

**M A Gandhian and Peace Studies**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Semester**  
**4008 Understanding Conflict: Basic Theories**

**Understanding Conflict: Relative Deprivation Theory**

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# Outline of the Study

- What is Relative Deprivation Theory?
- Major Proponents of this theory.
- Major Arguments.
- Criticism.

# What is Relative Deprivation Theory?

- Inferiors revolt in order that they may be equal, and equals that they may be superior. Such is the state of mind which creates revolution' – Aristotle
- **Relative deprivation** is a feeling that you are generally worse off than the people you associate with and compare yourself to. For example, when you can only afford a hut but your neighbour have big house, you feel relatively deprived.
- **Relative Deprivation** is defined as the conscious feeling of negative discrepancy between legitimate expectations and present actualities.

# What is Relative Deprivation Theory?

## Cont...

- **Relative Deprivation** theorists believe that political discontent and its consequences—protest, instability, violence, revolution—depend not only on the absolute level of economic well-being, but also on the distribution of wealth'. (Nagel, J. (1974), Inequality and Discontent: A Non-Linear Hypothesis, *World Politics*, Vol. 26, pp. 453–472.)
- As defined by social and political scientists, relative deprivation theory suggests that people who feel they are being deprived of something considered essential in for their lives (e.g. money, rights, political voice, status) may organize or join social movements or armed conflicts dedicated to obtaining the things of which they feel deprived.  
(<https://www.thoughtco.com/relative-deprivation-theory-4177591>)

# What is Relative Deprivation Theory?

## Cont...

- In some cases, relative deprivation has been cited as a factor driving incidents of social disorder like rioting, looting, terrorism, and civil wars. In this nature, social movements and their associated disorderly acts can often be attributed to the grievances of people who feel they are being denied resources to which they are entitled. (<https://www.thoughtco.com/relative-deprivation-theory-4177591>)
- Thus, Relative deprivation model also provides an intellectual space and methodological underpinnings to understand the armed conflict and it is very much close to grievance perspective.

# Definition of Relative Deprivation

- First formal definitions of relative deprivation has been presented by British statesman and sociologist **Walter Runciman**, who listed four required conditions:
  - ❖ A person does not have something.
  - ❖ That person knows other people who have the thing.
  - ❖ That person wants to have the thing.
  - ❖ That person believes they have a reasonable chance of getting the thing.

(<https://www.thoughtco.com/relative-deprivation-theory-4177591>)

# **Runciman's distinction between Egoistic and Fraternalistic relative deprivation.**

## **Egoistic relative deprivation**

- Driven by an individual's feelings of being treated unfairly compared to others in their group.
- For example, an employee who feels they should have gotten a promotion that went to another employee may feel egoistically relatively deprived.

