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Understanding Revolutions: The Necessity of Both Rational Choice and Sociological Approaches

Jake Loor

Revolutions are both an important area of study and a great mystery within the discipline of political science. The strategies of revolutionary movements and the empirical factors that make them most likely to succeed are relatively well understood. What is less clear is *why* revolutions occur, and why they occur at the moments that they do. In seeking to answer these questions, political scientists generally utilize one of two approaches: the rational choice approach or the sociological approach. The first approach focuses on the interactions of rational, self-interested individuals who act based on cost-benefit calculations. The sociological model, by contrast, focuses on the social systems and cultures that constrain and shape the actions of individuals. This paper will focus on this unresolved area of debate within political science literature and the following question: how should the phenomenon that is mass revolutions be explained and understood? Or more precisely, which model better explains revolutions? I argue that understanding revolutions necessarily requires both models. Far from being mutually exclusive, these two models are complementary lenses that each provide a distinct but necessary insight into revolutionary action. Social context is an integral part of the cost-benefit analysis that rational choice assumes, but rational choice remains a crucial explanatory factor in the study of revolutions within the sociological approach. Thus, any understanding of revolutionary action that is not attuned to both individual rational choice and sociocultural factors will be fundamentally flawed, or at the very least incomplete. This paper will show why the rational approach model alone is an incomplete method of studying revolutions, why the sociological approach is similarly insufficient, and the ways in which both are needed to explain and understand revolutions.

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The rational choice model is a critical component in the explanation of revolutions, but, employed on its own as it often is, the rational choice approach cannot explain revolutionary action. The rational choice model seeks to understand politics using the individual as the basic unit of analysis. These individuals are assumed to act in accordance with their self-interest, maximizing what they see as benefits and minimizing what they see as costs. Revolutionary action, under this model, is the result of self-interested egoists who each individually decide that the benefits of participating in a revolution are worth the costs. In his article “Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989,” Timur Kuran notes, insightfully, that “a mass uprising results from multitudes of individual choices to participate in a movement for change; there is no actor named ‘the crowd’ or ‘the opposition’” (Kuran 1991, 16). In authoritarian contexts, the cost of participating in revolutions is often high due to the repression that most regimes are willing to employ to stay in power. Protesting could cost one their life. Another factor that discourages participation in revolutions, seen from a rational choice perspective, is the fact that an individual can enjoy the benefits of a successful revolution without putting their own neck on the line. Meanwhile, risking one’s life in a revolution does not guarantee that the revolution will be successful. Here the rational choice model explains why revolutions occur so infrequently; every individual who participates in a revolution is risking everything for an uncertain, if not unlikely, reward.

Using a rational choice approach, Kuran devised a model to explain the dynamics of revolutionary action. He argues that individuals have a revolutionary threshold, or a point at which they will decide to publicly oppose the regime. This threshold depends on one’s private preferences, the external costs of protesting, and the size of the public opposition. The calculation of such a threshold is most relevant to those who want the government overthrown,

as those who are decidedly in favor of the political status quo are unlikely to participate in a revolution under almost any circumstances. For Kuran, each person who prefers that the government be overthrown faces the psychological costs of outwardly supporting a regime that they internally despise, and also the external costs of repression for publicly opposing the regime. While internal costs are mainly based upon the degree to which an individual cannot stand 'living a lie' and supporting a regime, external costs depend on multiple factors such as the likelihood of a government to engage in violence against dissenters and the size of the public opposition. One person who publicly opposes the regime will have a low likelihood of overthrowing the government and will face a high likelihood of repression, but as more people oppose the government the cost lessens because the regime is less likely to single one individual out in a large crowd, and they are also usually hesitant to fire into a large crowd (Bellin 2012). Thus, the revolutionary threshold is the "point where [an individual's] external cost of joining the opposition falls below his internal cost of preference falsification" (Kuran 18). So each person, as a result of their private preferences, has a level of external costs at which they will revolt. The die-hard revolutionaries will rebel no matter what, and citizens with less hatred for the regime will only rebel as the external costs of revolting decrease due to increases in public opposition (or occasionally other factors). Kuran uses this rational choice model to point out a cascade effect, in which the choice of only a few individuals to oppose the regime publicly will increase the opposition enough to reach the thresholds of others, who will then add to the public opposition and incorporate other citizens whose revolutionary thresholds have now been met, and so on. In this way, regimes can, and for Kuran always will, occur suddenly and surprisingly because of preference falsification and this cascade effect. There is no way to know each individual's private feelings towards the regime, so there is no way to know how close the size of

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the opposition is to meeting their revolutionary threshold. Thus, the rational choice model sees revolution, or the lack thereof, as simply the result of various different individuals and their own personal cost-benefit analyses.

