Theda Skocpol: “France, Russia China: A Structural Analysis of Social Revolution”
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Theda Skocpol’s “Structural Analysis of Social Revolution” seeks to define the particular set of conditions that must be present within a state and society in order to foment revolution. Skocpol chooses to conduct a structural analysis that is premised primarily upon historical analysis of institutions and structures within the state that are predisposed to revolutionary change “from below”. She begins by outlining the premise upon which she is conducting her study, why she has chosen to use such a method and the hope that she holds for her hypothesis’ further application beyond the scope of her study. Following a brief introduction of her research design, Skocpol conducts a historical analysis of her selected cases, the conditions she considers essential for social revolution and what structural inadequacies must exist to predicate them. Skocpol concludes with a discussion of her aggregate results and posits that the theory she has established can and should be extended in hypotheses concerning more cases. In other words, Skocpol believes her theory to posses a generality that allows it to be applied across many different cases.

Introduction

Skocpol begins by establishing an operative definition of a social revolution constructed through an overlay of Samuel P. Huntington’s and Vladimir Lenin’s respective definitions of revolution. For the purpose of her research social revolution is described as “rapid, basic transformations of socioeconomic and political institutions accompanied and in part effectuated by class upheavals from below”. Indeed, this definition proves quite effective in operationalizing the variables she later applies to the historical cases of France, Russia and China. It is of great importance to note Skocpol’s desire to distance her analysis from that of contemporaneous work being conducted at the time of her publishing “Social Revolution”.¹ She contends that the majority of social scientists have tended to avoid the study of social revolutions, preferring instead to focus on the ideological basis of revolutions and holding historical analysis as too historical and thus a-theoretical. Skocpol argues against this apparent logical dissonance by asserting that any theory in the social sciences should concern itself only with general phenomena so as to ensure its ability to be widely applied. As such, she posits that national historical trajectories must be used as cases in order to study revolutions as “complex wholes” and overcome the difficulties presented by the inevitable inability to conduct statistical analyses of social revolutions. No doubt Hans Keman’s discussion of

comparative research methods in Caramani can easily be seen as logically coherent with Skocpol’s striving to achieve generalization through her case selection.²

**Research Design and Case Selection**

The selection of cases in this study, as discussed above, is geared toward the achievement of a potentially general significance for social scientists. Skocpol selects her cases by seeking cases that demonstrate the conditions for occurrence, and examples of short-term outcomes from, social revolutions. As such, she selects social revolutions in France, Russia and China based upon the historical trajectories pre and post social revolution. Indeed, Skocpol seems keen to utilize the keen approach of historical relativism that is found in Karl Marx’s own work. Her research design is premised upon the contrasting of her selected cases with two separate groups of other revolutions: a) non-social modernization in Japan, Germany and Russia (up to 1904) and b) abortive social revolutions in Russia (1905) and Prussia (1848). She contends that through this contrast she will allow for the establishment of a generalized theory for two reasons. In other words, her research design allows for the identification of events, structures and processes that are common amongst the successful cases while simultaneously allowing for the identification of conditions found to be absent that may offer an explanation as to the why the negative cases failed.

“Explaining the Historical Cases: Revolution in Modernizing Agrarian Bureaucracies”

Skocpol begins her historical analysis through an assertion of the primacy of class struggle in revolutions. Again, Skocpol is here drawing upon Marx’s theoretical approach, which may serve to overly characterize a historical analysis wherein two of the cases she has chosen are premised upon Marxist ideological sentiments. Her brief discussion of the structural functionalism of agrarian bureaucracies is of great utility to her ensuing contrasting of historical trajectories. It is important to note here that, given the diversity and number of cases selected for contrast, Skocpol runs the risks that Caramani ascribes to functionalism wherein such a largely descriptive theoretical approach renders the results too vague to form generalizable conclusions.³ However, the selection of France, Russia and China as the main cases avoids such a pitfall. Such an avoidance is evidenced by the commonality that Skocpol asserts wherein all three cases demonstrate a break down in societal control vis-à-vis the incapacitation of administrative and military organizations. Thus, it logically follows, as Skocpol asserts, that fundamental structural changes are necessary to cause societies to “back into” social revolutions. Skocpol then contends that these changes are best described as being precipitated, in agrarian bureaucracies, by a combination of external pressures on state institutions and built-in structural inefficiencies. Indeed, these variables prove to be of great utility

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² Daniele Caramani, comp., *Comparative Politics* (n.p.: Oxford University Press, 2008), [68-69].
³ Ibid, 47.
to her historical analysis, particularly as she goes on to discuss the historical trajectories of her main cases.

**“Breakdown of Societal Controls”**

Skocpol embarks upon her historical analysis in this section by posing an essential comparative question: Why did the two above factors occur in each of the three cases selected? She begins from a sociological perspective, asserting that the evaluation of the interaction between the magnitude of foreign pressure and the structural characteristics of a given society must be applied in a historical analysis. Through a time-lapse view of Russia’s historical trajectory a strong comparison is made between the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, wherein only during the former did the Czar possess the administrative and military organizational power to put down a revolution. A brief mention is then made that these conditions also existed in Bourbon France and Manchurian China.

