

*Explaining Social Revolutions*

variables.<sup>58</sup> Two different sorts of transnational contexts are relevant. On the one hand, there are the *structures* of the world capitalist economy and the international states system, within which individual nations are situated in different positions. And, on the other hand, there are changes and transmissions in “world time,” which affect both the overall world contexts within which revolutions occur and the particular models and options for action that can be borrowed from abroad by revolutionary leaderships.

The involvement within transnational structures of countries (actually or potentially) undergoing social revolutions is relevant in several ways. Historically, unequal or competitive transnational relations have helped to shape any given country’s state and class structures, thus influencing the existing “domestic” context from which revolution emerges (or not). Furthermore, transnational relations influence the course of events during actual revolutionary conjunctures. Modern social revolutions have happened only in countries situated in disadvantaged positions within international arenas. In particular, the realities of military backwardness or political dependency have crucially affected the occurrence and course of social revolutions. Although uneven economic development always lies in the background, developments within the international states system as such—especially defeats in wars or threats of invasion and struggles over colonial controls—have directly contributed to virtually all outbreaks of revolutionary crises. For such developments have helped to undermine existing political authorities and state controls, thus opening the way for basic conflicts and structural transformations. International military balances and conflicts have, moreover, provided the “space” necessary for the completion and political consolidation of social revolutions. This is true because such balances and conflicts have divided the efforts or diverted the attention of foreign enemies interested in preventing revolutionary successes or in taking advantage of revolutionized nations during their periods of internal crisis. In the final analysis, too, the outcomes of social revolutions have always been powerfully conditioned not only by international politics but also by the world-economic constraints and opportunities faced by emergent new regimes.

As for the dimension of “world time,” some aspects of “modernization” have been unique processes affecting the world as a whole.<sup>59</sup> With state/societies as the units of analysis, limited generalizations about similar, recurrent national developments can be formulated. But, even as this is done, attention should be paid to the effects of historical orderings and of world-historical changes. Possibilities relevant to comparing and explaining social revolutions come quickly to mind. One possibility is that actors in later revolutions may be influenced by developments in earlier ones; for example, the Chinese Communists became conscious emulators of the Bol-

## *Introduction*

sheviks and received, for a time, direct advice and aid from the Russian revolutionary regime. Another possibility is that crucial world-historically significant "breakthroughs"—such as the Industrial Revolution or the innovation of the Leninist form of party organization—may intervene between the occurrence of one broadly similar revolution and another. As a result new opportunities or necessities are created for the development of the latter revolution that were not open to, or pressed upon, the former, because it occurred at an earlier phase of modern world history.

A concluding point is relevant for both sorts of transnational contextual influences. In analyzing the domestic effects of transnational relations, one should never simply assume—as current theorists of revolution almost invariably seem to do—that any such effects will influence primarily the situation, wants, and ideas of "the people." This may, of course, happen (as, for example, with shifts in international trade patterns that suddenly throw the people of an entire industry out of work). But, actually, it is state rulers, necessarily oriented to acting within international arenas, who are equally or more likely to be the ones who transmit transnational influences into domestic politics. Thus the intersection of the old (governmental) regime and, later, of the emergent revolutionary regime with international arenas— and especially with the international states system— should be a most promising place to look in order to comprehend how epochal modernizing dynamics in part cause and shape revolutionary transformations.

No valid theoretical perspective on revolutions can afford to ignore the international and world-historical contexts within which revolutions occur. If, for the most part, theories of revolutions have so far tried to ignore these contexts, it has been because they have operated with inadequate intranationally focused ideas about the nature of "modernization" and its interrelations with revolutions. As a corrective, this section has briefly highlighted the transnational aspects of modernization and has suggested ways in which these aspects are relevant to analyzing revolutions—with special emphasis upon the importance of the international states system. This emphasis, in effect, foreshadows arguments to be made in the next section about the centrality of potentially autonomous state organizations in social-revolutionary transformations.

### THE POTENTIAL AUTONOMY OF THE STATE

Virtually everyone who writes about social revolutions recognizes that they begin with overtly political crises—such as the financial imbroglio of the French monarchy and the calling of the Estates-General in 1787–9. It is likewise apparent to everyone that revolutions proceed through struggles in which organized political parties and factions are prominently involved.

## *Explaining Social Revolutions*

And it is recognized that they culminate in the consolidation of new state organizations, whose power may be used not only to reinforce socioeconomic transformations that have already occurred but also to promote further changes. No one denies the reality of these political aspects of social revolutions. Nevertheless, most theorists of revolution tend to regard the political crises that launch revolutions either as incidental triggers or as little more than epiphenomenal indicators of more fundamental contradictions or strains located in the social structure of the old regime. Similarly, the political groups involved in social-revolutionary struggles are seen as representatives of social forces. And the structure and activities of the new state organizations that arise from social revolutions are treated as expressions of the interests of whatever socioeconomic or sociocultural force was deemed victorious in the revolutionary conflicts.

An assumption that always lies, if only implicitly, behind such reasoning is that political structures and struggles can somehow be reduced (at least "in the last instance") to socioeconomic forces and conflicts. The state is viewed as nothing but *an arena* in which conflicts over basic social and economic interests are fought out. What makes the state-as-political-arena special is simply that actors operating within it resort to distinctive means for waging social and economic conflicts—means such as coercion or slogans appealing to the public good. This general way of thinking about the state is, in fact, common to both liberal and Marxist varieties of social theory. Between these two broad traditions of social theory, the crucial difference of opinion is over which means the political arena distinctively embodies: fundamentally consensually based legitimate authority, or fundamentally coercive domination. And this difference parallels the different views about the bases of societal order held by each theoretical tradition.

