

Introduction

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Since the number of numbers is infinite,
how can there be a last one?

And why then do you think there is a last revolution?
Their number is infinite...the last one is a child's story.

We, Yevgeniy Zamyatin

1 Revolutions from below

Over the course of the twentieth century, much of the developing world was convulsed by violent revolutionary movements seeking to overturn old political orders. From parts of Russia and China, to Indochinese and Burmese highlands to Malayan jungles, to the mountains of Dhofar in Oman, to the borderlands of Colombia, Mozambique, Mexico, and El Salvador, rural areas—even places where state authority was historically weak and governance highly localized—became centers of violent revolutionary movements. In some cases, revolutionaries succeeded, in some they were defeated, while in others, conflicts reached negotiated settlements. Through many of these forking paths, however, run common experiences: farmers, laborers, small traders, diverse ethnic minorities, monks and shamans, children and youths caught up in conflict zones were pulled out of their everyday lives and thrust into revolutionary networks and organizations, sometimes by choice and often ultimately by force, as new political parties sought to politicize rural, often marginalized people.

In this book, I focus specifically on what revolutionary mobilization did to rural areas over the long run, although some of the mechanisms at work apply more broadly to

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cases where powerful new military and organizational technologies were brought to bear on traditional polities. According to the Revolutionary Episodes Dataset, throughout the twentieth century there were a total of 149 distinct revolutionary conflicts with a peak mobilization of at least 1000 civilian participants centered on rural areas globally. Significant waves occurred in the 1910s and the 1960s, and conflagrations continued into the 1980s and 1990s (figure 1a).¹ Out of these, 43 were rurally-based leftist social revolutionary movements—that is, those aimed at transforming the class structure of society—mostly concentrated in the 1960s (figure 1b). Despite recent work emphasizing a shift towards urban revolutions over the past decades,² rural revolutionary movements have not disappeared. At the same time, even as urbanization progresses across the developing world, rural areas remain central to the most pressing questions of political and economic development: they are home to the majority of the world’s poor, they are the sites of lucrative natural resources, and in democracies they are often pivotal to electoral success.³ In many parts of the world, understanding these critical issues necessitates accounting for the legacies of rural revolutionary conflicts from decades ago. Furthermore, as a recent literature emphasizes,⁴ some of the historically most durable autocratic regimes have emerged from revolutions.

What were the consequences of revolutionary conflicts for political and economic development? To what extent were such movements able to compel the kinds of social change for which they strove? And what explains the drastic variation in their outcomes? Existing literature, as well as folk understandings, emphasizes two perspectives on the polities that emerged after such conflicts: the politics of totalitarianism and control, in places where revolutionary regimes prevailed, as well as, more generally, the politics of elite cohesion. According to classic sociological work, these movements were the culmination of certain inequitable patterns of modernization, involving more and more exploitation by landlords and state bureaucracies, and they ultimately led to the

¹Beissinger, 2022. Beissinger (2022, p. 25-30) defines a revolutionary episode as “a mass siege of an established government by its own population with the aim of displacing the incumbent regime and substantially altering the political or social order.”

²Beissinger, 2022.

³World Bank, 2024; cf. Nathan, 2023, p. 29.

⁴Levitsky & Way, 2022.

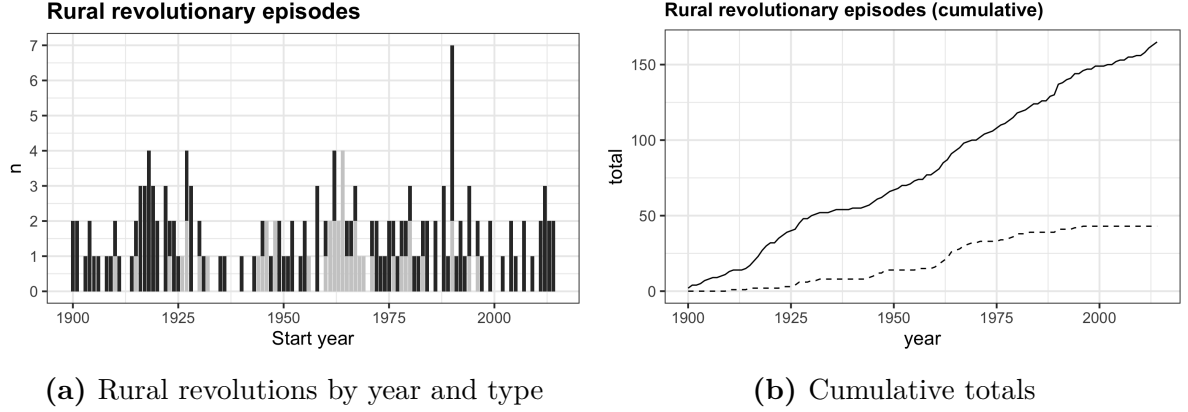


Figure 1: Rural revolutionary movements in the 20th century

In panel a, grey bars indicate rural leftist revolutionary episodes, while black bars indicate all other rural revolutionary episodes. The stacked bars thus cover the total number of rural revolutionary episodes that started in the given year. In panel b, the solid line represents the cumulative total of all rural revolutionary episodes in the 20th century, while the dashed line represents only rural leftist episodes.

further victimization, by modernizing revolutionary states, of the rural people who were their impetus.⁵ Meanwhile, dynamics within the political elite are particularly central to recent work on the long-run impacts of revolutionary conflict. Faced with existential pressures, the elites who emerged victorious—whether those on the side of the new or old political orders, in some accounts—stuck together, forming the basis for durable revolutionary autocratic regimes and counter-revolutionary leviathans.⁶

Moving beyond both macro-social and elite-centric accounts by leveraging novel micro-data and deep local histories, one strand of recent literature emphasizes social continuities despite the efforts of revolutionary regimes to create social change. Old hierarchies and social divides persisted, because cultures and human capital persisted—through norms, networks, and skills transmitted and preserved within families, especially those from urban and educated backgrounds—despite significant violence and repression and the efforts of revolutionary autocracies to transform society.⁷ The idea that revolutions actually created social transformation is thus contested, especially because the micro-level mechanisms of transformation, against those that cause tendencies towards the persistence of prerevolutionary social order, remain underspecified. As a result, fundamental

⁵Moore, 1966; Skocpol, 1979.

