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AN ENIGMATIC UPHEAVAL

IN THE SUMMER OF 1966, the People's Republic of China was approaching the seventeenth anniversary of its founding. Taking power in October 1949 after a two-decade guerrilla insurgency and three-year civil war, the Chinese Communist Party subsequently built one of the most powerfully centralized revolutionary regimes in modern history. Yet within months of this anniversary, the civilian structures of this party-state were on the brink of collapse. Several of the largest cities were paralyzed by street battles between factions of rebel workers that disrupted rail transport and large state enterprises. Soon afterward, a wave of power seizures toppled local governments, spurring the dispatch of the armed forces to stabilize new structures of power. This, in turn, ushered in eighteen months of even more destructive civil disorder and violent factional warfare, which in many regions resembled civil war. A tenuous order was finally imposed near the end of 1968, placing most regions under a harsh regime of military control. When the dust finally cleared in 1969, close to 1.6 million people had died in the upheaval and the suppression campaigns through which political order was rebuilt. What forces generated this remarkable upheaval, and how did such a powerfully centralized state unravel so rapidly?

This dramatic and confusing three-year period was the most violent phase of what would later become known as a decade-long Cultural Revolution. It was set in motion by Mao Zedong's remarkable decision to foment rebellion against his own party-state as a means to halt the bureaucratization

that afflicted virtually all regimes modeled after the Soviet Union. This was an audacious act, completely unprecedented in the history of twentieth-century communism.[1] The ultimate result, by 1969, was a new state structure built on a hierarchy of "revolutionary committees" composed of rebel activists, selected veteran officials, and military officers who, in most regions, exercised real control. Without the support of Mao and his enablers in the national leadership, this dramatic series of events would never have gotten underway. But how can we explain the confusing array of conflicts that unfolded over these years, which often appeared to confound Mao himself? Powerful political forces were unleashed. What were they?

More than a half-century on, much about this enigmatic upheaval remains deeply puzzling. There are large gaps in the historiography of the period, leaving basic questions unanswered. Prior to the collapse of civilian governments in early 1967, how widespread was popular mobilization and what forms did it take? How extensive was the wave of power seizures that undermined local governments in early 1967, and who actually carried them out? How did the overthrow of local governments alter political alignments and drive large rebel coalitions to fight one another with increasing violence well into 1968? How extensive was the intervention of military units across China, and what was their role in local politics? How widespread were these violent clashes, and why did they prove so difficult to resolve? How was political order finally rebuilt, and at what cost?

Answers to these questions remain elusive, in part, because past research has focused so heavily on the origins of conflict within schools and workplaces and the political activities of specific social groups.[2] This focus has shed considerable light on a range of previously obscure social cleavages and discontents in China's closed society, but the connections between these grievances and the broader conflicts that later erupted remained largely unexplored. Published regional accounts do address broader patterns of conflict, but they are few in number and skewed toward large cities.[3] The best national-level narratives jump selectively from developments in one region to developments in another, focusing on the ones that shaped the overall political direction of the Cultural Revolution.[4] In this book I shift the angle of vision to the national level, with a focus on mobilizations that undermined state structures, the formation of mass factions during 1967, and the violent regional clashes that culminated in campaigns of suppression in 1968.

Interpreting the Conflicts

What *were* the political forces unleashed during this tumultuous period? For many years we appeared to have a satisfying, if somewhat speculative, explanation. From the outset, researchers viewed these violent factional conflicts as the struggles of interest groups. The new revolutionary order, which aimed to eliminate the severe inequalities of the old society, had nonetheless generated distinctive new patterns of inequality and privilege, based on economic status and political affiliation.[5] The regime's close monitoring of citizens for compliance, its labeling of citizens based on their demonstrated or presumed political loyalties, and its conduct of regular political campaigns that left aggrieved citizens in their wake created reservoirs of discontent and frustration that broke out into violence when the opportunity arose.[6] In the first months of this upheaval, groups that suffered disadvantages frequently protested the limits placed on their opportunities, while those that enjoyed advantages or were tied closely to power structures mobilized to blunt the impact of rebellion and defend the existing order. In later phases of the conflict, large rebel coalitions with opposed stances toward the imposition of military control fought violent battles across large regions of China. Factions that supported military forces appeared to favor the restoration of the status quo and were labeled conservative or moderate. Factions opposed to military control appeared determined to continue the rebellion, and were designated as radical. It seemed reasonable to infer that the former represented relatively advantaged groups, while the latter represented the disadvantaged.[7]

When it first appeared in the 1970s, the evidence for this broad interpretation was suggestive at best, given the limited sources available to researchers during the late Mao era. But its logic appeared to be unassailable, and in the absence of other plausible explanations, it was widely accepted. The interpretation reflected a new trend in the analysis of Soviet-type societies that viewed them, not as totalitarian systems of total power, but rather as differentiated social structures with distinctive patterns of inequality that suppressed, but did not eliminate, interest-based activity.[8] Interest group conflicts were hard to detect in the Soviet Union, but the Prague Spring of 1968 amply demonstrated pluralist political competition and group conflict.[9] The first phases of China's Cultural Revolution seemed to illustrate the core tenets of this appealing new idea.[10]

This interpretation also fit closely with a then-new sociological perspective on political movements. The conflicts seemed to display a pattern familiar to students of protest movements in other settings—mobilization by the aggrieved spurred a countermobilization by those with interests tied to the existing order.[11] The central idea was that the opposed political orientations that defined the factional warfare of 1967 and 1968 expressed divergent interests tied to the social and political positions of actors. The early months of the Cultural Revolution radically changed the structure of political opportunity, permitting the mobilization of dissident challenges while spurring a reaction by those with vested interests in the status quo. The rebel power seizures that overthrew local governments across China in early 1967 were seen as a defeat for the forces of order, while the subsequent factional conflicts were viewed as struggles to shape the new order that would replace it. The conflicts between these two forces became so violent presumably because they were so deeply rooted in structures of power and inequality.

