and groups.

Each group of thinkers has a point. Ideas about proper and improper uses of violent means, about differences among social categories, and about justice or injustice undoubtedly shape people's participation or nonparticipation in collective violence. James Scott's villagers followed an elaborate code of civility as they attacked their landlords' harvesting combines. Deep behavioral regularities surely affect the readiness of different categories of people to inflict violence on each other. As David Courtwright's cowboys illustrate, segregated groups of young, single males figure disproportionately in collective violence over the world as a whole. Relations certainly matter as well; in Rwanda and elsewhere, previously existing organization and intergroup relations channel who visits violence on whom.

Recognizing that interplay, some analysts of violence offer combinations or compromises among ideas, behavior, and relations. Classic Marxists, for example, derived shared interests especially from relations of production but then saw interests as determining both prevailing ideas and interest-oriented behavior. Violence, in that view, generally resulted from and also promoted class interests. For Marxists, relations had priority, but relations, ideas, and behaviors interacted. Classic liberals replied that properly instilled ideas (sometimes, to be sure, reducing to simple person-by-person calculations of gain and loss) generated appropriate behaviors and social relations. They thus combined ideal and behavioral explanations while relegating relations to secondary importance.

In a less abstract way, David Courtwright himself combines ideal and behavioral explanations.

> The geographically and ethnically uneven distribution of American violence and disorder to the end of the nineteenth century can be explained by three sets of factors, one cultural, one racial, and one demographic. Cultural beliefs and habits, like southern sensibilities about guns and honor or the Irish penchant for aggressive drinking, help explain why some regions or groups consistently had higher rates of murder and mayhem. Racism

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-82428-6 - The Politics of Collective Violence
Charles Tilly
Excerpt
More information

> was important both because it encouraged and exacerbated conflict with minorities, such as the Indians, and because it contributed to the economic marginalization of black men and restrictions on Chinese immigration. Then there were local and regional variations in population structure, notably the age and gender imbalances on the nonagricultural frontier. Through a combination of pooled biological tendencies, widespread bachelorhood, and male group dynamics, these produced more drinking, gambling, prostitution, quarreling, carrying of weapons, and other traits associated with bad ends. (Courtwright 1996: 170)

Thus Courtwright treats behavioral causes as fundamental, sees ideal causes as modifying their effects, and makes a gesture or two toward relational processes. Despite many such attempts to combine perspectives, however, analyses of collective violence have divided sharply over the relative priorities and connections among ideas, behavior, and social relations. Strongly competing explanations for collective violence have therefore emerged (Aya 1990).

This book proceeds mainly along relational lines. While calling attention to influential ideas and behavioral regularities where necessary, it concentrates on ways that variable patterns of social interaction constitute and cause different varieties of collective violence. At the same time, it shows how similar causal mechanisms appear in disparate modes of violence, producing parallel short-term effects but yielding distinct overall outcomes as a function of their settings, sequences, and combinations. It stresses relational mechanisms – those that operate within interpersonal transactions – but sees them as producing their effects in conjunction with environmental and cognitive mechanisms.

A relational emphasis has its limits. For example, this book does not definitively obliterate the possibility that, deep down, the extent of collective violence depends heavily on how many genetically predisposed young people gather in the same place without firm discipline imposed upon them. Indirectly, this book raises doubts about the adequacy of simple behavioral accounts; it does so by identifying historical changes and variations in collective violence that surely result from variable social processes rather than from alterations of impulses, inhibitions, and population distributions. But in fact its conclusions leave open a great many questions concerning individual propensities to engage in violence.

Nor does the book provide a full account of the anger, fear, lust, gratification, and empathy that, variously combined, often dominate feelings of participants in collective violence. It does show that, for all their grounding in individual predispositions, such strong emotions arise from social interaction and respond to changes in social settings. But it does not trace out moment-by-moment connections between physiological changes and fluctuations in collective violence. Steadfast behaviorists may therefore leave the book still insisting that inhibitions

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-82428-6 - The Politics of Collective Violence
Charles Tilly
Excerpt
More information

and opportunities for expression of strong emotions ultimately determine how much violence occurs, on what scale, by whom, and to whom.

The book's challenge to idea-based explanations of collective violence does not extend far beyond insisting on the importance of social interaction in the generation, diffusion, and implementation of violence-promoting ideas. It leaves open the possibility that my great teacher Barrington Moore rightly sees monotheistic religions as fostering gross intolerance, hence readiness to kill outsiders, because of their sharply drawn distinctions between the worthy and the unworthy, the pure and the impure (Moore 2000).

Even if Moore is right, however, the relational analyses to follow clarify what social processes intervene between acquisition of a violence-promoting idea and direct participation in mayhem. After all, most holders of views that justify violence against one sort of human or another never actually abduct, maim, or murder anyone. That such ideologues should enlist others (who are often not especially ideological) to abduct, maim, or kill on their behalf raises precisely the kinds of questions about social processes that we are pursuing here.

