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Revolutions: A Worldwide Introduction to Political and Social Change

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Sanderson's book provides a general introduction to the extensive scholarly literature on the dynamics of social and political revolutions. Consonant with this stated aim it is organized into eight following parts: (i) a general introduction to the phenomena of social and political revolutions; (ii) a review of the literature on the 'great historical revolutions' (French, Russian and Chinese); (iii) a review of 'revolutions in the third world' (Cuba, Nicaragua, Iran, the Philippines); (iv) a two-chapter exposition of the sociological literature on the theory ('causes of') revolution'; (v) a review of what the author for some unexplained reason regards as 'revolutions from above' (Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union); and (vi) a review of 'the outcomes of the revolution', which, again surprisingly, leads not to any general theoretical conclusions but rather to an 'epilogue' on 'the future of revolutions.' This overview of the literature on social and political revolutions in 'the modern era' (since the 1500s) is followed with an appendix in the form of a short set of biographical vignettes on some 'leading students of revolution.' The book ends with some suggested readings and list of references.

The first feature of the book is that it does not purport to provide, or begin with, an overarching theoretical framework for sociology of revolutions. This is a positive and negative feature, the book's strength and its weakness. The strength is that the readers are exposed at the outset to diverse definitions and ideas about the nature of revolutions. This is useful in that these ideas are formulated by writers much more knowledgeable about revolutions than the author, whose knowledge appears to be derived and, it has to be said (or here written), overly general and somewhat superficial notwithstanding his previous writings on broad historical dynamics of social change.

The weakness of the book, also deriving from the approach adopted (a general review of the scholarly literature), is that despite the variety of cases of revolution reviewed the reader ends up with actually little feel for, and understanding of the actual complex dynamics that make up processes of revolutionary change. The book provides no description and analysis of these dynamics, nor do we hear the voices of the social and political actors. Thus we get no sense of the drama of revolutionary dynamics and change that readers of books such as John Womack's *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* would get. Perhaps this is a justifiable limitation, the author's purpose being to provide only a general introduction to a complex and vast sociological literature and to make this literature understandable and accessible in an overview form. However, is reading the book likely to provide students and readers with a taste to dip into the muddy waters of this literature? The short biographies in the appendix perhaps serve this purpose better, providing as they do brief glimpses of the lives of some leading students and scholars of social and political revolutions.

The one apparently original, albeit questionable working idea that the author introduces, and concludes with, is that revolutions as he defines and classifies them (excluding, for example, processes of revolutionary social change that do not entail 'violent forms of collective action against the social structure of economic and political power, or violence) are 'products of modern history', i.e. a matter of the past 200 to 500 years. Actually the author might better have left this idea alone in that he does not adequately justify or explain it. In fact, he might better have simply stated his

intention to limit the book's focus and scope to 'revolutions in the modern era'. For these are the revolutions that he has read about and studied in the scholarly literature.

The author does not seem to have an ideological or theoretical axe to grind in his introduction to revolutions but he does seem to have a decided penchant for a 'world systems' approach to large-scale process of social change, making repeated direct and indirect reference to theorists such as Immanuel Wallerstein who, as it happens, has never himself studied the dynamics of any particular revolutionary process, or contributed directly to the construction of a sociological theory of revolution, limiting himself to the provision of a broad analytical and typological framework for a structural-historical analysis of social processes. In this regard, it is fortunate that author has spared readers his rather questionable ideas regarding his 'Darwinian Conflict Perspective' on the historical dynamics of social change (Sanderson, 2001).

The author does not provide readers any overarching theoretical framework for understanding revolutions. But he does provide a loose analytical or typological framework, allowing him to identify and classify revolutions as 'social' (major explosions of transformative social change) and 'political' (less far-reaching instances of change in the political regime – regime breakdown or regime change?). The author's working definition and typology leads him to ignore, for example, processes of change associated with what has been described as 'silent revolution' (transformative change without political violence) such as that have been wrought in the past two decades, in the 1980s and 1990s, under conditions of a 'conservative reaction' to institutional structures and developments associated with liberal or radical forms of analysis and ideology. This 'silent revolution' is not unlike that which followed the French revolution in reaction to diverse struggles for 'freedom' (and 'equality') by serfs from the shackles of serfdom, of 'men of science' from the intellectual tyranny of the church, of an emergent 'bourgeoisie' (merchants, bankers, industrialists...) from restrictions on their 'freedom of enterprise', of citizens from the arbitrary will and whims of the monarch, of subordinate classes from the institutions of class rule. In any case, these and such at times revolutionary processes are entirely excluded, as are, less understandably, some 20th century 'revolutions' associated with a process of national liberation from various colonialisms, or class-based social and/or political revolutions in Mexico and Bolivia, for example.

