

Can Understanding Undermine Explanation? The Confused Experience of Revolution

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This article makes six points, using evidence from the Iranian Revolution of 1979: (1) Causal mechanisms, indeed all explanations, imply certain inner states on the part of individuals. (2) The experience of revolution is dominated by confusion. (3) People involved in revolutions act largely in response to their best guesses about how others are going to act. (4) These guesses and responses can shift swiftly and dramatically, in ways that participants and observers cannot predict. (5) Explanation involves retroactive prediction: it implies that if we had recognized causal factors A, B, or C at the time, we would have expected some ensuing development. (6) To the extent that revolutionary experience is characterized by confusion, then understanding this experience may disconfirm all explanation.

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1. CAUSAL MECHANISMS, INDEED ALL EFFORTS AT EXPLANATION, IMPLY CERTAIN INNER STATES ON THE PART OF INDIVIDUALS

In the social sciences, causal mechanisms are generally theorized as verbal nouns. This grammatical form points to processes: role segmentation in one theory of mechanisms (Merton 1968, 106), cognitive dissonance reduction in another (Elster 1989, 4), cooperation and competition (Bunge 1999, 21; see also Bunge 1997, 414-15), belief for-

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mation (Hedström and Swedberg 1998, 18-21), opportunity hoarding (Tilly 1998, 147-69), or threat/opportunity attribution (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 92). Whereas correlational explanations tend to focus on static nouns, mechanisms emphasize action.

Like verbs, verbal nouns imply the existence of subjects. They raise the question: Who is segmenting roles or reducing cognitive dissonance or cooperating? Clearly, people do. But theorists of causal mechanisms disagree as to the appropriate unit of analysis: some insist on methodological individualism (Elster 1989, 3-10; Hedström and Swedberg 1998, 11-13), while others reject this position as overly narrow. The critics wish to consider, in addition to individual-level factors, the distribution of external constraints (Bunge 1999, 88-91), mechanisms that involve collective processes (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 25), and institutional or cultural phenomena that shape individual behavior (Stinchcombe 1991, 372-73, 378-80). I share these concerns.

Nonetheless, hypotheses about systemic or collective mechanisms necessarily carry micro-level implications. Mechanistic explanations are not the only ones to generate implications about individuals. Structural or holistic or correlative hypotheses, even if they ignore causal mechanisms, do so as well. But mechanistic theories are often explicit about these implications. In the words of Mario Bunge (1999, 62), "Social relations pass through the heads of people." Bunge offers several examples, among them the correlation between income inequality and political democracy in modern societies, whose causal mechanisms arguably involve relative deprivation, frustration, rebellion, and state repression (Bunge 1999, 62-63), all of which are observed (to the extent that they may be observed at all) as aggregate phenomena, but all of which rely on the existence of particular inner states among enough individuals to generate the specified macro-level outcomes. (Theories of relative deprivation have been out of favor with most scholars of social protest for the past quarter century, but the form of the argument remains illustrative.)

The term *inner states* is intended to include the broadest possible range of mental structures and processes, among them preference structures, motivations, and emotions. Some of these may be conscious or available to consciousness upon reflection, while others may not (see section 6 below). In any case, causation operates through these inner states.

As a result, individuals' inner states constitute a proving ground for explanatory hypotheses. All forms of explanation must plausibly

account for the inner states of the individuals who enact causation. Conscious experience, as one form of inner state, thus offers a *prima facie* test of explanatory hypotheses. Understanding this experience cannot exhaust the possibilities of inner states, some of which, to repeat, stand outside conscious experience. But if, in some case, experiential evidence fails to confirm the inner states that explanation leads one to expect, then explanation has some explaining to do. The task may not be insurmountable, but it must be undertaken explicitly. Explanation needs to address understanding. To return to Bunge's example, suppose that people in a society of great inequality deny that they feel relative deprivation or frustration and that we have reason to believe that they are reporting their true feelings. We might still overrule their conscious experience by presenting evidence of nonconscious relative deprivation or frustration. But in any case, experiential evidence would need to be countered with some other form of evidence of individuals' inner states.

So it is strange to find theorists of causal mechanisms exhibiting hostility to the project of understanding. Bunge is particularly puzzling in this regard. Despite asserting the importance of "the heads of people," Bunge argues that social scientists and historians "do not have the tools to 'get into people's minds.' . . . At best, [understanding] may suggest investigation, or supplement explanation proper for heuristic or pedagogical purposes" (Bunge 1999, 20). Despite asserting that social science is forced to impute inner states "conjecturally, hence subject to tests," Bunge considers such tests to be impossible in most cases, since "most of the time social scientists have no access to the beliefs and intentions of their subjects" and any study of the subject "is necessarily speculative" (Bunge 1996, 155).