Research over the past decade has eroded confidence in this interpretation. A new generation of scholarship, based on the much richer array of source material made available during the long post-Mao era, has steadily undermined its core propositions. Evidence that once appeared to demonstrate the interest group foundations for factional conflict turned out not to be as convincing as once thought.

In the early months of these conflicts, marginalized groups did indeed take the opportunity to articulate their grievances: these included temporary and contract workers denied the benefits of permanent state employment, urban youth sent involuntarily to the countryside, and demobilized soldiers sent to remote state farms instead of urban jobs.[12] They were among the first to join rebel groups in 1966, and they openly presented their demands. Their protests were prominent for a period, but their cause never defined the main lines of factional division, and their self-interested demands were repudiated in early 1967 and their movements were suppressed.[13]

There was also a fascinating debate about the regime's practice of categorizing individuals based on their family background, which presumably predicted their loyalty to the revolutionary regime. Those in favored "red" categories, especially those whose parents were veterans of the revolutionary struggle, received enhanced opportunities for educational advancement and

career opportunities. Stigmatized "black" categories included those whose parents were from exploiting social classes or associated with the defeated Nationalist Party.[14] Students in the favored categories claimed leadership over the early Red Guard movement based on their families' heritage. They debated students from other family backgrounds, especially those with educated middle-class parents, who disputed their claims to be "naturally red." The latter tended to join the early rebellions against local leaders.[15] In one famous case, a widely debated dissident manifesto denounced the entire system of class labels.[16]

Upon closer examination, however, the debate over family background was largely inconclusive, and it was overshadowed by a more consequential debate over violence among high school Red Guards that found students from "revolutionary" households on both sides of an emerging factional cleavage.[17] The famous manifesto that denounced the system of class labels generated widespread support, but it was denounced as reactionary by the elite sponsors of the rebel movement who were close to Mao Zedong, and it was repudiated by the rebel wing of the high school movement that presumably should have embraced its message.[18]

The apparent significance of family class categories was further reduced by the discovery that the issue hardly figured at all in the much larger and more influential Red Guard movement in the universities. Moreover, the leaders and activists on *both* sides of the emerging factional divide were students from politically favored households with records of past political activism and Party loyalty.[19] Students split over political stances taken under rapidly changing and ambiguous circumstances, forcing activists from similar backgrounds subsequently to defend their prior stances.[20] The debilitating split in Beijing between the "Heaven" and "Earth" factions pitted students with identical backgrounds and recent histories of political cooperation against one another. It defied all efforts at reconciliation due to deep animosities toward the most powerful Red Guard leaders on the two largest campuses.[21]

There were, to be sure, those who mobilized to defend local authorities from the early rebel attacks. Party members and favored subordinates appeared initially to remain loyal to their superiors, and Party officials mobilized loyal subordinates as defenders.[22] In the large cities of Nanjing and Shanghai, alliances of workers known as "Scarlet Guards" mobilized near the end of 1966, relying on Party branches and official trade unions. For

almost a month they battled with a large alliance of rebel workers that eventually overthrew Shanghai's government.[23] The broader significance of this development, however, was altered by the realization that Scarlet Guard organizations rapidly disintegrated after rebel power seizures were publicly praised by Beijing. Moreover, it has become clear that the factions that engaged in violent warfare after the overthrow of local authorities expressed splits within the rebel movements that had earlier targeted the authorities. The movement-countermovement dynamic so evident in some large cities near the end of 1966, as it turned out, ended with the overthrow of local authorities, and was replaced by an entirely new factional cleavage.[24]

An important reason for the collapse of countermovement activity was that authority figures were divided against one another. In Nanjing, factions originated among workers out of antagonisms between two clearly defined groups in the Party leadership of one of the city's largest industrial enterprises. This, in turn, mirrored divisions between the Party apparatuses in a Beijing ministry and the city of Nanjing.[25] Even more problematic was new evidence that Party functionaries and the staff of government agencies themselves organized rebellions against their own superiors, were also divided into factions, and were active participants in the power seizures that overthrew city and county governments.[26] Divisions among these party-state cadres, and their active participation in rebel activities, undermined any meaningful distinction between forces favorable to, or antagonistic toward, the status quo. The factional battles of 1967 and 1968, as it turned out, were not an extension of rivalries between the defenders and opponents of local authorities in late 1966. Instead, they expressed splits among the rebel groups that had earlier sought to overthrow local governments.

