Structure versus Ayatollah

Theda Skocpol's social revolution theory applied on the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran.

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Introduction

Theda Skocpol's 1979 book *'States and Social revolutions'* was an important milestone for the structuralist interpretation of revolutions. With a detailed and strong argument based on the French revolution of 1789, the Russian revolution of 1917 and the Chinese revolution of 1948-1952, Skocpol's interpretation of the origins and development of social revolutions in general, seemed to be ready to be added to the analysts' arsenal of general theories of revolutions.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution that took place in 1979 in Iran did seem to invalidate her theory, because contrary to Skocpol's idea, this revolution seemed very much 'made', and a voluntarist explanation of the events seemed most likely. Skocpol must have felt pressure to amend her theory to make up for the initial criticism, judging from the publication of the 1981 article *'Rentier state and Shi'a Islam in the Islamic revolution',* in which she seeks to explain some of the details of the revolution.

But the question remains: can Theda Skocpol's theory on social revolutions stand up to the criticism that was brought upon it by the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran? To provide an answer, this paper will explore the questions of 'How can the 1979 revolution be seen in terms of Skocpol's theory?' and: 'Can Skocpol's theory convincingly explain the causes of the revolution?' To answer these questions, this paper will first deal with the core analytical aspects of Skocpol's Social Revolutions theory. Chapter 4 will analyze the revolution using Skocpol's theory, using the three principles that form the core of her theory. Then, her follow up paper will be discussed to answer the question: 'What did Skocpol think of the challenge of the Iranian revolution to her theory, and how did she react to this challenge?' The scope of this paper is limited to the causes of the revolution, and not the outcomes. This is a deliberate choice, because of the size constraints placed upon this paper, and to not

confuse the events leading up to the Shah's exile in 1979 and the process afterwards. This later process is less of a revolution, and more a very long political process, which arguably lasted up to the death of Khomeini in 1989. The difference between the two in ideas, actions and parties involved make it difficult to see both phases in their own right.

Chapter 1: The principles of Social Revolutions theory

1.1: How Skocpol came to her Social Revolutions theory

Before we analyse Skocpols theory of social revolutions, it is useful to study her commentary of the existing theories of revolutions at the time. As she explains, the general definitions at the time do not sufficiently explain what she defines as 'social revolutions':

Social revolutions are rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures; and they are accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below. Social revolutions are set apart from other sorts of conflicts and transformative processes above all by the combination of two coincidences: the coincidence of societal structural change with class upheaval; and the coincidence of political with social transformation.[1]

The existing theories of revolution were not suited for Skocpol's definition, because they did not appreciate social revolutions as complex subjects, but rather as more simplistic occurrences. She also supposes that successful social revolutions differ in origins and context from either other (political) revolutions, or failed social revolutions, something other theories do not account.[2] To make her point, she identifies four 'major families' of theories of revolutions. Karl Marx' theory of revolution is the first. Second, she identifies three theories born from American social science: Aggregate-psychological theory, represented by Ted Gurr's '*Why men Rebel*' , Systems-value theory, with Chalmers Johnson's '*Revolutionary change'* as an important work and political-conflict theory, as found in Charles Tilly's '*From Mobilization to Revolution'*.[3]

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[1] Theda Skocpol, *States and Social revolutions* (Cambridge 1979) 4.

[2] Skocpol, *States and Social revolutions,* 5.

[3] Ibidem 8-9.

Skocpol argues that despite all their difference, these theories do share *‚certain conceptions, assumptions, and modes of explanation'* [4]. Skocpol enumerates three commonalities with which she disagrees: 1. A voluntarist approach, 2. A limited reference to international structures and international historical developments, 3. a government as a force dependent on at least some parts of society, rather than being an autonomous force.[5]

These concepts are used in her 1979 book *‚States and social revolutions'*, published in 1979 as the basis for a new analysis of three 'classic' revolutions. She defined classic in the sense that these revolutions are the most famous social revolutions so that most readers would be familiar with the cases. However, this approach has strongly identified her theory with these revolutions to the point where her analysis of these revolutions has become mistaken for her theory. The result is that revolutions that do not seem to exhibit the same structures and developments are might be excluded from analysis with the social revolutions theory. This is not the case, and the association of Skocpol's Social Revolutions theory with exclusively agrarian societies, is a wrong association.

1.2: The validity of Skocpol's theory in non-agrarian societies

Skocpol explains her social revolutions theory with three cases: France in 1789, Russia in 1917 and China in 1959. All three of these states were clearly agrarian societies. They all conformed to the peculiarities of agrarian societies: the majority of the population were engaged in subsistence farming or small scale commercial farming; agrarian products made up the majority of GDP; farmers were usually bound to landed

[4] Ibidem 14.