One ideal-typical view is that the state is the arena of legitimate authority embodied in the rules of the political game and in governmental leadership and policies. These are supported by some combination of normative consensus and majority preference of the members of society. Of course this view resonates well with liberal, pluralist visions of society, which see it as being composed of freely competing groups and members socialized into a commitment to common societal values. In the theoretical literature on revolutions, one finds versions of these ideas about state and society especially in the arguments of the relative-deprivation theorist Ted Gurr and the systems theorist Chalmers Johnson. For them, what matters in explaining the outbreak of a revolution is whether the existing governmental authorities lose their legitimacy. This happens when socially discontented or disoriented masses come to feel that it is acceptable to engage in violence, or else become converted to new values wielded by revolutionary ideologues. Both Gurr and Johnson feel that governmental power and stability depend directly upon societal trends and popular support. Neither

## *Introduction*

believes that state coercive organizations can effectively repress (for long) discontented or disapproving majorities of people in society.<sup>60</sup> The state in their theories is an aspect of either utilitarian consensus (Gurr) or value consensus (Johnson) in society. The state can wield force in the name of popular consensus and legitimacy, but it is not fundamentally founded in organized coercion.

In contrast, Marxist theorists—and to a considerable degree the political-conflict theorist Charles Tilly, as well—do see the state as basically organized coercion. An important part of Tilly's polity model, recall, is a government defined as "an organization which controls the principal concentrated means of coercion within the population."<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Lenin, the foremost Marxist theorist of the political aspect of revolutions, declares: "A standing army and police are the chief instruments of state power. But how can it be otherwise?"<sup>62</sup> Neither Lenin nor (for the most part) Tilly<sup>63</sup> see state coercion as dependent for its effectiveness upon value consensus or popular contentment. And both are quite aware that states can repress popular forces and revolutionary movements. Not surprisingly, therefore, in accounting for revolutionary success, both Tilly and Lenin place emphasis on the breakdown of the old regime's monopoly of coercion and the buildup of armed forces by revolutionaries.

It remains true, however, that Marxists and political-conflict theorists like Tilly are as guilty as Gurr and Johnson of treating the state primarily as an arena in which social conflicts are resolved, though of course they see resolution through domination rather than voluntary consensus. For, in one way or another, both Marxists and Tilly regard the state as a system of organized coercion that invariably functions to support the superordinate position of dominant classes or groups over subordinate classes or groups.

In Tilly's collective-action theory, state and society seem to be literally collapsed. Tilly labels and discusses intergroup relations in political terms; he talks not about classes or social groups, but about "member" groups and alliances that have power in the polity, and those "challenger" groups that are excluded from it. His very definition of member groups—"any contender which has routine, low-cost access to resources controlled by the government"<sup>64</sup>—strongly suggests a virtually complete overlap between dominant-group power and the power of the state. The state becomes a (fundamentally coercive) instrument wielded by the "member" groups of the polity, those that have power within the population in question.

Classical Marxist theorists do not analytically collapse state and society. Marxists view societal order as founded upon class conflict and domination. State power is a specialized kind of power in society, not equivalent to or encompassing all dominant class power. Nevertheless, Marxist theorists still explain the basic function of the state in social terms: Whatever

the variations in its historical forms, the state as such is seen as a feature of all class-divided modes of production; and, invariably, the one necessary and inescapable function of the state—by definition—is to contain class conflict and to undertake other policies in support of the dominance of the surplus-appropriating and property-owning class(es).<sup>65</sup>

Thus, neither in classical Marxism nor in Tilly's collective-action theory is the state treated as an autonomous structure—a structure with a logic and interests of its own not necessarily equivalent to, or fused with, the interests of the dominant class in society or the full set of member groups in the polity. Within the terms of these theories, it is consequently virtually impossible even to raise the possibility that fundamental conflicts of interest might arise between the existing dominant class or set of groups, on the one hand, and the state rulers on the other. Society is characterized by intergroup domination and power struggles. And the state, based upon concentrated means of coercion, fits in as a form of instrumental or objective domination and as an object of struggle, but not as an organization-for-itself.

Yet what about the more recent developments in Marxism? Lately there has certainly been a renewed interest among Marxist-oriented intellectuals in the problem of the state.<sup>66</sup> In critical reaction to what had become a widespread vulgarization—the notion that states were nothing but instruments manipulated consciously and directly by leaders and interest groups representing the dominant class—contemporary analysts such as Ralph Miliband,<sup>67</sup> Nicos Poulantzas,<sup>68</sup> Perry Anderson,<sup>69</sup> Göran Therborn,<sup>70</sup> and Claus Offe<sup>71</sup> have raised the issue of “the relative autonomy of the state” from direct control by the dominant class. Interest in this possibility has been focused especially upon capitalist societies, but also upon the absolutist phase of European feudalism. Theoretical attention has been devoted to elucidating the broad structural constraints that an existing mode of production places upon the range of possibilities for state structures and actions. And, in a more innovative vein, the argument has been developed that state rulers may have to be free of control by specific dominant-class groups and personnel if they are to be able to implement policies that serve the fundamental interest of an entire dominant class. That interest is, of course, its need to preserve the class structure and mode of production as a whole.

