

November 1986

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### Recommended Citation

Rose, Gregory (1986) "Revolution, Culture and Collective Action," *Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 14 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol14/iss1/4>

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## Revolution, Culture and Collective Action

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It is possible to argue, as Theda Skocpol did in her retrospective analysis of the Iranian revolution, that the Islamic revolution in Iran represents a fundamentally new type of revolution, a type which, precisely because of its novel introduction of "the possible role of idea systems and cultural understandings in the shaping of political action,"<sup>1</sup> escapes hitherto-developed analytical categories. Such a view, however, is misleading. It is misleading precisely because the novelty in the Iranian case is not *typological*.

The novelty in the Iranian case is the degree to which this revolution highlights the relationship between culture and collective action. The Iranian case merely exhibits in a more striking and unmistakable fashion a dynamic which is common to all revolutions, but which structural analysis of the causes of revolution obscures because of assumptions such analysts tend to make concerning a particular kind of collective action — revolutionary mobilization. Specifically, structural analysis of the causes of revolutions assumes that economic outcomes associated with structural causes are the necessary and, usually, sufficient conditions for revolutionary mobilization. In the Iranian case strictly economic incentives, while present, were clearly of tertiary importance.<sup>2</sup> The fact that economic outcomes were not generally the source of revolutionary mobilization in Iran does not suggest that Iran's revolution is a new type; rather it suggests that the problem of revolutionary mobilization is a serious collective action problem and that the economic-determinist assumptions carried in structural analyses simply ignore the collective action problem by postulation of *strictly* economic incentives for revolutionary mobilization.

What the case of Iran does provide is additional insight into the ways in which collective action problems can be addressed. It raises the question of whether culture — broadly defined — can condition an environment in which the problem of revolutionary mobilization as collective action can be rendered less intractable. The problem, to be sure, with culture as a variable is that culture, by definition varies little over long periods of time. In the case of Iran, however, one can see the impact of the cultural variable by observing the relationship between changes of residency patterns of certain "culture-bearers" and their amenability to revolutionary mobilization.

The general framework used for this analysis is that developed by Samuel Popkin in his study of the Vietnamese revolution.<sup>3</sup> Popkin argues that shifting the focus of analysis from aggregates to individuals permits greater insight into the ways in which revolutionary movements mobilize a mass base for seizing state power. Key to this shift of analysis is consideration of the problem posed by Mancur Olson in his general study of collective action, the problem of the free rider. Two assumptions characterize actors where the free rider problem emerges — rationality (the actor discerns

open alternatives and is capable of rank-ordering alternative courses of action in terms of maximizing some preferred utility) and egoism (the actor most prefers that utility which most realizes his self-interest).<sup>4</sup> Two assumptions also characterize collective goods susceptible to the free rider problem — the impossibility of excluding noncontributors and the jointness of the goods' supply. In brief, the rational actor will choose that course of action which imposes no costs upon himself if the collective action of others produces a good from which he cannot be excluded, regardless of his noncontribution — the problem which Olson identifies becomes the fact that:

... unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interest.<sup>5</sup>

Olson suggests that the use of such special devices which produce excludable goods for individuals can induce willingness on the part of rational-egoist actors to engage in collective action. This view is termed the "by-product" theory of collective goods. Popkin expands on Olson's original analysis by suggesting that:

Contributions can occur (1) because persons contribute for reasons of ethics, conscience, or altruism; (2) because it pays to contribute on a pure cost-benefit basis; (3) because of selective incentives (excludable benefits), which can be either positive or negative; or (4) because it pays to contribute, given that the contributions of others are contingent on one's own contribution.<sup>6</sup>

In analyzing the Vietnamese revolution, Popkin suggests that peasants, as rational-egoist actors, evaluate risks of participation in revolutionary movements in terms of the ability of these movements to provide selective incentives, the degree to which the leadership of such movements is credible, and the degree to which individual participation is a condition of contribution by others.