The noted limitations of the book in terms of the range and type of social movements reviewed perhaps are acceptable. After all, the book does review the major revolutions of our time (with some exceptions such as the Mexican, which is only discussed in the appendix), at least at the level of the scholarly literature if not directly in terms of their actual dynamics. And the book covers a very large canvas, too large to paint except in broad brushstrokes. Also, no book can and should be everything for everyone. After all, the author only proposes to provide a readable introduction to a large and most important scholarly literature on important process of social change. And the book achieves this objective. It is written in an engaging style. It is a very readable introduction to the literature and accessible to undergraduate students. The book also introduces students to some important book length studies and students of social and political revolutions. This too is useful, although not particularly illuminating of revolutionary dynamics of social change.

In fact, upon finishing the book one ends up with surprisingly little understanding of the processes of revolutionary change. But perhaps this is a reflection of the limitations of the scholarly literature. The abundant literature certainly introduces and throws up all sorts of ideas, some of them useful for

the construction of sociological theories of revolutionary process of change and socio-political movements. Perhaps —and this is a limitation of the book – it might have been useful to have a critical assessment of the major sociological theories of revolutions, such as Tilly’s ‘resource mobilization theory.’ In fact, this theory is summarized but not analyzed critically or confronted with alternative theories — for example, those based on Skocpal’s now classical state-centred approach or equally classical Marxist class analysis. Unfortunately, critical factors specified by these and other sociological theories, such as the social base of revolutionary movements (peasant producers, indigenous communities, the working class in its variable forms) are not brought into focus. One reason for this is that author’s understanding of some forms of theoretical analysis, such as Marxist class analysis, is very limited if not deficient. In the concluding chapter, rather than providing some rather speculative reflections on the meagre prospects of revolutionary change in a post-modernist era, it might have been more useful to conclude with an identification, if not analysis, of the most critical variables of revolutionary change, including the critical contextual, structural and strategic factors of analysis. This the book does not do.

The author does not hesitate to introduce readers to his own ideas and predilections regarding the study of revolutions, although often these ideas are not reflected upon or justified. For example, the author notes that in her analysis of social dynamics of the Cuban revolution Eckstein probably overstates the case for its achievement because ‘she is a socialist.’ But the author does not reflect on the fact that his own ‘non-socialist’ views and orientation leads him, in his brief gloss on the Cuban revolution, to understate these achievements. In fact, the author’s understanding of the dynamics of this movement, as well as others, is sometime contrived, derivative and too distant — based on a simple review of different scholarly studies. In many cases, as in the case of the Cuban revolution, the author’s knowledge and his summary review of revolutionary dynamics is limited to the particular scholars whose works he happened to have read. In the case of the Cuban revolution, which should have been given more attention given that it is arguably the only on-going (relatively successful and not reversed or halted in its tracks) ‘revolution’, the author’s reading is restricted to Eckstein. Eckstein’s analysis, as it happens, is important for students to read. However, the literature is so voluminous and interpretations of its dynamics so diverse, that one might very well quibble with an introduction based on this one reading.

So what can we conclude about the book? That it is a somewhat useful but quite limited introduction to the phenomena of social and political revolution and even more so to the scholarly literature on this phenomena. If, as it might, it serves to introduce students to other more knowledgeable students of revolution then that it is a useful contribution. A readable and accessible style is another useful contribution. For an understanding of what can be concluded from almost a hundred years of sociological study the book is less useful. For this understanding we have to turn elsewhere.

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Henry Veltmeyer’s most recent work has been research into the dynamics of several Latin American social movements (Bolivia, Ecuador) published in a book, co-authored by James Petras, *Social Movements and State Power: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador* (London, Pluto Books, 2005).

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