Recurrently as this recent debate has unfolded, certain participants—especially those most concerned with understanding how states could act against dominant-class resistance to preserve an existing mode of production—have seemed on the verge of asserting that states are potentially autonomous not only over against dominant classes but also vis-à-vis entire class structures or modes of production.<sup>72</sup> However, this possible line of argument has been for the most part carefully avoided.<sup>73</sup> Instead, some

## Introduction

analysts, such as Claus Offe, have simply hypothesized that although state structures and policies are causally important in their own right, they objectively function because of in-built "selection mechanisms," to preserve the existing mode of production.<sup>74</sup> Others, especially the so-called structuralist Marxists, have replaced the discredited dominant-class instrumentalism with what might be labeled a class-struggle reductionism.<sup>75</sup> According to this view, state structures and functions are not simply controlled by dominant classes alone. Rather they are shaped and buffeted by the class struggle between dominant and subordinate classes—a struggle that goes on within the objective limits of the given economy and class structure as a whole. Finally, a very recent contribution to the debate has been made by Göran Therborn in a new book that focuses directly on state structures as such. Working in a related yet somewhat different vein from the class-struggle theorists, Therborn constructs and contrasts typological models of the different forms and functions of state organizations and activities in the feudal, capitalist, and socialist modes of production, respectively. He attempts for each mode to derive the state structure directly from the corresponding basic class relations. For, along with the "structuralist" theorist Nicos Poulantzas, Therborn maintains that "the state should be regarded neither as a specific institution nor as an instrument, but as a relation—a materialized concentration of the class relations of a given society."<sup>76</sup>

Thus the recent Marxist debate on the state stops short at the problem of the autonomy of the state, since most participants in the debate tend either to treat the state in a completely functionalist manner, or to regard it as an aspect of class relations or struggle. It is unquestionably an advance to establish (or reestablish, since this surely was the classical Marxist position) that states are not simply created and manipulated by dominant classes. Nevertheless, it is still essential for Marxists to face more directly the questions of what states are in their own right, and how their structures vary and their activities develop in relation to socioeconomic structures. So far, virtually all Marxists continue simply to assume that state forms and activities vary in correspondence with modes of production, and that state rulers cannot possibly act against the basic interests of a dominant class. Arguments remain confined to issues of *how* states vary with, and function for, modes of production and dominant classes. The result is that still hardly anyone questions this Marxist version of the enduring sociological proclivity to absorb the state into society.

Question this enduring sociological proclivity we must, however, if we are to be well prepared to analyze social revolutions. At first glance, a social-structural determinist perspective (especially one that embodies a mode of class analysis) seems an obviously fruitful approach. This seems to be the case because social revolutions do, after all, centrally involve

## *Explaining Social Revolutions*

class struggles and result in basic social–structural transformations. Nevertheless, the historical realities of social revolutions insistently suggest the need for a more state-centered approach. As the core chapters of this book will elaborate, the political crises that have launched social revolutions have not at all been epiphenomenal reflections of societal strains or class contradictions. Rather they have been direct expressions of contradictions centered in the structures of old-regime states. The political-conflict groups that have figured in social-revolutionary struggles have not merely represented social interests and forces. Rather they have formed as interest groups within and fought about the forms of state structures. The vanguard parties that have emerged during the radical phases of social revolutions have been uniquely responsible for building centralized armies and administrations without which revolutionary transformations could not have been consolidated. Social revolutions, moreover, have changed state structures as much or more as they have changed class relations, societal values, and social institutions. And, the effects of social revolutions upon the subsequent economic and sociopolitical development of the nations that they have transformed have been due not only to the changes in class structures, but also to the changes in state structures and functions that the revolutions accomplished. In sum, the class upheavals and socioeconomic transformations that have characterized social revolutions have been closely intertwined with the collapse of the state organizations of the old regimes and with the consolidation and functioning of the state organizations of the new regimes.

We can make sense of social-revolutionary transformations only if we take the state seriously as a macro-structure. The state properly conceived is no mere arena in which socioeconomic struggles are fought out. It is, rather, a set of administrative, policing, and military organizations headed, and more or less well coordinated by, an executive authority. Any state first and fundamentally extracts resources from society and deploys these to create and support coercive and administrative organizations.<sup>77</sup> Of course, these basic state organizations are built up and must operate within the context of class-divided socioeconomic relations, as well as within the context of national and international economic dynamics. Moreover, coercive and administrative organizations are only parts of overall political systems. These systems also may contain institutions through which social interests are represented in state policymaking as well as institutions through which nonstate actors are mobilized to participate in policy implementation. Nevertheless, the administrative and coercive organizations are the basis of state power as such.

Where they exist, these fundamental state organizations are at least potentially autonomous from direct dominant-class control. The extent to which they *actually* are autonomous, and to what effect, varies from case

## Introduction

to case. It is worth emphasizing that the actual extent and consequences of state autonomy can only be analyzed and explained in terms specific to particular types of sociopolitical systems and to particular sets of historical international circumstances. That is why the introduction to Chapter 2 will include a discussion of the institutional forms of state power in agrarian states such as prerevolutionary France, Russia, and China. Also, the likely lines of conflict between landed dominant classes and state rulers in such agrarian states will be indicated. There is no need to go into this discussion now. For the purposes of the argument at hand, it is enough to note that states are potentially autonomous and to explore what distinct interests they *might* pursue.

State organizations necessarily compete to some extent with the dominant class(es) in appropriating resources from the economy and society. And the objectives to which the resources, once appropriated, are devoted may very well be at variance with existing dominant-class interests. Resources may be used to strengthen the bulk and autonomy of the state itself—something necessarily threatening to the dominant class unless the greater state power is indispensably needed and actually used to support dominant-class interests. But the use of state power to support dominant-class interests is not inevitable. Indeed, attempts of state rulers merely to perform the state's "own" functions may create conflicts of interest with the dominant class. The state normally performs two basic sets of tasks: It maintains order, and it competes with other actual or potential states. As Marxists have pointed out, states usually do function to preserve existing economic and class structures, for that is normally the smoothest way to enforce order. Nevertheless, the state has its own distinct interests vis-à-vis subordinate classes. Although both the state and the dominant class(es) share a broad interest in keeping the subordinate classes in place in society and at work in the existing economy, the state's own fundamental interest in maintaining sheer physical order and political peace may lead it—especially in periods of crisis—to enforce concessions to subordinate-class demands. These concessions may be at the expense of the interests of the dominant class, but not contrary to the state's own interests in controlling the population and collecting taxes and military recruits.