The rational choice model has merit and delivers important insights. It is certainly true that a revolution is the culmination of various individual choices. The concepts of a cascade effect and preference falsification also offer compelling reasons for why revolutions are typically so unpredictable. In the case of the Eastern European revolutions, as Kuran points out, the seemingly invincible and publicly supported post-communist regimes in Eastern Europe fell rapidly and surprisingly in the late 1980s. The opposition grew as it became clear that the military was not firing on protesters (Kuran 1991, Bruce 2010). This fits with Kuran's revolutionary model. As external costs decreased, more peoples' individual revolutionary thresholds were met, and they took to the streets. Henry Thomson shows that in East Germany, the failure of the regime to repress protesters led to the explosion of protests throughout the nation (Thomson 2018). At first these protesters were either those harboring intense grievances, in this instance independent farmers under severe collectivization policies, or those with a high ability to communicate, in this instance construction workers. As it became clear that the regime was not repressing protesters, the protests quickly exploded into a mass movement. Here we see the rational choice model at work. Farmers with an acute reason to prefer the government's overthrow instigated protests as higher internal and material costs of living under the regime lowered their revolutionary thresholds. Construction workers who could guarantee safety in numbers through communication networks perceived lower external costs, prompting them to reach their thresholds and revolt. And as it became clear that external costs were low, most peoples' thresholds were met, and disparate protests coalesced into a successful and peaceful

revolution. The cascade effect and preference falsification that Kuran proposes are helpful in explaining why no one saw these revolutions coming; 76% of East Germans reported being totally shocked by the revolution 4 months after it occurred and only 5% claimed they were expecting such a revolution (Kuran 10). The critical aspect of the rational choice model, however, requires no evidence: it is logically intuitive. Put simply, it is impossible for a revolution to occur without each individual engaging in protest having made the conscious decision to do so. Each protestor will always have to decide whether the benefits of revolt are worth the costs. This position is largely irrefutable and certainly important for understanding revolutions, but it does not encompass all the important aspects of revolutionary action.

The problem with the rational choice approach is that it assumes an individual preference that is overly constant, coherent, and stable. Kuran argues that “neither private preferences nor the corresponding thresholds are common knowledge. So a society can come to the brink of a revolution without anyone knowing this, not even those with the power to unleash it” (20). He then goes on to say that anonymous polls would solve this problem, and that authoritarian regimes discourage anonymous polls for this reason. This analysis is missing something. First, it is not clear that individuals are so aware of their own private preferences. Second, private preferences are always shifting for a variety of reasons, one important factor being the society in which they live. And lastly, revolutions do start, and it seems wrong to suggest that they always start accidentally. In fact, the idea that people have no idea when society might be on the brink of a revolution somewhat contradicts his own theory of a cascade effect insofar as that theory requires that people have a sense of external costs and therefore also a sense of the size of public opposition. People obviously communicate preferences outside of only anonymous polls. Kuran claims that “if we possessed a reliable technique for measuring people's revolutionary thresholds,

we would see what it would take to get a revolution started. And if we understood the determinants of these thresholds, we would know when the required conditions were about to be met” (47). This analysis places far too much stock in the stability, and even existence, of a revolutionary threshold.

The threshold may be a helpful tool for theorizing, but it is not an objective thing that can be measured. An individual does not know their own threshold, and different factors determine their feelings about revolution each day. Thomson finds that, in East Germany, construction workers played an integral role in inciting the revolution, even though they did not face the same acute grievances that farmers did. As previously alluded to, “construction workers with strong mobilization structures and dense communications networks were significant instigators of unrest despite small numbers and moderate grievances” (Thomson 1). Though I have shown the ways in which this analysis supports the rational approach model, this example simultaneously illuminates its flaws. Are we to assume, then, that all construction workers happened to have the same revolutionary threshold despite being made up of diverse people with varying preferences? Clearly, they were not so uniquely aggrieved by the state as to prompt a uniform uprising. This indicates the need for another explanation as to why construction workers would rebel and not others. Kuran may respond by arguing that many people in East Germany wanted to rebel, but these construction workers had a unique ability to pull it off because their ability to communicate could guarantee numbers that would lower external costs. This is true, but it misses the ways in which individual preference is ever changing and shaped by society. Why exactly did the construction workers, among all types of people across the country, begin the rebellion? This ability for communication with diverse people that construction workers possessed had at least as much impact on their preferences and view of the regime as it did on their perception of external

costs. There must be a reason that the dominant position and norm amongst construction workers came to be that of regime opposition as opposed to, say, protest in favor of a preferable situation for construction workers. This speaks to both the culture among construction workers and the significance of societal undercurrents more broadly.

