

Introduction

The Rights and Wrongs of Revolution

What Are Revolutions?

There are two main ways of approaching the study of revolution in the contemporary world – and they are both wrong. On the one hand, revolutions appear to be everywhere: on the streets of Kobane, Caracas, and Tehran; in the rhetoric of groups like Podemos and Black Lives Matter; and in the potential of technologies to reshape people's lives. Rarely do weeks go by without a revolution of one kind or another being proclaimed. In recent years, figures as varied as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Emmanuel Macron, Tarana Burke, Xi Jinping, Tawakkol Karman, and Elon Musk have been labelled as revolutionaries, while the hugely popular musical *Hamilton*, and the even more popular *Star War* series, have eulogized revolutionary struggle. This broadening of the concept of revolution goes beyond its take-up by the mass media and in popular culture – www.revolution.com is a venture capitalist firm, www.revolution.co.uk is a software company, and www.revolution.com.au is a flea and heartworm treatment for dogs and cats. But is revolution really just a marketing trope, investment strategy, or pet service? And can it be street mobilization, social movement, and technological breakthrough at the same time?¹ If revolution is everywhere, perhaps it is nowhere.

This issue is complicated by an equally common, but apparently contradictory, belief – that revolutions are irrelevant to a world in which the big issues of governance and economic development have been settled. In the contemporary world, revolutions 'offer little promise and pose little threat' (Mayer 2001: 3). With the passing of state socialism in the Soviet Union, it is supposed, revolutions appear more as minor disturbances than as projects of deep confrontation and systemic transformation.

¹ The fracturing of the practice of revolution is matched by a decentering of the academic study of revolution. Although it is possible to find lots of work on revolutions around the academy, this often takes place outside the province of 'revolutionary studies'. Rather, revolution is studied in multiple disciplines under diverse sub-headings: contentious politics, social movements, civil resistance, terrorism, civil war, etc.

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What is left, for good or for bad, are pale imitations: anaemic (small ‘r’) revolutions rather than ‘real’, ‘proper’, ‘authentic’ (big ‘R’) Revolution.

Both of these positions are untenable. While the former makes revolution so all-encompassing that it becomes an empty term without substantive content, the latter fails to see the enduring appeal of attempts to overturn existing conditions and generate alternative social orders. The primary aim of this book is to generate a more judicious appreciation of the place of revolution in the contemporary world, examining how revolutions emerge, how they unfold, and how they end. Its central task, therefore, is to unravel the *anatomies of revolution*.²

This is a major undertaking. It is made harder by the fact that revolutions are not static objects of analysis, but processes that change in form across time and place – there is no supra-sensible revolutionary form from which empirical references can be drawn. Revolutions have been conducted by nationalists in Algeria and Angola, slaves in Haiti, constitutionalists in America and France, communists in Russia, China, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan, radical military groups in Libya and Ethiopia, peasants in Mexico, Cuba, and Vietnam, a curious coalition of leftists, students, merchants, and clergy in Iran, and an even curiousest mix of Islamists, youth, labour organizations, and ‘ultra’ football fans in Egypt. At the same time, the concept of revolution exists in every major language group in the world. A study of its etymology would need to take in the Greek concepts of *epanastasis* (revolution), the Arabic terms *thawra* (revolution), *inqilab* (*coup d’état*), and *tamarrud* (rebellion), the notions of *mered* (rebellion), *hitkomemut* (uprising), *meri* (revolt), and *keshet* (plot) in classical Hebrew, the Chinese word *geming* (change of life, fate, or destiny) and the Latin verb *revolvere* (to return).

Probing deeper into the European meaning of the term reveals further diversity. In Ancient Greece, the idea of revolution was linked to the movement contained within Aristotle’s trinity of democracy, oligarchy, and tyranny. In the Middle Ages, the concept was used to denote something circular, the turning of wheels rather than fundamental rupture, as in the elliptical movement of planets surveyed by Copernicus in his *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (‘On the Revolution of Celestial Spheres’). During the Early Modern period, the term began to be associated with sudden, dramatic political changes (Harris 2015: 27, 34; see Rachum

² The term ‘anatomies of revolution’ bears a deliberate resemblance to Crane Brinton’s *The Anatomy of Revolution*, first published in 1938. Whereas Brinton found a single ‘anatomy of revolution’ in the ‘great revolutions’ of England, America, France, and Russia, the goal of this book is to highlight the multiple pathways that revolutionary processes follow, emphasizing the overlap between revolutions and other forms of social change, and drawing on a greater range of cases than Brinton considered.

