

Why Men Rebel Redux: How Valid are its Arguments 40 years On?

Written by Ted Robert Gurr

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TED ROBERT GURR, NOV 17 2011

Why Men Rebel was written in the late 1960s when observers in the Western world were deeply concerned about political violence in postcolonial states, particularly in Africa and Southeast Asia, and mass protest movements, especially against racial discrimination in the United States and military intervention in Vietnam. It was first published in 1970 by Princeton University Press and won the American Political Science Association's Woodrow Wilson Award as the best book of 1970 in political science and international relations. In the next few years it was translated into German, Spanish, and Thai. In the first decade of the twenty-first century it attracted a new flurry of intellectual interest that led to the appearance of editions in Arabic and Russian. In 2011 Paradigm Publishers published a 40th anniversary edition and gave me the chance to take a retrospective look at the *Why Men Rebel* arguments. This essay is adapted from my introduction to the new edition. [1]

Looking backwards, the question is how well its arguments help us understand more recent waves of protest and rebellion within societies. I was in my late 20's when I wrote the dissertation that became *Why Men Rebel*. I thought, with too much ambition and too little self-criticism, that it was possible to provide a general explanation for political protest and rebellion that could help readers understand not only the violent conflicts of the 1960s, but a great many others as well.^[2] I was convinced then, and am convinced now, that to build more peaceful and secure societies, we need to begin by analyzing the minds of men—and women—who oppose bad governments and unpopular policies. But equally we need to know about the societies in which they live, their beliefs and cultural traditions, and the governments they oppose.

The essential argument of the *Why Men Rebel* model is that to understand protest and rebellion in general, and in specific instances, we should analyze three general factors. First is popular discontent (relative deprivation), along with an analysis of its sources.^[3] Second are people's justifications or beliefs about the justifiability and utility of political action. Third is the balance between discontented people's capacity to act—that is, the ways in which they are organized—and the government's capacity to repress or channel their anger. In the early 21st century people almost everywhere worry about international terrorism, instability in Africa and the Islamic world, growing inequality within and between countries, and the risks that political conflict will lead to genocidal massacres of dissidents. Does an analytic framework from 1970 help us understand contemporary conflicts over these issues?^[4]

The argument prompted strong theoretical critiques. Prominent scholars such as Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, and Sidney Tarrow argued that we should begin explanations by examining social and political structures (Skocpol), political mobilization (Tilly), and mass social movements (Tarrow).^[5] Mark Irving Lichbach showed that the anger-grievance-rebellion sequence could be explained within a rational choice framework.^[6] In light of forty years of research and reflection, I think the core of the *Why Men Rebel* model remains valid but is incomplete.

First, I continue to think that people, with all their diverse identities, desires, and beliefs, should be central to our analyses of conflict. This means that individuals should be the prism through which to examine the effects of social structures, beliefs, and the possibilities for mobilization and political action. Is "relative deprivation" the best concept for doing so? In my own later writings I have used the words *grievances* and *sense of injustice* to capture the essence of the state of mind that motivates people to political action. Whichever phrase is used, the essential first

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step in any analysis is to understand what people's grievances are and where they come from.

This brings me to my second point, which is that to understand grievances we must first examine where people stand in society and what goods and bads they experience. It is not enough to point to big economic and social structures as the "explanation." We need to understand how people interpret the situations in which they find themselves. Recent protestors against the effects of globalization, for example, are mainly young people in advanced industrial societies who, objectively, benefit from globalization. Why do they protest, and not the poor of the global South? Some young men in the Islamic world are attracted to militant movements like al-Qaeda and its affiliates that justify political violence by appealing to the Islamic doctrine of jihad; alternatively, they seek opportunities in the modern world in cities, in the Gulf states, and in Europe and North America. Why do they respond in such different ways to political appeals and opportunities?

