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# Nothing revolutionary

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Over the past quarter-century, Fred Halliday has distinguished himself as a prolific and insightful scholar of international affairs. He has imbibed a generous dose of Marxist theory without being intoxicated by it, and one might say the same for his consumption of other types of theory as well. Not content to be an armchair academic, Halliday is personally acquainted with a number of revolutionary movements and his writings combine an obvious sympathy for their aspirations with a clear-eyed sense of their shortcomings. The result is a combination of intellectual range and personal experience that is nearly unique among contemporary scholars of world politics.

These virtues are all on display in *Revolution and World Politics: The Rise and Fall of the Sixth Great Power*. It is a wide-ranging survey of two centuries of revolutionary thought and practice, and it ably illustrates Halliday's historical knowledge, interest in theory, and fluid writing style. Throughout the book, Halliday emphasizes the central role that revolutions have played in world history, a role he believes is not adequately explained by state-centric theories such as realism. If revolutionary elites routinely underestimate the constraining effects of the existing state system, Halliday writes, realist theory 'denies the importance of non-state factors—of social, ideological economic processes' (p. 153). He argues these deficiencies can be corrected by an *international sociological* perspective, that is, one that incorporates state-to-state relations, global market forces, the permeability of national borders, and the changing relationship between state and society.

Viewed as a whole, *Revolution and World Politics* is an excellent one-volume survey of the relationship between revolutionary change and international politics, neatly combining discussions of existing theory, illustrations from prominent historical cases, and Halliday's often insightful commentary. If one is looking for a single book to assign to an undergraduate course on the subject, in short, *Revolution and World Politics* is an obvious choice.

As an original work of social science, however, *Revolution and World Politics* is less satisfying. First, the book does not advance a novel argument; students can learn much that is useful from the book, but experts will not find much that is new. Second, although Halliday outlines his views on what a comprehensive theory of revolution would require, he does not offer a theory of his own. Third, his claims regarding the theoretical and historical importance of past revolutions are open to question. Although revolutions sometimes exert a lasting impact far beyond their original points of origin, the effects of revolution *qua revolution* are both less than Halliday thinks and of a rather different nature.

Let me briefly elaborate on each of these observations.



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**What's new?**

The international impact of revolutions is a field that historians, political scientists, and sociologists have tilled for several centuries, and many of Halliday's arguments will be familiar to readers who are already acquainted with this literature. Among the propositions he discusses are: (1) the tendency for revolutions to occur as part of a more widespread crisis of legitimacy, (2) the reciprocal relationship between revolution and war, (3) the tendency for revolutionaries to see their experience as a model for others, (4) the tendency for revolutionaries to exaggerate the ease with which a revolution can be exported, (5) the tendency for other states to see revolutions as threatening and to underestimate the ease with which the revolution can be reversed, and (6) the tendency for revolutionary states to moderate their aims and behaviour over time. Halliday also makes a convincing case for treating seemingly diverse revolutions (for example, those of France, Russia, Iran, Cuba, Algeria, and so on) as members of the same species, although he is not the first to see the deeper similarities that underlie the obvious differences.[1]

These points—and many others—are well taken. But virtually all of them are drawn from earlier literature, and Halliday does not add much to our existing stock of knowledge. This limitation is not entirely his fault, of course, given that the entire subject is by now well worn. But this makes *Revolution and World Politics* more of a synthesis of what we already know than a work that moves the research agenda forward.

**The need for theory**

Although Halliday offers useful critiques of a number of prominent theorists of revolution, he does not present a theory of his own. Instead, he outlines his own preferred 'approach' (or 'perspective') on the subject, which he calls 'for want of a better term, an *international sociology*'. This approach—informed by historical materialism but also incorporating ideological factors—would explain revolutions (and other political phenomena) 'within a context of a unified, if diverse, system, comprised of states, social and economic structures, and ideologies and cultures …' (pp. 162–3). Elsewhere he calls for a reassessment of international relations that would involve 'the linking of the analysis of the state with that of socio-economic context and of ideology or culture; the reconceptualisation of the state, [and] the

[1] Earlier works advancing these propositions include: Katherine C. Chorley, *Armies and the Art of Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1943); Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); idem, 'Social Revolutions and Mass Military Moblilization', *World Politics* 40:2 (1988); David Armstrong, *Revolution and World Order: The Revolutionary State in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); T.C.W. Blanning, *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars* (New York: Longman, 1986); Kyung-Won Kim, *Revolution and International System: A Study in the Breakdown of International Stability* (New York: New York University Press, 1970); Jonathan Adelman, *Revolutions, Armies, and War: A Political History* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1986); Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); and Patrick M. Conge, *From Revolution to War: State Relations in a World of Change* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

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incorporation of social movements and classes …' and repeats that 'the very concepts that lie at the core of the international relations literature—state, society, power—require rethinking' (p. 309).

