

# *The Politics of Collective Violence*

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CHARLES TILLY

*Columbia University*



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## *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:

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

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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 Kagame 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.

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,

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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 economic 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



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

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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

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;

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- 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.

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:

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first because rulers and ruling classes figure among those beneficiaries, second because beneficiaries have superior means of organizing and influencing government, and third because governmental resources (such as tax revenues, soldiers, weapons, ships, food, and information) flow to the government from systems of inequality whose challenge would threaten those crucial flows. Only in times of conquest or revolution do we regularly see governments intervening to replace existing systems of exploitation and opportunity hoarding. Although collective violence certainly occurs in conquest and revolution, it more frequently results from governmental use of violent means to defend beneficiaries of inequality from challenges by victims of inequality.

Beneficiaries and victims of nongovernmental exploitation and opportunity hoarding (e.g., mine owners and mine workers) often engage in their own struggles over the proceeds of their joint effort, sometimes use violent means in the course of their struggles, and occasionally attract intervention in the form of attacks by the government's armed forces against one or both sides, especially the challengers. Parties to relations of exploitation or opportunity hoarding regularly seek governmental support either to maintain or to overthrow existing advantages, which in turn generates new collective violence.

Political action, finally, is a way of creating, defending, or challenging nongovernmental systems of exploitation and opportunity hoarding, for example property rights to minerals, exclusive control over sacred sites, and customs that require workers (but not their employers) to keep their contracts. The extent to which governmental categorical distinctions (e.g., citizen vs. noncitizen or legislator vs. constituent) coincide with nongovernmental categorical distinctions such as gender, race, religion, and ethnicity affects the form and stakes of political struggle, hence the character of collective violence. As Hutu–Tutsi struggles show, under some circumstances lying on one side of a categorical boundary or the other becomes a matter of life and death. These insights will help us understand the surprising prominence of “us–them” categorical distinctions in all varieties of collective violence.

Collective violence presents a series of puzzles for which no one has yet arrived at satisfactory solutions.

1. Why does collective violence (unlike suicides and individual homicides) concentrate in large waves – often with one violent encounter appearing to trigger the next – then subside to low levels for substantial periods of time?
2. How and why do people who interact without doing outright damage to each other shift rapidly into collective violence and then (sometimes just as rapidly) shift back into relatively peaceful relations?

3. In particular, how and why do people who have lived with their categorical differences (often cooperating and intermarrying) for years begin devastating attacks on each other's persons and property?
4. Why do different kinds of political regimes (e.g., democratic and authoritarian regimes) host such different levels and forms of collective violence?
5. How and why do peacekeeping specialists such as police and soldiers so regularly and quickly switch between violent and nonviolent action?

So far, neither ideal, behavioral, nor relational analysts have provided credible explanations of collective violence that address more than one of these questions at a time. Nor has anyone assembled reliable evidence for proposed answers to any one of them taken singly. We face the challenge of using relational insights to construct superior and mutually consistent answers to these questions.

### *Types of Interpersonal Violence*

What must we explain? The great majority of interpersonal transactions proceed without violence – without immediate short-term physical damage or seizure of at least one party or that party's possessions by another. Even in zones of civil war and widespread brawling, most people most of the time are interacting in nonviolent ways. Yet nonviolent interactions do turn violent, people who have coexisted peaceably start killing each other, cowboys shoot, villagers sabotage, and Rwandan Hutus slaughter their designated enemies – sometimes. When, how, and why do shifts between nonviolent and violent interaction occur? In particular: when, how, and why do people get involved *collectively* in inflicting damage on other people? Collective violence takes many different forms, so what determines its social organization and character?

In order to arrive at satisfactory answers to such difficult questions, we must pick our way carefully through four distinguishable problems. First, what causes people to make collective claims – violent or nonviolent – on each other? This book draws heavily on previous analyses of collective claim making. Except for applying those analyses explicitly to violence, however, it does not add much to existing ideas on the subject.