At the core of the idea that factional warfare expressed different orientations toward the status quo was the fact that one faction fought against the imposition of military control, while the other supported military units. In these local struggles, factions that resisted military control appeared inherently more radical; they wanted to rebel "to the end." Factions that supported the armed forces' attempts to impose order appeared by definition to be more conservative. These conflicts were interpreted as familiar movement-countermovement phenomena.

As researchers pieced together local narratives of factional conflict, however, it became evident that these stances did not have the meaning attributed to them. The orientations of rebel factions toward military control, it

turns out, did not express preferences regarding the restoration of order, but instead to the restoration of order *on whose terms.* Rebels competed for military support and turned against military units (or supported them) based on whether the military units offered support for their claims in prior disputes with other rebels. In some regions, rebel factions opposed to local military control would call upon and receive support from other military units.[27] In other words, the stance of a rebel group's orientation toward military control did not signal an underlying political orientation regarding the restoration of the status quo. It was a contingent product of the group's history of interaction with local military forces.

A famous example that appeared to contradict this conclusion was a notorious "ultra-left" manifesto associated with a rebel alliance in Hunan that denounced China's entire bureaucratic class in the name of subordinate social classes.[28] The group, known as the "Provincial Proletarian Alliance" (*Shengwulian*), was adamantly opposed to military control, and was part of the last-ditch resistance. Statements that they issued near the end of 1967 called for liberation from oppression by the "red capitalist class." Yet a detailed analysis of the group's history revealed that these ideas did not issue from a coalition of the marginalized, but were instead the product of a split over tactics within the rebel movement, a rhetorical framing of diehard resistance that was not widely shared even within the splinter faction that generated the essay. An in-depth examination of the case concluded, "The birth of Shengwulian was thus impromptu, if not accidental . . . [it] signified the emergence of new political identities and dynamics . . . the immediate causes of the split were relatively minor, the differences over tactics and approaches would later become magnified."[29] Instead, these were "emergent political ideas that granted new meanings to ongoing conflicts"; they were the "contingent consequences of unfolding interactions."[30]

The much more granular view of the formation of political conflict that emerges from recent research suggests that the dominant process was the division of potential interest groups, not their attainment of solidarity, and the formation of new political interests and orientations, not continuity in previously fixed ones.[31] In sociological terms, the political factions that drove conflicts were emergent properties of sequences of political interaction in contexts where political institutions had collapsed, and along with them the taken-for-granted expectations and meanings attached to them.

They were not a function of predefined social and political positions, but rather were a product of interactive processes as conflicts unfolded.

If factions were not a straightforward expression of interests and political orientations that were fixed beforehand, then an explanation needs to specify and document the processes through which these groups and their interests formed. If interest group analysis, and its characteristic focus on mobilization, fails to explain the patterns of conflict during this period, what exactly is the alternative explanation? How does one provide an analysis that does not simply recount detailed narrative histories?

Factions as Emergent Properties

A focus on sequences of political interaction can generate alternative theories about the outcomes of sustained political confrontations.[32] To claim that factions are emergent properties of political interactions requires that we specify clearly the social processes, or mechanisms, out of which factional identities emerge. This implies that we cannot restrict the analysis to the variable characteristics of groups and political settings—the social networks, group political capacities, and features of the political environment. This further implies that narrative accounts comprised of sequences of events are not troublesome details that unnecessarily obscure the clean lines of a causal analysis. Instead, these are the social processes upon which a plausible explanation is based.

A neglected precursor of this line of analysis is Charles Tilly's account of the social origins of the Vendée rebellion against the French revolution.[33] He traced the origins of the rebellion to the local impact of the revolutionary regime's 1791 demand of a "constitutional oath" by Catholic priests. This public oath required clergy to renounce the authority of the Pope and pledge loyalty to the new regime in Paris. This split local priests, some taking the oath, and others refusing, setting off disputes that divided local communities. One of Tilly's most important discoveries was that the rebellion split virtually all social classes, and divided Catholic clergy and their congregants against one another. The rebellion did not express class interests in any meaningful sense. The opposed political factions were an emergent property of sequences of events touched off by the varied reaction of Catholic priests to the demand to take the oath.[34]

At the outset we need to be clear about what exactly needs to be explained. Theories about protest and rebellion typically focus almost exclusively on the problem of collective action—given certain political interests and orientations in a population, how are individuals mobilized to engage in collective action in pursuit of these common ends? These theories are about political mobilization. They assume that groups with shared interests have already formed, or that it is obvious who they are and what interests they have. Our problem, however, is not to explain political mobilization, but political orientation. We need to understand the processes through which opposed factions formed—not how collective action was achieved, but who engaged in what course of political action and why they did so.

To explain the formation of factions we must understand the political choices of individuals and groups. At the individual level, analyses of political mobilization focus narrowly on one choice—whether or not to join with others in collective action, and whether to persist in that activity, once it is underway. There is an extensive and varied literature on recruitment and commitment.[35] To explain the formation of factions, however, the relevant choice is not *whether* to engage in political action, but *what* course of action to take, or *which* group to join, among a set of alternatives. To focus exclusively on the decision to contribute to collective action presumes that political orientations are either obvious or analytically uninteresting.

