



The Impact of Islamic Revolution of Iran on Theories of Revolution

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In order to analyze and evaluate the impact of the Islamic Revolution of Iran on theories of revolution, it is important to first have a glance at the existing theories of revolution and subsequently discuss the strength of these theories with regards to the Islamic Revolution of Iran. It is also important to assess whether the existing political literature is in a position to analyze the Islamic Revolution of Iran in its entirety, or the fact is that some aspects and dimensions of this revolution cannot be examined and analyzed within the context of these theories. Furthermore, it is also important to know if the Islamic Revolution of Iran has set off the creation of new theories on revolutions.



The Pre-Islamic Revolution Theories on Revolution Classical Theories

Aristotle believed that the root cause of revolution is inequality and injustice in society. In his opinion, it is in the pursuit of equality and justice that people resort to revolution and resort to changing the existing social and political system.

Karl Marx defined revolution as the final result and outcome of class conflict over the ownership of the means of production at different ages in which the owners of the means of production comprise the exploiting class while those without the means of production are the exploited class working for the

former. In the opinion of Marx proletarian revolution is an inevitable phenomenon in which the working class overthrows the bourgeoisie and history enters a new era.

Alexis de Tocqueville considers the main causes of revolution to be disintegration in the fabric of the society, class gap, destruction of the middle layers of the society, the hard and inflexible resistance of the old political system toward the new social conditions, and the emergence and expansion of liberationist revolutionary thoughts and beliefs. The interesting point in his theory is that he believes that once the same people who have compromised

with a tyrannical government realize that the government has mitigated its pressures, they tend to take up arms against it.

In the opinion of Vilfredo Pareto, expressed in his major work "Trattato Di Sociologia Generale" (Treatise on General Sociology), the main cause of the revolutions is the non-circulation of elites in societies. He further expresses that a balanced and stable society is one in which elements from the lower stratum, or the non-elite can find their way into the higher stratum or the elite. He then goes on to state that in the absence of such a trend the society faces misbalance and moves towards instability and

revolution.

Modern Theories

The modern literature on revolutions was mainly formed in the mid-20th Century and particularly during the 50s and 60s and came to be completed in the 70s. However, with the involvement of various disciplines of social sciences in discussions pertaining to revolution the contemporary political literature was particularly enriched in this area. The five broad categories with regards to theories of revolution may be classified into the five categories of “Sociological Theories on Revolution (structural or functional); Economic Theories on Revolution; Psychological Theories on Revolution; Political Theories on Revolution; and Socio-political Theories on Revolution.

Chalmers Johnson is one of the prominent theorists of sociological (structural-functional) theory of revolution who believes that social balance can be upset as a result of a change in two factors: common values and environment. Since both these factors have a key role in the unity, integrity, and stability of societies, a change in any of them can direct a particular society toward revolution.

In the case of the economic theory of revolution rapid economic growth and development can be the main contributing factor to the revolution. As an economist and social scientist, Olson was of the opinion that economic development would not result in peace and nonvio-

lent democracy, but rather will lead to revolution and instability. This is because rapid economic growth and development give rise to a set of fundamental changes the inevitable outcome of which is instability and revolution.

The psychological theory is characterized by James Davies’s “increasing expectations” and Ted Robert Gurr’s “relative deprivation”, which are complementary and at the same time more outstanding than the other methods used, advocate the occurrence of revolutions becomes more likely when a period of material growth, whether economic or social, is followed by a short period of acute crisis. As a matter of fact, what prepares people for revolution during this period is an abstract and psychological phenomenon rather than an objective issue. People’s material expectations, too, gradually grow during the period of material growth in an

increasing manner while the state is unable to meet these increasing expectations because of being faced with an acute crisis. This inability of the state in aligning with people’s demands results in a gap that eventually leads to a revolution.