⁶Slater, 2010; Levitsky & Way, 2022; Lachapelle *et al.*, 2020; Meng & Paine, 2022.

⁷Darden & Grzymala-Busse, 2006; Alesina *et al.*, 2020; Lankina, 2022.

questions remain unanswered and the intellectual stakes are high: for instance, precisely how do the legacies of revolutionary mobilization differ from those set in motion by colonial governments as they coopted various social strata and brought new political and economic institutions to rural hinterlands in an earlier era?⁸ What, if anything, analytically separates the ultimate outcomes of a revolution from those arising from some species of top-down cooptation or strategic favoritism by political elites?

I argue that the answer lies in part in the transformative power of individual-level experiences over the course of revolutionary conflict itself, which shaped new social networks and skills. Throughout existing work, the stories of ordinary people from rural areas who underwent revolutionary mobilization remain mostly buried. Detailed and systematic empirical materials on long-run political development in the rural localities that were at the center of revolutionary conflicts are scarce, leaving the mechanisms of social change and continuity still obscured. Centering such histories, I argue that the nature of revolutionary mobilization itself is fundamental to the extent of post-revolutionary transformation.

The mechanisms of transformation are in the extent of processes of rupture and reconstitution in communities and families, as new political organizations and military technologies were brought to bear on rural areas in contingent and uneven ways. Mobilization endowed new skills and networks, which were further socialized in new kinds of families formed through and after conflict. Where state bureaucracies were thin and externally imposed, new bureaucracies emerged, recruiting directly from mobilized communities. In the process, indirect forms of rule, relying heavily on traditional elites, were replaced by more direct rule, with new modes of selection of political elites and intermediaries. Where politics had been highly local, new mass political parties pulled in new constituencies through revolutionary mobilization, allowing revolutionary autocracies to penetrate even previously remote localities. Where stratification had been based on processes of economic production, a new revolutionary class, rooted in revolutionary participation, emerged. Where economies had been organized around subsistence and lo-

⁸Cf. Nathan, 2023 for such an account.

cal trade, new paths of development were shaped by networks and connections forged in mobilization. Where culture and identity had largely been shaped by forgotten waves of ecological and economic changes, which crystallized norms, traditions, and taboos, new kinds of ethnic and national identities were constructed through interactions between mobilized communities and emerging states.

I test the argument using unique data, covering individual life histories, at scale and across multiple generations, of people from rural communities in Laos and Thailand. The genealogical data, collected across these heavily mobilized borderlands from the forefront of a defining conflict of the Cold War era, facilitates granular comparisons across two different, and paradigmatic, post-conflict political trajectories. The legacies of revolutionary mobilization continue to shape states and societies in many post-conflict polities, even those where revolutionary movements failed. I open with two vignettes of everyday life from the Lao and Thai borderlands at the center of my story. Although those directly involved in these conflicts have grown old and passed away, and the conflicts themselves are often seen as chapters from the past, today shut and closed,⁹ their traces persist even in the ways that contemporary politics plays out in everyday life.

Mountain village: northern Laos, summer 2023

A goat has been slaughtered as a feast is prepared for celebrating a military promotion. The fresh blood is put together with herbs into a large dish, as the animal is expertly cleaned, and a teenager with the given name Soviet—named for the once mighty U.S.S.R.—stands holding one of its horns filled to the brim with rice wine. “Protection from malaria,” he grins, drinking from the horn. Most guests arrive in motorbikes, while two or three arrive in Toyota or Ford pickup trucks. They are mostly men, party members in a one-party system, local people of influence interspersed among tables of family friends. A hydroelectric dam, festooned in Chinese and Lao lettering, which relocated villages and altered water levels and the flow of fish, stands a ten-minute walk away. Twenty-five years ago, you could drink from the river. Now, some fishermen avoid spending too much time in the water for fear of developing rashes. How has moderniza-

⁹Eg. Baird & Le Billon, 2012.

tion progressed in this revolutionary heartland, in the historically remote mountains of northern Laos?

Conversations on workplace matters, gossip involving local party politics, and stories of children, wives, and girlfriends flow with the beer and liquor in a mix of completely distinct languages: the Khmu and Phu Noi ethnic minority languages along with Lao, which is the national language. This is all the more striking given the civil war burning just hundreds of miles away in Myanmar, driven to some extent by ethnic divides and animus, albeit among a different mix of cultures. Most people here are ethnic minorities, in what has historically been, in James C. Scott's formulation, a "shatter zone"—an area of refuge for people fleeing the state.¹⁰ In Scott's account, even the last redoubts of "stateless" hill-people in South and Southeast Asia fell to advances in "distance-demolishing technologies," the railroads, all-terrain roads, and telecommunications that finally allowed lowlanders affiliated with the state to colonize these places, starting in the mid twentieth century.¹¹ But this is also a historical center of the Lao Communist Party, the home of foot soldiers and cadres since after the defeat of French colonial forces at Dien Bien Phu, across the nearby border with Vietnam, in 1953.

Used to working and living together—some even form culturally mixed families—many at the celebration understand enough of all three languages for conversations to flow in a linguistic mix as the feasting continues. There are expressions of support for Asian solidarity, support for the Chinese government, and for Russia in their ongoing invasion of Ukraine, and light debate over the value of the new Chinese-built railroad in Laos, a node in the expanding Belt and Road Initiative. "All I hear about the U.S. is that they are bombing and threatening this or that country, and maybe they will come back here. Well, if they do, we're ready like before," says a heavy man with a big golden watch, clenching his fists for emphasis. An older man laughs, "That's a bit too much for now, isn't it comrade?"

As the sun starts to set between the surrounding hills, a large speaker system housed in a wooden shed is turned on, and the singing begins. The songs are mostly in the minority

¹⁰Scott, 2009, chapter 7.

