

## *A Psychological Perspective on the Puzzle of Revolution*

“Hurrah for revolution. . .” thus begins William Butler Yeats’s poem “The Great Day,” which ends with an image of a beggar on horseback and a beggar on foot changing places, but the “lash” continuing to fall cruelly on the back of the beggar on foot.<sup>1</sup> This dire, dark, and cyclical image of revolution contrasts sharply with the shining utopian dreams articulated by revolutionaries, particularly during the awe-inspiring days leading up to regime change, when so many people have to make life-and-death sacrifices in the struggle to topple the ruling regime. I enthusiastically reveled in these utopian dreams as Iranian society hurled itself into a mammoth revolution until Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1919–80), the last Shah, was dethroned. But, as happens in so many societies after revolutions, life in post-revolution Iran proved to be very far from the open society for which tens of millions of people, holding many different religious and secular ideologies, had made sacrifices. My psychological research and everyday life experiences in Iran after the revolution led to a sobering reevaluation of the utopian dreams that propelled the Iranian revolutionary movement, as well as revolutions in general.

This book presents an adventurous new exploration of the psychology of revolution, based on my reassessment after about four decades of psychological research on this neglected topic. Psychology is at the heart of revolutions, and what I call the “puzzle of revolution” is best explained through a psychological lens. This puzzle is reflected in the expression “The more things change, the more they stay the same” (“*plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*”). At the heart of the puzzle of revolution is the sense that after a revolution and regime change, a great deal has been transformed, but yet in the most important ways nothing of importance has actually changed.

On the one hand, major revolutions bring about what seems to be enormous and rapid radical change. Regimes are toppled, former rulers become powerless, new rulers rise to power; new governments are formed;

new constitutions are ratified; the rhetoric used in public and even private life changes; new forms of speech, dress, and fashion come to life; just about everything in the media, arts, and entertainment is transformed; and all forms of communications put on a new face. The names of institutions, universities, schools, streets, buildings, parks, and even entire cities and nations are changed in line with the ideals of the revolution. Monuments are torn down and new ones are erected. National holidays and their names are changed. Society adopts radical new images and ideals. Even the most popular names for newborn infants become “revolutionary.”

On the other hand, even after the great revolutions, such as in France, Russia, and China, there was little change in central features of behavior such as the style of leader–follower relations and elite/non-elite inequalities in power and resources.<sup>2</sup> At a deep level, inequalities and injustices tend to continue after revolutions, even though the surface rhetoric about equality and justice indicates otherwise. Despite changes in rhetoric, the rulers and the ruled continue with their separate lives in their separate worlds, and their relationships continue to be characterized by chasms of inequalities. The beggars have changed places, but the cruel lash continues, as Yeats put it. Revolutions against dictatorships routinely lead to one dictator being replaced by another, as happened most recently in Iran and in the Arab Spring countries, and as had happened before in the great French and Russian revolutions: In France, Emperor Napoleon replaced the king; in Russia, Lenin, Stalin, and other dictators replaced the Tsar (and in the twenty-first century, Tsar Putin continues the same tradition of absolute, despotic rule). What explains this continuity? And, given the injustice of inequalities in power and resources in so many different societies, why are there so very few revolutions in human history? As Samuel Huntington has noted, “Revolutions are rare. Most societies have never experienced revolutions.”<sup>3</sup>

I argue that these questions about revolutions are best explained through a psychological lens. This is because at the heart of every revolution is the challenge of bringing about psychological changes, in both collective and individual cognition and action. This is irrespective of the type of revolution being considered. For example, Jack Goldstone considers the following categories: republican revolutions, Marxist revolutions, revolutions against dictatorships, and revolutions against communism.<sup>4</sup> Later in this chapter, I shall return to this topic and explain how I chose to focus on particular revolutions for this project.

The goal of revolutionaries is to bring about the ideal society they have imagined and propagated through their revolutionary rhetoric. However,

in order to create the ideal society, the revolutionaries must change behavior among both the masses and the elite; they must transform how people think and act. For example, after the 1917 revolution in Russia, revolutionaries such as Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924), Leon Trotsky (1879–1940), and Joseph Stalin (1878–1953) attempted to create conditions in which people would be motivated to work through collective rather than individual incentives and ownership. After the 1979 revolution in Iran, Khomeini and his extremist followers attempted to influence Iranians to abandon what they condemned as decadent Western values, ideals, gender roles, and behavioral styles, and instead to adopt what they claimed to be an authentic “Islamic” mode of cognition and action in both their private and public lives. The return to Islam was to create an ideal, ethical society, far removed from corruption and materialism. Behaviors such as theft and bribery would naturally disappear.

