
 What's New in Revolutions?

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Revolutionary mavens revel in metaphors. Crane Brinton employed disease as his favorite one (Brinton 1965:205–41); Charles Tilly preferred a vehicular one—the traffic jam (Tilly 1993:7); Timur Kuran used the metaphor of “wildfire” (1997:253–54). In his more recent book, Dan Ritter turned to the animal kingdom, referring to revolutions as “unholy beasts” (2015:3).

As his chosen metaphor, Mark Beissinger, in *The Revolutionary City: Urbanization and the Global Transformation of Rebellion*, prefers the hurricane. “Hurricanes,” he reasons, “begin as tropical disturbances that form zones of low pressure. Under conditions of low vertical wind shear, interactive processes between the warm ocean surface and the upper atmosphere can transform a tropical disturbance into a heat engine that begins to assume a circular motion” (p. 15).

But Beissinger is not satisfied with metaphorical allusions. Hurricanes are like revolutions because they develop through a combination of structural conduciveness and contingent factors. “This combination of structural conduciveness and uncertain development,” he concludes, “is akin to how urban civic revolutionary contention emerges” (p. 106). Beissinger never wavers the double flag of “agency versus structure,” but by the time you finish his book, you will have no doubt about his ability to bring the two together in a creative and convincing way.

Beissinger’s book builds on a combination of regularities and differences:

- The first regularity is found in Beissinger’s definition of revolution: “a mass siege of an established government by its own population with the goals of bringing about regime change and effecting substantive political or social change” (p. 25).
- The second is the structural theory that underlies this definition and brings it to

The Revolutionary City: Urbanization and the Global Transformation of Rebellion, by **Mark R. Beissinger**. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022. 566 pp. \$35.00 paper. ISBN: 9780691224749.

life—a causal link between the vast increase in the number and size of large cities and the advent—indeed, the predominance—of the use of urban spaces in revolutionary episodes.

- The third regularity is the formation of “negative coalitions”—that is, alliances among groups who have little to unify them apart from their willingness to challenge authorities. These groups assemble around abstract goals like democracy, which enables them to unite against their authoritarian opponents.

In an article that was probably the origin of his book, Beissinger pointed to the “negative coalition” in the Ukrainian “Orange Revolution,” which brought together Ukrainians with very different revolutionary claims (2013). The abstract nature of their claims allowed a broad coalition to form, but it also made it fragile, especially after it succeeded in ousting its opponents.

Now for the differences. The macrohistorical setting of Beissinger’s book is between three phases of revolution: first, the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century uprisings that used the city as a structure of places from which to mount attacks on those who would repress them—think of the barricades in the French revolutions; second, the agrarian revolutions that have their bases mainly in the countryside; and third, the newer urban revolutions that use cities to mass large numbers of protesters in open spaces. These revolutions, his data show, have swelled in number and importance since the end of the Cold War.

Agrarian revolutions, he argues, are largely *social*, in which rural social classes rise up on behalf of their social and economic claims against millers, moneylenders, and landed gentry who hold poor peasants in their thrall and take advantage of their ties with the state to repress rebellion. Contemporary urban revolutions, in contrast, are largely *civic*, making direct political claims against governments. One difference in the outcomes of these two types is that while successful agrarian revolutions displace the governments that oppress them, successful urban civic revolutions are more likely to take over government structures, seeking political and policy changes rather than regime change. This is one of the reasons for the ultimate failure of many of them: too many bad heritages and corrupt actors are left over from the old regime and clog up the wheels of the new one.

With this macro-historical comparison behind him, Beissinger focuses on the origins, the morphology, and the dynamics of the urban civil revolution:

- With respect to their *origins*, the growth of large cities—and of the urban middle class that inhabits them—is the major structural precondition for the shift of revolution from the countryside to the city.
- With respect to their *morphology*, urban civil revolutions take place in open spaces in central cities, using mainly peaceful mass demonstrations in close proximity to the centers of political power.
- With respect to the *dynamics* of urban civil revolutions, Beissinger lays out a series of mechanisms that transform structure into action. The most important is the formation of “negative coalitions”—that is, alliances among groups who have little to unify them apart from their willingness to challenge the authorities. These coalitions are wide-ranging, but they are fragile: they assemble around abstract goals—like democracy—which enables them to unite them against authoritarian opponents. They are also able to take advantage of the spatial geography of big cities to organize (mostly) peaceful

demonstrations and occupations. But the abstract nature of their claims makes them fragile, especially when and if they succeed in ousting their opponents.

