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The Saltwater Theory: A Directed Study of Failed Revolutions

James Gulliksen

On an unusually warm evening of December 31st, 1958, Cuban President Fulgencio Batista attended a New Year’s Eve party in Havana. President Batista spent his time at the party enjoying the company of those most loyal to him, and informing a few of them that he would be leaving the island later that night. The Castro uprising, he told them, had developed over the prior two years from sporadic attacks on his security units in the southern mountains of the island into a popular offensive on central urban provinces. Just before the party, President Batista was issued an update of the current state of the uprising: Che Guevara’s forces would soon control Santa Clara. Batista knew his time as president was over, and after the party he boarded a flight at 3 o’clock in the morning destined for the Dominican Republic along with $350 million and a few dozen friends and family. Meanwhile, 162 miles away, Che Guevara continued his surge into Santa Clara. Upon assuming control of the city on January 1st, 1959, Che and Fidel learned of Batista’s departure; Havana was theirs – the revolution had triumphed.¹

The Changing Study of Revolution

Successful insurrections, such as in Cuba, offer valuable insight to those who pursue the study of rapid (and often violent) political change within states. In 1938, Dr. Crane Brinton began the modern academic field of revolutions with his classic study on the uniformities of revolutions. Brinton focused on the conditions that allowed revolutions to occur and the stages that occurred in several massive political uprisings, culminating in a structure he theorized future revolutions must follow.² As the study of political change progressed, social scientists began a pivot to focusing on actors in uprisings rather than the conditions of the state. In their eyes, the actors (revolutionaries, political parties, foreign nations) within a sphere decide a path for political change, rather than the existing conditions (political rights, economic conditions, repression, etc.) in the same environment.³ This essay will instead counter this thinking by introducing a Saltwater Theory to explain how different forms of uprisings (the same as different species of animals) can survive in some environments but not others. Additionally, it will serve as an inverse to Brinton’s study of four classical revolutions by examining four failed revolutions: the Simba Rebellion beginning in 1964, the First Palestinian Intifada beginning in 1987, the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989, and the Syrian uprising beginning in 2011. As Che Guevara himself wrote, “Victory is a great source of positive experiences, but so is defeat.”⁴
The pivot to actors holds merit: revolutions in virtually every case are a David versus Goliath matchup, which aligns them with the vast prism of asymmetric conflict. As social scientists of asymmetry have found in determining outcome, the strategy of the weaker force in such conflict is enormously more important than the strategy of the stronger force. After all, sports coaches and managers aren’t bothered by the strategy of George Foreman in his upset loss to Muhammad Ali in 1974, nor the strategy of the St. Louis Rams in their shocking Super Bowl loss to the New England Patriots in 2002. Instead, the significance of those upsets lies in the audacious strategies of the winning underdogs: a confident, quick-footed Muhammad Ali or a doggedly focused Tom Brady. Likewise, the key decisions and strategies employed by those initiating a revolution are more significant to the study of revolutions than the strategies implemented by the Old Regimes.

The problem with the pivot to an actor-focused model of revolution is the resulting disregard for existing conditions of a state or Old Regime. Global academics and policymakers who once heralded the “misery breeds revolt” theory of revolution eventually discounted it, then dismissed it, then forgot it. In truth, “misery breeds revolt” is a simplistic observation which can be discounted by acknowledging the poor but stable states of the world, as there are plenty. However, the present paradigm has wandered too far by focusing heavily on the actions of revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries, but ignoring how an environment becomes conducive or resistant to revolution. The relationship itself between an actor’s behavior and the environment, rather than simply one or the other, is the most telling sign of whether a revolution will begin, succeed, or fail.