Moreover, we should not forget that states also always exist in determinant geopolitical environments, in interaction with other actual or potential states. An existing economy and class structure condition and influence a given state structure and the activities of the rulers. So, too, do geopolitical environments create tasks and opportunities for states and place limits on their capacities to cope with either external or internal tasks or crises. As the German historian Otto Hintze once wrote, two phenomena above all condition "the real organization of the state. These are, first, the structure of social classes, and second, the external ordering of the states—their position



## *Explaining Social Revolutions*

relative to each other, and their over-all position in the world.”<sup>78</sup> Indeed, a state’s involvement in an international network of states is a basis for potential autonomy of action over and against groups and economic arrangements within its jurisdiction—even including the dominant class and existing relations of production. For international military pressures and opportunities can prompt state rulers to attempt policies that conflict with, and even in extreme instances contradict, the fundamental interests of a dominant class. State rulers may, for example, undertake military adventures abroad that drain resources from economic development at home, or that have the immediate or ultimate effect of undermining the position of dominant socioeconomic interests. And, to give a different example, rulers may respond to foreign military competition or threats of conquest by attempting to impose fundamental socioeconomic reforms or by trying to reorient the course of national economic development through state intervention. Such programs may or may not be successfully implemented. But even if they are not carried through, the sheer attempt may create a contradictory clash of interests between the state and the existing dominant class.

The perspective on the state advanced here might appropriately be labeled “organizational” and “realist.” In contrast to most (especially recent) Marxist theories, this view refuses to treat states as if they were mere analytic aspects of abstractly conceived modes of production, or even political aspects of concrete class relations and struggles. Rather it insists that states are actual organizations controlling (or attempting to control) territories and people. Thus the analyst of revolutions must explore not only class relations but also relations of states to one another and relations of states to dominant and subordinate classes. For the historical cases of social revolutions to be discussed in the core chapters of this book, the analysis of old-regime contradictions and the emergence of revolutionary crises will center especially upon the relationships of states to military competitors abroad and to dominant classes and existing socioeconomic structures at home. And the analysis of the emergence and structure of new regimes will focus especially on the relationships of state-building revolutionary movements to international circumstances and to those subordinate classes, invariably including the peasantry, who were key insurrectionary participants in the conflicts of the revolutions. The state organizations of both old and new regimes will have a more central and autonomous place in the analysis than they would in a straightforward Marxist explanation.

Yet not only does an organizational, realist perspective on the state entail differences from Marxist approaches, it also contrasts with non-Marxist approaches that treat the *legitimacy* of political authorities as an important explanatory concept. If state organizations cope with whatever tasks they already claim smoothly and efficiently, legitimacy—either in the

## *Introduction*

sense of moral approval or in the probably much more usual sense of sheer acceptance of the status quo—will probably be accorded to the state's form and rulers by most groups in society. In any event, what matters most is always the support or acquiescence not of the popular majority of society but of the politically powerful and mobilized groups, invariably including the regime's own cadres. Loss of legitimacy, especially among these crucial groups, tends to ensue with a vengeance if and when (for reasons that are always open to sociological and historical explanation) the state fails consistently to cope with existing tasks, or proves unable to cope with new tasks suddenly thrust upon it by crisis circumstances. Even after great loss of legitimacy has occurred, a state can remain quite stable—and certainly invulnerable to internal mass-based revolts—especially if its coercive organizations remain coherent and effective.<sup>79</sup> Consequently, the structure of those organizations, their place within the state apparatus as a whole, and their linkages to class forces and to politically mobilized groups in society are all important issues for the analyst of states in revolutionary situations, actual or potential. Such an analytic focus seems certain to prove more fruitful than any focus primarily or exclusively upon political legitimation. The ebbing of a regime's legitimacy in the eyes of its own cadres and other politically powerful groups may figure as a mediating variable in an analysis of regime breakdown. But the basic causes will be found in the structure and capacities of state organizations, as these are conditioned by developments in the economy and class structure and also by developments in the international situation.

The state, in short, is fundamentally Janus-faced, with an intrinsically dual anchorage in class-divided socioeconomic structures and an international system of states. If our aim is to understand the breakdown and building-up of state organizations in revolutions, we must look not only at the activities of social groups. We must also focus upon the points of intersection between international conditions and pressures, on the one hand, and class-structured economies and politically organized interests, on the other hand. State executives and their followers will be found maneuvering to extract resources and build administrative and coercive organizations precisely at this intersection. Here, consequently, is the place to look for the political contradictions that help launch social revolutions. Here, also, will be found the forces that shape the rebuilding of state organizations within social-revolutionary crises.

In the part of the chapter just completed, three principles of analysis shared by existing theories of revolution have been critically discussed. And alternative theoretical principles have been proposed in their stead. In fact, all of the shared tendencies for which the existing theories have been taken to task are closely interrelated: A purposive image of the causes of

## *Explaining Social Revolutions*

social revolutions complements an intranational perspective on modernization. And each is most readily consistent with a socioeconomically reductionist understanding of the state. Not surprisingly, therefore, the alternative principles being proposed here are also mutually complementary. We shall analyze the causes and processes of social revolutions from a nonvoluntarist, structural perspective, attending to international and world-historical, as well as intranational, structures and processes. And an important theoretical concomitant will be to move states—understood as potentially autonomous organizations located at the interface of class structures and international situations—to the very center of attention.

The next part discusses the method of analysis that is appropriate to the task of explaining social revolutions.

### A COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL METHOD

“Social revolutions” as defined at the beginning of this work—rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures, accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below—have been relatively rare occurrences in modern world history. Each such revolution, furthermore, has occurred in a particular way in a unique set of social-structural and international circumstances. How, then can a sociologist hope to develop historically valid explanations of social revolution as such?

