

IV. REVIEWS AND NOTES

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Revolutions in the Contemporary World

**A Review of 'Handbook of New Waves
of Revolutions in the 21st Century:
The New Waves of Revolutions,
and the Causes and Effects of Disruptive
Political Change' by Jack Goldstone,
Leonid Grinin, and Andrey Korotayev (Eds.) –
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Is there a more important area of study in the contemporary world than revolution? As I write this foreword, in June 2021, a large number of revolutionary mobilisations are underway, from Myanmar to Colombia, Tigray to Belarus. If we extend our historical range back a decade, we would encounter experiences of revolution in nearly every world region. And if we extend our range even further back in time, say two centuries or so, we would find every country in the world touched by revolution, whether through direct experience of revolutionary uprisings, reformist attempts to defang the revolutionary challenge, or programmes of counter-revolution intended to drive revolutionaries underground, sometimes literally. Revolutions, therefore, are vital areas of study not just for contemporary world politics, but for modern world history. If this point was forgotten during the Rip Van Winkle period that followed the end of the Cold War, few people remain asleep today. And if there are any deep-sleepers or late-risers out there, this volume serves as an alarm call. Time to wake up.

This is a big book in more ways than one. In its 41 chapters, readers will find much to keep them occupied. The volume's range is vast, covering several hundred years of history and an equally expansive geography, offering grand

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theorising alongside granular analysis, and providing insights ranging from the descriptive to the predictive. Within this panorama, I would highlight four general themes that strike me as particularly significant: first, the book's focus on waves; second, its insistence on the back-and-forth between history and theory; third, its global frame of reference; and fourth, its attentiveness to non-progressive revolutionary currents, most notably religious revolutionary forces. Let me briefly address each.

The first important innovation in the volume lies in its central object of enquiry: waves. Revolutionary waves can be seen as groups of revolutions that arise from a similar context, have linked objectives, and share common features, whether in terms of their organisational form (*e.g.*, a horizontalist people power movement), tactics (*e.g.*, a commitment to non-violence), and/or their symbolic repertoires (*e.g.*, shared slogans or colours). The contributors to this volume extend our understanding of revolutionary waves by specifying a number of causal mechanisms that produce waves, such as 'agflation' (inflation in the prices of agricultural commodities), and also by noting the presence of waves-within-waves, such as the three mini-revolutionary waves that the world has experienced since the turn of the century. As the editors note, international dynamics need to be entwined with domestic factors in order to explain why revolutions happen 'here' and not 'there'. In this entwining, the focus on waves is a logical extension of scholarship on the international features of revolutionary change which, since the work of Theda Skocpol and others in the 1970s, has become a significant strand of research. But there are different ways of doing this research. A minimalist approach is to 'add the international and stir', examining how revolutionary tactics and symbols cross-borders, for example, while leaving existing theoretical schemas in place. A more maximalist approach recalibrates what it is we mean by revolutions, for example by making the object of enquiry itself transnational or by focusing on groups of revolutions that are not contained by a specific geography. In this way of thinking, revolutionary waves become more than the sum of their parts; rather, they become the object matter of revolutions research itself. Much to its credit, this book takes up both of these agendas. In doing so, it provides the kind of full-spectrum challenge that is the hallmark of a vibrant research programme.

The second highlight is the volume's insistence on the back and forth between revolutionary history and theory. The editors quite rightly point to revolutions as 'emergent' processes that adapt to the contexts in which they emerge. This allows them to distinguish between a range of revolutionary and revolutionary-like dynamics, which vary by degrees of ambition, transformative capacity, and more. The editors also distinguish between pre-modern and modern revolutions, with the former as more limited in their scope and effects. In the contemporary world, this more limited model of revolution is, once again, in vogue. For all their frequency and capacity to stir up societies around the world,

few revolutions of the post-1989 period have radically broken with existing conditions, let alone provided a new model of historical development. In many ways, these revolutions are not just limited, but self-limited – revolutionaries deliberately hem themselves in, whether by introducing democratic practices and institutions at home, or by joining international organizations abroad. This move represents a rejection of the 20th-century experience of revolutionary states, many of which were marred by despotism. But it also represents the latest twist in a long-running drama between revolutions and liberalism, one that was born in radical fusion in the late 18th century, underwent divorce in the 20th century as revolution was taken up primarily by leftist and anti-colonial forces, and which has remarried, or at least agreed to cohabit, in the present day. It is curious that this story remains without a definitive study. Once again, this volume points the way to an unfolding, highly productive research agenda.

The third point worth emphasising is the globalization of revolution as a field of study. Like other parts of the social sciences, the study of revolutions has been marred by Eurocentrism, whether in terms of the cases it sees as archetypal or in the concepts and categories it uses to construct theories. The lived experience of revolution has always exceeded this dual limitation. To take one obvious example, shifting the centre of gravity in the late 18th – early 19th century Atlantic Age of Revolution from France to Haiti both challenges historical narratives of revolution and poses a range of new questions, not least whether ideas of equality, justice and solidarity can include, both then and now, non-white peoples. Even more productive is the linking of these two cases into a single field of practice, one conjoined through the entanglements of peoples, war, trade, ideas, and more. This expansiveness in the subject matter of revolutions is, therefore, both empirical (it widens our universe of cases) and theoretical (it broadens our conceptual and analytical frameworks). It is remarkable, and not in a good way, that the social science of revolution has been, until relatively recently, built on a handful of ‘great’ cases. The absence of comparative or transnational work on ‘small’ or ‘forgotten’ revolutions, particularly from places we now think of as the global south, is a striking, persistent shortcoming of the field. We can, and must, do better. This volume is an important start in that direction.

Finally, there is the opening presented by the volume to analysis of non-progressive forms of revolution. For almost the entire modern period, revolutions have been studied as if they could only be secular, liberal or leftist projects, aimed at particular ideals of social justice and emancipation. This bias towards self-consciously progressive movements has been a significant blind-spot in revolutionary analysis, preventing scholars from paying sufficient attention to radical programmes that do not conform to the progressive script: fascism, hyper-nationalism, religious-inspired revolutionaries, and more. The 1979 revolution in Iran should have been a spur to this work. But despite the world

historical magnitude of the Iranian revolution, and despite the radicalisation of both Shi'a and Sunni movements over the past 40 years, research on revolutions has failed to sufficiently address the emergence of varieties of militant Islamism. In the contemporary world, neglect has become negligence. While unarmed movements remain the main focus of Western researchers and activists, militant Islamists and white supremacists are taking part in armed campaigns around the world, some of them sporadic, many of them sustained. If the epicentre of militant Islamism is currently located in the Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa, the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021 shows that revolutionary white nationalism is firmly entrenched within Western democracies. Given their scope, these violent strains of revolution should occupy a much more central role within contemporary revolutions research. Once again, this volume demonstrates the kind of open-minded, systematic analysis that the field of revolutionary studies requires. I commend the editors and contributors for putting together such a thought-provoking, agenda-setting book.