First, a return to Havana. After successfully overthrowing the Batista regime and beginning a new political system in Cuba, Che Guevara embarked on a worldwide tour in the summer of 1959. Foreign crowds celebrated Che as an international revolutionary icon – a status he still holds even after death. Guevara traveled throughout the Arab World, Europe and Asia in an effort to bolster Cuba’s status abroad and study foreign revolutions. Eventually, after returning to Cuba, Guevara’s location became unknown to the international community after he fell off the grid in an effort to export his vision for revolution around the world. To the actor-focused theorists of revolutions, the most successful revolutionary alive traveling across the world to export revolution is as close to apocalypse as it gets. After all, they saw revolutions succeeding as a result of universally successful strategies of the revolutionary. However, as Guevara traveled to Africa and later South America, his failures were paramount. The natural question arises: how, after participating in such a successful overthrow of the regime in Cuba, did Guevara attempt the same thing elsewhere with extreme disaster? A fitting comparison to the differences in state
environments is differences in the environments of animals. Che Guevara, like many revolutionary theorists today, thought that if uprisings were fish, you can take them from one place, put them in another, and let them swim. They fail to realize that fish themselves cannot swim in any water.

Fish swim in either freshwater or saltwater, typically without survivability in the other. In modern history, Guevara was the first person to take a “freshwater fish” per se – the Cuban Revolution – and release it in saltwater – Congo – leading the fish to eventual death. In other words, revolutions never take place in a vacuum. Every action taken by an actor is within a prism which affects the environment to make it either more or less conducive to revolution. The following studies illustrate how the strategies employed by several uprisings, though inspired by previous, “freshwater” revolutions, could not survive in the “saltwater” environment.

Congo: The beginning of Che's collapse

Africa, to Che Guevara, was the perfect arena to spur revolution. He saw the continent’s decolonization as merely a geopolitical shift without many practical implications for the peasant class who represented the majority of sub-Saharan Africans. Decolonization was an opportunity for real change though, and in Marxist fashion, his rhetoric outlined that opportunity. The sovereignty of the Africans, he argued, was in a transition from direct colonial control to a more subtle (but equally harmful) bourgeoisie control; one in which “Yankee imperialism” minimized the liberty of Africa as a whole. It was his duty to bring rural guerilla warfare to Congo which would ignite the continent in proletariat revolution.

In 1965, Che arrived in Congo with an optimistic band of about 200 Cuban soldiers determined to “Cubanize” the Simba (lion) group of Congolese rebels and overthrow the American-supported Congolese government of Joseph Kasavubu. Guevara recounted stories from his time in Congo in a series of journal entries and letters to Fidel Castro. The first line of his recollection reads, “This is the history of a failure.” While his humility is certainly admirable,
he is also correct. From the moment Guevara arrived in Congo, he saw nothing but failure in his attempts to replicate the Cuban Revolution across the Atlantic Ocean.

Most primarily, the Cubans found the Simba Rebellion in Congo to have no resemblance to a proletariat struggle. Rather than the peasant uprising of Guevara’s vision that could be supplemented by guerilla warfare, opposing tribes and their warlords were fighting for their own piece of the pie; while ready to fight, they were largely disinterested in the Marxist vision of a peasant overthrow. Furthermore, the warlords and tribal leaders in Congo were largely unprofessional. He was furious about their frivolous use of revolutionary funding (primarily from Cuba and the Soviet Union) on their own indulgence in booze and prostitutes. In a candid letter to Fidel Castro in May of 1965, Che quipped, “Not a cent will reach a front where the peasants suffer every misery you can imagine, including the rapaciousness of their own protectors … [Even though] whisky and women are not on the list of expenses covered by friendly governments, they cost a lot if you want quality.”

Finally, Guevara found the Congolese rebels (and his own men, to a lesser extent) to be particularly pathetic fighters. He wrote extensively about men dropping their weapons and fleeing skirmishes, often never to be seen again. He even theorized an ongoing “Congolization” of his Cuban forces, as they became lazier and increasingly apathetic as 1965 came to a close. By November, Guevara’s only concern was leaving the country. Eventually Guevara and his Cuban forces evacuated the DRC just north of Kelemie in the east across the lake to Tanzania, before returning to the Americas. By the time the Cuban revolutionaries left, the Simba Rebellion was crushed and the Simbas themselves were left abandoned to a hostile government.