Second, what causes people sometimes to damage other people and objects in the course of collective claim making, but other times to employ nonviolent means? The book says much more about this issue, but it does not arrive at grand general statements on the sheer presence or absence of violence. We will, in fact, discover some gray areas where no more than minor contingencies make the difference between otherwise similar political processes in which violence does and does not occur.

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Third, when people do employ violent means of claim making, what determines the extent of damage? Later chapters give the extent and intensity of violence considerable attention, examining both what sorts of social circumstances produce high levels of violence and by what kinds of social processes violent claim making reaches a large or small scale.

Fourth, what causes collective violence to take so many different forms, from cowboy brawls to peasant machine breaking to genocide? The problem of explaining variation in the character and social organization of violence takes up much more of the book's energy than do the first three problems. This book stands or falls on the extent to which it clarifies what causes collective violence, when it occurs, (a) to vary so greatly in form and (b) to make significant shifts, sometimes quite rapid, from one form to another.

In order to discipline our inquiry into the fourth problem, we must specify the sort of variation we are trying to explain. Let us construct a two-dimensional map of interpersonal violence, including individual attacks of one person on another or on that person's property. Call the first dimension *salience of short-run damage*. We look at interactions among the parties, asking to what extent infliction and reception of damage dominate those interactions. At the low extreme, damage occurs only intermittently or secondarily in the course of transactions that remain predominantly nonviolent. At the high extreme, almost every transaction inflicts damage, as the infliction and reception of damage dominate the interaction. Routine bureaucratic encounters that occasionally lead to fisticuffs stand toward the low end of the range, lynching parties toward the high end.

The second dimension represents *extent of coordination among violent actors*. The definition of collective violence offered earlier incorporated a minimum position on this dimension: it insisted on at least two perpetrators of damage and some coordination among perpetrators. Below that threshold, we call violence individual. Nevertheless, collective coordination can run from no more than improvised signaling and/or common culture (low) to involvement of centralized organizations whose leaders follow shared scripts as they deliberately guide followers into violence-generating interactions with others (high). At the low end we find such events as scuffles between drunken sailors and military police; at the high end, pitched battles between opposing armies.

This way of setting up analyses of collective violence emphasizes its connections with nonviolent political processes. Obviously we could conjure up other interesting dimensions of collective violence, such as scale, duration, destructiveness, asymmetry, and proximity to established governmental institutions. In fixing on salience and coordination I follow my hunches that: (a) they identify significant, coherent variations in relevant combinations of outcomes and causal



mechanisms; (b) they locate clusters of collective violence within which similar causes operate; and (c) for those reasons they help explain variation with respect to scale, duration, destructiveness, asymmetry, and proximity to governmental institutions (for some confirmation, see Bonneuil & Auriat 2000).

How much coordination occurs among violent actors and how salient damage is to their interactions with others, for example, help pinpoint and explain the degree of destruction resulting from those interactions. Broadly speaking, destructiveness rises with both salience and coordination. Where salience and coordination both reach high levels, widespread destruction occurs. Of our three opening vignettes, Rwandan genocide best illustrates combined high levels of salience and coordination.

Figure 1.1 presents a preliminary typology of interpersonal violence that follows from such a two-dimensional classification. For the moment the diagram includes individual aggression in order to specify its relation to other larger-scale forms of violence. Later I will give reasons for separating the analyses of collective and individual violence. Here is how the classification works: First, we locate a clump of violent episodes in the salience–coordination space, for example in the upper left-hand corner, where high coordination among violent actors and relatively low salience of damage in all interactions among the parties coincide. Then, we name the location for the most common kind of episode in that location. The upper left-hand corner gets the name “broken negotiations” because of the frequency with which longer-term nonviolent bargaining processes that go awry result in low-salience, high-coordination collective violence. Proceeding in approximately clockwise order from the upper right-hand corner, the types include