The main framework chosen in the political theory of revolution is concerned with issues related to modernization and development. By relying on political institutions this approach looks for the causes of revolution within the context of social modernization. From among the most prominent theorists of this approach, reference may be made to Samuel P. Huntington and Barrington Moore. According to Huntington modernization is the structural cause of revolution in the changing societies while in the opinion of Moore revolution is one of the causes of modernization in such societies. It is to be mentioned that Huntington, too, considers revolution in traditional societies to be a step, perhaps the final one, in the process of modernization. Thus, in the opinion of Huntington revolution does neither take place in very traditional societies with a low degree of social and economic complexities nor does it happen in very modern societies, and it is rather a phenomenon that occurs in those societies that have experienced some sort of social and economic development.

The socio-political theory of revolution is the last in the chain of theories of revolution and, therefore, is, in a way,

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complementary to the above-mentioned theories. The most prominent theorists of this approach include Charles Tilly and Theda Skocpol.

Charles Tilly is a sociologist according to whom revolution is a micro socio-political phenomenon within the macro context of social changes and developments. In this study, he specifies three political groups, which are struggling for power: the government, which intends to retain power; rival groups within the structure of the state that are fighting to come to power and finally the rival groups from outside the system that endeavor to find entry into the political system and power. Tilly then concludes that in their struggle for power every group is engaged in mobilizing its resources with the aim of influencing and eliminating the other rival groups.

Theda Skocpol, too, examines revolutions from the viewpoint of a sociologist. After making a comparative study of the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions, Skocpol concludes that two sets of structural conditions lead to revolution: a) the pre-revolution internal conditions and b) external international pressures. As regards the internal factors influencing the emergence of revolutionary conditions she deals with the pre-revolution structure of agriculture, the government structure, and the structure of the elites. From among external factors contributing to the outbreak of revolution she points out to the

two phenomena of the spread of capitalism and military rivalry among states. In the opinion of Skocpol social revolutions are ignited by a purely political crisis; a crisis in which a lot of conflicts take place among the political factions and parties. This crisis usually becomes acute and decisive that turns into a political-military crisis as in the case of many revolutions. She is also of the view that social revolutions generally take place in agricultural and peasant, and at times, in bureaucratic societies ruled by monarchs.

The Post-Islamic Revolution of Iran Theories of Revolution

It was under this atmosphere of political literature and theories on revolution that the Islamic Revolution of Iran was born. Being essentially and irrefutably different from other great revolutions of the world as well as the contemporary third world revolutions, one of the first impacts of the Islamic Revolution was challenging the contemporary political thought, stereotype analytical methodologies in social sciences, and sociological theories of revolutions.

The Islamic Revolution of Iran provided a perfect opportunity for putting the existing theories of revolution to test. The comparison made between the principles and contributive factors discussed in these theories and the causes and factors that contributed to the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran produced certain interesting re-

sults; a set of theoretical results that were of sociological, psychological, economic, political, and cultural essence.

Studying the essence and nature of the Islamic Revolution of Iran and analyzing its causes, two groups of political and social thinkers and analysts began to revisit the existing literature on revolution. These two groups included the Iranologists and the theorists on revolution. The epistemological methodologies and the theoretical context of both groups fell within the same conventional framework used in social science. The difference, however, was that the inability of the Iranologists in predicting the occurrence of revolution in Iran, on the one hand, and the Islamic essence and nature of this revolution, on the other hand, prompted fundamental reconsiderations on the part of this group of thinkers in their Iranian studies. By the same token, the inability of the contem-

porary theorists of revolution in explaining the essence and analyzing the causes of the Islamic Revolution made a number of them like Theda Skocpol reconsider their theories and prompted some others like Foucault, Foran, and Eshghi to create new theories on revolution.

A glance at the number of studies on the Islamic Revolution of Iran would result in the identification of a dual typology: a) those who, by taking into consideration the complexity and expansion of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, consider it to be a multi-causal or multi-factorial phenomenon and try to deal with and explain it with this approach; and b) those who, by relying on certain existing theories on revolution, have tried to analyze and explain the Islamic Revolution as a uni-causal uni-factorial phenomenon. The multi-factorial approaches to the Islamic Revolution are generally of descriptive-historical nature while the uni-factorial one is basically analytical and depending on their fundamental essence are sociological, psychological, economic, political, or cultural.

From among the research scholars who have tried to study the Islamic Revolution of Iran as a multifactorial phenomenon and with a descriptive-historical approach mention may be made of Nikki Keddie, the renowned American Iranologist. By the same token, from among the advocates of the uni-factorial approach for describing and analyzing the Islamic Revolution of Iran reference may be made to Paul

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Vieille of France, Eric Hooglund of the United States (adopting a sociological approach), Marvin Zonis of the United States (adopting a psychological approach), Robert Looney and Mohammad Ali (Homayoun) Katouzian (adopting an economic approach), Ervand Abrahamian of the United States and Bernard Hourcade of France (adopting a political approach) and Jean Pierre Digard and Christian Bromberger of France, Hamid Algar, Mary Hegland, Said Amir Arjomand and Michael Fischer of the United States (adopting a cultural approach).

Revision in Theories of Revolution

The famous scholar of Iranian

studies, Nikki Keddie, who had failed to predict the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and was, therefore, taken by surprise by it, tried to justify her earlier arguments on Iran by resorting to theoretical discussions on revolution. For instance, in her article "Can Revolutions Be Predicted, Can their Causes Be Understood?" she endeavors to argue against the possibility of predicting revolutions due to their complex nature and essence.

Revisiting her theory on revolution after the Islamic Revolution in Iran she reached the conclusion that contrary to her earlier staunch views and beliefs on social revolutions, the Islamic Revolu-

tion of Iran was the result of a rapid modernization that was caused by some sort of social rebellion and deviation, on the one hand, and extensive and widespread deprivation, on the other hand, in which the lower classed of the society managed to convert people's discontentment into some sort of effective political action, that was ultimately transformed into a revolution. She also points out that contrary to what the theories of revolution generally suggest prior to the revolutionary movement of the people the government of Iran was at the peak of its power.

Undoubtedly, one of the first theorists who revised her theory of revolution after the Islamic

Revolution of Iran was Theda Skocpol who categorically emphasized this stand in her article "Rentier State and Shi'a Islam in Iranian Revolution". It is, however, to be noted that this new claim of hers has given rise to new discussions by some other thinkers who have tried to challenge her views and these new debates certainly reflect upon the influence of the Islamic Revolution of Iran on the contemporary political literature and theories of Revolution.

Skocpol introduced the term "Rentier State" in her new model in order to strengthen her revised theory and adapt it to the Islamic Revolution of Iran and elaborated on how the Shah had set out improving the economy of the country by relying on petrodollars without resorting to any taxation system. In the opinion of Skocpol disintegration, degeneration and discontent alone do not cause the collective organization of forces and mobilization of reliable resources to form a resistance against the political and economic pressures of the ruling system. Such a task requires independent and powerful social cores capable of directing people's discontentment, both economic and political, and supporting and guiding their revolutionary movement. In the opinion of Skocpol, this decisive role was played by the Bazaar in the case of the Iranian Revolution. The Bazaar also managed to organize the revolutionary movement of other urban groups like the university students and industrial workers and give the required economic support.

Nonetheless, it was the Shi'a Islam that eventually made the revolutionary movement of the Iranian masses meaningful and directed it towards victory. The role of Shi'a Islam in this Revolution was outstanding, vital, and decisive both organizationally and culturally. The hardliner clergies supporting Imam Khomeini challenged and humiliated the monarchial regime by spreading the political thoughts of the revolutionary Shi'a Islam. Therefore, it is quite obvious that by admitting the decisive role of the ideological religious leaders in creating the Islamic Revolution of Iran by relying on the revolutionary Shi'a Islam Skocpol revised her earlier theory of revolution and joined those who considered it a fundamental role for ideology in giving rise to revolutions.

The Birth of the Fourth Generation of Modern Theories of Revolution

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In an innovative classification, Jack goldstone classifies the theories of revolution into three generations and considers Theda Skocpol to be the last of the theorists belonging to the third generation. The revision and reconsideration of Theda Skocpol's earlier theory of revolution has led some scholars like John Foran to ask if it is possible to speak of the fourth generation of theories of revolution.