Thus, the first challenge confronting revolutionaries is to bring about behavioral changes in a society, moving toward achieving the goals of the revolution. Psychological science has a direct bearing on this behavioral change goal of revolutionaries. Psychological science illuminates the probability of successfully changing behavior in certain ways, and the conditions necessary for such possible changes. For example, reflecting on the goals of Lenin and other Russian revolutionaries, research on social loafing, social laboring, and human motivation casts light on the possibility of establishing a society based on collective rather than individual incentives and ownership under different conditions. Second, psychological science guides us to better understand the length of time and conditions required to bring about particular individual and collective behavioral changes. Under certain conditions, behavioral changes, such as in the areas of incentives, motivation, leader–follower relations, and the like, might require very long time periods to bring about, perhaps decades, centuries, or even longer. On the other hand, under certain conditions behavioral changes in some other domains, such as gender roles, can be achieved more quickly.<sup>5</sup> Third, in addition to helping to explain behavioral continuity before and after revolutions, psychological science can help explain why there are so few revolutions.

Despite psychology being central to revolutions, only one major book has been published on *The Psychology of Revolution*; this was authored by Gustav Le Bon (1841–1931) and first appeared in 1894.<sup>6</sup> The *Anatomy of Revolution* by Crane Brinton (1898–1968),<sup>7</sup> first published in 1938, also has a psychological theme. More recently, I served as coeditor of a collection of psychological discussions published in 2018 on radical social

change and revolution.<sup>8</sup> However, there have been no published monographs on “the psychology of revolution” for well over a century. Nor do major handbooks on revolution include chapters on the psychology of revolution.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the neglect of revolutions in psychology is not surprising, given that since the development of psychological science in Western societies in the late nineteenth century, there have not been any major revolutions in Western societies. Consequently, Western psychologists have not directly experienced or encountered revolutions during the development of their discipline. However, they have encountered collective movements, including the women’s movement and various ethnic minority movements.

Although it is well over a century since a book on the psychology of revolution has been published, there is extensive theoretical and empirical psychological research on collective action and collective movements.<sup>10</sup> This research literature, which I discuss in the next two chapters, provides invaluable insights and perspectives on the conditions in which people participate in nonnormative collective action and mobilize against authorities and ruling regimes. However, getting to regime change is only one part of revolutions, and in a psychological sense it is the easiest part because it involves motivating people to topple a regime. The behavioral changes necessary for this type of collective action are relatively simple. A far more complex and difficult task is that of building the revolutionary society *after* regime change has been achieved.

In both Le Bon’s pioneering book and in the more recent works on the psychology of collective action and radical change, a key insight is that a change of regime does not change the cognition and actions of the people.<sup>11</sup> As Le Bon noted, “Changing the name of a government does not transform the mentality of a people.”<sup>12</sup> Numerous case studies of important revolutions highlight this same point, that a new regime and new rhetoric does not correspond with actual behavioral changes in society.<sup>13</sup> This insight has two important implications. First, it points to a gap between the idealistic narratives of revolutionaries, the constructed golden fictions used to inspire people to make sacrifices for the revolution, and the actual behaviors that take place among both leaders and followers, particularly in the post–regime-change period. The second implication, which has not been taken up, is that researchers must closely examine *what happens after revolutions*. Psychological science can help us to better understand not just what leads to revolutions, but also what happens in the post-revolution period. We must arrive at a more accurate picture of why so many revolutions manage to topple regimes and create different types of

change, but fail to arrive at the ideal society envisaged by revolutionaries – or even something close to it.

The objective of the present work is to address this gap by examining the psychology of revolution through an exploration of both what leads to revolution and what happens in the post-revolution period. I present a new and dynamic account of revolution based on twenty-first-century psychological science, using as a central theme the concept of *political plasticity*, the malleability of political behavior: How much, how fast, and in what areas change in political behavior is (and is not) possible.<sup>14</sup> Political plasticity is limited by hardwiring both within and outside individuals.<sup>15</sup> Hardwiring within individuals and particularly in brains has been studied extensively, and is a major topic in the vast and fast-expanding research areas of neuroscience and cognitive neuroscience.<sup>16</sup> However, hardwiring outside people and its role in relation to political plasticity deserves far more research attention.<sup>17</sup> Hardwiring outside people includes the built environment, and everything we refer to as “culture,” including the collectively constructed and collaboratively upheld narratives that we share.

