Terms and Ideas

- Sultanistic regime

- Exclusionary authoritarianism

- Revolutionary coalition

- Dual power

- Repertoires of collective action

- Political culture of resistance

- Shia Islam

- Bazaar

Questions

Q: How do Goodwin and Skocpol amend Skocpol's earlier framework?

A: The core idea that social revolution entails a transformation of the state and class structure is retained. However, the focus shifts from peasants alone to broad revolutionary coalitions and the regime characteristics that create state weakness and allow them to emerge. As before, grievances alone are insufficient for social revolution; the incumbent must be vulnerable to overthrow and create the political space for a revolutionary movement.

Q: How do revolutionary coalitions form?

A: Goodwin and Skocpol argue that coalitions broaden when exclusionary authoritarian regimes serve a narrow clique and do not deliver collective goods to citizens. This often occurs in Sultanistic (neo-patrimonial) and colonial regimes. The use of flexible ideological frames (such as nationalism or religion) that resonate across social groups also helps with coalition formation. Furthermore, revolutionary movements can increase their popular support through the provision of collective goods in areas where the state is absent. By contrast, regimes that incorporate key constituencies, distribute benefits, or allow limited participation often fragment potential revolutionary coalitions.

Q: How does agency fit into structural models of social revolution?

A: Selbin argues that while structural conditions influence the scope of agency, revolutions must also be understood as human creations shaped through ideas, culture, and leadership. Revolutions depend on how individuals mobilize repertoires of collective action to make rebellion appear both meaningful and possible. Revolutionary leaders are able to draw on these symbols and narratives (which are often contested by the incumbent regime) to create political cultures of resistance. The societies in which these narratives are easily available should be more prone to social revolution. Thus, while structural conditions set limits on where revolution can take place, agency determines which paths are taken within those limits.

Q: How was the Iranian revolution both traditional and modern?

A: According to Halliday, the Iranian revolution was ideologically traditional in that it rejected ideas of (1) historical progress, (2) material improvement, (3) nationalist themes of assertion, (4) historical legitimation, and (5) democratic sovereignty. However, it was socially modern because it occurred in an urbanizing, relatively affluent society, and toppled a regime that had not been defeated in war through political confrontation rather than armed conflict. Skocpol's original theory had emphasized agrarian bureaucracies, peasant mobilization, and state breakdown under international pressure (see Week 8 Recap); but the Iranian revolution defied this model.

Q: What political and social forces drove the Iranian Revolution?

A: Iran was an absolutist rentier state whose revenues flowed from oil exports rather than taxation. Because the Shah avoided incorporating different social actors, his regime was not embedded. This meant that bazaar merchants, Shiite clerics, and the urban poor were all available to mobilize against the regime during when the economy experienced a downturn. It is interesting to note that these groups contained elements of autonomy and solidarity that are comparable to the peasant communities in Skocpol's original cases of social revolution.

Q: How can Selbin's emphasis on culture and memory be applied to the Iranian case?

A: Skocpol and Halliday both point to Shia stories of martyrdom (Husayn at Karbala) and narratives of resistance against unjust rulers as important to how Iranians understood the struggle against the Shah. This can be connected to Selbin's notion of a popular political culture of rebellion, which leaders such as Khomeini activated to generate mass participation in the revolution.

Takeaways

These past two weeks focused on the phenomenon of social revolution; the lecture and readings form this week focused on modern cases. What can we conclude?

1. Social revolutions are rare and seem to require more than grievances created by modernization or economic crises. Discontent might be necessary but is not sufficient.

2. Social revolutions also seem to require (a) the state to be weak and (b) regimes to offer citizens the political space to mobilize against them.

   - On the first point: although agrarian bureaucracies under military strain and rentier absolutist states differ in various respects, both share elements of state weakness including an aversion to reform that could accommodate social pressures.

   - On the second point: bottom-up movements need not be peasant-based but can also constitute a broad coalition against the regime. What seems to matter is that these groups are powerful, exist outside of the state, and are able to unite against it.

3. Culture and agency appear to address some of the gaps of the structuralist approach to social revolution. Revolutionaries depend on flexible ideological frames to unite citizens under the revolutionary banner, and leaders determine the direction that social revolutions take.

Next week, we will return to thinking about democracies when we consider the role of two institutional configurations: constitutional and electoral systems. Until then!