Collective and State Violence in the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: The Limits of Classical Rational-Choice Theory

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Many analysts continue to invoke narrow, market-based forms of rational-choice theory despite the call for a historically specific and culturally sensitive version of the theory. This paper demonstrates the limits of classical rational-choice theory empirically by summarizing some results of a recently completed research project on the Palestinian insurgency and Israeli state response over the period 1987 to 2007. After first establishing the existence of several important patterns of collective and state violence that are anomalous from the viewpoint of classical

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rational-choice theory, it proposes a model of situationally defined rational action that increases explained variation in the frequency of suicide attacks and state-directed assassinations. The analysis leads to the conclusion that, while insurgents and state actors behave rationally, their rationality is culturally and historically contingent, which is to say that it takes different forms in different contexts.

**RATIONAL CHOICE AND COLLECTIVE AND STATE VIOLENCE**

This paper draws out an important theoretical implication of a recently completed research project on the Palestinian insurgency and Israeli state response over the period 1987 to 2007. It demonstrates empirically the limits of a narrow, market-based form of rational-choice theory—hereafter, “classical” rational-choice theory—and the advantages of incorporating cultural and historical contexts in explaining patterns of collective and state violence.

The first rational-choice theorists were economists. They asserted that the principle of utility maximization best explains all forms of human behavior. Assuming general preferences for wealth, power, and prestige in all human populations, they viewed the social scientist’s job as the discovery of how people seek to maximize benefits and minimize costs in their marital, criminal, religious, political, and other affairs. From the point of view of classical rational-choice theory, it is unnecessary to pay attention to culturally and historically grounded preferences in explaining human behavior because tastes and values are similar among all people and remain stable over time (Stigler and Becker 1977:76). This means in effect that the market is the only important institution.

More recently, sociological rational-choice theorists have emphasized that values other than utility maximization can govern human behavior. They have called for more research on the cultural and historical origins of such values. For example, 15 years ago, in a widely cited literature review, rational-choice sociologists Michael Hechter and Satoshi Kanazawa (1997) complained that “rational choice [theory] has been mute on the origin and nature of individual values . . . and the preferences derived from them” (p. 208). Accordingly, they identified the study of the historical and cultural origins of values and preferences as one of the three most pressing problems that rational-choice researchers had to confront. Some sociologists responded to their call. Seven years ago, reviewing relevant literature in political sociology, Edgar Kiser and Shawn Bauldry (2005) reported that sociological rational-choice theorists are increasingly “incorporating institutions, culture, and history into their models” (p. 174).

Despite Kiser and Bauldry’s encouraging update, the classical model remains deeply entrenched in many fields of inquiry. As Brent Simpson (2007) notes in a recent and sympathetic review of the field:
Rational choice theory is officially silent on what actors value. In practice, however, rational choice theorists almost always assume actors are motivated by self-interest, narrowly defined to include only material wealth (and, less commonly, power and prestige). In fact, the assumption that actors seek to maximize their wealth and nothing else is so common in rational choice approaches that many believe narrow self-interest to be axiomatic, rather than a “default” auxiliary assumption. (P. 3804)

One example of the dominance of the classical rational-choice model (and the liabilities of such dominance) comes from the sociology of religion in the United States (Stark and Bainbridge 1987). Conceiving of a religious economy consisting of “firms” (churches) and “consumers” (actual and potential adherents), American sociologists of religion routinely analyze competition among religious firms to offer appealing services to consumers, who choose among firms so as to maximize various social benefits and minimize a variety of social costs. The theory has generated numerous testable hypotheses, including the proposition that religious mobilization is greatest where interfirm competition is most intense. The hypothesis seems to hold up for Christian-majority countries. For instance, competition among religious firms is more intense and religious mobilization is more widespread in the United States than in Canada. However, characteristically for many classical rational-choice explanations, the hypothesis falters when extended to different cultural and historical contexts. For instance, competition among religious firms is less intense and religious mobilization is more widespread in Iran than in the United States (Kazemipur and Ali 2003; for a comprehensive critique of classical rational-choice theory as applied to the sociology of religion, see Bryant 2000).