The concept of political plasticity helps us to unravel the mystery at the heart of revolutions: why after revolutions on the surface so much seems to change, but at a deeper level, things seem to stay the same. Political plasticity points to the central role of hardwiring not only within but also outside individuals in limiting the speed and extent of behavioral changes. Insights from the application of political plasticity illuminate not only the processes before revolutions, but also during and after; not only collective action to bring about regime change, but also the coming to power of the new regime and its style of governance after the revolution.

Moreover, the concept of political plasticity helps us to develop a psychological account of revolutions that avoids the pitfall of psychological reductionism: the tendency to explain behavior by reference exclusively to the smallest units possible (such as parts of the brain, neural networks, and personality traits).<sup>18</sup> Only one kind of political plasticity is concerned with intrapersonal processes, and this is in many ways the least important kind of political plasticity as far as revolutions and revolutionary change is concerned. The larger and more important kind of political plasticity in this account of revolutions is concerned with hardwiring outside individuals, such as styles of leader–follower relations – with a focus on processes between rather than within individuals.<sup>19</sup>

In conclusion, then, the concept of political plasticity helps us to examine the highly complex topic of change in the post-revolution period. The available theories and empirical research in psychology have been

applied most directly to the topic of collective action, and are specifically applicable to the processes leading to revolutions – but not what happens after revolutions. This is an important omission which I take steps to rectify in this book because, after all, the long-term success of a revolution depends on what happens *after* regime change has taken place. Of course, revolutionary action to bring about regime change is an essential first step, but an even more difficult challenge is to bring about behavioral changes in the post-revolution period. The examples of revolutions since the early twentieth century, from the 1917 Russian Revolution to the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the Arab Spring revolutions of the twenty-first century, suggest that bringing about regime change is in some respects more feasible than changing mass behavior in line with revolutionary goals after the revolution. For this reason, much of the focus of this book is on what happens after regime change has taken place.

### Which Revolutions?

Written accounts of revolutions go back at least 4,000 years, so how should we limit the selection of revolutions in terms of time?<sup>20</sup> The number of revolutions around the world and across history could expand into the hundreds or even thousands, depending on our criteria for inclusion; for example, just modern Latin American revolutions could include Bolivia (1952–6), Cuba (1959–69), Nicaragua (1979–90), and Grenada (1979–83).<sup>21</sup> The Arab Spring revolutions (from 2011) could include Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, and Syria.<sup>22</sup> The second-wave Arab Spring has involved major agitations in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan, and Yemen.<sup>23</sup> Mark Beissinger, a scholar of revolutions, writes about a recent three-decade period in this way: “By my counting, from 1985 to 2014 there were approximately fifty-six revolutions worldwide involving mobilizations of at least a thousand civilian participants that successfully displaced incumbent rulers; there were also another sixty-seven attempted revolutions during this period that involved mobilizations of at least a thousand civilian participants but failed to gain power.”<sup>24</sup> A number of other scholars of revolutions have provided similarly extensive lists, including mass rebellions in modern times.<sup>25</sup> While reviewing extensive lists of revolutions has some merit, particularly if a quantitative research approach is taken, my focus on examining the psychological processes underlying revolutions requires a different, narrower perspective, in order to delve deeper.

This study of the psychology of revolution narrows down in one critical way. My main focus is on what I interpret as (and on what are generally taken to be) the great revolutions in modern history, which include the French Revolution (1789), the Russian Revolution (1917), the Chinese Communist Revolution (1927–49), the Cuban Revolution (1953), and the Iranian Revolution (1978–9). I include the Iranian Revolution (1978–9) because of the monumental impact it has had on regional and global events.<sup>26</sup> I consider the American Revolution of 1789 as a special case because it had global influence (although its limitations are often overlooked).<sup>27</sup> However, I interpret it more as a war of independence against a foreign power (Great Britain), in the same way that I interpret the Algerian Revolution (1954–62), which involved a fight for independence from France. I also consider, but give less attention to, the seventeenth-century English Revolutions (in 1640 and 1688), the Irish Revolution (1916–23), the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the so-called Color Revolutions (involving mostly territories in the former Soviet Union, from the early twenty-first century), and the Nazi Revolution of the 1930s.<sup>28</sup>

