

## Introduction

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The twentieth century, as much as any before it, must be judged an age of revolutions. The locus of these revolutions, with the important exceptions of Russia in 1917 and the startling events in Eastern Europe in 1989, has been firmly rooted in the Third World, on the continents of Latin America, Asia, and Africa. The record of these revolutions is highly mixed: almost all have started as popular movements which generated wide hope and optimism both internally and internationally, yet have ended at some later point in time, in economic crisis, political repression, or social failure.

The present study is one not of tragic ends, however, but of hopeful origins. It seeks to extend previous work by myself and others on the causes of successful social revolutions to a consideration of why so few revolutions have earned the label “social” revolutions, while so many have fallen short of the sorts of deep economic, political, and social change that could justify this claim.

This book will survey the causes of a wide variety of Third World revolutions, from cases of successful outcomes (measured in terms of taking and holding state power long enough to engage in a project of social transformation) to their close relations among the anti-colonial social revolutions, comparing and contrasting these with cases that have resulted in short-lived success followed by abrupt reversal, attempted revolutions, political revolutions, and the absence of revolutionary attempts where we might otherwise have expected them to occur.

This work is still unfinished. I have sacrificed some of the depth I initially wanted to bring to it to gain the breadth of scope to test a theory. As Jeff Goodwin noted at the start of his book on comparative revolutions, “There is . . . no ‘new’ historical data in the pages that follow.”<sup>1</sup> Or as Theda Skocpol has put it: “Some books present fresh evidence; other works make arguments that urge the reader to see old problems in a new light. This work is decidedly of the latter sort.”<sup>2</sup> I share the aspirations of both of my predecessors in these pages. I imagine that the results will not satisfy many of the historians of the cases touched on here, whose work

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nevertheless has provided most of the evidence on which I have drawn. Rather, my aim is sociological: to discern distinctive analytic patterns among these revolutionary upsurges, and my hope is to convince readers that there are recurring causal combinations in the historical record. The factors to be tested derive from a multi-faceted theoretical model of the origins of Third World social revolutions that I have been elaborating for the past fifteen (!) years, to which we may now turn.

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*Part One*

Perspectives

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## 1 Theorizing revolutions

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... there are real difficulties in grouping revolutions or, for that matter, any major historical phenomena.

Barrington Moore, Jr.<sup>1</sup>

... successful revolutions always have been, and always will be, unique.

Alberto Flores Galindo<sup>2</sup>

Revolutions powerfully shaped the twentieth-century world we have left, and promise to continue to do so on into the new millennium. The revolutionary events of the past generation in both the Third World from Iran and Nicaragua in 1979 to China and Eastern Europe in 1989 and Chiapas today, pose again old puzzles for social theory even as they herald the new situation of a post-cold war world. Alexis de Tocqueville's dual observation on the French revolution rings just as true for any of these more contemporary upheavals: "never was any such event, stemming from factors far back in the past, so inevitable yet so completely unforeseen."<sup>3</sup> Virtually all of these social movements took analysts by surprise, and send us back to our theories to detect those distant factors that, in some sense, caused them.

The present study aims to shed new light on a set of transformational struggles that may be clustered under the rubric of "Third World revolutions." Part Two looks closely at successes in Mexico between 1910 and 1920, China in the 1940s, Cuba in the late 1950s and Iran and Nicaragua at the end of the 1970s, as well as their close relations, the thoroughgoing anti-colonial revolutions in Algeria in the 1950s, and Vietnam, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Angola, all in the 1970s, and at shorter-lived revolutions such as Guatemala under Arévalo and Arbenz from 1944 to 1954, Iran's oil nationalization period of the early 1950s, Bolivia's experience from 1952 to the early 1960s, Allende's Chile between 1970 and 1973, Michael Manley's democratic socialism in Jamaica in the 1970s, and Maurice Bishop's New Jewel Movement in Grenada from 1979 to 1983. By "success," I mean coming to power and holding it long enough to initiate a process of deep structural transformation; I am not here

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passing judgment on the long and somewhat disappointing history of such bold experiments in change, important as such a balance sheet would be.