The study of social revolutions in their own right has been avoided in recent American social science because scholars believe that only phenomena of which there are a large number of cases can be studied in a truly scientific manner. There has been a self-conscious reaction against the “natural history” approach to revolutions favored by an earlier generation of American social scientists. The “natural historians,” chiefly Lyford Edwards, Crane Brinton, and George Pettee, examined handfuls of cases in an attempt to develop generalizations about the typical process of revolution.<sup>80</sup> Spurning this approach as too “historical,” later students of revolution sought, instead, to theorize only about large numbers of cases. Thus, in the introduction to a 1964 book entitled *Internal War*, Harry Eckstein defines “a theoretical subject” as “a set of phenomena about which one can develop informative, testable generalizations that hold for all instances of the subject, and some of which apply to those instances alone,”<sup>81</sup> and he goes on to assert that whereas “a statement about two or three cases is certainly a generalization in the dictionary sense, a generalization in the methodological sense must usually be based on more; it ought to cover a number of cases large enough for certain rigorous testing procedures like statistical analysis to be used.”<sup>82</sup> Many other contemporary students of revolution agree with Eckstein. Consequently, the favored strategies for

## Introduction

explaining revolutions have been premised upon subsuming them within much broader categories. These include structure-functionalist social-system categories (e.g., Chalmers Johnson) and categories such as "political violence" (e.g., Ted Gurr) or "collective action" (e.g., Charles Tilly) that refer to aspects shared by many types of political events.<sup>83</sup>

It is not that contemporary analysts of revolution-subsuming phenomena see their theories as irrelevant to social revolutions. They believe, of course, that their general theories should be "applied" to instances of revolution by historians or by social scientists who do analyses of single cases. In a sense, theories such as those of Johnson, Gurr, and Tilly certainly are applicable to individual cases of social revolution: One can find relative deprivation, multiple sovereignty, and system disequilibria and value-oriented ideological movements in any and all instances of social revolution. Historians or case analysts thus could, in principle, use any or all of these ideas in a discussion of a given revolution. Indeed, because the contemporary social-scientific theories are framed in such general conceptual terms, it is very difficult to tell if they ever *do not* apply to a given case. What society, for example, lacks widespread relative deprivation of one sort or another? And how do we tell a synchronized social system when we see one? Ironically, theoretical approaches that set out to avoid the pitfalls of a too-historical approach to revolutions can end up providing little more than pointers toward various factors that case analysts might want to take into account, with no valid way to favor certain explanations over others.

Marxist theory works with less general, more historically grounded categories than the recent social-scientific theories, and it offers a more elegant and complete explanation of social-revolutionary transformations as such (rather than, say, political violence in general). It is thus no accident that Marxism has been the social-scientific theory most consistently and fruitfully used by historians to elucidate various particular revolutions.<sup>84</sup> Yet the interaction between Marxist theory and history is incomplete because historical cases have not been used to test and modify the explanations offered by the theory. Marxist analysts have devoted themselves to highlighting the class conflicts and changes in class relations that certainly do occur during revolutions. But they have not devised ways to test whether these factors really distinguish between revolutions and other kinds of transformations or between successful and abortive revolutionary outbreaks. Perhaps especially because the factors that they consider are indeed an important part of the story, Marxists have failed to notice a crucial point: Causal variables referring to the strength and structure of old-regime states and the relations of state organizations to class structures may discriminate between cases of successful revolution and cases of failure or nonoccurrence far better than do variables referring to class

## *Explaining Social Revolutions*

relations and patterns of economic development alone. Similarly, in their explanations of the outcomes of revolutions, Marxist-oriented scholars emphasize changes in class structures and even very long-run economic developments. But they virtually ignore the often much more striking and immediate transformations that occur in the structure and functions of state organizations such as armies and administrations, and in the relations between the state and social classes. Again, this has meant that they have missed identifying the distinctive political-institutional changes that set revolutions apart from nonrevolutionary patterns of national development.

A gap of one sort or another between theory and history thus plagues both Marxist scholarship and recent academic social-science theories about revolution. Historians, especially, note the existence of this gap from time to time. Some of them complain about the vagueness of recent social-scientific theories of revolution.<sup>85</sup> Others polemically assert the inappropriateness of Marxist concepts or explanations for whatever case they are concerned to analyze.<sup>86</sup> Unfortunately, disillusioned historians sometimes conclude that their discipline should avoid social-scientific theories altogether.<sup>87</sup> They advocate instead analyzing revolutions case by case, each in its own analytic terms, or else each in terms of the language of the actors at that time and place. In practice, no such relativist approaches are really possible, for historians must always draw, at least implicitly, upon theoretical ideas and comparative points of reference.<sup>88</sup> But a hiatus of communication between historians and area specialists, on the one hand, and social theorists, on the other, is always possible. To the extent that such a hiatus exists, as it always does to some degree, it only encourages, simultaneously, the proliferation of putatively general theories of (or about) revolution that do not actually illuminate historical revolutions and an increase of specialists' accounts of particular cases that are not self-consciously informed by more general principles of analysis and explanation. The way to counter such a split, however, is not to deplore it from a vantage point above the fray. Rather, the only effective antidote is the actual development of explanations of revolutions that illuminate truly general patterns of causes and outcomes, without either ignoring or totally abstracting away from the aspects particular to each revolution and its context.

