

History 344 / Discussion of Feb. 7

- 1) Why does Michael D. Richards, in his *Revolutions in World History*, consider the English revolution to be a “success,” while the rest are failures? What are his criteria for success and failure?
- 2) All of the five revolutions Richards gives as case studies can be divided into stages. What are they? What determines a shift from one stage to another?
- 3) Compare the causes of revolution in Mexico and Russia. Is discontent sufficient to cause a revolution? To what extent do revolutionaries “make” revolutions? How do the strains of modernization and the old regimes’ inability to cope with modernization lie at the roots of revolution?
- 4) Why does Richards claim that “What happens after the seizure of power, how that power is consolidated and used, is certainly as important, perhaps more important, than how power was seized in the first place”? (p. 93) Compare the use of power after its seizure in England, Mexico, and Russia. When do those revolutions end? What is more effective historically, revolution or evolution?
- 5) Wars or civil wars are present in all of Richards’ case studies of revolutions. What role does military action and war play in each?
- 6) In what ways does Islamic fundamentalism distinguish the Iranian revolution from the others? Can revolutions be backward-looking, conservative, or right-wing? Do you agree with Richards that the Iranian revolution could still manage to be a successful one? (p. 86)
- 7) Who benefits and who loses most in the course of revolutions? Compare Mexico, Russia, and Iran.
- 8). What is the story and message embedded in Aleksandr Blok’s poem “The Twelve”? How does his poem portray the nature of the revolution, and can this add anything to our understanding of it? How can we explain the religious imagery in a poem about a socialist revolution--in particular the startling reference to Jesus Christ at the very end?
- 9). How does Jack Goldstone, in his encyclopedia entry, account for the origins of revolutions? What are the elements of the state crises that accompany them? Do revolutions, according to Goldstone, result in the kind of radical changes for which revolutionaries hoped?
- 10). What, according to Goldstone, is the role and nature of ideology in revolutions? If ideology serves merely as “an appealing set of symbols of opposition” that brings together “diverse grievances” toward the old regime, do the specific features of any revolutionary ideology have a significant impact in the origins and outcomes of revolutions? What, if any, is the link between revolutionary ideology and religious world-views? Do you see any connection here with Blok’s poem?
- 11). Explaining late imperial Russia’s lack of “effective leadership or coordination,” Figes writes that “Nicholas [II] was the source of all the problems...Russia gained in him the worst of both worlds: a Tsar determined to rule from the throne yet quite incapable of exercising power” (p. 23). What was the idea and practice of autocracy pursued by Nicholas? How did the personalities of the tsar and tsaritsa (Alexandra) contribute to the more general *structural* crises of imperial Russia? How can it be said that the revolution, “as in all modern revolutions” (p. 14), started at the top?
- 12). Describe the “unstable pillars” (Figes’s title of chap. 2) and the “thin veneer of civilization” (pp. 42-55) in the Russian empire to which Figes refers. Why were they “unstable”? What do you think he believes lies underneath the “veneer”? What lies behind his indictment of Russian “backwardness”—could it be his own sense of cultural superiority?