Bunge's polemic against understanding is especially unexpected, given his encyclopedic familiarity with the range of human sciences, many of which have developed sophisticated methods for "getting into people's minds." Public opinion research meets all the usual standards for scientific professionalism in its quest to measure inner states, as do many fields of psychology. Bunge cites some of this literature approvingly; see, for example, his repeated references to the work of cognitive psychologist Daniel Kahneman. At the same time, Bunge goes out of his way to dismiss the entire field of social psychology as generating "few robust findings" and being "in a permanent state of crisis" (Bunge 1998, 41-47). Qualitative research, which Bunge more typically associates with the project of understanding, also has a long tradition of searching for reliable, verifiable, falsifiable evidence

of inner states. To be sure, some virtuosic practitioners claim to commune with the minds of their subjects, but the more usual practice is to offer self-statements, observations, and other forms of publicly accessible evidence that speak to inner states.

Moreover, Bunge's polemic seems out of place in this age of methodological pluralism. In recent years, the primary professional associations of political science and sociology in the United States have recommitted themselves to methodological diversity, in response to protests by humanistic practitioners who felt excluded from the professions' flagship journals (Beck et al. 2000; Task Force on ASA Journal Diversity 2000).¹ The underlying approach, which may be obvious enough to most social scientists that it does not need to be stated outside of methods textbooks, holds that interpretive methods are "simply more appropriate for certain research purposes and goals," while other subjects are more amenable to objectivist explanation (Singleton and Straits 1999, 322). A second approach, championed by Max Weber and others, urges the social sciences to combine understanding and explanation as complementary elements in each research project. Weber's very definition of sociology links the two approaches sequentially: "a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences" (Weber [1921] 1978, 4; see also Ringer 1997, 100). It is in principle possible to sequence the two approaches in reverse—objectivist explanation first and then subjectivist understanding afterward—or to propose tacking back and forth between the two methods, but these positions do not appear have a major following.² A third approach, proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony

1. Methodological diversity is often framed in terms of qualitative versus quantitative approaches, but it encompasses also the partially overlapping distinction between (noncausal) understanding and (causal) explanation. This distinction is only partially overlapping because many qualitative studies engage in causal explanation (see, e.g., Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003, 23).

2. Some philosophers have argued that objectivist explanation, in and of itself, constitutes understanding. But this involves a redefinition of understanding that eliminates the crucial aspect of interpretive approaches, namely, the collection and evaluation of evidence of people's inner states. See, for example, Hempel and Oppenheim (1948, 145): "It is important to distinguish here understanding in the psychological sense of a feeling of empathic familiarity from understanding in the theoretical, or cognitive, sense of exhibiting the phenomenon to be explained as a special case of some general regularity." Hempel and Oppenheim reject the former definition and embrace the latter. See also Pearl (2000, 345) on "deep understanding," defined as "knowing not merely how things behaved yesterday but also how things will behave under new

Giddens, and others,³ denies that the two approaches are distinct: “understanding and explaining are one,” Bourdieu ([1993] 1999, 613) argues, and social science ought not be trapped in the “false choice . . . between social physics and social phenomenology” (Bourdieu [1980] 1990, 135). Giddens recommends that the “dualism” between objectivism and subjectivism “be reconceptualized as a duality—the duality of structure” (Giddens 1984, xx-xxi).

All of these approaches have one thing in common: they imply or state outright that different methods generate complementary conclusions. For Weber, understanding leads to explanation. For Bourdieu and Giddens, the two are inseparable. Social science textbooks combine the approaches seamlessly, and in the actual diversity of contemporary social scientific practice, there is relatively little cross-talk addressing substantive differences among methods. Where differences are noted, the goal is generally reconciliation (Rueschemeyer 1991; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Kurzman and Leahey 2004). A recent article has called for the community of social scientists to develop an “organic solidarity” that would integrate practitioners of all methods in mutual recognition of their interdependence (Sil 2000).

As in other communities, however, pleas for organic solidarity can signal denials of conflict. I propose that there may be cases where methodological conflict is inescapable, namely, episodes of intense social conflict like the Iranian Revolution. On one hand, the method of understanding generates evidence that Iranians were unable to predict their own behaviors during this period of widespread confusion. On the other hand, the method of explanation demands that we seek antecedent conditions that caused Iranians’ behaviors during this same period. In this case, and by extension in other cases like it, explanation aspires to make actions expected, after the fact, that even the actors did not expect at the time.

hypothetical circumstances.” See also Bunge (1999, 65) on “real understanding”: “I understand fact *f* if and only if I know a satisfactory explanation *e* of *f*.”

3. See, for example, the “embedding” theory of explanation in the philosophy of science, which attempts to integrate explanation and understanding by reconceptualizing explanation as coherence within a set of theories, downplaying the role of causality (Westmeyer 2001, 5158-59).

