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A Comparative Analysis on Revolution

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Revolution has been the driving force for political and social change in our world since the beginning of time. As such, it is the most recognizable form of political violence, being discussed endlessly by scholars and lay people alike. Often times however, in these discussions, the central elements of what makes a political movement become categorized as a revolution are often ignored. This paper seeks to identify the three core components of a revolution, and then to show how these elements can be found in a pair of revolutions separated by thousands of miles and hundreds of years, proving the validity of a universal application of this elemental definition of rebellion.

In order to effectively complete a comparative analysis on the subject of revolution, there must first be an established definition of revolution that the two subjects to be examined can be compared against. There are three core elements that are necessary for a revolution to occur, and these will form the core of the working definition used in this comparative analysis. First, there must be some form of inequality that exists within the society that the revolution is taking place in. Inequality is defined as avoidable, morally unjustified hierarchical differences that serve to divide a society (Therborn, 2009). There are a number of types of inequality that could fulfill this requirement, including vital, existential, and material or resource inequality. Therborn describes vital inequality and the inequality of health and death, where the poor die more often and earlier than the rich. He defines existential inequality as the denial of equal recognition and respect for a group, operating through status hierarchies as well as institutional discrimination (Therborn, 2009). The final form of inequality explored by Therborn is material or resource inequality, which appears through unequal access to various social capital such as education, known as inequality of opportunity, and inequality of rewards, referring to

distribution of income (2009). These inequalities are generally manifested in the abuse of the lower classes by member of the upper class, using tools such as exclusion and exploitation to create ways to limit the success of the lower class and make the toil of the lower class into spoils for the upper class (Therborn, 2009). There are a number of prime examples of these tools for the generation of equality through out history. For exclusion, the caste system of India is the most blatant manifestation, as citizens were categorized at birth, and social mobility from class to class was essentially impossible, giving members of the lower class little to no opportunity to better their station in life. The best example of exploitation is slavery in any of occurrences throughout history. The owners of the slaves would exploit their labor as a means of financially benefitting themselves, with the slaves who did all the work gaining little to no benefit from their labor. However, inequality simply existing in a society will not cause a rebellion or revolt to occur. There must be a realization that comes in reaction to the inequality.

This realization or awareness of the existence of the inequality is the second core component of a revolution. Albert Camus describes it as, “ the sudden, dazzling perception that there is something in man which he can identify himself, even if only for a moment”(1951). This quote focuses on the moment of clarity when a society or individual comes to the realization that someone who has no right to do so is indeed treating them unequally. Inequality can only be combatted if those who are victims are aware of it. The American Revolution would have never occurred had the people of the colonies not realized that the British crown was exploiting them for taxes, while excluding them from the legislative process in England. The Civil Rights movement in America would have never occurred had the African American community not been

aware of their unequal treatment, both in the eyes of the law, and informally by society. Once this realization has occurred, and the victims of the inequality now are aware that it exists, there is one final component that must be established for the revolution to fully manifest.

The final, and possibly most essential component of what makes a social movement a revolution is the support of 'the people'. While it would be beneficial for all people in a society to back a revolution, a majority of the population is the only portion required for the support of 'the people' to be gained (Toros, 2012). This comes from the democratic concept that the power of the government comes from the consent of the people to be governed. Therefore, if the people determine that the government they gave power to is no longer functioning in the best interest of the people, then that government can have its power taken away by the people. This can be achieved through the use of a revolution by the majority of the citizenry, as a means of giving the power back to the majority, whether the government or a minority of high-class citizens was holding the power. In summary, for a social movement to be categorized as a revolution, there must first be a societal inequality against a group of citizens, who must then come to the realization that they are being treated unequally. Once this realization has occurred, the group that is being treated unequally must then gain the support of the majority of the citizenry, triggering a revolution to end the causal inequality.