## **Fraternalistic relative deprivation**

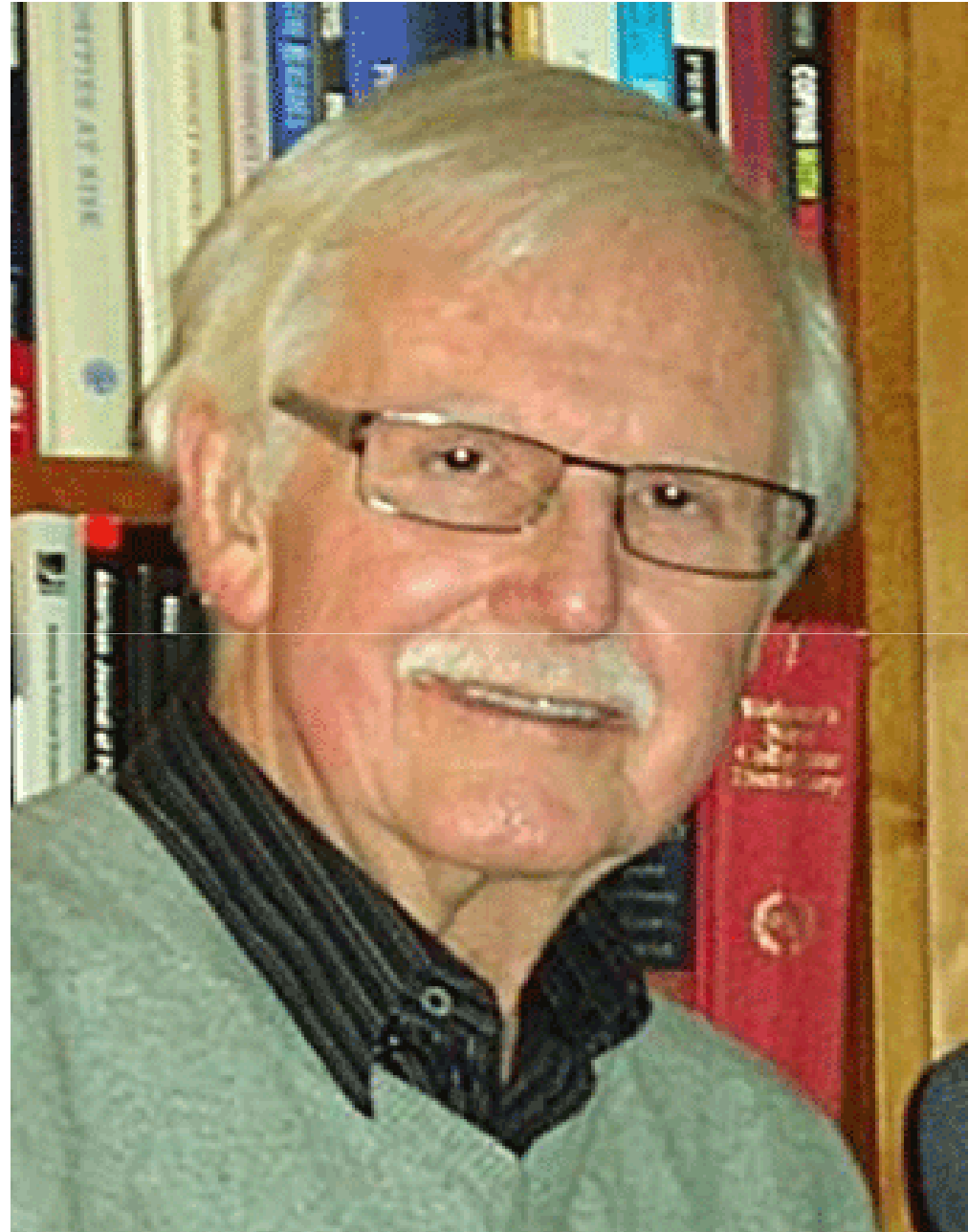
- Fraternalistic relative deprivation is more often associated with massive group social movements like the Civil Rights Movement.  
(<https://www.thoughtco.com/relative-deprivation-theory-4177591>)
- Fraternalistic relative deprivation is caused of social movements or armed conflict.