[5] Ibidem 14.

aristocracy; and power over military, judiciary and economical matters were decentralised. Iran in 1979, however, did not share these peculiar traits and its society looked entirely different. Power in Iran was highly centralized in the autocratic shah with no representation or distribution, aristocrats served no important function as rural communities were marginalised in favor of urban centers. The countryside became emptier as cities and towns became the residence of the majority of Iranians, agriculture was disfavoured as the state engaged in heavy industry and oil dominated the economy. At the eve of the revolution, in 1978, agriculture made up 9.4% of GDP, oil exports 35.8%, industry 19.1% and the service sector made up 35.7% of GDP.[6]

In Skocpol's definition, there is no requirement for social revolutions to only take place in agrarian societies. To assume it did, would do be a mistake as she did intend it for broader use: the concepts she uses to analyse the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions are valuable for analysing non-agrarian revolutions too. Interpreting her theory too broad and the assumption that her theory is a rigid model for social revolutions, would mean that when applied to non-agrarian states any research would break down on the problem of applying the processes and the symptoms that are common to her examples and do not necessarily occur in other sorts of social revolutions.[7]

In this paper Social revolutions theory is interpreted at its most basic form: the three concepts that Skocpol uses to formulate her theory. To avoid confusion, from this point onwards,,theory', or ‚Social Revolutions theory' or ‚Skocpol's theory' refers to Skocpol's three principles of *structuralist approach*, *international context* and

[6] P. Avery, G. Hambly, C. Melville (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Iran Vol. 7* (Cambridge 1991) 620.

[7] Skocpol herself argues for this in: Theda Skocpol, *Social revolutions in the modern world* (Cambridge 1994) 6-7.

autonomous state, rather than any rigid models, very general theories, or the opposite: narrow definitions of what Social Revolutions are. This view is flexible, adaptable to the myriad situations in which revolutions come about, is applicable to both Skocpol and the case at hand: Iran.

1.3: Skocpol's three principles for analysing a social revolution.

1.3.1: Structuralism as a point of view

For Skocpol, all general theories share similarities in the overall approach of revolution: through societal change come grievances, social disorientation, or new group interest. Subsequently, a new mass movement arises that is organised and supplied with ideology and has the goal to depose the current government or social order. Finally, the revolutionary movement either challenges the government and loses or wins and establishes its own values and takes over the government.

It is a valid point: the major theories do imply a certain voluntarism, even Marxist theory has grown to emphasise ‚the will of the people', or class interest, thus introducing voluntarism into its core concepts of how revolutions begin. Skocpol states the clear problem with this approach: it implies that the society's structure depends on the consensus of the majority, and accordingly, if it loses its majority, the conditions for a revolution are set. Such an approach is problematic, as there are numerous examples of states and governments that have survived for a long time without the support of the majority.[8] Additionally, organized disapproval of a government in itself is not enough to cause a revolution, because: ‚*the fact is that historically no successful social revolution has ever been "made" by a mass-mobilizing, avowedly revolutionary movement*'[9]. While she

[8] Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* 16.

[9] Ibidem 17.

does agree that mass-movements have played important roles in revolutions throughout history, they never created a revolutionary situation where there was none before. Indeed, it seems that not having the support of the majority is not enough reason for a revolution to occur.

The outcomes of social revolutions are also an issue: Skocpol argues that it is misleading to say that the outcomes are what the mass-mobilizing groups wanted, and thus inaccurate to establish a link between the intentions of important actors and its outcome of a revolution. She rather believes that:

> *The logic of these conflicts has not been controlled by any one class or group, no matter how seemingly central in the revolutionary process And the revolutionary conflicts have invariably given rise to outcomes neither fully foreseen nor intended by - nor perfectly serving the interests of - any of the particular groups involved. It simply will not do, therefore, to try to decipher the perspective or following the actions of any one class or elite or organisation - no matter how important its participatory role.*[10]

Thus, problems are attached to voluntarism in both the origins and outcomes of revolutions. Her arguments, that no revolution has been 'made' just because the state could not count upon support of the majority of the population anymore as cause for a social revolution, and that no group has ever been completely able to secure its interests in the outcome of a social revolution, are both convincing. It calls for a more structural approach.

1.3.2: The importance of international context for social revolutions

Skocpol argues that social revolutions are intricately linked to international developments and cannot be explained without taking them into account. Other theories of revolutions either get the misrepresent or marginalize the internationalize the international context of revolutions, according to Skocpol. Transnational economic

[10] Ibidem 18.

development and competing states are key to understanding the importance of international developments and their relation to the causes of Social Revolutions. According to Skocpol, other theories do take into account ‚modernization of state and economy', but miss the context of the unequal economic and technological development in which modernization takes place.[11]

Instead, Skocpol argues that states are not just in different points in similar yet separate developmental paths, but rather, higher development in another country will influence the development of other countries. This does seem to be a valid theory, as more technologically or economically advanced countries have influenced less advanced countries in a myriad of ways throughout history. For instance, this can be seen in the case of 19th century colonialism, where European states successfully subjugated African states using superior technology. This makes the concept of ‚Modernity' much more complex, by not only measuring which is the most advanced state, but also in what ways this influences countries with which they interact.

