

THINKING ABOUT REVOLUTION

Robert David Steele

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.

-- **Analysis** is the division of the subject into its basic components, the development of basic descriptive categories within which all aspects of revolution may be explored.

-- **Problemation**, a word coined by Eckstein, addresses the nuances of the topic, to include discussion of general frames of reference, the distinction between preconditions and precipitants of revolution, the process and techniques of revolution, and the outcomes and long-term consequences of successful or unsuccessful revolutionary effort.

This paper, based on a graduate thesis, provides the theoretical framework within which to evaluate revolution as a phenomenon--a framework within which to classify kinds of revolution and examine the basic questions of what (dimensions of revolution) why (aspects of revolution), where (preconditions of revolution), when (precipitants of revolution), and who & how (the revolutionary process).

Change and Revolution

It is not possible to define revolution without first establishing an understanding of change. The following chart, using the aspects of change identified by Ted Gurr, but adding specific levels of distinction for each, is an essential foundation for defining revolution.

<u>1. Type of Change</u>	<u>3. Scope of Change</u>
a. Political	a. Contained
b. Legal	b. Scattered
c. Social	c. Pervasive
d. Economic	
e. Ideological	<u>4. Pattern of Change</u>
f. Cultural	a. Random
g. Technological	b. Sporadic
h. Demographic	c. Consistent PERSISTENT
i. Natural	
k. Geographic	<u>5. Rate of Change</u>
l. Military	a. Slow
	b. Steady
<u>2. Extent of Change</u>	c. Fast
a. Negligible	d. Rapid
b. Moderate	
c. Significant	
d. Severe	
e. Catastrophic	

Figure 1. Aspects of Change

Now, having establish a sense of what constitutes change, the subordinate aspects of revolutionary change can be described, and a definition of revolution gradually achieved.

WHAT: Dimensions of Revolution

One must understand the differences between several broad dimensions within which revolution can occur; as will be outlined when the topology for study is presented, revolution can occur in one dimension without necessarily affecting others.

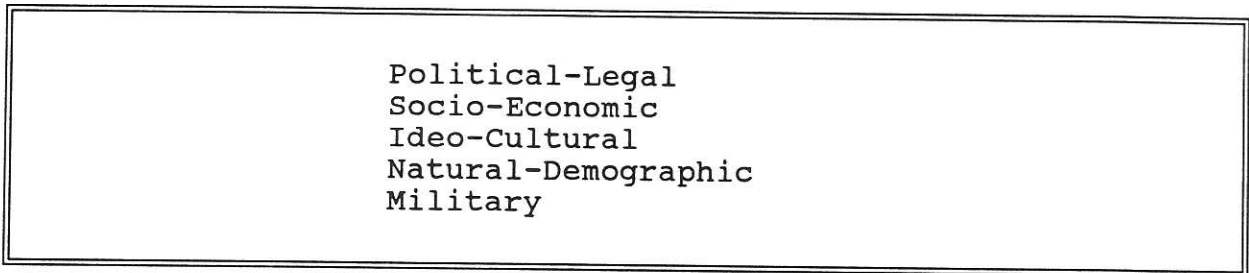


Figure 2. Dimensions of Revolution

The **political-legal** dimension refers to the rights and duties of the inhabitants of any given organization--who governs whom, and to what end. Included as items for observation would be the character of the elites, if any; priorities manifest in their day-to-day behavior; the competence of their administration and the authority & legitimacy which their regime displays; and finally, in a fundamental constitutional sense, their ability to respond to change, to assimilate other minor groups into the mainstream of political life, to maintain their autonomy vis-a-vis other groups or states, and to respect and nurture the complex elements of their sovereign domain.

The **socio-economic** dimension encompasses the tangible process of fulfilling the functions of the sovereign organization (not necessarily a nation-state), and is particularly concerned with the allocation of goods and services among the different constituent groups. Order, protection, and conservation being three of the broad functions of the traditional nation-state, these may be further defined:

-- **Order** would reflect the degree to which control is maintained over all non-coercive sources of power; the provision of the institutional framework within which the state moves to attain its goals; the maintenance of a degree of stability conducive to the social process; and the provision and regulation of those services essential to the integrity and prosperity of the sovereign organization.

-- **Protection** must encompass both the provision of a secure environment for society, and the nature and potential of the coercive forces permitting the enforcement of national standards; justice in the administration of sanctions and the allocation of resources; and the consequent welfare of the population and, by extension, the parent organization.

-- **Conservation**, as aspect of responsibility of increasing interest to scholars and the public alike, reflects the role of the sovereign organization in developing itself and its elements; health, education, equal opportunity, ecological sensitivity; technical sensitivity.

The **ideo-cultural** dimension is different from the socio-economic; whereas the socio-economic dimension encompasses the physical and institutional mechanisms by which the sovereign organization moves to achieve its goals, this dimension concerns itself with the spiritual means of coordinating the population, establishing the sense of community and inter-relatedness necessary to move forward.

-- This is a subtle and difficult area of interest. The faith of the population in the myths and institutions through which organizations manifest themselves will be difficult to gauge. The degree of obedience which can be extracted will be somewhat easily to calculate.

-- The promulgation of, and popular adherence to, role specializations (and, by extension, class and occupational stratification) will be crucial to the stability of the political-legal and socio-economic systems.

-- This dimension is traditionally neglected because of its difficulty, yet it is the normative behavior patterns engendered by ideological belief and cultural tradition that will do much to determine the perception of personal injustice on the part of elements of the population, and hence the degree of violence to which some might ascribe in seeking redress.

The **techno-demographic** dimension includes both technology and demography; both are variable sources of power for any sovereign organization.

-- The degree of **technological sophistication**, and the pervasiveness of the technologies--to name three--of communication, education, and employment, will suggest ideas about the capacity of the incumbent regime and the obstacles and advantages of any who might become insurgents.

-- The **national infrastructure**, including national, state, and local intelligence-gathering and processing capabilities, will affect the nature of any revolutionary process.