Fortunately, a method is available to aid in the development of such explanations of revolutions, at once generalizable across cases and historically sensitive. Social revolutions as such *can* be treated as a theoretical subject; there is no inescapable requirement to formulate explanatory hypotheses only about categories with large numbers of cases. Nor need theorists content themselves only with applying general concepts to particular cases. To generalize about social revolutions, to develop explanations of their causes and outcomes, one can employ comparative historical analysis with selected slices of national historical trajectories as the units of

## Introduction

comparison. "Comparative history" is commonly used rather loosely to refer to any and all studies in which two or more historical trajectories of nation-states, institutional complexes, or civilizations are juxtaposed. In this very broad sense, the term refers to studies with very different kinds of purposes. Some comparative histories, such as *The Rebellious Century 1830-1930* by Charles, Louise, and Richard Tilly, are meant to show that a particular general sociological model holds across different national contexts.<sup>89</sup> Other studies, such as Reinhard Bendix's *Nation-building and Citizenship* and Perry Anderson's *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, use comparisons primarily to bring out contrasts among nations or civilizations taken as synthetic wholes.<sup>90</sup> But there is still a third version of comparative history—which I am here labeling the method of comparative historical analysis—in which the overriding intent is to develop, test, and refine causal, explanatory hypotheses about events or structures integral to macro-units such as nation-states.

Comparative historical analysis has a long and distinguished pedigree in social science. Its logic was explicitly laid out by John Stuart Mill in his *A System of Logic*.<sup>91</sup> The method was applied to powerful effect by such classical social and historical analysts as Alexis de Tocqueville and Marc Bloch.<sup>92</sup> And it continues to be elaborated and applied by contemporary scholars, including (perhaps most notably) Barrington Moore, Jr., in *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.<sup>93</sup> Comparative historical analysis is distinctively appropriate for developing explanations of macro-historical phenomena of which there are inherently only a few cases. This is in contrast to more plentiful and manipulable kinds of phenomena suitable for experimental investigations, and in contrast to other phenomena where there are the large numbers of cases required for statistical analyses. Comparative historical analysis is, in fact, the mode of multivariate analysis to which one resorts when there are too many variables and not enough cases.

Logically speaking, how does comparative historical analysis work? Basically one tries to establish valid associations of potential causes with the given phenomenon one is trying to explain. There are two main ways to proceed. First, one can try to establish that several cases having in common the phenomenon one is trying to explain also have in common a set of causal factors, although they vary in other ways that might have seemed causally relevant. This approach is what Mill called the "Method of Agreement." Second, one can contrast the cases in which the phenomenon to be explained and the hypothesized causes are present to other cases in which the phenomenon and the causes are both absent, but which are otherwise as similar as possible to the positive cases. This procedure Mill labeled the "Method of Difference." Taken alone, it is a more powerful method than the Method of Agreement alone for establishing valid causal associations

## *Explaining Social Revolutions*

(provided that one can find suitable negative cases for the required contrasts). In practice, though, it is often possible, and certainly desirable, to combine these two comparative logics. This is done by using at once several positive cases along with suitable negative cases as contrasts.

That will be the approach of this book. France, Russia, and China will serve as three positive cases of successful social revolution, and I shall argue that these cases reveal similar causal patterns despite their many other differences. In addition, I shall invoke negative cases for the purpose of validating various particular parts of the causal argument. In so doing, I shall always construct contrasts that maximize the similarities of the negative case(s) to the positive case(s) in every apparently relevant respect except the causal sequence that the contrast is supposed to validate. Thus, for example, the abortive Russian Revolution of 1905 will be contrasted to the successful Revolution of 1917 in order to validate arguments about the crucial contribution to social-revolutionary success in Russia of war-related processes that led to the breakdown of state repressive capacities. Moreover, selected aspects of English, Japanese, and German history will be used in various places to strengthen arguments about the causes of revolutionary political crises and peasant revolts in France, Russia, and China. These cases are suitable as contrasts because they were comparable countries that underwent non-social-revolutionary political crises and transformations in broadly similar times and circumstances to France, Russia, and China.

At first glance, comparative historical analysis may not seem so very different from the approach of the "natural historians" Lyford Edwards, Crane Brinton, and George Pettee. They, too, analyzed and compared a few historical cases in depth. Actually, however, comparative-historical and natural-history approaches to revolutions differ both in objective and in method of analysis. Whereas the goal of comparative historical analysis is to establish causes of revolutions, the natural historians sought to describe the characteristic cycle, or sequence of stages, that should typically occur in the processes of revolutions. As Robert Park put it in his introduction to Lyford Edwards's *The Natural History of Revolutions*,

Every social change that is capable of description in conceptual terms will have . . . its characteristic cycle. This is one of the presuppositions upon which this study is based. As a matter of scientific method, this description of the cycle seems to be the first step in the analysis of social change everywhere.<sup>94</sup>

Methodologically, the natural historians analyzed revolutions by trying to fit either parts of various cases (e.g., Edwards) or a few entire cases (e.g., Brinton) to metaphors that seemed to best describe their shared stages of development, hence the sequence putatively "natural" to revolutions. Brinton, for example, explicitly employed a metaphor of disease that had also been used implicitly by Edwards:

## Introduction

We shall regard revolutions as a kind of fever . . . In the society during the generation or so before the outbreak of revolution . . . there will be found signs of the coming disturbance . . . They are . . . [well] described as *prodromal* signs, indications to the very keen diagnostician that a disease is on its way, but not yet sufficiently developed to be the disease. Then comes a time when the full symptoms disclose themselves, and when we can say the fever of revolution has begun. This works up, not regularly but with advances and retreats, to a crisis, frequently accompanied by delirium, the rule of the most violent revolutionists, the Reign of Terror. After the crisis comes a period of convalescence, usually marked by a relapse or two. Finally the fever is over, and the patient is himself again, perhaps in some respects actually strengthened by the experience, immunized at least for a while from a similar attack, but certainly not wholly made over . . . <sup>95</sup>

