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PART I

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Introduction

THE PUZZLE OF REACTIONARY DIFFUSION

Why do regressive changes sometimes spread across states and countries? What makes "bad" innovations attractive to emulators and prompts their adoption? Social scientists commonly assume that it is modern, progressive innovations that exude strong appeal and therefore diffuse inside countries and from nation to nation. In this vein, modernization theory postulates that new, rational ways of organizing politics and exercising authority have a clear advantage in efficiency and legitimacy and therefore displace tradition and religion; accordingly, political liberalism pushed aside the divine right of kings, and democracy has more and more displaced the rule of traditional elites. With similar optimism, many currents of constructivism tend to claim that advanced, universalistic norms and values sooner or later win out against personalism and arbitrariness, leading, for instance, to the growing protection of human rights (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; Finnemore and Sikkink 2001: 403–4). These progressivist premises also inform large parts of the burgeoning literature on diffusion in comparative politics.[1] Authors often assume that improvements such as political liberalism and democracy spread (Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett 2008) – not repression and authoritarian rule. Therefore, studies of novel, beneficial reforms far outnumber analyses that examine "the political power of bad ideas" (Schrad 2010).

But twentieth-century history calls this progressivism into question. Modern, forward-looking innovations are not always the models that most decision-makers find appealing and therefore adopt. Instead, reactionary institutions and policies can diffuse as well. Most jarringly, authoritarianism and fascism spread during the interwar years, in Europe and Latin America. Squeezed between

[1] The field of international relations, by contrast, features many analyses of the spread of war, terrorism, civil war, etc. – a point I owe to Fabrizio Gilardi.

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communism with its world-revolutionary ambitions and this upsurge of right-wing regimes, liberal, pluralist democracy was on the defensive – contrary to the hopes of modernization theory and constructivism (see graphs in Huntington 1991: 14–15, 26; Gunitsky 2014: 562). Democracy came under renewed assault in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s, when a rash of military coups rippled through the region; shockingly, these authoritarian takeovers often found broad civilian support (a fact downplayed in retrospect). The result was a pronounced, deep reverse wave that overwhelmed many liberal regimes, especially in South America;[2] even the longstanding democracies of Chile and Uruguay fell prey to this riptide (see graphs in Smith 2012: 27, 35; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013: 3, 73–4; see also the coup data in Powell and Thyne 2011: 255).

While a future volume will examine the massive, complex autocratic wave of the interwar years, the present book seeks to explain the latter, regional process of reactionary diffusion, one of the most clear-cut and striking instances in which modern history seemed to move "in the wrong direction." The atrocities committed by the Latin American dictatorships, which continue to cast a dark shadow long after re-democratization, highlight the historical significance of these regressive regime changes. In light of the progressivism prevailing in the academic literature, the proliferation of reactionary rule over the course of fifteen years constitutes a puzzle. It is therefore crucial to investigate why authoritarian regimes spread from country to country. What causal mechanisms propelled this surprising reverse wave? This study assesses the main approaches applied in the diffusion literature, which highlight great power pressure and imposition; normative appeal; and rational learning (Weyland 2005: 268–71).

THE MAIN ARGUMENT

Extant approaches cannot provide convincing explanations for the Latin American reverse wave of the 1960s and 1970s, as Chapter 2 demonstrates. The great power in the Western hemisphere, the United States, did not impose dictatorship; instead, its influence on democratic breakdown was limited, as Chapter 7 shows in depth. Similarly, the normative appeal of authoritarianism was low; military rule was seen as the lesser evil, tasked with forestalling a descent into disorder and chaos. As reactionary diffusion was not driven by coercion or moral attraction, it resulted mainly from interest-based learning. But this learning systematically deviated from standard rationality, as Chapters 4, 5, and 6 demonstrate.

[2] Most of Central America was chafing under repressive authoritarianism, as thoroughly explained in Lehoucq (2012); because there was little progress to reverse, this subregion was therefore not much affected by the Latin American reverse wave.

