



## Rebellious Collective Action Revisited

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## REBELLIOUS COLLECTIVE ACTION REVISITED

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**W**hy does it happen that ordinary people can come to participate in rebellious collective action? In the June 1986 issue of this Review, Edward N. Muller and Karl-Dieter Opp argued a public-goods model to account for why rational citizens may become rebels. They offered empirical data drawn from samples in New York City and Hamburg, Germany in support of the public-goods model. George Kolsko takes issue with the rationale of Muller and Opp, arguing that their public-goods model is not a rational-choice explanation of rebellious collective action. In response, Muller and Opp clarify their theory and further elaborate its assumptions.

**T**hough Muller and Opp locate their attempt to explain rebellious collective action within rational-choice analysis (Muller and Opp 1986),<sup>1</sup> I believe that there are problems with this assessment. These will become clear if we rough out some basic criteria of what constitutes a rational-choice explanation. Muller and Opp are not explicit about these matters, but I imagine that they would agree with the majority of scholars and accept the assumptions that rational-choice models explain social behavior as the behavior of individuals whose actions are (1) self-interested and (2) rational, that is, efficient or maximizing.

Assumption 1 is straightforward and need not detain us. Rational-choice theory makes the intuitively plausible assumption that individuals generally act in the pursuit of their own welfare rather than the welfare of other people, especially others who are not close friends or family members. The conception of an individual's welfare posited by rational-choice theory is what individuals generally regard as central to their well-being, most frequently such goods as eco-

nommic rewards, power, pleasure, and reputation.<sup>2</sup> As for Assumption 2, theorists in general define *rationality* in reference to the application of suitable means to the attainment of given ends. With his usual lucidity, Rawls describes *rationality* as follows:

The concept of rationality invoked here, with the exception of one essential feature, is the standard one familiar in social theory. Thus in the usual way, a rational person is thought to have a coherent set of preferences between the options open to him. He ranks these options according to how well they further his purposes; he follows the plan that will satisfy more of his desire rather than less, and which has the greater chance of being successfully executed. (1971, 143)

Rational-choice theorists hold that rational individuals are good judges of their own interest and pursue it efficiently. Faced with a number of different possible courses of action, *A* is assumed to be able generally to identify and to pursue that which is most conducive to personal welfare.

Because we will be treading on slippery terminological ground, some clarification is in order. The term *rationality* (and cognate words) are used in different senses by different theorists. The sense under dis-

cussion here is that prevalent in rational-choice analysis, the main thrust of which is efficient maximization of values, as has just been seen. Though Muller and Opp do not make this point explicitly, this is obviously the sense that they have in mind. In order to be as clear as possible, I will place the word *rationality* (and cognate words) in quotation marks when a wider construal is possible.

Returning to Muller and Opp, we can see that their analysis departs from Assumption 1. One of their major purposes is to argue against what they call a "private interest" account of rebellious collective action, in favor of a "public-goods model." The difficulties with the private-interest model are well-known (see, esp., Olson 1971). As long as the community is sufficiently large, it is highly unlikely that *A*'s participation in some protest activity will affect the likelihood of the movement's aims being realized. Since *A* is unable to influence the provision of the goods in question, their value should not be a factor in motivating *A* to participate. If we assume that some costs would be incurred by participation, it is not rational for *A* to take part. In order to account for the fact that individuals do protest, various additions to the private-interest model have been suggested, especially regarding "selective incentives" (Olson's term [1971, 51, 135-36]), personal benefits that individuals gain only by participating. For instance, Tullock (1971) makes much of the entertainment value of participating in various political activities.

Muller and Opp's public-goods model rests upon the hypothesis that individuals might be willing to forsake individual rationality for group rationality (pp. 473-74, 480). In addition to calculating their own ability to contribute to the provision of desired public goods, individuals might take into account the effectiveness of the group as a whole (pp. 473-74). Because of the greater effectiveness of

groups, it follows from the public-goods model that individuals can rationally choose to participate, provided that they also have the requisite degree of concern for the public goods. Thus, unlike the private-interest model, the public-goods model does predict an association between rebellious collective action and the value of the public goods it is intended to realize, a conclusion that is supported by Muller and Opp's survey data.

