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Theories of Revolution



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Synonyms

Coup d'état; Insurrection; Internal war; Political change; Rebellion; Social change; Structural change

Definition

Revolution (originates from Latin *revolutionis* = upheaval), in political science, is a phase of the historical evolution of nations that generates a rapid and radical (social, economic, and political) change in society.

Introduction

Revolution is one of the most important phases of the historical evolution of nations, occurring in the presence of socioeconomic and political issues. Revolution is: “change, effected by the use of violence, in government, and/or regime, and/or society. By *society* is meant the consciousness and the mechanics of communal solidarity,

which may be tribal, peasant, kinship, national, and so on; by *regime* is meant the constitutional structure—democracy, oligarchy, monarchy; and by *government* is meant specific political and administrative institutions” (Stone, 1966, p. 159, original Italics). This definition allows to distinguish between the seizure of power that leads to a major restructuring of government or society with the replacement of the former elite by a new one, and the coup d'état involving no more than a change of ruling personnel by violence or threat of violence. In the 1960s, social scientists at Princeton University have changed the word “revolution” with the concept of “internal war” that is defined as any attempt to alter state policy, rulers, and/or institutions by the use of violence in society, where violent competition is not the norm and where well-defined institutional patterns exist (Rosenau 1964).

Theories, Characteristics, and Causes of Revolution

Philosophy, history, and other social sciences have different approaches to explain revolution (see Fig. 1). In philosophy, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel suggests that revolution is equated with irresistible change represented by a manifestation of the world spirit in an unceasing quest for its own fulfillment. In this context, Karl Marx argues that revolution is a product of irresistible historical forces, which culminate in a struggle

Theories of Revolution,
Fig. 1 Different
 approaches for explaining
 revolution in society

**THEORIES OF
 REVOLUTION**

Classical Approaches

- Machiavelli
- de Tocqueville

Marxist Approaches

- Marx
- Tucker, Trotsky

Functionalism perspective

- Durkheim
- Spencer, Parsons Talcott
- Davis and Moore
- Almond and Powell

Comparative-Historical-Structural Approaches

- Skocpol
- Cohan, Goldstone

Agency-based explanations

- Selbin

Recent Debates

- Goldstone
- Keddie, Fairbanks
- Katz, Sakwa, Goodwin

between bourgeoisie and proletariat. Arendt (1963) interprets the revolutionary experience as a restoration, whereby insurgents attempt to restore liberties and privileges, which were lost because of government's temporary lapse into despotism. Instead, de Tocqueville (1955, p. 8) has defined revolution as an overthrow of the legally constituted elite, which initiated a period of intense social, political, and economic change.

Deutsch (1964, pp. 102–104) proposes four characteristics to differentiate the types of revolution (cf., Fig. 2):

- (a) Degree of mass participation
- (b) Duration
- (c) Number of persons killed both during and after revolution (a measure of intensity)
- (d) Intentions of insurgents and their eventual outcome

In this theoretical framework, a revolution may be due to a group of insurgents that illegally

and/or forcefully challenges the governmental elite for the occupancy of roles in the structure of political authority. A successful revolution occurs when insurgents are able to occupy principal roles within the structure of political authority. Moreover, if successful insurgents are ideologically committed to certain goals, then they may initiate changes in societal structure to effect the realization of these goals. In general, the changes in the personnel of governmental elite are often the precondition for meaningful changes in the political and social structure of nations.

Determinants of revolution can be:

- Preconditions (long-run causes), which create a potentially explosive situation
- Precipitants (immediate, incidental factors), which trigger the outbreak and may be nonre-current, personal, and/or accidental

Brinton (1938) proposes a series of *universals* to explain the great Western revolutions (English,

		Temporal duration			
		Long	Moderate	Short	Very Short
Mass participation / Domestic violence	High	Mass Revolution e.g., France 1789			
	Moderate		Revolutionary coup e.g., 2017 Zimbabwean coup d'état		
	Low			Reform coup e.g., 1955 in Argentina	
	None				Palace revolution e.g., Venezuela 1948

Theories of Revolution, Fig. 2 Types of revolution and some examples categorized with the level of participation of people, of violence and of temporal duration. Adapted from Tanter and Midlarsky (1967)

French, American, and Russian), such as economically advancing society, growing classes and status antagonisms, psychologically insecure and politically inept ruling class, and governmental financial crisis (cf., Gottschalk 1944).