¹¹Scott, 2009, p. xii.

languages of these hill people. Attendees take turns singing over karaoke backing tracks; recorded music takes over when there is a lull in the line-up to sing. “I have my heart and nothing else,” goes one popular song, lamenting the poverty of a country boy. Another, sung as a duet, tells the love story of a young soldier who is always on the move, bound to his duty, and his sweetheart left at home. We move on to Lao revolutionary songs, praising the land and its people—more nationalist than communist—and then Thai pop and country music, punctuated with electric guitar solos straight from American rock music, as the feasting continues. If this is a kind of colonization of rural upland areas by lowlanders, as elucidated by Scott, what explains the eager participation of some of these “hill people”?

Rice fields: northeastern Thailand, summer 2025

“An important question for us today is whether, given the war, it will be appropriate for us to go to Bangkok to join the protests next week—” In northeastern Thailand, close to the Laos border at the Mekong River, well past the point where the paved road turns back to dirt, past the rubber plantations, at the foot of an old house tucked into the rice paddies and standing alone for as far as the eye can see, a man in his eighties holds court over a group of about twenty. These are places where the Thai aristocratic and military elite, unable to mobilize locals to their side, resorted to a policy of violence and repression from the 1950s until the early 1980s. Today, a border war between Thailand and Cambodia has broken out, with Cambodian shelling hitting a Seven-Eleven convenience store and gas station as well as a hospital in Thailand. That morning, Thai F-16 jets have, for the first time, bombed positions far inside Cambodia. Nationalist protests, ongoing for several weeks, call for the ouster of the Thai prime minister, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, for undermining the military and betraying the nation, after the leak of a phone call where she sought to appease the Cambodian leadership.

Amidst a political crisis, some Thai protest organizers have advocated for a military coup. Images from the war—rocket contrails in blue skies, a hospital room turned upside-down, a displaced persons camp, cars stalled behind deployed Cold War era missile systems—dominate social media and tv news. In the rice fields, next to the man sits a

woman, also around eighty, she is a co-leader of this group and his wife of many decades, she joins in the conversation decisively and frequently. In front of them are younger men, some seated, some standing with rubber boots and farming equipment, and some smoking hand rolled cigarettes off to the side, all listening intently. The two elders are effortlessly charismatic, speaking with authority and listening intently, delivering sophisticated political opinions as they debate whether to attend right-wing protests in the Thai capital, Bangkok: these are no ordinary farmers.

Fifty years ago, the man and the woman were both members of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). Coming from a farming family, but trained in politics and administration in China, Vietnam, and Laos amidst a global war centered on Indochina, the man worked alongside people who would later become cabinet ministers in communist countries. While communism prevailed in these neighboring countries, it was defeated in Thailand. The man still goes by his old communist *nom de guerre* to most who know him, comrade (now uncle) Chaichana—meaning “victory.” In a partial about-face since his communist days, he now believes that the countryside must join hands with the old aristocratic elite to stop the big capitalists, the true enemies of the people.¹² The leader continues, “I hear from some of our old friends, who call me comrade “king’s guard” for supporting the military and the police.¹³ But who are the military and the police but our own children and relatives?” A murmur of agreement.

The gathered group are all either ex-CPT revolutionaries, who returned to their villages in the early 1980s after a national amnesty, or their descendants. The woman, trained as a doctor in Vietnam, used her skills to diagnose and treat fellow villagers for years after demobilization and her return home, though her credentials remain unrecognized in Thailand. Even in their eighties, the couple is driven by a vision for their nation and community, though there have been ideological twists and turns in the road. Where aristocratic and military leaders, with no connections to such rural communities, had struggled to mobilize locals to their side, ultimately resorting to widespread repression

¹²Throughout the manuscript, names and other personal details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

¹³The specific phrase used was *sahai ro or*—“*sahai raksa phra ong*”.

and extrajudicial killing in the 1960s and 1970s, today it is farmers themselves at the helm of nationalist right wing mobilization. How has this happened? Where were the requisite political skills built? The ultimate twist in the story—that these are not just any farmers but ex-communists—hints at an answer while raising further questions. What explains the political activism of this group, even decades after their leaders have been reintegrated into Thai society? What explains the ideological shifts since then? How have such people shaped Thai politics?

2 The argument

2.1 Mobilization: Rupture and reconstitution

Building on such stories, my objective in this book is to provide a coherent and illuminating lens through which to view politics after rural revolutionary conflicts: the politics of mobilization. The politics of mobilization is the politics of socio-political change progressing through the impact of political organizations brought to bear in violent conflict. The engines of social change are new skills, connections, and experiences at the level of individuals and localities, which are forged through participation, setting the stage for further processes of socialization. It is the politics of how individuals and communities become unevenly connected to new political projects aimed at social change. It is thus a view from the intersection of, on the one hand, states and political parties and, on the other hand, long reproducing local communities and families.

The *critical juncture* in the theory is the moment of revolutionary mobilization which, considered broadly, is full-time participation in an organization engaged in violent conflict aimed at a rapid change in the social hierarchies and state organizations of a given polity.¹⁴ Mobilization happens in uneven ways, often shaped by the specific geographies and timing of conflict. Coercion, voluntarism, ideological indoctrination, and inducements often all play a role in this process, differently at different points of time and sometimes all at once. Revolutionary mobilization involves the arrival of two powerful forces to rural hin-

¹⁴Following Skocpol's (1979) definition of revolutions.

terlands: new political organizations, often first formed by an intellectual “vanguard” in urban areas, and built through international networks, before being pushed out to rural localities by colonial and traditional states, as well as intensive violence using modern military technologies, brought to bear through international support and supply chains. These two factors separate revolutionary mobilization from older forms of peasant revolt and resistance, like millenarianism. Revolutionary mobilization shapes social networks along with human capital. This happens as mobilized people leave their families, often for years at a time, are ideologically indoctrinated, gain new skills, and form powerful bonds with compatriots, sometimes from very different backgrounds, ultimately returning home as profoundly changed people. These changes are then reproduced within reconstituted communities and families after the end of conflict as new norms, connections, and aspirations are passed down intergenerationally in new kinds of families, leading to durable social shifts. In aggregate, this transforms state-society relations through the new connections, skills, and preferences forged in mobilization, which make new kinds of interaction possible between states and societies. Transformations due to the affects of mobilization itself led to a unique post-revolutionary path of modernization in affected rural peripheries in the Global South.