Skocpol notes that states, as autonomous organizations of the European prototype, are always wary of, and constantly compete with, each other. Each state can only control a certain amount of territory, or valuable good or profitable trade at a certain moment in time, because they have to share the entire market with competitors. As their competitors' expansion can mean an uncertain future in the short or the long term, states are likely to try and outperform each other, which leads to an constant thirst for more territory, knowledge and trade. This competition not only spurs innovation, it also punishes those states who fail to innovate, as they become less important, less wealthy and eventually, uncertain of their future. This explains not only the influence states have on each other, but also *why* they choose to interact.

[11] Ibidem 19.

1.3.3: The state as an autonomous institution

For Skocpol, it is vital to consider that states have, or can potentially have, their own interest and logic and thus: autonomy. Other theories deny this autonomy and reduce states to an echo of certain socio-economic groups, or an arena to settle political confrontation.[12] Skocpol argues that states can be coercive organisations, which do not necessarily reflect the will of the majority or a minority, but instead impose its own will, and can force the people of its territory to give up the necessary resources to sustain itself. Thus, the state has its own ‚will to survive': it uses coercive methods: police, army and secret services, to maintain the status quo, regardless of what the population or the leading elites desires.

This view contrasts with Gurr's and with Johnson's views that the state is dependent on the population's approval of the status quo or at the very least their inaction when they disapprove. And while Tilly and Marxist theorists both agree with Skocpol that the state is a coercive organisation, they see the state as at least an arena for politics or as a weapon of certain small groups in society. Thus, they do not share the premise that the state has a will of its own. The state's will is a believable premise. States can and have, gone against the wishes of most or almost all of the population, yet they survive. The interest of the state is in many cases not the same as the interest of the dominant groups of society. In fact, in many cases, states continue to function without the support of a majority of the population. Iran is such a case.

[12] Ibidem 27.

Chapter 2: Social revolutions theory in the Iranian case

2.1: The autonomy of the Iranian state

The Iranian state was certainly autonomous from its population in 1978. Its government had been firmly been autocratic since the first Pahlavi Shah took the throne in 1923, and his son Muhammed Reza Pahlavi, had lost all democratic pretence in the last 25 years of his reign. Despite this, the state maintained its position and Iran enjoyed remarkable stability.[13]

This was possible because Iran's power was not primarily based in democratic support or local aristocracy, but was greatly enhanced, and for the most part depended upon, royalties received from the foreign companies operating Iran's vast oil resources. As the only industry of importance in Iran, the role of Oil royalties received from foreign oil companies like the British Iranian Oil company cannot be underestimated in gauging the independence of the Iranian state: 80% of the state's income was derived from oil royalties[14]. As profits were either exported or paid to the Iranian government, it also took away any chance for the local population to enrich themselves by ways of ownership or employment as typically only the lower ranking jobs were open to the local population.

The royalties received from oil export were partly used to finance an extensive state organisation, of which a large part were the police, armed forces, and intelligence services. These institutions greatly enhanced the government's coercive force—a force that could in turn both extract the resources it needed, as well as stifle any opposition to

[13] Avery e.a., *The Cambridge History of Iran Vol. 7,* 211-212, 224.

[14] M. Shabafrouz, ‚Iran's Oil Wealth', *Giga working papers* 113 (November 2009) 15.

the government. Examples of this power can be found in the great size and number of arrests the national security and intelligence agency, SAVAK, made.[15]

The oil royalties further supported the state's independence in two ways: by investing large amounts of money in industrialisation plans to give the state further control over the economy, consequently creating a dependence on the government in the entrepreneurial groups in Iran; and by the sheer size of the state: a great number of people were in its employ, and employed one of the more powerful armies on earth, supplied with the best American weapon technology.[16] This allowed the Shah, who stood at the top of the organisation and did not need answer to any person or institution, ultimate power.

Proof of the independent will of the state can be found in its treatment of the landowners. This group included the traditional powerhouses, the landed aristocracy, as well as the clergy, who depended on the rent from their domains to support themselves.[17] Although the landowners' great domains represented a sizable share of the agricultural economy, they could not gain political power through it, because the oil income made the state independent of their taxes. In addition the land reform and industrialisation plan, known as the 'White Revolution', was probably never intended to drastically improve agriculture. Its goal probably was to both raise legitimacy and popularity for the regime, while simultaneously diminishing possible opposition power by denying the aristocracy and clergy their income. It also signified that the state did not

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[15] Dilipp Hiro, *Iran under the Ayatollahs* (London 1987) 54.

[16] John P. Miglietta, *American Alliance Policy in the Middle East, 1945-1992* (Lanham 2002) 90-97.

[17] Misagh Parsa, *States, Ideologies and Social revolutions: a comparative analysis of Iran, Nicaragua and the Philippines* (2004 Cambridge) 134.

need the taxes they paid.[18] The White Revolution eventually turned out to be a failure and reduced agricultural production, forcing an increasing number of peasants to move to the cities.