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TABLE 1.1: *Military Dictatorships in South America, 1960–1980* (Institutional military regimes marked in bold)

1962	**Argentina, Peru**
1963	**Ecuador**
1964	Bolivia, **Brazil**
1966	**Argentina**
1968	**Peru**
1970	Bolivia
1971	Bolivia
1972	**Ecuador**
1973	**Chile, Uruguay**
1976	**Argentina**
1978	Bolivia
1979	Bolivia
1980	Bolivia

Cognitive-psychological mechanisms, especially inferential shortcuts and the skewed weighting of gains versus losses, shaped and distorted the perceptions and decisions that drove the remarkable spread of autocratic rule in the 1960s and 1970s. By applying cognitive heuristics and acting out of disproportionate loss aversion, sociopolitical elites, common people, and their organizations overreacted to perceived revolutionary challenges to their core interests; driven by excessive fear, they installed and supported repressive authoritarian rule to protect order and hierarchy. Thus, the central mechanism that produced the proliferation of autocratic regimes was a backlash effect. Left-wing efforts to spread revolution, inspired by the epic Cuban Revolution of 1959, prompted determined counterrevolution, which forcefully sought to immunize the region against the communist virus. Radical diffusion, which started with a rash of guerrilla movements, provoked reactionary counterdiffusion, which led to the installation of military dictatorships in country after country.

With these arguments, the book substantiates and further develops the bounded rationality approach to diffusion studies that my earlier work has introduced (Weyland 2014). In particular, the new study conducts an "out of sample" assessment of this theory by going beyond the analysis of democratizing changes and investigating authoritarian waves, which were pushed forward by different types of actors. After all, elites are the protagonists in autocratic regression, not the masses, which play crucial roles in struggles over democratization (Teorell 2010: chap. 5). Do these elite sectors operate in fundamentally similar ways as their progressive, pro-democratic adversaries?

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Moreover, the present study enriches the bounded rationality framework by highlighting the decisive role of asymmetrical loss aversion, a mechanism rarely invoked in political science. As a wealth of psychological experiments and field studies show, humans attach much greater subjective weight to losses than to gains. Therefore, they are zealous in stemming deterioration, while pursuing improvements with much less energy (Kahneman and Tversky 2000: chaps. 7–11; Zamir 2014; for an application to contentious politics, see Bergstrand 2014). This skewed choice mechanism is crucial for explaining the backlash driving the reverse wave of military regimes. In particular, loss aversion accounts for a striking feature of Latin America's autocratic regression, namely the enormous brutality with which military generals imposed and exercised their rule. In dislodging tottering democracies, suppressing their political enemies, and extending their hold on power, dictators employed an unprecedented degree of violence. They overshot beyond any conceivable political need and engaged in "unnecessary" overkill, as evident in the heinous, large-scale human rights violations committed by these autocracies, such as the infamous "caravan of death" in Chile (Verdugo 2001). This paroxysm of cruelty reflected excessive threat perceptions derived via cognitive heuristics, which triggered disproportionate loss aversion, the main impulse behind authoritarian crackdowns.

To explain this violent reflex, the study argues that Latin America's main wave of autocracy emerged from a strong reaction against apparent threats (see for democratic breakdown in general, Linz 1978: 14; and more broadly Stenner 2005). The rash of military coups constituted exaggerated responses to the danger that important sectors saw emanate from the radical left, which had received an enormous political and ideological boost from the Cuban Revolution. As radicals inspired by Fidel Castro's surprising success sought to promote similar profound transformations in a wide range of countries, right-wingers cracked down exceptionally hard to block these emulation efforts. Loss aversion explains why left-wing efforts at diffusion provoked massive counterdiffusion. This interactive dynamic, through which incessant attempts to spread revolution prompted determined counterrevolution, is central for the present study.

Historical analysis shows that the main motive for adopting reactionary regimes was a pervasive fear of the radical, revolutionary threats emanating from communism. To many observers, the Cuban Revolution demonstrated the striking ease with which a determined minority could grab power, impose total control, and overturn the sociopolitical order (Wickham-Crowley 1992: 30–7). Jumping to the conclusion that this unexpected, dramatic revolution could well find replication in their own countries, conservative and even centrist sectors did everything in their power to forestall such diffusion, which left-wing extremists and revolutionary Cuba actively promoted (Wright 2001; Brown 2017). The perceived danger of communism's spread – which was in fact quite unlikely – induced many political forces and organizations to seek refuge in

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the strong arms of anticommunists. Therefore, they demanded, supported, or accepted the brutal repression of left-wing revolutionaries and the imposition of harsh autocratic rule. Of course, the destruction of political liberalism and democracy exposed these sectors themselves to the arbitrary abuse of power by unaccountable dictators. To escape from the overestimated specter of the communist fire, they jumped into the reactionary frying pan, which really did burn, though not as badly as the imagined Marxist inferno. Disproportionate loss aversion drove this precipitous choice.