Similarly, in the study of collective and state violence, the assumptions of classical rational-choice theory still predominate. The cultural and historical roots of values and preferences rarely enter the picture. Incidents of collective and state violence are widely viewed as responses to cost-benefit calculations, and what constitutes benefits and costs is considered self-evident (Mitchell 2004). For example, as documented below, most analysts studying the Palestinian-Israeli conflict argue that if Palestinian insurgents or Israeli state officials figure that violence will significantly increase benefits or significantly decrease costs, they will engage in appropriate forms of violence. If violence purchases no significant net advantage, they will refrain from it. In either case, a calculus that is impervious to cultural peculiarities and historical contingencies, and therefore invariant over time and place, presumably governs the propensity to engage in collective and state violence.

ANOMALOUS EVIDENCE I: STATE RETALIATION

Most analysts concur that the level of Israeli state violence against Palestinian insurgent violence maximizes deterrence and compellence, that is,
discourages aggression and forces nonaggression to the greatest extent possible, by means of swift and disproportionate retaliation. Israeli military doctrine urges such retaliation (Almog, 2004–05), and economists have shown that the number of Palestinians killed by Israel correlates strongly with the number of Israelis killed by Palestinians in the preceding month (Jaeger and Paserman 2006, 2008).

One of my co-researchers and I corroborated this finding by obtaining monthly data on Israeli and Palestinian deaths due to state and collective violence between 1987 and 2007 from B’Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. These data are widely regarded as reliable (Jaeger and Paserman 2006:46), and we were able to confirm their validity with the assistance of Charles Kurzman of the Department of Sociology at the University of North Carolina. Kurzman created time series for Palestinian and Israeli deaths due to low-intensity warfare from Thomson Reuters news reports. For the period under study, he found a correlation of .85 between the B’Tselem and Thomson Reuters data sets on Israeli deaths due to Palestinian actions and a correlation of .80 on Palestinian deaths due to Israeli actions. In brief, we discovered a correlation of .63 between Palestinian deaths resulting from Israeli state action and Israeli deaths resulting from the actions of Palestinian insurgents in the preceding month for the period 1987 to 2007 (Brym and Andersen 2011).

We also discovered that the ratio of Palestinian to Israeli deaths varied widely over time—the implications of which analysts influenced by classical rational-choice theory ignore. Between 1987 and 2007, the level of Israeli retaliation was in the ratio of 4.3 to 1. Whenever a Palestinian killed an Israeli during this period, the Israeli state responded by killing an average of 4.3 Palestinians within the next month. However, examining the data separately for each of the four political periods into which analysts commonly divide the years 1987 to 2007 reveals a more nuanced story (Kurz 2009). The four periods are the first Palestinian uprising or intifada (December 1987 to August 1993), the Oslo lull, during which Palestinians and Israelis engaged in negotiations that most observers expected to lead to a peace settlement (September 1993 to August 2000), the first stage of the second intifada (September 2000 to February 2002), and the period after the extraordinary wave of suicide attacks in March 2002 (March 2002 to December 2007). We found that the ratio of Palestinian to Israeli deaths varied widely across periods, ranging from 1.6:1 to 9.9:1. This means that, for extended periods, Israel exercised relative restraint in response to the killing of Israelis by Palestinians, while for other extended periods Israel’s reaction was disproportionately violent.

Our analysis of secondary sources led us to conclude that each period began with a political shock (the outbreak of a mass insurgency, the realignment of international and political forces creating a conciliatory atmosphere, a sharp and unprecedented spike in suicide attacks) that
encouraged the crystallization of a unique “decision regime” among Israeli leaders. The decision regime served as a tactical guide—until the next political shock required its revision. Thus, contrary to the prediction of classical rational-choice theory, there was no invariant, context-free utility-maximizing principle underlying Israeli retaliation. Instead, Israel’s counterinsurgency strategy was historically contingent. It seems that different strategic preferences existed in different historical periods. It follows that if one wanted to account for variation in the exercise of state violence against insurgents, one would be obliged to investigate the social origins of strategic preferences, not ignore them, as classical rational-choice theory recommends (Brym and Andersen 2011; Gazit and Brym 2011; Kuperman 2007) (Table 1).