# Major Proponents of this theory

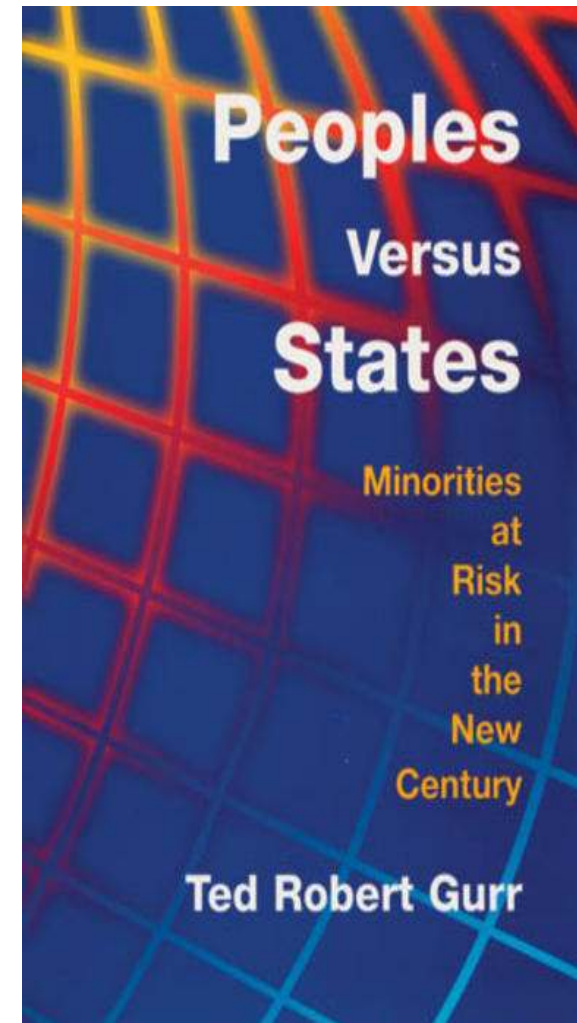
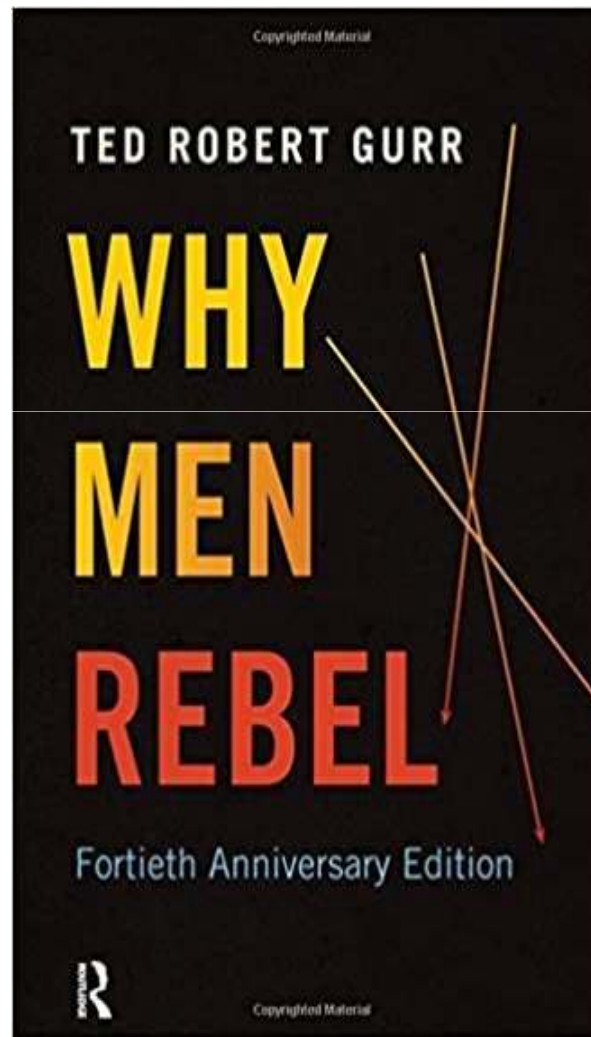
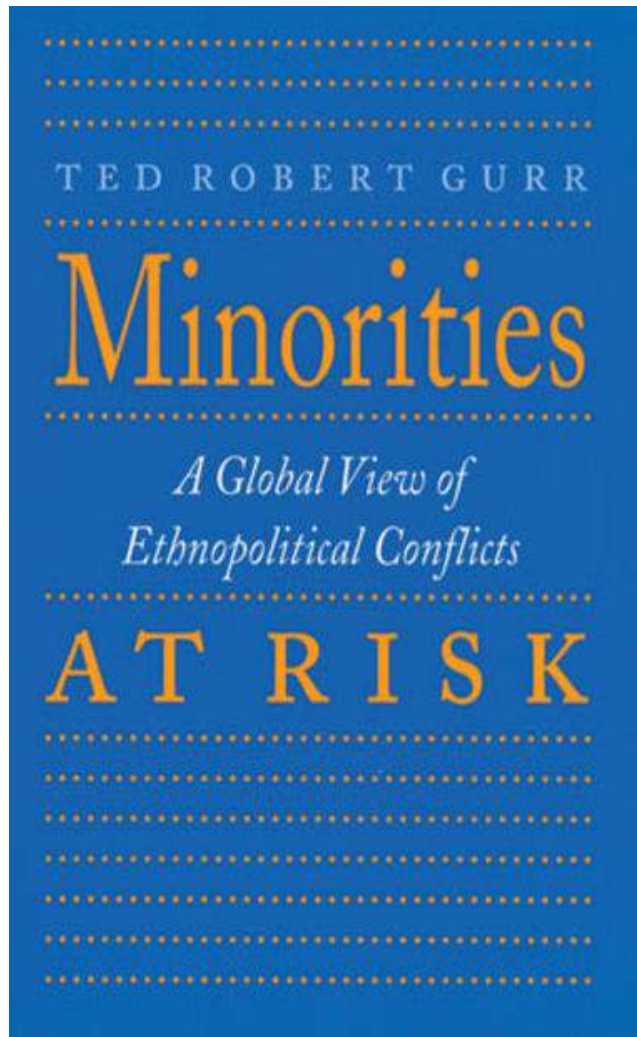
- Though Aristotle revealed the link between deprivation and conflict, **Ted Gurr**, the most prominent proponent of relative deprivation theory of modern times.
- It is almost a universal assumption that an inequitable distribution of resources and wealth will provoke violent rebellion.
- **Gurr** asserts that, there are several factors of 'political violence' and 'political movement', but dominant causal factor seems to be the subjective sense of 'Relative Deprivation' of the collectivities or the mass of people.

