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World Politics, 75th Anniversary, Advanced Access, (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.0.a920225>



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THE EVOLVING STUDY OF REVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

As the practice of revolution has evolved, so too have theories of revolution. Much of the current literature on revolutions focuses on contentious processes. But a need exists to take a more holistic approach—one that better incorporates history, thinks across divides in the literature, contemplates what precedes and follows revolution, and places revolutionary processes and the structural factors that underpin them into dialogue with one another.

IN the first volume of *World Politics* published in 1949, the renowned German political scientist Sigmund Neumann declared:

This is the age of revolutions. No longer are they the domain of the theorizer or the peripheral plotter. They have moved into the center of the average man's daily thought. They are on everybody's mind and in every newspaper's headline. No continent is exempted.¹

Today, the revolutionary ideology that Neumann pointed to as lying at the center of this “age of revolutions” (and the Soviet state that he saw as propagating it) has been swept away. Yet revolutionary upheavals continue to unfold around the world and to dominate our attention.² These contemporary revolutions are radically different from those of Neumann's day in their goals, their location, the social forces they encompass, their mode of organization, the mobilizational processes they involve, and the changes that they bring about in their wake. Despite numerous pronouncements of its demise, revolution as a mode of mass-mobilized regime-change from below has not disappeared. Rather, it has evolved, and with it the study of revolutions has as well.

Revolutions have occurred across history for a variety of reasons, and a long trail of inquiries exists from Aristotle through Locke, Rousseau,

¹ Neumann 1949, 333.

² Indeed, by my own count, the pace of revolutionary episodes in the post-Cold War period significantly exceeded the rate at which revolutions occurred during the first half of the twentieth century and the Cold War period. See Beissinger 2022, 57–63.

Burke, Marx, Tocqueville, and Weber that dissect the ethics, causes, processes, and outcomes of revolutionary upheavals. By the early 1980s scholars had divided the analytical literature into three generations: 1) a so-called natural history approach that identified common stages through which all revolutions supposedly traversed and that treated revolution as driven by the subversive ideas of revolutionary intellectuals and the contagious power of ideology;³ 2) a disequilibrium approach that viewed revolution as a manifestation of social strain and the breakdown of norms and institutions, often precipitated by modernization, relative deprivation, or rapid social change;⁴ and 3) a structural approach that drew inspiration from Marxism and focused on class relations in the countryside and the breakdown of state institutions of control.⁵ This latter school, the third generation, was known for its structural determinism in which the emergence of revolution depended on relatively given factors of the social order that determined individual choice and societal trajectories. As Theda Skocpol, quoting Wendell Phillips, put it, “revolutions are not made; they come.”⁶ For the most part, scholars directed their attentions to social revolutions—defined by Skocpol as “rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures that are accompanied and in part carried through by mass based revolts from below.”⁷ But by the 1980s, social revolutions receded and grew marginalized, even as other forms of revolution proliferated.

Beginning in the early 1990s, scholars hailed the emergence of a fourth generation of theorizing on the basis of a series of revolutionary waves: the people power revolutions of East Asia; the revolutions that accompanied the collapse of communism; the color revolutions of the late 1990s and early 2000s; and the Arab Spring in the 2010s. These theories focused attention on processes of revolutionary contention and pulled their inspiration from social movement theory, rational choice, and the cultural turn in the social sciences.⁸ As Jack Goldstone noted, fourth-generation scholars rejected the structuralist orientation of third-generation scholarship and sought instead to “treat stability as problematic, see a wide range of factors and conditions as producing departures from stability, and recognize that the processes and outcomes

³ Le Bon 1913; Brinton 1965; Billington 1980.

⁴ Kornhauser 1959; Davies 1962; Huntington 1968; Gurr 1970; Johnson 1982.

⁵ Wolf 1969; Paige 1975; Skocpol 1979; Goldstone 1980; Goldstone 1991; Skocpol 1994.

⁶ Skocpol 1979, 17.

⁷ Skocpol 1994, 5.