While Guevara’s and other historians’ account of the Cuban intervention in Congo are insightful, they often omit a simple fact: the Congo isn’t Cuba. Explanations of Guevara’s failure align with either, one: the actor-centric model, that the Simbas in Congo (even with Che) were not able to stage a successful revolution, or two: the state-centric model, that Congo was an environment that was protected from revolution. In truth, the explanation rests in the relationship between the actors and the state. Che Guevara assumed that since his revolution was so successful in Cuba, it must also be successful in Congo. He failed to account for the environment which allowed him success in Cuba: national cohesion, combinations of rural and guerilla warfare, and a common cause. These are qualities of an environment that he did not enjoy in the Congo: tribal identities and European miscalculation of borders made national cohesion impossible, the Congolese government’s overwhelming presence made guerilla warfare more direct, and warring factions had no chance of forming a common cause.
A surveyor of Che’s transition from Cuba to Congo may fittingly ask, “If Guevara experienced so much trouble sparking revolution in Congo, what is to say the environment did not allow for revolution at all?” This is where Congo is an extremely special case, as in addition to dispelling the actor-focused model of analyzing revolution, it also dispels the rigidity of the state-focused model. Three decades after Guevara’s failure in Congo, the government he fought against was overthrown by Laurent Kabila, a Simba rebel who had fought alongside Che himself (Guevara even recounted how unimpressed he was with Kabila during the 1960s uprising). Of course, elements of an environment can certainly change over a period of thirty years, but the quickness of Kabila’s insurgency speaks to the lack of mechanisms possible for a state to consider themselves fully immune to revolution.

**Palestine: An uneasy shift to violence**

1986 and 1987 saw steep escalations in tension between Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and the Palestinians living in the occupied Palestinian territories of West Bank and Gaza Strip. A series of attacks by Palestinians and retaliatory repression by the Israelis escalated the tension and eventually led to calls for an intifada (literally Arabic for ‘shake off,’ but has come to mean an uprising). By November 1987, several nonviolent youth demonstrations began to mobilize resistance against the Israeli occupying forces. Protests soon transitioned into more organized demonstrations, which included blocking roads, throwing rocks and burning tires. While the demonstrations became more aggressive, they remained nonviolent as cadres of Palestinians targeted Israeli resources and public sentiment rather than lives. This stage of the intifada was hugely popular among Palestinians, who found an obligation to participate, and demands were outlined: the withdrawal of Israel from the West Bank and Gaza Strip as well as expanded rights for Palestinians, primarily by the abolishment of curfews and checkpoints. The former of these demands is especially significant as it represents a concession by Palestinians to liberation in the territories rather than the entirety of historic Palestine, “from the river to the sea.” By 1989, the intifada had become violent, as car bombs and
Molotov cocktails became more notable than boycotts, sabotages and strikes. In 1993, the first Oslo Accord was signed, effectively ending the First Intifada.

In an historical sense, Palestine had two major directing actors in the 1980s, together working in semi-functional harmony. First, local factions in the Palestinian Territories pursued the resident Palestinian causes: protection from repression, ensuring mobility rights, performing administrative functions and more. The supplement to the local factions was the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the self-identified overarching governing body of the territories. The PLO, as a result of exile to Tunisia, had a much broader mission which focused on the holistic advancement of the Palestinian cause. Yasser Arafat, chairman of the PLO, had a distinct grand vision for that advancement: bringing the South African strategy to Palestine. Specifically, Arafat saw the resistance to apartheid by leaders such as Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela and found parallels to the Palestinian experience. In 1988, the African National Congress (ANC) validated Arafat by issuing several statements condemning the Israeli government and likening the environment in the Palestinian Territories to apartheid-era South Africa.

In the more practical setting of the 1987 uprising, local leaders organized the initial demonstrations, taking the PLO off guard. The PLO, even from Tunisia, saw themselves as the sole governing body of Palestine and seized control of the intifada in order to substitute their own vision into the uprising. PLO leaders opined that only the PLO had the resources and knowledge necessary to direct a large-scale resistance movement.

The most influential leader of the uprising once the weight shifted to the PLO was Khalil al-Wazir, more commonly known as Abu Jihad (meaning Father of Struggle; not to be confused with Jihadism, as al-Wazir was an enemy of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad group). Abu Jihad was appointed by Yasser Arafat to be the PLO’s orchestrator of the intifada and he made certain to advance Arafat’s agenda to replicate the South African model of liberation. An important (and somewhat ironic) caveat is that only after Abu Jihad was assassinated by Israeli intelligence forces in April 1988 did the intifada become violent.

The replication of South African strategy in the intifada explains two things: One, the newfound strategy of aggression through nonviolence by the PLO in 1987, and two, the PLO’s willingness to negotiate at Oslo. Nonviolence was not a staple of the PLO before or after the First Intifada, prompting the group’s addition to some international terror lists in the 1980s. Further, several sabotage strategies employed by the Palestinians such as the bombing of empty vehicles and burning tires were identical strategies advocated by Mandela prior to his imprisonment and
used by the ANC. The willingness to participate in the Oslo Accords, despite Palestinian pessimism on any negotiation’s outcome, represents the PLO’s diversion from drawing inspiration from South African liberation to attempting to replicate it.

From the PLO’s holistic vision for a South African-esque agenda for the Territories, the intifada was a success. Just as Arafat had hoped, much of the same international activism spent on Mandela and the abolition of South African apartheid was spent on Palestine in the 1990s. In fact, in 1990, just two weeks after his release from prison, Nelson Mandela made his first journey outside of South Africa to greet Yasser Arafat and offer his support to the Palestinian plight. From a practical view of the political system of the Palestinian Territories, however, the intifada was certainly a failed revolution. While Palestinians did not gain new political or social rights as a result of the revolution, many argue that rights constricted after 1993, causing the Second Intifada in 2000. Indeed, as new Israeli settlements sprouted and expanded in the West Bank after Oslo, homes were increasingly demolished, and the Israeli government established more organized methods of Palestinian repression. While debate ensues over the lasting ramifications of the First Intifada, perhaps an equally fitting question surrounds the viability of the South African liberation model in Palestine. Apartheid in South Africa was relatively (and quite literally) black and white. Could a duplicate strategy have been able to garner world attention based on parallels between the white over black experience and the (mostly) Euro-Jew over Arab experience? Herein lies the difficulty in taking the “revolutionary fish” from one environment to another.

**China: The swift silencing of idealism**

While the intifada ensued in Israel-Palestine, the Cold War was coming to a close in the rest of the international community. As the Soviet Union underwent economic liberalization and political reform, Moscow’s sphere of influenced lessened each year. Eastern European states began to break away from Soviet control, contributing to the collapse of the communist alliance system in the late 1980s. As states became increasingly democratic, western political scientists became validated in their long-held theory that if economic liberalization takes place (via privatization, removal of controls and opening of markets), political liberalization will inevitably follow. Their theory held true in every state that had so far embraced democracy and political rights since the same countries had begun economic liberalization just a few years prior.

The outlier to these assumptions, up to 1989, was China. Since a decade prior, the Chinese government in Beijing had been intensely involved in a campaign entitled “Economic Reform and Opening.” From the Chinese Revolution in 1949 until Deng Xiaoping’s reign beginning in 1978,
the Chinese economy was plagued by economic underperformance resulting in famine and stalled growth. As a direct result, and as the name suggests, Beijing began economic reforms beginning with privatization of industry and the opening of markets by promoting foreign investment in China. The west waited patiently, and no political liberalization came. Finally, in 1989, the western theorists began to think their final validation had arrived as the trend of economic liberalization brought the first challenge of political liberalization to Beijing. The death of Chinese reformist Hu Yaobang led massive groups of students to protest the Chinese government in mid-April 1989. They feared the imminent dismissal of Hu’s lifelong work of eliminating corruption in the communist party.

At first, the Chinese government attempted to cooperate with the students. Though the government never addressed the student calls for a more democratic government, moderates such as Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang promised to prioritize ending corruption. Shortly thereafter, about a hundred students stage a hunger strike in Tiananmen Square, the famous revolutionary square of Mao Zedong. To their delight, thousands more students participate in a sit-in to occupy the square. The students draft a series of grievances against the government and a set of solutions that primarily called for an end to corruption, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press. At this point, the government grew hostile to the demonstrators and the protests gathered more support. On May 17, the protests reached their peak: 1.2 million demonstrators marched on Beijing, along with smaller protests in 400 cities across China mainland. Later in May, 1.5 million demonstrators marched through the streets of Hong Kong, demanding political rights for all Chinese. By this time, the movement had transitioned from purely student-run and organized to a massive grassroots campaign that included laborers, police officers, and even party officials.