- *Violent rituals*: at least one relatively well-defined and coordinated group follows a known interaction script entailing the infliction of damage on itself or others as it competes for priority within a recognized arena; examples include shaming ceremonies, lynchings, public executions, gang rivalries, contact sports, some election battles, and some struggles among supporters of sporting teams or entertainment stars.
- *Coordinated destruction*: persons or organizations that specialize in the deployment of coercive means undertake a program of damage to persons and/or objects; examples include war, collective self-immolation, some kinds of terrorism, genocide, and politicide – the programmed annihilation of a political category’s members.
- *Opportunism*: as a consequence of shielding from routine surveillance and repression, individuals or clusters of individuals use immediately damaging

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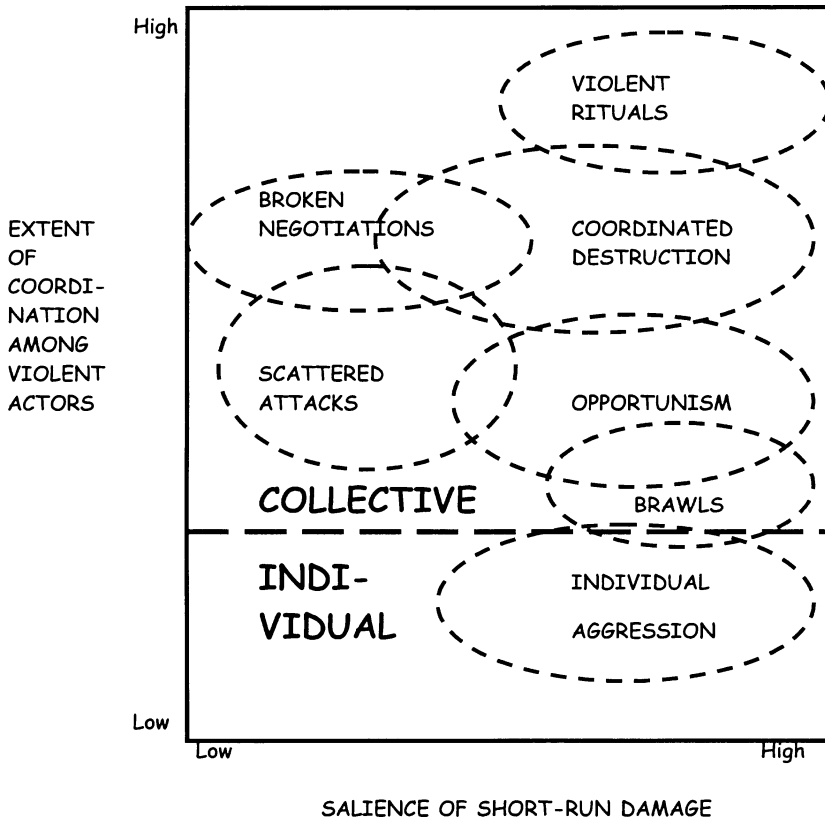


Figure 1.1 A Typology of Interpersonal Violence.

means to pursue generally forbidden ends; examples include looting, gang rape, piracy, revenge killing, and some sorts of military pillage.

- *Brawls*: within a previously nonviolent gathering, two or more persons begin attacking each other or each other's property; examples include barroom free-for-alls, small-scale battles at sporting events, and many street fights.
- *Individual aggression*: a single actor (or several unconnected actors) engage(s) in immediately and predominantly destructive interaction with another actor; examples include single-perpetrator rapes, assaults, robberies, and vandalism.
- *Scattered attacks*: in the course of widespread small-scale and generally non-violent interaction, a number of participants respond to obstacles, challenges, or restraints by means of damaging acts; examples include sabotage, clandestine attacks on symbolic objects or places, assaults of governmental agents, and arson.

