

# Non-Strategic Explanations for the Onset of Ethnopolitical Rebellion: An Analysis and Critique

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## ***Non-Strategic Explanations for the Onset of Ethnopolitical Rebellion: An Analysis and Critique***

### ***1. Introduction***

The literature on the onset of rebellion is dominated by two distinct types of explanations for why ethnic groups and their governments end up in armed conflict. This paper will analyze the non-strategic explanations. This is the most common type of explanation and it suggests that rebellion occurs when ethnic groups find that they have the necessary incentives, capabilities and/or opportunities to rebel (e.g. Gurr 2000; Brown 1996; Tilly 1978; Horowitz 1985, 1981). The second type of explanation is strategic. Examples of strategic explanations that have been advanced include the commitment problem (Fearon 1996), the security dilemma (Posen 1993; Kaufman 1996a, 1996b; Melander 1999; Roe 2000), the gamble for resurrection (de Figueiredo & Weingast 1999), and the information failure explanation (Lake and Rothchild 1998, Öberg 1999, 2000).

The classification into strategic and non-strategic explanations is based on *the number of causal agents*<sup>1</sup> they contain, i.e. the number of actors that are conceived as agents in the causal mechanism.<sup>2</sup> First, theories containing one causal agent are classified as non-strategic on the grounds that they do not contain two or more strategically interdependent causal agents.<sup>3</sup> These theories are often called structural explanations, as opposed to actor level explanations. But even in so called structural theories the explanation really centers on the decision of the ethnic group to rebel or not. Second, all theories that contain two or more causal agents that make interdependent decisions have been classified as strategic explanations. Note that the strategic theories will not be analyzed here – I will return to them in a later paper.

The main purpose of the present paper is to analyze the mechanisms explaining the onset of rebellion suggested in non-strategic theories. My principal claim is that whatever the empirical veracity of non-strategic theories, they fall short of explaining why rebellions occur. Realizing that this is a strong claim, I will do my best to substantiate it below. If I can do so convincingly, I will have accomplished two things. First, I will have shown

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<sup>1</sup> The concepts of agent and agency has become infused with new meanings in recent international relations theory debates (e.g. Giddens 1979, Wendt 1987, Onuf 1989). I should therefore make clear that I have in mind here only the ordinary lexical meanings of the words. According to Webster's new Universal Unabridged Dictionary agent means "one who or that which acts or has the power to act", and agency means the "state of being in action or of exerting power; action; operation."

<sup>2</sup> Readers familiar with the works of e.g. Gurr (2000) and Brown (1996, 1997) will notice that these authors invoke the security dilemma to explain ethnic conflict. Yet, I have classified their theories as non-strategic explanation and the security dilemma as a strategic explanation. The reason is simple. The security dilemma, when modeled properly (Cf. Melander 1999, Posen 1993), by definition contain two actors whose decisions are interdependent. In contrast, the aforementioned authors invoke the security dilemma as a variable (or set of variables) affecting the ethnic actor's decision, in much the same way they invoke state power as a variable affecting the ethnic actor's decision. In other words, the security dilemma is treated as a set of circumstances affecting one actor, and not as an interaction between two actors making interdependent decisions under specific circumstances. Consequently, the argument is non-strategic.

<sup>3</sup> The theories and works reviewed for this paper include, in the non-strategic category: Gurr 1970, 1993a, Gurr 1993b, Gurr & Harff 1994, Gurr & Moore 1996, Davies & Gurr 1998, Gurr 2000; Henderson & Singer 2000; Brown 1996, 1997; Van Evera 1994; Lischer 1998; Dudley and Miller 1998; Horowitz 1981, 1985; Tilly 1978; Ellingsen 2000.

that no non-strategic theory can explain rebellion, no matter how well their predictions fit the available data. Secondly, identifying the problems in previous theory is a prerequisite for developing better theory in the future. Identifying the strengths is equally important, although not the focus of the present paper. For example, the non-strategic tradition is fairly strong in identifying conditions that discriminate between cases of rebellion and no rebellion. This, and other things in previous research, will be important in developing and testing a new explanation for rebellion – one that can, at least in principle, explain the onset of rebellion.

Since my principal claim turns on what it means to explain something, I will begin by explicating exactly what I mean by explaining something. Having done so, I will go on to analyze and critique non-strategic explanations for rebellion. By way of conclusion I will summarize my findings.

## **2. Explaining by Causal Mechanism: The Search for Non-Question-Begging Answers**

### **2.1. Why Specify a Causal Mechanism?**

Assume we find that there is a strong association between a country's level of ethnic fragmentation and civil war (Cf. Ellingsen 2000). This tells us that countries with certain ethnic compositions experience a higher incidence of civil war than other countries, and that ethnic groups in these countries tend to experience more civil war than ethnic groups in other countries do. By itself, the observed association says nothing about *why* it is that countries with high levels of ethnic fragmentation experience more civil war than countries with low levels of ethnic fragmentation.