To be sure, the natural historians also offered, at least implicitly, some theoretical hypotheses about the causes of revolution. These were primarily social-psychological, and—the significant point for our purposes—little attempt was made to use comparisons of historical cases to validate them. Instead, the theoretical hypotheses were simply applied to the analysis as a whole, and the historical materials used primarily to illustrate the metaphorical stage sequence. The resulting natural-history analyses were certainly not without value—indeed, they offer many insights into revolutionary processes and can still be read with profit today—but they were very different from a comparative historical analysis. Such an analysis uses comparisons among positive cases, and between positive and negative cases, to identify and validate causes, rather than descriptions, of revolutions. Moreover, a comparative historical analysis does not in any way assume or attempt to argue that revolutionary processes should appear descriptively similar in their concrete trajectories from case to case. For analytically similar sets of causes can be operative across cases even if the nature and timing of conflicts during the revolutions are different, and even if, for example, one case culminates in a conservative reaction, whereas another does not (at all or in the same way). In a comparative historical analysis, such differences are not obstacles to the identification of similar causes across cases of revolution. At the same time, they represent variations that can themselves be explained by comparisons of the positive historical cases among themselves.

Of course, comparative history is not without its difficulties and limitations, and several especially relevant ones deserve brief discussion. There are, in the first place, inevitable difficulties in applying the method according to its given logic. Often it is impossible to find exactly the historical cases that one needs for the logic of a certain comparison. And even when the cases are roughly appropriate, perfect controls for all potentially rele-



## *Explaining Social Revolutions*

vant variables can never be achieved. Thus, strategic guesses have to be made about what causes are actually likely to be operative—that is, which ones could, or could not actually affect the object of study. The upshot is that there always are unexamined contextual features of the historical cases that interact with the causes being explicitly examined in ways the comparative historical analysis either does not reveal, or must simply assume to be irrelevant.<sup>96</sup>

Another set of problems stems from the fact that comparative historical analysis necessarily assumes (like any multivariate logic) that the units being compared are independent of one another. But actually, this assumption is rarely if ever fully valid for macro-phenomena such as revolutions. For, as we have already noted, these phenomena occur in unique world-historical contexts that change over time, and they happen within international structures that tie societies to one another. For much of any given comparative analysis the fiction of independent units can often be maintained. Thus, for example, I am willing to treat old-regime France, Russia, and China as basically similar and unrelated agrarian states for the purposes of exploring the causes of the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions. But, sooner or later in most macro-analyses, one must make allowance for the unique effects of the world setting and timing, and for interrelations among the units. Thus, I shall work into my analysis the effects of the unique world-historical contexts of the eighteenth-century French versus the twentieth-century Russian and Chinese Revolutions, and I shall take into account the fact that Russian revolutionaries actually played a role in the Chinese Revolution through the transmission of Communist party models and policies via the Comintern.

Finally, it needs to be stressed that comparative historical analysis is no substitute for theory. Indeed, it can be applied only with the indispensable aid of theoretical concepts and hypotheses. For the comparative method alone cannot define the phenomenon to be studied. It cannot select appropriate units of analysis or say which historical cases should be studied. Nor can it provide the causal hypotheses to be explored. All of these must come from the macro-sociological imagination, informed by the theoretical debates of the day, and sensitive to the patterns of evidence for sets of historical cases.

Still, comparative historical analysis does provide a valuable check, or anchor, for theoretical speculation. It encourages one to spell out the actual causal arguments suggested by grand theoretical perspectives, and to combine diverse arguments if necessary in order to remain faithful to the ultimate objective—which is, of course, the actual illumination of causal regularities across sets of historical cases. Whatever the source(s) of theoretical inspiration, comparative history succeeds only if it convincingly fulfills this goal. And when it *is* successfully employed, comparative his-

## Introduction

torical analysis serves as an ideal strategy for mediating between theory and history. Provided that it is not mechanically applied, it can prompt both theoretical extensions and reformulations, on the one hand, and new ways of looking at concrete historical cases, on the other.

### WHY FRANCE, RUSSIA, AND CHINA?

The preceding parts of this chapter have sketched a theoretical frame of reference and introduced a method of analysis, both of which are in principle applicable to the investigation of many possible sets of social revolutions. This book does not, of course, analyze in depth all available historical cases of social revolution. Nor does it analyze a "random" sample from the entire universe of possible cases. In fact, comparative historical analysis works best when applied to a set of a few cases that share certain basic features. Cases need to be carefully selected and the criteria for grouping them together made explicit. In the following chapters, the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions are to be treated together as basically similar examples of successful social-revolutionary transformations. At this point, therefore, some words are in order to justify this selection of cases.

There are some important practical reasons why these social revolutions rather than others were chosen for analysis. All of them, for one thing, happened in countries whose state and class structures had not been recently created or basically altered under colonial domination. This consideration eliminates many complexities that would need to be systematically included in any analysis of revolutions in postcolonial or neocolonial settings. Furthermore, the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions all broke out and—after more or less protracted processes of class and political struggle—culminated in the consolidation of revolutionary state power, long-ago enough in the past to allow a study and comparison to be made of all three as *entire* revolutionary transformations. It is possible, in other words, to trace each Revolution from the demise of the old regime through to the emergence of a distinctively structured new regime. For comparative history, Hegel's maxim indubitably holds: The owl of Minerva flies at dusk.

Stronger reasons than these, however, are needed to explain not only why France, Russia, and China have each been selected for intense study, but also why all three have been grouped together as fundamentally *similar* cases of social revolution. For, according to most existing ways of defining and grouping revolutions for comparative study, France, Russia, and China simply do not belong together—certainly not all of them in one set.<sup>97</sup> France was a pre-twentieth-century European revolution, typically understood as bourgeois-capitalist or liberal-democratic in nature. De-

## *Explaining Social Revolutions*

pending upon one's category scheme, Russia was either an antiabsolutist revolution, or a statist–developmental revolution, or a proletarian–communist revolution. Some analysts might be willing to group it with France, others with China, but none would agree that it belongs together with both.<sup>98</sup> For China, especially, is not considered legitimately classifiable with France, either because the French Revolution was “bourgeois” or “liberal” and the Chinese obviously neither, or else because China should be grouped with Third World national-liberation revolutions and not with European revolutions of any sort.