One limitation of the *Why Men Rebel* model is that it does not discuss in enough detail where people's beliefs about justice and the good life come from. This is my third point. To understand beliefs, it is not sufficient, maybe not even important, to analyze the abstract content of ideologies like indigenous rights or the motives of spokesmen for revolutionary doctrines. Group identity is more important: What are people's clan, ethnic, religious, and political identities? With what people do they feel kindred, what networks of social interaction and communication connect them? The politics of identity are central to understanding people's reference group, their sense of collective injustice, and their susceptibility to appeals for political action. This approach does not abandon the essential "understand people first" principle of *Why Men Rebel*. But it recognizes that in most of the world, including the West, despite its emphasis on individualism, group context and identity shape people's hopes and grievances. [7]

My fourth point concerns group mobilization. Empirical analyses of the causes of political protest and rebellion mostly confirm the late Charles Tilly's contention in *From Mobilization to Revolution* (1978) that whether and how people are organized is the immediate source of political action. The *Why Men Rebel* model also looks at the extent of group organization, in chapter 8, but mainly in structural terms—it does not provide a full account of the processes by which they become organized. Tilly gives much more attention to process, but with one glaring omission: he does not analyze carefully how a group's grievances and beliefs shape the mobilization process. Therefore, a full analysis of group mobilization and ensuing political action requires a synthesis of a *Why Men Rebel* analysis of grievances and beliefs with Tilly's analysis of mobilization as a process.

Fifth, we need to examine how the communication of ideas and personal mobility has transformed political action in the last half-century. When *Why Men Rebel* was written, most protest and revolutionary movements were specific to one country, or just one city or region within a country. Now the web, social networking and air travel make for much more rapid international movement of ideas and activists. Political action no longer stops at national borders. To understand why and how this occurs, it remains useful to begin with some of the *Why Men Rebel* arguments, which includes an analysis (in chapter 4) of the role of the communication media in spreading political ideas. We understand the mechanisms. What we do not understand as well is how skillful communicators can create a sense of identity and common purpose that transcend national boundaries and then use them to mobilize people in many different places for coordinated political action.

Next are some observations about the rationality of political action. *Why Men Rebel* was written on the psychological assumption that political violence originates as a non-rational reaction to frustration. An effort was made in chapter 6 to incorporate elements of rational-choice analysis, showing how cost-benefit calculations are used—especially by leaders—to channel people's anger into activities with strategic political purposes. In retrospect, I think it was a mistake to suggest that people who react violently to their sense of injustice are non-rational. It is true that the consequences of violent political action are more often destructive than constructive and can lead to great suffering for those who take the step to violence. Yet elements of rational calculation permeate the entire process of political conflict. I do not now think it makes sense to assume *a priori* that conflict behavior is either rational or irrational. Instead, one should focus on the identities, grievances, and objectives of people who initiate political action and ask, critically, whether and how their actions contribute to the attainment of their goals.

Let me turn last to the role of governments in the process of conflict. *Why Men Rebel* points out, in chapter 5, that

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governments' responses to political action are a major determinant of whether people's anger leads to violence against authorities or is channeled into other kinds of action. Many subsequent studies have shown that governments which respond with reform are seldom targets of rebellion. But the model simplifies reality by making a linear argument that people rebel and governments respond. This seems to imply that rebels are the problem and government the solution. A more careful reading shows that governments sustain or create the conditions for conflict at every step in the model. Government-imposed inequalities are a major source of grievances; repressive policies increase anger and resistance; denial of the right to use conventional politics and protest pushes activists underground and spawns terrorist and revolutionary resistance. This leads in turn to a big set of questions for which *Why Men Rebel* does not propose answers. Why do some governments rule by repression, thus reproducing the conditions of future rebellion, while others govern with policies and concessions that contribute to social peace?