1999 for an account that stresses earlier origins). By the early part of the nineteenth century, the constitutional revolutions of America and France had become seen as archetypal – the latter in particular crystallized the notion of revolution as a deliberate act, signified by the emergence of a distinct category of *révolutionnaire* (revolutionary) (Baker 2015: 95, 102). From this point on, revolution was a future-oriented act – an ongoing project of potentially unlimited duration. During the twentieth century, revolutions became primarily associated with violent ruptures from one type of social order (capitalist and/or colonial) to another (socialist and/or post-colonial). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many commentators argued that revolution had taken another turn, becoming variously ‘unarmed’ (Ritter 2015), ‘negotiated’ (Lawson 2004), conjoined with reform programmes to generate a new category of ‘refolution’ (Garton Ash 1989), or reconnected with older notions of return, as captured in Jürgen Habermas’s (1990) notion of ‘rectifying revolutions’. In the present day, as noted above, revolution is increasingly caught between two extremes: denigration on the one hand, catch-all term on the other.

All this presents a considerable, but not insurmountable, challenge. The first task is to establish some boundary conditions around revolution as a field of enquiry. This book does so in two ways. First, rather than examine revolution either in the sense of epochal change (e.g. ‘the Neolithic revolution’) or as breakthroughs in specific spheres of social life (e.g. ‘the information revolution’), this book is concerned with revolutions geared at the takeover of political power, whether the main site of political power is a state, city-state, empire, kingdom, or principality. In other words, my focus is on specific revolutionary projects rather than macro-structural transformations or domain-specific shifts, except when these impact (as they often do) on state-centred movements.³ As discussed below, this still produces a wide canvass, requiring that points of differentiation are drawn both within revolutions, such as the distinction between social and political revolutions,⁴ and between revolutions and other forms of social change, such as civil wars, *coup d’états*, rebellions, transitions, and reform programmes. Second, for reasons of analytical coherence, this

³ This is not to say that transformations that take place in particular domains of social life, such as the industrial revolution or the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), do not impact significantly on state-centred movements, just that this is not their central locus.

⁴ Political revolutions feature a turnover in state leadership and institutions; social revolutions embrace political, economic, and symbolic fields of action. Examples of the former include the uprising against Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines in 1986; the archetypal illustrations of the latter are France, Russia, China, and Cuba. For more on this distinction, see: Goldstone (2001: 143); Foran (2005: 8).

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book restricts its canvass to modern revolutions.⁵ It is worth briefly elaborating on these two points.

The relationship between processes of social change is a close one, both analytically and empirically. Indeed, this book argues that revolution is part of a broader family of processes associated with social transformation. First, a number of revolutions in the modern era were preceded or succeeded by civil wars, including those in France, Russia, China, Cuba, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, and Angola. Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke, hardly natural bedfellows, shared the view that England's Glorious Revolution in 1688 was both a revolution and a civil war (Armitage 2015: 67). Second, the effects of *coup d'états* can, on occasion, be revolutionary. The coup by Augusto Pinochet in Chile in 1973, the putsch against the monarchy led by Muammar Qaddafi in Libya, and the Francoist *golpe militar* in Spain set in motion radical economic and political programmes that significantly recast their societies. At the same time, coups have often preceded revolutions: the regime of Fulgencio Batista in Cuba was caught up in several coup attempts during the late 1950s, something that allowed the revolutionary forces led by Fidel Castro to build up support in the eastern highlands before advancing on Cuba's cities. Third, rebellions (here used synonymously with revolts) are also closely associated with revolutions. Often, disenfranchised groups from slaves to peasants have been in a state of virtually continuous rebellion, taking part in processes that have induced revolutions from Haiti to Nicaragua, and from Algeria to Mexico. Fourth, transitions from authoritarian to democratic orders often overlap with revolutionary dynamics, most obviously in the negotiated settlement that ended apartheid in South Africa in 1994. Finally, although reform movements are usually seen as distinct from, or as barriers to, revolutions, there are several occasions when reforms by governments have hastened rather than prevented revolution. In eighteenth-century France, for example, the programme of limited reform instigated by Louis XVI emboldened the provincial *parlements* (appeal courts), the newly empowered bourgeoisie, and peasants taking part in rural uprisings. As Alexis de Tocqueville (1999/1852) notes, the weakness of the monarchy was revealed by its reforms, allowing the middling classes of burghers and merchants to press for more radical changes. Defeat in the Seven Years War with England, the example of

⁵ Modern is less a temporal designation – and still less a normative one – than it is an analytical one. In other words, modern is taken to mean a specific configuration of industrial capitalism, rational-bureaucratic statehood, and 'ideologies of progress', such as socialism, nationalism, and liberalism. For more on this understanding of modernity, see Buzan and Lawson (2013, 2015). For an analysis of revolutions in the pre-modern world, see: Shaban (1979); Finley (1986); Ober (1998); Syme (2002); Arjomand (2019).

a successful revolution in America, and the growth of new ideas like nationalism coupled with elite fracture in turning reform into revolution.