Muller and Opp's postulation of collectively rational individuals who are concerned with the provision of public goods entails some modification of Assumption 1. This appears to be one factor in the public-goods model's "more precise specification of the nature of psychological incentives" (484). But we need not dwell on the complexities here. More important for our concerns is that Muller and Opp do not appear to realize the extent to which they modify Assumption 2 as well. There can be no doubt that they *believe* that the subjects they discuss are rational actors (see pp. 478, 480, 484). Though they do not make clear exactly what they mean by this, it is apparent that they view them as acting in accordance with Assumption 2, as efficient maximizers of the group's interest. It is upon this claim that I will concentrate.

As noted above, a basic assumption of rational-choice models is that, by participating in rebellious collective action, the individual will have a negligible effect upon the realization of the goods he or she pursues. Thus *A*, who seeks to further the group's interest is placed in the difficult position of having no means realistically to do so. The question, then, is what is the rational thing for *A* to do if unable effectively to advance this end?

According to one possible response to this question (Response 1), it is rational for *A* to participate in rebellious collective action. Response 1 depends upon distinguishing effective action from efficient action. To be rational an action must fall

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under the latter category but not necessarily under the former. By taking part in rebellious collective action, *A* will be advancing the end *as far as he or she can*. Because rational action is the selection of the most suitable means for one's ends under given circumstances, *A*'s behavior in Response 1 should be viewed as rational. Though *A*'s participation has only negligible effect, negligible effect is better than none.

There are difficulties with Response 1. Participation in rebellious collective action can be costly to *A*. But according to the public-goods model, collectively rational individuals are willing to subordinate their own interests to the interests of the group. As is indicated by Muller and Opp's curious finding concerning the incentive effects of the expected negative consequences of participation (which Muller and Opp dub a "martyr syndrome" [pp. 483, 485]), individuals are perhaps willing to disregard their own interests to a high degree. Despite the possible costs of action, then, *A*'s participation should still be viewed as rational.

By arguing along the lines of Response 1, Muller and Opp would be able to hold that the behavior of their subjects is both group-interested and rational. This would seem to be in accordance with their apparent belief that their public-goods model entails modification of Assumption 1 but not Assumption 2. However, Muller and Opp do not respond in this way. According to the public-goods model (Response 2), *A*'s participation is rational because *A* believes that it matters (pp. 478, 484). One of Muller and Opp's more interesting findings is that their subjects miscalculate the probable effects of their participation. They believe that their actions have "considerable personal influence on the provision of public goods" (p. 478). Hence Muller and Opp build into their conception of collective rationality a connection between *A*'s view of the effectiveness of

his or her own participation and of the effectiveness of the group (pp. 478, 480, 484). However, the crucial point that they overlook is that if *A* acts on the basis of such an egregious miscalculation, *A* no longer efficiently pursues his or her goals. Because *A*'s behavior is at variance with Assumption 2, Response 2 is unable to preserve the rationality of participation in rebellious collective action.

Because "rationality" is a complex concept, Muller and Opp have a possible reply to this objection. They could argue that rational actors efficiently pursue their goals *in accordance with their beliefs* concerning the circumstances that they face. Theorists who discuss "rationality" generally make implicit reference to the subject's beliefs about the circumstances.<sup>3</sup> This is made explicit by Elster: "That [an] action is rational means that given the beliefs of the agent, the action was the best way for him to realize his plans or desires." (1985a, 9). If Muller and Opp construe "rationality" in this sense, they can say that, because *A* believes that participation will be efficacious, it is therefore rational to participate.

I do not believe that this reply gets Muller and Opp off the hook. It is clear that there are constraints upon the beliefs in accordance with which an agent can act and still be considered rational. In a given choice situation, the rational agent will choose the greater of two possible goods. Thus, faced with two possible courses of action—*X* promising to yield 10 units of goods and *Y* promising to yield 20—the rational agent will choose *Y*. An agent who chooses *X* under the belief that 10 is greater than 20 should surely not be viewed as rational.