⁸ For examples of fourth-generation scholarship, see Tilly 1978; Kuran 1991; Lohmann 1994; Sewell 1996; Goldstone 2001; Goodwin 2001; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Kurzman 2004; Goldstone 2013.

of revolutions are mediated by group identification, networks, and coalitions; leadership and competing ideologies; and the interplay among rulers, elites, popular groups, and foreign powers in response to ongoing conflicts.”⁹

The fourth generation brought an eruption of new research on revolution in the 1990s and 2000s that pushed knowledge of revolutionary processes forward in critical areas: agency and leadership;¹⁰ identities and networks;¹¹ the formation of coalitions and the choice of tactical forms;¹² emotions, framing, and culture;¹³ incentives and the role of organization;¹⁴ the porous boundary between revolutionary and nonrevolutionary contention;¹⁵ the interdependence of choices within and the effects of government reactions to revolutionary collective action;¹⁶ and the dynamics of diffusion and transnational revolutionary waves.¹⁷ But in many respects, the fourth-generation label had always been a category of convenience, an eclectic assortment of theories divided by intellectual tradition and approach and defined primarily by what they were not—that is, their rejection of the structural determinism of third-generation scholarship.

The predominant focus on process came with costs. For one thing, fourth-generation research brought about a significant fragmentation of the field. Although fourth-generation theorists recognized that a shift had taken place in the character of revolutions and included a much wider variety of revolutions in their purview, as several synthetic reviews of the field noted, they were “overwhelmed” by the diversity of cases that they confronted.¹⁸ Analyses segmented into different types of revolutions, and the field soon came to be divided into separate literatures, as certain forms of revolutionary contention came to be treated independently from others. For example, once heavily associated with the study of revolution, scholarship on civil wars broke off on its own tangent with the end of the Cold War, particularly as civil wars came to be motivated less by ideology and more by ethnic difference.¹⁹ Similarly,

⁹ Goldstone 2001, 172.

¹⁰ For examples, see Selbin 1997; Wood 2003.

¹¹ See Gould 1991; Zhao 1998; Petersen 2001.

¹² Examples include Tilly 1978; Tilly 1986; Dix 1984; Traugott 2010; Beissinger 2013.

¹³ For instance, Sewell 1996; Kurzman 1996; Calhoun 1997; Selbin 2010; Pearlman 2013.

¹⁴ See works such as Tullock 1971; Popkin 1979; DeNardo 1985; Opp and Gern 1993; Bueno de Mesquita 2010.

¹⁵ Goldstone 1998; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001.

¹⁶ Opp and Roehl 1990; Kuran 1991; Lohmann 1994; Ressler 1996; Goldstone and Tilly 2001.

¹⁷ For instance, Katz 1999; Beissinger 2002; Beissinger 2007; Kurzman 2008; Weyland 2009; Weyland 2012; Weyland 2014.

¹⁸ Goldstone 2001, 140. See also Lawson 2019; Allinson 2019.

¹⁹ For a critique of this division, see McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001.

so-called nonviolent revolutions came to be treated as a separate category of analysis, as if violence and the absence of violence were unrelated to one another.²⁰ Yet, as cases such as Yugoslavia, Syria, South Africa, Libya, and Ukraine demonstrated, the boundary between nonviolence and violence is precarious,²¹ and the two often co-occurred within revolutionary contention.²² Riotous street violence was almost entirely ignored in the literature.²³ As the field fragmented, categories reified, and integrative thinking across these boundaries languished. Yet good reason exists to think holistically across these divides in order to understand why revolutionary contention assumes the forms that it does, and with what consequences.

The principal focus on the process of challenging regimes drew attention away from other aspects of revolution that merited equal attention—especially, what precedes revolutionary contention and what occurs after it. As much as contingency, choice, and uncertainty play important roles in revolutionary processes, revolutions do not occur at random. They are structured phenomena that are conditioned by prior developments—features of government, opposition, and society that render revolutionary contention more or less likely to occur and oppositions more or less likely to succeed. Even the errors that regimes and oppositions make in the heat of revolutionary contention are not completely without structural influence.²⁴ The conditions that structure the outbreak of revolutionary contention differ across historical time and fluctuate according to the various purposes to which revolutions have been put and the types of social forces involved. These factors render any universal causal theory of revolutionary outbreak and revolutionary outcomes problematic.²⁵ But this does not mean that the structural underpinnings of various types of revolutions cannot be identified or compared, or that the factors that affect the evolution of revolutionary contention should not be addressed. Fourth-generation theories of revolution largely discarded structural analysis in favor of analyzing the contingent, effervescent, and dynamic factors involved in revolution. In doing so, they threw the structural baby out with the bathwater.²⁶ Rather than discard structural analysis altogether, we need

²⁰ Chenoweth and Stephan 2011. For a more recent analysis, see Chenoweth 2023.

²¹ See della Porta et al. 2017.

²² Seidman 2001; Chenoweth and Schock 2015; Chenoweth 2023.

²³ Ketchley 2017; Kadivar and Ketchley 2018; Kudelia 2018.