2.2 State-society connections

The politics of mobilization is about how new connections and preferences are forged, rather than how policy is used to respond to static, preexisting preferences defined by social class or fixed identities. By shifting skills, networks, and identities, revolutionary mobilization rapidly increases the scope of state-society interactions. This is a story of state formation in the peripheries that centers “conversions” of individuals—through shifts in political identities and social networks—rather than cycles of confrontation between various social interests and the state¹⁵ or incorporation of social interests into the state.¹⁶ By the same token, the politics of mobilization illuminates how revolutionary autocratic regimes embedded themselves even in communities that have been historically

¹⁵Tilly, 1990.

¹⁶Barkey, 1994.

distant from state power.

This vantage productively runs counter to prominent frames in political science, which put forward views based on exchange and policy provision rather than socialization and interest formation. Important recent work, for instance, adopting a lens of policy provision, presents the timing of disruptive revolutionary policy initiatives, like land reforms, as puzzling.¹⁷ Given the risks of backlash and costs involved in attempting transformative policies, why do rebels and revolutionaries not wait to implement such policies until after the end of conflicts? Existing explanations invoke ideology¹⁸ or imitation of the revolutionary model established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)¹⁹ as reasons behind this seemingly irrational behavior. Centering the politics of mobilization—that is, conceptualizing revolutionary initiatives not as policy provision but as mobilization—leads to a different perspective on why revolutionaries pursue disruptive policies during times of warfare.

The central, and underappreciated, aspect of revolutionary initiatives is the mobilization and participation of new groups of people in the implementation of these policies. In many revolutionary contexts land reform, for instance, was not coolly carried out by government bureaucrats; rather, it was an impetus for mobilizing large numbers of people as participants and implementors in a project of radical redistribution, thus connecting them to revolutionary political organizations in enduring ways. The point of mobilizational revolutionary projects was not simply to provide a policy benefit to a favored constituency, it was rather to deeply connect individuals to modern politics through intense, violent, collaborative, and organizational experiences. It was less about providing policies that responded to well-defined pre-existing preferences, and more about *forging* such preferences in communities that had largely been excluded from modern politics. It was a way to create the police and soldiers who would be willing to die for the cause as well as the cadres who would not rebel easily nor excessively steal and pilfer, working for the party and state as if they were working for a higher calling. In communist contexts,

¹⁷Lachapelle *et al.*, 2020, p. 565; Stewart, 2021, p. 8.

¹⁸Lachapelle *et al.*, 2020, p. 566

¹⁹Stewart, 2021, p. 14

the experience of mobilization was, in Samuel Huntington’s phrasing, at the heart of not just the institutionalization but the “deification” of the party.²⁰ This was part of the project of creating a new revolutionary social class.²¹ In this light, the logic behind the pursuit of destructive and transformative policies during revolutionary conflict becomes clearer.²²

The significance of the resultant transformation in state-society connections is clearest when viewed against the historical baseline of state-society relations in rural hinterlands. Only decades before rural revolutions erupted, colonial and indigenous states alike had limited control over rural communities in many parts of the developing world. Processes of modernization—involving displacement, new technologies and investments, and more intensive extraction—ran into traditional “moral economies,” which if disrupted could set off large-scale violent unrest.²³ Millenarian revolts—from the “tribal belt” in India to the highlands of Indochina—periodically convulsed these regions, driven by charismatic local figures wielding purportedly magical objects and powers against unjust state authorities, often to great effect. Revolutionary mobilization made possible a fundamentally different kind of political order, one that solved problems of political control and legibility not only through coercion but more fundamentally by converting segments of the local population into aligned agents of the state. Such shifts in state-society connections and principal-agent problems, culminating in the establishment of what Michael Mann called “infrastructural power,”²⁴ were part of a broader process of distinctively revolutionary modernization.

2.3 Mobilization as modernization

Classic sociological work posited that there was a unique communist path to modernity: this is Barrington Moore’s “third route,” represented by the cases of Russia and China.²⁵ Accounts by Moore and Skocpol focus on factors like social class alliances, the nature

²⁰Huntington, 1968, p. 339.

²¹Djilas, 1957; Fitzpatrick, 1981.

²²Cf. Goscha, 2022.

²³Scott, 1976.

²⁴Mann, 1984.

²⁵Moore, 1966, p. xxii.

of the pre-revolutionary state, and international politics. This structural perspective, in fact, goes back to the work of Marx, who argued that the modes of production and economic organization limited possibilities for political action and social class consciousness: the majority of French farmers, he famously argued, lived in relative isolation, “much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes;”²⁶ only with changing economic organization—as happened with the emergence of an urban industrial proletariat—could class consciousness emerge and the possibilities for political action change.

While the very large literature in this tradition helps make sense of revolutionary onset, it provides limited purchase into understanding what revolutionary conflicts actually produced. Revolutionary outcomes varied significantly—from stable one-party rule, to purges and subsequent waves of mobilization, to enduring old regime hierarchies, to mass killing—and structural accounts have little to say on this variation. Picking up threads from Huntington’s classic presentation of communism,²⁷ I argue that the distinctiveness of the communist path instead lies in the politics of mobilization. Political organization operating in conditions of violent conflict, rather than structural economic conditions, created new social classes. Leninist, and later Maoist, party-states, by pulling ordinary people out of their traditional communities and reconstituting new communities and families through the new organizational context, produced selective and locally uneven modernization, as new connections and experiences determined subsequent resource flows and social changes. Variation in the nature of mobilization also helps explain different post-revolutionary trajectories.

In classic work, Karl Deutsch theorized “social mobilization” as a consequence of economic development, which in turn led to changes in behavior that fed further processes of modernization:²⁸

Social mobilization is a name given to an overall process of change, which happens to substantial parts of the population in countries which are moving from traditional to modern ways of life. It denotes a concept which brackets together a number of more specific processes of change, such as changes of residence, of occupation, of social setting, of face-to-face associates, of institutions, roles, and ways of acting, of

²⁶Marx, 1963, p. 124.

²⁷Huntington, 1968.

²⁸Deutsch, 1971.

experiences and expectations, and finally of personal memories, habits, and needs, including the need for new patterns of group affiliation and new images of personal identity.

I show how such processes have been rooted not only in economic development but also in revolutionary mobilization.²⁹ This is most clear in the case of Laos, where social mobilization—using Deutsch’s terminology—has progressed selectively according to exposure to revolutionary mobilization, even in a context of minimal economic development, creating social stratification based on exposure to revolutionary mobilization rather than on access to factors of production. Across cases of rural revolutionary conflict, similar processes have played out, though sometimes less visibly, as critical undercurrents to broader histories of economic and technological change, which redefined the nature of the relationship between central authorities, their local agents, and their subjects and citizens.

The mobilizational view leads to a kind of revisionist reading of communism along two axes. First, it illustrates how social transformation in revolutionary regimes differed from both classic celebratory and critical readings of communism and rural revolutionary movements: such regimes did not transform human nature, but nor can their social impacts be reduced to a hollow coercion. The failure of communist attempts to create a “new socialist man,” who like the philosopher kings in Plato’s Republic would work through internal motivations alone, is clear through catastrophes like the Great Leap Forward and the Holodomor. Absent incentives and local initiative, and given the inherent challenges in extracting information on societal needs without free markets,³⁰ central planners failed to organize production effectively: the proof of the absence of the “new man” is in these very failures. At the same time, if not entailing the creation of a new socialist man, with all its implied romanticism, communism—where it was the result of a mobilizing revolution—involved personal “conversions:”³¹ changes in an individual’s skills, associations, self conception, and world view, which were rooted in revolutionary mobilization itself and further socialized within reconstituted families. Although more

²⁹Cf. Pholsena, 2012, p. 171.

³⁰Hayek, 1945.

³¹Cf. McAdam, 1989.

mundane, these conversions underlay new hierarchies and state-society connections, as the cases of Laos and Thailand together illustrate.

The view advanced here also contests the idea that communist regimes are inherently highly centralized and in control of their societies.³² By explicating bottom-up mechanisms, the argument presented here provides new theoretical traction on the sheer variation of revolutionary outcomes, which canonical structural accounts left unexplained. The Khmer Rouge genocide, for instance, can be seen as a product of internal factionalism and a lack of central control, which were rooted in the dynamics of rapid mobilization in Cambodia in the early 1970s, rather than as a purely clinical top-down program of social engineering. Centralization and the politics of purges in the early Soviet Union can be seen, in part, as a reaction to the transformative effects of mobilization itself, rather than an outgrowth of ideology or purely elite politics.³³ Mobilization created new centers of power, sometimes driven by the necessities of conflict, and purges were an attempt by leaders to weaken them. Where rupture happened without any reconstitution, or processes of reconstitution progressed while networks remained fractured and insular, mobilization exacerbated instability.

Across the various trajectories, mobilization into political organizations during violent revolutionary conflicts broke old bonds, endowed new skills, and shifted social networks. This, in turn, led to broader transformation in society as well as in the state-society interface. Individuals were never subsumed by the state, but the unique pressures of revolutionary conflict created new paths and possibilities for interactions between emerging revolutionary states and communities that were previously governed in more decentralized ways. This culminated in the emergence of new patterns of social stratification, new classes of people, and new dynamics of factionalization. These micro-level dynamics have been undertheorized in both the canonical literature on regimes and revolutions as well as more recent research on authoritarianism, the legacies of conflict, and the microfoun-

³²A confluence in the interests of both ideological communists and anti-communists—in the first case in emphasizing the strong leadership and control of communist parties and in the second in highlighting their totalitarian core—arguably leads to a natural tendency to overestimate the extent of top-down control exercised by communist regimes.

³³Cf. Fitzpatrick, 1981.

dations of social change. Traces of these processes are visible even in cases where rural revolutions ultimately failed to take power. Given the nature and profundity of these transformations, the argument of this book in its most pithy form is simple: mobilization *is* modernization.

3 A people's history of revolution

3.1 Plausibility: Revolutionary life histories

Having previewed the theoretical argument of the book, I now consider the plausibility of the argument before then moving to a discussion of the data used to evaluate it more systematically. The fact that revolutionary mobilization itself, through the ways in which it shaped skills and connections, led to political changes is clear from life stories drawn from the ranks of post-revolutionary leaders from around the world. It remains to be seen, however, how deeply such changes reached into the masses and, more generally, how they impacted political hierarchies and paths of economic and cultural development.

Considering existing revolutionary histories and life stories, I move from the level of elites at the pinnacles of power to the much larger number of mobilized masses, across different revolutionary trajectories and historical and institutional contexts. Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev, Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas, Vietnamese general secretary Le Duan, Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, and, in an earlier era, U.S. secretary of treasury Alexander Hamilton: people from ordinary or even marginalized backgrounds—farmhands, laborers, immigrants, and clerks—rose to the pinnacles of political power because of social revolutions. While one finds such stories in all kinds of revolutions, they are especially significant in rural revolutions, where mobilization is often concentrated on communities with few prior ties to the state or modern political organization. Such stories of uneven social mobility through participation in revolutions, at the level of individuals and families, provide the microfoundational basis for testing my theory.

The rise of Alexander Hamilton, though from a different historical and geographical

context than my focus here, provides an especially prominent example of some key mechanisms of transformation. From the dead-end life of a young clerk in St. Croix, born out of wedlock, he rose into the ranks of the American revolutionary elite within five years directly due to his experiences in revolutionary war.³⁴ While stationed in Morristown, New Jersey, he met his wife Elizabeth Schuyler, the daughter of a Continental Army general from an elite family, cementing his place, and those of his descendants, among a newly forming post-revolutionary elite, drawn from diverse sources in pre-revolutionary society. Many of his descendants went on to become prominent military officers and civil servants, marrying into other prominent families.

One finds similar stories of personal transformation and upward social mobility in very different contexts. For instance, the Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, at the center of an international political crisis in 2020 after he was killed by an American drone strike in Iraq, was born to a poor family in a remote mountain village in southeastern Iran. He left home at the age of twelve to work as a laborer to help pay off his father's agricultural debts. A participant in the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and a part of the Revolutionary Guards in the new Islamic Republic, he worked to stop counter coups and suppress Kurdish separatism, rising to be a commander during the Iran-Iraq War.³⁵ He rose to be one of the most powerful people in the post-revolutionary Iranian regime, and his children continue in positions of prominence. For such people, the story of the regimes they serve are the stories of their own personal development and rise, in some cases in a "reversal of fortune," out of the most adverse and unlikely circumstances from which to seek power.

Even in places like Colombia, Brazil, and Thailand, contexts where revolutionaries were defeated, ex-revolutionaries like Gustavo Petro, Dilma Rousseff, and Phumtham Wechayachai, have risen to the pinnacles of political power through electoral politics. Even failed revolutions thus might leave behind more than, in the words of James Scott, "a few concessions from the state or landlords, a brief respite from new and powerful relations of production and, not least, a memory of resistance and courage that may

³⁴Chernow, 2005, p. 252.

³⁵See "Qassem Soleimani, Iranian Military Commander: 1957-2020," *The Financial Times*, 3 January, 2020 and "Who is Qassem Soleimani? Iran farm boy who became more powerful than a president," *The Guardian*, 3 January, 2020.

lie in wait for the future.”³⁶ They might also leave behind new networks and skills that are valuable in contexts of social movements, democratic politics, or authoritarian cooptation—or more broadly in processes of political and economic modernization.

But how did the impact of revolutionary mobilization play out among the much larger number of ordinary people pulled into revolutionary conflicts? Did impacts on skills and social and kinship networks spread into the ranks of the masses, engendering a social transformation that implicated political hierarchies, paths of economic development, and even cultural forms? There are hints from existing sources, covering various global cases, that the transformative impacts of revolutionary mobilization reached deeper, beyond the most famous figures, to those who never reached the pinnacles of political power but remained critical to the rapid rise of post-revolutionary states and ongoing adjustments between such states and their societies.

The Cuban revolutionary leader, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, writing from personal experience, for instance, notes:

Every one of the fighters of the Sierra Maestra who reached an upper rank in the revolutionary forces has a record of outstanding deeds to his credit. They attained their rank on this basis. It was the first heroic period and in it they contended for the heaviest responsibilities, for the greatest dangers, with no other satisfaction than fulfilling a duty.

In our work on revolutionary education we frequently return to this instructive theme. In the attitude of our fighters could be glimpsed the man of the future.³⁷

In the context of social revolutions, as things were “turned upside down,” new networks of people came to positions of power, bringing new political cultures, but also having to build their capacities in ways that are necessary for governance. Decades before Cuba, and in the different ideological context of the Mexican Revolution, for instance, Zapatista revolutionaries from rural and indigenous backgrounds came to control Cuernavaca, the largest city in the state of Morelos, to the south of Mexico City, in 1911. Many people from common backgrounds thus became involved in projects of governance:

Cuernavaca had become a town that Morelos’s common country people had taken over, camped in, and turned into their own. And all the strengths and weaknesses

³⁶Scott, 1985, p. 29.

³⁷Guevara & Zimmermann, 1967, p. 4.

of common country people pervaded the town's atmosphere. To their discomfort, the Constitutionlists could not tell who was a chief and who was not: except for stray charros, Zapatista leaders dressed like their followers in the sandals and white workclothes all Morelos farmers wore. Many could not read or write. And when they voiced their opinions in meetings, it was in the manner of simple folk distinguished less for eloquence than for dumb courage—with a meandering and ungrammatical and then suddenly straightforward modesty.³⁸

Delving deeper, and bringing local histories to bear on broader questions of politics, a range of work across the social sciences has argued for the transformational impact of revolutionary mobilization itself in various contexts. Path breaking research by Elisabeth Jean Wood, for instance, shows how revolutionary mobilization in El Salvador left behind new networks and political cultures in rural and indigenous communities.³⁹ Speaking to some similar impacts, though in a very different context, an important strand of literature on the history of the American Revolution makes the case that, despite the lack of radical policy discontinuities, the American Revolution was in fact a radical political project.⁴⁰ The roots of this radicalism, in these accounts, mirror my argument here: experiences over the course of revolutionary conflict itself led to the rise of new political interests and cultures. People who had never before been involved in politics played critical roles in the revolution, leading to new social networks, skills, beliefs, and practices, which culminated in a radically different polity as compared to the pre-revolutionary order, even though there was no forced land redistribution or guillotining of political enemies. Abdel Razzaq Takriti, studying the very different context of the Dhofar Revolution in Oman in the 1960s, a case where revolutionaries were defeated, shows how revolutionary mobilization still created a new egalitarian political culture.⁴¹ These impacts in rural Oman, especially as they apply to gender roles, are traced further after the defeat of revolutionaries in recent anthropological research.⁴²

In this book, I complete this analytic descent, from the life stories of national leaders

³⁸Womack, 1970, p. 204.

³⁹Wood, 2003.

⁴⁰Wood, 1991; Breen, 2019. In Gordon Wood's canonical account, much of the pre-revolutionary colonies resembled "traditional" polities, characterized by patron-client connections centered on the British administration, rather than the kind of inclusive political culture characterized in Tocqueville's study from soon after the American Revolution.

⁴¹Takriti, 2013.

⁴²Wilson, 2023.

to those of people at more local levels, by systematically studying life trajectories of common people over the long run. Existing work has not traced revolutionary impacts over long periods of time, and across multiple country contexts, theorizing and testing the mechanisms through which they persist or dissipate, as I do in this study. Nor has such work attempted to systematically quantify the various trajectories that this impact can take. This book thus builds on existing lines of work in two ways. First, I provide a broader theoretical account of revolutionary mobilization as a process of durable societal change, centering the rupture and reconstitution of families and local communities through violence, embeddedness in new networks, and family socialization. Second, I systematically trace individual family and life histories—at scale and across both contexts of revolutionary victory and defeat—analyzing revolutionary transformation through a novel methodology that centers the biographies and genealogies of common people.