Eckstein (1964) analyzes some conditions of revolution, moving from intellectual to economic (increasing poverty, rapid growth, income inequality, etc.), to social (resentment, conflicts due to the rise of new social classes, etc.), and to political factors (bad government, oppressive government, etc.). Moreover, other situational factors can affect the sources of revolution, such as a lack of harmony between state structure and society. Chalmers (1964) defines this situation *dysfunction*. In particular, if the process of change is slow and moderate, the dysfunction may not rise to dangerous levels. However, if the change is both rapid and profound, it may cause deprivation, alienation, and anomie in society, causing what Chalmers (1964) calls *multiple dysfunctions*. Hence, revolutions are due to a condition of multiple dysfunctions associated with intransigent elite.

Eckstein (1964) also suggests that each type of internal war and each step of each type can be explained with eight variables: four *positive* variables (elite inefficiency, disorienting social process, subversion, and available rebel facilities) and four *negative* variables (diversionary mechanisms, available incumbent facilities, adjusted mechanisms, and effective repression).

According to behaviorist approach, a prime factor of revolution is the emergence of an

obsessive revolutionary mentality. Talcott Parsons treats disaffection or “alienation” as a generalized phenomenon that may manifest itself in crime, alcoholism, drug addiction, religious enthusiasm, or serious political agitation. In general, causes of the alienation of revolutionaries and of the weakness of incumbent elite can be economic factors. In this context, Karl Marx states that popular revolution is due to increasing misery, whereas de Tocqueville (1955) claims that revolution is due to increasing prosperity. Olson (1963) argues that revolutions are the product of rapid economic growth, which creates both *nouveaux riches* and *nouveaux pauvres*. Davies (1962) argues that the fundamental impetus toward a revolutionary situation is generated by a rapid and long-run economic growth associated with a rising of the standard of living, followed by a short-term phase of economic stagnation (cf., Coccia 2010a, 2018a). In short, revolution creates new expectations by economic improvement, social and political reforms, and new patterns of technological innovation (Coccia 2010b, 2014, 2014a, 2015, 2015a, 2016a, b, 2017a, 2019), but subsequent economic recessions can increase the gap between expectations and real condition of population.

The reference group theory by Merton (1957) suggests that human satisfaction is related to the condition of a social group of reference against which the individual measures his current situation. Mass diffusion of information and communication technologies even among poor people of the world and the knowledge of high consumption standards elsewhere can induce alienation,

distress, and psychopathology in poor society, generating instability and social issues; in fact, the reference group of nations may be other near countries, such as poor countries of North Africa versus rich European ones.

In general, Hopper (1950, pp. 270–279) explains revolution with four social stages:

1. The first is characterized by indiscriminate, uncoordinated mass unrest and dissatisfaction.
2. The next stage sees this unease beginning to coalesce into organized opposition with defined goals; an important characteristic is a shift of allegiance by intellectuals from incumbents to dissidents. Two types of leaders emerge in this stage: a) the prophet sketches the shape of new utopia upon which men's hopes can focus, and b) the reformer works methodically toward specific goals.
3. The third stage is the beginning of the revolution proper. Motives and objectives are clarified, organization is built up, and a statesman leader emerges. Subsequently, conflicts between the left and the right of revolutionary movement become acute, and the radicals take over from moderates.
4. The fourth and last stage is the legalization of revolution. The administrators take over, strong central government is established, and society is reconstructed on a structure that embodies elements of the old system.

Classification of Different Typologies of Revolution

Brinton (1938, pp. 3–4) suggests a differentiation of revolution in which *a*) coup d'état generates the replacement of one elite by another one, whereas *b*) major revolution generates social, political, and economic change (cf., Fig. 2). Blanksten (1962, p. 72) also distinguishes between coup d'état and revolution, which both have profound consequences for the social structure of nations. Lasswell and Kaplan (1950, p. 252) present a further refinement in the classification of revolution using three categories: palace revolutions, political revolutions, and social revolutions. In this context, a type of revolution similar to palace

revolution is the *caudillismo* (a common form of coup d'état in Latin America). These forms of revolution appear to generate an increasing degree of change initiated by successful insurgents and followed by increasing political and social change.

Instead, Rosenau (1964, pp. 63–64) suggests three categories of internal wars:

- Personnel wars: goal is the occupancy of existing roles in the structure of political authority. This concept is similar to palace revolution.
- Authority wars: insurgents compete for the occupancy of roles in the political structure and for their arrangement. Authority wars are struggles to replace dictatorships with democracies.
- Structural wars: goal of insurgents is the introduction of social and economic changes in society (structural wars contain elements of both personnel and authority wars).