A relational approach maintains a dual orientation to conventional writing on violence. On one side, analysts of violence commonly reconstruct the motives, interests, circumstances, or beliefs of one actor at a time, then divide between condemning or defending the actor. After the major police–civilian battles, property destruction, and looting in predominantly black sections of large American cities during the 1960s, commentators divided sharply between (a) interpreting the events as an understandable response to deprivation and (b) justifying repression of disorderly youths who were merely seeking short-term gratification (for the two views see e.g. Feagin & Hahn 1975; Banfield 1970, esp. chap. 9). By locating causality in negotiated interactions, a relational approach makes individual assignment of praise, defense, or blame more difficult.

The same writing on violence, however, also commonly offers judgments on what would reduce violence – how to prevent genocide, deter terrorism, open up nonviolent paths to justice, mitigate the damage from brawls, and so on. All such judgments rest, implicitly or explicitly, on causal arguments concerning what produces the violence that occurs and what would produce alternative outcomes. For example, a blue-ribbon panel on violence convened by the National Research Council characteristically recommended new research and reporting, but its action program emphasized these measures to reduce violence:

- intervening in the biological and psychosocial development of individuals' potentials for violent behavior;
- modifying places, routine activities, and situations that promote violence;

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-82428-6 - The Politics of Collective Violence
Charles Tilly
Excerpt
More information

- maximizing the violence-reduction effects of police interventions in illegal markets;
- modifying the roles of commodities – including firearms, alcohol, and other psychoactive drugs – in inhibiting or promoting violent events or their consequences;
- intervening to reduce the potentials for violence in bias crimes, gang activities, and community transitions; and
- implementing a comprehensive initiative to reduce partner assault (Reiss & Roth 1993: 22).

Such recommendations rest primarily on the assumption that violence results from a balance between individual impulses and inhibitions on those impulses. Although it leaves some room for ideas, the implicit argument centers on behavioral causes. It assigns almost no weight whatsoever to effects of social relations except as they work through impulses and inhibitions.

If this book does its job well, it will make superior causal arguments to those now available in behavioral and ideal accounts of violence. It will thus clarify which proposals to reduce violence would, if implemented, produce what effects. If its arguments are correct then – for a given amount of effort – attempts to modify individual behavior, place greater restraints on impulses, or banish bad ideas will have significantly less effect on prevailing levels of violence than will intervention in relations among contenders.

Let us not assume automatically that any social policy reducing violence is a good thing in itself. Whatever else readers learn from this book, they will find that political regimes differ in the levels and kinds of violence they generate; in choosing political regimes, to some extent we also choose among varieties of violence. Personally, if forced to choose between a nonviolent tyranny based on stark inequality and a rough-and-tumble democracy, I would choose the democracy. I hope the book will help readers see how to create democracies with a minimum – but not a total absence – of damage to persons and property.

In stressing relational mechanisms rather than ideas or individually motivated behavior, this book extends recent analyses of contentious politics (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly 2001; Tilly 2001a). Contentious politics consists of discontinuous, public, collective claim making in which one of the parties is a government. A government is a substantial, durable, bounded organization that exercises control over the major concentrated means of coercion within some territory. Collective violence does sometimes occur quite outside the range of governments; however, above a very small scale, collective violence almost always involves governments as monitors, claimants, objects of claims, or third parties to claims.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-82428-6 - The Politics of Collective Violence
Charles Tilly
Excerpt
More information

When governments are involved, collective violence becomes a special case of contentious politics. That insight will serve us well when it comes to explaining variation in the character and intensity of large-scale violence. It will help us to see the influence of political regimes on the sorts of violence that occur within their territories.

The book also draws on recent work concerning social inequality (for critiques and syntheses, see Tilly 1998b, 2001b,c). In that line of analysis, two fundamental relational mechanisms generate and sustain a wide range of inequalities between categories of humans. *Exploitation* comes into play when powerful, connected people command resources from which they draw significantly increased returns by coordinating the efforts of outsiders whom they exclude from the full value added by that effort. *Opportunity hoarding* operates when members of a categorically bounded network acquire access to a resource that is valuable, renewable, subject to monopoly, supportive of network activities, and enhanced by the network's modus operandi. Once exploitation and opportunity hoarding are at work, inequality also depends on adaptation (creation of practices that articulate people's lives with unequal arrangements) and emulation (transfers of relevant practices, beliefs, and relations from site to site). For present purposes, however, exploitation and opportunity hoarding do the critical explanatory work.

Both exploitation and opportunity hoarding gain in effectiveness when the categorical boundary in play corresponds precisely to a boundary that operates widely elsewhere in social life and thus brings with it a set of supporting beliefs, practices, and social relations. Boundaries of ethnicity, race, religion, gender, or nationality reinforce exploitation and opportunity hoarding. In their turn, exploitation and opportunity hoarding lock such differences in place by delivering greater rewards to occupants of the ostensibly superior category.

Governments always do a certain amount of exploitation and opportunity hoarding, with government officials and ruling classes being the typical beneficiaries of the two mechanisms. They commonly incorporate categorical boundaries that already operate elsewhere, for example by excluding women or followers of heterodox religions from full citizenship. How much and exactly how governments exploit and hoard opportunities varies tremendously; much of political theory concerns just that variation. Inequality based on control of governments figures significantly in collective violence – both because it makes control of governments worth fighting for or defending and because it almost always includes differences in access to violent means.

Nongovernmental inequality also affects collective violence deeply. Governments usually side with beneficiaries of existing inequalities, for three reasons:

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org