A familiar distinction can be introduced to clarify matters here. In the *Ethics*, in discussing the mitigating effects of ignorance upon moral culpability, Aristotle distinguishes ignorance of general rules from ignorance of particular circumstances (see, esp., *Nicomachean Ethics*,

book 3, chap. 1). The details of Aristotle's account need not concern us, nor must we develop this distinction with great precision. Basically, I believe that rational-choice analysis can profitably employ a wider conception of "rationality" in certain cases. I believe that *A* can still be viewed as rational if acting out of mistaken beliefs concerning the specific facts of the case. But if acting according to mistaken general principles, especially simple and important principles that individuals can ordinarily be expected to know, then *A* should be viewed as forfeiting a claim to rationality. If *A* is hungry and believes that the wooden apple on the table is real, a decision to eat it can be viewed as rational, especially if the wooden apple is skillfully made and looks real. But if *A* is hungry and knows that it is a wooden apple, a decision to eat it is not rational, even if *A* believes that wooden apples are delicious and nourishing. Rational people do not hold such beliefs.

Along similar lines, individuals who participate in rebellious collective action in large communities, under the assumption that their own participation will appreciably affect the likelihood of their goals' being realized, should not (regardless of whether they are self-interested) be viewed as rational actors. The mistake that they make concerns one of the fundamental principles of rational-choice theory. It is a mistake that no rational person should make.<sup>4</sup> I conclude, then, that Muller and Opp's public-goods model departs from Assumption 2 in addition to Assumption 1 and so should not be viewed as falling within the family of rational-choice explanations.

The above criticisms of Muller and Opp concern more than a question of semantics. In all probability, Muller and Opp locate their public-goods model within rational-choice theory because of the great strengths of such analysis. Very briefly, rational-choice theory allows the construction of simple but powerful, test-

able explanations. To use Barry's words, the advantage of the method is that "in appropriate kinds of situations, it enables us, operating with simple premises concerning rational behaviour, to deduce by logic and mathematics interesting conclusions about what will happen" (Barry 1978, 15-16; and p. 5 n. 2). If we are able to determine the relative values of the goods that will be realized by the pursuit of different possible courses of action, we will be able to predict how individuals will behave. But we will be able to do so only if individuals behave in accordance with Assumptions 1 and 2 (especially 2). In departing from conventional rational-choice analysis, Muller and Opp threaten the elegance and simplicity of the model. That their subjects do not understand the most basic facts about the likely consequences of their actions makes their actions much more difficult to predict and explain. In addition to having to determine the values attached to different courses of action, the researcher must deal with an additional set of variables concerning how individuals will regard these options. Olson notes that rational-choice explanations can be distinguished from other explanations that stem from psychology or social psychology (1971, 161-62; also Simon 1985). Though Muller and Opp apparently do not realize this, their public-goods model—with its "more precise specification of the nature of psychological incentives" (p. 484)—falls into the latter camp rather than the former, while explanations of this kind forfeit much of the lucidity of the rational-choice model.

My remarks here do little to undermine the importance of Muller and Opp's empirical findings. Even if the public-goods model should not be viewed as a rational-choice explanation, to the extent that it helps to explain participation in rebellious collective action, it will, of course, make an important contribution. But, in at least one respect, the contribution seems to me

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to be different from what Muller and Opp have in mind. The fact that, according to the public-goods model (as revised here), individuals' decisions to participate in collective action are neither (1) self-interested nor (2) efficient indicates something of the limits of rational-choice analysis. As Muller and Opp's results suggest and as seems apparent to me, one reason that rational-choice theory has had trouble explaining a wide variety of political behavior is that individuals engage in such activity for a wide variety of "non-rational" reasons. Of course, there is nothing to prevent rational-choice theorists from reinterpreting such motives and subsuming them under the all-purpose category of "selective incentives," though the cost of doing so is, again, to deprive rational-choice theory of its simplicity and elegance. As scholars have argued, and as is surely suggested by the "'martyr' syndrome" that Muller and Opp observe, among the important factors motivating individuals to take part in political activity are concerns of a moral nature, which rational-choice theory promises to have no easy time accommodating (see, e.g., Benn 1979; Sorel 1950).

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Our 1986 paper in the *Review* was concerned with an application of the rational-choice model (RCM) to explain rebellious collective action. It was not possible there to spell out in detail the version of the RCM on which our explanation of rebellious collective action was based. We therefore welcome the comments by Klosko, which provide us the opportunity to clarify and elaborate on the theoretical foundation of our research.