Imagine that the association is strong and that we have solved the problems of isolation and temporal order. If we then wish to explain the association between the level of ethnic fragmentation and frequency of civil war we still have to overcome two problems. The first problem is that the association does not fulfill Hume's second criteria for establishing causation – the space-time contiguity criteria (Cf. Geller & Singer 1999:12). In my view, 'level of ethnic fragmentation' and 'frequency of civil war' cannot possibly be said to be sufficiently contiguous in space and time so that it can plausibly be assumed that one can affect the other directly. Thus, at this point we cannot even say that we have a causal relationship between the 'level of ethnic fragmentation' and 'frequency of civil war'. Before we can say that we have to establish *a chain of reasonably contiguous cause and effect relationships* that leads *all the way* from 'level of ethnic fragmentation' to 'frequency of civil war'.

To restate the argument in general terms; the problem is that the typical independent variables and the typical dependent variables in our field are almost never reasonably contiguous in time and space. In other words, the causal effect between independent and dependent variables are hardly ever *direct and unmediated*. It seems entirely implausible to assume that one social phenomena has a direct causal effect on another social phenomena without first involving the perceptions, motivations, calculations and decisions of human beings. In my view it is not possible to claim *direct* causation between social phenomena without resorting to some form of mysticism. In sum, all systematic associations beg the question *why* we observe the association we observe? But associations between social phenomena, because they are almost never sufficiently contiguous, also beg the question of *how* it can be that one causes the other?

How, exactly, does an event, structure, or situation (the independent variable) have direct causal effects on another event, structure, or situation (the dependent variable)? Is it even conceivable that the ‘level of ethnic fragmentation’ by some unknown causal principle (a theoretical term) actually can transform peace into war, without first involving the perceptions, motivations, calculations and decisions of human beings? To my mind, and insofar as we are talking about social phenomena, the independent variable would *always* have to work its effects on the dependent variable *indirectly*, mediated by actors. To me, it is puzzling that in many so called structural social science theories “things just happen without anyone doing them” (Becker 1986:8). It is puzzling because social phenomena and variables are not causal agents, they are properties of the unit of analysis. These properties affect actors which then act so as to generate new, or change old, social phenomena. In short, only actors are causal agents because only through the actions of actors can new social phenomena be generated – be it new structures, events, attitudes, or what have you.

The conclusion is, that if we can establish a chain of cause and effect relationships (a mechanism) that goes from the independent variable to the dependent variable in steps that are reasonably contiguous, then we have answered the how question. To use our example, we have then established *how* it is possible that ethnic fragmentation can have an effect on civil war.

To establish *why* ethnic fragmentation affects the frequency of civil war we would also have to invoke some theoretical term *for each of the cause effect relationships* in the chain leading from the independent and dependent variable. Remember that a theoretical term is an unobservable assumption that justifies the association between cause and effect in a cause-effect relationship.<sup>4</sup> Note also that if we accept that independent variables in social science always work their effects through individual human beings, this implies that we would always need some assumption about human nature. Otherwise we would have no explanation for how the actor translates the input (e.g. situation, event, or structure) to an output (e.g. a decision, attitude, or action). This is the function of the rationality assumption in rational choice theory.

## **2.2. Mechanism Based Explanations: A Definition**

The function of a mechanism is to explain both how and why the observed association holds, and to provide the warrant for believing that the observed association is indeed causal. Following Hedström and Swedberg (1998:Ch. 1) we can define a causal mechanism as an answer to the questions of how, and why, an observed association holds that has the following five characteristics.

First, on the occurrence of the cause, or input, the mechanism generates the effect, or output. Thus, the mechanism should be a specification of the generative process that connects the cause with the effect. Second, the mechanism should be specified in terms of the causes and consequences of action and interaction at the level of the individual actor. The point here is that actors – not properties of actors or structures – are the ones that act and by their actions generate the outcomes in social life. The causal mechanism thus provides micro-foundations for the alleged macro level associations. If the phenomenon that we wish to explain is either some form of

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<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Hempel 1966:51,70,72-75

human behavior, or some consequence of human behavior, any macro-level mechanism would be nonsensical. In other words; mechanisms operate at a lower level of analysis than the alleged cause and effect.

The third characteristic of causal mechanisms is generality. The logic and process connecting cause with effect should be specified in general terms. In the words of Hedström and Swedberg: “[a]ll proper explanations explain the particular by the general...” (1998:2). An account of a unique chain of events leading up to an outcome is not a causal mechanism, nor is it an acceptable explanation. This is because a causal mechanism is a chain of cause and effect relationships at a lower level of analysis, and causality can only be inferred from regularities (Cf. James Lee Ray 1995, Eckstein 1975; Geller & Singer 1999).

The fourth characteristic of a causal mechanism is that each step in the cause and effect chain should be tightly coupled, explicit, and precise. The mechanism should take us from the input, or cause, to the output, or effect, without begging any how or why questions. This implies opening up “black-boxes” and eliminating what Daniel C. Dennet (1995) calls “skyhooks”. Black-boxes are logical gaps and unstated, looked over or unexplained, connections in the chain leading from cause to effect. Skyhooks are assumptions that assume what is to be explained, or part of what is to be explained.<sup>5</sup> Instead of showing how and why the causal process generates the output, the output is simply assumed, given the proper input. One example would be to assume the existence of God as part of an explanation of how and why intelligent life came to exist. Given that God has intelligence, this would amount to assuming what is to be explained: the existence of intelligent life (Cf. Dennet 1995:75-80).