The threat perceptions and the reactionary reflex that produced the Latin American wave of autocracy did not emerge from thorough assessments and rational evaluations, but from the hasty, problematic inferences and unbalanced cost-benefit analyses of bounded rationality. Instead of rational learning, heuristic shortcuts governed information processing (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982; Gilovich, Griffin, and Kahneman 2002), and asymmetrical loss aversion deformed political decisions (Kahneman and Tversky 2000; Kahneman 2011). Specifically, people relied on inferential heuristics to assess the impact of the Cuban Revolution. Therefore, they greatly overestimated the chances of communism taking hold in their own country. Because the resulting threat perceptions fueled outsized loss aversion, important sectors took excessive countermeasures to defend themselves against this menace and fortified their polities through autocratic rule. Chapter 3 develops these arguments in greater depth and specifies their cognitive-psychological underpinnings, which Chapters 4, 5, and 6 then substantiate with ample documentary evidence.

One point bears highlighting: asymmetrical loss aversion played such an important role because communism promised a profound, dramatic, and all-encompassing transformation of the socioeconomic and political order; consequently, both the supposed benefits and the likely costs of revolution were huge. Due to the enormous magnitude of these prospective gains and losses, asymmetrical loss aversion produced deviations from conventional cost-benefit assessments that were substantial, consequential, and clearly noticeable, despite the messiness and "opacity" of the political world (cf. Pierson 2000: 259–62). Because losses have much greater motivating force than gains, defenders of the established order tended to outnumber promoters of revolution and to act with particularly strong determination, including the willingness to employ brutal violence. By contrast, steps toward democratization (as analyzed in Weyland 2014) constitute less drastic change: They offer benefits – increased political rights and liberties – to large segments of the citizenry without imposing great net costs on other segments.[3] Therefore,

[3] While there often are powerful sectors that benefit from autocratic rule, the concentration of power and lack of accountability exposes them to the risk of losing these benefits and even suffer costs. For an interesting recent analysis of these risks and of elites' resulting ambivalence toward autocracy, see Albertus (2015).

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loss aversion often does not spur a surplus of stubborn resistance that permanently blocks advances toward freedom.

The exceptional case of democratization in Chile, where the military coup of 1973 had evicted the only Marxist government that ever won a democratic election, demonstrates this difference. In the initial stages of the democratic transition during the 1980s, the depth of prospective change was unclear: significant sectors feared that the end of dictatorship would result in the dismantling of General Pinochet's market model and his rigid 1980 constitution and bring socialism back to power (Weyland 2014: 193). Therefore, resistance fueled by loss aversion for years prevented pro-democratic sectors from achieving inroads. The authoritarian regime finally relinquished power only after the main opposition groupings credibly promised moderation, accepted the market model, acquiesced in the constitutional framework (cf. Fuentes 2012), and thus strictly limited the change they sought and the cost it would entail for Pinochet's supporters. That is, democratization only advanced after the opposition largely deactivated loss aversion (Roberts 1998: chap. 5; see in general Drake 2009: 204, 214; Schmitter 2010: 19–20; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2013: 36–9, 77–80, 104–14). This case shows that the fear of profound socioeconomic and political transformation, especially revolution, triggers loss aversion to a much greater extent and in a more observable way than most efforts at democratization, in which only a political regime change is at stake.

In sum, when ample sectors see a serious risk of communism, loss aversion severely skews their political choices and prompts an urge to adopt strong countermeasures. Accordingly, the spread of autocratic rule in Latin America primarily constituted counterdiffusion: because radical leftists were captivated by the "success" of the Cuban Revolution and made incessant ill-considered attempts to imitate this precedent in many countries, ample rightist and even centrist sectors felt the need to combat these efforts at any price, including their own liberty. Left-wing hyperaction prompted right-wing overreaction. Thus, the riptide of autocracy during the 1960s and 1970s constituted a backlash phenomenon. As the example of the Cuban Revolution helped to fuel widespread radicalization during the 1960s, this reverse wave assumed a reactionary character, in the literal sense of the term. These clustered regime changes tried to stem the historical advance of mass mobilization and restore the stability that had prevailed in the past (cf. Mayer 1971: 48–9; Hirschman 1991: 8–10; Lilla 2016: xxii–xxiii).

DIFFUSION AND COUNTERDIFFUSION

The power and significance of the backlash driven by asymmetrical loss aversion have broader implications for diffusion studies, starting with their conceptual foundation. Diffusion is usually defined as the process by which an innovation or precedent in one unit increases the probability of its replication in various other

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units; by providing positive reinforcement, diffusion brings the spread of similarity amid diversity (cf. Elkins and Simmons 2005: 36; Weyland 2007: 19). But a broader conceptualization is required for investigating the feared spread of revolutionary change and its reactionary repercussions. Facing an externally inspired challenge that would entail exorbitant costs for them, status quo-oriented sectors often go beyond defensive efforts to avert such a profound transformation. Instead, they counterattack, repress their radical adversaries, and destroy revolutionaries' capacity to seek an overhaul in the future. Thus, political groupings cannot only refuse to follow a precedent, but try to turn the clock back. Attempts to force revolutionary change can thus provoke serious setbacks.