On May 20, the Chinese government declared martial law, and the military was deployed across the country to put down protests. In Beijing, the military moved into the city from every direction toward the revolutionary square. As they neared Tiananmen, scores of demonstrators blocked the military, who quickly opened fire. Several protestors were shot and chaos ensued, as the demonstrators, along with the international community, did not expect such heavy force from the Chinese military. As the summer progressed, the military was met with little resistance and the protests were successfully eliminated.
From virtually every perspective, the Tiananmen Square protests were a failure. Student activists had organized a campaign to march on Beijing until reforms were pursued with the strength of a million, only to be crushed in a short month. While several student groups had different agendas at Tienanmen, historians have found from activist leaders that the approaches of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr to be the most predominant strategies employed by the demonstrators. The strategies are certainly evident: hunger strikes, sit-ins, and written pleas are classic civil disobedience practices employed by both Gandhi and King. Here again, the debate on uprising rages on: while some say China in 1989 was resistant to revolution, others insist underlying faults in the strategy of the demonstrators did not live up to those of Gandhi and King. The latter point here is especially weak, since demonstrators in China followed Gandhi and King’s strategy almost verbatim. The only real difference is the lack of a central icon (perhaps with the exception of the Tank Man, who anonymously stopped a line of tanks approaching the square, pictured here). Here again, reality suggests the answer is somewhere in the relationship. It is not a contradiction to accept that China was hardly impervious to revolution while also accepting that the demonstrators did everything they could with the strategy they employed. The problem is, China wasn’t colonial India or Civil Rights Era United States. China had deep-seated institutions which prioritized a maintenance of the status quo over popular decision-making. Current evidence seems to suggest that despite China being vulnerable to some forms of uprising, perhaps indirect guerilla warfare, even King or Gandhi would have failed in Beijing in 1989.

**Syria: An uprising spirals downward**

Shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, western focus slowly shifted to the Arab World. Many leaders of Arab states were remnants of Cold War backing by the United States, despite their authoritarian statuses and tendencies toward oppression. Just as American policymakers began to rethink their policies toward the de facto subsidizing of dictatorship, the attacks on September 11th, 2001 reinvigorated a commitment for stability in Arab states, even at the expense of democracy. As a result, decision-makers of the west saw it in their interest to turn a blind eye to dictatorship in the Arab World, because they represented a lesser evil
than Jihadist extremism. A decade later, citizens of the Arab World attempted to prove to the world’s hegemons that the choice between brutal dictators and brutal terrorists was a false dichotomy.  

Beginning in 2011 with Tunisia, then Egypt, then Libya, a wave of uprisings overwhelmed North African governments and began to spread into the Near East. In addition to Bahrain and Yemen, the Syrian government headed by Bashar al-Assad (himself a remnant of Cold War dictatorship) was quickly faced with spontaneous protests. Tech-savvy millennials took to social media in hopes of organizing protests to address Assad’s brutality and call for economic relief in the wake of a massive Syrian drought. Though they originally failed to garner mobility, the prospect of an uprising in Syria seemed increasingly likely as the earlier Arab uprisings were watched by a famine-exhausted Syrian populace. In early March, just a month after the overthrow of governments in Tunisia and Egypt, Assad’s forces arrested several schoolboys and girls aged 10-15 for writing a slogan of the Egyptian revolution on a city wall in Daraa. The parents, after learning of their children being tortured and imprisoned, took to the streets in protest. In a Tiananmen-esque flex of muscle, Assad’s forces shot and killed the children’s parents as they demonstrated. The following day, March 24, 2011, twenty thousand Syrians attended the parent’s funerals in protest of Assad’s brutality. Reconciliation between Assad and the protestors proved impossible, and uprisings against the Assad Regime began in urban areas across western Syria. Slowly but surely, Assad reduced his reconciliatory tone and replaced it with intention to crush the protests. By the summer of 2011 Assad’s forces had occupied hotspot cities and defectors from his military had formed several armed groups to oppose him, most notably the Free Syrian Army. Chaos in Syria allowed for the initial success of the Islamic State terrorist organization, who gained a foothold in rural areas in the east.