Theories about protest and rebellion have an equally restricted conception of the problem at the group level. The emphasis of this line of analysis is the *emergence* of mobilized groups, and their capacity to sustain effective mobilization and prevail in political contests with the state or countermovements. Leaders adopt different tactics and rhetorical appeals in the course of these conflicts, but these are analyzed solely in order to understand their impact on the ability of a movement to successfully mobilize in pursuit of group aims.[36] The substantive *aims* of group mobilization—their interests and political orientations—are simply not considered as part of the intellectual puzzle. They typically are treated as a given circumstance inherent in existing structures of power and inequality. As a result, these theories offer little insight into the formation of varied political orientations.

This was not always the case: an earlier generation of scholars was overwhelmingly preoccupied with explaining political orientations. Theories about the origins of fascism and communism, right-wing extremism,

political violence, intolerance, and moral crusades were once the major preoccupation of political sociology.[37] Some of the most influential theories of that period lost credibility because they emphasized the impact of social disorganization, hardship and frustration, individual alienation, and the erosion of social ties to family and community.[38] These theories were undermined by empirical research that found a relationship between measures of group solidarity, organizational capacity, and levels of collective protest, but that failed to find a relationship with levels of hardship, deprivation, or social disorganization.[39] Closer examination of political mobilization revealed that it depended crucially on preexisting ties of solidarity between smaller groups of individuals who were organized for other purposes. The observation that mobilization relied on "bloc recruitment" of smaller solidary groups, later reconceptualized as network ties, refuted the proposition that individuals lacking ties to communities are drawn into protest movements.[40]

The refutation of older theories about the origins of political movements led to a subtle and largely overlooked shift of focus. Having demonstrated that political mobilization depends on certain forms of social solidarity, not social disorganization, a new field emerged that designated mobilization as the process of interest. This truncated the analysis of political movements and narrowed the focus. Interest in the formation of political orientations was jettisoned in favor of a quite different stance: "It is taken for granted that a collectivity or quasi-group . . . with common latent interests, already exists and that the members of the collectivity are dissatisfied and have grievances."[41] Theories about political *orientation* were replaced by theories about political *mobilization.* In essence, the then-new wave of theory about collective action moved on to a new question while ignoring the earlier one. This shift has endured in a large and intellectually diverse literature on social movements and collective action.[42]

Interest group explanations of factional warfare in China have the same logical structure. Interests and political orientations are treated as given, or exogenous—determined by a prior pattern of grievances or advantage in the status quo—and they are presumed to be stable motivators of political activity during the entire course of the conflicts. Political orientations are assumed to exist beforehand and provide the basis for collective action, which was facilitated when political opportunities shifted to permit their open expression.

This approach to political conflicts is now being questioned in analyses of ongoing political insurgencies around the world. Theories about civil conflicts routinely posit a unitary actor that is engaged in a contest with agents of a state.[43] Yet insurgencies are often riven with factional cleavages that divide combatants who share common linguistic, ethnic or class characteristics. Insurgents move in and out of alliances with other insurgent groups and with the forces of order and their political orientations and identities shift during the course of conflicts.[44] There is an evident need, in the words of one analyst, "to take seriously the endogenous dynamics of civil wars."[45] How should such an analysis proceed?

Political Orientation as Choice

Political orientations are the product of choices that individuals and groups make among alternative courses of action. In the conflicts described in this book, the primary choices can be stated very clearly. The first is whether to defend or confront individuals in positions of authority, in particular the leaders of local governments. The second is whether a rebel group seeks more than concessions from leaders, and moves to overthrow them in a power seizure. The third, in the wake of such a power seizure, is whether to support or oppose that act, whoever has carried it out. The fourth is whether to support military units dispatched to stabilize order in the wake of power seizures, or whether to oppose them. The fifth, after the formation of distinct political factions, is whether to use armed violence. In simplest terms, these were the alternative courses of action faced by political actors at the time, and they defined political orientations. Individuals who made similar choices coalesced into factions.

In an interest group analysis, the choice among alternative courses of action is a product of the social and political positions of actors prior to the onset of these conflicts. Those who are disadvantaged in the existing system will presumably support attacks on the powerful; they will likely support the overthrow of local officials in power seizures, and after the intervention of the armed forces they will likely resist the demobilization of rebels and the restoration of order by military units. Those who are advantaged, on the other hand, will choose to shield the powerful from rebel attacks; they will tend to oppose their overthrow by rebels in power seizures; and they will tend to support the imposition of order by the armed forces.

If, on the other hand, factions are an emergent property of evolving conflicts, these logical connections are tenuous. Whatever the interests of groups based on their positions in the existing order, choices among alternative courses of action are dependent on evolving political contexts. Under certain circumstances, those who are privileged in the existing order will find it in their interest to form rebel groups and join in attacks on powerful officials, and even to oust them from power—precisely in order to protect their positions. To do so they may willingly align themselves with rebels that express grievances against the existing order. Whatever the origins of a rebel group, their support for a power seizure over the local government will be contingent on their relationship to it. If they were included in a power seizure coalition, they were likely to support it; if they were excluded or preempted by others who acted more quickly, they were likely to object to it. Decisions about whether to support or oppose the efforts of military units to enforce order will be similarly context-dependent. If military commanders support a rebel group's stance in disputes with other rebels over power seizures, those rebels will likely support that military unit; if not, they will likely object to the army's actions. The connections between interests and political choices are defined by context.