In summary, then, there is one very important way in which this study of the psychology of revolutions is more expansive than traditional studies of revolutions: I include an examination of what happens *after* regime change, using the concept of *political plasticity* – in what ways, how much, and how fast political behavior does and does not change.<sup>29</sup> I address the following question: What are the psychological factors that limit change after regime change? If revolutions do follow a script as proposed by some researchers, an important component of the script is the failure of revolutions to reach their idealistic goals after regime change – a neglected topic, so far.<sup>30</sup>

## Book Contents

Following Chapter 1, the other ten chapters (2–11) and the Afterword in this book are organized in four parts.

### *Part I: Getting to Revolutionary Collective Action*

The two chapters in Part I critically discuss the psychological theories and research on collective action, and connect and apply this literature to revolution.<sup>31</sup> The theories and research are considered in two parts. First, theories that assume material factors and macro-structural conditions to be

the main drivers of group and intergroup behavior are considered in Chapter 2. These include research in the traditions of realistic conflict theory,<sup>32</sup> resource mobilization theory,<sup>33</sup> the Five-Stage Model,<sup>34</sup> social dominance theory,<sup>35</sup> evolutionary psychology,<sup>36</sup> and system justification theory.<sup>37</sup> Second, theories that give priority to subjective factors as the main drivers of group and intergroup behavior are examined in Chapter 3. These include research in the traditions of social identity theory,<sup>38</sup> terror management theory,<sup>39</sup> relative deprivation theory,<sup>40</sup> equity and various other justice theories,<sup>41</sup> and psychodynamic theory.<sup>42</sup> The theories discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 all have implications for the conditions in which nonnormative collective action is more likely to take place, and when a collective rebellion against authority is more likely to happen. The discussions in these two chapters incorporate empirical research related to the major theories and the questions they raise, such as the issue of what happens when people taking collective action face difficulties and failures, as often occurs during the process of revolutionary movements.<sup>43</sup>

Collective action with the goal of revolution is often driven by particular ideologies, through which images of ideal societies are presented as alternatives to what currently exists. For example, Lenin and his associates active during the Russian Revolution (1917) were motivated and guided by communist ideology and the ideal of a classless society, just as Khomeini and his associates active during the Iranian Revolution (1979) were motivated and guided by their particular interpretation of Islamic ideology and the ideal Islamic society. Revolutionaries present and use the ideal society to motivate people to join the revolution against the rulers of the existing society. Social comparison processes, relative deprivation, and perceived justice are at the heart of how revolutionaries present their imagined ideal society and mobilize collective action against the ruling regime. These psychological processes and their association with revolutionary ideals and collective action are also discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

### *Part II: Regime Change*

The three chapters in Part II focus on psychological processes underlying different aspects of regime change. Chapter 4 examines power and authority in transition, and particularly when a tipping point is reached leading to regime collapse. Collective and individual psychological experiences involving confidence, trust, feelings of security, perceived threat, and risk-taking are centrally involved in regime collapse. Historical examples of regime collapse are referenced in examinations of these and related

psychological processes, as well as the concept of a regime-collapse tipping point.

Regime change happens in different ways and over different time periods, with different psychological consequences for society; this is the topic of Chapter 5. For example, regime change can come about through a rapid *coup d'état*, involving a small number of army officers. An example of this is the coup that began on May 24, 2021, when the Malian military pushed aside President Bah N'daw. The Malian population was not involved in this regime change, and did not have an opportunity to become transformed through participation in collective action. I do not include such regime changes as examples of revolutions. In contrast, regime change can come about through a long process involving large sections of the population as participants in collective action. For example, the Iranian Revolution (1979) involved a longer process of collective action (about eighteen months) through increasingly large-scale public participation, at times with tens of millions of people involved. The Chinese Communist Revolution lasted decades, and was lengthened by the Great Leap Forward, the Culture Revolution, and other radical programs implemented by Mao Zedong (1893–1976).<sup>44</sup> I include the Chinese and Iranian examples in discussions of great revolutions.