ANOMALOUS EVIDENCE II: COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE

One reaches a similar conclusion about the limitations of the classical rational-choice approach from an examination of Palestinian collective violence, suicide bombing in particular. For example, political scientist Robert Pape (2005) holds that the rationality of suicide bombing is evident in its objectives, timing, and results. In terms of objectives, every group mounting a suicide campaign since the early 1980s has supposedly had as a major or central objective the goal of liberating territory its members perceive as their homeland from foreign occupation. In terms of timing, suicide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Ratio of Palestinian to Israel Fatalities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From the beginning of the first <em>intifada</em> (December 1987) to the month before the signing of the Oslo accords (August 1993)</td>
<td>9.9:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the signing of the Oslo accords to the month before the beginning of the second <em>intifada</em> (August 2000)</td>
<td>1.6:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the beginning of the second <em>intifada</em> (September 2000) to the month before Operation Defensive Shield (March 2002)</td>
<td>3.1:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Operation Defensive Shield (April 2002) to December 2007</td>
<td>4.8:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4.3:1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Adapted from Brym and Andersen (2011:490).*
attacks are not randomly distributed but occur in clusters, suggesting that suicide attacks are part of an organized campaign to achieve a political goal. Finally, in terms of results, Pape (2005) argues that the correlation between the increasing use of suicide bombing campaigns and their relative success in achieving their goals speaks to the rationality of suicide bombing; simply put, suicide bombing typically pays. Thus, for classical rational-choice theorists such as Pape, suicide bombers behave rationally insofar as they seek an achievable objective, time their actions for maximum effect, and reap significant payoffs because of their actions.

To test these ideas, one of my co-researchers and I created a database of collective and state violence events, including the 138 suicide attacks that took place in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza during the second intifada, defined as the period between October 26, 2000 and July 12, 2005 (for details, see Araj, 2008; Brym and Araj 2006). Data sources included newspaper reports in Arabic, Hebrew, and English; official statements issued by insurgent organizations; suicide bombers’ martyrdom videos; various public databases of suicide attacks; semi-structured interviews with family members and close friends of a 25 percent random sample of Palestinian suicide bombers (n = 42); and semi-structured interviews with leaders of the six major Palestinian militant organizations in the West Bank and Gaza (Hamas, Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Palestinian People’s Party; n = 45). The response rate for both samples was 100 percent. We tested Pape’s argument by examining (1) the reasons suicide bombers gave for their actions prior to their attacks (the bombers’ motives); (2) the reasons that representatives of organizations claiming responsibility for suicide attacks gave for their actions (the organizations’ rationales); and (3) the preceding events that affected the timing of suicide bombings according to representatives of organizations claiming responsibility for the attacks (the attacks’ precipitants).

With respect to bombers’ motives, revenge and retaliation figured prominently in the bombers’ stated reasons for planning suicide attacks against Israelis in 71 percent of cases. For the most part, suicide bombers gave up their lives to avenge the killing of a close relative, as retribution for specific attacks against the Palestinian people or as payback for perceived attacks against Islam. Contrary to Pape’s expectations, the main motivation for the great majority of suicide bombers had little to do with a utility-maximizing strategy aimed at wresting control of territory from perceived occupiers.

With respect to organizational rationales, 59 percent of attacks were justified as avenging Israeli attacks on insurgent organizations and the Palestinian people or retaliating for such attacks to maintain organizational morale. Again contrary to Pape’s expectations, only a minority of attacks were justified on short-term tactical grounds such as disrupting
security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority or long-term strategic goals, such as ending the Israeli occupation.

With respect to precipitants, in 82 percent of cases, specific Israeli acts of violence, including the assassination of organizational leaders, precipitated suicide attacks. Yet again contrary to Pape’s expectations, the timing of suicide attacks was not calibrated to maximize the utility of the attacks in terms of advancing the goal of liberating occupied territory.