The role of the political entrepreneur, as Popkin terms the revolutionary leadership, is pivotal. The mobilizing success of the political entrepreneur is conditioned by the degree to which he communicates in terms and symbols which his target audience understands, he presents a credible vision of the future, he embodies a persuasive moral code (frequently involving self-abnegation), he is familiar as a figure of authority to the target audience, and he can provide "local goods and goods with immediate payoffs" to convince the target audience of his efficacy.<sup>7</sup>

In applying Popkin's framework to the Iranian case, I shall concentrate on revolutionary events in Tehran in the period August 1978 to February 1979.<sup>8</sup> The vast majority of Tehran's urban poor, concentrated primarily in the southern half of the city, consisted of either first- or second-generation peasant migrants to the city who frequently maintained close social and economic links to the peasant communities from which they emigrated.<sup>9</sup> Thus, if Popkin's analysis of the constraints on peasant

behavior imposed by village life is correct, one might expect Iran's recently-urbanized peasants to exhibit approximations of the behavior Popkin predicts. While the anthropological literature on recently-urbanized peasants in Iran is sparse, what literature exists suggests striking parallels to Popkin's model of peasant behavior; even more striking is the parallel between anthropological studies of peasant behavior in villages in Iran and Popkin's observations in Vietnam. Furthermore, survey-research studies of peasant motivations for emigration to urban centers in Iran strongly suggests that threat to subsistence was less a motivation than anticipation of a higher standard of living available even to unskilled day-laborers in urban centers.<sup>10</sup> Thus, recently-urbanized peasants in Iran exhibited no great risk-aversion, but precisely the rational risk calculation which Popkin predicts.

The question which acutely arises is: why did these recently-urbanized peasants become mobilized as the vast majority of active participants in the revolutionary movement? What special incentives might have induced this collective action and, more specifically, what special incentives might have induced collective action of the particular type which occurred in Tehran? This second question is significant in light of the gross disparity in recently-urbanized peasant participation in revolutionary demonstrations organized by the left and the National Front and those organized by the religious opposition; a call from the left or the National Front might produce a demonstration of fifty thousand to two-hundred and fifty thousand persons; a call from Imam Khomeini put two to four million into the streets.

I suggest that recently-urbanized peasants chose to accept the leadership of Imam Khomeini and the religious opposition because that revolutionary leadership possessed more credible political entrepreneurs and provided a strong special incentive, the by-product of which was collective revolutionary action.

Analyzing the religious opposition's leadership, and that of Imam Khomeini in particular, a compelling case can be made for this proposition. Anthropological and political observers have frequently commented on Khomeini's use of terms, symbols and a speaking style which communicated more effectively with the peasant audience than any other figure in the opposition (Khomeini's radio-broadcast speeches are delivered with a strong rural accent and grammatical constructions which are more common to the language of the lower social classes, and the peasant in particular, than upper-class "literary" Persian). A content analysis of the speeches of Khomeini and other religious opposition leaders in the pre-revolutionary period indicates a high correlation between the semantic fields employed by these leaders and their recently-urbanized peasant audience. The vision of the future presented by Imam Khomeini, portrayed as it was in traditional and religious imagery, was more credible than any non-religious, particularly Western, vision, the substance of which was, at best, incomprehensible to the recently-urbanized peasant and, at worst, deeply offensive. Similarly, Imam Khomeini in particular embodied a demanding moral code, the substance of which was shared by the recently-urbanized peasant audience, and Imam Khomeini's ascetic image stood in stark contrast to much of the

imperial elite and competing revolutionary leaderships (this contention can be called into question with respect to other figures in the leadership of the religious opposition — however, Imam Khomeini, by and large, symbolized the religious leadership for the target audience). Furthermore, the religious leadership was, indeed, familiar to the recently-urbanized peasant as a source of authority (the seniormost religious leaders, including Imam Khomeini, were known as the *maraji'-i taqlid* — “sources of emulation” — and every believer, to the extent that he is not himself an expert in Islamic jurisprudence, is obligated in Shi'i Islam to emulate such a source in matters of religious practice, an institution known as *marja'iyat*).

The fifth characteristic of effective political entrepreneurship — provision of local goods and goods with immediate payoffs — is less evident in the Iranian case (and this is to an extent a consequence of the fact that the Vietnamese case from which Popkin derived his model involved prolonged guerrilla warfare, while the Iranian case was of far shorter duration and was a largely urban affair). However, it can be plausibly argued that the provision of social welfare, through *sadaqat* (charity) and *khoms* (a kind of unofficial religious tax administered by the *maraji'-i taqlid*) distributed by the local mosques, after the collapse of the unskilled construction labor market in Tehran in 1975-76 constituted such a local good with an immediate payoff, particularly in light of the absence of a state-organized welfare system. Still, this local good was certainly far less in scope and impact than the local goods provided by Vietnamese revolutionaries.