3.2 Data and methods

This book enlarges our empirical base of knowledge by studying local post-revolutionary politics and society in Laotian and Thai borderlands that were the centers of revolutionary movements in the mid twentieth century. My foregrounding of such local histories and perspectives, largely neglected in existing work by political scientists, is based on extensive fieldwork and lived experience as well as the systematic collection and analysis of highly granular data, conducted with the help of several local partners, all of whom are themselves deeply connected to the communities under study. This includes data on approximately 2,000 individual life trajectories and hundreds of family genealogies across my two central cases.⁴³ I also use original archival sources, largely from the French colonial Archives d’Outre Mer in Aix-en-Provence, France, as well as a large range of secondary sources in English, Lao, and Thai in building my argument.

The genealogical data collection, along with extensive on-the-ground fieldwork, is replicated across the contexts of Laos and Thailand, providing a perspective that is both comparative and granular. The comparative perspective provides leverage through

⁴³Cf. Wantchekon *et al.*, 2015.

analyzing variation in two critical factors: first, the microprocesses of mobilization and second, the trajectories of post-conflict political institutions, most importantly in differing paths of revolutionary victory and defeat. Meanwhile, the granularity and systematic nature of the data also serves two purposes: first, it allows me to analyze specific mechanisms of social and political change versus persistence; second, by capturing individual-level life histories across multiple generations it also makes it possible to separate the impacts of mobilization itself from prior historical factors to an extent that is rare in other similar work.

This kind of data is part of a broader methodology that combines grassroots embeddedness and collaboration between the researcher, research assistants, and research subjects, which is in-line with ethnographic work typically conducted by anthropologists, with quantitative analysis that applies econometric techniques and social scientific theories of causal inference. The ethnographic aspect of the work, along with the local and ongoing nature of research collaborations, facilitates a deep qualitative understanding of the communities under study. This also makes possible data collection on sensitive topics that would be impossible without building trust and buy-in with local communities around shared interests. Meanwhile, analysis of quantitative data brings to bear a framework based on systematically assessing sample selection and bias that helps address questions of representativeness and credibility that may be more challenging for purely qualitative work on similar questions.

4 Cases: A new vantage on the Indochina Wars and beyond

The revolutionary histories of both Laos and Thailand have minimal coverage in existing work in political science, sociology, or economics. While significant advances have been made in recent work by historians and anthropologists on revolutionary histories in these places, this expansion in the primary source base material has yet to influence theoretical understandings in political science.⁴⁴ This book further expands this empirical base, following a tradition of work in comparative politics that leverages new primary source

⁴⁴Cf. Kanokrat, 2016; Lentz, 2019; Baird, 2020; Goscha, 2022.

materials to advance arguably “revisionist” arguments about transformations in states and societies.⁴⁵ Both Laos and Thailand are cases where revolutionary violence was centered on peripheral areas, and together they provide a view on both sides of a “border” in the Cold War, where communist control was established in Laos but defeated across the Mekong River in Thailand. In both countries, communist revolutionaries, supported primarily by Vietnam and China, recruited heavily from rural, marginalized, often ethnic minority communities in the hills, against monarchical governments based in urban centers in the valleys and supported by Western powers.

Laos represents a certain paradigm of twentieth century social revolution: intensive conflict and mobilization centered on rural areas in the context of decolonization, followed by one-party rule. Laos also highlights underlying social transformation even where top-down policies for social change, although attempted for a time, have been weakly implemented. Resettlement of mountain villages to lowland areas, especially since the mid 1980s, is one notable area of state-led change. But although directed from the top, even this has been largely managed by local authorities and is thus arguably endogenous to the local penetration of state power.⁴⁶ In Laos, the revolutionary centers in the remote uplands were composed of small villages, often only connected by mountainous foot tracks, inhabited by subsistence agriculturalists from diverse ethnicities. Loose pre-revolutionary orders were profoundly disrupted by the Laotian Civil War, which involved hundreds of thousands of soldiers across the opposing communist Pathet Lao and Royal Lao Government (RLG) sides, fighting between 1954 and 1975. It drew in the extensive participation of North Vietnam, which at times had over 100,000 troops and cadres in Laos, and the U.S., which supported the RLG with extensive investments and dropped 260 million bombs on the country between 1964 and 1973. Given the lack of substantial post-revolutionary purges, like those in the U.S.S.R., or significant subsequent waves of mobilization, as in China, Laos is a case where the long-run implications of revolutionary mobilization have come to a kind of full fruition.

Until recently, revolutionary histories of communities in the China-Laos-Vietnam bor-

⁴⁵Cf. Barkey, 1994; Lankina, 2022.

⁴⁶Evrard & Goudineau, 2004.

derlands were virtually unknown to Western academia. While significant contributions have recently been made to the study of these areas, they tend to emphasize, and to some extent, naturalize ethnicity as a building block of politics.⁴⁷ Christian Lentz, in a path-breaking, largely archival, study of the revolutionary history of the Dien Bien Phu area in northwest Vietnam, close to my focus of study in Laos, analyzes revolutionary politics in this region as based on an ethnic alliance between the ethnic Kinh, the dominant group across Vietnam, and the Tai, the historically dominant group locally in his areas of study.⁴⁸ This is a perspective that, in a sense, emphasizes continuity, showing how the revolutionary project was simply plastered onto existing ethnic divides, where local Tai lords dominated groups like the Khmu and Hmong.

In contrast, I show how cultural identities have themselves been transformed by the impacts of revolutionary mobilization and how new forms of stratification have emerged within cultural groups as a result of differences in exposure to revolutionary mobilization. This view denaturalizes ethnicity, placing processes of revolutionary mobilization causally prior to the subsequent development of cultural forms, and it is a view that emphasizes transformation. What it means—in a direct sense of cultural practices—to be Khmu, Hmong, Tai, or any number of other cultural identities in the highland of Indochina and beyond has been fundamentally altered directly as a result of revolutionary mobilization.