The sociological model fills the gaps in the rational choice model, but it does not replace it entirely. The sociological approach to revolutions focuses on social systems rather than individuals. It assumes that individuals are social beings whose preferences and actions are shaped by their social context. Revolutionary action, under this theory, is a result of socialized individuals acting in accordance with the rest of society and its norms—the assumption here is that people generally fit into the society around them, or at least that their preferences and actions are influenced, though not deterministically, by their context. In his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James Scott argues that there exist public and hidden transcripts and that revolutions are ignited by acts of defiance against the public transcript. The public transcript is the “open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” (Scott 1990, 2). The hidden transcript, by contrast, describes “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by powerholders” (4). Thus, the hidden transcript is generally less performative than the public transcript because its discourse is less constrained by power dynamics. For Scott, revolution is dependent upon the breakdown of the public transcript. He argues that the moments “when the frontier between the hidden and the public transcripts is decisively breached” are “an essential force in political breakthroughs— a force that resource-mobilization theories of social movements, let alone public choice theory, cannot remotely hope to capture” (203). That is to say that the moments when the societal norm of obedience is publicly breached are key to inspiring and inciting revolution. Revolutions, then, are dependent upon acts of defiance that

create a new societal norm of public defiance rather than obedience. Though the hidden transcript between citizens may be consistently critical of the regime, once this criticism has “left the hidden transcript and [become] a public fact, it [poses] a threat to its legitimacy that offstage heresy alone could never pose” (204). The collective decision to revolt, Scott claims, is formed in the fabric of social discourse and is not just the result of individual cost benefit analyses that sometimes align such that revolution occurs.

The sociological approach has explanatory power in regard to revolution in important ways that are distinct from the rational choice approach. While it is true that these moments of defiance against a public norm of obedience may be the ‘push’ required to meet certain individual’s thresholds, thereby kickstarting a cascade effect that leads to revolution, this analysis alone does not capture the power of such moments of defiance. Romania in 1989 provides a good example of this power. Scott describes the moment in which a rally that was designed to be a show of President Ceausescu’s power turned into an anti-regime demonstration with a booing crowd as the moment “that made Rumanians realize that their all-powerful leader was, in fact, vulnerable” (204). This seminal demonstration on December 21st, 1989 “unleashed an afternoon of demonstrations in the capital and a second night of bloodshed” (204). This exemplifies the ways in which one rupture of the public transcript can inspire widespread protests by shaping people’s sentiments. These types of acts of defiance towards authority shape an individual's revolutionary threshold. Such protest shows people whether revolution is possible or futile, whether the regime is legitimate or illegitimate, and whether the government is supported or unsupported. Thus, the revolutionary threshold is not an objective, measurable thing; it is an ever-changing product of society. Of course, individuality plays a role in the

threshold, but individuality does not exist in a vacuum. Individuality is created within a specific social context and it evolves within a specific social context.

Yet, the sociological approach does not entirely replace the rational choice model. Just because society influences individuals' preferences and sentiments does not mean that each revolutionary participant does not engage in a decision-making process. The sociological approach factors into such a calculation, but the calculation is still made, and not only on the basis of social norms. Similarly, the notion that one engages in a rational cost benefit analysis that weighs internal costs and external costs of revolting or not revolting does not preclude the importance of social factors. Social currents can still be extremely important even if they are only one part of a vast and complex cost-benefit analysis. To say that people decide to revolt solely on the basis of an atomized cost benefit analysis, on the basis of stable and concrete preferences, is an incomplete perspective. But to say that revolutionaries are irresistibly and unthinkingly swept up into protest is also an incomplete perspective. The rational choice and sociological models are therefore not mutually exclusive; they are necessarily complementary.

Thus, to fully understand revolutions is to be attuned to both the rational choice and sociological approaches to revolutions. Any understanding of revolution that neglects either facet will be fundamentally flawed or incomplete. This is demonstrated by a variety of examples of revolutions. As Mark Bessinger shows, "Russia's 'virtual' civil society was in fact the driving force behind an unusual explosion of civic activism in Russia from 2011 to 2012" where "demonstrations over electoral fraud that took place on Bolotnaya Square on December 10, 2011 (60 thousand participants), at Prospekt Sakharova on December 24, 2011 (100 thousand participants), and at Bolotnaya Square again on February 4, 2012 (80 thousand participants) constituted the largest manifestations of civic activism in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet

Union” (359). Virtual civil society on social media is undoubtedly a place where people can gauge the size of public opposition and use this measurement in their calculations when deciding whether they should join a revolution or not. But virtual civil society is also a place where people read hidden transcripts, view regime criticism, and become immersed in the public discourse. Immersion is not the only possibility, one might be resistant or ambivalent towards the social current of the day, but social media is a place where the hidden transcript exists and people's preferences are shaped. When social media is rife with regime criticism, it can teach, encourage, or compel individuals to adopt such criticisms as part of their preference. This is because they discover new ideas, but also because they are affected by dominant social norms. Based solely on a rational choice perspective, one might assume that the internet would be an ineffective mobilizer. It is not easy to trust everyone on the internet to show up at a protest, and a ‘you first’ logic could easily see protests organized on social media falter. Yet, as the protests in Moscow show, this is not the case. Aleksandr Morozov, a Russian political blogger, noted that it was ““thanks to social networks [that] election observers for the first time were able to speak widely about the violations and disgraces that they saw at polling stations”” (Bessinger 2017, 359). A hatred for electoral fraud is not innate nor is it necessarily universal. The reason people deemed this to be reason enough to take to the street is deeply intertwined with the fact that society at large deemed such violations unacceptable. The meaning society gave this election fraud, as unacceptable and egregiously wrong, was a driving factor in the spur of protests. It is not as if each protestor developed such a preference for free elections in a vacuum, and it is also not as if each protestor would be so committed to this ideal were it not for societal consensus. Yet, hidden transcripts that socialize individuals into disliking the regime are still not enough to guarantee revolution. If the internet is a place where discourse can flourish away from officials in power, it

is not a deterministic predictor of revolution. Importantly, “for every case [around the world] in which widespread internet-based opposition has emerged, there are two cases in which it has not” (Bessinger 357). This is because the rational cost benefit analysis of individuals is indeed important. Even when societal consensus sees the regime as illegitimate, the high costs of rebelling still deter revolutions. The rupture of the public transcript was also present in the case of protest in Moscow, where Aleksei Navalny famously framed “United Russia as ‘the party of swindlers and thieves’ to the 60 thousand Russians reading his blog on a daily basis” (Bessinger 358). Clearly, both models must be used in order to explain and understand attempts at revolution in Russia.

In Syria, protests broke out even though the hidden transcript was heavily suppressed. There were no spaces in which people could speak freely or come together for collective action, and there was also widespread distrust due to the pervasiveness of informants and the state's tight control over society. Yet, protests still broke out (Pearlman 2021). This clearly shows the importance of rational choice approaches. Even with a severely deficient hidden transcript, people knew they wanted to revolt because of widespread, individualized hatred for the regime. These protests, though, could still not have happened without a social context, a hidden transcript, and a moment in which the public transcript was breached. Protests did not have pre-existing civil society structures to rely on, and therefore relied upon factors such as emotions, social media (when it was unbanned), “spontaneous assembly around focal points” and “the capacity of early risers to trigger a cascade” (Pearlman 1787). Even when hidden transcripts are suppressed, the cascade effect based on individual interests and the internal cost of enduring domination was able to take hold and lead to large scale protests. Yet, these protests also required social influences. The Arab spring was “critical in moving Syrians to the streets,” and as

the protests evolved, demonstrations became more organized and more integrated into societal norms (1791). The first protests, importantly, served as the breach of the public transcript of subordination that Scott emphasizes. It should also be noted that it is impossible for any regime to completely eliminate any hidden transcript. We should not assume that there was no subversive discussion in Syria, even if it was limited. Protests relied upon people bringing only those they trusted to protests or anti-regime meetings and allowing others they trusted to do the same (1797). Not only did society begin to coordinate subversion, during protests people engaged in activities that cannot be explained only by an individualized cost benefit analysis. As one activist said, “I did brave, crazy things that could have gotten me killed to rescue others in demonstrations, just because we were there together, shouting for the same goals” (1808). In an interview conducted by Wendy Pearlman, one mother said: “Before the revolution, Syria was just the place where I lived, but it didn’t belong to me...When the revolution began, I discovered that Syria was my country . . . People discovered each other” (1808). The social currents and norms changed as protests broke out and came to play an integral part in the revolution. In this instance, again, both models are necessary to understand why and when protests occurred, and also how they continued.

In conclusion, both the rational choice and the sociological approaches to revolutions are required to explain why revolutions occur when they do. Revolutionaries do engage in cost-benefit analysis, but this analysis is largely influenced by society and its norms. The study of revolutions would benefit greatly from acknowledging that these two theories are not mutually exclusive and should in fact be used to study revolutionary action in a complimentary fashion.

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