- *Broken negotiations*: various forms of collective action generate resistance or rivalry to which one or more parties respond by actions that damage persons and/or objects; examples include demonstrations, protection rackets, governmental repression, and military coups – all of which frequently occur with no more than threats of violence yet sometimes produce physical damage.

Figure 1.1 shows these types as overlapping ovals to emphasize that the concrete episodes involved necessarily have imprecise boundaries. Violent rituals such as sporting events, for example, sometimes convert into broken negotiations (ushers' attempts to expel rowdy spectators produce attacks on ushers and the stadium) or opportunism (spectators or players take private revenge on their enemies). But an even larger share of violent ritual overlaps with coordinated destruction – feuds, gang fights, and similar contests that look much like war except for their smaller scale and greater containment.

The typology names each segment of the coordination–salience space for the most common process that produces its particular combination of coordination and salience. Most often, for example, extremely high levels of coordination and salience result from activation of a familiar script by parties already specializing in doing damage with monitors who contain their interaction; the term *violent ritual* describes that sort of process. Now and then, however, two armies at war – and therefore engaged mainly in coordinated destruction – move into the zone of extremely high coordination and salience, stylizing and containing their interaction. I name the low-coordination but relatively high-salience territory near the individual–collective boundary *brawl* not because every interaction in the territory actually begins with a nonviolent gathering within which pairs of people begin to fight, but rather because such a sequence does regularly result in low-coordination, high-salience violence. The typology provides a handy reminder of on-the-average differences in dominant social processes occurring at different locations within the coordination–salience space.

Variation in participants' motives neither defines nor explains differences among the types of collective violence. No doubt participants in opportunistic violence feel greed and lust more often than participants in broken negotiations, while anger and fear frequently well up in broken negotiations. But (as later chapters will abundantly show) many a participant in opportunism acts with righteous indignation or fear, and greed recurs throughout the full range of violent interactions. The classification locates types of collective violence in terms of the social processes that generate them, not in terms of the motives and emotions carried by damage-doing people.

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Later chapters will spend little effort locating the exact boundaries of these types or deciding which incident belongs to which type. On the contrary, they will repeatedly trace processes by which events start out at one location in the coordination–salience space and end up in another – how scattered attack, for example, moves step by step toward coordinated destruction, or vice versa. Later sections of the book will show the large parts played by brokerage and activation of us–them boundaries in the more highly coordinated forms of collective violence: violent rituals, coordinated destruction, and broken negotiations. Where brokerage and boundary activation loom large, the evidence will show, they commonly override previously existing social relations among participants – so much so that people who live peaceably together one day begin slaughtering each other the next.

Conversely, previously existing social relations among participants (including previously hostile relations) exert greater influence in the zones of lesser coordination: opportunism, brawls, and scattered attack. We will likewise discover systematic relations of salience to social contexts, notably how accessibility of violent means and/or specialists in violence such as thugs and troops promotes high-salience collective violence.

In these terms, we can place the three episodes described by David Courtwright, James Scott, and Alison Des Forges in different parts of the coordination–salience space. Cowboy gunfights usually conformed to the model of brawls, although they occasionally mutated into opportunism, violent ritual, and even coordinated destruction as a consequence of shifts in the salience of short-run damage and of coordination among the violent actors. (Cowboys from rival outfits, for example, sometimes played cards, but shifted to shootouts when games went bad.)

Villagers' retaliation against landlords takes place mostly in the zone of scattered attack, but now and then veers into opportunism, violent ritual, or broken negotiations. James Scott has, in fact, spent much of his career examining what causes alternation between passive resistance and active rebellion. Rwanda's complex conflicts centered on coordinated destruction, but violent ritual, opportunism, and scattered attack all occurred at the edges of Rwanda's organized genocide. (Chapter 6 examines in detail the opportunistic overflow of Rwanda's genocide.) That genocide took place in the context of decades-long Hutu–Tutsi struggles for control of the Rwandan state.

