The J-Curve and Power Struggle Theories of Collective Violence

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COMMENTS

THE J-CURVE AND POWER STRUGGLE THEORIES OF COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE

A critique of relative-deprivation theories of collective violence appeared recently in this journal (Snyder and Tilly, 1972). As I read them, the authors say this: a theory which explains political violence as the product of a rapidly widening gap between what people want and what they get does not fit the data on France between 1830 and 1960. Snyder and Tilly then propose (1972: 526) a theory which explains violence as "a byproduct of struggles for political power," and they argue that "violence tends to occur when one group lays claim to a set of resources, and at least one other group resists that claim."

There seem to me to be deficiencies in their critique of my J-curve theory (Davies, 1962, 1969, 1971) and the related later theories of others (Feierabend et al., 1966, 1969); Tanter and Midlarsky, 1967; Bwy, 1968; Gurr, 1969, 1971). In the theory they propose–violence as a byproduct of the political struggle between groups to control resources–there is at least one major deficiency, aside from their failure to distinguish or discuss the groups that struggle.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN FRENCH HISTORY, REVOLUTIONARY OR OTHERWISE

One deficiency of the critique is this. There was no major nationwide collective violence at any time during the 131 years (1830-1960) of French history; Snyder and Tilly have presented only nationwide and no local data Their period omits the most gigantic political earthquake in French national history (the Revolution of 1789) at one end and one of the most severe tremors (the 1968 rebellion of students and factory workers) at the other. They do mention several serious disturbances that did not involve such nationwide violence as the 1789 revolution but do not consider where this violence occurred within France.

The result is that their data homogenize incidents of violence, erasing the difference in intensity of reaction to particular events in different parts of the country. This homogenization would not be such an analytical defect if the authors had applied their mode of analysis to the one truly nationwide revolution, the one that involved all France in widespread though of course not uniform violence. National data reduce to molehills such mountainous localized uprisings as the Paris Commune of 1871. There is a sharp rise in 1867-1872 in the authors' graph of disturbances (1972:523) but no detailed analysis of any of them, including the Paris Commune.

The J-curve can hardly be deemed deficient for failing to explain national revolutions that did not occur from 1830-1960; but it does critically help to explain the 1871 Paris uprising, the only one that I have tried to evaluate. A big gap did develop between expectations and gratifications in Paris in late 1870 and early 1871. This gap helped produce the localized but serious rebellion that lasted ten weeks, from March 18 to May 28, 1871.

As I see it, the gap developed as follows. There was a long-range rise in French prestige, pride, and power in the 18th century, reaching a peak when the French Revolution as a program of action became a cynosure of world attention and when the French armies under Napoleon became the terror of Europe. The defeat in 1815 was not definitive; it was a setback similar to the 1918 defeat of Germany during its long-term rise before the definitive defeat of 1945. The Franco-Prussian War, lasting just six weeks and ending in the surrender at Sedan on September 2, 1870, was a profound trauma, perhaps to most Frenchmen. This trauma was most directly experienced by Parisians, who underwent German siege from October 1870 through January 1871.

After being thus demoralized, Parisians were pushed down further by the puppet French national assembly, which terminated the siege-related moratorium on rents in Paris and declared payable, no later than the succeeding four months, overdue bills (échéances) and terminated the pay (1.50 francs per day) of the national guard, which was the major remaining repository of French military power after the January 1871 armistice disarmed the regular army troops. The national assembly seemed to be conspiring to unite Paris against it. In any case, the national guard formed the solid core of armed resis-

tance to the national assembly during the ten weeks of the Commune. These three economic measures affecting rents, bills, and guard pay were efficient factors in J-curve terms, though they would not of course show up as nation-wide forces. But the Paris Commune, which was supported by like uprisings in Marseilles, Toulouse, and Lyons, was not a nationwide outbreak.

It is easy to ignore such hard-to-measure factors as the shame of defeat,* but it should not be hard to get quantitative data on the effects of ending the pay of national guardsmen and the moratorium on rent and bills. To ignore the effect or depreciate the significance of such events is like saying that earthquakes do not occur in the absence of accurate seismographs. Social scientists who ignore such factors for those readily measurable are substituting statistical for empirical significance. As Galileo might have said: eppure si muove.