Revolution, therefore, appears in relation to, rather than opposition from, other forms of social change. Civil wars, *coup d'états*, rebellions, transitions, reform programmes, and revolutions are intimately connected, overlapping and running into each other at a number of junctures (Lawson 2006b). However, although revolutions bleed – sometimes literally – into other processes of social change, they also retain a relative autonomy from them. In their most basic sense, revolutions can be understood as the reorganization of everyday life – they seek permanent shifts rather than temporary changes to the texture of social relations. In this way, revolutions consist of several dimensions simultaneously: a symbolic revolution that seeks to destroy pre-revolutionary tropes and reforge new forms of symbolic order; a political revolution that aims to overthrow the old regime and reconstruct systems of governance; and an economic revolution that intends to recast relations of production, value, and exchange. In short, a revolution is a *collective mobilization that attempts to quickly and forcibly overthrow an existing regime in order to transform political, economic, and symbolic relations*.

Each aspect of this definition is important: ‘collective mobilization’ contrasts with processes of elite-driven change, many of which can be radical – China since its 1978 ‘opening up’ and some contemporary Gulf monarchies serve as cases in point; ‘quickly’ distinguishes revolutions from longer-running processes of evolutionary change, such as the several centuries of British parliamentary reform; ‘forcibly’ illustrates the importance of conflict, compulsion, and transgression to revolutions – contained forms of contention ranging from civil rights legislation, extending the suffrage, or introducing shock-therapy programmes may have dramatic consequences, but this does not equate to the forceful opening of previously restricted orders conjured by revolutions; ‘overthrow’ exemplifies the extra-constitutional component of revolutions, while also distinguishing them from more partial processes such as democratic transitions; both ‘transform’ and the inclusion of political, economic, and symbolic orders illustrate the systemic quality of revolutionary change; ‘attempt’ signifies that there are many more unsuccessful than successful revolutions and a large number of revolutionary situations that do not lead to revolutionary outcomes. If this book included only successful cases, its discussion would be limited to a handful of well-trodden cases.⁶

⁶ Colin Beck (2018) finds that research on revolution is, in general, skewed towards a few landmark cases: Nicaragua, France, Russia, Cuba, Iran, Vietnam, and China. Overall, Beck finds three main biases in the social science of revolutions: first, towards major social

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The point is not to see this definition as a template to which revolutions must comply. Such a move would not only elide the variety of forms that revolution takes, it would also struggle to make sense of unsuccessful revolutions and the many revolutionary situations that do not lead to revolutionary outcomes. The definition offered above is, therefore, best seen as a flexible abstraction rather than as an empirical straight-jacket, an analytical first cut by which to examine diverse revolutionary pathways. As subsequent chapters make clear, revolutions are dynamic processes that change over time and place. The measure of the success of this definition is not how well it represents each episode of revolution, but how useful it proves to be for two tasks: first, clarifying the various pathways that revolutions take; and second, highlighting both differences and overlaps between revolutions and other forms of social change.

Although revolutions have existed, at least in some form, throughout human history, their greatest impact has been felt under global modernity – the configuration of political, economic, and symbolic processes that have served to recast domestic and international orders over the past two to three centuries (Buzan and Lawson 2015). The resulting constellations – the modern states-system, industrial capitalism, and major political ideologies – are structural formations that contain a global reach. In many ways, therefore, global history over the last two centuries or so is a shared story. Struggles for and against imperialism, the extension of capitalism around the world (and resistance to its spread), the emergence of universalist doctrines, and technological developments have, with varying degrees of coercion, brought the world within some kind of commons. In this sense, modernity is, as Ernest Gellner (1988) puts it, a ‘tidal wave’ of homogenizing pressures. But the tsunami has not been evenly felt. Although processes such as industrialization, imperialism, and rationalization have affected most parts of the world, they have not done so in a uniform manner. Indeed, the dislocation wrought by modernity has provoked a multiplicity of responses: market openness and protectionism, democracy and authoritarianism, religious renewal alongside secularism. At its heart, therefore, modernity is a contradictory

revolutions; second, towards twentieth-century uprisings; and third, towards revolutions seen to be progressive. According to Beck, 75 per cent of historical-comparative books on revolution focus on ‘leftist’ or ‘democratic’ revolutions, while only 15 per cent survey religious or ‘reactionary’ cases, almost all of which examine the 1979 Iranian Revolution. This is a big problem. It means that conservative revolutionary movements are omitted, from fascism to militant Islamism. It also means that, if revolutions are successful by definition, then most studies are selecting on the dependent variable. This, in turn, means that there is not enough study of *why* so many revolutionary movements are unsuccessful, not least because of successful counter-revolutionary projects. These issues are picked up in the following chapter.

process, one marked by greater affluence but also rising inequality, and global forms of governance alongside drives for local autonomy. It is a profoundly ambivalent set of processes (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997/1944). And it is within this ambivalence that revolutions have assumed their most virulent form.