Another difference between these two lines of reasoning is whether choice is conceived as interactive. An interest group analysis presumes that individuals and groups will choose courses of action solely based on their own perceived interests, without reference to the actions of others. Factions in this view are essentially aggregations of like-minded individuals that pursue shared interests in concert. If, by contrast, factions are an emergent property of interactions, the political stance of a group will be contingent on the actions of others. Will a rebel group that was excluded from a power seizure become antagonistic to rebels who carried out a power seizure? That depends on whether those who seized power respond to opposition with denunciation and repression, or with compromise. Their response, in turn, may be a function of how the excluded rebels expressed their objections. Will rebel groups subsequently support or oppose military commanders? That depends on decisions taken by these commanders that either support or undermine their claims in disputes with other rebels, and may further depend on whether the armed forces responded with force to criticisms of their actions. The social and political characteristics of members of a group provide little guidance to context-specific choices that are shaped by the

actions of others. The process is endogenous to the conflicts themselves—political orientations and their associated identities are emergent properties of the interactions among different parties.[46]

The process is not random, but there is a random element to it, because factions are a joint outcome of contingent interactions in a series of shifting contexts. Statistical theory refers to this as a "stochastic" process. In a deterministic process one can predict an outcome based on the starting point—in this case the attributes of actors. Interest group analysis predicts the political orientation of actors based on their positions in sociopolitical structures at the outset of the period of observation. A stochastic process, by contrast, is one where the eventual outcome is produced by a series of steps, or turning points. At each step, each party faces a choice among alternative courses of action, and these choices are partly dependent on choices made by other parties. This means that it is not possible to determine where an individual or a mobilized group will end up, based solely on their interests or motivations at the outset. This does not mean that we are unable to explain the formation of groups. It simply means that there is no essential or fixed characteristic of actors that permits us to predict their political choices at each step without reference to the interactive contexts within which politics takes place.[47]

Out of a series of choices among alternative courses of action, groups develop political orientations—stances toward authorities, toward military units, and toward other mobilized groups that become allies or opponents. It is out of these choices that factional identities are constructed in the course of ongoing conflicts. These are *insurgent* identities, which define for actors and opponents who they are in relation to other actors.[48] In other words, actors construct collective political identities, often inadvertently, out of the choices they make in evolving circumstances.

To define the problem as one of choice does not imply any stance about the psychology of actors, or *how* they make choices. Usually conceived as questions about the rationality of actors, this issue is often debated as if it has momentous consequences for explanations of social processes. In this context, such debates are a needless distraction. Choice in this setting was highly problematic, whatever we imagine the mental processes of actors to be. Existing political institutions were either collapsing or had already collapsed, and expectations and norms based on prior experience no longer held. A calculating, self-interested actor would find it very difficult to

anticipate the likely consequences of a course of action, given the unprecedented and constantly changing nature of the situation. Such an actor would face a high level of *uncertainty* that would make choices highly problematic. Choice is equally problematic for an actor whose choices are presumably shaped by deeply held political commitments, or culturally shaped modes of judgment. This actor would face a situation where the meanings attached to different modes of action, and the evaluation of established institutions, have been thrown into question. This actor would find that the norms, values, and even personal loyalties long taken for granted can no longer be—requiring rapid judgments in novel situations. An actor oriented toward meaningful activity faces a high level of *ambiguity* about how to apply value commitments to an existing situation. The prevalence of both uncertainty and ambiguity makes highly problematic the idea that courses of action, for both individuals and groups, were a product of perceived interests or political orientations at the outset of this period of conflict. Given the contextual and interactive nature of choices, actors driven by presumably different motivations would be as likely to make the same choices as they would different ones.

Even with the best historical evidence it is impossible to distinguish which kind of motives are driving action. Strategic, self-interested actors build moral and political rationales for the correctness of their actions in order to justify them and convince others of their rectitude. Actors driven by political and moral rectitude will be just as determined to prevail in local conflicts as anyone else, and will be fully capable of acting in a highly strategic manner, precisely because they are so convinced of the rectitude of their position. Strategic, self-interested actors can convince themselves of (or deceive themselves about) their moral rectitude. Committed idealists, for their part, can become ruthlessly strategic in pursuing their ends. All actors will make decisions about courses of action in context, partly dependent on the actions of others. Their decisions, however they make them, are the foundation of factions.

