Saïd Amir Arjomand, *Revolution. Structure and Meaning in World History* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2019)

Half a century ago, students of Anglophone political anthropology were commonly taught (e.g. by Max Gluckman) to distinguish rebellion from revolution. The former, often highly ritualized and characteristic of tribal societies in Africa, did not transform the structures and institutions of the society. Revolution, by contrast, meant substantive discontinuity and was characteristic of more developed political systems in Europe and Asia. Its study was the domain of political science, rather than anthropology. The literature was dominated by the study of relatively recent cases of political transformation, exemplified by John Dunn's 1972 *Modern Revolutions*.[1] Without noting this particular contribution, Arjomand sets out to correct an unwarranted temporal restriction and thereby to fill a huge gap in historical social theory. His book is a sophisticated exploration of revolution in pre-modern Eurasia. Revolution is conceived (following Koselleck) "as a coherent collective singular serving as a regulative principle of knowledge" [4] in the centuries that have elapsed since the Great French Revolution. Acknowledging the anachronisms that inevitably follow from applying a modern concept in earlier centuries, Arjomand examines ten cases in detail, beginning with "The Akkadian Constitutive Revolution and the Establishment of Universal Monarchy in Mesopotamia" and concluding with "The Mongolian Integrative Revolution in Eurasia." A lengthy Introduction and a much shorter Conclusion expound the author's typology. In an Epilogue entitled "Revolutions of the last Hundred Years in the Light of My Typology" he discusses the rise and fall of socialist regimes in various parts of the world, as well as Islamic revolutions from Iran in 1979 to the Islamic State and the Arab Revolution of 2011.

Arjomand defines revolution formally as "a culturally significant and complex event that greatly increases the political mobilization of society and thereby results in many changes in its political organization or the structure of authority (the state, when the term applies)

[1] Dunn John, 1972. *Modern Revolutions: An Introduction to the Analysis of a Political Phenomenon* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

Chris Hann, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology [hann@ethn-mpg.de]
European Journal of Sociology, 60, 3 (2019), pp. 415–420—0003-9756/19/0000-900$07.50per art + $0.10 per page
©*European Journal of Sociology* 2020. doi: 10.1017/S0003975619000237

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975619000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and/or its social base (i.e., the political community)[14]." He devotes much of his Introduction to a critique of established approaches, from the original Eurocentrism of Karl Marx to recent *marxisant* discourses of "third world" liberation and diverse "fourth generation" theories. The most basic problem, according to Arjomand, is that almost all academic analysts, like the self-styled revolutionaries themselves from Marx onwards, remain in thrall to 1789 and project a Jacobin myth backwards and forwards in time. Another embarrassment is that, with their focus on capturing power at the centre, sociologists such as Theda Skocpol and Jack Goldstone merely repeat the insights of the most perceptive commentator on the French case, Alexis de Tocqueville. Goldstone is further chastised for tautologically defining revolution as state breakdown, while simultaneously asserting this to be its main cause. While most academic investigators of revolutions have engaged in futile quests for *causal* generalization, Arjomand's typology (he does not claim to present a new theory) prioritizes their *consequences*. Violence is common but is not taken to be a defining feature. Rejecting the generic formulas of "natural history" approaches, he looks instead to Ricœur and to narrative theory to make sense of revolution as *process*, hard though it is to operationalize secondary narrativization and specify collective agency at the level of societies. Careful attention to periodization (including interdependencies of which the actors may be unaware) and the need for a systematic, holistic approach to revolution(s) that presupposes their "coherence as a logical formation" are the principles that guide the ten historical cases.

The success of this ambitious undertaking depends crucially on downplaying both material (socioeconomic) and cultural (including religious) factors in order to assert the primacy of the political, in a tradition that derives ultimately from Plato and Aristotle. Non-political factors may be important, but since these vary from case to case they remain secondary and external for the purposes of this exercise. Arjomand offers four types. Three of these involve expansion of the political community and are termed *integrative*. The first is exemplified by the emergence of a centralized polity from culturally unified segmentary societies (*constitutive revolution*). The second highlights disgruntled aspirational elites in oligarchical polities, as formulated originally by Aristotle and echoed by Vilfredo Pareto (hence *Aristotelian-Paretan revolution*). The third is based on Ibn Khaldun's theory of how the urban dynasties of Islamic North Africa were periodically swept aside by the incursions of solidary tribesmen

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975619000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from the periphery. This type (*Khaldunian revolution*) can be extended to account for rural guerilla struggles around the world in the twentieth century, exemplified by Maoist success in China. Finally there is the familiar type of political transformation when one centralized regime is displaced by another but the state itself endures. According to Arjomand, this *Tocquevillian revolution* needs some modification if it is to be effectively applied in both modern and pre-modern conditions: first, a broader "structure of authority" should be substituted for state, and second, it is important to pay attention to the losers, those "dispossessed" in the course of the revolution.

Most of the empirical cases, presented clearly and holistically without jargon, turn out to muddle the types, as Max Weber would expect. The shadow of Weber is omnipresent in this book. Arjomand sees himself as fulfilling the master's barely articulated objective to grasp the world-historical significance of revolution, a goal Weber fell well short of realizing in his own political sociology (though his late work on religion offers clues to what might have been).