The fifth characteristic, finally, is abstraction and analytical accentuation. Analytical accentuation implies that the causal mechanism should be parsimonious and sharply focused on the on the logic (the why question) and structure (the how question) of the alleged cause-effect chain that leads from input to output. Abstraction is necessary both for generality and for analytical accentuation.

A causal mechanism can, thus, be thought of as *a chain of law-like generalizations at a lower level of analysis*. In other words, we use chains or sets of lower level associations to explain higher level associations. Obviously, these lower level associations do not explain themselves either, and will in turn have to be explained at an even lower level of analysis. Ideally, a satisfying answer to an empirical question is accomplished when the answer does not beg any further questions, because all black boxes have been removed (Cf. Boudon 1998). However, at any given point in time we have to stop somewhere, for practical reasons if nothing else. In the social sciences this would ultimately be at the level of the individual human being. Basically, this is an argument for reductionism. I would even go so far as to argue that all good scientific explanation is reductionist in this sense – biology is explained in terms of chemistry, and chemistry is explained in terms of physics, and so on (Cf. Dennet 1995). In the social sciences this kind of reductionism is methodological individualism, i.e. social phenomena are ultimately explainable at the individual level.

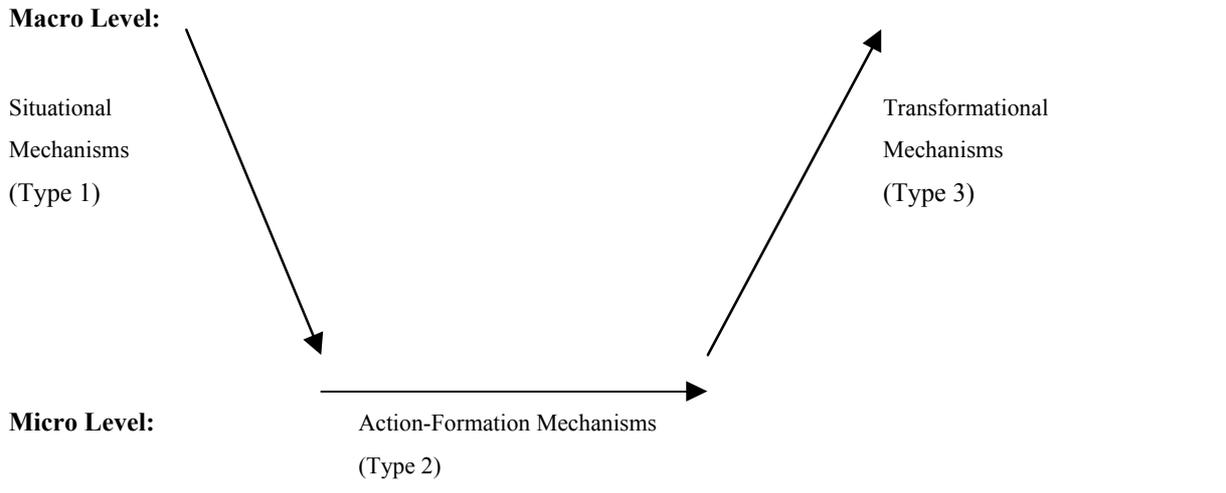
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<sup>5</sup> The lexical definition of a sky-hook is: an imaginary contrivance for attachment to the sky, an imaginary means of suspension in the sky (Cf. Dennett 1995:74).

In the following sub-section I will present an analytical framework that specifies in further detail what it means to explain social phenomena by causal mechanisms. This framework will then be used to analyze the non-strategic explanations for rebellion.

### 2.3. Causal Mechanisms: An Analytical Framework

**Figure 1.** A Typology of Social Mechanisms



Source: Hedström & Swedberg 1998:22

To provide an explanation for rebellion is to make explicit at three stages the generative mechanisms that produce the outcome (i.e. rebellion or not):

- Type 1. Situational Mechanism (macro-micro): The actor is exposed to a specific social situation that in some specified way affects the actor's beliefs, preferences and/or opportunities. Thus, the situational mechanism tells us how structural factors, macro level events and states, are linked to the actors beliefs, preferences and opportunities (Hedström & Swedberg 1998:23; c.f. Stinchcombe 1993). Bayes theorem is, an example of, a mechanism that translates macro level events and states into actor beliefs. In social-psychology, cognitive dissonance centers around a macro-micro mechanism (Festinger 1957).
- Type 2. Action-Formation Mechanism (micro-micro): the action-formation mechanism explains how the preferences, beliefs, and opportunities generates specific action. In game theory, this is the rationality assumption plus the set up of the game. The rationality assumption and the set up of the game, together, provide the algorithm by which the actor's choice of action is determined (given the preferences, beliefs and opportunities generated by the situation). In social-psychology, the dual-concern model is an action formation mechanism (Rubin et al. 1994:29-37).
- Type 3. Transformational Mechanism (micro-macro): here the mechanism depicts how the actions of different actors combine to generate collective outcomes, whether intended or unintended. Equilibrium solutions to game-theoretic models perform the same function. In other words, showing how individual actions combine to produce the outcome. In social psychology the structural change model of escalation (Rubin et al. 1994:82-97) is one example of a transformational mechanism.