Skocpol then asserts that all three of her cases demonstrate the inability of agrarian bureaucracies to apply the Weberian model of bureaucratic politics and the resultant structural inefficiency of societies structured upon two power sources: the ruling class and the landed upper strata on the rural areas. Such inefficiency is noted by Skocpol to cause considerable tension between political elites seeking modernization and centralization of power and the landed gentry that wished to maintain the status quo of local powers and revenue. As an example she provides China’s failure centralize power through a series of reforms that resulted, seemingly unavoidably, with devolution of power to regional groups that was so extensive that it effectively rendered the central powers incapable of maintaining military and administrative power. Indeed, (although China was not necessarily a federal system) this extreme devolution of power led to a form of balkanization that Ron Watts warns against in his *Comparing Federal Systems.*

**“Peasant Insurrection”**

Skocpol continues her structural analysis of agrarian bureaucracies by contending that it is the only form of government that possessed lower classes that were of immense strategic importance to the state (military conscripts and economic drivers) while simultaneously being, for all intensive purposes, organizationally autonomous from the central powers (given the power amongst landed gentry and local structures). As such, Skocpol logically concludes that this separation was exploited by peasant insurrection (in all three cases) once the state experienced breakdowns in its organizations that were egregious enough to render them powerless to control outlying areas. In support of this claim Skocpol again offers a particularly effective time series comparison between the Russian revolutions in 1905 and 1917. Furthermore, she distinguishes the difference seen in

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China wherein there was not a landed gentry such as existed in Russia but rather a market structure driven by merchants and artisans holding the economic power. Therefore, in a critical distinction, Skocpol asserts that Chinese peasants did not revolt directly against the landed gentry and ended up forming various rebel and bandit groups, particularly in outlying mountainous areas. It is important to understand this distinction because she then posits that the connection between the Chinese Communists to the peasantry owes less to ideological reasons than hindsight might suggest. Rather, this strong connection is the result of structural peculiarities in China.

After being presented with the historical analysis of both these cases it can be gleaned that Skocpol posits the existence of certain structural vulnerabilities that leave an agrarian bureaucracy vulnerable to peasant insurrection: a) when sanctioning machines important to the peasantry (welfare-type organizations and regular military forces) become centralized (thus losing their power of influence and b) when the work and social life become controlled and organized at the local level amongst families and community organizations. The second of these assertions, and to some degree the first, can be seen as completely in logical coherence with Skocpol’s earlier assertion that social revolutions occur when the state “backs out”. Indeed, these assertions can even be demonstrated as being in concert with James Davies’ “Toward a Theory of Revolution” and his model of j-curves for predicting revolution.5

“Radical Political Movements and Centralizing Outcomes”

Again, Skocpol embarks upon this section within the context of historical analysis, this time of English and European industrialization-commercialization as a large factor in influencing structural changes in agrarian bureaucracies. Skocpol attempts to explain the manner in which radical political leaders are able to fill the void along with the peasantry to affect radical structural change in the course of a social revolution. She contends, again through historical analysis, that for the first time non-noble individuals were able to attend university in large numbers, thus allowing them to come from “within the ranks” of university campuses that become hotbeds of radical fervor. The desire for educated members of society to engage in these activities are, according to Skocpol, related to agrarian bureaucracies being very statist. Therefore, official employment and engagement in politics were seen as a viable method of social advancement and augmenting social standing. Skocpol also contends that this sentiment was only further heightened through the driving forces of modernization.

What can be seen as common amongst the 3 cases?

Skocpol makes clear the need for agrarian bureaucracies to reform either through social revolutions (“bottom up”) or central reform (“top down”). As such, some agrarian economies, for her France, China and Russia ostensibly, can be viewed as structurally prone to peasant insurrection. Historically, in each of these three cases once the peasants vanquished the landed gentry (old political elites) a vacuum was created that allowed new radical to take center stage, bringing with them their various nationalist or ideological brands to thus be implemented. It is quite clear by this point that Skocpol sees these ideological considerations as secondary to the ascendency of these new political elites. Samuel P. Huntington’s assertion that “a complete revolution involves creation and institutionalization of a new political order” is clearly influential on Skocpol’s conception of social revolution. Indeed, in all three cases Skocpol demonstrates that the social revolutions created more highly centralized, bureaucratized and rationalized state institutions. Missing from Skocpol’s analysis here is mention of the autocratic states that soon developed from each of these social revolutions. Indeed, perhaps this evolution was predicated by the wish to avoid further conflict and social revolution through the establishment of strong military and administrative organizations. Such an assertion would certainly be in keeping with Mansfield and Snyder’s claim that transitions to autocracy often lead to the generation of far less hostility than do transitions to democracy.6

Conclusion

Skocpol concludes by reiterating that social revolution occurs in cases wherein structural vulnerability exists leaves a state prone to autonomous insurrection as a result of severe administrative and military disorganization largely fomented by external pressures. She then adds a measure of disclosure wherein she addresses the incomplete nature of her analysis of the negative cases (Japan and Prussia). Admittedly, the addition of further discussion regarding contrasting negative cases as well as the inclusion of a more robust historical analysis of France would be of great utility to this study. However, it is clear that the historical analysis approach applied within this research is an indispensible tool for the social sciences. The utility of this research can certainly be seen in Skocpol’s emphasis on the study of the mechanisms and dynamics of the state (rather than simply ideological proclivities) and her discussion of modernization and its structural implications on the state. It is no accident that Skocpol achieves her aim by providing a general theory that could be used to formulate further hypotheses for other cases. No doubt, with this study Skocpol has provided a transformative contribution to the field of political science.

Bibliography


