

[Lawson on Motadel, 'Revolutionary World: Global Upheaval in the Modern Age'](#)

Review published on Sunday, January 9, 2022

David Motadel, ed. *Revolutionary World: Global Upheaval in the Modern Age*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 292 pp. \$79.99 (cloth), [ISBN 978-1-107-19840-1](#).



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Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=56823>

Is there a more important area of study in the contemporary world than revolutions? As I write this review, revolutionary mobilizations are underway in a number of countries, from Myanmar to Belarus. If we extended our historical range back a decade, we would encounter experiences of revolution in nearly every world region. And if we extended our range even further back in time, say two centuries or so, we would find every country in the world touched by revolution, whether through direct experience of revolutionary uprisings, reformist attempts to defang the revolutionary challenge, or programs of counterrevolution intended to drive revolutionaries underground, sometimes literally. Revolutions, therefore, are vital areas of study not just for contemporary world politics but for modern world history. If this point was forgotten during the Rip Van Winkle period that followed the end of the Cold War, few people remain asleep today. And if there are any deep sleepers or late risers out there, this volume serves as an alarm call. Time to wake up.

Revolutionary World charts the impact that revolutions have made on world-historical development over the past two centuries. The volume is wide-ranging, both in terms of its temporal range, which begins with the Atlantic Revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and extends up to the present day, and in its equally expansive geographical compass, which includes revolutionary episodes (and some near misses) from well over a hundred countries. Carefully curated by David Motadel, who edits the volume and contributes an exceptionally thorough introductory chapter, the individual chapters are uniformly well written and well crafted. For an edited volume, the book is unusually cohesive, so much so that it reads almost as if it had a single voice. In large measure, this unanimity of voice arises from a unanimity of purpose. What is this purpose?

Perhaps the signal achievement of *Revolutionary World* is to embed the study of *particular* revolutions within *global* dynamics: shared structural contexts (such as imperialism), the connections that revolutionaries draw between their struggles and others (from common ideologies to shared tactics), the transmission systems that enable these connections (forms of media, activist networks), and more. If the idea of revolutions as domestic affairs reflects the caging influence of the nation-state on both political imaginaries and academic projects, this book shows that there are no fully domestic revolutions. It is self-evidently the case that revolutions are struggles over a particular state that happen amongst a particular people in a particular territory. But, as this book demonstrates,

they are much more than this. The economic downturns that often precede revolutions are dependent on market forces that transcend state borders. Incumbent regimes form part of international alliance structures. Elites—military, political, and financial—are bound up with transnational relationships of various kinds. Opposition forces deploy symbols and tactics that cross borders, from ideas of freedom, justice, and dignity to demonstrations, strikes, and chants. Revolutions often spark interstate conflicts; new coalitions, formal and informal, are established to extend and contain these struggles. This book demonstrates that revolutions are international “all the way down.”

Clarifying the ways in which revolutions are, in significant measure, international phenomena makes the relatively slight attention given to the subject by my home discipline, International Relations (IR), a frustrating missed opportunity. For the most part, IR scholarship has treated revolutions as problems to be solved rather than as constitutive of international order.[1] How might IR develop a more attuned revolutionary antenna? And how might this volume help with this task?

First, IR scholarship should pay more attention to a central subject of this volume: revolutionary waves. Revolutionary waves are groups of revolutions that arise from a similar context, have linked objectives, and share common features, whether in terms of their organizational form (e.g., a horizontalist people-power movement), tactics (e.g., a commitment to nonviolence), and/or their symbolic repertoires (e.g., shared colors).[2] *Revolutionary World* includes chapters on well-known waves, such as 1848 and 1989, and others that are, perhaps, less well known, such as the “Constitutional Revolutions” of the early twentieth century. The book makes clear that international dynamics must be entwined with domestic factors in order to explain why revolutionary waves instigate uprisings “here” and not “there.” This focus on waves is a logical extension of scholarship on the international features of revolutionary change, which, since the work of Theda Skocpol and others in the 1970s, has become a significant strand of research in comparative politics and sociology, if not in IR.[3] But there are different ways of undertaking this research. A minimalist approach is to “add the international and stir,” examining how revolutionary tactics and symbols cross borders, for example, while leaving existing theoretical schemas in place. A more maximalist approach recalibrates what it is we mean by revolutions, for example by making the object of inquiry itself transnational or by focusing on groups of revolutions that are not contained by a specific geography. In this way of thinking, revolutionary waves become more than the sum of their parts; rather, they become the subject matter of revolutions research itself. In taking up this maximalist agenda, this book provides the foundations for an original, potentially productive research agenda.