In the case of Iran, Skocpol's viewpoint that the state should be viewed as autonomous is productive. The Shah's government certainly was a coercive organisation, with its own goals and logic separate from the classes that could support the government. In contrast with the view of a non-autonomous government: and by using any of the other theories that Skocpol names, a researcher would become stuck in the question: „which socio-economic group of people is the government trying to appease?", Only Skocpol's theory can explain the Iranian government's self-interest.

Yet, from an international perspective it can also argued that the government was far from autonomous. On a basic level, without the influx of oil royalties from foreign companies, and the massive armoury of the Iranian state, the government would not be able be so independent from its people. Its relationship with the United States went even further: its strategic importance as part of the anti-communist bloc, was so great that the U.S. would support the Shah even against his own people, as they did in a reactionary coup against the powerful prime-minister Mussadiq of the secular, nationalist National Front in 1953[19]. It is also telling that the regime only fell after the U.S. changed its policy about supporting human rights-violating dictatorships after president Jimmy Carter took the office in 1977. [20] Leaving the question of Iranian

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[18] Avery,e.a., *The Cambridge History of Iran Vol. 7,* 279.

[19] Avery,e.a., *The Cambridge History of Iran Vol. 7,* 258-263.

[20] Avery,e.a., *The Cambridge History of Iran Vol. 7,* 287, 290; Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: roots and results of the revolution* (New Haven 2003) 165-166, 214-215.

subservience to foreign powers aside, the autonomy of the Iranian state in the country, was closely connected to its international relations.

2.2: The international factor in Iranian politics and economy

From the days of the Qajar-empire in the 19th century, international forces have influenced not only daily life in Iran, but also every major event, including the important revolutions and political crises of 1905-1911; the 1921 coup by Reza Pahlavi; and supporting the shah against prime-minister Mussadiq in 1953. Foreign powers, most notably Britain, Russia and the U.S., greatly influenced Iran's domestic policies, through the colonial policies of acquiring concession and sending advisors. The great technological and economical advantage the western powers had in comparison to Iran in the nineteenth and twentieth century allowed them to easily overpower any Iranian resistance to western thought, economic interests, and cultural outlets. However, although Iran was brought under western control, it was never colonised as control was only exerted through the local rulers.

This relationship is key to understanding the direction political discourse in Iran took, which led to the ideologies that would be represented in the revolution. It was through the extensive cooperation of the Shah with foreign powers, often operating against the interests of the Iranian citizens, that he lost all legitimacy as a national symbol or rallying point. This led to a republican, nationalistic discourse that was prevalent in the majority of political organisations. The oppression that the Pahlavis unleashed upon the Iranian population also backfired on the foreign powers, as their association with the state terror caused deep distrust in the population. This compounded into a xenophobic tendency that ran through political discourse, of which the National Front is a good example. However, not all ideology was home-grown in opposition to foreign influences. Socialism became a factor of importance after the

Russian revolution of 1917 in the form of the Tudeh party. Although the Tudeh party had a nationalist platform, it lacked the xenophobia of the National Front, as it had a strong, mainly ideological, connection with Soviet socialists. However, this became their undoing as they lost credibility because of this connection when the Soviet-Union engaged in formal diplomatic and extensive economical relations with the Shah's regime, and the Tudeh's Iranian network became increasingly infiltrated by the Iranian secret service.[21]

But the most influential development in Iranian political discourse was the home-grown political discourse of Islamism. Disappointed in socialism and without a truly Iranian symbol rallying point that could stand the xenophobic nationalist political discourse, Shi'a Islam was a perfect alternative to foreign influenced autocrat rule, soviet-backed Tudeh, and ineffective National Front opposition. Shi'a Islam was thoroughly Iranian, as the only majority Shi'a country in the world, and could count upon widespread and deeply ingrained adherence. Islam became the dominant political discourse due to its established position, with schools and mosques as channels of communication, its ecclesial hierarchy in which Ayatollahs could have great influence, and the relative immunity of the clergy against the regime.[22]

Thus, with Islam and its clergy put in in a place of authority on politics, and as voices to which the oppressed people of Iran could listen, it was only time before the clergy would become the leading political opposition against the Shah. In 1963, the political illegitimacy of the Shah's White Revolution sparked criticism from the high

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[21] Fred Halliday, 'The Iranian left in international perspective' in: S. Cronin (ed.) *Reformers and revolutionaries in Modern Iran: New perspectives on the Iranian Left* (New York 2004) 25-37.

[22].Keddie *Modern Iran: roots and results of revolution*, 227.

clergy in Qom, the ayatollahs Shariatmadari and Khomeini. Khomeini, who would eventually rise to prominence due to his refusal to back down even after his many arrests in 1963 and 1964 and finally his exile in Iraq, spoke out against the dictatorship, the subservient relations with the U.S. and the good relations with Israel.[23] However, these events would not lead to outright revolution, as the government was still strong and the country enjoyed a very prosperous decade.

