Explaining Social Revolution: Competing Approaches

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Some questions

- What is a social revolution?
- What causes revolutions?
- Why men rebel? Why men don’t rebel?
- What are the differences between structuralist and voluntarist explanations?
The menu
The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.
The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.

Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other – Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.
The bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part.

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations.

The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe.

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society.

The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together.

All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air.
Marx’s vision of history

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely **relations of production** appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material **forces of production**. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic **structure** of society, the **real** foundation, on which arises a legal and political **superstructure** and to which correspond definite forms of consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.
Marx’s vision of history

At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production [...] From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.
Historical materialism
Tocqueville on revolution

“So it would appear that the French found their condition the more unsupportable in proportion to its improvement [...] Revolutions are not always brought about by a gradual decline from bad to worse.”
The J-curve

An intolerable gap between what people want and what they get.

A tolerable gap between what people want and what they get.

Revolution occurs at this time.
“Political stability and instability are ultimately dependent on a state of mind, a mood, in a society” (Davies, 1962: 6)
“Revolutions are not made; they come”
Skocpol in one slide

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Bringing agency back in
“Revolutions do not come; they are made”
Unite!

WORKERS
OF THE
WORLD
UNITE