

Review

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Peter Kurrild-Klitgaard, *Rational choice, action, and the paradox of rebellion*. Copenhagen: Institute of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, 1997. xxxi + 392 pages. DKR 80,00 (paper).

This volume does a masterful job of analyzing rebellion. Using a rational choice framework, Kurrild-Klitgaard explains why there are impediments to rebellion even when most people would like to overthrow the existing government, and explains how successful rebellions can be organized to overcome these impediments. Kurrild-Klitgaard is so methodical and so complete in his arguments that the book is slow going at first, as he carefully explains the rational choice paradigm as applied to rebellion, but his careful reasoning pays off later, when he gets to the core of his argument. He draws on his solid foundation and just as carefully explains why rational actors can organize and participate in a successful rebellion. He explains why political entrepreneurs will almost always be necessary for a rebellion to succeed, and describes what entrepreneurs must do to enhance the probability of launching a successful rebellion. He has extensive footnotes and a very complete list of references, and discusses in depth the objections that could be raised to his line of reasoning. The book shows an impressive level of scholarship. His analysis is so thorough that the book could be viewed as a handbook for subversives on how to organize a successful rebellion, cleverly disguised as an academic treatise.

The paradox of rebellion arises because even if there is strong public sentiment for a rebellion to overthrow the existing government, the outcome of a

rebellion is a public good. Thus, even those who would like for the rebellion to succeed have an incentive not to participate, and just free ride on the result. Everyone has the incentive to be a free rider, so no matter how popular the cause, rebellions should never occur. The fact that sometimes they do is the paradox. Gordon Tullock, whose work Kurrild-Klitgaard draws on heavily, argues that people may participate if there are private benefits to doing so. Thus, rebellion is not a result of people supporting their preferred public policy, but is a by-product of the pursuit of private interests. The public good aspects of rebellion are irrelevant to the decision to participate, and whether a rebellion succeeds should have little to do with the merits of the changes proposed by the rebels.

Using a game-theoretic foundation, Kurrild-Klitgaard systematically shows the shortcomings of the paradox of rebellion argument, and explains why rational individuals can organize and participate in rebellions, and why they sometimes succeed. A major problem with the paradox of rebellion is that it is laid out in a static framework, where everyone makes a single decision at one point in time on whether to participate, when in reality rebellion is likely to be a dynamic activity that starts small, with a few organizers, and grows by attracting more supporters. Thus, rebels do not make a once-and-for-all decision on whether to participate, but can watch the rebellious activity and decide to join in at some point, when the benefits appear to outweigh the costs. A second problem with the paradox of rebellion is that it makes rebels appear to be a homogeneous group, when in fact they serve different roles and may have different reasons for joining. Kurrild-Klitgaard objects to the notion of a “typical” rebel. For many rebels, the free rider problem is really not a serious impediment.

Kurrild-Klitgaard divides rebellions into two different categories: spontaneous and organized. Spontaneous rebellions occur when a few people demonstrate their frustration with the incumbent government, and others with like sentiments join in. The rebellion then grows until the government is toppled. Kurrild-Klitgaard argues that this type of rebellion, while possible, is unlikely because of the incentive to free ride. In contrast, organized rebellions are begun by political entrepreneurs who build up support over time. Eventually, successful rebellions will reach a critical mass and overthrow the existing government. The incentives in organized rebellions overcome the free rider problem, eliminating the paradox of rebellion.

Political entrepreneurs, like entrepreneurs in markets, exploit potential profit opportunities. If there is dissatisfaction with the current regime, there is a potential profit to be reaped by replacing it with one organized by the entrepreneur. Entrepreneurship is the cornerstone of Kurrild-Klitgaard’s argument. Rebellion occurs because entrepreneurs set the wheels into motion, and en-

trepreneurs set the wheels into motion because they expect private gains from producing a public good. Those who are in on the ground floor of the rebellion have a better chance of assuming leadership roles in the new government, providing a private incentive for them to participate. At the early stages, there will be few people participating in organizing the rebellion, which limits the free rider problem for several reasons. First, with few people participating, each individual's participation makes more of a difference, and second, it is easier to monitor shirking among rebels in a small group. Individuals have an incentive not to shirk or free ride so that they can reap the private benefits that accrue to the leaders of a successful rebellion.

Resources to back rebellions can come from donations, exchange, and extortion. Those sympathetic with the cause may donate their time and money, adding to participation. Others might be paid for services. Mercenaries are an obvious example, but others might be paid for more mundane services like printing, supplying space, or anything else. Exchange also takes place when people contribute to a rebellion with the thought of gaining private benefits from the new government should the rebellion succeed. As noted above, this provides an incentive to join the rebellion early. Extortion can range from appropriating resources to peer group pressure. The point is, support can come from many sources, and not all participants have the same motivations. Entrepreneurs try to convince potential backers that their participation is important at the margin, reducing their incentive to free ride, and that if those backers do join in, the rebellion has a good chance of success.

As the rebellion gains visibility and appears more viable, others who previously had been content to free ride may choose to participate, albeit to a more limited degree, to show their support. Sympathetic individuals might be reluctant to join in a small demonstration when there are significant risks to participating, but if the demonstration is larger, they can participate more cheaply just by showing up, and the chance of bearing significant costs is reduced because of the large numbers. Kurrild-Klitgaard emphasizes that all participants are not the same, and nobody faces a binary choice of rebelling or not. The mass of people can watch the rebellion gain strength, and can choose to join in at any time. The fact that participants are different, and that rebellions grow over time, creates incentives for rebellions to grow and eventually succeed.

By the very nature of rebellions, they are hard to predict. Dissatisfaction with the current regime might be widespread, but people have an incentive not to act against a repressive regime to avoid government punishment. If a rebellion appears to have a good chance of succeeding, however, sympathizers have more of an incentive to show their support, and the more people that show support, the more that draws other people into participating. Thus, a

rebellion can spring from being almost invisible to toppling a government in a surprisingly short period of time. Ironically, if a repressive regime lets up a bit on its repression, rebellion becomes more likely even as conditions improve. Repression adds to the cost of participating in a rebellion, and an opening up of a repressive regime, by lowering the costs of speaking out against it, will make rebellion more attractive.

As a handbook for rebels, Kurrild-Klitgaard gives good advice on how political entrepreneurs can overcome the paradox of rebellion to organize a successful rebellion. But it is one thing to argue that if the benefits exceed the costs, the rebellion will grow and eventually succeed, and another to argue that it is actually realistic to expect the benefits to exceed the costs. My conjecture is that if we actually plugged realistic numbers into Kurrild-Klitgaard's equations, it would almost never be rational for an entrepreneur outside the existing government (e.g., not a member of the country's military) to initiate a rebellion, even if the rebel's government would be more popular than the current government. Kurrild-Klitgaard does not explain away the paradox of rebellion, but rather shows what conditions must exist for it to be overcome. Rebellions may be rare because there is little demand for them. Alternatively, they may be rare because even though there are more incentives to overcome the paradox of rebellion than the literature previously recognized, the incentives against participation still exist.

Kurrild-Klitgaard offers a substantial amount of insight into the nature of rebellion, but he also sheds light on rational choice modeling in general. By writing on an activity that is on the fringe of ordinary social interaction, he stretches the reach of the public choice paradigm and shows that the rational choice framework is broadly applicable, even to behavior that some people would characterize as irrational. For those interested specifically in the topic of rebellion, this book is essential reading, but readers with more general interests in public choice also will find the book full of insight.

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