Pape’s claim that suicide bombers attack because their actions encourage the withdrawal of occupying forces is suspect on other grounds too. The second intifada witnessed just one territorial withdrawal—Israel’s August/September 2005 pullout from Gaza. When a co-researcher and I examined the geographical locations of suicide bombings and the geographical origins of the bombers, we found that Gaza was the site of a disproportionately small number of suicide attacks and the recruiting ground for a disproportionately small number of attackers. If suicide attacks were a decisive factor leading to territorial concessions, one would expect those concessions to have been made not in Gaza but in the West Bank, where the great majority of bombers were recruited and from which the great majority of suicide attacks were launched (Brym and Maoz-Shai 2009).

In addition, to the degree that militant Palestinian organizations mounted suicide attacks to coerce Israel to abandon territory, the results of such attacks were the opposite of what they intended. Israeli polls show that suicide attacks helped hardliner Ariel Sharon win the February 2001 election and, in general, drove Israeli public opinion to the right throughout the second intifada. They encouraged Israel to reoccupy Palestinian population centers in the West Bank and then incorporate Palestinian territory on the Israeli side of the wall that Israel built to make it harder to launch suicide attacks. One can hardly consider these developments positive consequences from the point of view of suicide bombers and their organizations. One is obliged to conclude that suicide bombing did not pay and that, more generally, strategic rationality at both the individual and the organizational level was of secondary importance in motivating suicide attacks.

The inference that fixed utility-maximizing principles have governed neither violent insurgency nor violent state retaliation in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict should not lead one to reject the notion that rationality informed the actions of Palestinian insurgents and Israeli state officials. Ample evidence of utility-maximizing action exists. This evidence includes the strong correlation between Palestinian violence and the strength of subsequent Israeli retaliation, and the finding that at least a substantial minority of suicide attacks were individually motivated, organizationally rationalized, and timed according to strategic principles aimed at utility maximization. However, it seems clear that utility maximization is only part of the story underlying the actions of Palestinian insurgents and
Israeli state officials, not the whole story, as adherents of classical rational-choice theory claim.

HISTORICALLY CONTINGENT RATIONALITY

To appreciate the whole story, we need a better theory of human action than that provided by classical rational-choice advocates. French sociological theorist Raymond Boudon has developed such a theory (Boudon, 2006, 2008; Brym and Hamlin 2009; Hamlin 2002). In brief, Boudon argues that much human action is not rational from the point of view of the utility-maximizing principles identified by classical rational-choice theorists but is based on good reasons from the actor’s viewpoint and is therefore “subjectively rational.” According to Boudon, subjectively good reasons for action do not depend on the individual actor’s idiosyncrasies but tend to be general in the sense that all individuals in the same circumstances will tend to perceive the same reasons for action as good. This type of rationality is therefore culturally grounded and historically contingent.

Boudon’s approach suggests a three-stage research strategy for explaining human action in general, and collective and state violence in particular (see Figure 1). Stage 1 involves discovering the utility-maximizing principles that explain part of the variation in the action of interest, irrespective of whether actors are aware of these principles. Stage 2 involves discovering the subjectively good reasons for variation in the action of interest—that is, the actors’ justifications for their actions—that explain additional variation in the action of interest. Note that while utility-maximizing principles are relatively fixed, actors’ justifications are culturally grounded and historically contingent. They depend on specific circumstances that change over time. Stage 3 of the research strategy suggested by Boudon’s theory of social action thus involves discovering the social circumstances that account for variation in actors justifications for their actions.

HISTORICALLY CONTINGENT RATIONALITY AND STATE-DIRECTED ASSASSINATION

To illustrate the analytical advantages of Boudon’s approach, my co-researchers and I incorporated information on the 210 state-directed assassinations that took place during the second intifada in our database of collective and state violence events. We used the same primary sources described earlier. We then examined sources of variation in the frequency of Israeli state-directed assassination of Palestinian insurgents.

The data weakly sustain the classical rational-choice argument that the level of state violence was a response to the level of insurgent violence. Specifically, during the second intifada, there was a modest but still statistically significant correlation of .241 between the frequency of
state-directed assassinations in a given month and the number of Jews killed by Palestinian suicide bombers in the preceding month. The use of state violence is often explained by the state’s desire to deter insurgents from engaging in future acts of violence and, failing that, compelling them to stop. These standard utility-maximizing principles explain at least some of the variation in the frequency of state-directed assassination.

