

Terms and Ideas

- Social revolution
- Collective action problem
- Public goods and selective incentives
- Relative deprivation (J-curve)
- Bourgeoisie and proletariat
- Agrarian bureaucracy
- Peasant rebellion
- Marginal elite movement

Questions

Q: What are social revolutions and what makes them distinct?

A: Skocpol defines social revolutions as a rapid and fundamental transformation of a society's state and class structures together with a class-based revolt from below. This differs from regime change in that there is a restructuring of the basic social order. It is also narrower than Davies' definition of revolution as violent civil disturbances where a group with broad popular support displaces the previous ruling group. Marx and Engels see revolutions as also involving a change in the mode of production, where one class order is replaced by another.

Q: What is the collective action problem in the context of revolutions?

A: Olson describes how the provision of public goods faces the dilemma that everyone benefits regardless of their contribution. This leads individuals to have an incentive to free-ride, expecting others to bear the costs. Cooperation is more likely when participation is enforced by selective incentives (rewards or punishments), when the group size is small and members have similar preferences, or when entrepreneurs emerge who can organize collective action and internalize the benefits. This argument can be applied to revolutions to explain why these are rare events. Revolutions require not only grievances but also mechanisms that overcome the collective action problem and turn discontent into coordinated action.

Q: How do Marx and Engels and Davies view the importance of structural conditions?

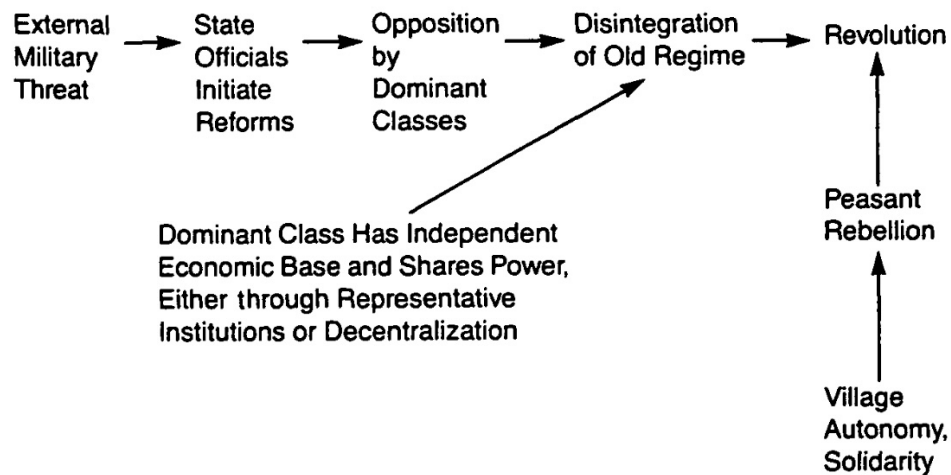
A: Both Marx and Engels and Davies link revolution to processes of economic development. For Marx and Engels, revolutions arise from structural contradictions between the forces of production (such as labor) and the relations of production (such as class hierarchies). Capitalism creates a class of industrial workers that are united in their shared exploitation, and its success leads to its eventual destruction at the hands of the proletariat. Meanwhile, Davies does not see revolution as the inevitable result of economic hardship but as dependent on perceptions of economic change. He argues that what matters is that a prolonged period of rising expectations is followed by a sharp reversal in conditions, a pattern that forms the J-curve. The difference in these two readings is the emphasis placed on absolute misery versus relative deprivation and frustration.

Q: What is Skocpol's theory of social revolution?

A: Skocpol insists that grievances alone cannot explain revolution. Instead, revolutions arise from the interaction between the breakdown of the state and pressures from below. The basic argument can be summarized in the graph from Geddes (1990) below.

There are three distinct elements in her mechanism. First, the state must be weak due to an

Figure 1: Summary of Skocpol Argument (Geddes 1990)



agrarian bureaucracy and either military defeat or fiscal crisis. Second, peasants must be prone to rebellion due to solidarity and autonomy. Finally, marginal elites form the revolution leadership and create the new order that emerges afterwards.

Q: How does modernization fit into theories of social revolution?

A: For Marx and Engels, modernization is the historical engine of revolution. Davies thinks that modernization creates revolution when it becomes stalled and rising expectations turn to frustration. Skocpol argues that modernization undermines agrarian bureaucracies by creating new demands that cannot be met, exposing structural weaknesses. This process is illustrated in the case of late imperial Russia, where the Fitzpatrick reading shows that institutions failed to manage the social and economic changes of industrialization.

Takeaways

This week examined revolutions as moments when societies are radically transformed. Revolutions represent extremes in some of the dynamics explored in the course so far: the failure of reform, the exhaustion of coercive means, and the mobilization of new actors demanding changes. Across the readings, revolutions emerge from modernization and crises of state strength. We can think of these as being neither accidents of history or as being entirely inevitable.

References

Geddes, Barbara. "How the Cases You Choose Affect the Answers You Get: Selection Bias in Comparative Politics". *Political Analysis* 2 (1990): 131–150.