

Classic studies 2.2 Theda Skocpol's comparison of social revolutions

The research problem

As all students of sociology and history are taught, the French Revolution of 1789 transformed France for ever. But why did it happen at that time? Was it just a historical accident or was it inevitable? The early twentieth-century revolutions in China and Russia not only turned those countries into communist societies, they also significantly shaped the direction of the modern world itself. Again, why then? The American sociologist Theda Skocpol (1947–) set out to uncover the similarities and differences across these revolutionary periods. Her ambitious task was to produce a general theory of the origins and nature of revolution grounded in detailed empirical studies. The result was *States and Social Revolutions* (1979),

one of the classic studies of long-term social transformation.

Skocpol's explanation

Skocpol looked at the processes of revolution in three different historical contexts: the 1789 French Revolution (1786–1800); the 1917 revolutions in Russia (1917–21) and the revolutionary period in China (1911–49). Given the essentially historical questions asked, her main method was the use and careful interpretation of a range of primary and secondary documentary sources. Although there are many differences between the three cases, Skocpol argues that their underlying structural causes are, in fact, similar. She rejects the Marxist idea that revolutions are the intentional product of mass, class-based movements with



The so-called Arab Spring, which began in December 2010, saw large-scale protests against numerous regimes in the Middle East and North Africa. In Syria the situation developed into a complex civil war and, by December 2020 – one decade after the start of the original protests in Tunisia – Bashar al-Assad's regime looked to have clung on to power. Mass social unrest does not always lead to revolution.

deep grievances. Instead, she argues that revolutions are not made, they come. That is, social revolutions are largely the result of the unintended consequences of intentional human actions. Before the Russian Revolution, for instance, various political groups were trying to overthrow the existing regime, but none of these – including the Bolsheviks, who eventually came to power – anticipated the revolution that occurred. A series of clashes and confrontations gave rise to a process of social transformation much deeper and more radical than anyone had foreseen.

Skocpol's explanation is that all three revolutions occurred in predominantly agrarian societies and were made possible only when the existing state structures (administrative and military) were breaking down as they came under intense competitive pressure from other states. In this context, it was peasant revolts and mass mobilizations that brought about social revolutions in France, China and Russia. Thus Skocpol argued against the widespread notion that peasants were *not* a 'revolutionary class'. Some similarities with other revolutions in Vietnam, Cuba, Mexico and Yugoslavia can also be seen. Skocpol's causal explanation focuses on state structures. As these began to break down, a power vacuum was created and states lost their legitimacy, enabling revolutionary forces to take power.

Skocpol's research makes use of the 'logic of scientific experiment' for comparative studies outlined by John Stuart Mill in the mid-nineteenth century. She adopts Mill's 'method of similarity', taking three similar events (revolutions) in very different national contexts. This allows her to look for key similarities across the three cases which can be identified as *independent variables* and thus help to explain the causes of political revolutions.

Critical points

Some of Skocpol's critics have raised questions about the structural argument of her thesis. This, they say, leaves little room for active agency on the part of people. *How* did peasant groups revolt? Did leaders not play a part in the revolutions?

Could things have turned out differently if individual actors and groups had chosen alternative courses of action? Are individuals so powerless to influence change in the face of structural pressures?

A further criticism is of Skocpol's notion of 'cause' in this context. Some contend that what her argument amounts to is really a set of sophisticated generalizations in relation to the cases she studied. And, though such generalizations work quite well for these specific cases, this is not the same thing as a general causal theory of social revolutions. Does the thesis hold for, say, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the 'Velvet Revolution' in (former) Czechoslovakia in 1989, or the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa during the 'Arab Spring' which spread from Tunisia in 2010–11? So, critics say, despite setting out to discover the underlying causes and nature of social revolutions, in the end, Skocpol's study showed that each revolution has to be studied in its own right.

Contemporary significance

Skocpol's study has become a modern classic for two reasons. First, it developed a powerful causal explanation of revolutionary change which emphasized the underlying social structural conditions of revolution. Such a strong central thesis was, nevertheless, underpinned by very detailed analysis of primary and secondary documentary sources. Hence, Skocpol successfully demonstrated that comparative-historical sociology could combine the study of large-scale, long-term social change with the empirical investigation of historical events 'on the ground'. In essence, she brought together the macro- and microsociological aspects into one theoretical framework. Second, Skocpol made a very significant contribution to our understanding of revolutions. She showed that there are enough similarities across different revolutions to warrant pursuing general theories of social change. In this way, her thesis helped to bridge the gap between mainstream historical studies and the sociology of revolutions.