

Government 20 – Section 5
Explaining Social Revolution: Competing Approaches
Jonathan Weigel

Discussion:

- **Definition of revolution.** What is a revolution according to Skocpol? Was the American Revolution a revolution? Was what happened in Egypt and Tunisia during the Arab Spring revolution?
- **Explaining revolution onset:**
 - o **Marx:**
 - Immiseration thesis: “nothing to lose but his chains”
 - Polarization thesis: growth of proletariat, shrinking bourgeoisie
 - Unprofitability thesis: crises of overproduction triggered by capitalists’ extraction of surplus value from labor
 - Problems:
 - Why revolution instead of unionization and welfare state?
 - Class consciousness stymied? Role for vanguard party (Lenin) or combatting reification (Lukacs)
 - Focus only on production: capitalists consider consumption too to maximize profit
 - o **Skocpol:**
 - Necessary conditions for revolution:
 - (1) Agrarian bureaucracy on brink of collapse:
 - Foreign competition and war has emptied their coffers
 - State elite too closely integrated with landed aristocracy to commercialize agriculture or sufficiently reform economy
 - (2) Peasants insurrection prone:
 - Autonomous: not tied to land in feudal structure
 - Sense of collective solidarity: Russian mir, Iranian bazaar
 - (3) Marginal elites
 - o **Davies:**
 - J-curve: period of rising prosperity followed by sharp downturn, which triggers a gap between expectations and actual need satisfaction
 - o **Selbin:**
 - Revolutions depend on leaders who strategically deploy ideologies and symbols from existing repertoires of collective action
- Compare Davies and Skocpol on **Russian Revolution**
 - o Agreement on importance of foreign war, but disagree on channel:
 - Davies: Russo-Japanese War and WWI delegitimize Tsar’s prior reforms
 - Skocpol: wars empty state coffers and contribute to state collapse
 - o Davies:
 - Expectation gap:
 - Economic expectations: Industrialization from 1861-1904
 - Political expectations: Political reforms of Alexander II, starting with emancipation of serfs
 - o 1905 Bloody Sunday, Nicholas II discredited. Increasing repression.

- Skocpol:
 - Foreign competition and war leads to collapse of state: Nicholas can't use army to squash 1917 revolution like he could in 1905
 - Peasants are autonomous (1861 emancipation) and have solidarity (mir) and also have grievances after emancipation made them landless
- Marx: should there have been revolutions in Russia, China, Cuba, and Vietnam?
- **Negative cases:** If we buy Skocpol's theory:
 - Why didn't Prussia have a revolution? (State in tact; peasants not autonomous)
 - Why didn't Japan have a revolution? (State bureaucracy distinct from landed elite)
- Would Skocpol have predicted the **Iranian Revolution**?
 - No foreign war, but oil shocks. Shah still strong and supported by US.
 - Urban not rural – bazaars help solve the collective action problem
 - A “made revolution” by Khomeini? Shia Islam necessary to justify resistance and revolt since the Shah's state remains in tact in 1979
- What is the **role of ideology** in revolutions?
 - French: human rights
 - Russian/Chinese (1949)/Cuban/Vietnamese: communism
 - Iranian: Islam
- Why are revolutions often accompanied by **leadership** cults? (Lenin, Castro, Khomeini) Is this evidence of the importance of leaders? What is the verdict on the structuralism versus voluntarism debate in the context of revolutions? Are revolutions made or do they come?
- Given the arguments we've seen, where else might we expect to see revolutions?
- Section evaluations