Original Article

Socialization, revolutionary states and domestic politics

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Abstract   Domestic politics is central to whether, how and when revolutionary states become socialized. Although socialization is supposed to operate most heavily on new actors, in fact revolutionary states often resist such processes, especially because they are hard to reassure. Domestic and international factors are likely to interact, as they did with Gorbachev's USSR and probably are doing with contemporary Iran, and this points to the importance of domestic politics within the other states in the system as well. For the United States domestic politics enters in both directly and in the American perceptions of the other's domestic system because of its tradition of 'second image' thinking, to use Waltz's term.

In the years since Maximilian Terhalle wrote 'Revolutionary Power and Socialization: Explaining the Persistence of Revolutionary Zeal in Iran's Foreign Policy' (Terhalle, 2009, pp. 557–586), time has been less kind to relations between Iran and the rest of the world than it has been to his important argument. Perhaps in some circumstances and for some purposes we can treat states as billiard balls, to use Arnold Wolfers' familiar term (Wolfers, 1962), but this is rarely the case for revolutionary states. Their behavior, and the extent to which and ways in which they come to conform to prevailing international norms and practices is strongly influenced by their domestic politics and struggle for legitimacy and power. This is not to say that the external environment is unimportant. It can be vital, but it works its effects through domestic configurations.

Much is unclear about Iranian politics, both domestic and foreign, but what has happened since Terhalle wrote bears this out very well. The possible Iranian-American détente in early 2009 might not have reached fruition under any circumstances, but it was killed by the disreputable presidential elections in the spring, followed by

large-scale protests that were met with violent repression and the reassertion of control by hard-line elements. Relations between Iran and the United States (and indeed with almost all other countries in the world) remained bad until the election of Hassan Rouhani in June 2013. Although secret talks between the United States and Iran had been underway before then, and at the time of this writing (August 2014) it remains unclear whether any agreement can be reached, it is hard to imagine the sort of progress we have seen without this domestic political turn.

The election itself was not sufficient to produce the change, nor was it an unmoved mover. Most observers believe that key decisions on Iran's nuclear program remain in the hands of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and, to the surprise of many of us, he has supported Rouhani in talking to the West. He has also staked out limits, going so far as to give a major speech that delved into some of the technical details, but so far has not pulled back. Of course, the reason may be that he expects the negotiations to break down (perhaps because he will not yield on limiting Iran's enrichment capability) and wants to gain international and domestic support by appearing to be cooperative. But whatever calculations he is making, they are sure to focus on the maintenance of the regime's power. The centrality of domestic concerns does not mean that the outside world is irrelevant, however. The economic sanctions imposed by the West have caused great domestic hardships, and it is likely that Rouhani's election and Khamenei's support for him in the wake of the election owed more than a little to the need for relief from them. Just as Mikhail Gorbachev's 'new thinking' and radical change in policy were in large part a response to the Soviet Union's economic weakness and its consequent need to gain access to Western technology, trade and investment, so economic difficulties, in part caused by Western sanctions, made Iran's situation intolerable. When outside pressure leads to accommodation and when it produces the opposite effect is a question that remains very difficult to answer, either in general or as applied to any particular case. The same is true for the other side of this coin – when can revolutionary countries be socialized by much fuller involvement with the international community? In all cases, however, a simple action-reaction model that sees the revolutionary state's policies as a simple function of its external environment is likely to be inadequate. The environment is not without important effects, but they almost always involve deep domestic struggles.

In one way, the recalcitrance of revolutionary states is odd. The literature on socialization tells us that it is novices who are most strongly subject to this influence. They are new to the game and need to pick up its rules. This might be true for states that want to join the prevailing order, but most revolutionary states do not. Here is another way in which viewing the states as billiard balls misleads us. It is logically possible that regimes that are born out of overturning the domestic regime would fully embrace the international one. Gorbachev's move away from communism may merit the label 'revolutionary', and he wholeheartedly embraced the prevailing rules of international politics. If Iran were to experience a full democratic revolution, it too

might move closer to rather than further away from the rest of the world. Usually, however, the regime that comes to power in a domestic revolution rejects much of the international order as well. Part of the reason is that in most cases the old regime was strongly supported by major allies abroad. This was obviously the case with the Shah's Iran, and even if the regime that overthrew had not been Islamist with a worldview that rejected many of the principles of the Western order, it almost surely would have been hostile to the United States.

In general, the energy, dedication, and indeed fanaticism necessary to stage a domestic revolution are not likely to be forthcoming by those who accept most of the way the outside world is run. The principles held by those who made the French, Russian and Iranian revolutions were seriously at odds with the way international politics was conducted. The French revolution obviously challenged the monarchical principle that underpinned the Western world order of its times; the Bolsheviks privileged class over nation and even after it had accepted prevailing rules of diplomacy sought revolution and influence through party-to-party connections; Iran rejected Western notions of the separation of church and state both domestically and internationally. Revolutionaries rarely have small ideas, and big ones are almost always disruptive internationally. There are exceptions, of course. Perhaps prime among them is Mao's China. As revolutionary (and murderous) as any domestically, the PRC was remarkably quiescent internationally, contrary to the demonized image of it espoused by the United States. It aided its fellow revolutionaries in Indo-China/Vietnam and of course fought in Korea, but the latter venture was undertaken only with great hesitation and in fear that an American-dominated Korea would be an existential menace to it, a concern that, if exaggerated, was not implausible (Hull, 2014).