In Rosenau's ranking, personnel wars are at the lowest rank position with regard to the degree of social change; instead, authority wars are at an intermediate rank, and finally structural wars are at the highest rank in the scale of social change.

Huntington (1962, pp. 23–24) has suggested a classification of revolution in four categories (cf., Fig. 2): mass revolution, revolutionary coup, reform coup, and palace revolution. The concepts of mass revolution and palace revolution are similar to Rosenau's structural and personnel wars, while revolutionary and reform coups can be included under the category of authority wars.

Finally, Chalmers (1964) categorizes revolution in six typologies:

1. The jacquerie is a spontaneous mass peasant rising, usually carried out in the name of traditional authorities (church and king) and with the limited aims of purging the local or national elites.
2. The millenarian rebellion is similar to the first type but with the added feature of a utopian dream, inspired by a living messiah, such as the

- Coup d'état, Caudillismo in Latin America: replacement of one elite by another one
- Major or Mass Revolution: it generates social, political and economic change

- Palace Revolution
- Political Revolution (increasing degree of change)
- Social Revolution

- Personnel War: the occupancy of existing roles in the structure of political authority
- Authority War: the struggle to replace dictatorships with democracies
- Structural War: it contains elements of both personnel and authority wars

- Jacquerie: it is a spontaneous mass peasant rising
- Millenarian Rebellion: it is guided by a utopian dream, inspired by a living messiah
- Anarchistic Rebellion: it is a reaction to progressive change, involving an idealization of the old order
- Jacobin Communist Revolution: the creation of a more efficient order without nepotism and corruption
- Conspiratorial Coup d'état: it is the planned work of a tiny elite fired by an oligarchic ideology
- Militarized Mass Insurrection: it is planned mass revolutionary war guided by dedicated elite

- Terrorism: it has similar characteristics to revolution, such as violence, a desire for power, the need to attract attention and send a message.

Theories of Revolution, Fig. 3 Different types of revolution in social and political sciences

- revolution of Florence in Italy led by Savonarola, a religious and political reformer, in 1494.
3. The anarchistic rebellion is the nostalgic reaction to progressive change, involving an idealization of the old order, such as the Vendée Rebellion (1793–1796), counterrevolutionary insurrections in the west of France during the French Revolution.
 4. The Jacobin communist revolution is: “a sweeping fundamental change in political organization, social structure, economic property control and the predominant myth of a social order, thus indicating a major break in the continuity of development” (Sigmund Neumann as quoted in Chalmers 1964). The goal here is the creation of a more efficient order on the ruins of the old structure of privilege, nepotism, and corruption.
 5. The conspiratorial coup d'état is the planned work of a tiny elite fired by an oligarchic ideology. This is a revolutionary type only if it anticipates mass movement and generates social change, such as the Castro revolution in Cuba from 1953 to 1959; it is distinguished from palace revolt, assassination, dynastic succession-conflict, and other forms of political violence, which are all under the category of “internal war (cf., Coccia 2017).”
 6. The militarized mass insurrection is a planned mass revolutionary war guided by dedicated elite. This guerrilla warfare is determined by political attitudes and rebels are dependent on popular support. This type of struggle is the insurrection in Vietnam, 1965–1973; Algerian War, 1954–1962; Afghan resistance, 1979–1989; etc.

A classification of manifold types of revolution is in Fig. 3.

Conclusion

Revolution is a phase in the historical evolution of some nations that can generate a structural change in society. A distinct form of revolution, not included in previous studies, can be *terrorism* that has similar characteristics to revolution, such as violence, a desire for power, and the need to attract attention and send a message (Fig. 3). Terrorism, like revolution, emerges in the presence of social and political issues and of a group organized of people having a purpose related to these issues. Coccia (2018) argues that terrorism (i.e., a distinct form of political violence with some characteristics similar to revolution)

thrives in specific regions with high growth rates of population that generate income inequality and relative deprivation of people. In short, terrorism has many analogies with revolution (e.g., economic, social, political, and demographic determinants), and it can generate structural change in problematic societies, such that terrorism might be considered an additional and specific form of revolution (cf., Coccia 2018).

Overall, then, revolutions are due to instability of manifold economic, social, demographic, ethnic, anthropological, and perhaps religious factors in society. To conclude, revolutions are mainly linked to the question of what human beings truly need and how they seek to satisfy needs, solve social issues, and adapt to changing contexts and environmental threats in society.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Evolutions and Revolutions](#)
- ▶ [Role of Superpowers in Conflict Development and Resolution](#)
- ▶ [Theories of Development](#)

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