Although the opposition to the shah can be seen as a mostly internal affair, it cannot be ignored that their disposition and discourse were strongly influenced by international developments. The government itself might have taunted its ‚Iranian' roots, by the adoption of ancient indigenous names and practices, but it was broadly seen as being held up with both discrete and explicit foreign support. The state's affiliation with foreign powers encouraged a strong nationalist and xenophobic political discourse. Shi'a Islam was only a logical solution to the ‚problem' of a nationalist movement finding a universal symbol that was free of government affiliation while at the same time truly Iranian.

2.3: A structuralist approach of the Islamic revolution

Even though Khomeini (or any other opposition politician for that matter) might have wished to bring about a revolution before 1977-1979, he could not have done it because the country still did not have the *revolutionary situation* necessary for a successful uprising to occur. That situation came only about in the second half of the 1970's, when the country faced a conflux of economic problems.

The large-scale urbanisation created many problems in Iran. Peasants migrated to the cities; partially as a result of government planning that prioritised industry and

[23] Keddie, *Modern Iran: roots and results of revolution*, 146-148.

put a low priority on agricultural development. The failure of the same government planning in both industry and agriculture,[24] especially in the years 1973 to 1978, meant that the growth of jobs in the cities could not keep up the number of migrants that arrived, creating large groups of unemployed citizens who had to live in impoverished conditions.[25] Tehran, for example, grew from 540,087 inhabitants in 1940 to 4,530,223 inhabitants in 1976, a growth of 838%.[26] These people were hit hard by economic developments in the late 1970's. Inflation steadily rose, reaching an average of 31% in 1977[27], causing housing to become unaffordable for families.[28] The government's response with a deflationary economic policy resulted in further unemployment among the unskilled and semi-skilled workers.[29] The relatively primitive infrastructure of the country crumbled under the great amount of imports[30] causing shortages in consumer products, including basic foodstuffs.[31] By 1978, future looked bleak for the poor and middle classes in Iran, while in the previous decade their future looked prosperous, as promised by the Shah. These economic problems caused social upheaval and mass demonstrations from 1977 onwards. The Iranian government however, only felt the

[24] Avery e.a., *The Cambridge History of Iran Vol. 7*, 229-230.

[25] Ibidem 627-628.

[26] Tehran Municipality, 'Population increase in Tehran districts' atlas.tehran.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=264 (14 may 2013).

[27] Tradingeconomics.com, 'Iran Inflation Rate' tradingeconomics.com/iran/inflation-cpi (21 May 2013).

[28] Avery e.a., *The Cambridge History of Iran Vol. 7*, 288.

[29] Keddie *Modern Iran: roots and results of revolution*, 164-165.

[30] Avery e.a., *The Cambridge History of Iran Vol. 7*, 288.

[31] Shabafrouz, 'Iran's Oil Wealth', 16.

trouble when it reached the oil-refineries in the form of massive strikes. That shut down production, and with it the main source of income for the government.[32]

These developments support a structuralist view of the outbreak of the Iranian Revolution. It is impossible to explain why the revolution succeeded in 1979 and not earlier, without considering the socio-economical factors leading up to the revolution. During the Mossadiq-crisis in 1953 and political turbulence in the 1960's, displacement was much smaller and the economy was still more diversified, with traditional agriculture an important and still viable option for the majority of peasants. Food and housing were still affordable and the future looked bright for many Iranians. These conditions were clearly different in 1979.

But the strongest argument for a voluntarist interpretation is the involvement of large-scale ideologically motivated groups at the very beginning of the unrest that would later be called the Iranian revolution. The high visibility of the clergy in the West during the revolution, due to Khomeini's presence in France in 1978, and the firm political control of the high clergy on contemporary Iranian politics has elevated their role in contemporary perception of the Islamic revolution. The name of the revolution itself implies a clergy-led revolution, but Shi'a Islam certainly was not the reason for the revolution, nor did it play a large role in starting the events that led to the fall of the Shah.

The beginning of the massive demonstrations in the cities were mainly supported through publications by both intellectuals as well as (moderate) secular and religious politicians, who felt supported by the Carter administration's human rights policy. [33] Although these demonstrations started out as secular gatherings, a

[32] Shabafrouz, ‚Iran's Oil Wealth', 15.

[33] Keddie *Modern Iran: roots and results of revolution*, 214-217.

government-sponsored publication in January 1978, denouncing ayatollah Khomeini, drew the ire of many of his supporters, who went out onto the streets to protest. The now open hostility of the clergy and many lay Muslims put religious forces, rather than the secular groups, at the forefront of the demonstrations. The protections that the Shi'a clergy could offer in the form of demonstrations disguised as religious processions, certainly helped designate demonstrations, even when they were joined by secular Iranians, as led by the clergy. The clergy's leadership was affirmed by the participation in the demonstrations the merchants of the bazaar. These *bazaaris*, had major grievances against the government for favouring modern trade and lending over their traditional ways. The merchants of the bazaar had to stand and see how they were to make room for this bright future, literally, as their narrow, winding streets were demolished to build wide boulevards in grid networks to accommodate 'the future of Iran'.[34] The traditional connections between the clergy and the *bazaari* greatly enhanced the clergy's leadership. Large parts of the new urban poor also joined in demonstrations. This latter group saw the radical clergy, such as Khomeini and Shariati, as the leaders of the revolution, and elevated their importance in comparison to the moderate clergy.