Figure 1.1 also specifies what phenomena the present book seeks to describe, differentiate, and explain – and therefore what possibly relevant phenomena it downplays. For the most part, chapters to come neglect individual aggression and the least coordinated forms of brawls. They concentrate instead on

common mechanisms and systematic variation among violent rituals, coordinated destruction, opportunism, brawls, scattered attacks, and broken negotiations. The oval containing individual aggression creeps across the threshold into collective violence to accommodate those cases where a lone assassin or terrorist strikes in the name of some dissident group but without visible support from that group.

Similarly, the oval for brawls dips below the collective–individual border to signal that, in the course of some such events, all significant interpersonal coordination disappears. This distinction of individual from collective violence will not satisfy anyone who believes that all violence springs from the same deep individual propensities. (Nor, for that matter, will it please anyone who thinks that crowds obliterate individuality and develop minds of their own.) But it does greatly facilitate the integration of violence into the study of politics at large. Because political analysts have commonly considered violent interaction as marginal (or even antithetical) to politics, that is no small advantage.

Knowledgeable students of collective violence will notice that the salience–coordination typology omits some standard terms. Interstate war, civil war, revolution, and rebellion fail to figure as separate types. Whether authorities and observers label an episode as interstate war, civil war, revolution, or rebellion does make a difference, because each label invokes a different set of legal conventions and calls up a different set of historical analogies. Furthermore, participants in some cases of collective violence organize their actions around existing models, for example of a coup d'état, a lynching, a gang rumble, or an attack on a dishonored house; the model lends coherence and predictability to interaction among the participants. Later chapters will present many episodes of model-based collective violence.

Nevertheless, I argue against thinking of each of these kinds of episodes as constituting a distinct causal realm with its own laws. I advocate recognizing multiple varieties of collective violence – coordinated destruction, broken negotiations, opportunism, and more – in different phases and segments of wars or revolutions. I urge (and practice) identification of analogies (including analogies in the adoption of culturally available models) among the causes of coups, lynching, rumbles, and attacks on dishonored houses.

I have omitted the widely used term “riot” from the typology for a different reason: because it embodies a political judgment rather than an analytical distinction. Authorities and observers label as riots the damage-doing gatherings of which they disapprove, but they use terms like demonstration, protest, resistance, or retaliation for essentially similar events of which they approve. In cataloging thousands of violent events – many of them called riots (or the

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local-language equivalent) by authorities and observers – from multiple countries over several centuries, I have not once found an instance in which the participants called the event a riot or identified themselves as rioters.

For both sorts of reasons, the word “terror” appears nowhere in the typology. Many violent incidents that people call terroristic show up in later chapters but usually under other terms. Terror always refers to someone else’s behavior and actually names episodes ranging from coordinated destruction (simultaneous attacks on multiple buildings) to scattered attacks (furtive killings of police). Deeply ingrained assumptions about the causation of social processes by unified intentions – for example, that revolutions occur because revolutionaries want them, or that terrorism occurs because crazy terrorists exist – will make my analytical choices jarring for many. I ask only that readers bear with me long enough to see how this book’s approach helps explain features of collective violence with which intentional accounts have trouble.

Let us not confuse violence with crime or with illegal behavior more generally. At both the individual and the collective level, governments generally distinguish approximately among behaviors that they prescribe, others they tolerate, and still others they forbid. Crime consists of (a) those legally defined behaviors (mostly individual) that governments not only forbid but also detect and punish, plus (b) detected and punished failures to perform behaviors prescribed by governments. Everywhere a great deal of behavior forbidden by one law or another escapes detection and punishment. Many legally forbidden behaviors, furthermore, fall outside the range of crime in any strong sense of the word; traffic violations, nonconformity to building codes, failures to meet tax deadlines, and similar violations offer cases in point. The vast bulk of crime and of noncriminal illegal behavior occurs without a trace of violence. Crime, illegal behavior, and violence overlap, but they do not coincide.

