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The Two Faces of Revolution

Book section

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Introduction

The Two Faces of Revolution

Revolutions, like the temple of Janus, have two faces. One is an elegant, abstract and humanitarian face, an idyllic face, the dream of revolution and its meaning under the calm distancing of eternity. The other is crude, violent and very concrete, rather nightmarish, with all the hypnotic power, loss of perspective and breadth of understanding you might expect to go with nightmares.¹

From the time of the great exchanges between Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke over the sanctity or barbarism of the French Revolution, scholars have disagreed fundamentally over what John Dunn calls the 'two faces of revolution'. For an activist like Paine, revolutions were 'a renovation of the natural order of things, a system of principles as universal as truth and the existence of man, and combining moral with political happiness and national prosperity.'² Revolutions symbolized the march of progress and rationality, of irresistible and irreversible change. But for Burke, a staunch critic of the events of 1789, the revolution was nothing more than a 'monstrous, tragic-comic scene' with potentially fatal consequences for the future of Europe.³

In reality, revolutions neither fulfil the expectations of the romantics who advocate them, nor become the dystopia feared by those who promote their overthrow. In order to understand the significance of revolutions – in this age or any other – it is important to cut a swathe through both of these myths: the exaggerated fantasies of revolutionaries themselves and the claims of those, often conservative, thinkers who deny the importance of revolutions to domestic societies or to international relations. Revolutions do not start history afresh from a fictitious year zero nor can they be reduced to mere trifles or footnotes in history. Revolutions have a formative effect on the particular societies where the changes occur and on the wider international relations with which they interact. Yet, in reality, much of the new order is curtailed by old-regime structures and many elements of the revolutionary programme are never initiated in the first place.

In the present day, a great deal of the passion and drama that characterized the great debate about the two faces of revolution seems strangely out of place. To all intents and purposes, the age of revolutions has been consigned to the archives. Even one of the theorists most attuned to the *formative* impact of revolution on world politics, Fred Halliday, subtitles his most recent book on the subject, *The*

¹ Dunn (1989: 4).

² Paine (1993: 103).

³ Burke (2003: 12).

Rise and Fall of the Sixth Great Power. The term revolution has been reduced to a sound bite, more often a means to peddle magazines, sell cars or spin policy proposals than act as a call to action. Revolutions appear to have little place amidst the apathy and weariness of mainstream political discourse in advanced market democracies. In an era seemingly best captured by Fukuyama's infamous phrase 'the end of history', revolutions have been tamed and commodified, becoming irrelevant to a world in which the big issues of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries have been settled.⁴

This book is an attempt to rescue revolution, both as concept and practice, from the triumphalism of the contemporary world. There are two main reasons why it is wrong to write off either the study or the practice of revolution. First, as Martin Wight points out, over half of the last five hundred years have featured some kind of conflict between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary states.⁵ From the 'Revolt of the Netherlands' (1566–1609), to the 'Springtime of Nations' (1848), revolutions have played a central, *constitutive* role in the making of the modern international system. The twentieth-century, perhaps more than any other epoch in world history, was consistently punctuated by revolutions – social upheavals in the early part of the century in Russia, Mexico, Persia and Turkey were followed by uprisings in China, Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Iran, Nicaragua and elsewhere during the Cold War.⁶ Indeed, much of the drama of world politics between 1945 and 1989 was played out through processes of revolution and counter-revolution.⁷ As Fred Halliday writes, 'revolutions were not mistakes or detours but part of the formation of the modern world.'⁸

Since the end of the Cold War, the dream of a new world order founded on peace, prosperity and security has floundered in many parts of the world. A decade or so on from the apparent triumph of Western market democracy, world politics is marked by turbulence and instability. In the former Soviet states of Central Asia, a disturbing *mélange* of oligarchs, mafiosos and former party cadres are carving up the spoils of a failed transition. In Latin America, populists, past dictators and strongmen are returning via the ballot box.⁹ Armed conflict continues

⁴ See Fukuyama (1992).

⁵ For more on this, see Wight (1978).

⁶ Using fairly demanding criteria, John Foran calculates that there were 31 revolutions in the twentieth-century. For more on this, see Foran in Foran (ed) (1997).

⁷ For more on this, see Schutz and Slater (eds) (1990).

⁸ Halliday (1999: 331).