# Ted Robert Gurr

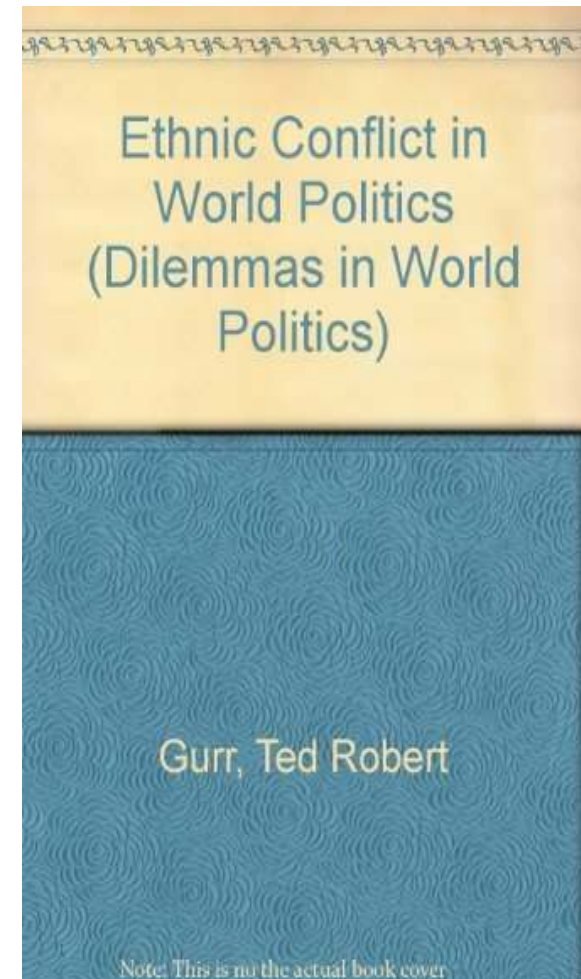
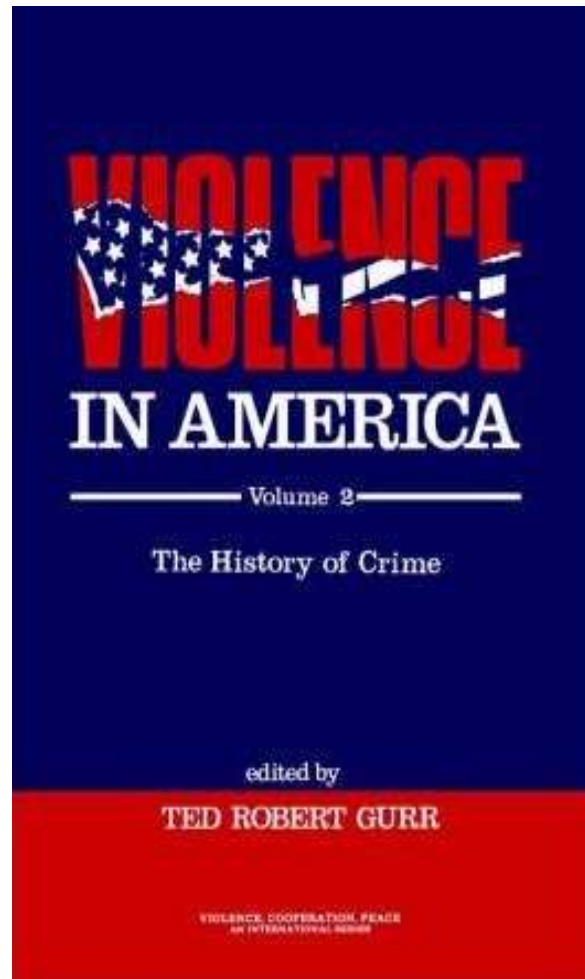
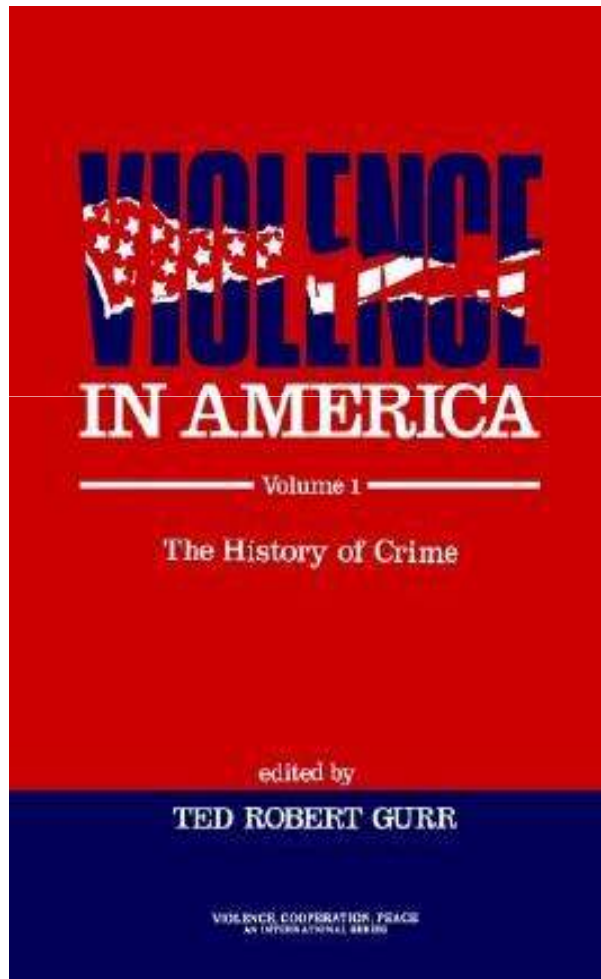
- [\*Why Men Rebel\*](#) (Princeton, 1970)
- [\*Violence In America\*](#) (with historian Hugh Davis Graham, U.S. Government Printing Office, Bantam Books, and Praeger, 1969; Sage Publications, 1979)
- [\*Handbook of political conflict: Theory and research\*](#) (The free press, New York, 1980)
- [\*The State and the City\*](#), co-authored with [Desmond King](#) (University of Chicago Press, 1987)
- [\*Ethnic Conflict in World Politics\*](#), coauthored with [Barbara Harff](#) (Westview Press, 1994, revised edition, 2003).
- [\*Early Warning of Communal Conflict and Genocide: Linking Empirical Research and International Responses\*](#) (United Nations University Press, 1996)
- [\*Preventive Measures: Building Risk Assessment and Crisis Early Warning Systems\*](#), co-edited by Gurr and [John L. Davies](#) (Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).
- [\*Peoples Versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century\*](#) (U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2000)
- [\*Peace and Conflict 2010\*](#), co-authored with Joseph Hewitt, [Jonathan Wilkenfeld](#) (Paradigm Publishers, 2009)



