Theoretical Interpretations of Modern Revolutions: Theories of Causation

The social, political, technological, and economic upheavals described in this course attest amply to the wide range and complexity of modern revolutions. Between sociopolitical revolutions such as the French and American Revolutions, and a technological revolution such as the Industrial Revolution, lie a rich variety of complex phenomena. We turn our attention, in this final reading, to the attempts that scholars and intellectuals have made to formulate theories or explanations of what causes these phenomena, and why.

The concept of revolution has received enormous amounts of attention, both from the general public and from scholars and academics. Many theoretical interpretations of revolutions have focused on what is called “theories of causation”—in other words, why revolutions happen. Early studies, those dating from the mid-19th century, primarily analyzed events in history from a socioeconomic perspective.

For example, early historians of revolutions, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, argued that revolutions were manifestations of a struggle against a centralizing state. In his book, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (1856), Tocqueville stated that the French Revolution was a revolt against an autocratic regime by a prosperous middle class that had become conscious of its social and economic importance. While it is true that one of the main causes of the French Revolution was the bourgeoisie’s resentment of royal absolutism and the traditional seigniorial privileges possessed by the nobility, Tocqueville’s thesis does little to explain other revolutions, such as the Russian Revolution.

German philosopher Karl Marx stated that revolutions were the result of a conflict between social classes. According to Marx, the organization of society directly depends on modes of production—in other words, the different socioeconomic systems in which people organize themselves, such as feudalism, capitalism, and communism. Class struggle was the direct result of an abrupt transition from one mode of production to another. As Marx explained:

> At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production, or (and this is simply a legal expression of the same thing), with the property relations within which they have operated up to that time. These relations change from forms of development of the productive forces into their fetters. There then begins an epoch of social revolution.¹

Thus, for example, Marx maintained that the French Revolution was a result of the replacement of feudalism by capitalism as the mode of production. For Marx, since class struggle was the main cause of revolutions and conflict, society would inevitably progress towards a classless and stateless system of socialism, better known as communism.

Early 20th-century scholars emphasized the necessity of approaching the study of revolutions by multiple social-science perspectives. For example, French sociologist Gustave Le Bon pioneered the analysis of revolutions using the field of mass psychology. In his work *The Psychology of Revolution*, Le Bon states of the crowd,

“Reality and experience have no effect upon them. The multitude will admit anything; nothing is impossible in the eyes of the crowd.”\(^2\) For Le Bon, the mentality of the crowd, which has an extreme credulity, an exaggerated sensibility, and is entirely dominated by unconscious elements, can trigger the multitude to start a revolution.

Le Bon’s crowd-psychology theory inspired other scholars, such as American sociologist Charles Ellwood, to use social psychology for the study of revolutions. Ellwood theorized that communication was the key element for social understanding; thus the suppression of communication could lead to intolerance and hostility, and ultimately to revolution.

The work of Le Bon and Ellwood made it clear that further study of the phenomenon of crowd psychology was indispensable for understanding the causes of revolutions. Numerous contemporary researchers have continued to draw upon their work, including Professors Ted Robert Gurr and Denton E. Morrison, with various works on the theory of relative deprivation. The theory of relative deprivation revolves around the concept that frustration due to perceived deprivation is capable of causing civic disorder and revolution.

Another current approach to the study of revolutions focuses on the process of modernization as a leading cause for revolutions. Because every country is unique, modernization does not happen in any two countries at the same pace. On a number of occasions, when countries have tried to catch up with the development of more advanced nations, the pace and method by which they try to impose new advancements has alienated large sections of their society. One leading researcher on the theory of revolution, Professor Edward H. Judge, maintains that the revolutions in Russia and Iran are examples of revolutions caused by autocratic states trying to impose modernization on their countries.

Similarly, globalization—understood as the product of international economic interest—can become another catalyst of revolutions. As explained by American sociologist Theda Skocpol, while international trade is important for any country’s economy, it can lead to an uneven development in society, to a forced modernization, and even to an abrupt shift in the mode of production, all of which are major political, social, and economic causes of revolutions.

Other writers, such as Professor Chimène Keitner, cite nationalism as a motivating force of modern revolutions. Although nationalism was a product of the French Revolution, it spread throughout Western Europe, and later, the rest of the world, becoming one of the most significant political and social causes of many revolutions, as for example the Greek War of Independence and the Cuban Revolution.

Finally, political scientists such as Charles Tilly and Samuel P. Huntington have tried to simplify the causation theories by describing revolutions as the result of the power struggle between competing interest groups. Thus, when a conflict between two parties arises, a revolution is a probable outcome if no satisfactory agreement can be reached.

All these causation theories can explain revolutionary events; however they are not always applicable to all revolutions, and do not provide scientific ways to predict future revolutionary phenomena. The study of revolutions is still evolving, and scholars

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continue to analyze their nature, causes, characteristics, and consequences, using multidisciplinary methods, providing hundreds of new definitions and theories every day.