

REVIEW ESSAY

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THE ANATOMY OF “SOCIAL” REVOLUTION; OR, THE COMPARATIVE METHOD AS A CONFIDENCE GAME

GERBER, HAIM. *Islam, Guerrilla War, and Revolution. A Study in Comparative Social History*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, London 1988. v, 209 pp. \$ 28.50.

The case-history method of presenting anthropological arguments has now been in vogue for many years. [...] The anthropologist propounds some rather preposterous hypothesis of a very general kind and then puts forward his cases to illustrate the argument. The technique of argument is still that of Frazer. Insight comes from the anthropologist's private intuition; the evidence is only put in by way of illustration. (*Edmund Leach*)*

Read historian for anthropologist, and Leach describes the methodology of Haim Gerber's botched comparative study on revolutionary war in Islamic societies.¹ The hypothesis Gerber propounds is that “social” revolutions occur because class conflict combines with successful nationalist guerrilla wars led by revolutionary intellectuals.² The cases he puts forward to illustrate the argument are Albania (1942–1944) and South Yemen (1963–1967), with Algeria (1954–1962) and Afghanistan (1978–) appended to show that when class conflict is subdued, guerrilla wars do not result in “social” revolution. Comparative history notwithstanding, the technique of argument is still that of Frazer – or Freud. Insight owes to intuition; the evidence goes in as illustration.³

* Epigraph: Edmund Leach, *Pul Eliya, a Village in Ceylon: A Study of Land Tenure and Kinship* (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 11–12.

¹ Haim Gerber, *Islam, Guerrilla War, and Revolution: A Study in Comparative Social History* (Boulder and London, 1988).

² *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3, 15–16.

³ James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London, 1922), uses the hypothetico-illustrative technique called Bacon's induction by enumeration and elimination, Mill's methods of agreement and difference, or (in social science) the comparative method. Freud's repressed reliance on intuition and illustration is a leitmotif of Frank J. Sulloway, *Freud, Biologist of the Mind: Beyond the Psychoanalytic Legend* (New York, 1979). Cf. note 5 below.

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Gerber's trouble is hypothesis, however, not technique of argument. Make no mistake. Intuitive insight and illustrative evidence are the stock in trade of social science and always have been. Read social theory for anthropology, cut "preposterous", and Leach describes the technique of argument ever since Thucydides. What matters is the hypothesis argued on the evidence available, not the method of presentation. Theda Skocpol's methodological fan dance flashes the naked truth that comparative and historical sociologists *all* put forward their cases to illustrate arguments, *even* when they hew to the rule that negative as well as positive cases must be explained by the hypothesis propounded.⁴ In use, the comparative method is not a method of critical testing or falsification, mainly, but a method of persuasion – and no more credible or conclusive than the evidence compared.⁵ Kosher comparative method cannot salvage a preposterous hypothesis argued on exiguous evidence, which (as shown below) is what Gerber serves up.

Gerber's hypothesis, again, is that "social" revolutions occur because class conflict combines with patriotic guerrilla wars led by revolutionary intellectuals. Before criticizing his hypothesis, however, one must first get clear what he tries to explain. Gerber conceives "social" revolution as a "fast, violent, and total revolution that involves far-reaching changes in power and class relations". He makes it "by definition a *successful* revolution" so a "failed social revolution" is a "contradiction in terms".⁶ Readers who dread defining "revolution" need not fear: Gerber keeps it simple in his case studies, where "social" means Communist so "social" revolutions happen whenever Communists seize state power and use it to change society.⁷ With that, the explanatory problem becomes why Communist

⁴ Theda Skocpol, "Emerging Agendas and Recurrent Strategies in Historical Sociology", in Theda Skocpol (ed.), *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 356–391, the methodological pedigree of Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge, 1979), scores an own goal.

⁵ Skocpol contends the comparative method can "validate", not merely "illustrate" hypotheses (*States*, p. 38), though that is a fallacy (Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London, 1972), pp. 27–145, 251–281). The most it can do is test hypotheses by producing exceptions, even as theorists seldom subvert their own ideas by researching counterevidence: competitors do that (Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 2 vols (London, 1966), 2, pp. 260, 267, 217, 218, 220, 221).

⁶ Gerber, *Islam*, pp. 5, 6.

⁷ It transpires that the "takeover by the Albanian Communist party may properly be called a social revolution", also that South Yemen "became a Marxist country. The South Yemeni revolution thus clearly qualifies as a radical social revolution" (*ibid.*, pp. 32, 48).