Any rational-choice explanation of behavior must include, according to Klosko, two assumptions: (1) individuals

are *self-interested*, and (2) their behavior is *efficient*. The question is, Are these assumptions consistent with those of our version of the RCM?

The version of the RCM that underlies our explanation of rebellious collective action includes the following assumptions:

1. *The preference assumption.* Individual preferences are determinants of actions that are—in the perception of the individual—instrumental in satisfying the respective preferences.
2. *The constraint assumption.* Constraints/opportunities imposed on/available to individuals are determinants of their actions.
3. *The utility maximization assumption.* Individuals choose to perform those actions that will realize their preferences to the greatest extent, taking into account the constraints/opportunities imposed on/available to them.

The preference assumption and the utility maximization assumption clearly imply that individuals will seek to satisfy their own interests and are therefore self-interested. We do not introduce any restrictions on the kind of preferences that may be included in a rational-choice explanation of rebellious collective action (or of any other kind of behavior). In particular, the preference assumption does not imply that the interests of individuals are purely egoistic in the sense of being limited to their own private welfare. The exact nature of preferences is left open: they may include public goods, which will benefit all members of a group or broader society, including the individual; and they may include the private welfare of others (altruistic goals of collective action, e.g., the Sanctuary Movement). Because Klosko acknowledges in note 2 that the RCM "is compatible with a wider conception of the individual's interest," it is inconsistent for him then to claim that our public-goods model "should not be

viewed as falling within the family of rational-choice explanations" because it departs from Assumption 1—as well as from Assumption 2. The public-goods model does not depart from Assumption 1, except under a quite narrow definition of self-interest, which Klosko himself concedes is arbitrary.

Klosko recognizes that our version of the RCM is compatible with Elster's (1985a) definition of rational action, "That [an] action is rational means that given the beliefs of the agent, the action was the best way for him to realize his plans or desires" (p. 9). In emphasizing the "beliefs of the agent," this definition allows for subjective misperception of individual or group influence on the satisfaction of preferences and therefore does not depart from Assumption 2, the efficiency assumption, even if the effectiveness of the individual and/or the group is calculated incorrectly according to an objective criterion. Thus, our version of the RCM implies that actors behave rationally according to Elster's definition (also see Elster 1985b)—indeed, when we spoke of rationality in our paper, we had this definition of rational action in mind. Klosko, however, does not think that a definition like Elster's "gets [us] off the hook." This must be because he would not include Elster's definition within the rational-choice "family."

The real issue for Klosko is not the question of how self-interest is defined in Assumption 1 but rather how *efficiency* is defined in Assumption 2. In this context, he refers to "the application of suitable means to the attainment of given ends." Whether an actor acts efficiently or not is thus judged by an outside observer, not by the actor. This is apparent when Klosko writes that if an actor miscalculates his influence on the provision of a public good, the actor "no longer efficiently pursues his or her goals," that is, does not act efficiently.

All average citizens acting in nonsmall

groups miscalculate their influence if they think that their participation makes any difference to the outcome of collective behavior. Yet, in all the studies of political efficacy that have even been conducted, substantial numbers of individuals actually have reported the belief that their participation matters. Moreover, sense of political efficacy has been found consistently to correlate positively with level of political information and formal education. Thus, miscalculation of individual influence cannot be assumed to be just an aberration due to lack of knowledge about politics or inadequate education; it is typical of individuals who possess other attributes that one would expect to enhance the likelihood of rational decision making. Why?

We propose that many individuals who participate in rebellious collective action because of a high sense of efficacy (in part) do so not because they have a mistaken understanding of general principles but rather because they substitute a collectively rational general principle for the individually rational general principle of the conventional RCM, which is based on simple probability theory. The collectively rational general principle is that if all average citizens are individually rational, then nobody but the leaders of the movement will participate, and collective action will fail; consequently, an individual act of participation cannot be regarded as separable from that of the whole group. In other words, the collectively rational general principle is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Perceived influence, in the general RCM, operates as a constraint on preferences. Neither Elster's nor our definition of rationality stipulates that such constraints must conform to objective criteria of probabilistic logic, according to which the whole cannot be greater than the sum of its parts. As the violation of Assumption 1 depends on how one defines the term *self interest*, so the extent to which a

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rational-choice model is judged to depart from Assumption 2 depends on one's definition of the general principles by which efficiency is to be assessed.