Another deficiency is the unfortunate decision to take only three randomly selected months for the years 1861-1929. This may have distorted the authors' data on the events of 1870-71. The Franco-Prussian War began on July 19, 1870; the siege of Paris lasted from September 19 to January 28, 1871; the Commune was in control of Paris for the seventy-two days from March 18 to May 28, 1871. If the three randomly selected months happened to be in the first half of 1870 or the second half of 1871, the analysts would have missed the whole show. Their graph (1972:523) indicates they did not miss the whole show, but their randomization may have distorted the magnitude of such brief events as the Commune.

Another deficiency in the quantitative analysis clearly indicates their failure to measure the gap between expectations and gratifications and therefore their failure to test the theory. They use three items as "indicators of hardship and well-being": indexes of food prices, manufactured goods prices, and industrial production. They use these data to measure the gap as follows: they say that increases in the prices of food and manufactured goods and decreases in industrial production are deprivations. Without other data, these indexes say only that there were fluctuations in food prices, manufactured goods prices, and industrial production.

If incomes rise when prices rise, there is no sure evidence of deprivation. If incomes fall when prices fall, there is no sure evidence of deprivation. In failing to include income in their index, the authors fail to establish real income levels and in no other way demonstrate a change in the standard of living. Very possibly there were gaps as the result of time-differential rates of change in real income. The authors, however, show no sign of awareness that this is a problem in their data base.

THE ORIGIN OF THE J-CURVE CONCEPT

The idea of a suddenly developing gap between expectations and gratifications first occurred to me in the mid-1950s, when I was trying to figure out why the Pullman Strike of 1894 in the Chicago area had taken place. The only data source that I knew of for the relevant period is *Historical Statistics of the United States: 1789-1945,* published by the United States Department of Commerce in 1949. From this volume, several facts became apparent. First, from the end of the Civil War in 1865 until 1891, wages rose rather steadily among nonagricultural employees (p. 66). Using 1860 as an index-year of 100, the wage index in 1865 stood at about 143 and in 1891 at about 161 (p. 66). Second, the general price index (base of 100 in 1913) went from 127 in 1865 to 75 in 1893 (pp. 231-2). Confirming these figures is a cost of living index (base of 100 in 1913), which fell from 102 in 1865 to 75 in 1893 (p. 235).

In sum, the standard of living of workers generally in the United States after the Civil War was in a generation-long upswing. Then came the 1894 recession, which among others hit railway car workers hard. Their take-home pay was suddenly and drastically reduced, mainly because of reduced working hours. Rent for workers who lived in the company town of Pullman was deducted from their paychecks, in some cases leaving anywhere from seven cents to six dollars for food for a two-week period. As dissatisfaction increased, so did repressive measures by the Pullman company. The result was a prolonged and bitter strike, at last broken by the intervention of United States army troops. The strikers lost public sympathy and were exhausted (Lindsey, 1942, esp. ch. 5). The sequence of events was like that which culminated in the establishment and destruction of the Paris Commune, twenty-three years earlier.

Not knowing how unique the effect was of sudden deprivation, I decided in the Spring of 1960 to test it in other situations. The J-curve

*In a speech the secretary of the national guard said: "even after the signing of the shameful treaty delivering our proud capital to the enemy, the people would not believe in the obvious plot to betray the Republic" (Edwards, 1973:52). See also Marx, 1871.

proved helpful in explaining Dorr's Rebellion in Rhode Island in 1842, the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the Egyptian Revolution of 1952. Efforts to apply the J-curve to the Chinese Revolution of 1949 and the Hungarian Revolt of 1956 failed. Data were unavailable. In none of these events, each much larger than the Pullman Strike, were socioeconomic factors the only ones; but they were the easiest to quantify over time and are probably universal ingredients in civil violence.

Then I placed the J-curve in theoretical perspective by noting its kinship to Tocqueville's theory of long-range improvement and to Marx's theories of relative deprivation and progressive degradation. This kinship confirmed my hunch about the broad theoretical applicability of the J-curve. But the most significant intellectual matrices for the idea came from my long academic training in psychology and from mulling over ideas that formed after reading Crane Brinton's *Anatomy of Revolution* (for the first time as an undergraduate in 1938) and Thomas Masaryk's *Spirit of Russia,* a precocious study of prerevolutionary Russia, first published in 1913 and first read by me in early 1960.