The third part of the book investigates a wide ranging set of contrasting cases, starting with the reversal of the seven short-lived revolutions above, the attempts at revolution between 1975 and the present in Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, Peru, the Philippines, China, Algeria, and Chiapas, and moving to a set of political revolutions: China in 1911, Haiti and the Philippines in 1986, and Zaire and South Africa in the 1990s.

The central question we will ask of each is what were the causes of the events? What sets of economic, political, and cultural factors were at work, and in what combinations? What role was played by external factors in each case, what role by internal forces? In the end, we shall seek to discern deep patterns across cases, thereby taking up the challenge posed by Barrington Moore, Jr. and Alberto Flores Galindo, who feel that revolutions are so unique that finding a pattern among them is difficult, if not impossible.

The puzzle at the heart of this book is: Why are social revolutions such rare events? And why have so few succeeded and so many failed? The present chapter will lay the basis for the answers suggested by the subsequent case studies in two ways – by briefly introducing the history of theorizing about social revolutions, and by proposing an original model of the origins of Third World revolutions to use as a guide for comparative-historical investigation.

### Defining revolution

The study of revolution is marked by fundamental theoretical and political controversy, beginning with the definition of the term itself.<sup>4</sup> An influential definition of what he calls the “great revolutions” was offered by political scientist Samuel Huntington some four decades ago:

rapid, fundamental, and violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership, and governmental activity and policies. Revolutions are thus to be distinguished from insurrections, rebellions, revolts, coups and wars of independence.<sup>5</sup>

This points to the numerous dimensions of social transformation that revolutions unleash, but substitutes *violence* for the seizure of state power and/or mass participation. A better definition of social revolution has been provided by sociologist Theda Skocpol, who takes up some of Huntington’s criteria while moving fruitfully beyond them:

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Social revolutions are rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures; and they are accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below . . .

What is unique to social revolution is that basic changes in social structure and in political structure occur together in a mutually reinforcing fashion. And these changes occur through intense sociopolitical conflicts in which class struggles play a key role.<sup>6</sup>

This definition, which I shall adopt in full as my own, represents an advance in linking political and social changes and in identifying the importance of large-scale participation. In this we find an echo of Trotsky's famous formulation: "The most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historic events . . . The history of a revolution is for us first of all a history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny."<sup>7</sup> The salience of these three factors – political change, structural transformation, and mass participation – allows us to dissociate revolution from violence per se and to explore the revolutionary potential of such strongly reformist democratic movements as those of Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala, Michael Manley in Jamaica, and Salvador Allende in Chile, each of whom aimed at serious transformation of their society.

Skocpol's definition has the drawback of not telling us *how much* political and social transformation is required to qualify a case as a social revolution; nor does it define "rapid"; nor, finally, does it stipulate *how long* a revolutionary government must remain in power to constitute a "successful" case. These are judgments for which observers will have different answers. My sustained case studies of "success" include Mexico, where the most radical forces were defeated; Nicaragua, in which power was held only eleven years; and Iran, where socio-economic change may not have been fundamental. Only Cuba and China now seem entirely uncontroversial on this list. I acknowledge these difficulties, and will attempt to defend my decisions at the appropriate points. The definition does have the great merit, however, of throwing into relief what the successful cases have in common with each other, and how they vary from other sets of cases. Anti-colonial revolutions, I will argue, are closest in kind to the five principal cases of success, both in meeting Skocpol's three criteria, and in the patterning of causality. In fact, they differ mainly in that the government overthrown is not an indigenous one but a foreign one. Reversed revolutions are cases where revolutionaries came to power – sometimes by non-violent means – but failed to hold it long enough to fulfill Skocpol's requirement of basic transformation. In my view they represent significant cases of incipient revolutionary transformation;

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taking them seriously, as cases of both success and failure, is a novel feature of the present study.

These sets of successful cases by our criteria can be clearly contrasted with such types as attempted social revolutions where revolutionaries never came to power at all, but where the movements were prepared to carry out the deep social transformation in question (obviously, such judgments are based on historical counter-factualizing); and political revolutions, which possess a mass character and alter the outlines of the state, but fail to make deep changes in social structure. In this way one can see Iran as a social revolution, and the Philippines as a political one, or Chile as a social revolution, however short-lived, versus South Africa as an enduring, but only political revolution. I exclude from this analysis movements which lacked mass participation even where significant social transformation arguably occurred, as in the “movement” which toppled Haile Selassie in Ethiopia in 1974, the Afghan revolution of 1978, or the horrific events in Khmer Rouge Cambodia in the 1970s, while including the events in Grenada in 1979 also carried out by a small group, for the society itself was much smaller and embraced the change in power with immediate enthusiasm. These are important distinctions, if difficult judgments, to make, possible only if we take Skocpol’s very useful definitional work seriously. This allows us to focus on the conjunction of human agency and structural change, to isolate the causes of those events where people, in large numbers, came together to remake society. I do not pretend to cover the entire universe of relevant cases here, although I have tackled a good part of that universe.<sup>8</sup>

### Historical perspectives on revolutions

This study is about the origins of such events. Social science models of the causes of revolutions date back to the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>9</sup> Comparative historians such as L. P. Edwards in *The Natural History of Revolution* (1927), Crane Brinton in *The Anatomy of Revolution* (1938), and G. S. Pettee in *The Process of Revolution* (1938) engaged in a search for common patterns among such major revolutions as the French, American, English, and Russian cases. According to Jack Goldstone, the findings of this first-generation “Natural History of Revolution” school included:

1. Prior to revolutions, intellectuals cease to support the regime.
2. Prior to revolutions, the state undertakes reforms.
3. Outbreaks have more to do with a state crisis than active opposition.
4. After taking power, conflicts arise within the revolutionary coalition.
5. The first group to seize power is moderate reformers.

6. The revolution then radicalizes because moderates fail to go far enough.
7. The radicals then bring about organizational and ideological changes, taking extreme measures to deal with problems and secure power.
8. Radicals impose coercive order (“the terror”) to implement their program in the midst of social dislocation.
9. Military leaders such as Cromwell, Washington, Napoleon, and Trotsky often emerge.
10. “Eventually things settle down and pragmatic moderates regain power.”<sup>10</sup>

The critique commonly aimed at these pioneers of theory is that they merely *describe* the process of revolution, they do not explain *why* revolutions occur. With respect to more recent Third World social revolutions, it must be noted that many other considerations enter into their causation that were not available to these pre-World War 2 theorists of revolutions among the great world powers, as we shall see. And yet, as description, this list is not at all bad, as some of our case studies – Iran, for example – bear out.

A second generation of somewhat disparate American social scientists in the 1960s tried to explain why and when revolutions arise, using either social psychological or structural-functional approaches to collective behavior, which Rod Aya refers to generically (and dismissively) as the “volcanic model” of revolution.<sup>11</sup> Ted Robert Gurr and James Davies developed theories of political violence based on aggregate psychological states, notably relative deprivation. Davies proposed a “J-curve” – “a period of growing prosperity that raises people’s expectations for a better life, followed by a sharp economic downturn that dashes those recently raised expectations” – as a recipe for revolt.<sup>12</sup> Within the then popular modernization paradigm derived from Parsonian structural-functionalism, Neil Smelser and Chalmers Johnson looked for imbalances in the subsystems of a society which disoriented people and made them more prone to embrace radical ideologies.<sup>13</sup> Smelser, in his *Theory of Collective Behavior* (1962) provides a prescient set of factors including structural conduciveness, strain, new beliefs, precipitants, mobilization, and social control. The critique that is generally advanced of all of these approaches hinges on the difficulty of observing and measuring aggregate psychological states and societal disequilibrium, and the corresponding danger of sliding into tautology – a difficulty and danger for all who would theorize revolutions. As Davies himself remarked of Chalmers Johnson: “If one tells an automobile mechanic that the car’s engine is dysfunctional, it is just about as clear and true as when one says it about an old society.”<sup>14</sup> It is also true that these models have a hard time explaining



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why revolutions have been so rare (as the types of change initiating the pattern have been widespread), and there is here no mechanism to explain the outcomes of revolution (as the earlier Natural History school did). Goldstone tasks them further with being too “purposive,” i.e. seeking to explain revolutions in terms of the rise of oppositional actors in society.<sup>15</sup> However, in my view this emphasis, along with the attendant concern for the values, beliefs, and ideologies of those involved, is a strength of these otherwise not too convincing theories, and in its way compares favorably with the more one-sidedly structural theories that would constitute the third generation.