Consequently, the diffusion of radical contention tends to galvanize pronounced polarization. Initiatives to emulate a revolutionary precedent usually provoke counteracting efforts to suppress these challenges and prevent their recurrence (Beissinger 2007: 268–74). Ambitious transformational impulses thus have a cleaving impact: they stimulate initiatives toward imitation but also moves in the opposite direction. Attempted advances serve as a deterrent and trigger a backlash. These contradictory effects, which are both causal products of the initial precedent, complicate diffusion studies (Gunitsky 2013). Statistical analyses, for instance, are only starting to grapple with the possibility that such opposite repercussions cancel out (Pengl 2013). By looking primarily for direct replication, scholars may miss the contradictory effects of the triggering impulses and overlook powerful counterdiffusion. Whereas the diffusion literature has focused on positive stimuli for replication, such as contagion and demonstration effects, this study demonstrates the importance of repulsion by powerful deterrent effects.

Due to this backlash, the net outcome of diffusion impulses can in fact be negative (Weyland 2010: 1158–9). The more drastic and radical the change sought, the more likely it prompts an aggregate move away from the initial model or precedent, rather than toward it. Communist revolution promised great gains for some, and corresponding losses for others. Yet disproportionate loss aversion means that subjectively, losses clearly outweigh gains of equal magnitude. This asymmetry was a principal reason why the leftist quest for deep-reaching change remained much weaker than the rightist efforts to squash this quest at all cost. As a result, radical efforts to spread revolution were mostly unsuccessful, whereas reactionary counterattacks, which included attempts to seek refuge under authoritarian rule, advanced much farther. Consequently, the Cuban Revolution did not prompt the spread of communist transformation from country to country, but the proliferation of right-wing authoritarian regimes that sought to immunize countries against the revolutionary virus.

This remarkably lopsided distribution of outcomes reflected not only obvious resource advantages, especially the command over economic clout, political influence, and military might that established elites held. Instead, even in popular support, antirevolutionaries usually bested revolutionaries.

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As the available evidence suggests, conservative military coups that ousted leftist governments in Latin America often found majority acceptance, as in Brazil in 1964 and in Argentina in 1976 (Brands 2010: 111, 116, 120; Cohen 1989: 41–6; Potash 1996: 508; Novaro and Palermo 2003: 23–33; Finchelstein 2014: 124–5; Motta 2014: 11–13).[4] In fact, Argentine society in 1976 even "justified [the military regime's] ruthless repression" of urban guerrilla groupings and "vigorously supported their elimination" via forced disappearances and assassinations (Moyano 1995: 96, 152; see also 98). Thus, loss aversion induced ample sectors to reject radical left-wingers with fervor and to embrace reactionary forces that sought to forestall the risk of revolution through the installation of autocracy.

This stark asymmetry suggests that deterrent effects can be stronger than contagion and demonstration effects. Because the diffusion literature has focused primarily on the positive boost emanating from novel models and precedents, it has largely overlooked this possibility (Gunitsky 2013), which arises from high-stakes innovations with huge repercussions. By calling attention to the double-sided impact that external stimuli can have, this book tries to broaden the focus of this important body of scholarship.

THE RELEVANCE AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

Investigating Latin America's reactionary wave holds great substantive and theoretical relevance. This cluster of liberal breakdown and autocratic imposition constituted a watershed in the political development of many countries. The military regimes of the 1960s and 1970s left lasting legacies. The dictatorships in Brazil, Peru, and – more disastrously – Argentina used their unaccountable power to impose profound transformations on economy and society, create a host of new state agencies, and, in the lusophone country, totally restructure the political party system. The imprint of autocracy is most thorough in the Chilean case: the Pinochet regime decreed a neoliberal economic model and a power-concentrating constitution (Garretón 1983), whose basic parameters have remained in force to the present day, significantly shaping the new democracy (Fuentes 2012). Thus, although the autocracies installed during the reverse wave did not endure and sooner or later gave way to renewed democratization, this reactionary diffusion process proved hugely important for countries' political trajectories.

With its extensive narrative analysis, the study seeks to capture the distinctive politics of this unusual time period, in which the political world seemed upended and profound uncertainty reigned. The Cuban Revolution shook up the established sociopolitical order like an earthquake and shattered the parameters of political thought and action throughout the

[4] While these coups did not result from popular clamor (Bermeo 2003), they seem to have found widespread popular endorsement.

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