A banner year for political protest occurred in 2011; from the “Arab Spring” to the “Occupy” movement to protests against economic policies in Spain, Greece, and Italy, citizens everywhere seemed to mass in the streets demanding change. Although not all of those protests succeeded, they gave new impetus to a long-standing area of interest in comparative politics, what most scholars refer to as “contentious politics.” **Contentious politics** is political activity that is at least in part beyond institutional bounds. Groups form over grievances and demand change; they may work via elections and other institutions as well, but the hallmark of contentious politics is extra-institutional activity: petitions, protests, riots, violence, civil war, and revolution. Decades ago, political scientists often viewed such activity as a dangerous threat to political order (Huntington 1968). In the last several decades, most have come to see contentious politics, at least in nonviolent forms, as an important part of civil society and political participation, whether in a democracy where such activity is usually legal or an authoritarian regime where it is not.

The last chapter examined political participation within institutions; in this chapter we explore participation that goes beyond institutions, the realm of contentious politics. We examine social movements and protests; political violence, including ethnic conflict, terrorism, and civil war; and revolution. Contentious politics is ubiquitous. Although regime-threatening acts of political violence are relatively rare, protests...
are common. Table 7.1 provides data on the number of protests, more serious acts of political violence, and terrorist acts for a range of countries. Protests are the most common form of contentious politics by far, and regime-threatening violence the most rare. In contrast to many people’s current perceptions, protest is most common in wealthy democracies whereas serious violence and terrorism are scourges of poorer societies. Indeed, countries with more protest have seen less terrorism and vice versa.

Participation outside institutional bounds faces the same collective action problem we outlined in the previous chapter. Although many people may have grievances against their government, what incentives do they have to join a group, protest in the street, or throw a rock? Indeed, politics outside institutional channels is often more risky and in some cases illegal; the collective action problem may be even greater than what we discussed earlier. One of the key questions we ask, then, is, How and why are people mobilized to participate in contentious politics? Once they are, we ask, How do social movements and other forms of contentious politics function, and what effects do they have on governments and policies? We also ask, What effects have globalization and the advent of Internet-based communications and social media had on contentious politics, a phenomenon highlighted in the 2011 protests? Then we turn to the question, Why do politics sometimes turn violent and take the form of terrorism or civil war? Finally, we ask, Why do revolutions—contentious political episodes that change regimes—arise? We start, however, with a brief examination of the role of contentious politics, particularly in its nonviolent forms.
CHAPTER 7  Contentious Politics

FRAMING CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

Political scientists have studied contentious politics for years, most commonly examining social movements, organizations that have a loosely defined organizational structure and represent people who perceive themselves to be outside the bounds of formal institutions, seek major socioeconomic or political changes to the status quo, or employ noninstitutional forms of collective action.

What we now call social movements arose at least a century ago, but they have become much more common since the 1960s. In that decade in much of the Western world, growing numbers of citizens, particularly young “baby boomers,” came to feel that their governments, political parties, and interest groups were not providing adequate forms of participation or representation. They viewed all major political institutions as organs of elite rule. Established institutions were overwhelmingly controlled by white men. In response, what came to be called new social movements arose, led by racial minorities, women, antiwar activists, and environmentalists, all challenging the status quo. These groups have since been joined by many others, such as the antiglobalization movement that proclaimed itself to the world in 1999 in protests in Seattle, the more recent Occupy movement that arose in 2011 in New York, and the Black Lives Matter movement in response to police violence against African Americans that began in Florida and Missouri.

Although they exist throughout the world, and have had significant impact especially in the process of democratization of authoritarian regimes (which we examine in chapter 9), social movements are most common and have arguably had the greatest impact in wealthy democracies. Social movements helped women enter public life to a degree never before seen. Racial minorities united to get many segregationist and discriminatory policies overturned and were able to enter public life to a much greater degree. Gay rights activists have succeeded in getting a number of governments to redefine marriage and international organizations to think of gay rights as part of universal human rights. And in the age of global climate change, environmentalists have put their concerns on the agenda of national and international institutions.

Social movements are generally seen as pursuing a “progressive” agenda, meaning an agenda of social change based on new ideas favored by those who consider themselves on the “left” of the political spectrum, usually in the name of the less powerful members of society. The rise of the Tea Party in the United States, however, demonstrates that social movements can come from the conservative side of the political spectrum as well. The Tea Party possesses all of the elements of a social movement: loose organization and leadership, opposition to what its members see as the status quo in both political parties and established interest groups, self-perception of its members as outsiders, and demands for fundamental change. It is a conservative movement, though, in the sense that it calls for a return to an earlier era (based on what its members see as the original meaning of the U.S. Constitution). This would mean a rollback of many major policies of the last half century. Similar movements have arisen in Europe as well, most recently in response to increased immigration from Muslim countries.
Given this history, comparativists have taken great interest in social movements, and contentious politics more broadly. At one time or another, scholars have used almost all of the theoretical approaches we outlined in chapter 1 to try to understand contentious politics. The oldest theories are psychological or structural. Various psychological theories can explain why people choose to act on grievances by joining groups or engaging in violence. Scholars have also used both economic and political structural arguments to explain protest. More recently, they have looked at strategic interactions based loosely on rational actor models to analyze the dynamics of how movements emerge and evolve. Finally, cultural theories have helped explain why and how movements gain supporters and effect change. We examine this theoretical debate in this section, then turn to related debates about why people turn to violent political action in the next section.

### Why Contentious Politics Happen

The first question we must address is why contentious politics happen. Why do people mobilize to demand change and engage in protest or other actions beyond the day-to-day politics of elections and lobbying? The oldest theories are mostly psychological, focusing on why people develop grievances against their government. The best known is based on the concept of **relative deprivation**, a group's or individual's belief that they are not getting their share of something of value relative to others.
they are not getting their share of something of value relative to others. Social psychology research suggests that relative deprivation produces demands for change especially when it is group-based: a sense that members of a self-identified group are not getting what they deserve in part because of who they are (Klandermans 2015, p. 220). Thus, the identities we discussed in chapter 4—for example, race, ethnicity, and gender—can be powerful sources of contentious politics. More recently, comparativists have looked at emotions as sources of grievances. A situation that transgresses people’s core values or sense of fairness and produces moral outrage and anger can lead people to demand change just as relative deprivation can (Flam 2015).

Christian Welzel (2013) argued that people’s values, not just their grievances or emotions, can lead them to participate in contentious politics. Using data from the World Values Survey, covering nearly ninety countries and 200,000 people, he found that what he and colleagues call “emancipative values” enhance participation in non-violent social movements in particular. Emancipative values (see chapter 9 for more on this) are values favoring greater individual freedom and equality of opportunity. He found that as both individuals’ and entire societies’ emancipative values increased, so did participation in social movements. Following the postmaterialist thesis we outlined in chapter 1, he argued these values rise as people’s basic needs are satisfied. Hence, social movements have been strongest and most effective in relatively wealthy countries, and even in those countries, support often comes not from the most deprived segments of society but from those at least somewhat better off and more educated.

Most scholars, though, argue that individual motivations—whether grievances, emotions, or values—do not fully explain contentious politics. People with grievances will not necessarily create or join a movement, protest, or rebel; they may instead feel disempowered, unhappy but feeling unable to do anything about it. Overcoming the collective action problem requires something more. Scholars of contentious politics have pointed to several factors that explain how grievances lead to political mobilization. First, they examined what came to be known as “resource mobilization”: What resources do groups and organizations have to effect change? These resources could include organizational capacity, money, or educated and effective leadership, among other things. The existence of seemingly strong organizations that at least appear to have the potential to succeed encourage people with grievances to join and support them.
A second group of scholars argued that resources alone are not enough. They added a structural argument based on political opportunity. The political opportunity structure is the extent to which a regime is open to influence from social movements and other extra-institutional groups. Consensual democracies are likely to be more open than majoritarian ones, and both are generally more open than authoritarian regimes. Multiple and independent centers of power, openness to new actors, instability in political alignments, influential allies within the regime, and regime willingness to facilitate collective action all enhance the political opportunities social movements have (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, p. 59). Greater opportunities to succeed encourage people with grievances to mobilize to demand change. Quinn Mecham (2017), for instance, argued that successful Islamist mobilization occurs when a key resource—a common and widespread understanding of a particular type of Islam—combines with a key political opportunity—a situation in which the traditional Islamic religious elite has limited control over followers and a significant political or economic crisis happens. Another group of scholars, mainly in sociology, have argued that networks are crucial to explain why contentious politics happen. Networks provide potential group members personal connections to a group and direct information on the group’s goals and activities, and can serve as direct channels of recruitment. Network connections to a relevant group thus help overcome the collective action problem. Networks can also be closely related to identity, a powerful source of contentious politics: if you already identify with a particular ethnic or racial group, for instance, you are likely to have personal networks established within that group, both of which increase the likelihood of your engaging politically in what can be high-risk activities that you perceive to be in the group’s interests.