An interactive perspective on conflict also implies that the ideals and political commitments that are expressed by groups can themselves be the product of these interactions, rather than an inherent feature of individuals and groups at the outset. To portray interactions as a series of choices does not deny that there are powerful subjective elements and ideals for which groups fight. Studies of these conflicts have already illustrated the

ways that new conceptions and political ideals emerged over time. The April 14 rebels at Tsinghua University, for example, in their bitter rivalry with a more powerful rebel faction, eventually developed an explicit rationale for a "moderate" political line that conformed with a recent shift in direction by the Central Cultural Revolution Group. But they did so only after a rival rebel leader objected to that shift, creating a rhetorical opening for this line of attack.[49] The "ultra-left" Hunan rebel group Shengwulian developed an elaborate critique of China's "red capitalists" only near the end of their last-ditch fight against military control.[50]

The observation that ideals and political commitments are the product of political experiences rather than a set of beliefs fully formed prior to participation in politics is familiar in other settings. Studies of antiabortion activists in the United States, for example, have shown that activists initially did not have clear beliefs about conception and unborn fetuses, and developed them only during the course of participation in movement organizations.[51] Similarly, the abolition of feudalism during the French Revolution was not inherent in the lists of grievances initially recorded in assemblies of different estates in 1789. The demands and accompanying ideology shifted over time as popular assemblies in Paris responded to regional protests.[52] The question is not whether ideals and political commitment matter—it is where these political commitments come from and how they develop.[53] These ideals and commitments are part of the process of interaction and identity building that we describe here—they are themselves an outcome of these histories of interaction.

Political Contexts

At the core of any plausible explanation of the endogenous formation of groups, and the subsequent development of violent conflict, must be a clear understanding of the features of contexts that define the choices that actors face. This implies that the dynamic element in these endogenous processes is a sequence of shifts in political contexts over time. Individuals and groups do not constantly face the same choices in a repeating fashion—they face an evolving series of choices presented by contexts that can shift in unanticipated ways.

The idea that contextual shifts are the dynamic element in sustained political conflicts is not a new idea. The familiar concept of "political

opportunity structure" is a statement about the context for group mobilization, and it is inherently dynamic. The structure of political opportunity can be defined by trends in national politics that provide elite allies or opponents, legal regimes, levels and techniques of repression, shifting strategies of repression, or the emergence of other mobilized groups that can provide either allies or opponents. The rise and fall of protest movements, their evolution, and their level of success, can be readily traced to the opening up or closing down of political opportunities at the national or local level.[54]

Political opportunity structures are invoked almost exclusively to explain the propensity of individuals to join in collective action, or the success with which a group mobilizes to pursue its ends. But the concept is equally relevant to understanding choices among alternative courses of action, and can readily be applied to understanding these choices. For this purpose, the central puzzle is not limited to the conventional one of explaining the rise and fall of certain forms of political mobilization. It is to help us understand *who* the factional combatants were and *why* they engaged in violent conflict.

In this setting, the first dimension of political context was signals of support or disapproval by actors at the apex of the national hierarchy regarding different courses of action. This was important not only because China had a unitary and centralized political hierarchy that reached down into almost every local community. These signals shifted with regularity, and it was often unclear to local actors which pronouncements reflected Mao Zedong's own preferences. Mao and his associates were the initiators of all rebel activity, and they tried to regulate and steer it over time. Local actors had little prospect of prevailing in courses of action that had the clear disapproval of Beijing. There was, moreover, frequent uncertainty about which actors in Beijing authoritatively conveyed Mao's stance. Younger radical members of the Central Cultural Revolution Group, the ad hoc committee that mobilized rebellions during the Cultural Revolution, often issued directives that encouraged action against civilian and military authorities. Other actors, especially Zhou Enlai, issued directives that countered or moderated these initiatives.[55] Mao Zedong himself shifted his support from one tendency to the other over the course of these conflicts. These signaled shifts in the perceived likelihood at the local and regional level that certain courses of action had a chance to succeed. As we shall

see, these signals could have a decisive impact on the courses of action chosen by locally mobilized groups.

The second dimension is the local impact of events at the immediately higher level of the political hierarchy. Events at the province level shaped the choices of actors at the level of prefectures and prefecture-level cities, and events at the prefecture level shaped choices at the level of counties and county-level cities. The relevant shaping influences were most evident within the vertical lines of the political hierarchy. What mattered in a locality were developments at the immediately higher level in the hierarchy. When a provincial government fell in a power seizure, this altered choices faced by actors in cities and prefectures immediately below it; and when the governments of these cities and prefectures were overthrown in turn, this shaped the choices faced in smaller cities and counties below them. After the collapse of provincial governments, it mattered whether the region was placed under military control, or whether it was placed under a new government—a "revolutionary committee"—that had the explicit approval of Beijing. This shaped the choices faced by actors lower in the hierarchy, as military control persisted, or gave way to an approved revolutionary committee, at each step downward in the hierarchy.

A third element of political contexts was the stances of regional and local authorities, both civilian and military, toward mobilized political groups, which could take the form of active support, passive acceptance, the mobilization of defensive countermovements, or aggressive repression by force. These stances, like the activity of mobilized groups, also depended heavily on signals emanating from actors in Beijing, and the actions of both civilian and military authorities during this period shifted repeatedly in response. Given the stances of local authorities—through most of this period and in most regions this meant military units—the decisive element was their capacity to enforce their decisions, and their willingness to act decisively to do so.

A fourth and final element of political contexts was the history of local political interactions among rebel groups and between rebel groups and local authorities, in particular military units. Two aspects were particularly important. The first was the pattern of alignments among rebel groups in support of or in opposition to the power seizures that toppled local authorities, and the way that these alignments were shaped by the actions of local

military units when they intervened in local politics. These alignments were the product of contingent encounters, and they created new cleavages that generated political identities. The second was the prior history of conflict between factions, and in particular how long they endured and how violent they became. The choices evolved as violent conflict persisted.