Indeed, if the desire to remake the world is one central revolutionary impulse, fear is another (Kim, 1970; Walt, 1996; Hampson, 1998; Colgan, 2013, pp. 656–690). Henry Kissinger argues that 'the distinguishing feature of a revolutionary power is … *that nothing can reassure it*' (Kissinger, 1957, p. 2). In his analysis of what were then called rogue states, President Clinton's National Security Advisor, Anthony Lake, agreed: 'these nations … share a siege mentality. Accordingly, they are embarked on ambitious and costly military programs – especially in weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and missile delivery systems – in a misguided quest for a great equalizer to protect their regimes or advance their purposes abroad' (Lake, 1994, p. 46). There is much to this argument, and it raises questions and conundrums. Prominent among the former is how such fears could be assuaged; among the latter is the danger that attempts to do so would reinvigorate their hopes for revolutionizing the world.

On both fronts, domestic factors may be central. The original leaders of the revolution may always be fearful and the possibility for effective reassurance may arise only with their successors. Similarly, the latter may have weaker impulses to spread the regime abroad, although the progression surely will not be a steady one. The history of the USSR is interesting in this regard. As we can see from declassified

Soviet records, their leaders did indeed greatly fear the West, and these fears played a large role in their aggressive policies. (I will return to the question of whether the fears were justified.) Gorbachev's radical change in foreign policy was based in part on the belief that while the USSR was indeed threatened, the cause was not underlying Western hostility, but rather provocative Soviet behavior. The implication of accepting the idea that the Soviet Union was caught in a version of the security dilemma was that the route to security was not through building up arms but rather reducing them and showing the West that his country was not a menace. The scholarly debate over whether this 'new thinking' was really little more than a reflection of the external pressures the USSR was under and the fundamental failure of its political and economic system to deliver the goods to its own people or whether Gorbachev's creative leadership and the rise of a politically supportive class was essential (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2002, pp. 93–111; English, 2002, pp. 70–92) is paralleled by arguments about how internal and external forces interact in contemporary Iran. But what is clear is that a necessary if not a sufficient condition for the change in Soviet policy was a great reduction in the leadership's fear of the West.

Ironically, Gorbachev's faith turned out to be misplaced in two ways. First, Presidents Reagan and Bush did not reciprocate his concessions – or policy changes, as he viewed them – and instead essentially waited him out, reaching agreements only on American terms. Second, the effects of his policies, largely domestic, brought down both communism and the Soviet Union. The threat – or at least a threat – proved to be very real.

Another aspect of this interaction is important as well. Reagan's attitude changed more than his policy did, and this was in response to perceived domestic changes in the USSR at least as much as to altered Soviet foreign policy. As he famously replied in Red Square when he was asked if he still thought the Soviet Union was an evil empire, 'That was another time, another era'. For Reagan as for many Americans, the fundamental source of a state's foreign policy was the nature of its domestic regime; like George W. Bush, he was a 'second image' thinker, to use Kenneth Waltz's typology (Waltz, 1959). For people in this category, revolutionary states will become socialized only when their domestic regimes mellow, although this does not mean that the causal mechanisms are only domestic. George Kennan's fundamental thesis was that if Soviet expansion was frustrated and contained, eventually it would change domestically, and as I will note below, some scholars expected a parallel change in Iran while others expected it in the United States.

Largely based on living in the Cold War, scholars such as Raymond Aron, Stanley Hoffmann and Henry Kissinger argued that heterogeneous international systems are much less stable than homogeneous ones – in other words, international systems composed of units formed on very different principles can coexist with each other only with great difficulty (Hoffman, 1961, pp. 207–209; Aron, 1966, pp. 99–124; 373–403; Kissinger, 1966, pp. 503–506; Jervis,

1997, pp. 94–102). Although multiple reasons can be deduced for this, fear is central. It is possible that a system could be composed of heterogeneous units that followed a live-and-let-live principle and neither wanted to spread their domestic systems nor thought that others did. In the real world, however, this is unlikely. Even if revolutionary regimes do not feel compelled to spread their ideologies and domestic systems abroad, they are likely to feel that more established governments see them as a menace and will work tirelessly to destroy them. In most cases, this belief is fairly well-founded. Even paranoids have enemies, after all. The major powers at the time of the French, Russian, Chinese and Iranian revolutions did seek to 'strangle the baby in the cradle', partly out of the fear that they were a menace to the international order.