For an explanation to be complete it has to cover all three steps in an explicit and logically coherent fashion, without inserting black-boxes or sky-hooks on the way. Otherwise the explanation falls short of actually explaining why, and how, the alleged macro level cause can generate the macro level outcome.

Specifying causal mechanisms is helpful in distinguishing genuine causality from coincidental association, because it provides a warrant for believing that the observed association is causal (Hedström & Swedberg 1998). In Jon Elster's words, "going from a black-box regularity to a mechanism is to go from 'if A, then always B' to if 'A, then always C, D, and B'" (Elster 1999, 6). Thus, the causal mechanism also generates additional empirical implications at a lower level of aggregation (e.g. C and D) which, gives us empirical criteria with which to decide on the issue of spuriousness between A and B, and to adjudicate between competing explanations for the same observed association.

Finally, analyzing mechanisms can provide reasons for looking for new associations and empirical patterns. My dissertation project, which begins with the same independent and dependent variables used in previous empirical studies of rebellion, can serve as an illustration. By identifying problems in existing mechanisms and developing new mechanism to address these problems, I generate novel implications which results in a search for different empirical patterns and associations among the variables already extensively studied. The new mechanism also sheds light on the important role of some previously neglected and poorly understood phenomena (Öberg 2000).

### ***3. An Analysis and Critique of Non-Strategic Explanations for Rebellion***

#### **3.1. Introduction**

Non-strategic theories of ethno-political rebellion, explain rebellion as function of a number of mostly structural or situational variables. The idea is that these variables in various ways influence the ethnic group's decision to rebel, or not. Arguments of this type are made by a large number of scholars on ethnic conflict.<sup>6</sup> For example, Barbara Harff and Ted R. Gurr argue that the potential for communal rebellion is "a joint function of group incentives, group capacity, and opportunities for collective action" (Harff & Gurr 1998:551). In a similar vein, Donald L. Horowitz argue that: "In short, (separatist) precipitants may act either to raise the costs or to reduce the benefits of remaining in the state – provided, of course, that benefits and costs are understood to embrace non-material as well as material values" (Horowitz 1981:193). According to Michael E. Brown (1997:4) most explanations for ethnic conflict are of this kind.

The main focus of this analysis will be Ted R. Gurr's theoretical arguments.<sup>7</sup> There are several reasons for this choice. First, Gurr is one of the leading exponents of the non-strategic tradition. Second, Gurr (1993, 2000) bridges a traditional divide that has previously separated non-strategic explanations for rebellion into two camps: theorists arguing that grievances are more important (e.g. Gurr 1970) and theorists focusing on the opportunity-mobilization nexus (e.g. Tilly 1978). This also means that Gurr's argument synthesizes and, to a large extent, subsumes a number of arguments made by other theorists, such as e.g. Charles Tilly (1978). Third, Gurr devotes

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<sup>6</sup>E.g. Henderson & Singer 2000; Brown 1996, 1997; Van Evera 1994; Lischer 1998; Dudley & Miller 1998, Ellingsen 2000, to name a few.

substantial attention to his explanation, giving a fairly clear and explicit account of how, and why, the alleged causal factors generate rebellion. A fourth reason to focus on Gurr is that his arguments have been more extensively tested than any other theory of rebellion. In addition, I will use his model and data for empirical comparison in a later part of my dissertation project. Finally, expedience has been of some concern. The non-strategic literature on rebellion is vast. Consequently, separately presenting all the different versions of the non-strategic argument seems redundant. Whatever differences in terms of causal logic there may be are immaterial to the point being made. In short, all non-strategic theories by definition suffer from the same key explanatory problem.

### **3.2. A Brief Summary of Theoretical Claims From the Non-Strategic Explanations for Rebellion**

The obvious key claim made by non-strategic theories is that they explain rebellion. Empirical studies of the onset of rebellion conducted under the aegis of the Minorities at Risk Project report a number of important empirical associations that lend support to this claim. Reflecting the theoretical approach of the project, independent variables are usually divided into three groups. The first group consist of incentives for collective action and include such things as history of lost political autonomy, collective disadvantages, repression by the state and, contingent on other incentives, frames for political action. The second group of factors reflect the groups capacity for collective action and include the strength of group identity and the degree of militant mobilization. The third category, finally, are factors affecting the group's opportunities for collective action, such as support from kindred groups abroad, and recent major changes in the political structure of the political regime (Cf. Gurr & Moore 1996, Harff & Gurr 1998, Gurr 2000:Ch. 3). The various statistical models based on this theorizing show reasonably strong and statistically significant effects for a number of theoretically relevant factors (e.g. Gurr & Moore 1996, Gurr 2000).

Identifying the conditions related to ethnic conflict does not, by itself, constitute an explanation for ethnic conflict. To have an explanation we need an answer to the question of why, and how, these conditions are related to ethnic conflict. The vast majority of the scholarly debate focuses on, which factors and what combinations cause violent ethnic conflict. In fact there is a tendency to think of theory, "as having to do with which variables should be included in the equations and how these variables relate to other variables – and not as something which is about which mechanisms produce the observed associations in the variables" (Sørensen 1998:308).<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, non-strategic theories are rarely purely about which determinants matter most. Like most explanations based on structural models the arguments reviewed here rely on some implicit assumption about human nature and are presented in terms of how the determinants affect the ethnic actors, motivating them to rebel or not. Thus, although labels and specifics may vary, non-strategic explanations for rebellion belongs to large class of theories that explains costly conflict as the product of incentives and enabling conditions, e.g. incentives and capabilities, willingness and opportunity, interest and power, etc.