A Focus on the State

The analysis in this book is framed by the architecture of China's party-state, a single hierarchy that encompassed 174 cities of various sizes and more than 2,200 rural counties. I employ an event-based analysis that draws on a database that is extracted from a near-complete collection of more than 2,200 city and county annals, and combine this with an examination of raw material from the longest and most detailed local narratives. By aggregating the political events described in local histories, I trace patterns of conflict across time and space.

This approach to analyzing political conflict has not previously been used in the analysis of China's Cultural Revolution, but it has been widely applied in other settings—to both long-term shifts across historical time, and to relatively brief and intense upheavals.[56] Studies of this sort usually focus single-mindedly on popular insurgencies. My sources, however, also contain a wealth of information about the pattern of collapse of local governments and their subsequent rebuilding, and acts of repression by military and civilian authorities. This facilitates an analysis that portrays conflict as a series of interactions between insurgents and authorities in shifting national and local contexts.

A focus on the state requires us to pay close attention to the structure of this unitary and centralized hierarchy and also the activities of the individuals who staffed it. In 1965, there were 2.4 million office personnel ("cadres") who staffed Party and government organs, and a total of 21.5 million Party members.[57] They were organized into a single hierarchy that reached deeply into the grass roots, well below the level of city and county government. Their reaction to the events of this period, as we shall see, undermined China's party-state far beyond the capacities of the early popular insurgencies, and local cadres continued to play an active role in the factional conflicts that followed.

This implies that we need to focus on the state in a second sense—local state structures are sites of conflict and even rebellion, not just targets of popular insurgencies. Scholarship on this period has been singularly pre-occupied with movements among students, workers, and others who challenged political authorities across China. But there was an equally dramatic political mobilization within the party-state bureaucracy. Beginning in June 1966, the state's structures were quickly thrown into internal upheavals that interacted in complex ways with the unfolding political activism of students and workers. Near the end of 1966, internal rebellions by party-state functionaries against their own superiors destabilized and eventually destroyed state structures far beyond the capacities of the popular rebellions that they faced. As we shall see, the large-scale factional warfare that we associate with this early phase of the Cultural Revolution began only *after* local power structures were overthrown.

The idea that popular mobilizations are intimately connected with state structures is familiar in historical studies of political contention. These publications relate changes in the forms, rates, and styles of collective protest to the expansion of capitalism and the creation of more intrusive and centralized state structures. Charles Tilly's work was notable for its emphasis on the historical evolution of state structures: "The national state's growth entailed increasing control of the resources in a contiguous territory by an organization that was formally autonomous, differentiated from other organizations, centralized, internally coordinated, and in possession of major concentrated means of coercion."[58] This was matched by a parallel evolution in the organization of early-modern economies and societies. The expansion of wage labor and concentration of capital interacted with the increasing scope and centralization of state structures to increase the capacity of urbanized populations to organize and pursue their interests in the form of the modern social movement.[59] Over the course of historical trajectories "we have much to gain from an analysis that singles out the effects of large social changes on ordinary people's interests, opportunities, and organization, then examines how changing interest, opportunity, and organization influence their prevailing modes of collective action."[60] This book is part of that broad tradition of historical sociology, but its focus on the relationship between state structures and political conflict is compressed into a short and intense period of political upheaval. In such a compressed

period of time, the relationship of state structures to popular political mobilization shifts rapidly in ways that requires much closer examination.

This focus on state structures is facilitated by the source materials that form an important foundation for this book. Throughout, I draw on information contained in local annals *(difang zhi)* that were published in China by county and city governments after the mid-1980s. The annals for each local government separately provided its own account of political events during this period, creating a framework for understanding that maps directly onto the state hierarchy. These annals revived a practice in imperial dynasties, when they contained accounts of local history, surveys of the local economy and society, and biographies of imperial degree holders and other local notables. Surviving annals from the last two dynasties, the Ming and Qing, have informed research on popular protest and collective violence in earlier eras.[61] The new annals contain general chronologies of major events, and many of them also contain narrative accounts of specific political campaigns, the local history of the Communist Party and government institutions, and a variety of statistics on the local population, economy, and social structure.

Accounts from a near-complete collection of 2,246 local annals have been coded and assembled into a data set of events (see the Appendix: Local Annals Data Set). Although the quality of local accounts and their level of detail vary widely, in the aggregate, the annals yielded an extraordinary amount of information. The data set contains information about close to 34,000 events at the city or county level from June 1966 to December 1971 according to the month they occurred, and more than half of them according to a specific day. It also contains information for more than twenty indicators of the demographic and political characteristics of the locality, and the features of the account from which the event data were coded.

I employ the resulting data to trace the temporal and geographic spread of certain kinds of insurgent activities and other key political events across China's cities and counties and their evolution over time, alongside patterns of repression. My aim is to develop a clear, evidence-based description that will illuminate long-standing areas of ignorance and perhaps rectify misimpressions that that may have resulted from the grassroots focus of past research or the selective nature of regional studies. These broader patterns will also help to identify puzzles that require further analysis by

addressing other sources. Statistical patterns alone are insufficient. The historical narratives in the longest and most detailed local accounts contain essential information that cannot be expressed in statistical terms. The patterns revealed by the quantitative data frame questions that require a closer look at local narratives, and the processes revealed in the narratives frame questions that will require a closer look at the statistical patterns.