All well and good. Unfortunately, Halliday does not go beyond this brush-clearing exercise to show how this 'perspective' leads to clear and counterintuitive arguments about the place of revolutions in history or their role in our understanding of international relations. This omission is not surprising, of course, because the approach he outlines incorporates so many different factors that it is hard to imagine how anyone could combine all of them in a persuasive and testable explanatory theory.

This issue is important, since theories are useful primarily because they help us make sense of the bewildering array of forces that combine to produce social outcomes. Everything is connected to everything else—at least in some vague sense—and we need *theory* to cut through the confusion and identify the central forces at work. Revolutions are complex events, and their international repercussions are especially difficult to disentangle. But the way to do that is not to incorporate more and more explanatory elements into the picture; rather, it is to determine which elements are most important and which are relatively inconsequential. A good theory inevitably *simplifies* reality, hopefully without distorting it too badly. To date, progress in understanding revolutions (or their international consequences) has come not by trying to erect all-encompassing explanatory schemas, but by more narrowly-focused efforts to identify the causal mechanisms that account for recurring domestic or international tendencies. One need not fetishize parsimony to recognize that Halliday's approach is really a recipe for detailed description rather than a path likely to yield general explanatory propositions valid across time and space.

Second, theories go beyond mere correlation and identify what is causing what. Halliday's historical survey identifies a number of important tendencies, but the absence of a theory leaves the causality murky. Thus, he writes that revolutionary states are 'drawn into confrontation with their *status quo* neighbours', without explaining exactly how this process occurs (p. 132). His use of the passive voice is revealing: lacking a theory, Halliday cannot tell us which side bears most of the blame for the confrontation. And if both sides are responsible—that is, if conflict arises from the *interaction* between the revolutionary state and the other powers—Halliday's approach cannot identify *which aspects* of the interaction play the greatest role in paving the path to war. This issue is important because we cannot hope to understand—let alone mitigate—the various problems associated with revolutionary change if we don't know what is causing these conflicts to recur.

Third, theories are most useful when they lead us to anticipate outcomes we would not otherwise expect. We don't need a theory to tell us what revolutionaries *want* to do; they are usually willing to tell us themselves and they usually provide ample evidence that their stated aims are genuine. In particular, one hardly needs a theory to understand that revolutionaries seek to promote revolution. But we do need theory to explain the tendency for revolutionaries to abandon (or at least moderate) these goals once in power, and we need theory to explain why efforts to spread revolution (or counter-revolution) usually fail even when conditions seem propitious. Given what revolutionary elites say they want to do, and given the fears they often provoke elsewhere, it *is* surprising that most revolutions do not spread or

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that most revolutionaries are willing to compromise their ideological aims once they seize the reins of power. Among the virtues of realism (as applied to revolutions) is its ability to explain why deeply committed radicals like Lenin, Mao, or Khomeini chose to moderate their goals for the sake of more traditional diplomatic objectives. Halliday acknowleges this point, of course, while retaining an overriding scepticism toward most (all?) approaches that emphasize the central role of the state and the constraining effects of international anarchy.

**Do revolutions really matter?**

The lack of a clear theory also undermines Halliday's attempt to restore revolution to what he sees as its rightful place as the 'sixth great power' (that is, as a major force shaping the modern world). Throughout the book, he emphasizes that revolutions have repeatedly shaped the agenda of world politics and defined the terms of political contestation. Although the spread of revolution has rarely (if ever) fulfilled the expectations of the revolutionaries themselves, he argues that even failed revolutions have cast a shadow on subsequent events. Thus, the French revolution may have ended with the restoration of the Bourbons, but 'the ideas of the French revolution were to inspire further political change' (p. 196). Similarly, Halliday sees the Bolshevik revolution as an 'enduring concern' from 1917 onward, and judges Third World revolution to be 'the greatest single element in the course of the Cold War'. (p. 198).

No one would deny that revolutions can exert effects beyond their borders. Yet Halliday's attempt to place revolution on an equal footing with the more familiar dynamics of Great Power politics is not fully convincing, for several reasons.

First, because he does not have a theory of international change, he cannot easily separate out the independent effect of revolution from the effects of other factors that coexist with them. The French and American revolutions may have hastened the spread of liberal ideals, for example, but liberalizing pressures were widespread before 1776 and European society would almost certainly have evolved in this direction had these revolutions never taken place. Fear of revolution subsequently encouraged a number of countries to abandon laissez-faire capitalism and adopt the institutions of the modern welfare state, but the pressures of international competition (and especially World War I) and the growing political power of labour were equally (and possibly more) responsible for this development. And while the Cold War was clearly exacerbated by ideological differences and the lingering fear of revolution, US leaders saw it primarily as a struggle for power between the two strongest states in the system and conducted the competition on that basis.[2] Revolution did matter, but not as much as Halliday claims.

