The Role of Peasants and Ideology in Social Revolutions

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“The peasants…provided the dynamite to bring down the old building.” – Barrington Moore.

The study of revolutions has seen countless analyses and arguments. Explanations ranging from purely structural or economic approaches and ending with psychological explanations have explored the reasons as to why rapid and complete changes in social and political structures of societies take place. Particularly of interest has been explaining the long-standing consequences of revolutions and the continued influence that they have on modern institutions. One of the most famous works, admired by many for its unprecedented ability to deal with the complexity of social revolutions has been Theda Skocpol’s book *States and Social Revolutions*, where she outlines the structural mechanisms that cause the pivotal and often violent social and political changes that are brought on by revolutions. Skocpol’s book is seen as a departure from previously either hierarchical or narrative explanations of the reasons behind social revolutions.¹ The structural theory of the revolutionary process, however, disregards any psychological action on the side of the actors as it disregards the role of voluntary action.² This is because the structural perspective assumes that no single revolutionary intention can lead to the sweeping consequences of revolutionary action, as everything is interconnected and is a product of the structured environment. However, individual action is worth investigating in the case of revolutions not least because it is still governed by informal institutions that the structural perspective does not consider. Skocpol determines that peasant upheaval along with a state and institutional weakening lead to unintended consequences beyond the imagination of anyone.

involved. While the consequences of revolutions may be unpredictable they are certainly not products of disinterested individual action. The structural method employed by Skocpol limits her analysis of the rational, interested actions of the actors involved. The analysis of the role of peasants in revolutions reveals the importance of rational and ideological considerations that drive the participation of the peasantry that then leads to successful social revolutions.

To understand the complex revolutionary process it is therefore imperative to first understand the role peasants play in the larger societal structures, but also to evaluate why peasants choose to participate in revolutions in the first place. To do this both structural constraints that they face and their own personal beliefs and considerations must be evaluated. This paper first considers the structural limits and the role of peasants in revolutions (as argued by Skocpol), followed by an analysis of the rationality of the peasants and impact of ideology on their considerations to join revolutions. This will in turn provide a more nuanced understanding of the revolutionary process, because it does not leave out the motivations and intentions of the very actors who carry out the revolution.

Part I: Peasants and Revolutions

Social revolutions are a very specific type of revolutions that cause rapid and often violent social and political change. Actors that are faced with a possibility of a revolution are first and foremost operating within a given structured system. Relying on Theda Skocpol’s structural analysis of the process of revolution, it is first imperative to outline the structural roles of the peasants. Social revolutions will be considered successful, according to Skocpol, if they “are accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below.” Furthermore they are a product of “two coincidences: the coincidence of societal structural change with class

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upheaval; and the coincidence of political with social transformation.”⁴ Inherent even to this definition of social revolutions, therefore, is the appeal to “coincidences” in an attempt to circumvent the intentional action of individual (the specific subject of coincidence will be taken up later in the paper). Nevertheless, Skocpol’s definition is useful especially because it allows for a clarification of the structural role of the peasantry. According to the definition there have been very few successful social revolutions in world history so far; the cases of France in 1789, Russia in 1917 and China in 1911-1949 being some of the most famous ones. These revolutions were successful because they included not only sweeping social and class changes but also transformation of the political system. Most importantly, their complexity was due to the unintended consequences of many actors within a particular state. These actors include the role played by the peasants as well as other national and international actors involved in institutional changes causing eventual state break-up.⁵ Furthermore, the cases of successful social revolutions share a similarity in that all of them had a particularly structured peasantry. The two most similar structures, those that appeared in France and Russia are examined in this paper. The two cases, while showing the fruitfulness of the examination of the peasant community structure, also reveal the importance of understanding the initial choice to revolt at all. Incorporation of rational and ideological explanations of peasant action thus helps fill some gaps left by structural analysis.

The concrete reasons for peasant revolts are not mysterious, though the timing of their revolts deserves much more attention. Peasants will generally demand more authority over their land. Since these sentiments over the control of the land are always present, however, they are not the most helpful explanation as to why peasants participate in revolutions. The fact that the

