
INTRODUCTION

Delineating the Problem

Revolution, together with global war, was the defining characteristic of the twentieth century. Indeed, most of the events in world history that customarily qualify as “revolutions” have occurred since 1914. With Communism’s demise, the modern revolutionary phenomenon seems to have run its course. Is this, in fact, likely to be the case, or does revolution spring eternal in human affairs? Both to answer this question and to understand the century’s drama, it is necessary to trace the roots of modern revolutionary phenomena far back into the past of Western society.

But does the subject of revolution as such exist? War has certainly existed as a distinct phenomenon from earliest times, and as the subject of historical investigations since Herodotus and Thucydides. By analogy, it seems, we suppose that revolutions can occur in any place or time if appropriate conditions are present. My argument is that this supposition is mistaken, and that what we call revolutions are a historically specific phenomenon—in fact, specific to Europe and, during the last century, the area of European influence.

Therefore, I will not begin by offering a definition of revolution and then comparing it with a list of cases. Rather, I will proceed the other way around, building from specific problems and events to more general propositions. And my approach will not be structural; it will be historical. This means tracing the radicalization of the European revolutionary process from what I consider to be its beginnings with the fifteenth-century Hussites to the twentieth century, with special emphasis on the two pivotal instances of modern revolution, France in 1789 and Russia in 1917.

And my key questions are: Is there a basic pattern—structure, if you will—of European revolution? Is there an overall European revolutionary process in

which this pattern escalates over time? Finally, is there an underlying revolutionary impulse acting throughout the last millennium?

My interest in the problem of revolution goes back many years. It began as an effort to “re-conceptualize” the Russian Revolution, which fitted into none of our usual theories of revolution. Most of these posited that revolution is a process with a clear beginning, middle, and end, whereas the Russian Revolution, once the Bolshevik-Jacobins had seized power, was fixed in a seemingly unending ultra-radical movement, which in fact lasted seventy-four years (it was as if the original Jacobins had held power from 1793 to 1867). Similarly inapplicable to Communist Russia are such comparative categories as “Thermidor” and “Bonapartism,” such explanatory ones as “proletariat” versus “bourgeoisie,” or such excessively broad concepts as “modernization” and “development.” None of these categories gets at the uniqueness of the Russian case. For, after October 1917, Russia offered the unprecedented spectacle of an inverted world in which the ideology determined the political structure (Party hegemony), and the political structure determined the economic order (a command economy), while there was no society (that is, no “civil society”), since all components of the system lived in subordination to Party purposes and control—the whole structure justified by the great cause of building, then defending, Socialism. And it was because there was no real society or autonomous economy in Soviet Russia to counteract the total state that October could be frozen in place until the meltdown of 1989–1991.

These views regarding the uniqueness and inverted nature of the Soviet regime were argued extensively in my *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991*.¹ The origins of this paradoxical phenomenon were then explored in the context of modern European development since the Enlightenment in *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum*.² What I wish to do now is to show that the Russian case, for all its uniqueness, is also a logical, though extreme, culmination of the long revolutionary tradition in European civilization as a whole. Russia will not figure prominently in this book, but it will enter in as the terminus ad quem of an all-European development. This book’s main subject is the European revolutionary tradition.

Seven general considerations define the approach of this book.

1. Revolution is a European phenomenon in origin—just as modern civilization overall is a European creation, however unfair this may be to the rest of humanity. Until the twentieth century, outside the European cultural orbit (which includes, of course, the Americas) there was nothing that may plausibly be called a revolution—nor, for that matter, was there anything resembling democracy,

constitutionalism, or philosophies of the pursuit of individual liberty or social equality as supreme social goods; nor were there words for such concepts outside of European languages. Thus, the origin of the revolutionary phenomenon must be sought in specifically European institutions and cultural norms.

2. As a consequence of this Eurocentricity, revolution must be studied in the first instance historically, in specifically Western terms, rather than structurally and “trans-culturally.” The American social sciences are, by and large, structural in orientation; that is, they operate in terms of the “social system” or “society,” whose basic structure is assumed to be the same in all times and places, from France to China and from the twelfth century to the twentieth.³ History, by contrast, operates in terms of the particular and the temporal, a perspective in which differences in time and place have a great deal to do with the differing structures we find across the globe.