How Contentious Politics Happen

Once we have some ideas of why contentious politics happen, we can ask, What do social movements and other groups engaged in contentious politics actually do, and how can we understand variation in their behavior? Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly (2001), in their influential book, Dynamics of Contention, argued that we need to analyze contentious politics as a process involving multiple actors and mechanisms. Social movements and other groups have particular resources and act within a particular political opportunity structure and cultural context. As they act, however, other political actors and institutions respond and the context can shift as a result, leading to changes in the way the social movements respond. This iterative process plays itself out in what they term “contentious episodes” of varying lengths.

Strategies and Repertoires Social movements and other groups engage in a variety of strategic actions to demand change, from peaceful protest to acts of civil disobedience such as the sit-ins at lunch counters in the 1960s or the Black Lives Matter movement blocking roadways more recently. Violent actions, which we discuss in
more detail shortly, can also be strategic actions, even if they are typically condemned more quickly than other options. All of these are examples of “repertoires of action” that groups use in political performances to gain attention to their cause and demand change. Which repertoires a group chooses and which are more likely to be successful depend very much on context. Successful repertoires usually draw on meaningful past examples, often within a given society, though not always. The Mahatma Gandhi’s repertoire of civil disobedience (refusing to obey what he believed to be unjust laws), for instance, was consciously adopted by leaders of the American civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g., blacks riding in the “white” section of a bus), then taken up by the movement against the Vietnam War (e.g., burning draft cards). Sidney Tarrow (2013) argued that the language movements use as part of their repertoires needs to have “symbolic resonance” in a particular context to be effective.

**Political Opportunity Structures** These can strongly influence how social movements engage in contentious politics. Consensual democracies with multiple-party systems are more likely to produce major candidates and/or parties that champion a social movement’s demands, leading the latter to engage in electoral politics more readily. At the other extreme, repression under authoritarian regimes leads groups to engage in “repressive repertoires”: often “underground” actions to preserve their group and plan for more overt action when the opportunity arises (Johnston 2015).

**Discourse and Identity** Scholars examining cultural influences, often using a postmodern approach, analyze how social movements create meaning via discourses and constructing identities. Constructing stigmatized identities—such as identities based on ethnic, racial, or religious minorities—is particularly powerful in mobilizing support. These scholars often argue that constructing an identity, as we discussed in chapter 4, and giving the group political voice can be important ends in themselves (Scholl 2014). This was a key element of the “new social movements” that arose in the 1960s in Western countries, giving voice to women, gays and lesbians, and racial minorities.

**New Communications Technology** The rise of new communications technology in the last twenty years, and especially social media in the last decade, has provided new repertoires for use in contentious politics and set off a debate about the effects of the new technology on movements’ strength. As part of the debate over social capital we outlined in the previous chapter, some observers fear online communications isolate individuals, thereby limiting their likely participation in social movements and threatening the continued existence of the movements themselves. Other skeptics see online activity as “slacktivism”—low-cost, low-commitment activism that has little impact. At the other extreme, scholars such as Manuel Castells (2012) argue that “the networked social movements of the digital age represent a new species of social movement” (p. 15). Social media, in particular, allows activists to bypass their
traditional reliance on “mainstream media” to disseminate their ideas. It also allows all individuals, regardless of their past involvement or leadership, to express their grievances to larger audiences and find like-minded people with whom to form networks. This, supporters argue, means social media creates a more horizontal and potentially democratic “public space” in which social movements can form and act.

Activists and social movements can use social media and other web-based communications in various ways. Long-standing social movements can use the web to disseminate their ideas, new movements can form first via social media and then organize real-world actions (the model of many of the movements of 2011), or activism can remain purely online. Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport (2011) argued that the web has two transformative elements: lowering the costs of creating and organizing movements, and aggregating individuals’ actions into collective actions without requiring the participants to act in the same time and place. When movements are able to harness these benefits, they create new and powerful models of contentious politics; when they do not do that, the effects of the web are far less important. Lowering the costs of communication can help mobilize people in the first place. If a potential activist reads social media posts from people with similar grievances, she may be more likely to translate her grievances into activism rather than free ride on others’ actions; if she knows via social media that many people support the cause and say they will show up to protest in the square, she will be more likely to overcome her fear and show up herself. Eliminating the need for activists to be in the same time and place can reduce organizational costs dramatically, perhaps even allowing the elimination of expensive infrastructure such as offices and paid staff. Paolo Gerbaudo (2012), however, suggested that “influential Facebook admins and activist tweeps become ‘soft leaders’ or choreographers, involved in setting the scene, and constructing an emotional space within which collective action can unfold” (p. 5). Social media does not eliminate the need for organizations and leaders and must be used wisely to be effective. These authors thus argue that how transformative social media will be depends on how it is used; the nature of the technology alone does not determine its impact on contentious politics.

The role of social media was most famously illustrated in the Arab Spring. As 2011 began, the world watched as seemingly out of nowhere tens of thousands of Tunisians took to the streets, demanding the ouster of the country’s long-ruling president, Zine Ben Ali, in what came to be known as the Jasmine revolution. As this revolt unfolded, Egyptians began flooding the main square in Cairo, demanding the ouster of their even longer-ruling president, Hosni Mubarak. In just six weeks, two of the oldest and seemingly most stable authoritarian regimes of the Arab world had fallen. Protests quickly followed in most Arab countries, with varying outcomes. We examine those outcomes in chapter 9, but here we look at how the protests arose in the first place.

The Arab Spring, particularly the seminal cases of Tunisia and Egypt, illustrates much of what we have learned about contentious politics. Social media certainly had an important role but was far from the only element of importance. Ricardo Larémont
(2014) argued that relative deprivation explains much of the grievances behind the protests. Economic growth was significant in most Arab countries prior to the uprising but was unequally distributed; those left out felt they were promised more than they received. They also saw evidence of massive corruption among the elite that denied the rest of the population the benefits of booming economies. Mobilization for protest, though, takes more than grievances. Earlier and less dramatic protests took place in both Tunisia and Egypt, starting in 2008 and 2005, respectively. In Tunisia, these began in the relatively poor hinterland among underemployed youth; in Egypt, the protests were around lack of political reforms in the 2005 and 2010 elections. These protests helped create social movement organizations with a set of repertoires and networks with which to mobilize people. In both countries, survival under authoritarian rule required people to have extensive social networks (see chapter 8) that they used to mobilize politically.

It is not as clear that an obvious political opportunity existed in either country going into 2011; although open resistance to both regimes was growing, neither seemed under extreme pressure. Nonetheless, the Arab Spring began in Tunisia, where a university-educated street vendor (who couldn’t get a better job) set himself on fire in a small, poor town in the interior, to protest harassment from the local government. Protests, building on those from several years earlier, began there and spread to nearby towns. News of his death from his wounds a few weeks later, and the regime’s repression of the early protests, spread via social media, especially in urban areas. What had been a series of local revolts became a national movement, culminating in tens of thousands of people marching in the capital. After initial reluctance, the national labor union joined the effort, mobilizing its long-standing membership to join the young, social-media-driven activists. After further regime repression, the movement demanded, and got, the long-ruling president’s resignation. As David Patel et al. (2014) argued, Tunisia created a portable model: it achieved its goal relatively quickly and with minimal loss of life, and established a set of repertoires that could be copied throughout the region.