²⁴ Beissinger 2022, 198–235.

²⁵ Beissinger 2022, 23 and 108–123.

²⁶ For a critique of the absence of structural thinking within the social movement field, see Walder 2009.

to embed agency, indeterminacy, and dynamic interactions within the broader structural conditions confronting regimes and oppositions that influence their interactions.²⁷

We also know that revolutionary contention is often an iterative affair. First, attempts at regime change frequently fail, and repeated revolutionary outbursts in the same society do occur. Because it had a relatively narrow focus on processes of revolutionary contention, little work in the fourth-generation literature addressed this iterative character of revolutionary contention, what happens between episodes, the cultural impact exercised by failed revolutionary campaigns or the lessons learned, and how revolutionaries survive to fight another day. Long before the outbreak of revolutionary contention, networks develop—in civil society, in prisons, among political parties, or in exile—that structure the ways in which oppositions are able to contest regimes once the moment of contention arises. These ties have important consequences for political developments in the wake of revolution.²⁸ The ways in which the past is embedded within and connected to the present was largely lost in fourth-generational thinking. In short, a broader need exists to bring history back into the study of revolution.

Fourth-generation theories generally focused on issues surrounding processes of mobilization and the mobilizational outcomes of contention, but they largely ignored what happens after revolutionary contention ends. All revolutions come with two goals: to gain power and to effect substantive political or social change after gaining power. The two are not unconnected, as the ways in which revolutionary oppositions contest power are related to what they are able to accomplish once they gain power. So much more has been written about the causes and processes of revolutions than about their consequences, as the questions of how and why revolutions matter took back stage to the questions of why revolutions occur and why revolutionary oppositions succeed in gaining power.²⁹ Scholars are only beginning to get a grip on the conditions under which counterrevolutionary elites are able to seize back power in the wake of revolution,³⁰ why certain types of revolutions produce regimes that are durable while others do not,³¹ the effects of revolution

²⁷ Any such attempt must necessarily be carried out on the basis of a probabilistic understanding of causation rather than thinking, as third-generation theorists did, in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.

²⁸ Nugent 2020. See also Amat 2023.

²⁹ See Goldstone 2001, 167.

³⁰ See, for example, Clarke 2022; Allinson 2022.

³¹ Kadivar 2018; Levitsky and Way 2022; Beissinger 2022.

on inequality,³² the cultural legacies of revolutions,³³ and the impact of failed revolutions on subsequent political trajectories.³⁴

The transnational, global, and world-historical contexts of revolutionary contention were also dealt with only tangentially within fourth-generation scholarship. Transnational and geopolitical factors play an important role in shaping the onset and outcomes of revolutionary contention.³⁵ They undoubtedly affect the consequences of revolutions as well. Neoliberalism, geopolitical change, massive movements of population to cities, and transformations in communications technologies and in technologies of repression and rebellion have left palpable impacts on revolutionary processes, outcomes, and aftermaths on a global scale.³⁶ Climate change may be exerting comparable effects. All these factors need to be incorporated directly into a broader, holistic understanding of revolutions.

In short, the fourth generation of research pushed forward our knowledge of revolution in critical ways but left some gaping holes that scholars need to fill. This gap has led some to call for a fifth generation of research on revolutions.³⁷ Others, by contrast, suggest that it is time to abandon generational thinking about revolutions altogether and move toward a synthetic approach.³⁸ It is not yet clear what a fifth generation represents, and too early to identify its parameters. But I do agree on the need for an integrative and holistic approach. Such an approach should take global and historical contexts into consideration; recognize the variety of purposes to which revolutionary contention can be put and how revolutions have evolved over time; bring structural thinking back into the study of revolution without jettisoning attention to process, choice, and contingency; probe what precedes and follows revolutionary contention; include both armed and unarmed rebellion in its purview and think across divides within the literature; and address issues of space, culture, politics, technology, and economy in new and creative ways.

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³² Beissinger 2022, 359–416; Farzanegan and Kadivar 2023; Berman, forthcoming.

³³ della Porta 2016; Fishman 2019.

³⁴ Slater and Smith 2016.

³⁵ Beck 2011; Ritter 2015; Gunitsky 2017; Lawson 2019.

³⁶ Bayat 2020; Beissinger 2022.

³⁷ Allinson 2019; Abrams 2021; Bayat 2021; Goldstone, Grinin, and Korotayev 2022, 48; Beck et al. 2022.

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KEY WORDS

revolution, rebellion, violence, protest, contentious politics