One of the purposes of this book is to fill large gaps in the historiography of this period—to accurately describe and characterize *what* happened. But there is an even more important explanatory agenda—*why* the conflicts of the period unfolded as they did. As broad patterns of political activity come into focus as part of the descriptive agenda, a series of explanatory puzzles come into focus, some of them for the first time. To address these puzzles, it will be necessary to depart from or modify the emphases of influential theories about rebellion, revolution, and other forms of contentious politics. This defines the second task, which is to analyze patterns of conflict from the perspective of social science theory, to treat these patterns as puzzles that require explanation, and to generate ideas that extend theories about political conflict into subjects about which they currently provide little insight.

The first of these puzzles is brought into focus in Chapters 2 and 3, and analyzed explicitly in Chapter 4: why did such a highly centralized and disciplined party-state collapse so rapidly in early 1967? Theories about rebellion and revolution adopt two different approaches to this question. The first views the overthrow of governments as a consequence of the scale of mass mobilization, which overwhelms a state's repressive capacities. In the wake of the unexpectedly sudden collapse of a series of state socialist regimes from 1989 to 1991, threshold models of collective behavior have come to the fore, emphasizing the social processes that generate sudden upsurges of popular protest.[62] The second, an older "state-centered" stream of theory, departs from bottom-up views of revolution as a function of the scale of popular rebellion, and asserts that states are vulnerable only if they have preexisting structural weaknesses that make them vulnerable to mass mobilizations.[63] As we shall discover, local governments collapsed across China in early 1967 well in advance of the spread of popular insurgencies, which at the time were still very limited outside of the largest cities. Moreover,

prior to these upheavals the Chinese state did not suffer from the structural weaknesses emphasized by state-centered theories. As we shall see, the answer to this puzzle lies in previously unexamined political processes within the party-state itself—a dimension of politics rarely emphasized in theories about rebellion and revolution. Power seizures diffused downward in the national political hierarchy as party-state officials turned against their superiors as shifting political contexts redefined the choices that they faced. The centralized and disciplined nature of the national political hierarchy was itself a major reason for its rapid collapse.

The second puzzle, addressed in Chapter 5, is why large and antagonistic factional alliances formed in the wake of the collapse of local governments, and in particular why they adopted different orientations toward military units that intervened in local politics. Social science theories about rebellion and other forms of contentious politics—either explicitly or implicitly—typically view conflict groups as expressions of interests defined prior to the activities of interest. I examine detailed local narratives and aggregate data about the formation of factions to reconstruct how factions formed through a series of path-dependent interactions among disparate rebel groups and military units. This is the core of the intellectual problem highlighted earlier in this chapter.

A third puzzle, addressed in Chapters 6 and 7, is why violent factional warfare ensued. To explain how factions formed is not to explain why they subsequently engaged in violent conflict. As we shall see, large-scale factional warfare did not occur everywhere, and the intensity of violence increased the longer that it persisted. What drove this collective violence in certain regions, which proceeded to the point where close to a quarter-million of the combatants were killed? Social science theories about collective violence typically attribute it to the enormity of the stakes for different social classes or ethnic groups, as a reaction to violence initiated by the state's agents, or as a strategy that sustains mobilization and wears down opponents. These explanations all focus—explicitly or implicitly—on how collective action is initiated and sustained. Instead, we will find that the key to explaining the severity of the violence is in understanding how collective action *ends*—in particular, the anticipated costs to participants of failing to prevail over their opponents, or at least fight to a draw. Prolonged histories of unresolved conflicts were the features of local contexts that drove escalating violence. By examining circumstances under which the

most severe violence occurred, it will become evident that the problem of exit from collective action explains the most severe and sustained violence. In certain circumstances, combatants were drawn into self-reinforcing escalation traps.

A fourth and final puzzle is addressed in Chapter 8, which examines the process through which state authority was reestablished. Prior work has demonstrated that the restoration of order was far more damaging in terms of lives lost and disrupted than the many months of violent disorder that preceded it. Four to five times as many people died in the campaign to reestablish order, primarily after the end of insurgent activity.[64] In this penultimate chapter I will seek to explain why this was so. Throughout many months of violent regional warfare, China's armed forces always had the capacity to quell armed civilian insurgencies. As 1968 progressed, in one region after another, military units were given freer rein to compel local factions to disarm and disband. Yet death tolls and political victimization rose to unprecedented levels *after* factions were disarmed and disbanded, when they and other citizens returned to their places of residence and work. How to explain the puzzling timing of this upsurge of repression, which went far beyond what was necessary to demobilize rebel combatants?

Scholarship on this period, like many accounts of popular upheavals, has been preoccupied with mobilizations by ordinary citizens to confront agents of the state. In this historical episode, however, the groups that one would ordinarily expect to be bulwarks of the political order—in particular, party-state cadres and military units—contributed to these upheavals in ways that turned them into agents of disorder. The process unfolded in the last half of 1966, when the state's structures were quickly thrown into internal upheavals that interacted in complex ways with the growing political activism of students and workers. It is to the extensive and varied political mobilizations of the last half of 1966 that I now turn.