But it is the premise of this work that France, Russia, and China exhibited important similarities in their Old Regimes and revolutionary processes and outcomes—similarities more than sufficient to warrant their treatment together as one pattern calling for a coherent causal explanation. All three Revolutions occurred in wealthy and politically ambitious agrarian states, none of which was ever colonially subjugated. These Old Regimes were proto-bureaucratic autocracies that suddenly had to confront more economically developed military competitors. In all three Revolutions, the externally mediated crises combined with internal structural conditions and trends to produce a conjuncture of: (1) the incapacitation of the central state machineries of the Old Regimes; (2) widespread rebellions by the lower classes, most crucially peasants; and (3) attempts by mass-mobilizing political leaderships to consolidate revolutionary state power. The revolutionary outcome in each instance was a centralized, bureaucratic, and mass-incorporating nation-state with enhanced great-power potential in the international arena. Obstacles to national social change associated with the prerevolutionary positions of the landed upper class were removed (or greatly curtailed), and new potentials for development were created by the greater state centralization and mass political incorporation of the New Regimes.

Whatever other category systems may assume, the French and Chinese Revolutions—the two “polar” cases of my trio—were not so different from one another, nor so similar (respectively) to early European, liberal revolutions and to Third World, nation-building revolutions, as their contrasting spatio-temporal and cultural settings might suggest. The French Revolution actually was in important respects strikingly different from the English Revolution of the seventeenth century, and rather similar to the Chinese and Russian Revolutions. Peasant revolts played a key role in the process of the French Revolution, and the political result was a more centralized and bureaucratic state, not a liberal-parliamentary regime. As for the Chinese Revolution, it seems remarkably shortsighted in historical terms to regard it as a new-nation–building revolution of the mid-twentieth century. China had an imperial Old Regime with a cultural and political history stretching back many hundreds of years. And the

## *Introduction*

Chinese Revolution as an entire process was launched in 1911 by an upper-class revolt against an absolute monarchical state, not unlike the aristocratic revolt that started the French Revolution.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, the Chinese Revolution eventually gave rise to a developmentally oriented Communist regime that is certainly as much or more similar to the post-revolutionary Soviet regime as to contemporary, noncommunist Third World governments.

Given that there are, indeed, sufficient similarities to allow these three Revolutions to be grouped together for comparative historical analysis, much is to be gained by actually doing so. The similar sociopolitical features of the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions can be highlighted and explained in ways that would necessarily be missed by analysts determined to keep them segregated in separate type categories. Above all, there is much to be learned from the juxtaposition of these Revolutions about the causes and results of peasant participation in social revolutions. There is also much to be learned about the dynamics of the breakdown and reconstruction of state administrative and coercive organizations from old to new regimes. It is not incidental that these aspects of revolutions tend either to be played down or assumed away by many other comparative analyses. This happens because most of the alternative category schemes serve to highlight instead either bourgeois/proletarian class configurations or patterns of legitimate political authority and the ideological self-conceptions of old and new regimes.

But we shall not only emphasize the common patterns shared by the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions. Given the flexibility and the historical sensitivity of the comparative method, attention can also be paid to the particular features of each of the three Revolutions. There will be no need to deny that the French Revolution had bourgeois and liberal features, that the Russian Revolution was extremely statist in its outcome, or that the Chinese Revolution had in its process elements of a national-liberation struggle. For even as we primarily look for and attempt to explain patterns common to France, Russia, and China, we can also attend to the variations that characterize pairs of cases or single cases. These can then be explained as due in part to variations on the shared causal patterns, in part to contrasts among the social structures of France, Russia, and China, and in part to differences in the world-historical timing and succession of the three great Revolutions. As a result, exactly those distinctive characteristics of the Revolutions and their world-historical setting that have prompted other scholars to segregate them into separate type categories will be cast in a new explanatory light as they are studied against the background of the patterns shared by all three Revolutions.

## *Explaining Social Revolutions*

### *Looking Ahead*

The chapters to come present a comparative historical analysis of the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions—an analysis conceived and executed within the frame of reference developed in this first chapter. Part I discusses the structural and historical conditions for the emergence of objective revolutionary situations in old-regime France, Russia, and China: Chapter 2 focuses upon the political crises of the absolutist states, and Chapter 3 analyzes the situation of the peasantry. In order to help validate the main lines of the argument, particular subsections of Chapters 2 and 3 briefly show that the conditions hypothesized to be crucial for producing social-revolutionary situations in France, Russia, and China were absent, or not present all together, at relevant periods in Japan, Prussia/Germany, and England. Thus the logic of comparison in Part I primarily stresses ways in which France, Russia, and China were similar. And this is underlined through contrasts to negative cases.

In Part II, on the other hand, the logic of comparison focuses entirely upon the similarities and differences among the positive cases of social revolution. For in Part II it is taken for granted that France, Russia, and China shared similarly caused revolutionary situations. The objective is to explain the revolutionary outcomes against that background. Hence this part demonstrates how the conflicts unleashed in the revolutionary crises led to social-revolutionary outcomes, with certain patterns common to all three Revolutions and others distinctive to one or two of them. Within Part II, Chapter 4 introduces the major analytic considerations to be explored for each Revolution; and Chapters 5, 6, and 7 deal with the revolutionary conflicts and outcomes of France, Russia, and China, respectively.