⁹ This trend is best epitomized by the example of Hugo Chavez, a former Venezuelan paratrooper who returned as president in 1998, six years after he had conducted an attempted coup, in order to lead a 'peaceful revolution' against the 'rancid oligarchs' and 'squealing pigs' of the old regime. But other examples are also pertinent – the former dictator of Bolivia, Hugo Banzer, was re-elected as president in 1997. Since Banzer's death in 2002, the country has witnessed a period of some turbulence, exemplified by the coup in October 2003 against the regime headed by Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada. In Peru, Alberto Fujimori's period in office ended in 2000 with his forced exile amidst a welter of political and financial scandals. His successor, Alejandro Toledo, was forced to declare a state of emergency in 2002 as a result of increasingly violent grass roots protests. The current

to plague Africa. In South-Eastern Europe, a decade of war has left a devastating legacy on the social, economic and political landscape of much of the region.¹⁰ Fundamentalist groups of various hues question the very foundations of modernity.

There is, as yet, no concrete understanding or general agreement about the predominant features of contemporary international relations. Questions loom large over whether the world is operating under the suzerainty of an American empire, whether there is an imminent multipolarity marked by the rise of global institutions and organizations, or whether the fundamental challenge of the epoch is a clash between radically divergent views of modernity. Furthermore, the pressing concerns facing the world – civil conflict, terrorism, poverty, inequality, disease, social dislocation and environmental degradation – hint at the continuing salience of radical change.¹¹ Given, then, both the relative openness and uncertainty which characterize the structural conditions of the contemporary era and the persistent conflicts that mar world politics, it seems strangely remiss to ignore the process which, throughout history, has had such a foundational influence on world politics and which remains, both as aspiration and practice, so relevant to the study and practice of international relations.

The second point about the importance of revolution to the modern world is more theoretical. Many of those scholars who deny the importance of revolution to the contemporary world do so because they mistakenly equate revolutions with certain inalienable, *essential* features: class-based, violent, utopian and so forth. For the most part, revolutions are ascribed with certain core features, masquerading as objective criteria, without which they are considered to be ‘invalid.’ Such a view is misguided because it reduces revolutions to static objects of analysis rather than seeing them as dynamic processes with features that change according to their historical and social contexts. The concept of revolution exists in every major language group in the world – its heritage is diverse, drawn from a variety of cultural settings.¹² As befits this contextual cornucopia, the nature and meaning of revolution has changed across time and place. In Europe, revolution – derived from the Latin verb *revolvere* – traditionally evoked a return to a previous order, for example the restoration of constitutional monarchy witnessed by the Glorious Revolution in England in 1688. It was only during the eighteenth-century that the

instability which mars Ecuador and Argentina, along with Colombia’s longer-term volatility, serve as potent examples of the region’s unsteady milieu.

¹⁰ Although many states in the region, among them Serbia, Croatia and Kosovo now bear the trappings of formal democracy, the region remains mired in deep seated problems from which it will be difficult to recover, not least among them the spectre of a return to populist, authoritarian rule.

¹¹ There is also a demographic factor behind the continuing importance of radical change to the contemporary world. As David Willetts points out, of the world’s 25 most youthful countries, 16 have experienced major civil conflict since 1995. The average age in China at the time of the revolution was 19, in Iran at the time of the Shah’s overthrow, it was 17. Conversely, of countries with the oldest populations in the world, only Croatia has experienced serious conflict over the last 15 years. For more on this, see David Willetts, ‘Too many kids,’ *Prospect*, October 2003, p. 18.

¹² For more on this, see p. 52.

classical concept of a return to a previous order was replaced by a notion of volcanic ruptures, quasi-astronomical alignments, sharp breaks with the past from which societies could not turn back, ideas that were harnessed and exemplified by revolutionaries in France and America.¹³ There is no universal quality, characteristic or image that encapsulates a revolution: they may be velvet or violent, reactionary or progressive. Equally, there is no theoretical reason to suggest that revolution cannot take a contemporary form in keeping with an era marked by globalization and heteronomy. The argument of this study is that this novel form of revolutionary change should be seen as ‘negotiated revolution.’

The term ‘negotiated revolution’ was first used in a book of that title written in 1993 by two eminent South African scholars, Heribert Adam and Kogila Moodley. It was further popularized in South Africa by the journalist Allister Sparks, who used the term as the subtitle of his investigation into the secret talks between the apartheid regime and ANC leaders prior to the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990. Farther afield, the Hungarian social scientist Gustav Tökés used ‘negotiated revolution’ to describe the elite-controlled transition from communism to market democracy in Hungary. Outside these two area-specific settings, the concept has featured in some general literature on transitions.¹⁴ This book both builds on and extends this legacy.

