

A CULTURAL THEORY OF REVOLUTION

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Theorists of revolution in sociology and political science have tended to treat revolutions as static phenomena, essentially the same in all times and places. This paper proposes that a historical-anthropological approach, emphasizing how the phenomenon of revolution has changed over the centuries and how revolutionary actors have variously made sense of their involvement, can provide a necessary corrective. The paper will examine changes in the “practice” of revolution and shifts in thinking about revolution from the 1640s, when the term was first used politically, to the present. It will pay special attention to the interplay between the experience of revolution and evolving theories of revolutions, the one influencing the other in a “conversation” that is still ongoing. In short, by outlining the cultural history of revolution over the past four centuries, the paper will present what amounts to a new theory of revolution—with significant implications for how we anticipate the future of revolution.

Since the 1980s there have been a number of excellent cultural histories of particular revolutionary episodes in modern Europe, but no one has yet attempted to synthesize the results of these investigations into a new, general theory of revolution. At the same time, political scientists and sociologists have been calling for a “fourth generation” of revolutionary theory that would integrate agency with structure. Despite a number of attempts in this direction, the results have been unimpressive—arguably because the study of agency among multitudinous actors over considerable lengths of time in diverse settings requires methods that are more characteristic of anthropology and history than of political science and sociology, while anthropologists and especially historians shy away from the kind of comparative thinking that the development of theory requires. By surveying the cultural history of individual revolutionary episodes over the past four hundred years, however, it is possible to discern consistently recurring patterns of meaning-formation with profound implications for the unfolding of revolutionary processes, despite tremendous structural differences across time and space. The term *revolution* itself, for example, is used in each instance mythologically to legitimate the new order with reference to a new notion of sacred community.