It should be noted that the *Ulama-bazaari* alliance had some overlapping worldviews, but their goals were different. For the clergy, this was a battle for traditional religious practice and Shi'a influence in Iran's culture, while for the *Bazaaris,* it was mainly a fight to survive in a world in which the government had no future for them. The new urban poor were another group who were mainly struggling for survival. Although this alliance has received the most attention in the contemporary view of the revolution, other less traditional groups, such as the secular opposition of

[34] Keddie *Modern Iran: roots and results of revolution*, 228.

the National Front, the liberals, the leftists, the middle class, and the factory-workers, also played important parts in the revolution. In the summer of 1978, it seemed as if the latter groups had determined the outcome of the uprising, when the Shah promised liberalizations and free elections, which caused the protests to die down. Until this point, nothing seemed to point to the radical direction the revolution would take, as even the deposing of the Shah was not yet widely supported.[35] Khomeini's refusal to compromise with the Shah made him seem somewhat irrelevant in in June and July of 1978. It was only in September, after the SAVAK suddenly continued repression and the government declared a state of emergency that suddenly suspended all normal public life, that the protests continued. It was then that the willingness of all opposition to compromise with the government ended and demonstrations and strikes started which forced the economy to a standstill. Khomeini's influence quickly grew due to the uncompromising view he had put forward since the beginning of the uprising. The secular and religious opposition united and withstood repression from the army and the SAVAK to force the Shah capitulate to their demands. On December 30th, the Shah made one of the National Front opposition leaders prime-minister, agreed to reforms and announced his departure from Iran by January 16th.[36] Khomeini returned on February 1 to Iran and appointed his own prime minister, Bazargan, who deposed Bakthiar and dissolved the imperial government in favour of a new provisional government. The unity of the months before quickly broke down and the former opposition splintered again.

In retrospect, Khomeini might seem to have been the primary instigator of the revolution and reaped the most benefit of the revolution, suggesting a voluntarist

[35] Ibidem 230.

[36] Ibidem 234-238.

explanation. However, if we study the revolution closely, we can see that it was not Khomeini who started the revolution. Instead, the revolution was caused by the dire economic situation for many Iranians, the anti-shah publications in and outside Iran, and America's human rights policy. Nor was it Khomeini who led the demonstrators, but rather this was a broad coalition, with different goals and ideas about what should come after the Shah's regime. Khomeini did serve as a powerful national symbol and in the last half of 1978, as a trusted leader, able to muster the resolve in the protesters to continue their struggle in the face of a powerful state machine. At no point did Khomeini or his faction represent the opposition as a whole. They did not start the revolution, nor were they able to truly seize control of Iran after the revolution: they could only do this in later years.

Chapter 3: Skocpol's response to the Iranian revolution

Having constructed an interpretation of the Iranian revolution based on Skocpol's theory, and having weighed the validity of the three concepts she proposed in *'States and Social Revolution',* it is time to compare it to her reaction to the 1979 revolution in the article *'Rentier state and Shi'a Islam in the Iranian revolution'.*

In this article, Skocpol first confirmed that this was a social revolution, and asserts that this revolution was *made*, in contrast to her earlier book. She analyses four peculiarities in her article. The first is the dependence of the Iranian government on the royalties from the foreign oil companies. Skocpol calls Iran a *'Rentier absolutist state'*, with which she means a centralised, autocratic state that is independent from society and bases its power on other sources, in this case oil. In this first peculiarity, she argues along the same lines as earlier in this paper: Iranian society lacked strong political classes who could oppose or support the shah and was very vulnerable to changes in the price or production of oil.

Her second observation is the relative importance of the traditional networks of the bazaar merchants in the urban environment. She theorises that the bazaars of Iran held on to their intricate networks in the community throughout the shah's regime, maintaining themselves, as well as integrating new immigrants through and, most important, held their deep interconnectedness with the Shi'a clergy. The bazaar, and thus the clergy, would also maintain connections to students, industrial workers, the secular middle-class and the government, through family ties and commercial relations. Skocpol theorises that these many connections must have given the bazaaris a crucial coordinating role the mass demonstrations of 1978.

Thirdly, Skocpol states that the demonstrators held for an extraordinary amount of time in the face brutal repression from the government. She attributes this to the

organisational capacities of the Shi'a clergy, who could rally the people under their nationalistic and uncorrupted banner; and the cultural aspects of Shi'a Islam where martyrdom could be asked of its followers during the demonstrations, based upon the faith's myths and beliefs. Thus, the religious community could ‚make' a revolution against the Shah happen.