The most prominent of all theories of revolution, Marxism, offers a combination of structural and historical elements. It is structural insofar as it holds that all “history is the history of class struggle,” and class is universally defined in terms of relationships of production leading to relationships of exploitation: thus, whether we are talking about such significantly different “ruling classes” as Chinese mandarins, Hindu Brahmins, Roman slaveholders, Western feudal lords, or American planters, we are always talking essentially about “exploiters.” Yet Marxism is also historical in that class struggle develops over time in intensity and self-consciousness, as the mode of production becomes ever more advanced and exploitative. Nonetheless, in Marxism historical movement itself is structured, since there is only one, logically phased line of social development, in all civilizations, from slaveholding to feudal to capitalist society. Further, there is no significant place in Marxism for the autonomy of either politics or culture, both of which are reduced to the status of a mere “superstructure.”

In short, Marxism, though recognizing historical differences over time, is not really comparative because it reduces all history to a single set of socioeconomic factors arranged in an escalating continuum. Thus, historical materialism, though it proclaims that “Europe shows the rest of humanity its future,” can hardly explain why it was only the European “class struggle” that produced those revolutions that are “the locomotives” of universal history. Yet a diffuse Marxism remains far and away the most important influence in the contemporary social sciences.

3. A Western revolution is in the first instance a political and ideological transformation, not a social one. And on this subject the best guide is Weber, taken as a general methodological antidote to Marx, for Weber has nothing to say directly about the phenomenon of revolution. The relevant point here is that Weber, as a

genuine comparativist, sought to explain why Marx's capitalism was born in Europe, rather than in some other culture; and he answered that it was the distinctiveness of European religion, particularly Calvinism, that made Europe more dynamic than rival civilizations.⁴

But there is more to European religion than the Lutheran doctrine of this-worldly calling and the Calvinist principle of double predestination which Weber singled out. There was, in the first instance, the sacramental and sacerdotal system of the early church and the Middle Ages; and there was the principle developed from Constantine onward that the church was coextensive with society; a church-society called by the Carolingians Christendom. In this sacred world the spiritual and the secular swords were inextricably linked, with the former of course being the higher of the two. Thus revolt, if not yet revolution, began in Europe with the redefinition of the sphere of the spiritual: that is, with heresy.

Specifically, since eternal salvation depended on sacraments, and since these might be invalid if the priest were unworthy, European heresy perennially tended toward antisacerdotalism and antisacramentalism. Over the long years after the Gregorian reform of the eleventh century, it eventually emerged that the ultimate consequence of this position was the abolition of both clergy and sacraments in favor of direct contact of the believer with God. The culminating expression of this was the Münster Anabaptist revolt of 1534–35.

Moreover, in this sacred world any challenge to the ecclesiastical hierarchy was automatically a challenge to the secular hierarchy. Religious dissent and heresy, therefore, furnished the first impulse to radical social change, and ultimately leveling, in Western culture, and they remained the primary force for egalitarianism until the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Furthermore, even the church's own efforts to reform itself tended to generate a millenarian expectation of the reign of the Holy Spirit on earth. These and other, more temperate, forms of religious protest were brought into the center of politics by the Reformation; and the secularization of religious values is clearly one component of the Western revolutionary tradition, acting to diffuse power in a manner similar to the fragmentation of political authority by feudalism. The radical political consequences and the egalitarian social implications of medieval and Reformation heterodoxy have received their most impressive theoretical formulation by Weber's colleague Ernst Troeltsch.⁵

These insights, and their application to the Middle Ages and Reformation, will be the subject of the first part of the book. The three "escalating" cases involved are: Hussite Bohemia, Lutheran Germany, and the Dutch Revolt.

4. The same cultural distinctiveness may be claimed for European political forms and philosophies, for it is only the Western world—first in Greece and

Rome and then in medieval representative assemblies and their modern descendants—that has known participatory politics and the legal and philosophical reflection such arrangements generate. And this political culture thoroughly encapsulates the Western “class struggle.”