⁴ Ibid. Pp.4.
⁵ Ibid. Pp. 42.
sentiments are not the catalysts behind peasant motivations (but only part of the consideration) is evident because otherwise revolutions would either occur continually, or they would never appear again after proper reforms—neither of which is empirically true. Given that their grievances are well known suggests that participation in revolutions is not because of new grievances, rather it depends on when and how these sentiments are activated. Structural theories claim that the timing is because of institutional structures that create an environment largely out of the reach of individual (and intended) control. Looking specifically at cases of the French and Russian Revolutions, peasant participation can thus be explained by three reasons: (1) degree of solidarity among the peasant community prior to revolutionary conditions, (2) degree of peasant autonomy in administering their day-to-day activities, and (3) the degree of the relaxation of the state coercive mechanisms. First, the solidarity provision explains why the participation was a collective and broad event, rather than a series of spurious and suppressed peasant revolts. Next, the fact that the peasants in both countries were autonomously administered also played a role in giving them more organization across the nation. Moreover, depending on the local structures of power, it was (or was not) feasible for peasants to revolt. The third reason is much less controlled by the peasants, but it still has an impact on whether they engage in revolution. The national and international influences and subsequent weakening of the central authorities provide an opportunity for the peasants to revolt. This structural analysis, while being very informative as to the structural reasons that allow peasant revolt, still does not answer the central question of why peasants choose to participate in revolution.

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7 States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China. Pp. 115.
Skocpol demonstrates the empirical validity of the structural analysis by demonstrating the above dynamics in the detailed case studies of the French and Russian revolutions. There are some differences in the two cases; nevertheless, she claims that these cases are instances of successful social revolutions. It is particularly important to note the outcomes of the peasant involvement in France and Russia, as their peasant structure was the most similar. While in France, land remained private and as a result consolidated private property holdings, in Russia, the land was collectivized. In both cases, the peasant class had a common enemy to unite against: the landowning elite. In the French case, they were largely supported by other revolutionaries who aimed to overthrow the old ruling elites. Despite the peasant unification for the duration of the revolution, however, the rich and the small landholding peasants benefited from the new institutional arrangement created, since private property remained in private hands. The peasant solidarity was shattered after the private property holdings of the small landowners and rich peasants were not subject to redistribution. In contrast, the peasants in Russia ended with collectivized land altogether. The peasantry acted because of solidarity and autonomy just like the French peasants, but both solidarity and autonomy in case of Russia were largely a result of *obschina* regulations. According to Skocpol, the differing outcomes in the cases of Russia and France are because of the structural limitations that these communities faced. This is still not a satisfactory explanation for why peasants chose to participate in the revolts in the first place. There have to be local, communal and rational reasons, as well as broader ideological considerations that inspired individuals to collective action.

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Part II: Rationality and Ideology in the Peasant Communities

The choice to participate in a revolt is one that is to be very heavily considered by the potential participants; it is a choice that can potentially have very high costs. Skocpol disregards the intentionality and purpose behind people’s actions, because she argues that revolution is a process that is not completed by people with revolutionary intentions. As was noted in her definition above a revolution is indeed a “coincidence” of different actions that created unintended consequences that eventually culminated in an all-encompassing revolution. Revolutions, in Skocpol’s view, are not the results of purposive or voluntary actions.\(^{11}\) However, the fact “that revolutions are not made by people with revolutionary action does not mean that they are not in the first instance the product of *intentional* action.”\(^{12}\) Indeed, the peasants’ very choice to participate is a consequence of not only the structural limits that they face, but they are also the result of social, communal, and ideological considerations. Skocpol’s analysis of the role of peasants in revolutions explicitly suffers from the exclusion of both rationality of the actors involved and the role of ideology that was a major force behind both the French and Russian (and others like Chinese) Revolutions.

Without a consideration for the rational choice of the peasants, the salience of peasant solidarity in joining a revolution remains unclear. Solidarity is supposed to ensure the widespread and rapid occurrence of peasant rebellions across the country, such that occurred in France and Russia. Solidarity of a community by itself, however, is not sufficient or a necessary reason for peasants to opt for revolt.\(^{13}\) That is because a community that is heterogeneous (i.e.

\(^{11}\) Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. Pp. 18.


some tension exists between the peasants such as amount of landownership) is actually more likely to revolt than a community that is homogenous (and has more internal solidarity). The factions of a community that are different and contain internal tensions, therefore, will participate in a revolt by concentrating on group-specific motivations. Niche motivated solidarity does not always contribute to a community-wide revolt.\textsuperscript{14} Pointing to the solidarity of a community as one of the reasons as to why peasants opt for revolution is therefore insufficient as less solidary groups are likely to revolt. Moreover, in a homogenous group it might be incredibly hard to persuade everyone to participate equally, again leading to the need to analyze the contextual rationality of the peasants in these situations.\textsuperscript{15} Since peasant participation in the French and Russian revolutions did occur despite internal divisions and tensions within the peasant class, there is an assumption of initial participation that the structural argument cannot address because it refuses to look at the salience of rational choice of individual actors.

