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Joseph L. Derdzinski
United States Air Force Academy, derdzinski@edu.edu

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Review

Revolution and Dictatorship: The Violent Origin of Durable Authoritarianism

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Joseph L. Derdzinski*

Why do some—and not other, of course—regimes survive? Surveying a comprehensive range of historical and more contemporary examples, Levitsky and Way's *Revolution and Dictatorship: The Violent Origins of Durable Authoritarianism* is an important contribution *to* scholarship that seeks *to* answer this fundamental question. While much of comparative political specifically, and political science more broadly, centers on democratic regimes and their fragility (and cases of stability, to be fair), why some authoritarian regimes "succeed" over multiple generations is less well understood. By focusing on the authoritarian regimes that emerge from social revolutions, Levitsky and Way's excellent work succeeds in furthering our understanding of these subsets of authoritarian durability.

* **Joseph Derdzinski** is a lecturer of political science, a senior international development and governance adviser, and an active member of organizations that promote the care of persons with developmental disabilities. Joe earned his Doctor of Philosophy from the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver, a Master of Arts in Russian and East European Studies from the University of Texas at Austin, a Master of Science in International Relations from Troy University and an undergraduate degree from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Much of his current research and consulting interests center on the study of the democratic consolidation processes of post-authoritarian states. He has served on election observation missions in Egypt and Afghanistan and conducted and published research to help the Ukrainian government develop its post-authoritarian military.

He was a U.S. Air Force officer, retiring after 22 years as an associate professor of political science and a senior faculty member at the United States Air Force Academy, teaching and publishing on democratization, human rights, and governance.

The causal logic of their argument is wonderfully straightforward: authoritarians who are tested early on—and-most critically—*survive,* rise from these foundational experiences more cohesive and capable withstanding further domestic and international pressures. "Social revolutions," they argue, "trigger a *reactive sequence* that powerfully shapes long-run regime trajectories" (4). What then, is a social revolution? Levitsky and Way provide a rather expansive definition, certainly broader than others that might normally be understood to be a revolution. This is not a critique; rather, it serves well to expand the boundaries of what scholars might otherwise limit themselves to. Social revolutions, in their reckoning, occur from below (fair enough); overthrow violently the *ancien regime;* set out for a fundamental transformation of the state; and initiate radical change. Despite this generous definition, social revolutions remain rare: 20 in modern human history. Of these, Levitsky and Way engage 13 case studies whose range, necessary for a work of this scope, is refreshing. Employing cases from the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Europe serves well in testing temporally, culturally, and geographically their thesis.

Revolution and Dictatorship is divided into three main sections: classical revolutions; national liberation regimes; and variations in revolutionary outcomes. Beginning with the ideal types (what they describe as "classical") of what are widely understood to be a revolution, they compare— uniquely, I believe— not just Russia and China, but Mexico. These choices likely reflect the pair's regional expertise: Way for the post-Soviet sphere, and Levitsky in Latin America. Clearly a superficial assessment, these opening cases are by far the lengthiest of the lengthiest of the 13, allowing for richer and more comprehensive comparisons. Moreover, this section allows even those who know well these three cases to find new insights and perspectives. Excerpting one or all three of them for a comparative politics course is more than reasonable.

To put these cases to the test, central to Levitsky and Way's thesis are the tangible outcomes of early tests to the authoritarian regime: a cohesive ruling elite; a strong and loyal coercive apparatus; and the destruction of rival organizations and other independent sources of power.

Certainly because of my own research interests, I appreciated the more-than-passing discussion of the role of the military and, more deliberately, their discussion of the place of police and internal security services in maintaining regime stability. Russia (in both the Soviet and post- Soviet eras) and China, with their emphases on

surveillance and political policing, are obvious examples, but subsequent cases lend further and less straightforward evidence of the importance of understanding the coercive capacity of the state. Mexico, for example, "failed to develop a police state...(and) did not invest in a powerful intelligence agency or political police" (139). Yet, the PRI (Mexico's entrenched Institutional Revolutionary Party) regime was able to survive; Levitsky and Way attribute the security forces' success at stopping strikes and protests to their *not* being tested by large-scale and sustained movements. My read on this is that internal security forces in principle are essential for regime survival, but a critical factor is their capacity *relative* to threats and regime goals. A pervasive police state appears necessary only in proportion to. regime oppression. This is an underserved area in comparative politics, especially among institutionalists. Levitsky and Way remind us of its import.