“success” overcame Albania and South Yemen but not Algeria or Afghanistan.⁸

Gerber’s solution – Communist revolutionaries win power by surfing a wave of peasant nationalism while landed elites sit out a patriotic guerrilla war – sums up his crypto-Marxist anatomy of “social” revolution, which looks like this:

First is the “necessary societal background” or “precondition” of a “social” revolution, namely, an “appropriate class structure” whose “cleavages and gaps” create “deep-seated discontent” but at the same time admit “tactical autonomy”. Agrarian societies best fit the bill where “decentralized” sharecropping makes class exploitation “visible and personal”. When peasants cultivate holdings they “consider their own” yet have to rent from absentee landlords who serve “no positive function”, their “potential for resentment is understandably great”, as is their “freedom to organize or be organized by sympathetic outsiders” if central authority comes unstuck.⁹

Next comes the desertion of the “landowning elite” amid a guerrilla war of national liberation, which they sit out because combat is “too arduous” as well as “dangerous” to their members, who cannot hack “hardship” and whom the enemy know “too well” and would destroy “immediately” if they took part. Their default leaves the “arduous job” of national liberation to the “lower classes, who no doubt feel resentment”.¹⁰

Enter a new middle-class “counter-elite” of revolutionary intellectuals who take command of the war effort, getting “tactical control” of peasants “normally client to the landed upper class”. Once accepted as guerrilla leaders, this “counter-elite” add “social drops to the nationalist beverage” by delegitimizing the “mode of economic exploitation” on which the “ruling elite’s power is based”. Yet while the guerrillas form a “formidable military power [...] imbued with radical ideology”, no one “tries to nip that power in the bud” because its “driving force seems purely nationalist”. By the time the “ruling elite” wise up, therefore, “it is already much too late”.¹¹

In short, the “transfer of allegiance” from “ruling elite” to “revolutionary elite” takes place because the latter lead a successful guerrilla war of national liberation. The “unintending masses” boost a “revolutionary van-

⁸ *Sic transit gloria mundi*. Gerber shows the danger of reading Communist revolutions as the culmination or consummation of history. The very idea now sounds anachronistic, even oxymoronic.

⁹ Gerber, *Islam*, pp. 6–7, 178–179, 17, 8. Gerber loans “decentralized sharecropping” from Jeffery M. Paige, *Agrarian Revolution: Social Movements and Export Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World* (New York, 1975), pp. 58–71, 358–376.

¹⁰ Gerber, *Islam*, pp. 16, 179.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17, 178–179.

guard” to power “unaware” that the new leaders mean “to go much further than just independence”.¹² How far the revolutionaries go falls outside Gerber’s narrative though not his analysis: the “far-reaching changes in power and class relations” that “social” revolutions involve occur *after* the radicals found a new regime. Why this fact refutes Gerber’s hypothesis will be clear in a moment. For now, note that his definition of “social” revolution commits him to explaining two things – why revolutionary vanguards win state power and then why they use it to make their revolution “social” enough to satisfy his defining criteria. Note too that explaining the one is not explaining the other – seizing state power and setting social policy are different events – so that Gerber has to explain them each in turn in order to explain them both together. That means explaining the actions they each consist in and (as each round of actions taken constrains choices made later) showing how one event leads to the next in a cumulative causal sequence.¹³

Now back to Gerber’s hypothesis that when a guerrilla war “erupts” in a society “riven by class conflict”, it triggers a “sociological mechanism” that churns out a “radical left-wing regime”. The “mechanism” works as noted: class interest leads absentee landlords to desert or defect; nationalism leads peasants to boost revolutionary radicals to power; so a “social” revolution follows as a matter of course. But where big native landlords either do not exist (as in Algeria) or are symbiotic with and not parasitic on peasants (as in Afghanistan), a guerrilla war triggers no such “mechanism”, so no “social” revolution occurs. Gerber concludes that since “social” revolution owes to his “sociological mechanism”, the vanguard party and its ideology do not matter much. A revolutionary situation is a “supermarket” where the “crowd chooses an ideology and elite” to suit its “needs and wishes”, which in the cases compared are nationalist. Neither does Marxist ideology cause nor can Muslim faith prevent “social” revolution once the fatal “mechanism” is in motion.¹⁴

Note that Gerber’s “sociological mechanism” hinges on situational logic: the relevant actors face some predicament defined by their goals and constraints; what action they take depends on what they want and what they think they must do to get it. Now situational logic obliges one not only to reconstruct the actors’ definition of the situation (comprising their goals and constraints), but also to give evidence of the goals and constraints one imputes – evidence that one’s situational model fits the actors’ own definition of the situation or (as anthropologists say) the “native’s point of view”. The evidence may be direct or circumstantial. But evidence there has to be.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 185.