The force of Klosko's critique of our version of the RCM thus depends on *which* definitions of self-interest and principles of efficiency are allowed into the family of rational-choice models. Definitions are, of course, not true or false but more or less useful. We reject the "strict" (or, as we would say, "narrow") definition of rationality preferred by Klosko and by many economists because we do not consider it to be useful for explaining rebellious collective action.

In proposing what we consider to be a more useful version of the RCM, we allow individuals to perceive their own personal influence on provision of public goods as being nonnegligible, and we introduce the likelihood of success of the group as determined by the past success of groups—that is, contingencies of vicarious reinforcement—as a relevant constraint on individual preferences. We assume—but without testing the assumption—that both personal influence and group influence can be determinants of the choice to participate in rebellious collective action, given public-good preferences, because individuals recognize that the success of rebellious collective action depends on the group's acting together as a whole. In effect, we allow individuals faced with a choice to participate or not in rebellious collective action to reject free-riding as being collectively irrational. Is this acceptable?

Economists are reluctant to accept a version of the RCM that includes a broad variety of motivations and constraints. One of the reasons mentioned by Klosko is that a broad model threatens "to deprive rational choice theory of its simplicity and elegance." Elegance and simplicity, however, are not the primary criteria to assess theories. A nonelegant and complex theory that is correct and

has explanatory power will be preferred to one that is simple and elegant but is incorrect and lacks explanatory power.

The conventional economic RCM is widely recognized to lack explanatory power with respect to behavior such as rebellious collective action. We argue that its weak explanatory power is due to restrictive assumptions, which can be modified by introducing broader definitions of *self-interest* and (particularly) of *efficiency*, to use Klosko's terminology. The best way to assess the fruitfulness of our broad version of the RCM is to derive hypotheses from it that can be tested empirically. This was the main thrust of our research. We found that our "public-goods" model did have some nontrivial explanatory power in regard to rebellious collective action. In particular, we found support for the hypothesis that participation in rebellious collective action is a function of the product of public-goods preferences and perceived individual and group influence on provision of public goods. We did not actually test the assumption that perceived individual and group influence are both relevant *because* of a belief in the general principle that the success of rebellious collective action depends on all members of the group "doing their part"; but we found that individuals seemed to behave as if they accepted this principle. Therefore, our modification of the efficiency assumption to allow for what we call "collective rationality" appears to be useful.

One important priority of future research is to investigate empirically the question of whether individuals are unaware of or misunderstand the principle that their own personal participation will have a negligible effect on the realization of their public-goods preferences or whether they consciously reject this principle in favor of an alternative general rule that the success of collective action depends on the group's acting together as a unified whole. If the latter is the case, then



our version of the RCM could be said to modify rather than depart from Assumption 2. If the former is the case, then we would have to acknowledge that the public-goods model does not conform to the efficiency assumption, but we still would not regard this as justification for dismissing it altogether from the rational-choice family. In any event, a second important priority of future research is to compare the explanatory power of our version of the RCM with that of other competing psychological and sociological theories and hypotheses about determinants of rebellious collective action. It may thus turn out that, although the RCM is burdened with problems, the problems of alternative theories are even more severe.

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### Notes

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1. Unaccompanied page references are to this article.

2. Although, as Muller and Opp indicate, rational-choice theory generally posits self-interested individuals (Bonner 1986, 6), the model is compatible with a wider conception of the individual's interest. It can accommodate individuals who pursue the welfare of other people in addition to or instead of their own. See, e.g., Barry 1978, 11-21; Buchanan and Tullock 1962, 18; Olson 1971,

65. Of the two assumptions, then, Assumption 2 is probably more important than Assumption 1.

3. For some of the complexities involved in assessing "rationality" in particular cases, see Elster 1983, chap. 1; Simon 1985.

4. Barry (1978, 18 n. 5) makes a very similar point (criticizing William Riker) in a work cited by Muller and Opp.

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