Moreover, a good deal of violent behavior occurs under the cover of law. Government agents and allies regularly employ violence as they pursue their own ends. Soldiers, sailors, police, jailers, and guards enjoy legal rights – even legal obligations – to use violent means on behalf of governments. Within the purviews of most historical governments, multiple parties have exercised some control over violent means with varying degrees of authorization by governments, and their relations to governments have shifted rapidly. Pirates, privateers, paramilitaries, bandits, mercenaries, mafiosi, militias, posses, guerrilla forces, vigilante groups, company police, and bodyguards all operate in a middle ground between (on one side) the full authorization of a national army and (on the other) the private employment of violence by parents, lovers, or feuding clans. We will eventually have to examine how different forms and uses of

violence relate to established governmental institutions. Governmental sponsorship and governmental repression strongly affect the character and intensity of collective violence in any regime.

### *Mechanisms, Processes, and Explanations*

If we were idea people, we would no doubt concentrate on how different governments and cultures incorporate different conceptions of violence and its permissibility, then show how variations in prevailing forms of violence correspond to distinctly different shared understandings. When examining different types of violence and the regimes in which they occur, we will pay some attention to variations in ideas but mainly seek explanations elsewhere. If we were behavior people, we would no doubt emphasize how motives, incentives, opportunities, and controls that promote or inhibit damaging acts alter from one social setting to another, again seeking to show how such alterations affect the character and intensity of collective violence. Motives, incentives, opportunities, and controls receive more attention than ideas in the following pages, but still do not constitute the nubs of the explanations to come. As relation people, we will focus our attention on interpersonal processes that promote, inhibit, or channel collective violence and connect it with nonviolent politics.

We are looking for explanations of variability: not general laws or total explanations of violent events, but accounts of what causes major variations among times, places, and social circumstances in the character of collective violence. We search for robust mechanisms and processes that cause change and variation. Mechanisms are causes on the small scale: similar events that produce essentially the same immediate effects across a wide range of circumstances. Analysts often refer to large-scale causes (poverty, widespread frustration, extremism, resource competition, and so on), proposing them as necessary or sufficient conditions for whole episodes of collective violence. Here, in contrast, we search for recurrent small-scale mechanisms that produce identical immediate effects in many different circumstances yet combine variously to generate very different outcomes on the large scale. Relevant mechanisms come in three flavors: environmental, cognitive, and relational.

*Environmental* mechanisms alter relations between the social circumstances in question and their external environment, as for example when drought depletes the agriculture on which guerrillas depend for their day-to-day survival. *Cognitive* mechanisms operate through alterations of individual and collective perceptions, as when members of a fighting group decide collectively that they have mistaken an enemy for a friend. *Relational* mechanisms change connections

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among social units, as when a gang leader makes a deal with a cocaine wholesaler and thus converts petty protection rackets into high-risk drug merchandising.

Analyses to follow call on all three varieties of mechanism, but stress relational mechanisms. The mechanism of *boundary activation* will, for example, make appearances time after time in later explanations of collective violence. It consists of a shift in social interactions such that they increasingly (a) organize around a single us–them boundary and (b) differentiate between within-boundary and cross-boundary interactions. (Boundary deactivation denotes the opposite shift, toward new or multiple boundaries and toward decreased difference between within-boundary and cross-boundary interactions.) Hence us–them boundaries such as male–female, Hutu–Tutsi, cowboy outfit A versus cowboy outfit B, or landlord–peasant, although always available in certain settings, shift from being relatively insignificant to absolutely dominant for current interaction.

Again, in pages to come we will often encounter the relational mechanism of *brokerage*. Brokerage operates uniformly by definition, always connecting at least two social sites more directly than they were previously connected. Yet the activation of brokerage does not in itself guarantee more effective coordination of action at the connected sites; that depends on initial conditions and combinations with other mechanisms. For example, if brokerage connects factions on each side of an us–them boundary without establishing new connections across the boundary, then it facilitates polarization of the two sides and thus reduces overall coordination of their actions. If, on the other hand, brokers compete for control on the same side of a boundary, then fragmentation results – at least until one broker eliminates the others.