¹³ These peremptory remarks on explanation proceed from *Rethinking Revolutions and Collective Violence: Studies on Concept, Theory, and Method* (Amsterdam, 1990), which I cite as an excuse for not going into detail here.

¹⁴ Gerber, *Islam*, pp. 15, 177, 11–12, 2–4, 180–185.

Otherwise, situational logic is vain – social science fiction, ideological humbug, or both rolled into one.¹⁵

With these methodological cautions in mind, take one last look at Gerber's hypothesis and the evidence he gives for his claims about historical causation – claims that when a guerrilla war starts absentee landlords chicken out, thus complicating social resentment with treason – so peasant patriots put Communists in power and a “social” revolution ensues automatically. This causal chain connecting class conflict, peasant nationalism, and “social” revolution pops all three links at the first touch of criticism.

Leave aside Gerber's scrappy description of class and power in Albania and South Yemen; forget whether his crypto-Marxist categories make social structures commensurable; ask only what evidence he gives that when a guerrilla war started, incumbent elites left insurgent masses in the lurch because those elites hated hardship and feared reprisals.¹⁶ The evidence consists of his say-so plus two brief anecdotes – one on Albania, one on South Yemen – that he reads as positive proof of his hypothesis. The first comes from a British agent who met secretly in Tirana in September 1944 with two members of the Vlora family, which owned 60,000 hectares in south Albania. His host, Nureddin Vlora, “resplendent in white ducks and a white silk bush shirt”, spoke of fearing “violent revolution” and the “destruction of the ‘cultured classes’”. The second comes from a North Yemeni who went six weeks (no place or date given) with South Yemeni guerrillas, four of whom lived on a “daily ration of one loaf of bread and a can of sardines”, which attests that “only members of the lower classes” could “endure such long and difficult hardships”.¹⁷ Incredulous readers should consult the original.

The next link in the causal chain is peasant nationalism, which Communists exploit, interposing as resistance leaders. Here, however, Gerber has circumstantial evidence on his side (if not in his book) thanks to Chalmers Johnson, who – in a study published thirty years ago and debated still though absent from Gerber's bibliography – argues that the catalyst of Communist revolution in China was the Japanese army, which (during World War II) wrecked the Nationalists and wreaked “such savagery” that peasants turned to the Communist Party en masse as the “only true leader

¹⁵ Ditto note 13 above. The monograph cited there presents the homework behind this contentious paragraph.

¹⁶ Gerber's hit-or-miss class analysis of Albania and South Yemen (*Islam*, pp. 35–42, 53–88) looks for “signs of discontent” with the “reigning social order” because if (as he assumes) “social” revolutions owe in part to “deep resentment” of an “extremely inegalitarian social structure” (*ibid.*, p. 78), he needs independent evidence for that leg of his explanatory argument to avoid circularity. If evidence exists that lower-class discontent with “social structure” indeed motivated revolutionary violence, Gerber keeps it well hidden.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 174, 41, 45, 196, 96.

of anti-Japanese guerrilla resistance".¹⁸ If Johnson is right that Communists must be *national* socialists to get the mass backing they need to win guerrilla wars, the good news for Gerber is support for the peasant nationalist plank of his argument. The bad news is that nationalism cuts two ways. If Communists win when they field the only hard-hitting nationalist forces, they lose when competitors upstage them in combat. Peasant nationalism can buoy guerrillas of *any* nationalist persuasion; and if non-Communist revolutionaries do better by it (as they did in Algeria), no "social" revolution attends their accession.

The last link in Gerber's causal chain is a Marxist regime to effect the "changes in power and class relations" that make a revolution "social". No Marxist regime, no "social" revolution. Gerber has little to say about Marxist rulers, only that they "wiped out" the "traditional elite" in Albania and saw to "blood baths" and "radical land reform" in South Yemen.¹⁹ By censoring the measures taken and defining "social" revolution by Communist rule, he verges on tautology here. But no matter. The real trouble is that evidence of this last link in the causal chain refutes rather than confirms his hypothesis. Watch closely. The hypothesis says landlord treason in a guerrilla war breeds peasant nationalism, which boosts Communists to power who always remake society by force. Now Gerber has no evidence for the first part of his hypothesis while evidence for the second shows a party that profits from peasant nationalism need not be Communist – so if the "wrong" party wins, a "social" revolution is lost. Having swung and missed twice he then takes a called third strike on why Marxists in power make "social" revolution. The policies they pursue all depend on their goals and constraints – on what they want and think they must do to get it. But Gerber draws a blank because his hypothesis rules ideology out of account.²⁰ Why bother explaining the policy decisions that constitute "social" revolutions when his "sociological mechanism" makes them a foregone conclusion?