Generated from an analysis of a strike of workingmen in the 1890's, the idea now seems to apply to a wide range of phenomena. People who have (like academicians in the mid-1960's) come to expect yearly salary increases are frustrated when these increases diminish or stop. If after such a period of rising expectations, academicians were to lose their jobs, the deprivation would be greater and the probability of their becoming rebellious would increase. People whose physical and social environment has improved are frustrated when they fear these advances may be lost (like those who moved from slums to suburbs in the 1950's and found blacks moving in next door in the 1960's). People who have come to expect career opportunity to improve and then see it threatened by military service are indeed frustrated—as the student uprisings in American universities in the 1960's have adequately demonstrated. Campus violence diminished sharply when the draft (not the Vietnam war) ended.

The crucial research problem, as I see it, is not the applicability of the J-curve but the inherent difficulties in measuring the critical points at which frustration is followed by violence. The Berkeley student uprising that commenced in December 1964 followed by a few weeks a decision by the university administration to deny what had become a common practice, soliciting funds on campus for off-campus political action. This precipitator, plus the long-range expectation of living exciting lives in a good society—a hope frustrated by the Vietnam war and the threat of military service—were enough to turn students to violence, to the surprise of those who perhaps thought only the working class would resort to violence.

THE POWER-STRUGGLE THEORY

As an alternative theory of collective violence, Snyder and Tilly propose the struggle for power between groups seeking to control scarce resources. Their measures of collective violence (what they call a "byproduct" of the power struggle) seem to me excellent, notably the suppression of violence, which includes in their data "excess" arrests and "man-days of detention in jails." Their measure of power struggle, if I read it right, is the occurrence of a national election. The authors find high correlations between their measures of collective violence and power struggle: they find that the number of arrests and of man-days of detention rises in an election year. Indeed these indicators should correlate.

My objection to their theory and to its measures is that both are basically tautological: they are discussing and measuring the same thing. Civil disturbances are neither byproduct nor cause of the power struggle: they are one kind of power struggle. Another kind is the process of elections. To explain one kind by correlating it with another is like explaining precipitation by correlating snowfall and rainfall. The two authors offer no explanation for why groups compete for scarce resources, and why they do so, sometimes violently and sometimes peacefully. They have thus failed to present a theory.

IN SUM

Measuring and predicting political violence is enormously more difficult than measuring calmer events. I do not claim—and I doubt that others of the relative deprivation category, including Gurr, the Feierabends, Bwy, Tanter, and others would claim—that the J-curve or any subsequent theories about the gap between expectations and gratifications amounts to a totally adequate, holistic theory of civil violence. But I do claim that events in what are loosely called the minds of men—the human central control systems (the central nervous system and the endocrine system and

their contents in learned behavior patterns and stored memories)—are *a* and perhaps *the* crucial variable in producing violence. If environmental circumstances are sufficiently frustrating to basic expectations, which are organically rooted in the minds of men, people will turn to violence. If government is blamed for the frustrations, people will turn to political violence. Without environmentally induced frustration, there could be no violent response; without being assessed and acted on by the minds of men, environmental inputs would be of no political significance, let alone any other significance. While not sufficient to produce any human action, mental processes are a neglected but necessary element of all action.

The power-struggle theory and the data do not predict French civil violence before, during, or after the 131-year period. If we do not get to the causes of such violence, they may produce worldwide revolution or worldwide repression. In that case, there will be arrests and power struggles, but national elections will be meaningless.

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ON DEBATING AND FALSIFYING THEORIES OF COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE

Mr. Davies' objections to our article have little connection to the language or the logic of what we wrote. The 1972 research report which began this debate offered the work of Feierabend and Feirabend, Gurr and Davies as examples of arguments predicting rising levels of collective violence within a given population as a consequence of widening discrepancies between that same population's expectations and achievements. Although various members of our research group (e.g. Polen 1972, Tilly and Rule forthcoming; Tilly, forthcoming) have deliberately examined Davies' J-curve formulation elsewhere, the report in question did not concentrate on revolutions or restrict itself to the special J-curve formulation of the expectation-achievement theory. It offered measures of conflict, expectations and achievements which were arguably consistent with the measurement practices of major authors of expectation-achievement arguments, plus further measures representing variables in an alternative power-struggle formulation. It applied those measures to France as a whole for 131