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Edited by Brady Wagoner , Fathali M. Moghaddam , Jaan Valsiner
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The Psychology of Radical Social Change

Since 2011 the world has experienced an explosion of popular uprisings that began in the Middle East and quickly spread to other regions. What are the different social-psychological conditions for these events to emerge, what different trajectories do they take, and how are they are represented to the public? To answer these questions, this book applies the latest social psychological theories to contextualized cases of revolutions and uprisings from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century in countries around the world. In so doing, it explores continuities and discontinuities between past and present uprisings, and foregrounds such issues as the crowds, collective action, identity changes, globalization, radicalization, the plasticity of political behavior, and public communication.

BRADY WAGONER is Professor of Psychology at Aalborg University, Denmark, and an associate editor for the journals *Culture and Psychology* and *Peace and Conflict*. He received his PhD from the University of Cambridge, where he started his line of research on the social and cultural psychology, remembering, social change, and the development of dynamic methodologies. His recent books include *The Constructive Mind: Bartlett's Psychology in Reconstruction* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), *The Psychology of Imagination* (2017), *Street Art of Resistance* (with Sarah H. Awad, 2017) and *Handbook of Culture and Memory* (2018). He was awarded the Early Career Award by the American Psychological Association (Division 26).

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The Psychology of Radical Social Change

From Rage to Revolution

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This book is dedicated to Michael Billig for his seminal contributions to our understanding of the role of ideology in everyday life and the intricate social-psychological processes that inhibit progressive revolutions.

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Foreword

Rom Harré

Revolution in the political or cultural sense, say, in the conventions of art, is a metaphor for a species of change. "Revolution" is not one thing. The uses of the word cover a wide field of "family resemblances," some of which are superficial and some of which are profound. In tracing its role in human life, "all history" is subsumed.

The root idea is a process by which a system, say, a wheel, returns to its original condition. In the political sense, "revolution" contrasts not only with its material sense of rotation but also with other modes of change. Evolution is a process of gradual change; that is, only some features of a system or practice change in any time, though the change may be profound if a long enough time scale is considered. The third cultural and political possibility is conservation, in which, in a fairly long period of time, no changes of consequence occur. Ancient Egyptian art and architecture seem to have maintained the same conventions for a very long time.

The very idea of political revolution depends on a belief in the possibility of social change. In turn, for this idea to make sense, there must be some conception of the roots of the social order that revolutionaries propose to change. And looking even more deeply into the presuppositions of radical movements, there must be some program of action that will change the presumptive roots of the existing social order and replace them with something different.

In a political or cultural revolution the change to the system is abrupt. At least in principle a revolution involves a total change of all the significant attributes of the system overthrown, relative to some scale of importance. This kind of revolution is the topic of the essays in this book and many other writings in political philosophy and cultural commentary.

In the political context, though it is not always the case; the revolutionaries have little idea with what to replace the system they have overthrown. Chaos and disorder appear, while the leaders search for some improvisation that will keep some sort of common life going.

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An important topic for research apropos of "revolution" is to investigate the conditions for revolutionary change to break out. Following directly on this comes the question of the conditions that are necessary for a revolution to succeed, at least for a while. Why are some insurrections successfully repressed while others succeed? What distinguished the Paris of 1786 from that of 1860? When a revolution has succeeded and the old order is overthrown, what militates against the new conditions of life continuing as a new stable social order? And why do internal conflicts among the revolutionaries occur so frequently as to negate the change that seems to be imminent?

The intensity of revolutionary fervor is an important psychological feature of insurrections psychologists might seek to understand. Sometimes a frenzy of destruction breaks out as the old order is broken and the constraints on public behavior seem to dissolve. This might take the form of mass murders, such as the Terror of 1793 in Paris under the "Committee of Public Safety" or the wrecking of the plant on which the workings of the oil industry in Bulgaria had depended prior to the collapse of the communist regime.

Linked to all these considerations is a profound and perhaps unanswerable psychological question. What sort of people are the revolutionaries? Is there anything that Cromwell, Lenin, and Akhenaton had in common other than a summoning need for change? And if they are part of a group, why do they so often fall out among themselves?

The most important question a psychologist might attempt to answer is why so few programs of revolutionary action succeed. In case after case, seemingly independent of the religion, social arrangements, and language of the culture of a society, at the historical moment of a revolutionary event, after sometimes a very short time, the very system that was overthrown reappears. Napoleon very soon becomes emperor, and Stalin very soon becomes the Czar by another name. And the "other name" point is fundamental to understanding why political orders reappear as if by magic.