This writer agrees with Foran on this issue and, therefore, believes that the theories of revolution inspired by the Islamic Revolution of Iran fall under the fourth generation of such theories since it would not be out of place to claim that this Revolution gave birth to a new set of theories. The most outstanding difference between this generation of theories of revolution with the one preceding it is the result of the differences between the Islamic Revolution of Iran with the earlier revolutions of the world. According to the famous French-educated sociologist and scholar of Iranian studies, Leili Echghi, the least impact of the Islamic Revolution of Iran was putting an end to certain other earlier revolutions. In other words, the Islamic Revolution of Iran proved to be the beginning of a new set of revolutions that logically call for new theories for explaining them. It appears that we can accommodate four theories and approaches in the fourth generation of theories of revolutions; the theories and approaches that may be referred to as the

children of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. The most important of these approaches is the cultural approach, which will be briefly discussed here.

Cultural Approach

A glance at the earlier discussions in this chapter i.e., the discussions on the pre-Islamic Revolution theories of revolution

would clearly reveal that prior to the victory of this Revolution culture had no place in the various approaches dealing with revolutions. The theories developed during the 1950s to 1970s were basically dominated by sociological, economic, psychological, and political approaches and none of them considered culture to be of any significance

as regards revolutions.

However, immediately after the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran and owing to the fact that it was essentially different from other revolutions of the modern times due to the outstanding role of Shi'a Islamic culture in it, many thinkers of revolution, scholars of Iranian studies, humanities and social sciences set out looking for a new approach that could explain the causes and the various new dimensions of this unique and unprecedented Revolution. And certain features of the revolution like the point of its departure, the focal center of the revolution, its slogans, its leadership, its turning points, the pioneering strata and classes,



the literature of the revolution, and the mode of struggles of the revolutionaries made it absolutely clear that it was a hundred percent religious, Islamic, Shi'a and cultural revolution.

Some of the most outstanding characteristics of the Islamic Revolution of Iran were as follows:

1) The point of departure of the movement was the 19 Dey 1356/9 January 1978 in the city of Qum, which was an important center of Shi'a Islam in Iran and the world of Islam. 2) The main centers of this revolution were religious places like mosques, hoseiniyehs, and shrines. 3) Most slogans of the movement were essentially of religious and cultural context. The two main slogans of the revolution were "Esteqlal, Azadi, Jomhuri-ye Eslami/Independence, Free-

dom, Islamic Republic" and "Na Sharqi, Na Gharbi, Jomhuri-ye Eslami/Neither East, Nor West, Islamic Republic" both of which emphasized the religious nature of the movement by stressing on "Islamic Republic". 4) The leader of this revolution was a great Shi'a scholar, a Grand Ayatollah and a religious leader. The interviews taken from the late Imam Khomeini by the media reporters from different parts of the world during the period his stay in Neauphle-le-Château made it absolutely clear that the movement of the people of Iran was religious-cultural in essence. 5) The turning points of this Revolution, too, were of religious significance and included events like the fortieth day of the martyrdom of a number of revolutionaries, demonstrations on such days as the Eid al-Fitr of 1978 in Tehran, followed by the 17th Shahrivar/September 8, 1978 incident, and on Tasu'a and Ashura of the same year in Tehran. 6) All research schol-

ars agree that the pioneering groups of the Revolution were university students and religious and traditional lower classes of the various urban areas all of whom were inspired by religious and cultural motives. 7) The language and the terminologies of the revolution, too, were derived from the religious culture of the Iranian society. The terms that could be frequently heard during demonstrations and in speeches included justice, martyrdom, freedom, jihad, (Imam) Husain and Yazid, sacrifice, forgiveness, Moses and Pharaoh, Taghout (arrogant power), imperialism, oppression, etc., all of which were religious terms derived from the Glorious Quran and the teachings of Islam. 8) The struggles against the regime that was mainly in the form of shouting slogans inspired by the Islamic teachings in demonstrations held in the daytime and shouting Allah-o-Akbar from the rooftops at night, reflected upon the cultural-religious nature of the Revolution.

Thus, a new approach was introduced to the theories of revolution and many thinkers began to discuss the role of culture and religion in fundamental socio-political developments and changes in society from different angles the titles of which will be mentioned hereunder.

John Foran's Theory on Social Revolutions in the Third World
Michel Foucault's Theory of Spirituality

The Mystical or Metaphysical Theory of Leili Echghi