In some circumstances, then, one mechanism activates another mechanism. Brokerage commonly stimulates boundary activation, as local disputes between individuals or households that happen to occur across an available but not currently salient boundary become large categorical confrontations through the intervention of third parties who connect disputants with other members of their categories. In Rwanda's genocide, brokerage by Hutu activists activated the Hutu–Tutsi boundary among people who had previously lived, however uneasily, in peaceful coexistence.

Processes are combinations and sequences of mechanisms that produce similar effects across a wide range of circumstances. Without the name, we have already encountered the process of *polarization*. Polarization involves widening of political and social space between claimants in a contentious episode and gravitation of previously uncommitted or moderate actors toward one, the other, or both extremes. Polarization combines mechanisms of opportunity–threat spirals, competition, category formation, and the omnipresent brokerage. Polarization



generally promotes collective violence because it makes the us–them boundary more salient, hollows out the uncommitted middle, intensifies conflict across the boundary, raises the stakes of winning or losing, and enhances opportunities for leaders to initiate action against their enemies.

Close readers of later chapters will catch me blurring the distinction between mechanisms and processes. Sometimes, for example, I call brokerage a mechanism and sometimes I call it a process. That depends mainly on the scale of analysis: when watching how a single actor produces a precise link between two other clearly defined and previously unconnected actors, I will speak of brokerage as a mechanism. When speaking more broadly about how a whole category of actors (for example, Hutu Power leaders in Rwanda) produce previously missing links, I will generally speak of brokerage as a process. Looked at closely, every mechanism compounds smaller-scale mechanisms – environmental, cognitive, and relational. We may call an invariant and widely applicable cause a mechanism when *at the current level of observation* its components are invisible and its immediate effects indistinguishable.

Mechanisms and processes give us another way of thinking about this book's rationale. The provisional typology of brawls, scattered attacks, broken negotiations, and so on distinguishes locations within the coordination–salience space where similar bundles of mechanisms are operating. Boundary activation and brokerage appear together more frequently, for example, in the high-coordination–high-salience zone called coordinated destruction than in the low-coordination–low-salience zone called scattered attacks. At least so goes the book's argument.

### *What's Coming*

Where are we going? This book pursues three objectives. First, it maps variations in forms of collective violence to clarify what we must explain. Second, within each variety of collective violence it searches for recurrent cause–effect links that operate in similar ways across a wide range of times and places – cause–effect links, for example, that appear in scattered attacks whenever and wherever they occur. Third, it identifies causes that work similarly in diverse types of collective violence and thus affect the likelihood and character of violence at large. For instance, we will see eventually that brokerage – intervention establishing new connections among previously unconnected persons and groups – regularly promotes moves toward more highly coordinated forms of collective violence. The point is not to establish general laws for all sorts of violence but rather to identify crucial causal processes: those that operate similarly

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in the short run across a wide range of circumstances yet produce dramatically different forms of collective violence depending on their settings, combinations, and sequences.

If successful, such an approach will not produce total explanations of all violent episodes. It will not even provide complete explanations of single events. It will, however, yield several valuable results. It will explain significant variations in violence – in its quantity, intensity, and character – across time, place, and social setting. It will explain critical differences among violent episodes. It will explain shifts in the character of collective violence within particular places and populations. It will pinpoint processes that translate generally favorable conditions for collective violence (e.g., the presence of many unsupervised young men) into actual violent interactions. It will, finally, explain puzzling features of particular episodes: why, for example, otherwise peaceable Rwandans mobilized by the tens of thousands to massacre their neighbors in April 1994.