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<sup>7</sup> I will for the most part rely on his most recent statement of the theory (i.e. Gurr 2000).

<sup>8</sup> To quote Hedström and Swedberg: "The guiding principle behind this type of theorizing – usually referred to as 'causal modeling' – is the notion that individual behavior can and should be explained by various individual and environmental 'determinants,' an the purpose of the analysis is to estimate the causal influence of the various variables representing the determinants" (1998:15).

The point here is that in spite of differences in labeling and variations in what causal factors to focus on, the explanation remains the same. To see this consider two recent reviews of the literature on the causes of internal war by Michael E. Brown (1997, 1996). In the literature, he identifies four different causal stories for how internal war comes about. He labels these stories as bad domestic problems (war caused by internal mass-level factors), bad neighborhoods (war caused by external mass-level factors), bad leaders (war caused by internal elite-level factors), and bad neighbors (war caused by external elite-level factors) (1997, 1996). It might be tempting to view these four scenarios as four different causal mechanisms, but in fact they all rely on the same causal logic.<sup>9</sup> The only difference is related to which factors that are involved in each scenario. Obviously, this is not a trivial or unimportant question, especially not if it can be established that these factors indeed do represent typical scenarios precipitating violent ethnic conflict. However, if we ask, for each of these four sets of factors, how and why these factors lead to rebellion, the answer given is the same in all four cases: the factors affect the ethnic group's incentives, capabilities and opportunities to rebel, thereby determining the ethnic actor's decision and hence the outcome, rebellion or not.

### **3.3. The Non-Strategic Explanation in Terms of Causal Mechanisms**

The non-strategic theories give a plausible general argument of why, and how, some strongly motivated and capable ethnic groups will, given the opportunity, press for change in a prevailing and unfavorable situation (e.g. Gurr 1993, Gurr & Moore 1996, Harff & Gurr 1998, Gurr 2000, Brown 1996). Exactly what factors are emphasized, how they are labeled, and details in the argument varies. But, Gurr's summary of his own theory captures the gist of most non-strategic arguments:

“Ethnopolitical action presupposes an identity group that shares valued cultural traits and some common grievances or aspirations. These sentiments and interests provide the essential bases for mobilization and shape the kinds of claims made by group leaders. Shared identity and interests are the elements from which skillful leaders forge a group's capacity for political action. The timing of action and the choice of strategies of participation, protest, or rebellion depend largely on political opportunities external to the group, principally its relation to the state and external actors” (Gurr 2000:41).

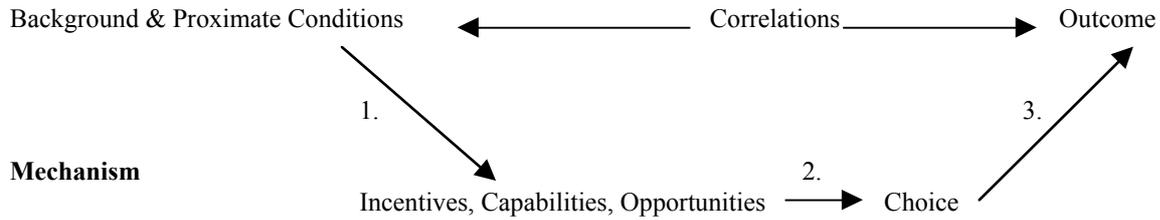
If we focus exclusively on the onset of rebellion the non-strategic argument boils down to this: when the situation is sufficiently bad to give the group incentives to rebel, and the group at the same time has both the capacity and opportunity to attempt to change the situation through rebellion, then change through rebellion seems more favorable than the current situation and, thus, the group is likely to rebel. In rationalist terms, the argument is that when the expected utility of rebellion is higher than the expected utility of the status quo, the ethnic group is likely to rebel (See e.g. Barktus 1999). This argument is illustrated by figure 2.

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<sup>9</sup> By claiming that they rely on the same causal logic I mean that they invoke the same set of mechanisms to explain how and why the alleged causal factors generate the outcome.

**Figure 2.** The Standard Non-Strategic Model of Rebellion

**Causal Factors**



Note that arrow number 1. represents the situational mechanism; 2. represents the action-formation mechanism; and 3. represents the transformational mechanism.

In the following three sub-sections I will take a closer look at the non-strategic argument at each stage of the process leading from background conditions to the outcome (1-3). This will reveal the chain of cause-effect relationships that are invoked to explain how and why the alleged causal factors produce rebellion.

*1. Situational Mechanisms: The Macro-Micro Argument*

The non-strategic theories are mainly concerned with the situational mechanism, and hence the effects of various variables on the ethnic actor are relatively well developed. Recall that the situational mechanism specifies how a social situation affects the actor’s beliefs, preferences and/or opportunities.<sup>10</sup>

In Gurr’s theory, losses suffered in the past creates resentments, anticipation of future losses creates fears, the potential for future gains create hopes and so on, all of which are incentives for action (Gurr 2000:Ch. 3). Incentives, in Gurr’s model, should be understood as including both rational and emotive components, goal-seeking and the motivating forces of relative deprivation (Gurr 2000: Ch3, footnote 3).