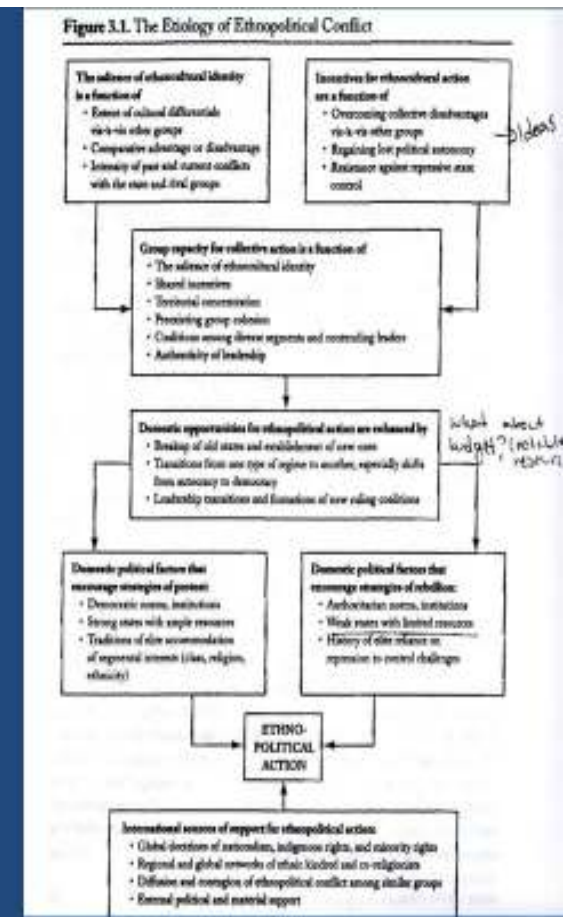
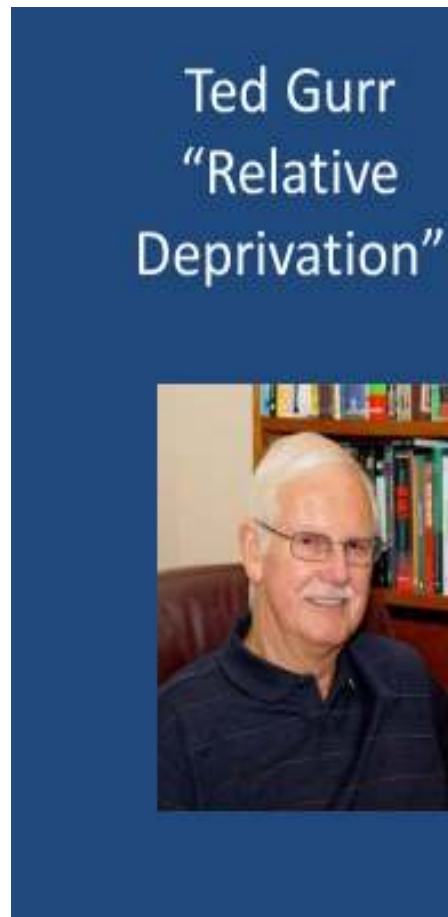
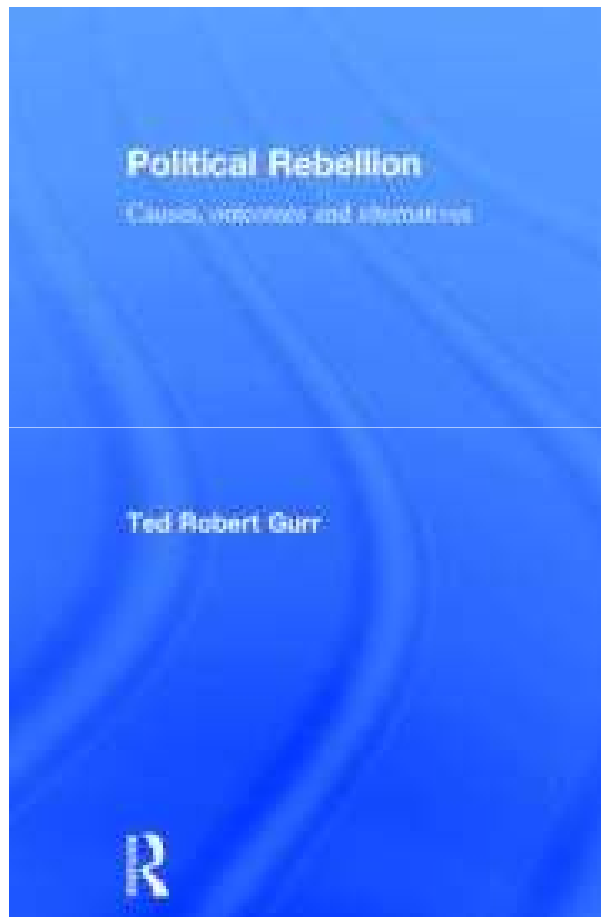
# Gurr's Contribution



