

THINKING ABOUT REVOLUTION

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Introduction

This article presents a brief overview of a theory of revolution and provides a concise framework for the evaluation of revolutionary conditions.

There are many who would maintain that there is no theory of revolution, and there is no general agreement on such basic elements of theory as terminology, definitions, and the kinds of data that should be collected in order to support a topology of revolution. Many works on revolution, relying heavily on the historical case study method, also fail to reconcile an array of partial theories.

Early scholarship essentially distinguished between the naturalist and the romantic concepts of revolution, with a realist concept emerging in this century.

-- The **naturalist concept**, the earliest concept, stemmed from the association of the word "revolution" with astronomy, where the cyclical and systematic movements of the stars suggested both an inevitability to political and social changes, and a revolving process in which a government that fell one year might easily return the next.

-- The **romantic concept** came into being when men discovered their ability to alter the course of their development by intervening in the affairs of state. The emphasis in this concept was placed on the subjective inclinations of "man as the master of history" by virtue of his "heroic, romantic deed(s)."

-- The **realist concept** reflects a relatively new sensitivity to objective conditions combined with a continued recognition of the importance of subjective elements which must be present if the objective conditions are to culminate in a successful revolution. To this extent, the naturalist concept (the inevitability of objective conditions) and the romantic concept (the necessity for human motivation) are combined.

Early scholarship and its simplistic approaches to the phenomenon of revolution were increasingly called into question as the world grew more complex. This article, after reviewing the elements of theory, provides a summary of a theory of revolution, and a basis for studying the preconditions and precipitants of revolution in a number of related but sometimes distinct spheres: political-legal, socio-economic, ideo-cultural, techno-demographic, and natural-geographic.

Elements of Theory

There have been three general (but partial) approaches to the study of revolution; none has provided an over-arching theoretical foundation able to accommodate the universe of revolution.

-- **Group conflict** approaches, which include the partial theories of group differentiation and class conflict, suggest that the essential cause of revolutionary upheaval is either the incompatibility of the goals of two or more different groups; or the perception on the part of any group that it does not possess a sufficiently proportionate share of the available resources (political power, economic wealth, social prestige, cultural coherence) vis-a-vis other groups.

-- **Social-psychological** approaches have been popular, emphasizing individual perceptions of relative deprivation. The psychological approach includes five separate mini-theories, those of social isolation, cumulative deprivation, relative deprivation, rising expectations, and status inconsistencies. While these all share an appreciation for socially induced discontent as a precondition for collective violence, each reflects a different conception of precisely what kinds of social conditions and processes of change will lead to enough social discontent to cross the threshold of violence.

-- **Socio-structural** approaches emphasize the importance of shared value systems and properly integrated subsystems. Stress is placed on the structural manner in which a social systems continues to fulfill its functions in the face of change.

Early attempts to discuss the need for a theory of revolution, led by Harry Eckstein of Princeton, focused on four pre-theoretical gaps which must all be addressed if a theory is to be developed:

-- **Delimitation** consists of restricting the scope of the inquiry by agreeing on the boundaries of the subject; i.e. which phenomena it will and will not include. Successful delimitation must both identify a homogeneous set of cases, and limit the degree of homogeneity required for a case to be included in the universe under study.

-- **Classification** pursues the pattern broadly established by delimitation, attempting to sub-divide the considered phenomena into classes about which both common and separate generalizations can be formulated. Classification is intended to reduce ambiguities and permit the creation of a topology. There are two types of classification: concrete, based on actually experienced and studies types; and ideal, composed of logically satisfying types.