Jack Goldstone: "Comparative Historical Analysis and Knowledge Accumulation in the Study of Revolutions"

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March 23, 2015

1 Citation

Goldstone, Jack. 2003. "Comparative Historical Analysis and Knowledge Accumulation in the Study of Revolutions." In Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, eds., *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

2 Abstract

Jack Goldstone argues that Comparative Historical Analysis (CHA) holds a distinct epistemological orientation vis-a-vis large-N, frequentist approaches that has proven to be particularly fertile for the study of revolutions. He begins by sketching this CHA epistemology, focusing on its use of Bayesian analysis, process tracing, and congruence testing. Goldstone then proceeds to show, via a historiography of postwar scholarship on revolutions, how the deployment of CHA has produced an increasingly accurate conceptual understanding of revolutions and an a more sophisticated empirical understanding of the emergence, dynamics, and outcomes of revolutionary episodes. Goldstone concludes with a brief overview of recent trends in the social scientific study of revolutions and by outlining five necessary conditions for the emergence of a revolution that extant CHA scholarship has revealed.

3 The Epistemology of Comparative Historical Analysis

Goldstone begins his essay by distinguishing the epistemology of Comparative Historical Analysis (CHA) from Large-N, frequentist approaches for causal inference. He argues that large-N studies of revolution, "far from providing a more solid basis for inference and knowledge accumulation, as some critics of small-N analyses have suggested, have themselves failed to provide any cumulative insights;" after all, how could one expect to understand the causes of revolution "by ignoring the differences between the Soviet Union and Burundi, or between Cuba and Cambodia, and by treating all of these as equivalent "cases"?" (Goldstone 2003: 43). Instead of seeking general regularities leveraging an assumption of unit homogeneity, "analyses using CHA generally face a finite set of cases, chosen against a backdrop of theoretical interests, and aim to determine the causal sequences and patterns producing outcomes of interest in those specific cases (Ibid). Specifically, CHA proceeds by way of (1) Bayesian inference, (2) Process tracing, and (3) Congruence testing:

- *Bayesian Inference*: Scholars using CHA usually have strong prior beliefs about the causal processes operating within their cases of interest. As they begin their examination of the historical record, their implicitly Bayesian approach is to ask the following: "Given that I have strong prior beliefs about the relationship of A and B, how much would a particular bit of new data shift that belief?" (Ibid: 45). This can be achieved via a "most/least likely" approach, whereby existing theoretical claims that are most/least likely to hold true in specific cases are probed; by assessing "convergence/divergence," whereby theoretical claims about differences or similarities between cases are assessed; and "discrimination/reconciliation," whereby competing observable implications between theories are evaluated or accomodated in a composite narrative (Ibid: 46).

- *Process Tracing*: Process tracing involves disaggregating asocial process into a sequence, or a series of sequences, of events/conditions, concatenated by a set of causal mechanisms, "and showing how those events are plausibly linked given the interests and situations faced by groups or individual actors" (Ibid: 47). Inferences regarding the presence of unobservable causal mechanisms necessitate "making deductions about how events are linked over time, drawing on general principles of economics, sociology, psychology, and political science regarding human behavior" (Ibid: 48).

- *Congruence Testing*: Congruence testing involves making "claims about the number of cases that fit a particular causal sequence or pattern (or model). This then sets up strong prior beliefs about which cases are accurately explained by particular models" (Ibid: 51). This requires leveraging process tracing to build a "strategic narrative," which differs from a traditional historical narrative "by being structured to focus attention on how patterns of events relate to prior theoretical beliefs about social phenomena" (Ibid: 50).

4   Knowledge Accumulation in the CHA Study of Revolutions

Having sketched the epistemology of CHA, Goldstone proceeds to show its ability to deepen our knowledge of the "causes, processes, and outcomes of revolutions" (Ibid: 51).

4.1   Conceptual Knowledge-Accumulation: What is a "Revolution?"

Conceptually, CHA has helped scholars construct a more accurate definition of "revolution." From the time of the French Revolution in 1789 until well into the 20th century, the prevailing definition of a revolution had consisted of three elements: "a dramatic and progressive change in a societys values and institutions, mass action, and violence" (ibid: 53). Yet from the 1970s to the 1990s CHA scholars demonstrated that the foregoing definition was inaccurate. For one, from the overthrow of the shah of Iran in 1979 to the "people's power" revolution to overthrow Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines in 1986, clear revolutionary upheavals contained startlingly little violence by protesters against the regime (Ibid: 53). Hence "the role of violence in revolutions is now seen as complex and contingent" (Ibid: 54). Furthermore, CHA scholars have shown that many important revolutions or revolutionary waves - such as the European revolutions of 1848 - "were largely defeated after brief but inspiring bursts of energy," and hence did not lead "to the permanent transformation of institutions and values" (Ibid: 54).

Hence CHA have begun converging on the following definition of "revolution:" "efforts to change values and institutions and on mass action, but without insisting on revolutionary success or violence" (Ibid: 54).