As with any typology, the selection of the cases is critical in defining the space for comparison and contrast. The first half of the book is devoted to Near Eastern and Mediterranean cases with which most Anglophone readers will have some degree of familiarity. Even when relying on well-known secondary sources, Arjomand's political narratives are richly laced with original insights and interpretations. After starting in Mesopotamia, we proceed to the Cleisthenian Revolution in Athens and the "counterrevolutions" of the Peloponnesian Wars. The following three chapters examine three centuries of Roman integrative revolutions in careful detail, from the long last century of the Republic via the Flavian consolidation of imperial autocracy to the "long third century" between the victory of Septimius Severus in 193 and the conversion of Constantine in 313. Severus owed his success to betting consistently on the legions in which he had made his career, rather than the ineffectual Senate. Yet he had studied law in his youth and, according to Arjomand, one of his major achievements was the "reform and rationalization" of Roman law under brilliant jurists such as Papinian and Ulpian. It might be objected that this was not innovative but rather a continuation of the Flavian Revolution. Severus hailed from North Africa. He expanded the territories of the empire here and in the east. His revolution is not theorized as Khaldunian, yet it was made in the provinces and did much to protect and encourage "a sect from the Christian periphery." The "political

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975619000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

monism of the Severan postrevolutionary reconstruction" led to the universalization of citizenship and thus a more inclusive social structure than any previous Roman polity. Ultimately, however, the universalism of Christianity harboured even greater potential for societal integration. Arjomand concludes this absorbing chapter with the observation that Constantine's conversion more than a century after the death of Septimius Severus was "a foregone conclusion" [147].

At this halfway point Arjomand shifts his focus eastwards, reminding us as he does so that the memory of Alexander the Great was crucial for East and West alike. Thus, instead of analyzing barbarian revolution in Europe, we are invited to consider the decentralized organization of Parthian feudalism and the "long integrative revolution" of Ardashir, which led via the revival of Zoroastrianism to a new political community, that of Iran. Two further chapters deal with the constitutive revolution of Muhammad in Arabia and the consolidation of the new monotheism in the 'Abbasid Empire (which accomplished "Islam's integrative social revolution"). Whereas the analysis of Persianate civilization and Islam reflects the author's core historical expertise, the final chapters, no less scintillating in their execution, are unexpected. First, we return to the west to see how the efforts of Pope Gregory VII to free the Roman Catholic Church from secular political constraints, though a failure in the short-term, qualify as (a) revolution in world-historical perspective, with consequences that included the Crusades and the Reformation. Finally, in the only chapter that extends the coverage to East Asia, the integrative contributions of the Turko-Mongol nomadic world are given close attention of the sort they receive all too rarely in comparative historical sociology. The Great Mongol Empire created by Chinggis Khan is classified as a Khaldunian integrative revolution. Indeed, it is undeniable that this polity did more to connect and unify the Eurasian landmass than any other between Alexander and Marxism-Leninism. Most of the chapter consists of a detailed narrative of the unique military organization of the Mongols, of the tensions between primordial kinship ties and the supra-tribal loyalties on which the new empire depended, and of the endemic problem of "tanistry" (contests to succeed the charismatic leader in the supreme office—the unusual term is only introduced in this last chapter, though arguably the same tensions exist in different form in the sedentary civilizations examined earlier). Arjomand concedes that the Mongol revolution has precedents in earlier constitutive revolutions of Turkic tribal

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975619000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

confederations. Contrary to the dismissive stereotypes of Eurocentric and Sinocentric scholarship, he identifies "compound societies" in both East Asia and Il-Khanid Iran. Yet it is clear from his comparison of these two successor polities that the consequences of Mongol conquest were decisively shaped by earlier patterns. Thus the doctrines and practices of Confucian statecraft reasserted themselves rapidly after Qubilai's subjection of southern China. The analysis points ultimately to the strength of long-term political continuities, just as the chaos that marked the Severan revolution eventually yielded to a consolidation of Flavian autocracy. If this applies generically to premodern revolutions, one may ask: how different are they from mere rebellions on the one hand, and from modern revolutions on the other? How much discontinuity is necessary, and for how long must it be sustained, to warrant the diagnosis of revolution?

In his Epilogue, Arjomand interprets the collapse of the Soviet bloc as a very unusual form of revolution, "dystopic" in the sense that the postsocialist societies rejected all forms of ideology. Some would suggest that this void is now being filled across Eurasia by neonationalist mobilization. Arjomand, following Ernest Gellner, highlights the failure of the socialist regimes to satisfy the consumerist aspirations of their citizens as being critical to their loss of legitimacy and rapid internal disintegration around 1990. In this case, then, economy clearly plays a role—but, according to Arjomand, *only* in this case: "Economic failure [...] did not cause the collapse of the communist regime *per se* but only because it was required by the principles of legitimacy of that type of regime and therefore it resulted in its loss of legitimacy" [329]. One need not embrace the pseudoscience of historical materialism to suggest that aspects of political economy, the distribution of resources in both absolute and relative terms, deserve close attention in any world-historical account of the significance of revolution. Arjomand's critique of Marx and neo-Marxist approaches is incisive, but it is pushed too far.

At the same time, some readers might feel that he does not push his enthusiasm for Weber far enough. The subtitle's reference to "meaning" is limited to its abstract philosophical sense. "Cultural complexity" features in Arjomand's definition of revolution but in none of his case studies does he probe into the subjectivities of the actors to examine what revolutionary action meant for them. While noting that revolutionary socialism can only be understood in Abrahamic traditions of messianism, his privileging of the political inhibits closer exploration of political theologies, ideology and legitimacy in the cases

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975619000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

examined in this volume. With respect to the religion that the author knows best, what feels like a deficiency in this work is (we are told) about to be made good in a companion volume: *Apocalypse and Social Revolution in Islam* (forthcoming, Oxford University Press). All in all, Max Weber could hardly ask for more.

CHRIS HANN

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975619000237 Published online by Cambridge University Press