A second point of contact is the volume’s insistence on the back-and-forth between revolutionary history and theory. All but one of the contributors to *Revolutionary World* are historians, yet most of the chapters engage theoretical work on the subject, if sometimes only ceremonially. More importantly, the volume points to a deeper way in which history and theory are co-implicated. As Motadel outlines in the book’s introduction, the meaning and practice of revolutions has changed over time, from the circular movement of political cycles that characterized European understandings of the term in the early modern period to the sudden, often violent transformations that revolution came to mean over subsequent centuries. In this way, the concept of revolution has not just been forged *in* history, it has been remade *through* history. The threads of revolution run from the Atlantic revolutions of the late nineteenth century to the nationalist uprisings in Europe in 1848, the constitutional revolutions of the early twentieth century, the socialist uprisings inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution in the twentieth century, “Third World” movements in Cuba, Vietnam, Angola

and elsewhere during the Cold War, the unarmed uprisings in Eastern and Central Europe in 1989, the Arab Uprisings of 2011, and up to the present day. Revolution as concept and practice has been remade in these events. Revolution is not an abstract ideal that exists *outside* history, but a concept-practice that is forged *in* history.

This insight matters to how we understand contemporary revolutions. For all their capacity to stir up societies around the world, few uprisings of the post-1989 period have radically broken with existing conditions. In many ways, contemporary revolutions are not just limited, but *self-limited*—revolutionaries deliberately hem themselves in, whether by adopting tactics that do not threaten a state's control over its coercive apparatus, introducing liberal reforms at home, or joining international organizations abroad. This move represents a rejection of the twentieth-century experience of revolutionary states, many of which were marred by despotism. But it also represents the latest twist in a long-running drama between revolutions and liberalism, one that was born in radical fusion in the late eighteenth century, underwent divorce in the twentieth century as revolution was taken up primarily by leftist and anticolonial forces, and which has remarried, or at least agreed to cohabit, in the present day. If *Revolutionary World* does not examine this particular issue closely, it does provide valuable illustrations of a more general point—we need to combine history and theory in order to explain the changing ways in which revolutions are understood and practiced.

A third issue opened by *Revolutionary World* concerns the globalization of revolution. The study of revolutions has been marred by Eurocentrism, whether in terms of the cases it sees as archetypal or in the categories it uses to construct theories. The lived experience of revolution has always exceeded this dual limitation. To take one example, shifting the center of gravity in the Atlantic Age of Revolution from France to Haiti poses a range of new questions, not least whether ideas of equality, justice, and solidarity can include, both then and now, nonwhite peoples. Even more productive is the approach taken by David Bell in his chapter, which joins France and Haiti—and other cases—in a single field of practice, one brought together by transnational entanglements of peoples, conflict, trade, ideas, and more. This expansiveness in the subject matter of revolutions is, therefore, both empirical (it widens our universe of cases) and theoretical (it broadens our conceptual and analytical frameworks). It is remarkable, and not in a good way, that the social science of revolution has been, until relatively recently, built on a handful of “great” cases. The absence of comparative or transnational work on “small” or “forgotten” revolutions, particularly from places we now think of as the Global South, is a striking, persistent shortcoming of the field.[4] We can, and must, do better. This volume is an important step in that direction.

Finally, there is the opening presented by the volume to analysis of nonprogressive forms of revolution. For almost the entire modern period, revolutions have been studied as if they could only be secular, liberal, or leftist projects, aimed at ideals of social justice and emancipation. This bias toward self-consciously progressive movements has been a significant blind spot in revolutionary analysis, preventing scholars from paying sufficient attention to radical programs that do not conform to the progressive script: fascism, hypernationalism, religiously inspired revolutionaries, and more. The 1979 revolution in Iran should have been a spur to this work. But despite the world-historical magnitude of the Iranian revolution, and despite the subsequent radicalization of both Shi'a and Sunni movements over the past forty years, research on revolutions has failed to sufficiently address the emergence of varieties of militant Islamism.