Significantly, however, the correlation disappears for political assassinations considered alone (i.e., excluding assassinations of lower level operatives; see Table 2). Israel assassinated 11 Palestinian political leaders during the second intifada. Five were killed in periods when the number of Jewish deaths due to suicide bombing was relatively low (numbers shaded in column 4, Table 2). Two were relative moderates (names shaded in column 1, Table 2). Thus, the utility-maximization principles of deterrence and compellence break down when it comes to explaining why Israel assassinated Palestinian political leaders during the second intifada.

To account for the assassination of Palestinian political leaders, it is necessary to advance to stage 2 of the research strategy outlined earlier (see Figure 2). We must identify the subjectively good reasons that Israelis responsible for state-directed assassination gave for the actions of the Israeli state. To do so, one of my co-researchers conducted a series of semi-structured, approximately 90-minute interviews in Hebrew between July 2006 and March 2007 with 74 senior Israeli security decisionmakers and advisers who were in state service at the time of the second intifada.
Table 2

Political Assassinations during the Second Intifada

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Jewish Deaths in Suicide Attacks, Preceding Month (Average = 2.4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thabit Thabit</td>
<td>Fatah</td>
<td>December 31, 2000</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamal Salim</td>
<td>Hamas</td>
<td>July 31, 2001</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamal Mansur</td>
<td>Hamas</td>
<td>July 31, 2001</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abu Ali Mustafa</td>
<td>PFLP</td>
<td>August 27, 2001</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jihad Ahmed Jibril</td>
<td>PFLP-GC</td>
<td>May 20, 2002</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salah Shehadeh</td>
<td>Hamas</td>
<td>July 22, 2002</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibrahim al-Maqadma</td>
<td>Hamas</td>
<td>August 8, 2003</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ismail Abu Shanab</td>
<td>Hamas</td>
<td>August 21, 2003</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmed Yassin</td>
<td>Hamas</td>
<td>March 22, 2004</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi</td>
<td>Hamas</td>
<td>April 17, 2004</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Izz al-Din Khalil</td>
<td>Hamas</td>
<td>September 26, 2004</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Gazit and Brym (2011:868).

Note: The shaded names of assassination targets in column 1 are those of the relative moderates. The shaded numbers in column 4 indicate a below-average number of Jewish deaths due to suicide attacks in the month preceding a political assassination.

About 100 such people were identified from a review of the Israeli newspaper, ha-Aretz, for the years 2000 to 2005, and two comprehensive monographs on the second intifada by respected Israeli journalists. We solicited interviews from the individuals on the list, some of whom recommended additional potential respondents who had not made their way onto our initial list because their work was not highly publicized. The response rate was 61 percent (for details, see Brym and Maoz-Shai 2009).

In brief, we found that respondents were motivated to recommend the assassination of Palestinian political leaders less by the principles of deterrence or compellence than by the desire to prevent Palestinian sovereignty in anything other than a subservient state. Neither classical rational-choice theorists nor Israeli politicians in their public statements mention this reason for Israel’s assassination policy; both justify assassinations only on the grounds targets are “ticking bombs” threatening Israeli security.

