

The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran. By Charles Kurzman. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004. \$27.95.

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Faulting the literature on revolution for overstating its explanatory pretensions, Kurzman casts his inquiry into the causes of the 1979 revolution in Iran as an indictment. Theories of revolutions wrap their claims as if they could have predictive value. This “as if” assumption, however, is misleading. In revolutionary times, people experience deep confusion, and in the midst of this experience, they shift, reconsider, or alter their preferences. Since these processes elude definite patterns, any retroactive assessment framed as if prediction could have been possible is misleading (p. 135).

Coupled with this broad indictment in *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* are critiques targeted at what Kurzman labels the “political, organizational, cultural, economic, and military explanations” of revolutions. Political opportunity arguments fail to explain why Islamists decided to mobilize at a time—the end of 1977—when the Shah was reverting to a repressive stance (chap. 2). Organizational accounts portraying the mosque network as a key resource overlook the fact that until early 1978 most prominent Islamist clerics opposed any attempt to overthrow the regime. Initially, mosques were not sites for mobilization (chap. 3). Cultural explanations, which infer revolutionary fervor from religious dispositions, are problematic in two respects. First, they confuse the effect for the cause. The political significance of religious ceremonies emerged in the course of the contention process. Second, cultural explanations misrepresent the demonstrators’ willingness to die as martyrs for the cause (chap. 4). Economic explanations in terms of sector unbalance, socioeconomic dislocations, and (relative) deprivation do not fare well from a comparative viewpoint (chap. 5). The economic situation in Iran was not worse than in countries with a similar development pattern. Furthermore, social groups’ economic trajectories do not correlate with their involvement in revolutionary activism. As for accounts focused on coercive capacities, they miss the point (chap. 6): “After each atrocity the revolution lurched forward” (p. 117). “Repression, not vacillation, hardened the attitudes of the populace” (p. 116).

The problem with these “usual” explanations is that they “leave a residual of evidence that just doesn’t fit” (p. 5). They are “only partially valid” (p. 163). Their “sweeping statements” (p. 7) always prove incorrect in some respects. Observing that “all these explanations face significant anomalies” and anticipating that any attempt to devise a new explanation would undergo a similar fate, Kurzman proposes an “anti-explanation,” which acknowledges anomaly, “puts it in the foreground,” and “reconstructs the lived experience of revolution” (pp. 165–66). Here the main

claim is that, in revolutionary times, people's behavior is influenced by their assessment of the scope of the protest: "Viability" is the key term. People get involved when they view a movement as "viable," that is, as "having a realistic chance of success" (p. 136).

There is much to learn from this rich account. A definite strength is its focus on the temporality of the mobilization process through a close-up on the evidence documenting actors' subjective representations. All chapters are arrayed in a chronological order. Each, accordingly, explores a span of the chronology: "1977" (chap. 2), "early 1978" (chap. 3), "mid-1978" (chap. 4), "fall 1978" (chap. 5), "winter 1978-79" (chaps. 6, 7). Since, furthermore, each chapter explicitly engages one explanation, the descriptive foci are analytical informed and the analytical arguments grounded in empirical descriptions. In blending the descriptive and analytical genres, Kurzman draws on published testimonies, interviews in the press, interviews by scholars, as well as interviews he conducted in Istanbul in 1998-99. This combination of genres serves the book very well.

The paradox is that when *The Unthinkable Revolution* advances its main thesis, it proceeds in the same mode as those explanations that the book dismisses for their partial validity and constitutive defect. If the thrust of an explanation is to set forth claims that stand on their own independent of the reference to the specifics of a case, then an account in terms of confusion and viability is indeed "explanatory." Furthermore, contrary to what Kurzman's posture is intended to suggest when he sets his account in contrast to "social science" (pp. 4, 9), "social scientists" (pp. 5-7, 11, 136), "academic debate" (pp. 15, 84), or even "academic prose" (pp. 85, 135, 162), this book is steeped in a social scientific understanding of contention processes. The claim about viability rests on, and is indebted to, well-elaborated theoretical arguments cast in terms of critical mass and learning (chap. 7)—arguments which their proponents no doubt would describe as having explanatory value.

Second, the argument in terms of viability, as Kurzman sets it forth, is "explanatory" in the same way "usual explanations" are. For instance the claim that "Iranians were more likely to participate in revolutionary events if they felt that many others would do the same" (p. 170) is as "sweeping" as those that Kurzman castigates for overlooking diversity, heterogeneity, and variation (p. 7). Here, confusion and viability become broad and unqualified analytical clues. These clues rest on a postulate of subjective homogeneity. They dilute the empirical referent and generate "anomalies" of their own—cases in which individuals either do not experience confusion or adopt an oppositional stance without paying much attention to the scope of the protest. Further, the claims that confusion and viability are prevalent modes in high-contention conjunctures are predictive claims. On this point, it is worth noting that, at times, Kurzman's own account lapses into an explicit retroactive and predictive mode. Consider the following assessment: "Victory may be dated to mid-November 1978, when the shah played his last card by installing a military government" (p. 137).

In other words, from mid-November 1978 on, the game was settled. Does not this assessment amount to predicting the outcome retroactively?

These few remarks do not invalidate the relevance of Kurzman's account of the 1979 revolution. Nor do they undermine the soundness of his focus on subjective assessments. Rather, they point to a different diagnosis of the main challenge facing explanatory claims applied to high-contention conjunctures. Unconditional and sweeping statements such as "opportunities, resources, culture, deprivation, the balance of forces or viability determine protest" are problematic precisely because they have this dubious flexibility that makes them either false or true depending on the empirical focus and its degree of precision. From this perspective, the key issue is whether explanatory claims are specific enough to define the structural and contextual factors conditioning their validity. The multiplicity of the processes at play in high-contention conjunctures and their interactive character make collective outcomes indeed unpredictable. It does not follow that these interactive processes and their interaction effects cannot be investigated for their own sake.

Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence. By Jeremy M. Weinstein. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. 402. \$26.99.

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Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence offers new insights into our understanding of the dynamics of political turmoil in the developing world. Jeremy Weinstein employs novel conceptual models and research strategies to enhance existing explanations of the character and intensity of collective violence committed by nonstate insurgents during civil wars. As opposed to conventional conflict studies, which begin with the nature of the state and its interactions with civil society and political challengers, Weinstein's innovative analysis commences with a focus on the initial environmental conditions of the rebel army on the eve of civil war and the rebels' subsequent relationship with the noncombatant population it may need for sustenance. In particular, the resource endowments available to rebel leaders at the time of launching an insurgent campaign play a decisive role in the type of strategies, tactics, recruitment, control, and governance patterns that revolutionary leaders will deploy, including the level of violence directed at the noncombatant population.

The central thesis of Weinstein's book states that insurgencies that commence in resource-rich environments, either through external funding or by virtue of local natural resources, will organize their campaigns around the use of more indiscriminate violence and will recruit soldiers by enticing them with short-term material incentives (called "opportunistic" rebellions). These conditions lead to indiscipline in the ranks of