In fact the structural analysis is enriched by the analysis of the rationality behind the choices of the peasants. In both the French and Russian cases, the peasants acted rationally specifically because of the regard for their community. In case of Russia, the \textit{obschina} was a “genuine community, whose members would find conditional cooperation rational.”\textsuperscript{16} This feeling was strengthened when it was organized by local actors.\textsuperscript{17} While choosing whether to participate or not, the peasants were thus implicitly following the norms of their community, which legitimized their rational choices.\textsuperscript{18} Solidarity is fostered by the local community, but participation is reinforced by the rational considerations and willingness to protect the communal

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{14}] Ibid. Pp. 139.
\item[\textsuperscript{15}] Ibid. Pp. 138.
\item[\textsuperscript{17}] Ibid. Pp. 73.
\end{itemize}
standards and way of life. In other words, the fact that the motivation for participation was found in informal, voluntary institutions explains the widespread occurrence of the peasant revolts in these cases of successful social revolutions. The conditions present resulted in many actors coming to the same rational conclusion: to participate in the riots. Structural arguments lack this insight into peasants’ rational choice and leave the question of why peasants choose to participate largely unanswered. Simply appealing to a sense of solidarity does not explain why people would be willing to risk all they have for something extremely unpredictable as a revolution. It must be noted, that considering the peasants’ rational choice, it does not mean that their choice is centered on questions like “should we make a revolution today”; their choices are entirely instructed by their immediate local and communal concerns and immediate threats that they face, so that the questions they ask themselves may very well have little revolutionary intent.

The differing result of the French and Russian revolutions, one ending with private property and one without, can thus be analyzed by looking at the rational choices people made in favor of upholding certain communal values and norms. This difference, is however, even better illustrated by the importance of ideology in these two cases. Structural theory, disregards the intended actions of revolutionaries, for the same reason it disregards the role of rational choice. The intentions of revolutionaries, according to Skocpol, are not a sufficient explanation since revolutions are a complex processes ending with unintended consequences. While that may be true, ideology and ideas of the time play a crucial role in determining the context and results of the revolution. Especially in the French and Russian revolutions, the role of ideology is glaringly apparent. The fact that the Russian socialist revolution ended with collectivization and the

19 Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China. Pp. 18.
French revolution culminated in consolidation of private property is in many ways a consequence of the ideologies and the propaganda that were used during that time\(^{20}\) (the propaganda in turn also informs the rational opinions of the peasantry). Although Skocpol’s structural argument attempts to circumvent the role of ideology by appealing to “world historical models available” at the time, it would benefit from an added analysis of how ideology also structures the informal institutions that construct people’s lives rather than appealing to awkward phrasings of the ‘historical models’ available.\(^{21}\) Nevertheless, the structural argument instead chooses to disregard voluntary action altogether.

The rational and ideological analyses only improve the structural explanation of why peasants choose to participate in revolts. The structural explanation for the participation of the peasants rests on the descriptions of the institutions that surround peasants. The structures are the solidarity-based kinship institutions, local autonomous administrative institutions, and the wider national and international institutions (though the peasants have very little control over the latter). What is absent from the structural explanation are the informal institutions that instruct people’s every day actions and choices, making the peasant himself an irrational and dependent actor in the revolutionary scenario. While the peasants may not have much of a politically charged culture, and the extent of their politics is mostly related to land claims, they are still rational and voluntary actors in the revolutionary process. The peasants are most immediately instructed by the informal institutions that govern their societies. These are the norms and values of their communities that are likely to influence their rational choices, but they are also the broader ideologies that are imposed on them through things like propaganda. The salience of such a structuring of the world for the peasants is evident for example in the aftermath of the


\(^{21}\) Ibid. Pp.171.
Russian revolution. The peasants were first and foremost protecting what was rightfully theirs (their rational choice to protect their land holdings). Eventually, they opted to support the Bolshevik side, not because they vigorously believed in the Bolshevik ideology (although some did perhaps), but because the Bolshevik propaganda was much more effective in structuring the peasants’ choices of which side to support.  

Conclusion

The cases of successful social revolutions are certainly made clearer by the structural explanation, however, there needs to be an additional level added that analyzes the rationality and ideological dimensions of the decisions taken by the peasants. Skocpol’s argument is beneficial in that it analyzes the structural constraints that peasants faced prior to revolting; although as collective action theorists point out, it is equally necessary to evaluate rationality behind the choices of the peasants. By understanding why these choices were made allows for a better understanding of why people choose to participate in revolutions, and more broadly, how their choices can affect the structural environment they find themselves in and how they impact radical events such as revolutions.

22 Koslow, *The Despised and the Damned; the Russian Peasant through the Ages*. Pp. 130.
References:


