Course Overview

This course is designed to provide an introduction to the study of revolutions. It explores the political mechanisms contributing to revolutions and the context for political violence. It begins by defining revolution and examining competing theories about its causes, outcomes, and processes. It explores the main theoretical approaches to explaining revolutionary phenomena, namely structural and subjectivist. Structural theories posit that there are objective factors which determine whether or not a regime falls by revolution. In contrast, subjectivist theories argue that regimes which lack support cannot survive and that structural factors are secondary in determining a regime’s ability to survive a revolution.

The following questions are investigated throughout the course: What are primary causes of revolution? What different approaches have scholars taken to studying its causes? When do revolutionary movements emerge? Are revolutionary changes inherently unpredictable? How do we explain why people participate in revolutions? What sorts of factors determine the tactics people will use once they decide something must be done? What are the essential factors for revolutionary movements to succeed? Does the emergence of new social media undermine authoritarian stability and hence affect revolutionary outcomes? What tools do governments and leaders use to repress revolutions? Does repression instigate or impede revolutions?

In examining these questions we will study in-depth several revolutions (France, Russia, China, Iran, Revolutionary movements in Latin America, Color Revolutions) as well as cases where revolutions seemed likely, but did not occur or failed. We will then consider how more contemporary cases (Tunisia, Egypt, Ukraine) challenge or support these theories.

In the second part of the course, attention then turns to the inter-relationship between foreign aid, poverty and revolutions. A set of analytic tools based on the strategic perspective of political science and political economy will be introduced to evaluate the current debates on revolutions and to draw policy-relevant conclusions. We will further explore diverse topics ranging from the impact of foreign aid on revolutionary outcomes and of natural disasters on revolutionary movements.

Overall, this class aims to equip the student with the conceptual tools and prerequisite knowledge to understand, evaluate and think about the interaction between revolutions, regime change and leadership.
Course Requirements

The class will be run like a seminar. You are expected to have completed the readings before each class and come to class ready to participate in the discussion. For each class, two students will be responsible for starting the discussion with short presentations. The discussion leaders will submit 5 questions based on the readings the day prior to the class. The point of the introduction will be to identify the key discussion questions which will guide the class discussion and provide a brief overview of the readings.

Course grade will be based on class participation and presentations (30%), a 2 page research proposal (30%), and a research paper (40%). The research proposal is due by October 11th. The final paper should be 10-15 pages and will represent an expanded analytic version of your proposal. The presentation of your paper is on Dec 13. Your presence in class is REQUIRED on December 13. The final paper is due by December 17.

Your writing assignment can be:

(i) A case study. If you choose this option, you are expected to take a case which represents some of the themes discussed in class and provide a detailed analysis of the events and issues involved.

(ii) An exploration of the conceptual issues raised by the themes in the class. The paper in this case may be a deeper analytic examination of such a question.

Course Readings

All journal articles are available on the class website via Classes. Readings marked with an asterisk (*) denotes further recommended reading and are optional. The textbooks for this course are listed below and are on reserve at the circulation desk in Elmer Holmes Bobst Library.


Course Schedule, Topics and Reading Assignments

Part 1. Introduction to the Key Concepts

Week 1 (Sept 6)
Overview of Theory, Empirics and Conditions.
No readings assigned.

Part 2. New Media and Revolutions

Week 2 (Sept 13): Authoritarian Regimes and New Media

Week 3 (Sept 20): Authoritarian Regimes and New Media, contd.


Week 4 (Sept 27): New Media and Protest


Part 3. Violence, Rebellions and Revolutions

**Week 5 (Oct 4)**: Theories of Revolution


**Week 6 (Oct 11)**: Theories of Revolution, contd.


**Week 7 (Oct 18)**: Research paper meetings

**Week 8 (Oct 25)**: Theories of Revolution, contd.


**Week 9 (Nov 1)**: Rebellion: The Structure of Rebel Organizations

**Week 10 (Nov 8)**: Rebellion: The Strategies of Rebel Groups


**Part 4. Revolutions, Regime Change and Leadership**

**Week 11 (Nov 15)**: The Anatomy of a Revolution


**Week 12 (Nov 22)**: A Theory of Selectorate Politics


**Week 13 (Nov 29)**: Foreign Aid, Poverty and Revolutions

Week 14 (Dec 6): Natural Disasters, Leadership and Revolutions


Week 15 (Dec 13): Presentations