Thus, although there are numerous examples in European history of acute social conflicts, whether urban revolts such as that of the Ciompi in Florence in 1385, or rural uprisings such as the *jacquerie* during the Hundred Years’ War or the German Peasants’ War of 1525, none of these led to general revolutions like 1640 or 1789. Such social struggles, therefore, are the necessary but not the sufficient cause of major revolution. For the latter type of event to occur there first must exist the framework of a *unitary state* to focus all political, social, and other forms of protest in a single set of institutions. And this focus on the transformation of state structures, and the concomitant challenge to existing state legitimacy, is what gives to a general revolution both its explosive character and its political-ideological nature.

Historically speaking, these European state forms originated in feudal monarchies. These proto-national institutionalizations of the secular sword, like the parallel organization of the spiritual sword into a clergy-laity ecclesiology, were strictly hierarchical bodies; in fact, the two hierarchies meshed in the system of the three orders or estates: those who pray, those who fight, those who work. Formed between 1100 and 1300, these feudal monarchies were slowly centralized to where by the sixteenth century they became what historians later called “absolute” monarchies, and which after 1789 everyone called *anciens régimes*. The feudal origin of these state forms is of paramount importance because feudal relationships everywhere mean a division of power, which would later form the basis for the separation of powers and the checks and balances of modern constitutionalism.

5. A European “grand revolution,” then, is a generalized revolt against an Old Regime. Moreover, such a transformation occurs *only once* in each national history, since it is also the founding event for the nation’s future “modernity.” Western revolutions thus acquire their distinctive character from the Old Regime constitutional and cultural structures *against which* they are made, thereby producing each time related patterns of revolutionary action. And that against which European revolutions were made, from 1400 to 1789, was the sacred commonwealth of the two swords and the three orders.

6. Western revolutions do not simply repeat the basic pattern of revolt against the Old Regime; rather each revolution learns from the experience of its predecessor, and so escalates that pattern each time to a more intense level of radicalism. (And let it be recalled that everywhere east of the Rhine modified Old

Regimes existed until World War I—in Prussian Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia.) This progression is, schematically, as follows:

a. The English or Puritan Revolution, though the same in its basic pattern of action as the French, was still half-religious in character, and so never thought of itself as a revolution. When it was finished its heirs obliterated from the national consciousness the fact that they had made a revolution. At the time, the revolution's concluding episode, the Glorious Revolution of 1688, meant a "restoration." (The original meaning of revolution is a return to a point of origin.)⁶

b. The American colonists began what they indeed called their "revolution" (in the 1688 sense) as an effort at the "restoration" of their historic rights as Englishmen. But when they got through, they had created a new nation and a republic, an outcome that was obviously "revolutionary" in the modern sense of post-Old Regime.

c. This modern sense emerged fully in the course of the French Revolution. Although similar in its basic pattern to its English predecessor, the French Revolution was the first to occur in a predominantly secular culture: the Enlightenment. Seventeen-eighty-nine therefore quickly escalated into a frontal assault on the whole of Europe's thousand-year-old *ancien régime*: monarchy, aristocracy, and church. As a result, revolution now came to mean a creatively violent process ushering in a new world-historical epoch, and the creation of a "new man." Thus, the French events generated, for the first time in the West, a cult of revolution as the way history works; or at least it did so on what now became known as "the left."

d. Then came the turning point of 1830–1848. Since the French Revolution failed to complete its task of human emancipation, after the July overturn of 1830 its more radical heirs took to anticipating a second, and final, 1789. On the far left, this Second Coming was expected to escalate the revolutionary agenda from political liberty for the rich and the few to social justice and equality for the impoverished many, a creed variously called socialism or communism; its maximal program was the abolition of private property, profit, and the market, an "exploitative" system for which the term "capitalism" was coined toward the end of the century. This socialism was of course this-worldly in orientation, indeed often militantly anti-religious, just as the Enlightenment had been. Nonetheless, the new movement in fact often reproduced medieval and Reformation millenarian expectations in secular guise, from the Saint-Simonians' New Christianity to Marx's edenic "classless, stateless society," a filiation often directly claimed by the movement's leaders. Marx, the basis of whose system was laid by 1845, was only the most prominent of

these theorists of *revolutionary anticipation*. Moreover, the link between his communist vision and Reformation eschatology can be clearly traced through Hegel's historicist metaphysics. Engels, indeed, deemed Thomas Müntzer to be Marx's direct predecessor.