The Theme Park Worlds of International Relations and Sociology

Beyond contributing to the debate about the place of revolutionary change in the contemporary world, this book also seeks to play some part in ongoing debates about the theory and practice of International Relations (IR) and historical sociology. It is sometimes bemusing to witness the content, style and vehemence of debates that take place in IR over the make-up and function of states, the concept of power, structure and agency, the relationship between fact and value, epistemology and ontology, the nature of ‘science’ and so on. For the most part, IR scholars seem content to ignore or remain blissfully unaware of the *Methodenstreit* that have taken place in other social sciences over the past two centuries or so. As the British scholar Martin Shaw commented after moving from sociology to IR in the 1980s, the latter resembled ‘a 1950s theme park where questions long since thrown up and seemingly answered in other fields were popping up as novelties.’¹⁵ But IR is not alone in its navel-gazing insularity; sociology is equally short-sighted. Over the last thirty years, numerous historical sociologists have borrowed concepts from IR that were then misapplied to studies of world history, revolution and systemic change. This ‘off-the-shelf’ multidisciplinary does little to enrich either discipline. It may be that both sides of the IR/sociology fault-line can look with some legitimacy at the theme park irreverence of the other.

¹³ For more on this see Arendt (1963) and Halliday (1999).

¹⁴ See Adam and Moodley (1993a), Sparks (1995), Tökés (1996), and Kennedy (1999).

¹⁵ Shaw in Hobden and Hobson (eds) (2002: 82).

The first chapter in this book is devoted to delineating some common ground between IR and sociology. This evokes a historical-sociological critique of the neorealist view of world politics as a timeless realm of endemic conflict in which political units face an enduring struggle to survive.¹⁶ Borrowing heavily from 1970s microeconomic theory, neorealism, in particular its high-priest Kenneth Waltz, conjures up a kind of ideal-speech situation in which the units of the international system (states rather than consumers or firms) act as functional, rational utilitarians, maximizing their (national) interest. Within this perfect system (anarchy rather than the market), undifferentiated by time and space, an equilibrium is generated through a universal law or mechanism, the balance of power, acting as a functional equivalent for the economists' formulation of 'supply and demand.' There are numerous problems with this economic analogy: it limits rationality to self-interested utility maximization, invents a timeless international system that does not exist, bypasses economic theory beyond the neoclassical tradition, and reduces 'science' to parsimony by insisting that non-observables, whether they be quarks or social structures, are removed from further study.¹⁷ What is left looks more like political philosophy than a universally applicable scientific theory. The complexity of world history cannot be reduced to a few banalities posing as timeless truths. As the political commentator Henry Louis Mencken puts it, 'there is always an answer to a complex problem that is neat, clear and simple. And it is wrong.'¹⁸ The 'continuist mystique' within which neorealism labours perpetuates what John Hobson calls a 'chronocentric naturalism' in which the past is ransacked in order to explain the present. Thus, the contest between Athens and Sparta is transplanted to the Cold War in order to elucidate the stand-off between the United States and the Soviet Union; all wars, whether they be guerrilla insurgencies or total conflicts, are explained by international anarchy; and all political units – city-states, nomadic tribes, empires, nation-states and transnational alliances – are functionally undifferentiated. What Hobson describes as a 'gigantic optical illusion' generates an isomorphic homology of social kinds.¹⁹

This book is an attempt to illustrate how one kind of social fact – revolution – changes over both time and place. Ironically, given the weight that Waltz and his fellow travellers place on dismissing 'second-image' explanations as reductionist, one of the primary purposes of this study is to show how neorealism itself is rooted in a reductionism that cannot explain *why* particular revolutions take place *where* and *how* they do.²⁰ Without an understanding of agency in all its

¹⁶ Neorealism, perhaps the predominant school of thought in contemporary IR, is both an extension and a rebuttal of earlier realist thought. On this, see Waltz (1990).

¹⁷ On this latter point, see Ruggie (1998).

¹⁸ Mencken was an American political commentator of the first half of the twentieth-century, best known for his withering assaults on Roosevelt and other social democrats. Of the numerous sources for this quote, it is worth starting with Rodgers (1991).

¹⁹ For more on this, see Hobson (1997, 2000).

²⁰ For Waltz, there are three images or 'levels of analysis' in IR. He evocatively labels these 'man, the state and war', by which he means human nature, domestic factors and

forms, or without paying concomitant attention to domestic social, economic and political processes, the focus on third-image 'permissive context' tells us next to nothing. The explanation offered in this study is that the winding down of the Cold War opened up the space for liberation movements from below to succeed. But it was only in the *conjunctural* marriage of world-systemic opening, the operation of domestic and international agency, and domestic systemic crisis that revolutionary movements prospered. The monocausal *explanans* of neorealism yields little until it is conjoined with a broader concept of agency and a wider understanding of the social and normative contexts, both international and domestic, within which social action takes place. Historical sociology, which was in its post-war guise in part a reaction to the timeless, spaceless (and specious) general theory associated with Parsonian structural-functionalism, is well suited to disentangling the synchronic mystique of neorealism. This study is a work in historical sociology in that it is rooted in a diachronic understanding of the international realm, looking at how social action and social structures, and the social facts engendered by interaction between these two spheres, is a domain of both continuity and disjuncture.