The special incentive provided by the religious opposition was, simply put, salvation. As Popkin himself notes, “. . . the quintessential excludables often involve religion.”<sup>12</sup> In the case of Shi'i Islam, the strong identification of salvific faith with action to embody that faith, suggested by the jurisprudential definition of *iman* (faith) as *tasdiq* (realization of God's will on earth), conditioned salvation on behavior which aimed at realizing God's intended polity on earth.<sup>13</sup> This was reinforced, no doubt, by the traditional institution of *marja'iyat*. Once the attention of the recently-urbanized peasant was drawn by the religious leadership to the claimed entailment of revolutionary action by the basic tenets of the faith, revolutionary mobilization rapidly occurred.

To be sure, Imam Khomeini had made such a call in 1963 and, while the imperial regime was sorely tested by the ensuing clashes, no successful revolutionary mobilization took place. I suggest that the difference in 1978-79 was in the concentration of the target audience in urban centers which took place in the period 1964-1978 and which permitted considerably more effective communication between the leadership of the religious opposition and the target audience. Table 1 shows the distribution of population in Iran's ten largest cities in 1966 and 1976. Tehran's population alone increased by nearly 40% in that ten year period.<sup>14</sup> Table 2 indicates that rural-to-urban migration throughout Iran accounted for 35.2% of the urban population increase in the same period, with an average annual increase of 211,000 during the period attributed to rural-to-urban migration. A peasant population, thus, was concentrated from the relative diffused environ-

ment of Iran's 60,000 villages to a few urban centers, of which the most prominent was Tehran. In these centers, these urbanized peasants increasingly turned to their cultural tradition, in particular Shi'i Islam, in response to the anomie they experienced in the urban environment.<sup>15</sup> This concentration in urban centers of a population culturally-conditioned to religious appeals, coupled with the increasing stature of Imam Khomeini as a religious leader (Popkin's fourth criterion of political entrepreneurship) as he became almost exclusively identified as the source of religious opposition to the imperial regime, provided the key difference between 1963 and 1978-79.

Application of Popkin's framework to the Iranian case highlights, then, the interesting way in which the Iranian revolution resolved the collective action problem presented to it and sets the basis for a rather more interesting theoretical point.

TABLE 1  
Population Distribution in Iran's Ten Largest Cities:  
1966-1976

City	1966	1976
Tehran	2,719,730	4,496,159
Isfahan	424,045	671,825
Mashhad	409,616	670,180
Tabriz	403,413	598,576
Shiraz	269,865	416,408
Ahvaz	206,375	329,006
Abadan	272,962	296,081
Kermanshah	187,930	290,861
Qom	134,292	246,831
Rasht	143,557	187,203

Source: Adapted from Kazemi, *Poverty and Revolution in Iran*, p. 17.

TABLE 2  
Increase in Iranian Urban Population: 1966-76

	Total Population (000)	Percent of Total Increase	Average Annual Increase (000)
Natural Population Increase	2,621	43.7	262
Rural to Urban Migration	2,111	35.2	211

Source: Adapted from Kazemi, *Poverty and Revolution in Iran*, p. 14.

Similar to the "free rider" problem of collective action is the problem of the "Prisoners' Dilemma." Here it is shown that under certain conditions rational-egoist actors will be unable to reach a Pareto-optimal solution to their dilemma, despite the convergence of their interests. The following matrix illustrates the problem (where R is the reward, P is the punishment, T is the utility accruing to defection, and S is the "sucker" payoff):

		Prisoner A's Choice:	
B's Choice	COOPERATE	COOPERATE	DEFECT
	DEFECT	R,R (3,3)	S,T (1,4)
Payoff Ordering:	T > R > P > S	T,S (4,1)	P,P (2,2)
		Condition: $R > (S + T)/2$	

In this game, both prisoners would be worse off by defecting than by cooperating, but each ranks the utility accruing to defection higher in his own self-interest than the utility of cooperation. When one adds, however, certain additional assumptions, this outcome is no longer so clear. For example, if one assumes that both prisoners are members of *Cosa Nostra*, sworn to the oath of silence — *omerta* — and aware that defection would likely result in the defector's murder at the hands of other organization members, the subjective game matrix for the prisoners would be:

		Prisoner A:	
Prisoner B:	COOPERATE	COOPERATE	DEFECT
	DEFECT	R,R (4,4)	S,T (3,2)
		T,S (2,3)	P,P (1,1)

Thus, introduction of an assumption about prior relations of power, expectation, values and conventions can radically change the expected outcome by predisposing the players to cooperation. Such outcomes have been generally noted with respect to repeated-iteration games. As Alexander Field suggests, rational-choice analysis has precisely to make assumptions about such factors which affect how interests are determined and, consequently, how calculations about interests are made.<sup>16</sup>