This introduces the final reason why *modern* revolutions are the focus of this book – revolutions have had a major impact on the development of modern social orders. Martin Wight (1978/1946: 92) wrote in the late 1970s that over half of the preceding 500 years had featured some kind of conflict between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary states. The period since the publication of Wight’s book may well be the most revolutionary in history – we are living in a ‘new age of revolution’ (Goldstone 2016: ii). Although, as this book will chronicle, no revolution has delivered in full on its promises, revolutions have bought dramatic changes in their wake. The French Revolution introduced the notions of nationalism and popular sovereignty, concepts of political ‘left’ and ‘right’, the metric system, and a conflict between absolutism and republicanism that dominated European politics during the nineteenth century. The Russian Revolution pioneered a model of state-led industrialization that was a powerful draw for many states around the world during the twentieth century. The Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cuban revolutions exemplified variants of southern revolution that resonated around the insurgent ‘Third World’ during the Cold War. The Egyptian Revolution of 1952 established a form of military-led social transformation that inspired revolutionary movements in the region during the 1950s and 1960s, just as comparable uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt inspired unrest in North Africa and the Middle East in 2011. The ‘people power’ uprisings in Eastern and Central Europe in 1989 have served as the lodestone for a range of unarmed revolutions in the contemporary world. Whichever form revolutions have taken, they stand as a challenge to status quo authority, both at home and abroad, by virtue of the example they set in overcoming seemingly overwhelming forces and in their capacity to generate substantial changes both to the texture of their home societies and to international orders. Revolutions and the *avoidance* of revolutions, whether through autocratic modernization, reform programmes, or counter-revolution, are not occasional punctuation marks, but the very grammar of modern world history.

Why Revolutions Matter

Revolutions matter, therefore, in three ways: as *substantive* processes that have played a central role in shaping the modern world; as *analytical*

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categories that overlap with, but do not fully merge into, other processes of social transformation; and as *normative* projects for and against which people have fought and died. This book examines these issues in reverse order. The next section of this chapter concentrates on the normative aspect of revolutions, looking at how revolutionary utopias have both inspired and appalled. The following chapter takes a first cut at the analytical issues most closely associated with the study of revolutions, exploring themes of continuity and change, whether revolutions ‘come’ or are ‘made’, to what extent revolutions should be seen as international or domestic processes, and the difficulties of theory building given the diversity of revolutionary experiences. Chapters 2 and 3 take a more fine-grained approach to these issues, establishing a historicist, relational, inter-social understanding of revolutionary situations, trajectories, and outcomes. This, in turn, provides the parameters for Chapters 4, 5, and 6, which demonstrate the pay-off of this approach to six revolutionary episodes: England, Chile, Cuba, South Africa, Iran, and Ukraine. Chapter 7 examines one of the main forms that revolution has taken in the contemporary world – ‘negotiated revolution’. Chapter 8 examines the prospects for the theory and practice of revolution in the contemporary world.

As a whole, the book aims to make three main contributions to the study of revolutions. First, it develops an *inter-social* account of revolutionary change.⁷ Despite attempts to incorporate international factors into the study of revolution, for the most part, international processes tend to be seen either as the facilitating context *for* revolutions or as the dependent outcome *of* revolutions (Lawson 2015a). The result is an analytical bifurcation between international and domestic in which the former serves as the backdrop to the latter’s causal agency. An inter-social account overcomes this binary by showing how transboundary relations form an interactive crucible for each and every case of revolution, from the desire to ‘catch-up’ with more ‘advanced’ states to the role of ideas in fermenting unrest across borders. Chapter 2 outlines the parameters of a *descriptive* inter-social account that recognizes the centrality of transboundary entanglements to revolutions, and an *analytical* inter-social account that theorizes the ways in which interactions between social sites play a constitutive role in how revolutions begin,

⁷ The term ‘inter-social’ is preferred to alternatives such as intersocietal, international, and inter-state in that it does not presume that the objects of analysis are societies, nations, or states, respectively. Throughout the book, ‘inter-social’ is used interchangeably with ‘transboundary’. For more on this, see Chapters 1 and 2.

develop, and end. The key contention here is that revolutions are inter-social all the way down.

