Violence and Revolution

1. **System Breakdown**

Political scientists rarely used to pay attention to political violence and revolution because they generally believed that political systems were stable.

The rash of political violence in the 1960s changed that perspective and led to the argument that political systems do decay and break down over time.

This decay is often marked by riots, civil wars, terrorism, coups, and authoritarian governments.

Breakdowns begin when legitimacy erodes.

Legitimacy is the feeling by citizens that government should be obeyed. States with high legitimacy need few police, while states with low legitimacy are often subject to political violence.

A good example of this is Northern Ireland, where legitimacy in the system of government eroded to the point that the British had to send in military troops.

Generally, legitimacy erodes as government shows that it is ineffective in solving the myriad of problems.

* 1. **Violence as a Symptom**

Political violence does not necessarily mean that a revolution is near, and in fact, often government takes steps to avoid a revolution once political violence manifest.

While violence is deplorable, it can illustrate deep problems within society; as such, it can serve a purpose by getting the government's attention.

1. **Types of Violence**

Primordial

Primordial violence grows out of conflicts between basic communities.

There are multiple examples, including conflict between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda

Primordial violence is not limited to the developing world and has occurred in states like Northern Ireland and Quebec.

Separatist

Separatist aims at independence for the groups in question.

It can sometimes be an outgrowth of a primordial conflict, like Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka and how Bengali independence from Pakistan led to the creation of Bangladesh.

Revolutionary

Revolutionary violence aims at overthrowing or replacing existing regimes.

It is important to remember that revolutions seek to completely get rid of existing elites.

The struggles against repressive governments during the Arab Spring is a good example.

Ex. 1: The economic roots of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring is usually seen as a backlash against repressive political regimes. Economist Hernando de Soto says the causes were fundamentally economic: when the prevailing powers expropriated the livelihoods of entrepreneurs who lacked any legal standing, their dramatic protests sparked a revolution.

In 201 Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire after being expropriated of his fruit cart, triggering 200 million businessmen in Tunisia to do the same. The value of the fruit he lost was about 200 dollars, but what he lost was more invisible than tangible: he lost his property rights, he became bankrupt because he bought his supplies on credit, he lost his right to create collateral to form a company and issue shares.

Ex. 2: The origin of the Iranian Revolution

The Iranian revolution was unusual for the surprise it created throughout the world: It lacked many of the customary causes of revolution (defeat at war, a financial crisis, peasant rebellion, or disgruntled military), occurred in a nation that was experiencing relative prosperity, produced profound change at great speed, was massively popular, resulted in the exile of many Iranians, and replaced a pro- Western authoritarian monarchywith an anti-Western authoritarian theocracy.

Revolutionary violence also includes the category of counterrevolutionary movements, which are conservative attempts to crush revolutionary change, such as the Soviet attempts to crush liberalizing movements in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Coups

Coups are usually aimed against revolution, corruption, and chaos and are almost always conducted by the military.

Occasionally they are indirectly supported by key sectors of society.

Coups usually involve little violence, at least initially, but can turn violent if the military senses opposition.

Once a country has a coup, it is highly likely that it will have another one.

Issues

Finally, there is a catchall category called issue violence.

Political violence that falls into this category is generally less violent than other forms of political violence.

Examples of this might include the globalization and austerity protests that have recently occurred.

Change as a Cause of Violence

Political violence can be sparked by the changes a country experiences as it goes through modernization.

As modernization occurs, the transition away from the world of traditional stability leaves people worried, confused, and ripe for violent actions.

Economic change is often the most unsettling, and economic improvement can be just as unsettling as economic decline for people during this transition period.

Certain groups feel passed by and become bitter. It is not poverty but relative deprivation (Ted Gurr).

This means that violence and revolutions tend to occur when things are getting better, not worse in societies.

Other societal changes can spur unrest as well, such as shifts from subsistence to commodity farming, population growth, outdated political systems, and rising education levels that expose citizens to new ideas such as freedom and democracy.

Population growth is related to civil unrest. Political system may be out of date. Rising education levels expose people to ideas such as freedom and democracy.

1. **Terrorism**

Terrorism is a strategy to weaken a hated authority and it is not a new phenomenon, contrary to the perception of many Americans.

Terrorist groups target governments that are hated and that they believe are usually corrupt and repressive.

Muslim terrorists hate the United States because it supports these types of governments and consequently deploy terrorist tactics against the U.S. to effect political change.

Terrorists are not insane but are rational in their selection of tactics to achieve their goals, which include recruiting new members, panicking the populations, and gaining publicity. In the end, remember that terrorist groups always have a reason for their actions.

Terrorism is a group activity. Individual acts of violence, even if they are political in nature, do not qualify as a terrorist activity.

John Hinkley, who shot Reagan, was not a terrorist because he acted by himself.

Currently the Middle East is a breeding ground for terrorists. There are material reasons for why terrorism is attractive in that region.

High birth rates lead to large numbers of unemployed youths susceptible to the message of terror groups.

Islamic terrorism can ultimately only be solved by modernization.