Tocqueville, in the same years, made a kindred point in more sober fashion: once "democracy," in the sense of social equality, had "destroyed monarchy and aristocracy," there was no reason to "believe that it would stop short before the bourgeoisie and the rich." Thus he defined democratic revolution as the unavoidable fate of the modern world, and the great political problem of modernity was how to make it compatible with individual liberty; and this, not the chimera of integral socialism, is indeed the practical political and social problem of modern politics. Tocqueville, further, plausibly traced the origins of modern liberty back to feudal "liberties," and the modern leveling impulse back to the monarchical state's struggle against those same aristocratic liberties. Tocqueville, finally, is a genuine comparativist: in order to understand why the most explosive of European revolutions broke out in France, he compared the French case with cognate Old Regimes that did *not* produce revolutions so as to "isolate the variable" peculiar to France; and the answer, of course, was that this variable was the anti-nobility, leveling monarchy. All of these insights will be used in this study and applied to the hundred and fifty years of revolutionary history since Tocqueville.

e. The would-be new 1789, when it at last materialized in 1848, disappointed the anticipations of all stripes of revolutionary, whether liberal, socialist, or nationalist, by bringing to power the likes of Napoleon III and Bismarck, thus producing the first revolution won by conservatives. But revolutionary anticipation hardly disappeared. To be sure, in industrialized Western Europe there were no more working-class uprisings after the Paris Commune of 1871; and after 1889, the Marxist Second International tended increasingly to seek its goals through elections, thus becoming by 1914 social-democratic reformism, in fact if not in formal doctrine. Still, Socialism as full noncapitalism remained the stated goal of the international workers' movement, and crisis could easily give it a new life.

f. At the same time, maximalist revolutionary anticipation moved east to backward Russia. In 1917 this one-time bastion of European reaction unexpectedly produced the Second and Final Revolution, anticipated yet constantly thwarted farther west from 1830 to 1871. From the victorious high ground of October, Marxism-Leninism then reinjected into part of the Western left the cult of revolution, whose specter would dominate so much of twentieth-century politics everywhere.

7. The Western revolutionary tradition moves not only from the primacy of political liberty to that of eliminating social inequality, and from relative moderation to extremism, but from more advanced societies to more backward ones. Thus, it spreads from the economically developed and politically complex Old Regimes of the Atlantic West, to the simpler and more predominantly military Old Regimes of Prussia and Austria, to the crudest and most brutal of them all, Russia. That is, it moves along what Germans call the “West-East cultural gradient.” This factor also contributes to the radicalization of the revolutionary process, for modernity’s movement eastward leads to the telescoping of historical stages, and after 1917 to the inversion of the Western development. Finally, once this tradition has achieved its “final,” inverted embodiment in Russia, it then expands in the twentieth century to much of the Third World, thus making the twentieth century the world-historical locus of revolution. (This view of Europe as a spectrum of graded zones owes much to Alexander Gerschenkron.)⁷

These various considerations at last permit a comprehensive definition of the method employed here. This method is, first, to follow Tocqueville’s procedure of comparing only cognate cases within the same culture. By extension, this means pursuing comparisons of contiguous cases in a sequential temporal continuum: that is, cases of partial overlap, as well as of partial divergence, between earlier and later instances of a brusque break in European history. Indeed, such a genetic and incremental approach is the grand axis of historical method. And historical investigation, after all, is not primarily about structures; it is about appropriating the human experience under the ordinance of change and continuity over time.

Programmatically, the overall aim of this investigation is to generalize Tocqueville’s insights into the workings of the modern democratic impulse, and to do so both forward and backward in time. Tocqueville explained the escalation of egalitarianism down to 1789 by the action of Old Regime absolute monarchy on feudal structures going back to the year 1000. But it is obvious that the egalitarian impulse thereby generated continued to escalate after 1789 to yield the increasingly radical, leveling revolutions of the twentieth century. Moreover, although Tocqueville spoke often of the clergy, he said little about religion itself, beyond noting that it was the indispensable moral cement of society.