Testing further its central thesis, *Revolution and Dictatorship's* middle section reviews relatively compactly the cases of Vietnam, Algeria and Ghana, which exemplify three national liberation movements that rose from anticolonial movements. Again, their case selection is to be lauded; I can't recall this particular combination in other contexts. Beginning with Vietnam, students of U.S. foreign policy are well familiar with the trajectory of the war first against the French, and the U.S. focused violence that followed. The post-colonial histories of Algeria and Ghana, however, are likely (and unfortunately) less well known outside of regional specialists; however, these latter two cases serve well Levitsky and Way's thesis by demonstrating how a disconnected elite and the existence of independent centers of power (in the case of Algeria) and a military without strong ties to the ruling party (in Ghana) can both lead to regime instability. The Ghanian regime lasted just ten years, while despite the Algerian regime's almost 50 years in power, it was far less stable than in Vietnam. What accounts for the farmer's relative lack of durability? Levitsky and Way place this on the mode of transition. Akin to the other two cases in this section, Ghana's national liberation struggled and was animated by the global struggle for independence; however, unlike in Vietnam and Algeria, in Ghana, "the regime was not revolutionary" (195). While Ghana enjoyed a relatively peaceful transition of power, the practical effect was that Kwame Nkrumah's government inherited a colonial-era military and security apparatus that felt little loyalty to the new regime. Moreover, and paradoxically, Nkrumah sought a moderate path, which fostered little internal opposition: no opposition, no cohesive elite, no regime durability.

Revolution and Dictatorship's last substantive section focuses on the variations in revolutionary outcomes, comparing Cuba and Iran (successful and durable), Hungary in the 1950s, the Khmer Rouge regime, and Afghanistan under the Taliban (all unsuccessful, at least initially in the latter case, as we now know). Consistent with earlier comments, I read with interest their discussion of the Cuban coercive apparatus, arguably not well appreciated outside specialist circles, despite being one of the "five or six best in the world" (219). How has an otherwise weak, poor, and domestically not well-respected regime, under pressure from the world's wealthiest country without patrons willing to support it with favorable commodity prices, been able to endure? Its domestic security structure is to a large degree the answer.

What happens when states seek more accommodationist strategies, i.e., less ambitious attempts to restructure all levels of state and society, as in Guinea-Bissau, Nicaragua, and Bolivia? Consistent with Levitsky and Way's expectations, these states ultimately saw limited regime stability. The driving rationality that underpins the accommodationist path—avoid triggering militarized response s—led to these regimes' ultimate downfall. If accommodation guided these revolutions, however, this might cause some scholars to question whether these states were all that revolutionary to begin with.

Is the age of revolution over? In their concluding remarks, Levitsky and Way argue that "Revolutionary regime are among the world's most durable autocracies. They are also the most reckless. This is no coincidence" (317). Marxism (and, later, anti-colonialism) was key to the risk- taking behavior of many would-be revolutionaries. In short, if the social revolution removes the capitalist imperative, all the political and social structures that stem from and support capitalism will end. This was clearly worth the risk to many would-be revolutionaries. However, today, with Marxism's transformative energy played out internationally, ultimately all comparative politics scholars will grapple with whether revolutionary tendencies are in fact over. Levitsky and Way believe it is not. They conclude that in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, "...the weakening of states across the global periphery...as peripheral autocracies lost the patronage of rival superpowers, created more favorable positions for revolution" (354). This left (and leaves) room for more and different ideologically-founded revolutionary regimes.

What to do with this? For scholars, the link between regime transition and its institutional development and practice—notably the security apparatus—should give

further support for research on other state may not conform to a revolutionary ideal type, but nonetheless have similar outcomes. More tangibly, at least policy wise, because of the initial weakness of revolutionary states, powerful states that commit to sustained efforts to destroy emerging revolutionary regimes can (might?) destroy these movements before they take hold. I believe, however, the reemergence of the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan likely has shaped an entire generation's attitude against intervention.

Revolution and Dictatorship makes significant contributions to the study of regime transitions (so-called transitology), as well as state development. *Revolution and Dictatorship* made me think on more than one occasion Jeffrey Herbst's work on the development of the African state, where a lack of threats—especially external threats—to the postcolonial regime contributed to an underdevelopment of state institutions. This reinforces the centrality of the state in understanding politics. State-centered approaches, having lost some of their luster in the past century, clearly have regained their prominence.

As a broader assessment, how much does understanding the potential sequences of social revolutions apply to today's world, where there are more democracies—including the backsliding of previous decades—than ever before. Even the undemocratic states are less, well, dictatorial than in previous eras. Most non-democratic states make a pretense of having democratic procedures. Does this help explain current regimes in Myanmar? Venezuela? Egypt? Maybe. These regime transitions were not revolutionary according to Levitsky and Way's definition, yet remain persistently authoritarian. Is there some process akin to revolution that allows for a unique combination of Levitsky and Way's three factors (elite cohesion; loyal coercive apparatus; weak opposition) that promotes authoritarianism? Future scholarship can provide insights into the particularities of each.

As I'm sure will resonate with many teachers, I'm continuously seeking scholarship that can demonstrate causal inference for use in comparative classes and other research courses. These examples can be elusive, but Levitsky and Way hit a pedagogical sweet spot in presenting a clear, concise and testable thesis, anchored by theory, and developed by (mainly) qualitative cases. If the world is now in a moment of stalled democratization in favor of authoritarianism, time, of course, well tell; however, *Revolution and Dictatorship* will make it one way or another into my courses in the coming academic years.