By 2016 – five years after the uprising – Syria has become a state of proxy war: global superpowers support opposing sides that align most closely with their interests. Primarily, the protesting groups have entrenched themselves in the northwest along the Turkish border and in the southwest
along the Israeli border. Assad’s forces occupy the area in the west between the rebel groups, while Kurdish separatists control all of the Turkish border east of the Euphrates River. The Islamic State (aka Da’ish) remains in control of a foothold following the Euphrates River Valley into Iraq.¹⁹

Syria, despite its chaos, is a valuable uprising to study because of the clearly evident consequences of replication. The street protests, just weeks after the fall of Mubarak, were modeled astoundingly closely after the protests in Egypt. Beginning with tweeting youths, several of the revolutionary calls and demands were taken from the Egyptian movement. When children drew graffiti on a wall in Daraa, they used “Down with the regime,” the slogan of Egyptian Revolution. Syrians went so far as to rename the city center of Damascus “Tahrir Square,” after the famous revolutionary square of Cairo. What the protestors failed to realize was the polar opposite nature of the two governing structures. In Egypt, the top military officials (who eventually oversaw the resignation of Mubarak) were largely distanced from the President. While the President had the support of many deep institutions, the powerful military was somewhat independent. In Syria, Assad ensured a loyal military above all by coup-proofing the military and government. The military was organized in a way that enforced checks to the power of individual units by overlapping roles. In addition, almost every key military position was filled by a member of Assad’s extended family, who were also Alawites (the religious minority, like Assad).¹⁸ As the two uprisings progressed in parallel, Assad’s protection of a loyal military proved smart as the direct, traditional nature of the uprising worked in his favor.

The Saltwater Theory

Attempted political change and revolution, as seen above, are almost always inspired by historical precedent. While inspiration plays a role in adding value and relevance to a developing uprising, the distinction between inspiration and replication is an important one. Inspiration opens the path for actors to develop a fitting strategy for their environment; replication limits the path to a strategy.

Like economics, the study of revolution is not a definitive (or absolutely empirical) science as it must include the human element – unpredictable acts that include randomness. Environments and conditions within a state can be influenced in ways that make a geopolitical prism either more or less conducive to revolution depending on an actor’s interaction with it, as if the possibility of revolution is hanging on a balance. However, no relationship between a state’s conditions and an actor’s behavior creates an environment where revolution is either inevitable or impossible. Interestingly, Che Guevara’s failure (and eventual execution) negligibly changed the paradigm of
revolutionary theory. Academics and policymakers continued the pivot toward an actor focus, and continued away from a focus on a state’s environment and the likelihood of revolution. As Palestinians continue to advocate for political and social rights, historians wonder how the Intifada could have succeeded. After the massacre at Tiananmen Square, rather than dispel the notion that economic reform must lead to political reform, policymakers offered shallow explanations on how protestors somehow weren’t doing things right. Even in the post-Arab Spring world, diplomatic analysts theorize on the actual and potential behavior of revolutionaries rather than assessing the relationship between the revolutionary and their prism of influence.

Perhaps the most important question in correctly identifying the drivers of revolution is why any of it matters. Most of the world probably has no interest in participating in a violent revolution against their government. However, massive globalization has resulted in a world in which there is not a single person of the seven billion on earth who is not either a part of, or influenced by a hegemon. Fittingly, each conflict listed had hegemonic influence. From an American perspective for example, while Che was fighting in Congo, the US State Department backed the Congolese government; while the Palestinians sabotaged and demonstrated against the Israelis, the Defense Department again funded the Old Regime; while the protestors rose up for political rights, the US quietly cheered them on in China; and when protests and skirmishes broke out in Syria, the American military essentially added Syrian rebels to the Pentagon’s payroll. Superpower and regional power influence in uprisings will not slow as the 21st century progresses. Most appropriately, those powers should arm themselves with the insight that revolutions are often attempted replicatons of prior successes. The aim of both states and of revolutionaries will increasingly focus on first identifying the differences in connections between states and actors, and next exploiting those differences to reject or ensure revolution, respectively.
Notes