Beissinger’s capacious book is both broad and focused. Unlike many of his classical predecessors, who were so consumed with the concept of revolutions that they largely ignored other forms of contentious politics, he draws on two broad literatures: social movements and civil wars:

- Drawing on the social movement literature, he focuses on the central role of the demonstration, the classical social movement performance (Tilly 2006). Unlike their minor place in the first two forms of revolution, demonstrations turn out to be critical to the repertoire of the urban civil revolution (p. 185; also see Tartakowsky 1998).
- Drawing on the civil war tradition, he shows that when the military plays a key role in revolutionary breakthroughs—as it did in Egypt in 2011—the revolution is vulnerable to what Holger Albrecht and Kevin Koehler (2020) call “military endgames.”

Beissinger’s book is also highly *focused*. Its central claim comes in Chapter Four, when he lays out what he calls “The Repression-Disruption Trade-off.” This trade-off encompasses the double dynamic of urban civil revolutions—what leads them to succeed and why they fail. The proximity of urban insurgents to the sites of power in capital cities gives them a physical access to power that their agrarian social cousins—buried in the countryside—lack. But it also makes them more subject to repression than rural insurgents, who could retreat to the countryside, hide in the forest, and use their knowledge of the hinterland to confuse and encircle their antagonists. For me this chapter is a triumph of mixed-mechanism analysis.

Expansive breadth and microscopic focus come together in the triangulation of different methods that Beissinger employs. Like his classical predecessors, Beissinger draws on case studies of revolutions—many of which he has studied in the past (Beissinger

2011; 2013). But like the school of “conflict studies” in International Relations, he builds his book on an enormous mass of quantitative data on urbanization, revolutionary situations, and the widely varied outcomes of these revolutions. For this reviewer, Beissinger’s ability to blend quantitative and case study materials is a signal achievement of his book.

The most dramatic—and for fans of revolution, the most disappointing—finding in the book is that successful urban revolutions do not last as long as successful agrarian ones. This is in part because they inherit the structures and some of the practices of the governments they replace—including their corruption—but also because of their “hastily convened coalitional character” (p. 363). In sum, “as revolution has evolved away from social revolution and towards urban civic forms,” Beissinger concludes, “the impact of revolution on society has not only changed; it has also grown more precarious and uncertain” (p. 363).

It is not easy to criticize a book that is so original, so encompassing, so rich in methodological depth and diversity as *The Revolutionary City*, but I will try.

First, can we be as confident as Beissinger seems to be in categorically distinguishing “agrarian social” from “urban civic” forms of revolution? To be sure, the Russian, the Chinese, and the Cuban revolutions were embedded in the countryside and had predominantly socio-economic goals, while such recent revolutions as the Ukrainian one were centered in the capital and had predominantly political goals. But how “predominant” must a set of goals be in order to place a particular revolution in one category or the other? Think of the fascist revolution that brought Benito Mussolini to power in Italy in 1922: the main shock force of his movement was in the countryside of the Po Valley, but the goal of the future Duce was to displace Italy’s frail parliamentary democracy, which he did by taking Bologna and marching on Rome (Ben-Ghiat 2020).

Second, the civic urban revolution certainly has an elective affinity for such performances as the march and the demonstration, which connects them to modern social movements. But didn’t many of the earlier

revolutions that Beissinger classifies as agrarian begin with urban demonstrations too? Think of the 1905 revolution in Russia; it was touched off by the repression of a peaceful demonstration for bread in the streets of St. Petersburg.

Third—and my first two cavils will prepare you for this—how comfortable can we be with the typological structure of *The Revolutionary City*? In the social movement literature that I know better, scholars have come to believe that many modern movements are “hybrids”—for example, combining institutional and extra-institutional collective action (Milks and Tichenor 1919; Tarrow 2021). Are there no “impure” types of modern revolution, too—for example, like the Tunisian one, which began with socio-economic claims in the hinterland and only became an “urban civil revolution” as it approached the capital (Barrie 2021)?

But these are mere cavils regarding a book that breaks new ground—as indeed do the revolutions that Beissinger has studied. With *The Revolutionary City*, Beissinger has written a peak career book and joins such giants as Barrington Moore, Charles Tilly, and Theda Skocpol in documenting and analyzing the long cycle of revolutionary politics in modern history and its relationship to different forms of regime and capitalism.

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