In Gurr’s model, enabling conditions come in two forms: capacity and opportunity. He first argues that having a territorial base, a preexisting organization, authentic leadership, and so on, makes rebellion more feasible. These factors are thus understood as having an enhancing effect on the groups capacity for political action (Gurr 2000: Ch. 3, pp. 6-19). Gurr then argues that a different set of durable and transient factors generate opportunities for political action, including rebellion. These factors include state power, regime instability, and regime type, but also transitions, various types of foreign support for the group (or the state), and spillover from conflicts in other countries (Gurr 2000: Ch. 3, pp. 20-40). Similar arguments are also made by several others (e.g. Saideman 1997, Brown 1996, 1997), sometimes in terms of more traditional factors affecting the capabilities of the ethnic actor, such as relative power (van Evera 1994).

In line with Gurr’s argument, the general idea in the non-strategic theories is that one group of independent variables increase or decrease the actor’s incentives or willingness to rebel. Another group of variables affect

<sup>10</sup> Since I am writing in a rational choice tradition I use the labels conventional to this tradition. In the works reviewed here, what I call beliefs and preferences are generally called incentives, motivations, or willingness and sometimes fears, expectations, hopes, and so on. In rational choice theory, preferences and beliefs in combination generate incentives, motivations, willingness, fear, hope, expectations, and so on.

actors' capability to act on their incentives. A third group of factors determines the opportunities for action available to the group. Not all theories contain all types of factors (e.g. Gurr 1970, Tilly 1978), but most recent theories do.

In rationalist terms the basic macro to micro argument is that incentives have the effect of lowering the ethnic actor's expected utility for the status quo, while enabling conditions (capabilities and opportunities) raise the expected utility of challenging the state to change the status quo in favor of the ethnic actor.

Having established how background and proximate conditions are thought to affect ethnic the actor, the next link in the cause-effect chain to be explained is how and why incentives, capabilities and opportunities translates into action that might, in the end generate rebellion.

## *2. Action-Formation Mechanism: The Micro-Micro Argument*

Recall that the action-formation mechanism explicates how the preferences, beliefs, and opportunities generate specific action. To do this, the set of actions available to the actors need to be defined and some algorithm for translating the situational input into a choice of action also needs to be specified. In most non-strategic theories the action-formation mechanism is set up as a choice between a set of reasonably well defined alternative courses of action (usually including a continuation of business as usual), protest, and rebellion. So far, this seems unproblematic. The question is what algorithm determines the choice?

Generally speaking, at this point we would always need some assumption about human nature that explains how the actor translates the input into a decision. It seems to me that any social science explanation without an explicit assumption on how, and why, the input is processed by the actor, fails to explain why the input generates the decision. Without it we might have correlation, or hypothesized correlation, between inputs and decision outcome, but we do not have an explanation for why and how this correlation is generated. Still, why should we believe that this correlation is part of a causal chain leading from the independent variables to the dependent variable?

One possible warrant would be that ethnic actors always try to improve the circumstances under which they live so long as the costs of attempting to change the living conditions do not outweigh the expected gains of trying. This is to say that one possible warrant is that the actor is a utility maximizer, which means that the actor is rational or at least goal-seeking.

The clearest statement of a decision algorithm is made by Viva Ona Bartkus (1999) in *The Dynamic of Secession*. Her explanation is explicitly a rational cost-benefit analysis preceding the decision to secede or not, but the argument and the implications are similar to most other, less explicit non-strategic explanations. In Bartkus own words: "the argument does assert that, at a fundamental level, human behavior is guided by rational criteria. In approaching a decision-making juncture, the members of a community complete an implicit weighing of the costs and benefits of the various alternatives" (Bartkus 1999:25). Bartkus claims, that she has this in common with scholars like Ralph Premdas, Anthony D. Smith, and John R. Wood, as well as at least implicitly

with Donald L. Horowitz (C.f. quote above) and Anthony Birch. Charles Tilly (1978:59-78) explicitly builds a rational actor model and could thus be added to the list.

Gurr seems to be of a similar persuasion when he asserts that “The ways in which identity, incentives, and capacity are translated into ethnopolitical action are complex [...] But most ethnopolitical action, including all sustained campaigns of protest and rebellion, is shaped by the strategic assessments and tactical decisions of the leaders and activists of politically mobilized communal groups” (Gurr 2000:Ch. 3, p. 20). Elsewhere, he states that he *does not* assume “that the incentives of communal groups are nonrational or that they inherently dispose people to violence. Instead they constitute a potential for goal-directed political action”(2000: Ch. 3, p. 7). These passages and similar sections elsewhere in the text seem to imply a rational decision. At the same time, Gurr explicitly claims that his theory is different from “Tilly’s calculated ‘collective interests,’” because he assumes “that incentives for political groups have an intrinsic affective component” (2000: Ch. 3, p. 7). Precisely, what this implies for the decision algorithm is unclear. Assuming that incentives have an affective component does in no way exclude a purely rational decision algorithm, but since it is not stated more clearly it is hard to tell for sure.<sup>11</sup>

In other non-strategic theories the action-formation mechanism is never specified explicitly at all (Henderson & Singer 2000, Ellingsen 2000). In these cases, more particularly how and why incentives, capabilities and opportunities translate into the actor’s choice of action is a matter of conjecture.