Chapter 6 examines the psychological stepping stones people go through on their way to becoming full participants in revolutionary collective action. These stepping stones are derived from the theories and research discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, and begin with people becoming aware of an ideal alternative society – and the realization that we *can* do better with respect to the kind of society we live in. The psychological steps involve changes in cognition, including seeing the ruling regime as illegitimate and unstable and, finally, being willing (if necessary) to make huge sacrifices and take enormous risks in order to achieve regime change. However, a point I stress is that in some respects achieving regime change is easier than managing changes in the post-revolution period.

### *Part III: What Happens after Revolutionary Regime Change?*

The three chapters in Part III explore what happens after regime change has taken place – a topic neglected by traditional research on revolutions. Chapter 7 examines the psychology of behavioral continuity and change in the post-revolution period, when policy changes in economic, political, social, and other arenas can take place very quickly. For example, a new constitution and new economic policies (e.g., collective ownership of

resources) can be drawn up and ratified “on paper” relatively quickly by the new revolutionary government. However, the actual micro-level behavioral changes necessary to implement these new macro-level policies often take far longer to bring about, and sometimes the change is never successfully achieved. For example, on paper, farm ownership can be changed from “individual/private ownership” to “collective farming” overnight. However, the process of changing the actual behavior of farmers to perform effectively and happily as members of collective farms will take many years, if it is achieved at all. Indeed, the experiences of the Soviet Union, China, and some other societies could be cited as evidence to argue that such behavioral change is not possible in the relatively short term. If it is to become possible in the long term, then the conditions for this change must be identified and made ready – something not achieved in any large society so far. In Chapter 7, I examine this and other challenges related to behavioral change and continuity, in the context of revolutions and their ideological goals.

The puzzle of behavioral continuity after revolutions is the main topic of Chapter 8. I argue that even major revolutions only achieve within-system rather than between-system change: bringing about surface-level rather than deep-level system change. For example, one type of dictatorship is changed for another (e.g., communist dictatorship replaces the Tsar’s dictatorship in Russia, or the mullahs’ dictatorship instead of the Shah’s dictatorship in Iran). I explain the puzzle of behavioral continuity through reference to *cultural carrier*, the means by which culture is propagated and extended, and the micro–macro rule of change, which proposes that the maximum speed of change is higher at the macro level than at the micro level. For example, a new revolutionary constitution can be ratified or new economic policies can be signed into law overnight by the revolutionary government, but micro-level behavioral changes among ordinary people to implement these new revolutionary constitutions and economic policies typically take far longer – if they happen at all.

Personality factors play a role in all stages of revolutions, but this role is probably most important in the post-revolution period, a topic discussed in Chapter 9. I refer to personality factors such as Machiavellianism, authoritarianism, openness to experience, extroversion, conscientiousness, narcissism, and aggression to assess the rise of particular individuals into leadership positions in the post-revolution period. References are made to important revolutionary leaders, including Stalin, Castro, and Khomeini, among others, in the discussion. One of the extremely difficult challenges in the post-revolution period is to avoid the coming to power of an

authoritarian strongman, who invariably leads society to a dictatorship with a new facade.

*Part IV: Reevaluating Revolutions*

The two final chapters (10 and 11) and the Afterword in Part IV of the book present a psychological model of revolution, examine the relationship between human nature and revolution, and interpret revolutions as acts of collective creativity. All humans hold and are influenced by illusions in their everyday lives. The Illusion-Motivation Model of Revolution (Chapter 10) discusses the illusions that underlie each phase of revolution, and the motivations that arise from each particular illusion. I stress that the use of the term “illusion” in this context is not intended to have negative connotations. Illusions influence all humans, and in this chapter the focus is on illusions that are particularly influential during revolutions.

Chapter 11 directly addresses the following question: Are revolutions doomed to fail because of human nature? In addressing this question, I explore a number of psychological factors, including the personalities of the leaders who are more likely to rise to the top after revolutions, and areas of behavior with low political plasticity (such as in the area of work motivation, in relation to collectivization programs). The underlying theme of the chapter is limitations to the changes that can possibly be brought about by revolutions because of hard-to-change human psychological characteristics. In the Afterword, I interpret revolutions as acts of remarkable collective creativity, both on the part of those involved in revolutionary movements intended to achieve regime change, and those engaged in defending and upholding the ruling regime. Although the collective creativity demonstrated by both sides during revolutions is highly impressive, the outcome of these processes is seldom leading to open societies, in the short term at least.