Beginning in the 1960s and increasingly in the 1970s, a series of structural macro-sociologies of revolution were elaborated, identifying actors and themes ranging from the state, dominant elites, and armies to international pressures and peasant mobilization as the keys to understanding social revolution. An obvious influential precursor was Karl Marx, who stressed the role played by class struggles as structured by the mode of production (unequal social relations based upon a particular labor process) found in societies undergoing economic transition. De Tocqueville, too, in a more *ad hoc* fashion, noted the importance of the state and elites, village autonomy, and ideology in bringing about the French revolution.<sup>16</sup> Structural theories of revolution in contemporary social science were pioneered in 1966 by Barrington Moore Jr.’s path-breaking comparative study, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Moore identified the vulnerable moment as that of the transition to capitalist agriculture and the changing relations among peasants, the state (usually a monarchy), landlords, and a nascent bourgeoisie in this period. Variations in the relative strength of these social groups produced peasant revolution in China, democracy in France, England, and the United States, and fascism in Japan and Germany. He argued that successful commercialization of agriculture undercuts peasant revolution, that peasants must possess certain solidarity structures to rebel, and that they need allies to make a revolution.<sup>17</sup> Eric Wolf’s 1969 survey of six “peasant wars” (by which he really means “revolutions in an agrarian society”<sup>18</sup>) confirms the utility of much of Moore’s schema with a look at Third World cases. Though he insists that each revolution has unique historical determinants, patterns do emerge – the commercialization of agriculture threatens peasants’ access to land, middle peasants are best placed to rebel, allies must be found among the urban classes, and armed force is necessary to seize the state.<sup>19</sup> Jeffery Paige’s 1975 book on Third World peasant movements specifies that revolution occurs only where landed classes depend on the land itself (not capital, machinery, and technology) for their income and peasants are amenable to organization in their capacity as sharecroppers

or migrant laborers.<sup>20</sup> Of these three theorists, Paige is the most single-minded in focusing on the peasantry at the expense of urban sectors, the state, and almost all else.

Theda Skocpol's 1979 work, *States and Social Revolutions*, represents a landmark in the sociology of revolutions. For our purposes it clearly illustrates both the undoubted strengths and the distinctive weaknesses of a resolutely structural approach. Skocpol argues for a structural, as opposed to a "voluntarist" or "purposive" perspective:

[Historical revolutions] . . . have been powerfully shaped and limited by existing socioeconomic and international conditions . . . The logic of these conflicts has not been controlled by any one group or class, no matter how seemingly central in the revolutionary process . . . To explain social revolutions, one must find problematic, first, the emergence (not "making") of a revolutionary situation within an old regime. Then, one must be able to identify the objectively conditioned and complex intermeshing of the various actions of the diversely situated groups – an intermeshing that shapes the revolutionary process and gives rise to the new regime.<sup>21</sup>

The particular structures on which she focuses attention are "the nexes of state/state, state/economy, and state/class relationships."<sup>22</sup> Her comparative study of France, Russia, and China yields a common pattern: political crises arose when old-regime states could not meet external challenges because of internal obstacles in agrarian and elite relations. In France, foreign wars led to fiscal crisis which inefficient agriculture exacerbated. Efforts to tax nobles led to elite revolts; peasants took advantage of the crisis and were able to mobilize due to communal solidarity structures. In Russia, collapse in World War 1 led to state crisis; in China the Japanese invasion and World War 2 created an opportunity. Skocpol also provides a theory of outcomes, linking these to pre-revolutionary structural factors and revolutionary crises. The new states are more centralized and stronger vis-à-vis internal elites and lower classes and other states.<sup>23</sup>

Various criticisms can be leveled at this model as it stands (leaving aside for now its potential applicability to Third World cases). On one hand, it is cast at a rather high level of abstraction – an emphasis on relations between states, among classes, and between state and classes covers just about everything. There are also significant variations among even the three cases she analyzes, raising the issue of the degree to which there is a single pattern here at all (not that there must be just one, as we shall see). The limits of a structural approach become apparent too: structures don't change *by themselves*, so change cannot be completely explained in structural terms. As Michael Taylor puts it: "*Social* changes are produced by