Second, this book historicizes revolutionary dynamics. This goes beyond any claim that ‘history matters’. Most social scientific studies of revolution use history to test and refine their accounts, while some of the most important scholarship on revolutions has been conducted by historians (e.g. Palmer 1959, 1964; Rudé 1964; Brinton 1965/1938; Moore 1966; Bailyn 1967; Hill 1975; Furet 1981, 1999; James 2001/1938; Dubois 2004; Sewell 2005; Adelman 2006; Pincus 2009; Ferrer 2014). Rather, what this claim entails is a need to *historicize* revolutions by being attentive to the constitutive impact of time and place on revolutionary practice and theory. This is different from seeing history primarily as a means of testing theory or as a foundation for coding and experimentation. It is a position that starts from the premise that all revolutions are singular in the sense that the events that produce a particular revolution are not replicable because contexts are never completely alike. This insight, one that many revolutionaries themselves have often been resistant to, is joined with a second claim: that singular events produce sequences – or plots – that can be abstracted and used to explain other revolutionary episodes. Part I uses multiple episodes of revolutionary change to construct ideal-typical anatomies of revolutionary situations, trajectories, and outcomes. Part II refines these revolutionary anatomies through a series of historical illustrations. Part III develops, and explores the edges of, a group of revolutions in the contemporary world: ‘negotiated revolutions’. In each case, the goal is to combine narrative and abstraction in a way that provides an explanation of a particular revolutionary episode, while simultaneously generating portable insights into the wider genus of revolutions. Throughout the book, history and theory are treated not as binaries, but as co-constitutive (Barkawi and Lawson 2017).

The book’s final contribution stems from taking seriously the idea that revolutions are not a single thing (McAdam et al. 2001: 226). This may seem like an obvious claim. Yet much of the social science of revolution proceeds by identifying revolutions as a particular class of phenomenon, breaking them down into their constituent parts (a range of core attributes, necessary and sufficient conditions, independent and dependent variables, etc.), and measuring the fit between these components and cases that conform to – or challenge – these attributes. This book proceeds differently. It starts from particular revolutionary episodes, ordering these episodes into clusters of social action that, in turn, yield causal configurations that reoccur across time and place. Such analysis does not require any

kind of historical homology – there is a basic acceptance of variation in terms of initial conditions, sequences of events, combinations of causal mechanisms, and outcomes (Tilly 2005: 28). The goal is to demonstrate that alongside the singularity of historical experience can be found recurrent causal patterns – interactive dynamics that shed light on diverse revolutionary episodes. The difference between this approach and much existing scholarship is akin to taking a photograph or shooting a film. Most approaches do the former, holding certain conditions constant by taking a snapshot of a particular moment in time, then testing the generalizability of this snapshot to other instances of the phenomena. This book does the latter, seeing social reality as a moving spectacle that requires analytics to be adjusted to changing conditions. The aim is to move away from a view of revolutions as bundles of properties towards a relational concept of revolutions as ‘entities-in-motion’ (Lawson 2017: 77).

Anatomies of Revolution, therefore, seeks to develop a global historical sociology of revolution in which the inter-social provides the ‘global’, the concern with historicizing revolutions provides the ‘historical’, and the relational constitutes the ‘sociology’. If global historical sociology examines the inter-social dynamics that enable the emergence, reproduction, and breakdown of social orders, then revolutions must play a central role in its agenda (Lawson 2017). After all, revolutions are the archetypal instance of social breakdown and reemergence. Beyond this contribution, the book introduces a number of concepts to the study of revolution: *revolutionary sovereignty* (Chapter 1), *causal configurations* (Chapter 2), *the protest spiral* (Chapter 6), and *the moderation curse* (Chapter 7). The bulk of this book, therefore, is concerned with why, when, and how revolutions take place. But behind these dynamics lie more basic impulses. Lurking behind scholarly analysis of revolutionary change are fundamental questions about the rights and wrongs of revolutionary struggles.

Revolutionary Rights and Wrongs

Revolutionaries can never be innocent.⁸

Why have people been willing to lay down their lives in support of, or in opposition to, projects that promise a radical transformation of existing conditions? Many of those who take part in revolutions, whether in the revolutionary vanguard or amongst its rank-and-file, may do so for

⁸ This acute observation is made by the narrator in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s 2015 novel about the Vietnamese revolution: *The Sympathizer*.