The first revolution that the core elements of revolution can be applied to is the French Revolution. Prior to the revolution, French society was divided into three social classes, known as the Three Estates. The first estate was the clergy, made up of members of the clergy of the Catholic Church. The second estate consisted of the nobility,

including landowning nobles and members of the royal family other than the king. The third and largest estate was made up of the rest of the citizens, comprising 96 percent of the population of France. While the first and second estates were free of taxes and afforded a great amount of freedoms, the third estate was responsible for all the tax burden of the country, including paying taxes to the first and second estates (University College London, 2013). This tax burden represents the inciting inequality that is necessary for a revolution. The people of the third estate were paying all of the taxes, with member of the other estates and the king continued to live lavish life styles while not paying taxes themselves. This corresponds well with Therborn's definition of exploitation, where the masses struggle for the benefit of the rich and powerful. There also exist links to Therborn's discussion of exclusion. Because of the rigid class system, there was no easy way for members of the third estate to move up into the other estates. One could join the clergy, but this took a great amount of education, which most of the Third estate could never be able to afford, especially with the weight of taxes hanging over their heads. And access to the second estate from the outside was a near impossibility, as members of the nobility would simply marry other members of their own class, and a noble marrying outside of the estate carried great social stigma. With food prices soaring because of the opulence of the crown and the first and second estates, in addition to expanded taxes to cover war costs (History, 2009), members of the third estate experienced the awakening of awareness that is necessary to incite change in a society. They became acutely aware of the fact that they were struggling to survive day to day, while members of the church and nobility lived opulently, often within plain view of the class they took advantage of. With this, the second condition for a revolution was

met, as the third estate now had a thorough understanding of the fact that they were being treated unequally in their society. The third core element of gaining the support of the majority was not much of a struggle for the rising third estate, as 96 percent of the population of France was experiencing the same inequalities. This absolute majority allowed for the eruption of one of the most pivotal revolutions of the modern West, with the majority of the population of France taking back the power from a small minority that was exploiting it through the use of inequality.

The final revolution that the causal elemental definition of revolution can be applied to is the February Revolution of Russia, which was shortly followed by the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Alexander Rabinowitch writes, “The February 1917 revolution ... grew out of prewar political and economic instability, technological backwardness, and fundamental social divisions, coupled with gross mismanagement of the war effort, continuing military defeats, domestic economic dislocation, and outrageous scandals surrounding the monarchy”(2008). The inequality for this revolution comes from the fundamental social divisions mention by Rabinowitch. These focused on grievances by the workers of the factories of St. Petersburg as they experience poor work conditions, compounded by very low wages. With Russia emerging as an industrial power, the owners of the factories, referred to as the bourgeoisie by Marxists, had little regard for the lives or well being of their workers, the proletariat. Like in the case of the French Revolution, the working class felt that they were not getting an equal piece when compared to the nobility and the land and factory owners. In addition to the work place grievances, there were rampant food shortages because of the dragging on of World War 1 (History, 2009). These two issues led to two distinct sectors of unhappy citizen in the

late days of Imperial Russia. While they struggled to survive, the nobility once again sat back and reaped the benefits. In response to this inequality hunger protests, started over rising bread prices, and protests by factory laborers began to merge. These coinciding protests represent the awareness of inequality that is necessary for revolution. Each group realized that they were not alone in their feelings of longing to be heard and helped by those holding the power. By uniting their grievances, they were able to form the necessary majority to take control of the government and take the power back, ousting the czar. While there was a certain amount of bloodshed in the protests, the will of the people was overwhelming for the nobility and landholders. This initial revolution set the stage for the Communists to take control not long after. And in turn, the abuse and neglect by the former regime made Russia ripe for the pro-citizen politics that became so prevalent in the future USSR.

In conclusion, a set of three core defining elements for a social movement turning into a revolution was established. These began with the creation of inequalities in society, followed by the group being subjected to these inequalities becoming aware of their victimization by the upper classes of the society. Once this realization occurred, the final step towards revolution is gaining the support of the majority of the citizenry or the people of the nation. Once all three of these elements are met, revolution can begin to make changes in a country. Two examples were explored, examining how the circumstance of the French Revolution and the February Revolution of Russia meshed very well with these core elements, despite varied locations, cultural circumstances, and time periods. The fact that these core elements can be applied to such varied situations



proves their validity as the true causal factors of revolution, proving crucial to triggering social and political change in our world, past, present, and future.

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