News of the Tunisian president’s resignation spread rapidly via mainstream media—in particular the relatively new, regional television network Al Jazeera—and social media throughout the Arab world. Activists from earlier protest movements in Egypt called for a national day of protest and used a repertoire similar to the one in Tunisia: occupation of a central square in the capital. A relative handful of social media activists who had been involved in the protests of 2005 and 2010 mobilized a massive group using Facebook and other online tools. The long-standing Muslim Brotherhood did not officially endorse the protest but told its massive membership (it was by far the largest opposition group in the country) that they were free to join the protest. Over a million people took over the iconic Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011, and within weeks, Hosni Mubarak, a dictator of thirty years’ duration, had resigned.

Digital media played an important role throughout the Arab Spring. Tunisia and Egypt were among the countries with the highest levels of connectivity, particularly...
via mobile phones, which had become nearly universal, especially in urban areas. Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain (2013) found that social media was particularly important in helping activists share and spread their grievances, plan the protest itself, and ignite the spark that got people into the streets. Wendy Pearlman (2013) argued that shifting emotions played a crucial role in overcoming what seemed to be a lack of political opportunity: the regime’s initial repression and the strength in numbers gained via social media spread transnationally from Tunisia to Egypt to other Arab countries, turning fear into anger, a powerful mobilizing emotion. Although the outcomes varied widely—electoral democracy in Tunisia, a return to military rule in Egypt, and civil war in Syria and Libya—contentious politics affected the entire region. But the protests were not as spontaneous as they seemed; long-standing social movements used social media, their preexisting networks, and a common set of repertoires to mobilize people for effective action.

Transnational Activism

The Internet is but one aspect of the broader phenomenon of globalization, which has had multiple effects on contentious politics. As global communication has become easier and a growing number of issues (e.g., trade, human rights, environmental protection) seem to require global action, transnational social movements have arisen. One estimate counted 183 such groups in 1973 and over 1,000 in 2003 (Tarrow 2012, p. 187). Virtually all of these groups operate at both the national and global level. Some groups, such as the global justice movement (GJM), launched in the “battle for Seattle” in 1999, explicitly target international organizations, whereas others simply use global resources to fight domestic battles. The Seattle protest at the 1999 meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) was the first of a series of protests targeting global organizations such as the WTO, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and G8 (an annual meeting of the heads of government of eight of the largest economies in the world). These actions brought together traditional movements like labor unions with “new” transnational networks of activists around issues of fair labor, environmental destruction, and indigenous rights, all connected together by concern about the effects of globalization. Conflicts among the groups—between the older hierarchical organizations such as labor unions and the newer “horizontal” networks of activists, and between violent and nonviolent groups—was a continuing problem, but these protests nonetheless represented a new level of global organizing and action (Fominaya 2014).

The GJM is only the best known of a set of new “transnational advocacy networks” of activists working together to use global resources to force policy change (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Transnational activism has created new political opportunity structures and new resources: groups can target international organizations instead of or in addition to national governments, and wealthy and more experienced groups can share their knowledge and resources with younger and weaker groups in other countries. Groups can also share repertoires of action across borders much more easily, as global norms around issues such as human rights create a sense of collective purpose. These
changes have been particularly important for groups in poorer countries and under authoritarian regimes; their ability to appeal to, and borrow repertories and resources from, groups in wealthier countries can be crucial to their survival and success. Entire networks of like-minded organizations have formed to engage in parallel actions around the world, as the Occupy movement briefly demonstrated in 2011.

On September 17, 2011, approximately a thousand activists descended on the little-known Zuccotti Park near Wall Street. In the name of “occupying Wall Street,” they set up a camp in which they remained for two months. “Occupy” groups quickly emerged in other American cities and around the world, ultimately reaching 951 cities in eighty-two countries (Rogers 2011). Their grievances centered on the political and economic inequality that seemed to increase significantly after the recession of 2007–2009. The movement never became a single organization. Indeed, organizers declared it a new kind of movement based on a horizontal model of organizing and a new conception of participatory democracy. They in fact denied that any real “leaders” existed, though a key group of people planned the main events in New York and ran key social media sites.

The movement engaged in a new repertoire of action involving long-term occupation of space and active use of social media. Inspired by the Arab Spring and the massive movement of Indignados (the indignant) in Spain (who protested the economic policies imposed on Spain by the European Union in the European debt crisis), Occupy sought to establish a long-term encampment, like those in Tahrir Square in Cairo and Puerta Del Sol in Madrid. The initial group fell far short of their goal of mobilizing twenty thousand protestors; for most of the two months of the encampment, a few hundred people were there. Prior to the encampment, activists primarily used Twitter to spread their message, eschewing Facebook as not trustworthy and too corporate. Gerbaudo (2012, pp. 113–117) argued that the Twitter efforts had little effect because they did not make an appeal to people’s emotions. Once the famous “we are the 99%” slogan crystallized
and an online campaign of photos of people holding signs saying “I am the 99%” went viral on Facebook, support spread rapidly. Occupy groups sprang up across the country and around the world, occupying city squares, university campuses, prominent government headquarters, and financial institutions. Repertoires originating in Cairo and Madrid were adopted in New York and in turn spread to London, Paris, and beyond.

**What Effect Does Contentious Politics Have?**

Scholars have explained why and how contentious politics occurs at great length, but the ultimate question may be, Does it matter? What effect has all this difficult political action had? Oddly, political scientists have examined this question far less than the questions of why and how people organize. On the one hand, it seems obvious that contentious politics has mattered a great deal. For anyone living in the West, the new social movements arising in the 1950s to the 1970s clearly have had an impact: attitudes and policies about racial minorities, women, and the environment—just to name a few—have changed dramatically. Similarly, authoritarian regimes around the world have fallen over the last thirty years as their citizens mobilized, demanding democracy. On the other hand, how do we know that these changes were a result of the social movements’ actions? Outcomes of contentious politics are particularly difficult to discern because many factors influence government policy, social attitudes, and cultural changes. And if we can figure that out, can we then determine why some forms of contentious politics are more successful than others?

Most social movements focus on changing government policy, but many outcomes are possible. In addition to policy changes, contentious politics can affect access to the political system, the political agenda, policy output (resources for and implementation of policy), policy impact on people’s lives, and more fundamental structural changes (Giugni 2004, p. 7). Contentious politics can also have indirect effects on policy by changing social or cultural attitudes and opinions, or the practices of other important institutions such as large corporations. Finally, particular episodes or groups can affect future contentious politics, as social movements evolve or give rise to new ones. Thus, the study of the outcome of contentious politics is exceptionally complex.

Scholars are divided over what explains the outcomes of contentious politics. Some, following the political opportunity structure approach, argue that the context in which particular movements act is crucial. In particular, a state’s capacity to respond by changing policy efficiently and effectively and the presence of political allies within the state affect groups’ ability to effect policy change. If a state cannot adapt new policies with relative ease, no amount of pressure is likely to change policy. Marco Giugni (2004) argued that the presence of allies within the state and public opinion in support of a movement’s goals are crucial to success.

Other scholars, however, argue that factors internal to movements themselves are crucial. Those following the resource mobilization school argue that only sufficient resources of all types will allow a group to succeed. In addition to resources, movements’
Are Nonviolent Movements More Successful than Violent Ones?

The following table gives some examples of the cases on which Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) based their argument that nonviolent movements tend to be more successful than violent ones. What other hypotheses about why movements succeed or fail can you generate from the table? The table includes the years of the movement, so you can think about the era in which it took place and its length, as well as whether it used new media in the digital age and the level of repression it faced from the state.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Violent?</th>
<th>Use of new media</th>
<th>Repression</th>
<th>Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>Taliban</td>
<td>1992-1996</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>Karens</td>
<td>1948-2006</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Democracy Movement</td>
<td>1976-1979</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>FARC</td>
<td>1964-2006</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czechoslovakia</td>
<td>Velvet Revolution</td>
<td>1989-1990</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Kifaya</td>
<td>2006-2005</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>Eritrean Secession</td>
<td>1974-1991</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Rose Revolution</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>IRA</td>
<td>1968-2006</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Kashmir Separatists</td>
<td>1988-2006</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>East Timorese Independence</td>
<td>1988-1999</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Democracy Movement</td>
<td>1990-1991</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Democracy Movement</td>
<td>1987-2000</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Anti-Ceausescu</td>
<td>1987-1989</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Chechen Independence</td>
<td>1994-2006</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Basque Separatist</td>
<td>1968-2006</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Tamil Separatist</td>
<td>1972-2006</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Papua</td>
<td>Anti-Occupation</td>
<td>1964-2006</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data are from Erica Chenoweth and Orion A. Lewis, Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns Outcomes Dataset, Vol. 2.0 (http://www.du.edu/korbel/sie/research/chenow_navco_data.html).
strategies can make a difference. William Gamson (1990), and many scholars since, argued that disruptive tactics and even violence produce successful change; groups engage in these tactics because they work. Some scholars have suggested more recently that this argument applies to terrorism as well, a subject we address shortly. On the other hand, Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan (2011) used a quantitative analysis of a large data set covering the past century to examine movements demanding regime change. They argued that nonviolent civil resistance is more effective than violence in all cases except secessionist movements, primarily because nonviolent movements are more effective at mobilizing widespread popular support for their cause. Nonviolent movements that could not mobilize widespread support tended to fail, whereas the relatively few successful violent movements were those that did mobilize widespread support. This was true even when facing authoritarian regimes and active repression.

Beyond policy and regime changes, social movements and their individual members evolve in response to their past activities, another set of potentially important outcomes. Some of their members go on to found or join formal interest groups, such as the National Organization of Women, or even political parties, such as the German Green Party. The nature of the electoral system can profoundly affect these trajectories; proportional representation in Germany provided an opportunity for the environmental movement to form a party that doesn’t exist in the first-past-the-post system in the United States. When successful social movements cross over into the sphere of formal institutions, new groups often emerge to replace them with new and more challenging agendas. In the U.S. environmental movement, for example, the institutionalization of groups like Friends of the Earth as interest groups has left the role of social movements open to new challengers like EarthFirst! and 350.org. Sabine Lang (2013) argued the fate of many social movements has been what she and others have termed “NGOization.” As social movements become more institutionalized, they become NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), developing organizational imperatives to find funding and hire...
professional staff. In the process, they adapt both their goals and strategies to work within institutionalized political systems rather than challenging those systems more directly and, she argued, speak for rather than engage with the citizens whom they claim to represent. Carew Boulding (2014), on the other hand, suggested that where the quality of democratic representation is low—where parties and elections do not represent popular opinion well—NGOs can have an important role in mobilizing protest; once again, the political opportunity structure matters.

Scholars of contentious politics have drawn from a wide array of political science theories—institutional, structural, and cultural—to try to understand why, how, and to what effect contentious political movements occur. Many of these theories were first developed in the context of iconic examples of contentious politics such as the American civil rights movement but can be applied to more contemporary contentious politics as well, such as the Occupy and Black Lives Matter movements.

**POLITICAL VIOLENCE**

Many people have sympathy for social movements that engage in peaceful protest but very different feelings toward groups that engage in violence. This is especially true in liberal democracies, where peaceful protest is a well-established action within the bounds of civil society but violence is seen as illegitimate; but even when opposition groups face authoritarian regimes, many people question whether violence is justified. Scholars of contentious politics, however, see violence as simply one more repertoire of action in which movements might engage. Rather than asking whether violence is ethically justifiable, comparativists in the field of contentious politics instead ask why and how groups choose to engage in violence. They note that many groups shift from nonviolent to violent tactics and back again, and assert that the contentious politics framework we outlined earlier can help us explain why violence happens.

Scholars working in other subfields of comparative politics—such as security studies, ethnic conflict, terrorism studies, and revolution—also try to explain why violence occurs. Violence takes many forms, from small-scale protests using physical force to terrorism to ethnically divided conflict or genocide to full-scale civil war. These categories overlap and merge into one another at times, as particular situations evolve. Often, the distinctions among these categories of violence do not involve the intent of violent groups in society but whether a regime splits in response to their actions and a transfer of power is possible (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, pp. 172–175). We examine all of these situations briefly, using multiple perspectives from comparative politics.

**Theories of Political Violence**

**Political violence** is the use of physical force by nonstate actors for political ends. We include the term *nonstate* in this definition simply to distinguish political violence from war undertaken by states. We make no assumption or argument here about the
ethical superiority or justification of political violence vis-à-vis war, but it is analytically useful to distinguish the terms. Donatella della Porta (2013) used the contentious politics framework to explain why groups choose to engage in violence. She highlighted the interactive processes between social movements and the state, and among competing movements. The political opportunity structure that groups face, she argued, is a key element. Scholars have long noted that social movements are likely to be more peaceful in democracies, where they have greater opportunity to achieve their goals. Repression, under whatever type of regime, can produce violent responses. It is likely to undermine the influence of or radicalize moderates within opposition groups, leading the groups in a more radical direction. If police escalate their response to protest, and especially if protestors see that response as excessively brutal vis-à-vis nonviolent demonstrators, a violent response is more likely. Competition among protest groups can also produce violence, as they compete for attention and support by engaging in ever more dramatic actions.

Repertoires of action, however, also matter; past political violence in a society can serve as a model of acceptable and/or effective tactics, whereas certain forms of violence may be seen as beyond the bounds of moral acceptability, regardless of their effectiveness. Finally, emotions can be a powerful force; Seferiades and Johnston (2012) argued that violence can help turn emotions into a sense of meaning and purpose for activists. For della Porta and others using the contentious politics framework, we cannot explain violence by looking at the nature of the groups or individuals involved or their ideology. Rather, we have to understand the dynamic process that unfolds as groups engage in contentious actions, and the state and other groups react, all within an evolving political system and cultural setting.

Conflicts among ethnic or other identity groups, as we discussed in chapter 4, are a particularly common source of political violence. Identity groups, like other social movements, may pursue their grievances in nonviolent ways initially and then choose to become violent. Comparativists studying ethnic and other types of identity conflicts, though, have developed several other theories for why these conflicts seem to generate so much violence. Probably the oldest explanation is the primordialist argument of “ancient hatreds”: some groups of people have grievances dating back centuries, hatreds they pass from one generation to the next, and they will attack one another when they get the chance. As we argued in chapter 4, though, primordialism ignores the historical variation and modern origins of most ethnic identities and fails to explain why violence breaks out at certain times and not others. Indeed, in a recent comparative analysis of several African cases, Scott Straus (2015) argued that the way in which the political community was socially constructed along lines of identity is central to understanding when the most horrific form of ethnic violence, genocide, happens:

Genocide [is] more likely in those places where founding narratives establish a primary identity-based population whom the state serves. Such narratives thereby
construct a group or groups within a territorial space that should not be dominant and in whose hands power should not reside. In a crisis, political elites are more likely to take actions that conform to the protection of the group that defines the nation and to construct the excluded group as having interests that are inimical to the primary group. (p. 64)

He noted that genocide only happens in times of war: when faced with an extreme threat, elites follow the logic of socially constructed identities, protecting “their own” at the expense of “the other” when groups have been constructed in the manner he describes.

The perception of threat is another long-standing explanation for a wide variety of ethnic violence via the concept of the **security dilemma**. This is a situation in which two or more groups do not trust and may even fear one another and do not believe that institutional constraints will protect them, often because the state is weak. In that context, the fear of being attacked leads people to attack first, believing that doing so is necessary to protect themselves. Stanley Kaufman (2001) joined the security dilemma and leaders’ manipulation of ethnic symbols, arguing that violent ethnic conflict arises when the two combine in a vicious spiral. Straus’s (2015) study of genocide reaffirms this general approach, arguing that it explains even the worst types of violence.

The security dilemma can be especially explosive when the boundaries of identity groups overlap other social, political, or economic cleavages. If an ethnic group, for instance, believes that it as a group is not getting its fair share of land, income, or political power, violence is often possible. The perception of injustice based on the unequal distribution of resources or power is reinforced by the symbolic importance of group identity. Psychological theorists note experiments that regularly show any time people are grouped distinctly, an “us versus them” attitude develops. Combined with perceived unfairness or inequality, this attitude can be explosive. Emotions can play an important role as well. Roger Petersen (2002) posited three emotions that lead to violence: fear, hatred, and resentment. Fear is a response to situations like the security dilemma in which a group’s primary motivation is safety. Hatred is a motivation when an opportunity arises for violence against a group that has been frequently attacked in the past. Resentment motivates violence after a sudden change in status hierarchies among ethnic groups.

One of the most difficult tests of these theories in recent history is the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. In one hundred days, thousands of Hutu slaughtered 800,000 of their Tutsi compatriots in the worst genocide since the Holocaust. Genocide, the attempt to completely eliminate a people, is perhaps the most difficult political phenomenon to understand: Why would large numbers of people, even when horrific leaders are encouraging them, slaughter people en masse based on who they are? In most cases of genocide, including Rwanda, people had been living together more or less peacefully (though not without resentment and memories of past violence) when, seemingly overnight, large numbers of one group started slaughtering people in a different group.
Although many people view Africa as full of “ancient tribal” animosities, no situation shows the inaccuracy of this primordial argument better than Rwanda. Hutu and Tutsi spoke the same language, lived in the same communities and neighborhoods, had the same customs, followed the same religions, and had lived for centuries in the same kingdom. Cultural differences between them don’t exist. What did exist were several other elements commonly involved in political mobilization and violence: a potential battle over a key resource (land), a sense of relative deprivation, fear of attack in a situation of extreme political uncertainty, and an elite using a racist ideology to mobilize hatred of the “other” as part of an effort to build a strong state that it could control.

The Tutsi dominated the precolonial kingdom, but a Hutu-led government controlled the country from independence in 1960 to the genocide. Tutsi exiles who had long lived in neighboring Uganda invaded the country in 1990. By 1993 a cease-fire had been established, and democratic elections were planned. Elements on both sides, however, feared the results. Hutu leaders enjoyed the privileges of power and wanted to maintain them, and some Tutsi rebel leaders seemed unwilling to allow the majority (overwhelmingly Hutu) to rule, even via democratic means. A group of Hutu extremists in the government began propagating an anti-Tutsi ideology. They continuously told their followers that the Tutsi were trying to regain complete power, take away Hutu land, and kill them. In a very densely populated country dependent on agriculture, the threat to land ownership was particularly explosive. The Hutu extremists also created private militia of unemployed and desperate young Hutu men, and when the Hutu president’s plane was shot down on April 6, 1994, the extremists and their armed militia swung into action. Barriers went up across streets all over the capital, and the militia began systematically executing “moderate” Hutu who might oppose the genocide (lists of the first to be killed had been prepared in advance), as well as any Tutsi they found. Extremist hate-radio directed much of the effort, telling the militia where Tutsi were hiding. Members of the militia demanded that other Hutu join them in
identifying and killing Tutsi; those who refused would themselves be killed. The killing didn’t stop until the Tutsi-led rebellion swept into the capital, took over the country, and stopped the genocide—but only after three-quarters of the entire Tutsi population had been killed. Leaders took advantage of a situation of fear (the security dilemma) and relative deprivation to mobilize people around a socially constructed identity tied to claims on both sides that they should rightfully rule the nation. Although crimes of this magnitude are still impossible to comprehend fully, we can see some patterns that help us find a rational explanation based on past theories.

Civil War

The Rwandan genocide took place at the end of a three-year civil war. Although not all civil wars occur along ethnic lines, many, as the Rwandan example suggests, do. Civil war, whether tied to ethnicity or not, has been a particularly common form of political violence in recent decades. It is distinguished from other forms of political violence by the nature of the conflict: two or more armed groups, at least one of which is tied to the most recent regime in power, fight for control of the state (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, p. 180). Since 1960, civil wars have constituted a significant majority of all wars worldwide (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, p. 182). This chapter cannot present all elements of the long-standing debate over civil war, much of which is the purview of the field of international relations. Comparativists, however, have increasingly examined civil war within the larger framework of political violence and contentious politics.

Groups that eventually become armed combatants in civil wars may well begin as nonviolent actors engaging in contentious politics. Often, a situation of increasingly violent contention becomes a civil war not because the groups involved are inherently different from groups competing in other situations of potentially violent contention but because the incumbent regime splits, with important regime supporters joining the opposition and thereby providing it with enough resources to challenge the regime’s monopoly on violence. Sometimes, this comes in the form of regional elites mobilize supporters. Cederman et al. (2013), on the other hand, argued that ethnically based political exclusion and inequality do produce conflict. Map 7.1 provides measures of ethnic fragmentation and violent political conflict around the world. Comparing the two maps, what patterns do you see? Does it seem that countries with greater ethnic fragmentation also have a lot of violent political conflict? What hypotheses can you develop from the map to explain why political violence occurs more in some places than others? What do the maps suggest for the debate over what explains ethnically based violence?
A comparison of the level of ethnic fragmentation and the outbreak of civil wars around the world demonstrates that the relationship between ethnicity and violent conflict is more complicated than people usually assume. Whereas some countries with the highest levels of ethnic fragmentation have suffered from multiple civil wars (such as Congo, Angola, and Nigeria), others have had none (Kenya, Kazakhstan, Canada).


Note: A rank of 1 equates to a highly diverse ethnic population, whereas a lower ranking signifies greater ethnic homogeneity. No data available for French Guiana, French Polynesia, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, West Bank, and Yemen.

Source: Data for the civil war map are from Lars-Erik Cederman, Brian Min, and Andreas Wimmer, “Ethnic Armed Conflict Dataset” (http://hdl.handle.net/1902.1/11797 V1 [Version]).

Note: No data available for French Guiana, Greenland, and Western Sahara.
attempting to secede, as happened in the American civil war. The groups that rebelled against the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria in 2011 initially pressed their demands nonviolently as part of the Arab Spring. In contrast to Tunisia and Egypt, the Syrian regime had been so repressive that no prior organized protests had occurred; the initial protests were largely spontaneous and peaceful but not as well organized as elsewhere. The regime responded with brutal repression, and the country was divided along religious lines, with the minority Alawites, a Shiite sect, in particular supporting the government. The result was not a united and peaceful rebellion but instead growing divisions within the military, partly along religious lines, and eventually defections from the military to create an armed opposition that had the support of a significant Syrian diaspora outside the country. Repression and internal divisions helped turn peaceful protests into civil war, as the contentious politics framework suggests.

The choices armed groups make during war and the way in which they mobilize supporters can also sometimes be explained using concepts such as political opportunity structure and resource mobilization. A particularly prominent line of research in recent years has focused on the level of violence during civil war, especially against civilian noncombatants. Common perceptions of such violence harken back to the primordialist argument of \textquoteleft\textquoteleft ancient hatreds\textquoteright\ unleashed by war. Recent scholarship, however, has demonstrated the political logic of such violence. Stathis Kalyvas (2006) argued that in areas in which armed groups have good sources of information, their violence is discriminating, attempting to target only their enemies and gain support from potential supporters, whereas in areas in which they have no information they tend to engage in indiscriminant violence, willing to kill many innocent people to ensure they get their enemies. Jeremy Weinstein (2007) examined resource mobilization, finding that groups that can rely on external sources of funding such as access to natural resources are more violent vis-à-vis the civilian population because they do not require local support, whereas groups that depend on the local population for resources are far less violent.

Scholars of security studies and ethnic conflict have also contributed to the debate over civil war, especially what causes it in the first place. Analysts long assumed a close connection between ethnic difference and civil war: groups forced to live together, typically in postcolonial states, had profound cultural, social, and political differences, and this inevitably led to secession and civil war. A group of economists led by Paul Collier, however, conducted a large, quantitative examination of all civil wars since 1960, finding that greed and opportunity were the key factors that led to violence, not ethnic difference (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Collier, Hoeffler, and Rohner 2009). Where valuable resources such as minerals were available for groups to fight over and reap the rewards of, civil war was more likely, indicating greed is a major driving force. Civil war is also more likely in societies with large numbers of young men, available to join ethnic militia, and in societies with mountainous terrain in which rebels can hide, suggesting opportunity is also a major factor. In contrast, societies with greater ethnic fragmentation were not more likely to have civil wars, indicating these wars
really weren’t about identity politics at all, even if their leaders claimed that was what they were fighting over.

Recently, political scientists Andreas Wimmer (2013) and Lars-Erik Cederman et al. (2013) used new data to challenge the economists’ arguments. Their data measured not just the existence of ethnic difference but the degree to which ethnic groups were excluded from political power and the degree of economic inequality among groups. Wimmer (2013) argued that civil wars typically occur in the first few decades after the formation of a nation-state, when political institutions are often weak and ethnically divided elites cannot compromise on shared governance, and some groups may be excluded entirely. Cederman et al. (2013) found that both an ethnic group’s political exclusion and relative poverty increased the likelihood of civil war. Thus, ethnic grievances do cause civil war, but not just because different ethnic groups exist (which is what Collier and colleagues measured) but because certain groups are excluded from power and what they perceive to be their fair share of society’s resources. These situations lead to mobilization of opposition as outlined in the contentious politics framework, which can and often does turn violent.

**Terrorism**

Although civil war is unquestionably the form of political violence that has produced the most fatalities in recent decades, the most closely studied type of violence in the last fifteen years, of course, has been terrorism: “political violence or the threat of violence by groups or individuals who deliberately target civilians or noncombatants in order to influence the behavior and actions of targeted publics and governments” (Nacos 2012, p. 32). The key distinction between terrorism and other forms of political violence is who is targeted. Radical groups that become violent in opposition to some government typically target that government directly: the African National Congress in South Africa battled apartheid primarily by attacking the symbols and infrastructure of the state, such as police stations and the power grid. In civil war, the goal is to target and defeat the government, even if civilians are killed in the process. Terrorists, on the other hand, target civilians who are not directly responsible for the targeted state’s policies; they try to sow fear in a general population via seemingly random acts of violence in order to influence a particular government or population. Terrorist groups are almost always clandestine, whereas other groups engaging in political violence are typically more public.

Since the attacks by Al Qaeda on September 11, 2001, the field of terrorism studies has exploded. About fifty books were published on the subject in the 1990s and over three thousand in the 2000s (della Porta 2013, p. 11). Like most forms of political violence, terrorism is a tactic, not a type of unchangeable group. Many groups that engage in terrorism began using other means to address their grievances, and some ceased using terrorism at some point. Many types of groups can and have used terrorism; one of the longest-standing “terrorist groups”—now no longer using violence at all—was
the Irish Republic Army (IRA), which fought to free Northern Ireland from British rule. Today, of course, most attention is focused on religious terrorists, and Islamist ones in particular.

Scholars working in terrorism studies explain the decision to use terrorism primarily by looking at characteristics of individuals or groups who engage in it. After the 2001 attacks, many observers asserted that terrorism ultimately stems from the poverty and lack of education in many Muslim societies, particularly among young men. In fact, numerous studies have shown that neither factor is associated with the decision to join a terrorist group; some have found that more education is associated with more terrorism, not less (Nacos 2012, p. 103). Others have argued that emotions such as fear and humiliation motivate terrorism, particularly in the Middle East, where Muslim societies have gone from perceiving themselves as being the most advanced societies in the world a millennium ago to being colonized and exploited by the West over the last century. No single factor, though, has been found to be systematically associated with individuals’ decisions to engage in terrorism.

Ideology, of course, is another possible cause of terrorism; religious terrorism justifies acts of violence against what most people would see as innocent civilians in the name of God (or Allah) and his dictates. The leadership of Al Qaeda was heavily influenced by the Salafi form of Islam prominent in Saudi Arabia, in particular, which looks back to the founding of the religion as the golden age to which Muslims should adhere. Motivated by opposition to Israel and Western support for it, the Iranian revolution (though that was Shiite), and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, some radical Salafis developed a jihadist version of Islam that justified terrorism in the name of ridding the umma (the Muslim community as a whole) of Western and Jewish influence. They look to the eventual re-creation of the caliphate, or single Muslim theocratic rule across the entire Muslim world. As we discussed in chapter 2, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) tried to put that caliphate in place. Some scholars see religious terrorism as qualitatively different from older, secular forms, arguing that religiously
inspired groups seem to desire to kill as many people as possible, apparently without limits.

Scholars using the contentious politics framework, though, question the utility of explaining terrorism via the traits of individuals or groups. They point out that even Al Qaeda evolved over time in response to its political context, like many other episodes of contentious politics. Osama bin Laden and others officially founded Al Qaeda in 1988 as an offshoot of a broader jihadist movement whose main purpose was supporting the Taliban in its fight against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The United States and Saudi governments, among others, actively supported the jihadists, including bin Laden, in their fight against the Soviets. Once the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, many jihadists, mostly from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, tried to return home to continue Islamist political activity, both peaceful and violent. They, for instance, were active in fighting in Yemen and Bosnia in the early 1990s in defense of what they saw as Western or Soviet attacks on Muslims. Many of their governments, however, viewed the returning jihadists as threats to domestic stability; Egypt actively repressed them, whereas the Saudi government initially tried to co-opt them. When the Saudi government allowed U.S. troops into the kingdom in response to the Iraqi invasion of neighboring Kuwait in 1990, bin Laden broke with his government. By 1992, he had been forced into exile in Sudan and then in 1996 to Pakistan. It was in this period, facing repression, financial constraints, and competition for followers among competing Islamist groups, that Al Qaeda issued two key fatwas, or commands, in 1993 and 1996, identifying the United States as the primary enemy of the Islamic umma and instructing the faithful to kill all Americans. Al Qaeda’s ideology had evolved from fighting to defend Muslim territory from direct invasion to indiscriminate terrorism on a global scale, in response to political opportunity structures, resources, and competition within the larger Islamist movement (Alimi, Demetriou, and Bosi 2015).

A more recent example is Boko Haram, a terrorist group in northeastern Nigeria. Most Westerners first heard of the group in April 2014, when it kidnapped 276 secondary schoolgirls from the town of Chibok. It was founded, however, in 2002 as Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihād (Groups of the People of Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad) and changed its name to Wilāyat Gharb Ifriqiyyah (Islamic State West Africa Province) when it pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in March 2015. (The name Boko Haram, which means “Western education is sinful,” is actually a pejorative term that local detractors used to describe the group, but it has become the common name by which it is known around the world.) Nigerian political scientist Abdul Raufu Mustapha (2014) argued that poverty and the extreme weakness and corruption of the Nigerian state are key factors explaining Boko Haram’s rise and evolution. Mohammed Yusuf, the group’s founder, was youth leader of a Salafi Islamic sect. He broke with the group and founded Boko Haram over the issue of how much a “true” Muslim could compromise with the secular Nigerian state. In 2003 he and about two hundred followers created their own community in a remote area, where
they dedicated themselves to living under their own version of sharia. They launched a series of attacks on police stations and other government offices.

In 2009 the Nigerian police killed hundreds of Boko Haram supporters, captured its headquarters, and summarily executed Yusuf without a trial. Remnants of the group quickly reformed under the leadership of one of Yusuf’s assistants, Abubakar Shekau, and began a much larger-scale campaign of violence, targeting Christian churches, schools, and state institutions such as police stations and prisons. It was at this point that the group began to engage in actual terrorism, targeting innocent civilians rather than just government institutions. By 2015 it was declared the most violent terrorist group in the world, killing more people than any other, and controlling significant territory in the region. A new Nigerian president in 2015 reorganized the Nigerian military and allowed the neighboring states of Chad and Cameroon, which had seen violence tied to Boko Haram as well, to join the battle against the group. By 2016, Boko Haram had lost control of most of its territory and appeared to have broken into at least two groups, only one of which continued its official affiliation with ISIS. Attacks continued and made the region quite insecure, but more and more involved suicide bombings of “soft targets” such as schools and markets in remote villages, increasingly using women and girls as suicide bombers, and looting and pillaging for supplies. Although clearly engaging in terrorism, its repertoire of violence evolved over time, following the opportunities and resources available.