[2] It is worth remembering that the United States eventually formed a tacit anti-Soviet alignment with Communist China, and also backed a number of other socialist states (for example, Yugoslavia) whenever they broke with Moscow. US leaders did use ideological arguments to rally public support, but their primary concern was with Soviet power. On these points, see Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, The Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Thomas C. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

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Second, and following from the first point, Halliday's analysis overstates the importance of revolution *qua* revolution and understates the crucial role of power. The revolutions in Belgium in 1789 and Poland in 1791 had relatively little impact on the rest of the world, and neither did the communist takeovers in Outer Mongolia or South Yemen. Why? Because these states were minor powers of little strategic importance. Similarly, Marxism's lustre would have faded sooner had Albania been its chief exponent, and even a charismatic radical like Fidel Castro would have been a 'bit player' on the world stage had he not quickly aligned himself with one of the two strongest states in the world.

By contrast, the revolutions Halliday sees as of the greatest historical significance were important precisely because they occurred in great powers that had—or soon acquired—the material capacity to promote their particular political visions. The case of Soviet Russia is especially instructive in this regard: although Communism's ideological appeal declined steadily, the growth of Soviet *power* made it possible to expand the 'world socialist system' through a variety of familiar instruments (including direct military conquest). Ideas do matter, but *whose* ideas they are matters more.

Third, Halliday's claim that Third World revolutions were the 'greatest single element' in the Cold War must be viewed with some scepticism as well. Reasonable people can disagree on what that 'greatest element' might have been, but events in the developing world played a less significant role in the course and outcome of the Cold War than Halliday thinks.[3] Although US leaders were prone to describe these events in apocalyptic terms, the United States actually did relatively little to halt or reverse the course of revolution in the developing world. To be sure, the United States (and some of its allies) did support a variety of counter-revolutionary efforts (such as the *contras* in Nicaragua), but it never devoted much blood or treasure to the effort. Instead, both superpowers focused the bulk of their defence efforts on the nuclear arms race and on the conventional confrontation in Central Europe, and the United States fought revolution mostly in a fit of absent-mindedness.[4] The Soviet Union made seemingly impressive gains during these years, but its 'victories' in Afghanistan, Angola, China, Cuba, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Nicaragua, North Korea, Somalia, South Yemen, and Vietnam turned out to be of dubious long-term value. Among the Soviet leadership's many errors, in short, was the belief that revolution mattered even when the state in question did not. Fortunately for us, Western leaders did not fully succumb to this illusion.

Fourth, it is worth noting that most of the revolutions Halliday examines were in fact *regressive* events. Liberalism would probably have taken firm root in France far sooner had Louis XVI retained his throne under the Constitution of 1791, thereby avoiding the excesses of the Terror and Napoleon's subsequent depredations. Similarly, tsarist Russia might well have evolved in a more progressive direction had the Bolsheviks failed in 1917, sparing the Russian population seventy years of misguided and tyrannical rule. The communist victory in 1949 did help free China

[3] In saying that these events were relatively unimportant, I refer only to their impact on the agenda of world politics and the basic character of the international system. Obviously, the outcome of these struggles was vital for the inhabitants of these countries, and sometimes for neighbouring states.

[4] The obvious—but only partial—exceptions are Korea and Vietnam, which were viewed as unprovoked external aggression and a direct challenge to US credibility rather than as instances of revolutionary change.

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from foreign interference, but Mao's own megalomania delayed China's further development for several decades, and at enormous human cost. The case of Iran is more ambiguous, but it is hard to see the present theocracy as an enlightened and modernizing force. Similar lessons can be drawn from the histories of North Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Angola, and many others.

Indeed, as Halliday recognizes, one of the great tragedies of the twentieth century is the degree to which various countries succumbed to the seductive snake oil peddled by misguided revolutionary leaders, who mistook their skill (or luck) in gaining power for an ability to govern wisely. This record supports Halliday's claim that revolutions can have lasting impact, but mostly in the negative sense of having kept these unfortunate societies from reaping the benefits that less 'revolutionary' societies have enjoyed. Capitalism is hardly a perfect social order, but it certainly looks preferable to the existing alternatives. Even an autocrat like Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore looks like a far more 'progressive' force than Kim il Sung, Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Pol Pot, or Fidel Castro.

Thus, Halliday's book—despite its many strengths—downplays what may be the most important revolution of all. Over the past several centuries, perhaps the most fundamental revolution in human affairs has been the loss of faith in the 'enlightened' leadership of an ideologically-inspired, self-selected elite, committed to building a 'republic of virtue', 'scientific socialism', an 'Islamic republic', or some other form of man-made utopia. As James Scott has ably demonstrated, these experiments are usually tragic failures, whatever the initial aims of their designers.[5] And partly as a result of these failures, more and more people prefer to live in societies where leaders and policies are chosen via the self-interested actions of (more or less) free individuals. Now *that's* a revolution.

[5] See James M. Scott, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

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