Finally, Skocpol asserts that the outcome of the revolution is not traditionalist, but rather modern, albeit not in a way as understood in the West, by combining democracy and theocracy. The 'modernised' state as an outcome of the revolution was even more centralised and brought under the control of the radical clergy. State and 'church' were fused together after 1979 and the support of the protestors against the Shah was mobilised to increase the *Ulama's* power and direct frustrations outward, mainly towards 'US imperialism'.

The first analytical object is in line with what was discussed previously in this paper and thus with what she stated in her book. The second point is a complete break from theory in the sense that is very voluntaristic and not class-based at all. The idea she has of a bazaari community that is compromised of both the poorest as well as rich Iranians, who are bound by tradition and culture, rather than bound and divided by socio-economic position and were intricately connected with every other part of society, and voluntarily and naturally support the clergy, is outright strange. Although Iran's social order might be a strange and unfamiliar one, because it did not adhere to western concepts of class in the sense of working class and bourgeoisie, it is unlikely that the social order was made up of a large majority of a bazaari class that would defy wealth divisions through cultural binding. Social differences were stark in Iran before 1979, with a small elite owning large percentages of the nation's wealth and millions of poor, recently arrived migrants in the cities. With unemployment rife amongst the urban population, and the typical makeup of a bazaari trading company

having 10 or fewer employees, it is unlikely that the rich and poor were united in a bazaari class, or that the recent migrants were to be successfully assimilated into the bazaari class. The ‚network' aspect is equally unlikely, because however intricate and extensive these networks might have been, they are unlikely to have absorbed the huge influx of migrants in the period 1940-1976. Tehran, the most important city during the revolution, had an average population growth of 6% over the 36 years before the revolution. For instance, in the year 1975,, that would require the bazaari class to form a connection with 200,000 new Tehranians, a near impossible task. The concept of a single, monolithic class as dominant in society is wrong and gives a voluntaristic interpretation to the revolution by making all the individual protesters and their actions representative of the will of the *Bazaaris.* Such class never existed and the merchants of the bazaar did not control large portions of the Iranian society.

Skocpol also overestimates Shi'ism's role. Indeed, it did serve as a symbol to rally around, and the clergy was effective in rallying its supporters for demonstrations. However, the argument that the tradition of martyrdom in Shi'ism is an important reason for the revolution's success, misrepresents the religious make-up of the protests, as considerable numbers of the protesters were secular, and there is no proof the secular Iranians were any less determined than the religious protesters in the face of government violence. Secondly, the government repression was not consistently oppressive. Although the massacres of September 1978 were its most brutal period, afterwards the Shah wavered in outright attacking the population. Most importantly, the Iranian government never tried to suppress the protests by massacring the protesters, as it could have as it possessed one of the stronger armies in the world. Thirdly, the choice to not suppress the protests, combined with the concessions in the

summer of 1978, must have given protesters unprecedented hope for change, as every protest before had been quashed. [37]

Although Skocpol's final observation is outside the scope of this paper, it does seem to be consistent with the examples outlined in her earlier book: a stronger state emerged and inherited the strengths of the Shah's government, but none of the weaknesses. The revolution kept the oil revenues and the superior military equipment of the Shah and gained the legitimacy and the support the old regime lacked. The result was a state that could count upon its citizens to fight a long and protracted war against Iraq in which they would be asked to themselves.

Rentier State and Shi'a Islam in the Islamic revolution does include some useful observations that can help to better understand Skocpol's Social revolutions theory. These observations include the Iranian state as a rentier state and Shi'a islam as a rallying point. To outright say that a huge bazaar 'class' created the revolution, and who were strengthened by Shi'a martyrdom, is an outright oversimplification of the revolutionary situation that led to the revolution. It is a complete reversal from Skocpol's earlier statements in *'States and Social revolutions'* that the causes of revolutions should be problematized and studied as a complex object. As demonstrated above, this oversimplification is incorrect and thus unproductive. Skocpol should have adhered to the principles she set out in 1979 in examining this revolution.

[37] Keddie*, Modern Iran,* 237.

Conclusion

In this paper, the Iranian Islamic revolution is analysed as a social revolution within Skocpol's definition. Using the three concepts that form the core of Skocpol's theory - *an autonomous state, international context and a structuralist approach* - I analysed the Iranian situation from a structuralist perspective. Aware of the danger of comparing this analysis of an oil-based *Rentier state* to the three agrarian societies that are used as examples in the book *States and social revolution*, I chose an approach that focused singularly on the three concepts named above. For this approach, I found support in Skocpol's remarks that her theory should not be seen as a general theory, but rather as a collection of theoretical principles[38], making it possible to apply these principles to Iran in its own right. After a short theoretical analysis on the usability of these principles, I described the Iranian revolution in the terms of these principles.