**REVOLUTION**

Boko Haram hoped to overthrow Nigeria’s democracy but hasn’t succeeded. What Charles Tilly (1978) called a “revolutionary situation” might exist in northeastern Nigeria, but no revolution has occurred. Revolutions are a form of contentious politics, but with a difference: they involve not just a mobilized group demanding change but the successful overthrow of a regime, and in some cases an entire social order. The impetus behind revolutionary movements is often similar to the causes of other types of contentious movements, but the outcome—regime change—requires additional explanation. Social movements and other forms of contentious politics could become revolutionary movements demanding regime change, though only a handful do, and even fewer succeed. Here, we address why revolutions occur, and save their outcomes for chapter 9, where we discuss regime change more broadly.

**Types of Revolution**

As with so many terms in political science, scholars have debated endlessly how to define and classify revolutions. One way is to classify them by the ideologies that inspire them: the liberal revolution of France, the communist revolutions of Russia and China, and the Islamist revolution of Iran, for example. These ideological differences would seem to be crucial, yet most scholars of revolution argue that the ideological
motivations and pronouncements of key leaders do not explain very much about revolutions. Typically, only the top leadership thoroughly understands and believes in the ideology in whose name the revolution is fought. As is true for all forms of contentious politics, many participants have other motivations for joining a revolution, and specific political circumstances must exist for revolutions to succeed. Ideology helps more to explain the outcomes of revolutions in that the subsequent regimes, as we discussed in chapter 3, arise out of the ideological commitments of the revolutionary leadership. However, ideology usually does not tell us much about why the revolutions happened in the first place.

We find it most useful to think of two key types of revolutions: political revolutions and social revolutions. A political revolution is the fundamental transformation of an existing regime, instigated and primarily carried out by a social movement or armed group. The key difference between a political revolution and a military coup or regime transition negotiated among elites (see chapter 9) is the role of at least one major social movement or armed group. Political revolutions are relatively rare, but much more rare are social revolutions: fundamental transformations of a regime and social structure, instigated and primarily carried out by a social movement or armed group. Social revolutions are so rare they are often historically important events not only for their country but the world, such as in France (1789), Russia (1917), China (1911–1949), Cuba (1959), Iran (1979), and eastern Europe (1989–1990).

Many revolutions, particularly social revolutions, are violent, though they need not be by definition. For many years, analysts believed that violent movements were more likely to result in revolution, particularly social revolutions. The presumed scenario was an armed group overwhelming a weak and illegitimate regime, militarily removing them from power: storming the Bastille in France is the classic image. Since

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**political revolution**
The fundamental transformation of an existing regime, instigated and primarily carried out by a social movement or armed group

**social revolution**
A fundamental transformation of a regime and social structure, instigated and primarily carried out by a social movement or armed group

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Lech Walesa, the trade union leader who became the chief leader of the anticommunist movement in Poland, campaigns for president in 1989. The collapse of communism in eastern Europe from 1989 to 1990 is the most recent example of social revolution: not only the regime but also the social and economic structures of society fundamentally changed. Some countries, like Poland, became fully democratic, whereas others did not; but they all profoundly changed via revolutions, the rarest form of regime change.

AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski
the end of the Cold War, some theorists have reassessed that position. As we noted earlier, Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) found that nonviolent movements are actually more successful at achieving regime change than are violent movements. Not all regime changes are revolution, though, as we discuss further in chapter 9. Using a comparative case method, Sharon Nepstad (2011) argued that nonviolent movements achieve political revolutions when they convince a section of the regime’s security forces to abandon the regime. It seems the state’s monopoly over the use of violence has to be eliminated one way or the other, either by overwhelming it with an alternative force or by splitting it into factions.

**Why Do Revolutions Happen?**

Comparativists have developed several theories to explain why revolutions occur, using the full range of political science theory: Marxist analyses of the economic structure of the old regime, structural arguments focused on political opportunity structures and movements’ resources, psychological theories of the motivation to revolt, and analyses of the process of modernization.

Scholars using the contentious politics framework have claimed that grievances, mobilization, resources, and political opportunity can all be important in producing a revolution. Using social-psychological theories, James Davies (1962) argued that revolutions occur at periods of rising expectations: people don’t revolt when they are at their lowest point but rather when things have started to get better and they want more. This is closely related to Ted Robert Gurr’s (1970) theory of relative deprivation, which can explain the motivation for revolution just as it can other contentious political actions. Nepstad (2011, pp. 5–6) noted the factors involving grievances and mobilization that produce a revolutionary situation: widespread grievances against the state, some elites shifting allegiance from the state to the opposition, enough anger over regime injustices to motivate popular action, a unifying ideology of rebellion, and a mobilizing organization with adequate resources to coordinate and mobilize people.

Many argue, however, that a revolutionary situation will result in revolution only when the political opportunity and/or economic structures are supportive. Theda Skocpol (1979) noted that a crucial ingredient for successful revolution is a state in crisis, often one that has been weakened by international events. She pointed to the effects of World War I on Russia as an example. A revolution can only happen where a state faces a severe crisis and lacks the resources to respond, creating a political opportunity. Jeff Goodwin (2001) also focused on the state but argued that certain types of states are prone to revolution: those with weak, neopatrimonial regimes that exclude major groups from a share of power. These regimes are not capable or willing to allow political opposition a role in politics, which forces the opposition to turn to revolution as the only option for change, and the states’ weakness means it cannot resist revolutions once started.

The earliest theorist of revolution in the modern era was Karl Marx. As we explained briefly in chapter 3, Marx believed that social revolution was the necessary transition
Was the American Revolution Really a Revolution?

The careful reader might note that we have not mentioned the United States in our discussion of revolutions. This may come as a surprise to American students who are accustomed to thinking of the American Revolution as a pivotal historical event. It certainly was that, but whether it was a revolution in the sense that comparativists use the term has been subject to extensive debate. Barrington Moore (1966) argued that the real revolution in the United States was the Civil War, which ended slavery as an economic system and established the dominance of industrial capitalism. He was clearly thinking of a social revolution in arguing that the American Revolution did not qualify. Like any successful anticolonial movement based on a popular uprising, the American Revolution seems to qualify as a political revolution, in that the colonial regime was destroyed and a fundamentally new one put in its place. The crux of the debate over the place of the America Revolution in the broader understanding of revolutions is the question of whether it fundamentally transformed not just political institutions but the social structure as well.

One school of thought argues that the American War of Independence was led primarily by the colonial elite, who did not envision or implement a major redistribution of wealth. Granted, they eliminated British rule and created a new republic based on the republican ideal of equality of all citizens, but they defined citizens very consciously and deliberately as white male property owners. Wealth was actually distributed less equally after the war than it had been before—and, arguably, slavery was more entrenched (Wood 1992). Not only was slavery codified in the Constitution, but it expanded for several more decades. Indeed, the Constitution as a whole can be seen in part as an effort to limit the effects of egalitarianism in that it created an indirectly elected Senate to represent state governments rather than citizens and an indirectly elected president with the power to veto laws passed by the directly elected House of Representatives.

The chief proponent of the view that the American Revolution really was a social revolution is historian Gordon Wood. Wood (1992) argued that the American Revolution “was as radical and as revolutionary as any in history” (p. 5). Though he readily conceded most of the points mentioned earlier, he argued that the egalitarian ideals of republicanism created not just a political but also a social and cultural revolution during and after the war. Republican thought did not deny the existence of all forms of superiority but instead argued that superiority should not come from birth but from talent and reason. Some men (women were not included) would rise to the top as leaders of the new society based on their abilities, their hard work, and the willingness of others to elect them to positions of leadership. Government was therefore to serve the public interest in a way that a monarchy never did or could.

This egalitarian ideal spread throughout society, Wood contended, leading to further questions about the prerogatives of rank and privilege. He noted numerous changes to social and cultural norms, such as pressure to end many private clubs, the taking of the titles “Mr.” and “Mrs.” that were previously reserved for the landed gentry, and the shift from reserving the front pews in churches for select families in perpetuity to selling rights to those pews to the highest bidders. As the latter suggests, the revolution caused commerce to expand rapidly as well; wealth became even more unequally distributed, but many new men gained it. This revolution of ideas and in the way men treated other men (the treatment of women changed little and wouldn’t for well over a century) helped to create a new society never before seen in which inherited status was considered illegitimate and leadership and high status were to be based solely on merit and election.