### *3. Transformational Mechanism: The Micro-Macro Argument<sup>12</sup>*

A transformational mechanism shows how the actions of different actors combine to generate collective outcomes, whether intended or unintended. Rebellion would seem to fall clearly into the category of collective outcomes. So what mechanism do non-strategic theories invoke? The short answer is none. A slightly longer answer follows.

The claim made by non-strategic theories, at this juncture of the causal chain, is that if the ethnic group decides to challenge the state with rebellion, rebellion happens at some level of intensity and with some probability. Some theorists do not discuss the probability and, thus, would have to assume that it is 1 for the argument to make sense (e.g. Brown 1997, 1996 ). Other theorists, such as Gurr (2000) cushion their claim by saying that states sometimes do make accommodations if challenged. However, the point here is that the state is not an actor with its own decision calculus and its own set of factors influencing the decision. Instead, the state is part of the context and it is the attributes of the state that enters into the calculation of the ethnic group, and affects how it will pursue its demands. Gurr is quite clear on this issue as is indicated by the title of the subsection in chapter 3, which deals with the role of the state: “The State Context of Political Action: Effects of State Power and

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<sup>11</sup> The discussion in this literature seems to revolve around whether preference formation is rational, emotive, or a bit of both. I am not sure what this is supposed to mean, or whether it is supposed to have any effect on whether the decision algorithm is rational, or emotive, or something else.

<sup>12</sup> Note that in Bartkus theory, cited in the previous sub-section, the dependent variable is not rebellion but the decision to seek secession, or not. Consequently, her theory actually provides a causal mechanism that connects the independent and dependent variable. This also means that the critique developed in this sub-section does not apply to her theory. In other words, Bartkus does not fall short of explaining rebellion, she stops short of trying.

Democracy” (Gurr 2000:Ch. 3, p. 22). The state is considered as an opportunity factor, where opportunity is defined as a structure affecting the ethnic group’s expectations of success or failure. In Gurr’s wording, “The state’s political institutions and capabilities structure ethnopolitical groups’ choices and what objectives to pursue and the means to do so” (Gurr 2000:Ch. 3, p. 22).

In sum, since there is only one agent in the non-strategic models, whether the actor is an ethnic group or an elite, no transformational mechanism is provided. It is simply posited that if the ethnic actor chooses to rebel, then rebellion is the outcome.

It is unclear why the ethnic actor’s decision to rebel against the state is taken to automatically imply rebellion. But for the claim to be true we would have to assume that the state chooses fight the rebels, or else there would be no one to rebel against, and hence no rebellion. The problem is that assuming that the state always fights, or fights by some probability, seriously restricts the domain of what the theory can explain. In this case the assumption squarely puts rebellion outside the domain of the theory, because at least half of what constitutes rebellion has then already been assumed. Thus, the assumption that the state fights is a sky-hook.

The alternative interpretation is that nothing is assumed and the whole causal chain beyond the ethnic group’s decision is simply black-boxed. Rebellion would then putatively be within the empirical domain of the theory but it would remain unexplained. In other words, we would be left with no theoretical warrant for believing that a decision by the ethnic actor to rebel will generate rebellion.

The obvious problem, is that the state is not an actor in the non-strategic models. And rebellion, like all armed conflict, to be possible, by definition requires at least two actors fighting over some good (Wallensteen & Sollenberg 2000:648). The state in these theories is represented as regime type, regime instability, state power and so on, but not as a causal agent. Thus, unlike the ethnic group, the state is not an actor making a decision on whether to fight or make concessions, based on some set of environmental determinants and according to some explicit decision algorithm. The state and its attributes are simply treated as part of the decision context of the ethnic actor. For example, the likelihood of achieving concessions from the state enters the model as a variable (e.g. regime type or power) affecting the ethnic group’s decision on whether to rebel. However, the calculations behind the states decision to make concessions or not is not part of the model (e.g. Gurr 2000:20-41).

#### **4. Summary and Conclusions**

The central conclusion of the above analysis is that *the non-strategic theories fall short of explaining why and how rebellion comes about*. Falling short of explaining something is not necessarily the same thing as being wrong – in fact the non-strategic explanation may well be correct as far as it goes. The point here is that it falls short of explaining why, and how, the background and proximate conditions generate rebellion, because the generative mechanism, or causal chain, does not take us all the way from incentives and enabling conditions to rebellion (or not). Thus, whatever the true explanation for rebellion may be, the non-strategic explanation is, at best, one part of the full explanation. To put it differently, whatever the empirical veracity of the non-strategic explanation, it *cannot* be the whole explanation. On purely logical grounds, we may conclude that the non-

strategic model can *explain* nothing beyond the ethnic group's decision to challenge the state. Interestingly, there is some empirical evidence that points to the same conclusion.

The non-strategic model fits the data fairly well up to the decision by the ethnic group to challenge the state. Beyond this point preliminary evidence flat out contradicts the propositions and implications of the non-strategic theories (Öberg 2000). I would argue that these preliminary findings suggest that the exercise undertaken in the analysis conducted above is not just theoretical positioning or logical hair-splitting. Thinking more carefully about explanations, causal mechanisms and logic is worthwhile, not just because it promises logically coherent explanations and elegant theory. More importantly, substantial dividends may be had in terms of better understanding of substantive issues, improved predictive power, and thus new insights into pressing real world problems and their solutions.