A second fundamental aspect, then, of the approach used here is to apply to Tocqueville’s problem Weber’s sensitivity to the social role of Christianity. This means linking both Christianity’s doctrinal content and its institutional structures to the political and social process of democratic escalation. To do so, it is necessary to go back again to Tocqueville’s starting point in the year 1000, and

thus to relate Christian theology and ecclesiology to both feudalism and early-modern Old Regime successors. Weber himself, of course, never attempted such an effort; nor was he interested in the problem of revolution. But the aspect of European uniqueness he was interested in, capitalism, clearly was not the source of that other uniquely European phenomenon, escalating revolution—as the perverse twentieth-century fate of Marxism amply illustrates. Nonetheless, a religious approach to Tocqueville’s political problem is a legitimate extension of Weber’s assessment of the historical decisiveness of culture.⁸ For it is indeed from this long-term political-cum-cultural background that the insatiable and Faustian revolutionary tradition of Europe springs.

To illustrate the birth of this-worldly radicalism out of otherworldly faith, let us recall that before the watershed of 1776–1789 Europeans lacked the modern concept of revolution as a clean break and new departure. But recall also that the first European revolution now considered modern, the English Revolution of 1640–1660, was fought in terms of a religious ideology, thus earning it the label Puritan. Yet, the culmination of this “revolution of the saints” in the monarch’s ritual execution links it to the next grand upheaval in the standard series—the unambiguously secular and democratic French drama of 1789–1799. This pair of revolutions thus clearly offers two species of the same historical genus. Until now, modern “staseology” has usually followed this organic development forward to the twentieth century. The first step here, however, will be to follow it *backward* to the medieval matrix of a distinctive European civilization in the period 1000–1300. For it is in those remote centuries that the European revolutionary impulse first appeared; and it was directed, not against the state, which did not yet exist, but against the church, which was the only all-embracing unit of European society. The revolutionary impulse, indeed, first appears in the sacred sedition of heresy, particularly in its millenarian or apocalyptic form.

From this base, the continuum of European radicalism will be followed forward as it escalates from religious to political sedition and on to overt revolution; and then from the political revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the “scientific” millenarianism of twentieth-century social revolution. Thus did the Western revolutionary tradition traverse the millennial trajectory from salvation religion as surrogate politics to salvation politics as surrogate religion.

For seventy-odd years, social science “staseology” has been in pursuit of the grail of a universal (standard) model of revolution, and the dominant approach, inevitably, has been comparative. Unfortunately, this method has usually been treated as a one-way street designed to lead us to *similarities*. In fact, though, as between any two cases there always exists at least as many differences as similari-

ties, and so the longed-for “model” has never appeared. Now seven decades into the quest, the search has ended in a clear cul-de-sac. So why not try the other side of the comparative street, and collect *differences* as well? This indeed was the tried-and-true method practiced by Tocqueville and Weber in order to isolate the decisive political and cultural variables from one case to another. And when it comes to a *historical*, as opposed to a sociological, investigation, might not these differences, when shuffled in with the similarities, yield a different kind of model, one of incremental-revolutionary change over time? That making comparisons should yield differences as well as similarities is no doubt a platitude. Yet it is surprising how many great minds have missed this elementary point—Marx, for example, for whom all “bourgeois revolutions” must ultimately be the same.

In the nineteenth century, “revolution” was a problem in political history. In the twentieth century, it became a problem in social history. After two centuries of inconclusive pursuit of both approaches, it has now become clear that revolution must in the first instance also be considered a problem in the history of ideas. This is true on two accounts, first, because the historiography of both the various revolutionary “cases” and revolution-as-such is so self-contradictory that our understanding of either subject must initially be approached as a branch of intellectual history; and second, because this historiography reveals that both the political and the social content of our various cases has been crucially molded by ideas. The present study, therefore, is above all an investigation of revolution as a history of ideas. Accordingly, each revolutionary case examined here will begin with a survey of its historiography.

So much for the generalities; now for the historical narrative.