In the long term, the American Revolution clearly had a profound effect, especially due to its notion of equal citizenship. As Wood rightly noted, its ramifications went far beyond what its original Founders intended. But most of the political and social elite before the War of Independence remained the elite after the war. As for the grand ideals of equality, they applied only within the very restricted realm of white, male property owners for another generation. As Crane Brinton (1965) noted in his classic study of revolutions, the American Revolution (which he included as one of his cases) is also quite peculiar in its evolution and result: no reign of terror occurred, as is so common in violent revolutions, and an authoritarian state did not ultimately result. Although arguably beneficial, the absence of these elements, along with the other points mentioned, raises questions about whether the first war of independence against European colonialism was also a social revolution.
as part of the modernization process. Samuel Huntington (1968) saw them as being most likely to occur after economic development has raised popular expectations and political demands, but state institutions have not developed adequately to respond to them. Steven Pincus (2007) argued more narrowly that state modernization is the key: revolutions are most likely when the old regime is attempting to modernize the state, which brings new groups into contact with the state and expands its activities. If, in this process, it becomes apparent that the state may lack a full monopoly on the use of violence, revolutionary leaders will try to take advantage of the situation. Perhaps the most influential modernization approach, though, was Barrington Moore’s (1966) *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Moore set out to answer not only why revolutions occur but also why democracies emerge in some places and dictatorships (sometimes via revolutions) in others. He focused on the transition from agricultural to industrial society, arguing that if the landed elite commercializes agriculture by removing the peasants from the land and hires labor instead, as happened in Britain, the landed elite would ultimately become part of the bourgeoisie and demand liberal rights, putting the country on the path to liberal democracy. In contrast, if the peasantry remained on the land into the modern era, as in Russia and China, they continued to be affected by the commercialization of agriculture in ways that harmed them. In response, they provided the basis for revolutionary communist movements.

As with many areas of comparative politics, the theoretical debate over the cause of revolutions will undoubtedly continue. Some scholars see revolutions as products of particular historical epochs or transitional periods, which could help explain why there seem to be fewer of them now than in the past. Others see them as the result of forces and circumstances not tied to a particular era: rising expectations or particular political opportunities such as a severely weakened state.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 that created the Islamic Republic emerged from a sense of relative deprivation among many segments of the population despite a growing economy; an old regime weakened by at least the perception of a loss of international (especially U.S.) support; and a religious leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who became the charismatic symbol of revolution. The shah of Iran’s government prior to the revolution had seemed to be a classic case of a modernizing authoritarian regime during the 1960s and 1970s. The regime’s policies, however, did not benefit everyone equally. Although economic growth and personal incomes rose noticeably on average, what the poor saw was the elite’s conspicuous consumption, which they compared with their own very meager gains. Modernization of agriculture drove rural migrants to the cities, and there they joined the long-standing bazaar groups (petty traders in Iran’s traditional bazaars), who felt threatened by modernization as well (Clawson and Rubin 2005). Along with students and workers, these groups became key supporters of the revolution. Opposition to the shah was divided along ideological lines among nationalists who wanted greater democracy, Marxists, and religious groups.

A perception that the shah’s regime was weak was a crucial element in igniting the actual revolution. U.S. president Jimmy Carter enunciated a new foreign policy based
on human rights and noted the shah’s regime as one that did not adequately protect such rights. The United States had strongly supported the regime for decades, so even the hint of U.S. willingness to consider regime change inspired the opposition to act. In January 1978, theology students organized a large demonstration in protest in the holy city of Qom. The shah’s police responded with violence, and at least seventy people were killed. The religious opposition, joined by students and the bazaaris, then used the traditional mourning gatherings for those killed to organize greater demonstrations. By September, a demonstration of more than a million people took place in Tehran, and the shah once again reacted with the use of force, killing more than five hundred people. Continuing demonstrations demanded Khomeini’s return from exile, a demand the government continued to resist until finally giving in on February 1. Khomeini immediately declared one of his supporters the “real prime minister,” a claim the government rejected. The opposition mobilized its followers to invade prisons, police stations, and military bases on February 10 and 11 to take them over in the name of the revolution. After two bloody days in which hundreds more people were killed, the revolutionaries succeeded in gaining power. A sense of relative deprivation, a weak state, and religious leadership combined to produce an Islamist revolution.

CONCLUSION

The study of contentious politics has helped transform our understanding of political action outside formal institutional bounds. Political leaders and political scientists alike had earlier seen demonstrations, riots, sit-ins, and rebellions as nothing but threats to political stability. Starting in the 1960s, both activists and scholars began to argue that such contentious political acts could enhance democracy. At least in their nonviolent forms, they could express legitimate grievances that were not being met institutionally in a democracy, and they could seriously threaten authoritarian regimes. The original focus of the contentious politics framework was on social movements in Western societies, but scholars have expanded its use to examine various forms of political violence and even revolution. The study of both violence and revolution, though, includes scholars using other theoretical frameworks such as security studies.

Comparativists have examined individual motivations; internal group characteristics and dynamics; and the larger political, economic, and cultural context to try to understand contentious politics. Psychological theories are the primary means by which scholars try to explain individual motivation, focusing on why and how people form grievances and then choose to act on them. The latter, however, usually involves something beyond the psychological level. A relatively recent theory that is closely related to psychological theories focuses on emotion, particularly how anger arises. Beyond that, though, theorists have examined how and why aggrieved and angry people overcome the collective action problem. In this context, internal characteristics of mobilizing groups such as their resources and networks can be important, but so can the political and economic context. Political opportunities can lower the threat of repression from
the state and increase the perceived odds of success, leading people to act. Groups’ effective use of key cultural symbols and language can also help motivate action.

Although nonviolent forms of contentious politics are widely accepted as legitimate in democracies and as legitimate opposition to authoritarian regimes, political violence is not. Indeed, since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, political violence is most often associated with the killing of innocent civilians. In fact, other types of political violence have long existed and are far more common than terrorism. Ethnic and other types of identity movements can be particularly susceptible to becoming violent, in part because of the powerful connection between individuals’ grievances and their identity. Where such violence leads—to small-scale armed rebellion, civil war, or revolution—depends as much or more on the context as it does on the ideological motivations of the group in question. Groups often change repertoires, from nonviolent to violent and among violent options, depending on what is strategically advantageous and perhaps morally justified in their minds. Most scholars even see terrorism as a repertoire rather than a permanent characteristic of a group, though some groups such as ISIS seem to have placed terrorism at the heart of their ideology.

Revolutions are the rarest form of contentious politics, meaning a particular set of circumstances must account for them, but it is not always easy to determine what those circumstances are. A weakened old regime and state seem essential, for strong states can resist revolution no matter how many people are involved. A strong revolutionary organization that unites and mobilizes people’s grievances also seems vital. Revolutions are known by their leaders’ ideologies, but that does not always explain the motivations of the masses supporting them. The masses are often motivated by the failure of the old regime as well as a sense of relative deprivation, whether due to declining economic circumstances or rising expectations that have not been met.

The full range of political science theories have been employed to explain contentious politics. Theories focusing on individual motivation, both psychological and rational actor, try to understand the individual motivations behind contentious politics. Rational actor theorists have also looked at the strategic dynamics between the state and political movements to explain the evolution of particular episodes of contentious politics. Structural theories have long been used as well, looking at the economic structure of a society, the political opportunity structure, and the distribution of resources among groups to explain why some succeed whereas others fail. Finally, theorists using cultural models have sought to understand why particular symbols and language embedded in groups’ repertoires are successful at mobilizing support and how these repertoires shift over time and place.

We turn next to political institutions and participation in authoritarian regimes. Although scholars initially studied contentious politics mainly in wealthy democracies, many have done so in authoritarian regimes in recent years. With institutionalized participation severely limited, scholars have recognized the growing role of contentious politics, both in expressing citizens’ grievances within authoritarian regimes and in demanding the end of those regimes, a subject to which we turn in chapter 9.
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Skocpol, Theda. 1979. States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China. New York: Cambridge University Press.


WEB RESOURCES

Global Terrorism Database
(https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/)

The Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) Data Project
(http://www.du.edu/korbel/sie/research/chenow_navco_data.html)

The World Handbook of Political Indicators
(https://sociology.osu.edu/worldhandbook)