As is explored in some depth in Chapter Two, historical sociology is hardly free from its own form of mythologizing. For many 'second-stage' historical sociologists, revolutions contain a set of essential characteristics without which they are considered to be unviable units of analysis. Much of this 'essentializing' stems from a romanticism that equates revolutions with heroic fights to the finish in which nothing less than 'death or liberty' will suffice. This disguises a much more complex relationship between revolutions and violence than is usually understood. Often, revolutions have been relatively peaceful seizures of power. Violence stemmed, for the most part, from battles *after* the initial takeover of state power, resulting from the need by revolutionary regimes to shore up their rule in the face of domestic and international attempts at counter-revolution, a cycle that can be observed in France (in particular in the Vendée) after 1791, Russia during its four-year long civil war after 1921, and in Iran, by way of its war with Iraq and the brutal measures employed against the regime's 'un-Islamic' foes after 1980. The revolutionary ideologies that ignited these struggles have not always been the novel utopian visions which their champions proclaimed. Rather, revolutionaries have tended to conjure a heady mixture of nationalism, populism and religious fervour to support their uprisings, much of it borrowed from other revolutions, past and contemporaneous. Similarly, revolutionary victory has not been as total as is often imagined. The paradigmatic revolution of the modern era in France was, to some extent, overturned by the restoration of the Bourbons in 1815; many of the families who enjoyed positions of influence under the *ancien régime* retained their privileges during the first half of the nineteenth-century, something that helps to explain the subsequent revolution of 1848. The second

international anarchy. Waltz claims that only the third level – anarchy – provides a *theory* of international relations: the first is little more than a belief about the decency or iniquity of human nature; the second mere 'description.' For criticism of Waltz's trinity, see Ruggie and Ashley in Keohane (ed) (1986), Halliday (1994) and Rosenberg (1994). Defenders of the neorealist flame include Grieco (1988), Walt (2002) and Mearsheimer (2003).

chapter of this book looks at how the static conceptualization of revolutionary change offered by many second-stage historical sociologists reproduces the isomorphic tendencies of neorealism; instead this study offers a more complete understanding of the contingent relationship between violence, ideology and systemic change, and a sociologically sensitive definition of revolution capable of accommodating variation in terms of time and place.

A general weakness with much historical sociology to date has been the relatively slight consideration given to international factors, hence the rubric adopted in this book: *International Sociology*.²¹ Historical sociologists of the immediate post-war period sought primarily to explore the domestic dimensions of large-scale social change. To some extent, this was rectified by second-stage theorists: Mann, Skocpol and Tilly all looked at the ways in which international factors impacted on processes of development and upheaval.²² However, these scholars, in large part because their knowledge of IR was limited to a reading of realism, failed to provide a full picture of the *formative* ways in which the international realm, both as structure and agency, affected wars, social revolutions, and the flows of world history itself. Michael Mann, for example, identified four principal sources of social power (ideological, economic, military and political), that acted as the drivers of world historical change. But the richness of Mann's story of domestic power was not matched by his explication of the international realm, where he reduces these four sources to one: military power. There is nothing in Mann's account about the world market, transnational ideas or the manoeuvrings of foreign policy.²³ Similarly, Theda Skocpol contends that geopolitical pressures, most notably defeat in war, leads to elite fracture, the mobilization of alternative sources of domestic authority and, thereby, to revolution. Charles Tilly reduces state formation to war. These scholars are, for the most part, silent on international factors ranging from the global sources of domestic economic weakness to the spread of ideologies like nationalism and Marxism-Leninism, forces that play their part in the *creation* of revolutionary situations, the playing out of revolutionary events and in determining the outcomes of revolutionary struggles. A major focus of this study is the multifaceted influence of the international on revolutionary causes, processes and outcomes.

This book is also intended to highlight a third weakness in second-stage historical sociology: its tendency to focus on the *structural* dimensions of revolutionary change – relative geopolitical position, degrees of modernization, class relations and so on – to the detriment of agency, both domestic and international. For Skocpol, as for many other historical sociologists, inevitable outcomes emerge from predetermined conditions. This leads to a general failure to explain revolutions in states where certain structural conditions are not in place (such as Iran), and negates the role of peasants, workers and colonized elites (from Nicaragua to China) in *generating* uprisings, even in apparently unyielding

²¹ To some extent, this has been rectified by historical sociologists working within IR, such as Justin Rosenberg (1994), Benno Teschke (2003) and John Hobson (2004).