The results have been unexpected. Although Skocpol had doubts about the accuracy of her theory during the Iranian revolution[39], I can certainly say that her theory yielded an overview of the Iranian revolution that has great explanatory value. Indeed, if anything, the three principles highlighted the exact peculiarities that made Iran's revolution so very different: the strong and independent state who operated without significant support in society; the deep involvement of foreign powers and the dependence upon oil royalties; the economic troubles, failing government intervention in the economy and the different oppositional movements.

The concept of the autonomy of the state placed the Iranian oil-funded rentier state at the centre of research on the revolution, an insight that placed the root cause of

[38] Skocpol, *Social revolutions in the modern world*, 6-7.

[39] Ibidem 240-242.

the revolution with its complete disconnection from society. Wealthy from the oil dollars and the extensive support it received from foreign powers that had vested interests in Iran, Iran set about to rapidly transform the country into the likeness of a western nation. Such transformation in the social and economical spheres of life was not only against the wishes of the population, but also failed due to the lack of understanding of Iranian society, its appreciation of agriculture, and the oppressive top-down approach the government took. Independent of the misery this caused in rural areas and the urbanisation it resulted in, the government continued to try and implement the same failing policies to industrialise and westernise the country.

The international context helps explain why western powers were continuously present in Iran and why they would staunchly support the Shah: for a secure supply of oil and to prevent Iran from falling to their Cold War enemies. With the Shah supplied with the best of foreign weaponry, he was an excellent ally to the western cause. Simultaneously the West ignored the large-scale human rights violations the weapons enabled.. This policy caused great opposition under the Iranians, whose political discourse as a result became increasingly nationalistic, xenophobic, and eventually islamic. Shi'a Islam arose only as a viable political movement because of the symbolic value it commanded as an uncorrupted, nationalistic banner to rally around when so much of Iran's heritage and national symbols were appropriated or tainted by the regime. The supportive international environment became much more negative in the late 1970's, as oppositional parties organised themselves abroad, the western media started publishing report of atrocities committed by the state, and American support for dictatorships such as Iran's faltered.

These developments are some of the structural reasons of the revolution. The structuralist view assisted answering of why the revolution happened only in 1979, and not earlier, during uprisings in the 1950's and 1960's. In addition to the causes above,

which were only in full effect in the latter years of the 1970's, were the economical problems caused by the disconnected government: high inflation, a weak transport network, and food and housing shortages. The Shah's government was already widely hated, but the promise of prosperity in the decade before delayed demand for reform. In the years leading up to the revolution, the hopeful outlook proved to be a sham and the situation became desperate for many Iranians, causing protests and strikes that were repressed rather than heard by the government. Much has been made of the role of the clergy in the revolution, who are supposed to have initiated the revolution just by their will. In the course of this paper, this view was disproven, as the protests were made up from a large number of groups who varied in ideological outlook, religiosity and demands. The leadership of the revolution only fell to Ayatollah Khomeini in the last months of 1978, and this leadership was rather symbolic, than actual, as he only arrived after the Shah had fled. Only after the protests were over, the radical clergy would establish itself in the political system, but such development could not have been predicted yet in the summer of 1978, when the revolution seemed to take a distinctly liberal direction.

Although the theory fits exceptionally well with the Iranian case, Skocpol's earlier doubt must have made her reject her earlier staunch structuralist viewpoint, because her 1981 follow-up article on the Iranian revolution seeks to amend her theory with voluntarist elements and a rejection of all class-based conflict. Among strong observations, such as the symbolic value of Islam, the rentier state, and the modernisation of the Iranian state, she chose to put forward the *bazaari* merchants and traders as a single group and the single group responsible for bringing about the revolutions, due to their connections in the community. This voluntarist argument completely generalises the complex make-up of the revolutionary crowds, and is counterproductive rather than an improvement. The same problem occurs with her

argument that the crowds could last longer in the face of brutal violence than any western group of protestors because of the cultural qualities of Shi'a Islam. However, not only does she not question the violence the government used, the generalisation that all protesters would share the same mind set, denies the diversity of the demonstrating groups.

Theda Skocpol's Social Revolutions theory has proven to be an elegant and highly productive method of looking at the causes of the Iranian revolution. I was surprised by the amount of flexibility the theory allows for interpretation, making it possible to analyse both the social revolutions in agrarian states, as well as in rentier states such as Iran. Her original book has sufficient analytical value. The later article, does not add any necessary analytical tools necessary for understanding the Islamic Revolution. Skocpol started her book and theory with an analysis of what was missing from all four existing theories of revolution and crafted the answer that came out of this analysis into three concepts that are particularly well suited to analyse the 1979 Islamic revolution. But to really estimate the theory's explanatory value, a thought experiment might be in place: can the Islamic revolution really be explained *without* these three concepts? Can any of the four theories Skocpol analysed explain the remarkable independence of the state in the first place, or why earlier uprising never grew out to successful revolutions? It seems to me that it is not possible leave out the any of these three concepts, thus proving the usefulness of Theda Skocpol's Social Revolutions theory.

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