There is some cause for concern because it really is only a matter of time before a terrorist group can develop a nuclear incendiary device.

Another type of terrorism is state-sponsored terrorism, which occurs when states support the actions of terror groups around the world. The state itself can also be an agent of terrorism.

Does terrorism work?

Rarely, and if it does it usually is in conjunction with other strategies to effect political change.

Currently, U.S. agencies are not well-positioned to fight terrorism, and terrorism is tricky to fight because it falls between war and crime.

The good news is that Islamic terrorism is declining due to backlash from terrorist activities.

1. **Revolutions**

Revolutions are quick, dramatic system changes that throw out the existing elites.

Small or moderate changes that leave the system intact are not revolutions.

Revolutions do not have to be bloody. Many of the revolutions that saw the end of communist systems of governance in Eastern Europe were peaceful, such as the velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia and South Africa.

Revolutions do not just occur, they require organizations through which to focus frustrations.

Absent these, there would just be apathy and indifference.

* 1. **Intellectuals and Revolution**

This is why intellectuals are important for revolutions because they provide the organization for revolutions.

Certain factors predispose intellectuals to develop "revolutionary faith" (Billington): a belief that the current system can be replaced with something better.

While common folks want improvement in material conditions, it is the convictions of intellectuals that cement revolutions together.

* 1. **The Stages of Revolution**

FIRST – THE OLD REGIME DECAYS:

First the old regime decays as administration breaks down, taxes increase, and citizens no longer believe in government.

SECOND – THE FIRST STAGE OF REVOLUTION:

The first stage of revolution occurs as committees, conspiracies, networks, and cells form, committed to overthrowing the old regime.

A catalyst event occurs, for example, the storming of the Bastille.

The initial takeover is usually easy because government has essentially put itself out of business, which is what causes the revolution to occur in the first place.

THIRD – AT FIRST, MODERATES TAKE OVER:

These are people who are connected with the old regime, but who oppose it, take over and initiate moderate, non-radical reforms.

These reforms are not enough for extremists, who challenge the moderates' rule.

FOURTH – EXTREMISTS TAKE OVER:

The extremists drive the revolution to a high point where everything old is thrown out and the revolution goes mad; "The revolution devours its children”.

FIFTH – A "THERMIDOR" ENDS THE REIGN OF TERROR:

DEF: *A Thermidor is the summer month od French revolutionary calendar that marked the end of the revolutionary extremism*

This cooling off period is welcomed, similar to a convalescence after a fever.

Often a dictator who resembles the original tyrants of the old regime takes over to restore order, something most people welcome.

1. **After the Revolution**

In general, revolutions end badly: they often exchange one form of tyranny for another.

Ex. the Tsars were replaced by despotic Stalin, Castro threw out Batista only to further reduce freedom in Cuba, and there are similar fears in the Middle East following the Arab Spring.

What about other revolutions that have occurred around the world?

American Revolution

Some scholars argue it was not really a revolution because it did not remake society and that in effect it was an example of separatist violence, a war of independence and not a revolution.

Hannah Arendt disagreed, arguing that the U.S. Revolution was a revolution and may be the only complete revolution in history because the old system of tyranny was replaced by new system of democracy.

This was possible because the American revolutionaries did not have to wrestle with big social questions like the French. America was prosperous with a fairly equal distribution of wealth and as such avoided many of the excesses associated with revolutions.

The French Revolution is very controversial.

Most people agree about the ideas that guided the revolution but acknowledge that the revolution went wrong, which led to bloodshed and tyranny.

The larger question is, was this avoidable? Most scholars now argue that the bloodshed was inevitable.

Russian Revolution raises the question: Had Lenin lived, would communism have looked different? Did Stalin pervert Lenin's revolutionary vision?

Most scholars now believe that Lenin was just as ruthless and bloodthirsty as Stalin and that Lenin was wrong from the start.

Cambodia was the worst and most deadly revolution in history as the Khmer Rouge killed 1.7 million Cambodians.

Vietnamese revolution went astray as after the war, the communist government turned Vietnam into one of the world's poorest countries.

However, in 1995 the United States and Vietnam re-established diplomatic ties and the Vietnamese economy engaged successfully with the world market and has now become relatively prosperous.

The Cuban revolution has been a nagging thorn for American administrations.

Castro continued to proclaim his regime revolutionary even though most citizens are over the shortages and restrictions. Under Raul Castro reform seems possible.

Currently there are few revolutionary movements around the world.

At the beginning, movements are idealistic and believe they can bring about a just society once the oppressors are gone.

After seizing power, the revolutionary regime discovers governing is harder than they thought, and people are quickly frustrated as their situation in life does not change in any meaningful way. Consequently, they want to throw the regime out.

In response, the regime becomes draconian and violent and attempts to lock itself into power while country falls further and further behind.

Eventually a new generation comes to power and admits that changes have to occur.

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Not necessarily, as there is still plenty of injustice in the world and rage is the fuel of revolutions.

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Currently the greatest source of rage is governmental corruption.

The way to prevent revolutions is through reforms that address injustice and corruption, but this is never easy to do.