²² See Mann (1986, 1993), Skocpol (1979) and Tilly (1993).

²³ I am grateful to Fred Halliday for this point.

structural conditions. An inability to deal with issues of agency reveals a weakness in the definition of power offered by many second-stage historical sociologists. All too often a concentration on ‘power over’, or domination, is not matched by an equal commitment to ‘power to’, or resistance to structural forces. The (over) emphasis placed on structure is shared by much mainstream IR theory that seeks to explain events on the ground by evoking overriding structural conditions, whether they be anarchy, capitalism or globalization.²⁴ In neither contemporary International Relations nor in historical sociology has the dual nature of power been sufficiently explored. In the three case studies that are at the heart of this book, the multifaceted relationship between structure and agency, and the two dimensions of power, are fully surveyed.

This book is, therefore, a work of both historical sociology and International Relations. In the first instance, it is a comparative, empirically grounded study which depends on ‘sufficient similarity’: the use of a few, meaningful cases in order to draw out and refine a social fact (revolution) and a particular variant of it (negotiated revolution). The controlling variable is world-historical time – the end of the Cold War – envisaged as the central condition that provided the necessary context for the three transformations to succeed. Within the three cases, there are important variations that need clarification. The Czech case, which will be explored in depth during Chapter Three, stands as a ‘maximum’ condition of revolutionary change.²⁵ The subject of Chapter Four is the transformation from apartheid to market-democracy in South Africa. This case, it is argued, warrants the label ‘minimum’ transformation, primarily because some of the structures inherited from the apartheid regime (in particular economic institutions), have been difficult to break and remould. The ousting of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, surveyed in Chapter Five, is considered to be a case of transition rather than revolution, negotiated or otherwise, because while some important social, political and economic changes have taken place since 1989, these have largely been contained within the ‘authoritarian enclaves’ prescribed by the junta.

In one sense, the conclusions afforded by this approach are bounded by its inductive approach and limited to the cases under review. The aim of the study is not to generate a universalist programme, but nor is it limited to mere contingency. In other words, the book rejects both abstract over-generalization that explains nothing *and* a retreat to description which seeks refuge from causal patterns. As such, this study takes place within a research tradition dating back to Max Weber’s attempt to mediate between various *Methodenstreit*: explanation and understanding, rationalism and reflectivism, materialism and idealism, general trend and *sui generis*. Weber sought a means of reconciling these dichotomies by providing an empirically rich, comparative study of social facts which he used as a

²⁴ Interestingly, some contemporary IR historical sociologists, for example Rosenberg (1994), also deliver top-heavy accounts stressing the importance of structure over agency, although for Rosenberg this means capitalist anarchy rather than realist anarchy.

²⁵ The idea of ‘maximum’ and ‘minimum’ conditions of revolutionary transformation is borrowed from Hobsbawm (1973). For more on this, see pp. 61–63.

means to generate and evaluate a general argument. This combination of interpretation and explanation (*Verstehende Erklahrung*) used awareness of particular contexts in order to derive a nuanced, causal explanation of ‘ideal-types’ that potentially contained a wider import. Weber’s approach seems to me to lie at the very heart of historically sensitive, yet significant, social science.

This book is a ‘first cut’ in that it is an attempt to generate an ideal-type (negotiated revolution) that is both a narrow argument based on three case studies and a conceptual standard by which to conduct further empirical research. In the final chapter of the book, the ideal-type of negotiated revolution is explored and its wider significance to the post-Cold War world probed. The aim is the construction of a researchable category that could be applied sideways to other cases which took place in the afterglow of the Cold War (Poland, Hungary and Namibia among others), forwards to other authoritarian states that continue to labour under the yoke of despotism (Cuba, Myanmar and North Korea, for example), and backwards to states that have undergone various degrees of democratic transition.²⁶ The final argument of the book is that negotiated revolutions are, beyond their theoretical potential, central dynamics in understanding the substantive place of radical change in the contemporary world. As the principal examples of relatively peaceful yet revolutionary transformations between authoritarian regimes and market-democracies, negotiated revolutions have distinct and profound consequences both for the international system in general and for those states facing similar contexts and pressures. The age of revolution is not yet over. The debate that has raged from the time of Paine and Burke over the two faces of revolution remains one of immense significance to the contemporary world.

²⁶ Although this claim is made with the explicit proviso that, if the concept proves inadequate, it should be discarded.