4.2   Empirical Knowledge-Accumulation: Revolutionary Genesis, Dynamics, and Outcomes

4.2.1   Resource Mobilization and the Divergence of Revolutionary Outcomes

Empirically, practitioners of CHA have uncovered an increasingly refined set of causal processes that engender revolutions and that shape the dynamics and outcomes of revolutionary events. Scholars like Samuel Huntington and Ted Gurr initially posited that popular discontent, or relative deprivation, was the main driver of revolutions. Yet in the 1970s Charles Tilly, borrowing heavily from the insights of Leon Trotsky, began to show how "popular misery and frustration never lead to revolution by themselves; if they did, [as Trotsky] wrote, the masses would be in revolt at all times and everywhere . . . only when organized contenders emerge, capable of mobilizing popular support against the government and defeating the government for control of society, can revolution occur" (Ibid: 59-60).

Tilly's resource mobilization approach was complemented by the foundational contribution of Barrington Moore, whose *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* problematized modernization approaches to the study of revolutions. Moore argued that there are three historical routes from agrarianism to the modern industrial world. In the *capitalist democratic route*, exemplified by England, France, and the United States, the peasantry was politically impotent or had been eradicated alltogether, a strong bourgeoisie was present, and the aristocracy allied itself with the bourgeoisie or failed to oppose its democratizing efforts. In the *capitalist reactionary route*, exemplified by Germany and Japan, the peasantry posed a threat to the interests of both the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, which consequently formed a conservative alliance against the

peasantry; this alliance bolstered an autonomous, occasionally authoritarian state capable of being coopted by a fascist leader in a revolution from above. Finally, in the *communist route*, exemplified by China and Russia, the bourgeoisie failed to emerge and the the peasantry was strong and independent enough from the aristocracy to spur a radical revolution from below against the centralized agrarian bureaucracy. (Ibid: 60-61). Modernization, Moore concluded, need not engender a convergence in revolutionary outcomes.

4.2.2   International Competition and State-Elite Conflict

The next major innovation was that of Theda Skocpol, whose *States and Social Revolutions* elaborated a social-structural theory of revolutions focusing on state-elite conflicts and competition between states in the international system. Unlike Moore, Skocpol argued that it was not domestic modernizing pressures that disturbed political stability; rather, the exogenous shock came from "international military and economic competition between states at different levels of modernization that created destabilizing pressures:" 18th-century France faced military competition from more advanced Britain; czarist Russia was "overwhelmed by German military might;" and China faced a long series of imperialist invasions from Japan and European powers (Ibid: 63). Furthermore, unlike Moore Skocpol argues that because the state can achieve relative autonomy from society, the pressures brought by international military and economic competition " could trigger a political crisis" whereby state officials and political elites become divided, engendering the necessary political opportunity to "precipitate a revolution," assuming that peasants have the necessary organizational structures, either at the village level or at the national party level, to mobilize (Ibid: 63-65).

With time, Skocpol's social-structural theory itself began to be contested and refined. The Iranian revolution overthrowing the Shah, for example, did not conform to Skocpol's model: "The Iranian state... far from being pressured by competition from more advanced states, was the most powerful and advanced state in the Persian Gulf region and had the strong and committed support of the worlds leading superpower, the United States" (Ibid: 66). Further, the case of Soviet collapse undermined Skocpol's focus on conflicts between state officials and political elites, "since there were no independent economic or political elites outside the structure of the communist party-state. Rather, it was cleavages within the party, setting reformist against conservative factions of the military and political elites, that led to the fall of the Soviet regime" (Ibid: 67). Finally, several CHA scholars posited that social-structural accounts are unable to accomodate the important role that ideology plays in "shaping the opposition and guiding revolutionary mobilization" (Ibid: 72). Despite these difficulties, however, Skocpol's key insights - concerning the importance of international pressures and elite conflicts - have generally been accepted as sound (Ibid: 67).

4.2.3   Recent Synthetic Efforts

Finally, in the contemporary period there have been numerous efforts to synthesize the historical study of revolutions with related approaches to the study of politics. Efforts to take seriously Mancur Olson's collective action problem, for example, have pushed CHA scholars to integrate rational choice models within their studies, often "using "analytic narratives" that combine insights from both rational choice logic and close analysis of specific historical cases" (Ibid: 72). Furthermore, revolutionary and social movement scholars have increasingly begun to collaborate with one another, with the effect that the conjunctural importance of (1) political opportunities, (2) active mobilization networks and social linkages, and (3) interpretive "frames" leveraged by revolutionary leaders, are increasingly stressed (Ibid). Finally, the CHA of revolutions has increasingly problematized the notion that regime stability is the norm and revolution is the exception by assessing the conditions that engender stability and framing revolutions as prompted by the breakdown of those stabilizing forces (Ibid: 78).

4.2.4   Taking Stock: Five Necessary Conditions for the Emergence of Revolutions

Ultimately, Goldstone argues that the foregoing process of knowledge-accumulation has generated consensus that at least five conditions are necessary for a revolutionary episode:

- *A crisis of state authority*: " in which the state is widely perceived by elites and popular groups as both ineffective and unjust" (Ibid: 81).

- *A crisis of elite relationships* "in which elites become divided, alienated, and polarized into factions that disagree over how to reconstitute state authority" (Ibid).

- *A crisis of popular welfare* where "urban and/or rural groups find it difficult to maintain their customary standard of living" (Ibid).

- *The emergence of an elite-popular coalition* "to attack the authority of the state" (Ibid: 82).

- *An ideology of opposition* "that binds elites and popular groups in their attack on the authorities, justifies that attack, and suggests alternative bases for authority" (Ibid).