If successful, the effort will eventually dissolve the classification of collective violence into coordinated destruction, violent rituals, opportunism, brawls, scattered attacks, and broken negotiations. These types will turn out to represent different combinations of settings and causal processes but not distinct species of social interaction. The types will continue to guide comparisons and searches for causes, but they will not require separate kinds of explanation. Furthermore, recognizing the porosity of boundaries among types will make it easier to understand mutations – for example, how a coup d'état escalates into a large-scale massacre or how mass confrontation disintegrates into scattered sabotage. In each case, transition from type to type depends on the activation or cessation of crucial causal processes. The point of this book is to identify those crucial processes and show how they work.

Despite its concentration on collective processes, the book eventually helps explain individual violence as well. It makes four contributions to that difficult enterprise.

*First*, by showing how the dynamics of interpersonal interaction transform prevailing beliefs, inhibitions, and sentiments in the course of collective violence, it suggests analogues of the same transformations at the individual level.

*Second*, by identifying social processes that facilitate and constrain large-scale deployment of violent means, it similarly suggests analogous forms of facilitation and constraint at the small scale.

*Third*, it clarifies where the categories of difference that often activate violence at the small scale – categories of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, or

class – come from, and how individuals justify attacks on others who fall on the wrong side of a categorical boundary.

*Finally*, it sheds light on how violent means and practices become available to individuals and pairs of individuals – not only ordinary people who turn from nonviolent to violent forms of interaction but also the specialists in violence who will figure prominently as we proceed through violent rituals, coordinated destruction, opportunism, brawls, scattered attack, and broken negotiations.

Even if it accomplishes these ambitious aims, the book does not do some things readers might expect of it. For neither the violence to be explained nor the proposed explanations does it lay down a neat array of measurable variables, specify appropriate measures for those variables, and perform the measurements – much less use such measurements to demonstrate that violence varies in accordance with the book's main arguments. I admire good measurement and estimation and will frequently draw on other people's in pages to come; in earlier work, I often attempted just such measurement and estimation myself. But this book has a different aim: to develop new lines of explanation that apply across apparently disparate times, places, groups, social settings, and forms of action.

By the same token, the book overflows with examples but never lines up a systematic body of evidence that could, in principle, verify or falsify its main arguments. The next two chapters, for example, make strong claims about the sorts of political regimes and transitions from regime to regime that promote high or low levels of collective violence. They build on and cite previous research indicating that overall intensities of violence rise at regime transitions and between the extremes of low-violence repressive regimes and low-violence democratic regimes, but they provide neither neat comparisons among well-documented regimes that differ in their levels of collective violence nor new data on international variation in those regards. Instead, the book's innumerable examples serve to construct and clarify new explanations of variation in the form, intensity, and incidence of collective violence. Approach the chapters that follow as a preliminary synthesis, a guide to new research and theory.

Despite its synthetic aims, the book remains open to empirical and theoretical challenge. Empirical challenges could occur at two levels: in demonstrating that I have misrepresented particular cases (such as opportunistic violence in Rwanda) and in showing that available data contradict my claims concerning some sort of variation (such as differences in the character and intensity of collective violence between high-capacity democratic and high-capacity undemocratic regimes). Theoretical challenges could identify either logical flaws

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in the general arguments or existing theories that explain change and variation in particular types of collective violence more precisely and economically than do the mechanisms and processes proposed here. Surely some empirical and theoretical challenges will require repairs to one aspect or another of the book's arguments. I am claiming, however, that over the terrain they cover the relational arguments point to better explanations than the ideal and behavioral accounts now prevailing in analyses of collective violence.

Here, then, is how such an agenda-setting book proceeds. The next chapter (Chapter 2) looks more extensively at the place of violence in public political life. Chapter 3 takes up trends and variations in violence during the last few centuries. Chapters 4 through 9 deal separately with each of our provisional types: violent rituals, coordinated destruction, opportunism, brawls, scattered attacks, and broken negotiations. Chapter 10 draws conclusions from the whole enterprise.