If Laos is a most likely case for observing long-run impacts from revolutionary mobilization, Thailand represents a least likely case. It is also, critically, the nearest and most similar contrasting case of revolutionary failure. While Thailand also saw extensive revolutionary conflict in its peripheries, often involving minority people, the Thai state is well known for its programs of modernization and centralization, going back to the reign of King Rama V, Chulalongkorn, in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁹ As a nation that was never colonized by a Western power, the anti-colonial appeals that were so salient in revolutionary mobilization in Laos and elsewhere were not so directly relevant in Thailand. During the Cold War, the Thai state received extensive support from the U.S., allowing it to

⁴⁷eg. Lentz, 2019; Han, 2019.

⁴⁸Lentz, 2019.

⁴⁹eg. Thongchai, 1997.

rapidly pursue political and economic projects aimed at counterinsurgency and to defeat communism, in a pivot from earlier strategies based on military force and repression. In response to insurgency, massive strategic investments in roads, hospitals, and schools connected and assimilated diverse peripheries. Yet even here, I show that personal histories of revolutionary mobilization have had important subsequent consequences, both in the context of oppositional political movements, as well as through processes of cooptation, where ruling elites cultivated ongoing relationships with ex-revolutionaries, capitalizing on their political skills for implementing projects centered on the counter-revolutionary state.

Recent work analyzes the life trajectories of “Octoberists,” members of student movements who fled to CPT bases in the forests of Thailand after government repression in the 1970s, finding that many of these people have since continued to play important roles in Thai politics, scattered across a variety of factions.⁵⁰ I expand on this research by focusing on the life stories of the thousands of rural rank-and-file mobilized by the CPT, along with their families and communities, rather than the much smaller number of elite and middle-class students. This uncovers the consequences of mass mobilization in a way that cannot be captured by the political trajectories of the elite, urban, and educated subset of revolutionaries studied in the work on Octoberists.

To a certain extent, this is an account of Thai political development that “decenters” Bangkok, instead focusing on the agency of mass-level actors in the provinces. With important exceptions, dominant accounts of Thai politics present rural areas as backwaters, either of political apathy to important national issues and ignorance, or of clientelism and patronage, where local elites dominate common people.⁵¹ Against this view, I analyze the legacies of revolutionary political action, which preceded but also shaped more recent waves of economic development. This perspective illuminates the political rise of rural Thailand. While Thailand remains a polity that is dominated by an aristocratic and military elite, it has made significant investments in its peripheries, involving healthcare,

⁵⁰Kanokrat, 2016.

⁵¹Works by Somchai (2006) and Walker (2012) constitute important exceptions. These works also describe the dominant “rural backwater” view.

education, and agriculture. Why is this the case, and how has it happened? The move from the repressive policies of the 1960s and 1970s towards policies of reconciliation and integration in former conflict zones has involved top-down investments as well as the harnessing of local initiative. Legacies of revolutionary mobilization have been important in the renegotiation and contention that has culminated in the rise of rural peripheries.

5 Plan of the book

The book progresses through five core chapters. Chapter 2 presents the theory, which entails a mobilizational perspective on rural revolutions and what they produced. The chapter argues that revolutionary mobilization constituted an alternative and partly exogenous path to modernization, shaped by a twin technological shock involving the arrival of new military and organizational technologies to rural peripheries in the twentieth century Global South. The key mechanism is rupture and reconstitution: wartime mobilization ruptures traditional families and communities, while revolutionary organizations provide the context for the reconstitution of new ones. These two steps together produce collinear shifts in human capital, social networks, and orientations toward the state, producing a version of the “interchangeability of indicators” associated with modernization. Operating at the level of individuals and families, this produces new forms of social stratification that cut across pre-revolutionary social groups, creating new distinctions even within prior communities. Mobilization facilitates a shift to more direct forms of rule, promoting legibility of previously far-flung areas; it determines subsequent paths of economic development by shaping investment patterns; it even shapes trajectories of cultural change by creating new social and kinship networks and allowing for new forms of interaction between the state and mobilized communities.

Chapter 3 then presents further details on the cases of Laos and Thailand and the comparative logic connecting them. It goes on to discuss the unique intergenerational data which is at the heart of this project and the ways in which this was collected. Granular, systematic, and long-run empirical data on what happened in historical centers of rural revolutionary mobilization during and after revolutionary conflicts is exceedingly rare.

The collection of such materials was made possible through grassroots partnerships with communities under study, in a model of data collection and research intermediation that is rare in the social sciences. This yields data that is not only high quality, collected under challenging constraints in authoritarian systems, but also feeds back into the communities under study and preserves histories that are otherwise at risk of becoming forever lost. I highlight possibilities for more direct local intermediation in empirical research—as opposed to an outsourcing to commercial survey firms—as an increasingly tractable model that makes possible new forms of data, like the large scale family histories, covering over 2,000 individuals, replicated across Laos and Thailand, that are at the heart of my argument.

The empirical chapters then proceed sequentially following the key mechanism of rupture and reconstitution at the micro level in Laos and Thailand, before zooming out to the global scale. Chapter 4, titled “Initiation and Action” analyzes local microprocesses of mobilization in Laos and Thailand using the family history data. It describes how the CPT and Pathet Lao penetrated these communities, the nature of the organizational structure, and who was mobilized, how, and why. In addition to quantitative analysis, I use qualitative histories to characterize the nature of the rupture in these two areas. Chapter 5, titled “Inheritance,” then presents the intergenerational results. I first move sequentially through long-run results in Laos and Thailand before leveraging comparison across these cases to show how human capital and network effects, rooted in mobilization, shaped politics across the mirrored paths of revolutionary victory/defeat. Finally, chapter 6 draws out global implications from this analysis. This chapter presents qualitative comparative histories of several global cases before presenting an analysis of post-revolutionary cabinets globally to argue that the politics of mobilization sheds light on post-revolutionary political development in a range of global cases.

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