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# Gurr's Contribution



# Major Arguments: Ted Gurr

- The main argument of relative deprivation theory is that conflict is not merely a passing social event but an inseparable part of the human experience.
- Conflict has its own foundations in people's mind.
- People or community who feel deprived of some good(s) or resource(s) tend to conflict.
- Individuals or community who are lacking some good, service, or comfort are more likely to unleash an armed conflict to improve their material conditions.

# Major Arguments: Ted Gurr

- Proponents of this theory have not focused attention on violent conflict, per se, rather, they study episodes of political violence and revolution.
- In his study of 114 countries, Gurr found relative deprivation and inequality as the major cause for the manifestation of conflict, and political violence.
- Ted Gurr (1970) states that his research is concerned with political violence – “all collective attacks within a political community against the political regime, its, actors ... or its policies”. (Gurr, Ted (1970), *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, Pp. 3-4)

# Major Arguments: Ted Gurr

- Gurr formulates his notion of relative deprivation by linking expectations with capabilities and states that violence is likely to develop in a society where a gap between actual and potential exists on a wide scale.
- Gurr states, a perceived discrepancy between men's value expectations and their value capabilities' can be understood as relative deprivation.
- 'Value expectations are goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are rightfully entitled' and 'value capabilities are the goods and conditions they are capable of attaining or maintaining', Gurr states.

# Major Arguments: Ted Gurr

- Relative deprivation may occur when expectations remain constant but capabilities decline; expectations increase but capabilities decline; and expectations increase while capabilities remain stable.
- Gurr argues that increasing expectations without increase in level of capabilities result in relative deprivation which manifests in violence.
- Thus, according to Gurr, violence derives from high level of discontent caused from relative deprivation.

# Criticism

- M.S.A. Rao (2000) states 'the relative deprivation theory offers a more satisfactory explanation of the genesis of social movement for it is pivoted around conflict and cognitive change, motivating people and mobilising them around certain interests and issues'.
- But this theory has some of its own limits that prove it's insufficient in understanding the armed conflict across the world.
- 'A position of relative deprivation does not generate a conflict. The structural conditions of relative deprivation provide only the necessary conditions'.  
MSA Rao (2000)

# Criticism

- It may be asked whether conflict necessarily result of negative conditions of relative deprivation.
- Do the conflict not a deliberate, organise and conscious effort of insurgents?
- Do the structural and cultural violence not contribute in arise a conflict?
- Does not focus on underlying factors which leads a conflict, such as, resource constraint, mobilisation, displacement, people's belief, etc. It completely overlooks the geographical terrain and the greed aspect of conflict.

# Criticism

- Being deprived is not always cause of an armed conflict, for instance, Dharavi of Mumbai, the second largest slum of the world, can be a good example of relative deprivation, but Mumbai has no violent conflict.

*Thank you*