The complete collapse of Gerber's explanatory argument comes with the "test case" he puts forward to clinch his hypothesis by the comparative method. Despite guerrilla warfare and peasant nationalism, no "social" revolution swept Algeria after the FLN took power in 1962. The common-sense explanation is that the Communists were as French as the colonial

¹⁸ On that hypothesis and its critics see Chalmers Johnson, "Peasant Nationalism Revisited: The Biography of a Book", *China Quarterly*, 72 (1977), pp. 766–785, together with Chalmers Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937–1945* (Stanford, 1962).

¹⁹ Gerber, *Islam*, pp. 173, 101. Note that the "final turn to Marxism" in South Yemen occurred in June 1969 whereas the British had quit Aden in November 1967. Gerber admits he cannot explain the delay (*ibid.*, pp. 102, 97, 103).

²⁰ Ditto note 13 above.

regime while the FLN was anti-Marxist all along and stood no competitors.²¹ Gerber's "adequate social explanation", however, is that since big landlords were French, the "class struggle was simultaneously also [*sic*] the national struggle". So supplanting the French and seizing their property constituted not only a "national but also a social revolution" that remained "moderate in terms of social policy". "Nationalist ideology was enough to sustain such a revolution" since "peasants had no political reason to opt for socially radical ideas".²² Peasants had no more say in social policy than French owners had estates in the main FLN guerrilla base areas Aurès and Kabylia (Wilayas 1 and 2).²³ But inconvenient facts never incommode Gerber, who ignores them. He waves the magic wand of comparison and hey presto counterexample is confirmation.

Readers who think the comparative method here is a confidence game are right, though Gerber seems innocent of any intent to deceive. Before fooling others he had to fool himself first. He claims the "methodology of comparative social history" is not just a "powerful tool" but a "new paradigm", a "new mode of thinking" that ("canonized" by Skocpol *et al.*) made a "small-scale scientific revolution" in sociology.²⁴ The trouble is, the comparative method is only as sound as the premises it proceeds from. Some examples will illustrate. On 16 October 1348, Clement VI at Avignon issued a bull methodologists may ponder. He refuted the theory blaming Jews for the plague by pointing out that it killed them too (method of agreement) and spread where no Jews were living (method of difference). His own hypothesis was either astrological conjunctions or retribution from God.²⁵ Keynes (quoting Frazer's *Golden Bough*) remarks that when Polish peasants have bad harvests after adopting iron plows – and so revert to wooden ones – or Borneo tribesmen blame a heat wave on some sojourner,

²¹ Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954–1962* (London, 1977), pp. 27, 136–138, 406–407.

²² Gerber, *Islam*, pp. 105, 112, 115, 124.

²³ Postdating Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1969), pp. 211–247, by nearly two decades, Gerber's chapter on Algeria represents a regression – in research, theory, and style – delightful to disbelievers in cumulation.

²⁴ Gerber, *Islam*, pp. 148, 149, 153, 147. Thus oversold, comparative study sounds more like a cargo cult than a confidence game. Either way, the revolution in sociology Gerber credits to the comparative method is a secret he alone seems to know. Puzzled readers might ponder Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York, 1984), which – with no trace of malice aforethought – confirms for comparative historical sociology the point Leach makes about contemporary ethnographic anthropology in the epigraph above.

²⁵ Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (London, 1990), p. 67.

“What is this curious superstition but the method of difference?”²⁶ The argument is valid while the assumptions are absurd.

Truly bad books of social science make awful reading but useful re-viewing because they manifest confusions, errors, and fallacies commonly latent in social thought. Gerber’s is not the worst book comparing revolutions (the wooden spoon goes to a competitor),²⁷ only bad enough to show in neon what should be obvious to anyone but obviously is not: the comparative method cannot make up for empirical evidence or make good false assumptions.²⁸

²⁶ John Maynard Keynes, *A Treatise on Probability* (London, 1973), p. 273, after Frazer, *Golden Bough*, p. 225. Modern ethnography records copious cases of “curious superstition involving the comparative method”.

²⁷ The award ceremony is chapter 5 of the monograph cited in note 13 above or “La révolution en échec: Des situations révolutionnaires sans dénouements révolutionnaires”, *Revue française de sociologie*, 30 (1989), pp. 559–586.

²⁸ Sylvia L. Thrupp, doyenne of comparative study, often warns of this danger: in Raymond Grew and Nicholas H. Steneck (eds), *Society and History: Essays* (Ann Arbor, 1977).