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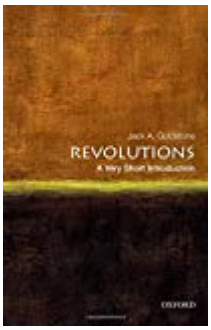

Jack A. Goldstone. *Revolutions: A Very Short Introduction.* Very Short Introductions Series. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 168 pp. $11.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-985850-7.

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What is a revolution? And why do revolutions surprise us? These are the questions that Jack A. Goldstone sets out to answer in his book, *Revolutions.* The book is one of the latest in Oxford University Pressâs Very Short Introductions series that covers topics as diverse as African religions, surrealism, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Though a pocket-sized book of just over one hundred pages, this primer on revolutions offers a thorough and well-thought-out definition of revolutions as well as a discussion of why scholars still struggle to differentiate them from other political movements and activities. With lucid and accessible prose, Goldstone divides the book into eleven, mainly chronological chapters, though he begins by explaining what revolutions are and what they are not, what causes revolutions, and what the typical outcomes of a revolution are when the dust settles.

As indicated in its title, this volume is meant to serve as a brief introduction to a massive and heavily debated topic, but Goldstone does not fail to underscore important distinctions and put forward an argument. One of Goldstoneâs most valuable assertions is his explanation of the difference between revolutions and revolts or grain riots and the like. A peasant revolt, for example, might erupt because of discontent over high taxes or famine, but the actors in said event have no conception of or desire for regime change or an overhaul of the system. Rather, they desire a new policy or aid on the part of the government. A revolution, on the other hand, is a different animal. The author cites five factors that make a revolution what it is. *Revolutions* is a kind of cookbook in which Goldstone provides a recipe for change. He notes that a revolution requires lack of support from or alienation of elites, a crisis such as a fiscal strain, mass mobilization and popular anger against perceived injustices, an ideology of resistance, and favorable international relations. Most important, Goldstone debunks the common misconception that revolutions spring from an excess of injustice and poverty leading to frustration and eventual resistance. Poverty and frustration are not enough to ignite a revolution as countless examples, such as the Irish Potato Famine, have shown. What is needed is widespread belief that change is both desirable and possible, as well as a convergence of the factors mentioned above.

One of Goldstoneâs most insightful illustrations of this phenomenon is his use of the metaphor of stable versus unstable equilibrium. According to the author, triggers usually help tip a society over the edge toward revolution, but this is only effective if a society is in unstable equilibrium. A regime in stable equilibrium is like a ball

at the base of a depression. Events such as wars, huge deficits, or popular unrest might nudge the ball in one direction or the other, but it will eventually fall back into place. A society in unstable equilibrium, on the other hand, is like a ball at the top of a hill. The same kinds of events might be the trigger that precipitate the ball over the edge, and at that point it is anyoneâs guess where the ball will land and come to a stop. While revolutions are difficult to foresee since few are positioned to perceive all five preconditions simultaneously, it is even trickier work predicting their outcomes or determining their final stages. Some revolutions involve increasing radicalization and authoritarian rule while others settle into stable democratic states, usually those countries with past experience with democracy. And when is a revolution over, Goldstone asks? Did the American Revolution come to a disastrous conclusion with the Civil War, or is the democracy that exists today its result? Did the Russian Revolution finish with Joseph Stalinâs purges or with the end of the Cold War? Such thought-provoking questions and points are one of the strengths of the book that not only informs readers but also invites them to pursue these questions and explore scholarship on the subject. *Revolutions* also boasts a well-organized and helpful bibliography of books arranged by topic.

After the initial three chapters defining and examining the problems of revolution, the other chapters, beginning with Egypt in the twenty-second century BCE and finishing with the Arab Spring, provide case studies of revolutions through time. Given this structure and the length of the book, it is naturally difficult to be in-depth and showcase particularities. Unless it is a failed attempt, a revolution is the spectacular death of a regime and the birth of something entirely new. Revolutions are therefore like stars that go nova or supernova, briefly bursting forth in a flurry of light, heat, and activity in a usually calm night sky. There are certain symptoms of a star in its death throes, and there are indications of whether the star will end up a stable white dwarf, or a black hole sucking in and destroying anything that comes near it, but they are often surprising, and there are still no two exactly alike, like revolutions.

One important distinction, though, that Goldstone does well to point out is the difference between premodern and modern revolutions. While we find revolutions even in ancient times, these movements still relied on traditional institutions and authority. The first modern revolutions, however, the American and the French Revolutions, were the first to embrace âa fundamental break with the past, [the idea] that revolutionaries can create something entirely new by force of will and frame a government using the principles of reasonâ (p. 62). While modernity is a concept that will continue to be belabored by scholars surely for centuries to come, this is an important assertion in the history of revolutions that most can agree on. One subject, particularly with regard to modernity, to which the author might have devoted more space was that of women in revolutions. He mentions in chapter 3 how often women were active in revolutions throughout history but received little credit, yet moves on from the topic without an attempt at explanation. While much scholarship exists on this topic that readers can pursue further, Goldstone might have briefly mentioned the paradox of women and democracy or universalism. With the rise of democracy, women actually found themselves more formally excluded from politics than they were in premodern times precisely because the modern definition of the citizen and universal laws envisioned the citizen who was equal before the law as male. Though Goldstone mentions how revolutions could sometimes succeed at the expense of a minority group used as a scapegoat, he might have also pointed out how some groups who had already found themselves disadvantaged emerged even more so after a revolution. *Revolutions* is nevertheless an excellent introduction to a dense subject with such features as excerpts from relevant documents that make it valuable reading for scholars, students, and casual readers alike.

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