This excursus into the "Prisoners' Dilemma" highlights the general theoretical contribution of the Iranian case. If the problem of revolutionary mobilization is a free rider problem, then the intractability of such a free rider problem is conditioned by the ways in which prior factors affect determination of interests by actors and the ways in which actors make calculations about their interests. This complex of prior factors is the "web of significance" which Clifford Geertz has defined as "culture:" "a context, something within which [social events] can be intelligibly described."<sup>17</sup> At least four of Popkin's criteria of effective political entrepreneurship (communicative skill, shared vision, persuasive moral codes, and familiarity of authority) point to the effect of culture on overcoming the problem of collective action. Furthermore, it is reasonable to suppose that cultures wherein which special incentives are plentiful or a certain special incentive is especially prized or a particular culture-bearing population is especially available to political entrepreneurs provide environments wherein the problem of collective action can be more easily surmounted. This certainly seems to be the case for Iran.

This analysis brings us full circle to the observation that structural analyses of the causes of revolution fail to explain the Iranian case because of their economic-determinist assumptions about collective action. The Ira-

nian case, certainly, does not suggest that extra-economic phenomena lie at the root of all revolutionary mobilization; rather, it underscores the importance of the problem of collective action and, while economic special incentives may be present in some cases, the cultural environment can, and in the case of Iran does, provide equally compelling special incentives. The question becomes, then, an empirical one.



<sup>1</sup>Theda Skopol, "The Rentier State and Shi'a Islam in the Iranian Revolution," *Theory and Society*, 11, 268.

<sup>2</sup>I have no desire to debate whether the ultimate basis of all political, or even cultural, phenomena is economic. I grant that it is possible to argue that economic causes *ultimately* underlie all the event discussed herein. The point being made here is whether exclusively economic causes *immediately* underlie all cases of revolutionary mobilization. Clearly, I do not think that to be the case.

<sup>3</sup>Samuel Popkin, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1979). I do not argue that Popkin's framework exhaustively explains the Iranian case, nor that the two cases — Iran and Vietnam — share more than a handful of pertinent similarities. Rather, I argue that this handful of similarities is powerful circumstantial evidence that culture can condition an environment such that the problem of collective action is more easily overcome.

<sup>4</sup>Certainly egoism is not a necessary condition for rational choice analysis (whether an actor's utility preferences are self-interested or self-disinterested is irrelevant). However, Olson clearly makes the assumption of egoism. See Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>Popkin, *The Rational Peasant*, p. 254.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.* pp. 259-262.

<sup>8</sup>I recognize the shortcoming of analyses which have focused on Tehran, often to the exclusion of equally important provincial centers of revolutionary activity. However, I suggest that strong demographic similarities among the urban poor in Tehran and other major cities compensates for any skewing of my analysis insofar as the social composition of this stratum in most Iranian cities is remarkably homogeneous.

<sup>9</sup>Farhad Kazemi, *Poverty and Revolution in Iran: The Migrant Poor, Urban Marginality and Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 1980).

<sup>10</sup>Mihdi Salamat, et. al., *Ilal-i Muhajirat va Barrisi'y-i Awza-i Farhang-i, Igifsadi, va Ijtima'i-yi Muhajirin-i Mantagih-yi Yakhchiabad* (Tehran: College of Social Work, 1971).

<sup>11</sup>See Gregory Rose, "Velayat-e Fagih and the Recovery of Islamic Identity in the Thought of Ayatollah Khomeini," in Nikki Keddie, ed., *Religion and Politics in Iran: Shi'ism from Quietism to Revolution* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 166-188.

<sup>12</sup>Popkin, *The Rational Peasant*, p. 255.

<sup>13</sup>Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Faith as Tasdiq," in Parviz Moreuedge, ed., *Islamic Philosophical Theology* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1979).

<sup>14</sup>Iranian census-takers systematically excluded potential respondents without permanent addresses and have been accused of underestimating the urban poor population of Tehran by as much as 50%.

<sup>15</sup>In March 1979 I was afforded the opportunity by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran to examine confidential reports of the imperial regime's National Security and Intelligence Organization (SAVAK) which repeatedly emphasized the growth of religious consciousness and observance among Tehran's urban poor in the period 1975-1978.

<sup>16</sup>Alexander J. Field, "The Problem with Neoclassical Institutional Economics: A Critique with Special Reference to North/Thomas Model of pre-1500 Europe," *Explorations in Economic History*, Volume 18, No. 2, 174-198.

<sup>17</sup>Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 14.