To sum up, non-strategic theories are really about how situational factors affect the ethnic actor by generating incentives, opportunities and capabilities for rebellion. If we assume, as most of the theorists seem to do, that the ethnic actor thus affected is instrumentally rational we also have an explanation for why the ethnic group might choose to challenge the state. But this still does not explain why rebellion is the outcome. To have a full explanation of rebellion we must both explain why the ethnic group decides to rebel and why state decides to fight. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Öberg 1999, 2000), even that would not be enough. We also have to explain why the state and the ethnic group fail to reach an agreement by less costly means than rebellion (Cf. Fearon 1995; Gartzke 1999).

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### ***Appendix A: A Tentative Formal Analysis of the Non-Strategic Argument***

The purpose of formalizing an argument is to check it for logical consistency, reveal what assumptions are necessary to make the argument coherent, and to formally investigate what implications follow from the argument. To my knowledge, the general non-strategic argument is never formalized, so I will make a simple formalization of it here, to check for consistency and necessary assumptions. It will also tell us if the main implications suggested in the informal theories actually follow, and if there are any looked over implications.

The simplest formal statement, of the non-strategic argument, would be that the ethnic group will rebel if and only if the  $EU(\text{Rebellion}) > EU(\text{Status Quo})$ , where the expected utility for rebellion is an additive linear function of the factors influencing the groups capabilities and opportunities, and the utility of the status quo is an additive linear function of the factors influencing the groups incentives.<sup>13</sup> If, but only if, we assume that the ethnic actor is a rational utility maximizer, and that the government always fights if challenged, then the implications of this specification are the same as those proposed by most non-strategic theorists, (e.g. Gurr 2000, etc).

However, some theorists argue that the government may sometimes accommodates group demands peacefully (e.g. Gurr 2000). Although, they do not draw out the full implications of this in their theoretical, or statistical, specifications we may do them more justice if we incorporate this possibility into the formal theoretical specification.

If we thus relax the assumption that the government always fights and instead assume that there is a probability  $p$  that the government will fight a rebellion rather than accommodate the ethnic groups demands we arrive at the following specification. The group will challenge if:

$$EU(\text{Status Quo}) < p[EU(\text{Rebellion})] + (1-p)[EU(\text{Peaceful Accommodation})]$$

Here we can think of the expected utility for Peaceful Accommodation as a function of the change demanded by the ethnic group. As before the expected utility for Rebellion is an additive linear function of the factors influencing the groups capabilities and opportunities and the expected utility of the status quo is an additive linear function of the factors influencing the groups incentives. Following the arguments made by non-strategic theorists in relation to the democracy/autocracy variable the probability  $p$  is some curve-linear function of the degree of democracy/autocracy.

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<sup>13</sup> This formulation requires that we formulate the democracy/autocracy variable as e.g. an  $X^2$  function since it is posited to have an inverted u-shape relation to the actors opportunities.

Solving for  $p$  we obtain the critical risk, i.e. the threshold probability at which the group will challenge the government with rebellion,

$$p > \frac{EU(\text{Peaceful Accommodation}) - EU(\text{Status Quo})}{EU(\text{Peaceful Accommodation}) - EU(\text{Rebellion})}$$

Holding  $p$  constant (i.e. analyzing the comparative statics), this specification tells us that anything that lowers the expected value for the Status Quo will increase the risk of rebellion, and anything that increases the value for Rebellion will increase the risk of rebellion. Less intuitively perhaps, it tells us that increases in the expected value for a Peaceful Accommodation will increase the risk of rebellion. All of these implications (except the last one) conforms with the propositions forwarded by structural theorists and the basis of their informal reasoning. If we think of  $p$  as a curvilinear (inverted u-shape) function of regime type (e.g. Gurr 2000), this formulation also implies that the threshold for challenging the government with rebellion will vary according to regime type. In line with Gurr's argument (2000:22-25) this implies challenges will tend not to end in rebellion in democracies, and have the highest propensity to do so in incoherent autocracies. An a further implication, not noticed by e.g. Gurr, is that challenges will, *ceteris paribus*, be more common in democracies *and* in coherent autocracies, than in incoherent autocracies. It would therefore seem to be more in line with the spirit of e.g. Gurr's argument to assume that regime type and other state are variable is a linear functions, even though he states that they are curvilinear. The observed curvilinearity would then stem from an interaction effect between the state variables and the incentives to rebel (i.e. the  $EU(\text{Status Quo})$ ).

From this exercise we may conclude three things. First, that if we assume that the actor inhabiting the non-strategic models is rational, then the standard non-strategic argument is logically coherent and largely consistent. Second, the above specification conforms with the mechanisms suggested by the non-strategic theories and it yields largely the same implications as the non-strategic argument, thus it seems to be a reasonably good specification of the main ideas in the theories reviewed here. Finally, the formalization reveals some implications not noticed by the non-strategic theorists themselves. It suggests that some of the specifications of variable functions are inconsistent with the implications they argue follow from the specification.