

Western Philosophy of Social Science

Lecture 10. Theories of rebellion

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I. Peasant rebellions and rebels

- Why did the great peasant rebellions of late Imperial China occur?
- Were there large historical factors that played a central causal role in these rebellions?
- What motivated peasant rebels?
- How do theories of collective action, class politics, and religious movements contribute to satisfactory explanations of these occurrences?

Our question today ...

- We are not considering comprehensive theories of revolution or rebellion.
- Instead, we are asking the question, what are some of the things that motivate people to become rebels?
- What explains rural collective action from the point of view of the peasant who participates?
- What other local factors are necessary or conducive to facilitating collective action and uprising?

II. Local politics theory

- Local-politics theories look at rebellion from the point of view of the motives of individual rebels and leaders: what factors lead peasants to decide to support a budding rebellion, and what determines the level of support which they give?
- These are largely premised on the assumption of individual rationality at the level of the local decision maker, and give primary attention to the local environment of choice: the institutional arrangements at the local level which condition the opportunities and risks constraining individual choice.

Local politics theory

- The individual's needs, interests, and motives.
- The sources of potential solidarity at the level of the individual.
- Analysis of the circumstances of choice of the likely participants.
- Analysis of the concrete goals of the participants.

Local politics theory

- Analysis of the “local politics” that surround mobilization in times of rebellion.
- Political entrepreneurship: what motivates leaders in times of political unrest? Analysis of their private interests; their ability to make use of popular organization and motivation for their own political ends.
- Analysis of the ways in which organizations—bandit gangs, village militias, crop-watching societies—function as instruments of collective mobilization and action.

Nian Rebellion

- Elizabeth Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845-1945*
- Rebellion as a deliberate response to challenges to survival.
- Strategies of survival, individual and collective, underlie her analysis of these rebellions.
- Also a careful analysis of the interlocking effects of the strategies chosen by antagonists: bandit gangs, villages, and the state.

Dearth, predation, protection

- Ecological stress on local rural society; flooding, drought, and famine in Shandong Province (1840s).
- A cycle of predation and defense leading to an escalation of rural violence.
- Bandit gangs motivated by dearth; village militias formed to defend villages; escalation of conflict.
- Emphasis on unintended consequences.

Local strategies of competition

- Predatory strategies: smuggling, robbery, banditry
- Protective strategies: crop-watching societies, local militia, fortification, tax resistance.
- State becomes aware, uses army to attack bandit gangs; gangs become large and strong enough to defeat the armies sent against them.
- Rebellion as a local response to local conditions, rather than an ideological attempt to attack the state.

Other rational actor models of rebellion

- Note the parallel to Popkin's analysis of the Vietnamese rebellions
- Popkin gives more explicit attention to individuals within collective action problems
- Perry gives more emphasis to local politics
- Neither emphasizes the idea of largescale collective goals or revolutionary ideology.

III. A class conflict theory

- Why do people rebel? Because they are the subject of exploitation and domination; because they recognize their common situation with others; because they recognize rationally that, as a group, they have the power to threaten or overthrow the institutions that oppress them.
- Rebellions occur when the mass of producers acquire both the political resources and the advantageous circumstances needed to mount a potentially successful rebellion.

Application to China

- Social tensions result from the exploitation of peasants and conflict between peasants, landlords, and the state.
- Chesneaux interprets the Taiping Rebellion as a class conflict struggle; the Taiping social program was one of agrarian reform. But it was also a movement based on religious symbols, charisma, and mobilization around religious beliefs.

Haifeng County

- Robert Marks, *Rural Revolution in South China: Peasants and the Making of History in Haifeng County 1570-1930*.
- Robert Marks analysis rural collective action in South China.
- He analyzes the class structure of the region and attributes class-based motives to the participants.
- Exploitation is recognized by participants.
- He emphasizes the importance of the features of taxation and land tenancy as central factors in stimulating protest and resistance.

Haifeng County

- Marks asserts the importance of class consciousness in the politics of this region.
- He de-emphasizes the importance of leaders and organizations, emphasizing mass politics instead.
- Marks holds that indigenous peasant movements and political traditions are the primary factor in the occurrence of rebellion and revolution--not the presence or absence of outside political leadership and organization.

Problems with mass politics

- Marks does not provide analysis of the mechanisms through which class identity arises (a microfoundation for his theory).
- What social mechanisms would permit a geographically dispersed class to arrive at a group identity based on its shared material interests in opposition to other, regionally-based interests that may be shared with locals from other classes?

Bianco's observation

- Consider Bianco's point: spontaneous peasant uprising are almost always short and unsuccessful.
- And in fact, Bianco finds that nonclass factors are often equally important in local unrest: religion, intervillage conflict, vertical social organizations, ... (As we saw in lecture 8).

IV. A millenarian theory

- Do collective action and rebellion sometimes occur as the result of symbolic politics or religious ideas?
- Is it possible for people to mobilize around purely religious or symbolic goals?
- Is millenarianism irrational?
- Consider the political strength of fundamentalist Islam or Hindu nationalism.
- Consider the White Lotus sects and the White Lotus rebellions in North China (Eight Trigrams Rebellion, 1813).

Millenarianism in history

- Millenarianism is a cultural or religious framework that predicts catastrophic change in the near future.
- Often there are “signs” that can be read to predict the coming catastrophe.
- Christian movements in the middle ages in Europe present an example.
- Susan Naquin provides a theory of the mobilization of rural people and rebellions that ensued in North China around her interpretation of millenarian Buddhism.

Millenarian Buddhism

- A heterodox religion in rural areas in North China
- Promulgated by itinerant teachers and martial arts instructors
- Religious content in the form of banners, chants, secret rituals, charms
- Mantra—”Eternal Progenitor in Our Original Home in the World of True Emptiness”
- Sect leaders call for rebellion when they see the signs of the turning of the kalpa

The White Lotus rebellion

- “Vigorous leaders had used ordinary sect ties to build a sect organization of extraordinary size and scope, and they had emphasized one dimension of the religion— its vision of apocalypse and millenium—to mobilize believers into rebellion” (Naquin).
- Naquin focuses on the motivations and beliefs of the adherents
- She analyzes the organizational resources created by the sect.

Critical observations

- Naquin appears to overemphasize the religious content of these rebellions. Only a minority of followers and activists were members of the White Lotus sect.
- She appears to give too little attention to the material motivational factors that might have motivated rebels.
- Her account needs to be supplemented by the ecological, material, and class-based analysis provided by the other two theories.
- It is a highly interesting element of these events.

V. Assessment

- Are these competing theories of rebellion and revolution?
- No. They are instead focused analyses of important parts of the story: material interest, ideology, local politics, organizational capacity, the effects of strategic interaction.
- These should not be seen as attempts at comprehensive theories, but rather interpretations of the particular moments of rebellion that they consider.

Assessment

- Furthermore, we have no reason to believe that there is a single or most important potential source of mobilization and rebellious motivation. Ideology, religion, class, solidarity, moral economy, sense of injustice, nationalism—all these factors can be used as a basis of mobilization by organizations and leaders.
- And there are historical examples of collective action that invoke each of these factors.

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