There is then likely to be what I have called a 'deep security dilemma' between a revolutionary state and an established one, or between two revolutionary states (think, for example, of the relations between Nazi Germany and Stalin's USSR). By this I mean that each's existence poses a threat to the other even if neither state is committed to converting the other side to its way of life (Jervis, 2001, pp. 36–60; Tang, 2010). Each, then, might be willing to coexist, but doubt that the other is, in part because of the perception that the other believes that the state will always be hostile to it. To take the case of US-Iranian relations, there are lots of reasons for each to be skeptical that the other is willing to live at peace with it. Each can point to many hostile acts that the other has taken over the past 35 years, and many of these perceptions are well-grounded. Furthermore, each can readily believe that it itself is not irrevocably hostile but has only responded in self-defense to what the other has done (Jervis, 2014).

My analysis so far, like most treatments, implies that the United States is an established power. In many senses, it obviously is. It talks about upholding the international order and prevailing ways of behaving, seeing those who fall outside these bounds as 'rogues' (although the term has fallen out of favor). But, leaving aside the possible hypocrisy involved in such designations, it is not only President George W. Bush who believes that countries that are not democratic are potential if not actual threats to the international system in general and the United States in particular. Bush's views not only harken back to a version of Woodrow Wilson's, but have deep resonance in American history, traditions and ideology. Political realism's denial of the importance of a state's regime for its international conduct has always been alien to the American polity despite its popularity among scholars. As a result, although American behavior has varied over time and circumstances, the revolutionary impulse to remake the world in its own image has always been present (Jervis, 2006, pp. 7–20). This is not to say that the United States is dedicated to overthrowing the Iranian regime, or at least that it would not be dedicated to doing so if it did not believe that Iran was bent on nuclear weapons capability, dominating the region and subverting its pro-American neighbors. Although any regime that denies individual choice in the social and political arenas offends American values, the

American political elite is divided as to whether such a state is inevitably a threat to the security of the United States and its allies. As which group prevails is largely a matter of domestic politics, Iranians and leaders of other states founded on 'un-American' principles have reason to fear the United States.

The Cold War epitomized ideological heterogeneity and hostility. Only a few members of the general public, but more in the academy, believe that the root of the problem lay in the United States, not the USSR. It was the former that would not live at peace with a divergent regime. A particularly interesting variant of this view was espoused by the political theorist Louis Hartz (Hartz, 1955; Riley, 1988, pp. 377–399; Abbot, 2005, pp. 93–109). For Hartz, the United States is different from other countries because it was founded by a middle class 'fragment', and so differed from European countries in lacking feudalism and a subsequent bourgeois revolution and the rise of a radical if not revolutionary working class. What is important here is the argument that a result of this was to make it extremely difficult for the United States to understand the rest of the world, and in particular to understand left-wing movements and regimes, which it was quick to see as Communist. Hartz also believed that although this distorted perception led to many unnecessary conflicts, the deep engagement with the world brought with it the possibility of a changed American understanding of its environment and itself. As perceptive as Hartz's analysis was, I believe that his hope was misplaced and the United States emerged from the Cold War with its self-knowledge not deepened and its views of the world intact.

I would not expect the American interaction with Iran or even with the entire Muslim world to lead to much change in the general American view of other societies or its own. But day-to-day American domestic politics both affects and is affected by Iranian-American relations. In a familiar irony summarized in the phrase, 'only Nixon could go to China', it may be harder for a Democratic administration to reach an agreement with Iran than it would be for a Republican one. (On the other hand, few Republicans today are as pragmatic as Nixon and would accept the sorts of agreements that might be within reach.) Domestic politics may be responsible for the American demand that any agreement has to give the West at least 6 if not 12 months' warning of an Iranian breakout to nuclear weapons; many strategic analysts like myself would be willing to settle for a 1-month warning as very little time is required to implement the bombing plans that are at the ready. But for many people, Iran's previous behavior and its domestic regime make it such an unreliable partner that agreements will always be suspect. Therefore the perception of domestic change may be key, just as it was in the case of Reagan's willingness to make even one-sided agreements with the USSR. For some in the United States, only regime change would suffice. But others would be swayed by domestic liberalization far short of that. It may well be that Rouhani would like to implement at least some measures of this type, but it is unlikely that he could muster the domestic support to be able to do so without a radical change in the external environment. Therefore it is

possible that we are trapped in a vicious circle and that only an agreement could bring about the conditions that are necessary for it to be reached. To students of international politics who view this arena as a tragic one, this kind of dynamic is not unfamiliar, although the focus on the domestic politics involved, discussed so well by Terhalle, requires realists to broaden their focus from the politics between states to include politics within them (Rose, 1998, pp. 144–172; Lobell *et al*, 2009; May *et al*, 2010).

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Robert Jervis is Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Politics at Columbia University. His most recent book is *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Cornell University Press, 2010). He was President of the American Political Science Association in 2000–2001, received the National Academy of Science's tri-annual award for behavioral sciences contributions to avoiding nuclear war, and is the founding editor of the International Security Studies Forum.

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