Why do political revolutions so often seem to be succeeded, after a period of chaos, with a regime that is very similar to the one that has been brought down? By what means have the basic social relations that define a certain society survived to shape postrevolutionary society? Part of the answer lies in the necessity for everyday language to remain meaningful in order that the new situation might be intelligible both to the revolutionaries and to their beneficiaries. The revolutionaries in France realized something of this, renaming the days and the months and changing ordinary terms of address. The necessary language continuity is coupled with the continuity of the means for accomplishing very small-scale

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necessities of everyday life. Recipes are not usually discarded while others are adopted in a revolution. A baguette is a baguette for whoever is having one for breakfast. While the leaders of a revolution are attacking the grand institutions, such as royalty or the form of the economy, the small acts that constitute everyday life continue unchanged. Their invisibility makes them potent continuants. We might call these *reductions* – the smallest social acts that are meaningful, their repetition serving to maintain the old society.

The social psychology that offers the best chance of explaining this apparently paradoxical phenomenon grounds all social arrangements in the catalog of meanings by which the populace of the time understands social events, and the rules, explicit and tacit, that express the orderliness of the customs and conventions of society at that time and place. What is the significance of burning someone alive whose opinions you dislike? What are the conventions by which an *auto da fe* is carried on? What is the meaning of the various incidents in the unfolding of a high school prom, and by what tacit rules are they managed? When can you hire a limo?

Looking closely at the social order of a particular moment at a particular time and place reveals levels of persistence through time of different kinds of customs. Those that are the longest lasting are the everyday means by which the simplest and least attended to aspects of social order are managed. How do people greet one another, and how do greeting ceremonials differ among different categories of persons – fathers and mothers, officials, friends, and so on? How is the distribution of food at mealtimes managed? And by whom? Research by such historians of culture as Peter and Iona Opie (*The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*) reveals a stable repetition of patterns over many centuries. Again, we will call these basic and persistent elements of social life *reductons*. When we analyze an episode of real social life, what are the basic social atoms beyond which analysis will not take us? In Europe, some version of shaking hands is ubiquitous among men and some version of kissing among women. There are definite customs for greetings between men and women depending on their social relationships. But none of this applies in India even after two hundred years of the Raj and nearly a century of Westernization.

But when the revolutionaries man the barricades, it is to cries of "A bas les aristos," "Viva Fidel," and such like references to matters at the very opposite scale from the way the sans-culottes greet one another or the executioner motions the next victim to approach the guillotine. It is the persistence of reductons through moments of revolutionary fervor, because they are not attended to and their significance is not realized,

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that accounts in large part for the reproduction of the lineaments of the old society in the new. Once upon a time, the French rallied around the *fleur de lys*, then they flocked to the *tricouler*. But both activities were "flocking to the flag." So far as I know, the only example of a revolutionary movement that recognized this phenomenon was the French. The revolutionaries installed the goddess of reason on the altar of Notre Dame. They gave the days of the week and months of the year new names, and they tried to stamp out "monsieur" and "madame." Their rule was for so short a period that these seemingly trivial but actually deep innovations did not take. The disappearance of "thee" and "thou" from English in the eighteenth century made social space for a form of address that did not demand the overt recognition of the social status of one's interlocutor, unlike the *tu* and *vous* of the continental languages.

Though it would be impossible to devise a revolutionary program to build a society on new reductons, which did not serve as the carriers of the tacit social mores of the old regime, it is pretty clear what will not work – apparent changes in the social structure of the state. Social structures are epiphenomena of the activities of actual people, interacting according to their conceptions of the proper way to manage their lives in relation to others. The camaraderie of the munitions factories and hospitals of World War I had much more to do with the changing status of women in Britain than with any amount of demonstrations by the brave and well-meaning suffragettes.

Let us return to basics by another route. What does lead to social change? Close study of historical examples discloses something like a mutation/selection process. New customs are forever being introduced. Mostly they do not catch on outside the circle of their originators. Gender-neutral pronouns failed to change common speech. The step-by-step encroachment by women on the preserves of higher education is such an example. What began in London slowly spread to such bastions as Oxford and, later, Cambridge. Innovation and environment must match at just the right moment for a new social custom that might in the end spread to being about a fundamental social revolution. But there are no guarantees that any such coincidence will occur. The best models for social change and how to bring it about are surely the fashion and automotive industries. The couturiers invent a new style of dressing. The big clothing stores offer it, and the public affirms or rejects it. Alec Issogonis designed a car with a transverse engine. Now nearly all cars are made that way. Why? Somehow it suited the mood of the car-buying public. That is the end of the story.

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