Democratic governance is widely understood as part of the answer: elected leaders are more responsive to popular demands in norm and practice. A less recognized factor is that governments, like political movements, are increasingly exposed to international influences. One of the positive consequences of globalization is that most governments now depend on international trade, investment, and external political support. Therefore they face political pressures to respect human rights, to rely on reform rather than repression to contain discontent, to reduce corruption, and to open up their political systems to popular participation and power-sharing. Failure to do so is risky because it often leads to international criticism, diplomatic pressures, reduced trade and investment, and, in response to the worst abuses, international intervention.

Why Men Rebel continues to be recognized as a classic because it helped lead the way to a systematic, people-based understanding of the causes of political protest and rebellion. The book itself and forty years of critical analysis also point to additional questions. I encourage readers in the contemporary world to keep the following guidelines in mind when seeking to understand and respond to popular discontents:

- Begin by examining the group identities and grievances of disadvantaged people, including the poor, underemployed urban youth, and members of ethnic, national, and religious minorities.
- Understand the sources of people's grievances by examining their status and their treatment by governments and by other groups. Listen to what people say, not just what others say about them.
- Ask why group identities and disadvantages make their members susceptible to different kinds of political appeals and ideologies that justify protest or rebellion.
- Analyze the motives and strategies of leaders who seek to build political movements among aggrieved people.
- Study the motives and strategies of governments in dealing with disadvantaged groups. Are governments open to political participation by such groups? Do government policies increase or reduce the potential for disruptive conflict?
- Look for evidence about international factors—transnational movements, ideologies, examples of successful political action—that affect group grievances, mobilization, and choices among different political strategies.
- Analyze the international pressures and constraints that influence the way governments respond to political action.
- Consider how political action and government responses affect the groups involved. How much does a group gain or lose? Do governmental policies restore public order or do they provoke further resistance?

First and last is the question of values. Most conflict researchers cited here, including the author, try to be objective in their analyses. The ultimate normative purpose of this kind of conflict analysis, though, and the objective that has

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attracted most scholars to the subject, is to help all of us—political activists, policy makers, and scholars—understand how to build more just and peaceful societies.

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[1] The Arabic edition was published in 2004 by the Gulf Research Center in the United Arab Emirates, the Russian edition in 2005 by Piter Publishers in St. Petersburg. The translator of the Russian edition, sociologist Vladimir Anurin of Nizhniy Novgorod, added a detailed forward about the history of sociological publications in Russia on “conflictology.” He first learned of *Why Men Rebel* in the late 1980s from translations of other English-language books but was unable to obtain his own copy. He went to Moscow with a “spy camera” and photographed pages from the library of a social science research institute—but failed because the camera did not transfer film. It took him another two years to get a Xerox copy and a decade before a translation could be added to Russia’s growing literature on conflict analysis—including works by Russian authors as well as translations. Jennifer Knerr of Paradigm Publishers in Boulder, Colorado, convinced me to prepare the new edition for publication in both hardcover and paperback editions and approved the publication of this article.

[2] Terminology in conflict studies has changed since 1970. I used the term *political violence* as a shorthand term for rioting and demonstrations, conspiracy, and rebellion aimed at governments. Since only some of these events used violence, in later writings I referred to them as “protest and rebellion.” Other scholars use the general term *collective political action*. Here I use the above terms interchangeably.

[3] Relative deprivation is defined as “actors’ perception of discrepancy between their value expectations and their value capabilities. Value expectations are the goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are rightfully entitled. Value capabilities are the goods and conditions they think they are capable of getting and keeping” (p. 24).

[4] In the 1990s, Stephen G. Brush, a historian of science, analyzed several hundred publications in the social sciences that addressed the scientific agenda laid out in *Why Men Rebel* and published his findings in “Dynamics of Theory Change in the Social Sciences: Relative Deprivation and Collective Violence,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 4 (1996): 523-545. The argument provoked a great deal of empirical research and conceptual criticism.

[5] Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978); Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[6] Mark Irving Lichbach, *The Rebel’s Dilemma* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

[7] I develop this kind of analysis in detail in Ted Robert Gurr, *Peoples versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2000), esp. ch. 3, “The Etiology of Ethnopolitical Conflict.”