This issue is discussed at length in an insightful chapter by Abbas Amanat, which chronicles the multiple ways in which Iran's revolution has shaped, and continues to shape, key aspects of global politics, not least by identifying the close connection between state repression, inequality, and demographic change on the one hand and heightened revolutionary sentiment on the other. Yet Amanat's contribution is, in more ways than one, exceptional.[5] The broader silence on this subject by revolutions researchers is not just intellectually negligent but also politically dangerous. While unarmed, people-power movements remain the main focus of Western researchers and activists, militant Islamists and white supremacists are taking part in armed campaigns around the world, some of them sporadic, many of them sustained. If the current centers of militant Islamism can be found in central-west Asia and the Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa, the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021 shows that revolutionary white nationalism is entrenched within Western democracies. Given their extensive scope, these violent strains of revolution should occupy a much more central role within revolutions research.[6]

All in all, therefore, this volume demonstrates the kind of open-minded analysis that the field of revolutionary studies requires. It is a thought-provoking, agenda-setting book. I hope it is widely read, not just by historians, but also by IR scholars. The book's main points of emphasis—revolutionary waves as objects of analysis, the genetic relationship between history and theory, the need to globalize case selection, and the centrality to contemporary world politics of nonprogressive revolutionary strains—are highly promising avenues for future research. We could not wish for a richer illustration of the ways in which the past of revolutions informs their present, nor of the many ways in which revolutions are a vital area of study in contemporary world politics.

George Lawson is professor of international relations at the Australian National University. His most recent books are Anatomies of Revolution (Cambridge, 2019) and, with Colin Beck, Mlada Bukovansky, Erica Chenoweth, Sharon Nepstad and Daniel Ritter, On Revolutions: Unruly Politics in the Contemporary World (Oxford, 2022).

Notes

[1]. Rare exceptions include Jamie Allinson, "Counter-Revolution as International Phenomenon," *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 320-44; Nick Bisley, "Revolution, Order and International Politics," *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 1 (2004): 49-69; Mlada Bukovansky, *Legitimacy and Power Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Jeff Colgan, "Domestic Revolutionary Leaders and International Conflict," *World Politics* 65, no. 4 (2013): 656-90; Fred Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999); George Lawson, *Anatomies of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Maryam Panah, "Social Revolutions: The Elusive Emergence of an Agenda in International Relations," *Review of International Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 271-92; and Stephen Walt, *Revolutions and War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

[2]. Lawson, *Anatomies of Revolution*, 74-75.

[3]. Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). Also see: Colin Beck, "The World-Cultural Origins of Revolutionary Waves," *Social Science History* 35, no. 2 (2011): 167-207; John Foran, *Taking Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006);

Jack Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (London: Routledge, 2016); Charles Kurzman, *Democracy Denied, 1905-1915* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Jean Lachapelle et al., "Social Revolution and Authoritarian Durability," *World Politics* 72, no. 4 (2020): 557-600; John Markoff, *Waves of Democracy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 1996); Daniel Ritter, *The Iron Cage of Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Nader Sohrabi, "Global Waves, Local Actors: What the Young Turks Knew about Other Revolutions and Why It Mattered," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44, no. 1 (2002): 45-79.

[4]. Eric Selbin, *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance* (London: Zed Books, 2010).

[5]. Although also see the discussion in Jack Goldstone, Leonid Grigin, and Andrey Korotayev, eds., *New Waves of Revolution in the 21st Century* (New York: Springer, forthcoming 2022).

[6]. This is not to say that these groups are not studied—they are, whether in terrorist studies, analysis of "rebel governance," work on political violence, or other subfields. Rather, the point is that there should be more explicit points of connection between these subfields and revolutions research. For a promising move in this direction, see Megan Stewart, *Governing for Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Citation: George Lawson. Review of Motadel, David, ed., *Revolutionary World: Global Upheaval in the Modern Age*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. January, 2022. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56823>

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