That reasons of greater strategic importance were at stake in the case of political targets is evident, first, from the decision-making process. Respondents informed us that the assassination of military operatives required the approval of nobody higher in rank than a brigade commander...
who had actionable intelligence about an imminent threat posed by an individual. In contrast, the assassination of political leaders required approval by the highest political echelon in the Israeli government. Respondents also noted that Palestinian political leaders rarely posed an immediate terrorist threat to Israel, and some even judged the assassination of political leaders as likely to increase the frequency of suicide bombing in the short term. The perceived threat was more profound. It was based mainly on the growing power of Hamas during the second intifada. According to opinion polls, Hamas commanded less than a third the popularity of Fatah just before the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000. However, the two organizations were about equal in popularity by March 2004, when Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin was assassinated (Araj and Brym 2010; Brym and Araj 2008). As the 2005 presidential election and the 2006 legislative election approached, the fear grew among Israeli leaders that Hamas might soon take over the Palestinian Authority—an intolerable situation from the Israeli perspective because of Hamas’s refusal to recognize Israel’s sovereignty. The planned pullout from Gaza in 2005 reinforced Israeli anxiety that the region might fall into Hamas hands because the party was especially popular in Gaza and its leadership was concentrated...
there. In this context, it is not surprising that nearly three-quarters of assassinated political leaders were Hamas members. As one respondent, the former head of Israel's antiterror unit, told us, political assassinations were ordered to bring Hamas to "a state of chaos." Even relative moderates, such as Hamas's Ismail Abu Shanab, were fair game. Abu Shanab supported an independent Palestinian state in the occupied territories alongside Israel, not in place of it. He was assassinated in August 2003.

Israel had made it clear in the peace negotiations that stretched from 1993 to 2000 that it was willing to accept the formation of a subservient Palestine state consisting essentially of three noncontiguous, demilitarized territories almost completely surrounded by Israeli settlements and defenses. The collapse of peace talks in 2000 and the subsequent rise of Hamas showed Israelis that Palestinians were unwilling to accept such subservience. To ward off the creation of a more robust state, it seems that Israeli policymakers decided to eliminate the elements of the Palestinian political leadership that supported it most energetically. Stage 3 of the research strategy outlined earlier underscores the need to identify the circumstances underlying this transition (see Figure 2).

Those circumstances involved the absence of the kind of conciliatory pressure from internal publics and the United States that had brought both sides together in 1993 (Rasler 2000). Both Palestinians and Israelis reached the limits of their willingness to make concessions in 2000. Palestinian disappointment and fury, well reflected in public opinion polls, encouraged the first suicide bombings of the second intifada. These attacks quickly undermined the Israeli left and enabled the election of Ariel Sharon's right-wing government. At the same time, the 2000 American presidential election put in place the administration of George W. Bush, which was markedly more sympathetic to the Israelis than the Palestinians. After the attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001, President Bush gave Sharon a free hand to do pretty well whatever he wanted to deal with the Palestinian uprising. With external and internal peace pressures gone, an increasing proportion of senior elected officials and decisionmakers in the Israeli military and intelligence communities saw the assassination of the most threatening elements of the Palestinian leadership as a desirable response.

CONCLUSION

To the degree that rational-choice theory sticks to its classical principles, failing to recognize the significance of nonutilitarian values as wellsprings of human action, it is bound to evoke criticism from the sociological community, which is more indebted to Max Weber's rich conceptualization of social action than to Jeremy Bentham's and John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism (Weber 1947:115; see also Sen 1977). The range of sociological criticism varies. Some sociologists say classical rational-choice theory needs a
tune-up. Others claim it requires an overhaul. Still others recommend interment in the junkyard.

The analysis presented here leans toward the middle position insofar as the data my co-researchers and I collected and analyzed suggests that classical rational-choice theory is not so much wrong as it is limited as an explanation for collective and state violence. To a degree, both Israelis and Palestinians acted according to utility-maximizing principles when they employed violence during the second intifada. Classical rational-choice theory thus serves as a useful baseline explanation for their actions. However, the principles that classical rational-choice theorists have identified do not explain all of the variation in insurgent and state violence. That is because they do not encompass the historically contingent reasons that actors themselves gave for behaving as they did—reasons that, as Boudon argues, must be incorporated in any comprehensive explanation of social action.

A formal, coherent explanation of how utilitarian and nonutilitarian values originate and combine to form the basis for social action does not yet exist (Simpson 2007:3805). However, Boudon’s model of social action points us in the right direction by employing utilitarianism as a starting point but allowing for nonutilitarian action based on historically contingent, subjective reasons. Denying the significance of such reasons in explaining action may be parsimonious, but it has the unfortunate consequence of limiting our understanding, restricting our explanatory power, and making people seem more like calculating machines than fully rounded human beings. The plain fact is that people are not calculating machines. Sometimes they just don’t add up.

References