2. THE EXPERIENCE OF REVOLUTION IS DOMINATED BY CONFUSION

Contemporaneous and recollected accounts of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 routinely emphasize the high degree of confusion that characterized the revolutionary experience. "Whenever two or three people got together, they would start a discussion. Words, views, advice all differed from top to bottom. It was unclear what would happen," author Mahmud Golabdareh'i wrote.

My mother is afraid. My father is asleep. My brother made a telephone call and [afterwards] told my mother: "Tell the kids not to leave the house tomorrow. They're going to kill everyone tomorrow, like on September 8. They're going to shoot from above, from rooftops and helicopters." My mother started crying. Now he picks up the phone again and dials. He says, "Come and hear for yourself," and puts the receiver in my hand. I say "Hello," then "Yes, I see," then "Goodbye." Now I'm terrified. Everybody has gone to sleep. I can't sleep. (Golabdareh'i 1986, 54, 58-59)

Around the same time, December 1978, the Tehran magazine *Khandani'ha* (Things Worth Reading) asked, "Has the time come to put order into this chaotic situation? The answer is not clear" (Joint Publications Research Service, Arlington, VA, February 8, 1979, fiche 72787, 17). Even in early February 1979, just a few days before the monarchy fell, a newspaper columnist noted, "In Tehran, conversations are limited to this: how will the revolution, which has gone halfway, deal with the fundamental power of the government? Will it resign? Will there be a fight? And how far would fighting go?" (*Ayandegan*, February 6, 1979, 12).

Only a handful of dedicated revolutionaries, it appears, were confident enough to predict the rapid demise of the monarchy. Even Mehdi Bazargan, a long-time liberal oppositionist, did not believe it less than 4 months before the monarchy was ousted. On October 22, 1978, he met with *Imam* Ruhollah Khomeini in a villa outside Paris, where Khomeini had just moved after 14 years' exile in Iraq, and discussed the strategy of the revolution. Bazargan's goal was to convince Khomeini that the opposition should take up the shah's offer of free and fair parliamentary elections the following summer. With this legal basis and public tribune, Bazargan argued, the movement could then turn methodically to capturing executive power. He called this his "step-by-step" plan (Chehabi 1990, 240-241; *Asnad-e Nehzat-e*

Azadi 1982-84, XI:13-17; *Corriere della Sera*, September 30, 1979, 5; *New York Times Magazine*, October 28, 1979, 26; Rubin 1981, 221-22, 393). Khomeini would hear none of it. The revolution will succeed completely, and soon, Khomeini insisted. But the Americans will not allow this, Bazargan protested. Khomeini responded, "America will not oppose us, because we speak the truth." Bazargan tried to lecture Khomeini on the ways of the world: "The world of politics and the international environment are not like the clerical circle of Najaf and Qom, where logic and truth may be sufficient. We face a thousand difficulties and problems, and they will crush [our] schemes and plans. They won't surrender just because we speak the truth." Bazargan saw that he was getting nowhere. Khomeini "considered the case closed and rejected. He said, 'When the shah has gone and I have returned to Iran, the people will elect parliamentary representatives, and then a government.'" Bazargan was flabbergasted. Khomeini's "indifference to and heedlessness of the obvious problems of politics and administration grieved me." At the same time, he recalled, "I marveled at and admired his seeing things so simply, his quiet certitude that success was near" (Bazargan 1983, 21-23; Chehabi 1990, 242-45).

Khomeini too, for all his confidence, may not have considered revolution imminent. His quiet certitude may have signified capitulation to divine will, rather than an expectation of regime change. In December 1978, a visitor asked him, "Do you think our present course is wise? What will happen if the army keeps on slaughtering people? Will people sooner or later not get tired and discouraged?" Khomeini "responded quite simply that it is our duty to struggle in this fashion and the result is with Allah" (Algar 1983, 54). By contrast with Khomeini's fatalism, his delegates in Tehran, appointed to a Revolutionary Council that attempted to organize the protest movement, were prudent enough to take no minutes, make no recordings, and generate no written documents until after the victory of the revolution, out of concern for the continued capabilities of the monarchical state (Hashemi-Rafsanjani 1997, I:362).

I call the inner state of Golabdareh'i, Bazargan, and Khomeini's delegates—though not of Khomeini himself—"confusion," which I distinguish from the ordinary uncertainty that characterizes huge portions of social life. Arguably, each section of the daily newspaper is organized around a sector of institutionalized uncertainty, that is, an arena in which one expects not to know what will happen tomorrow: "news," sports, business, style. We are used to dealing with this sort of uncertainty. We know what it means to bet on sports or stocks or

“keep up” with the latest news and styles. To the extent that the rules of the game stay relatively constant, we expect the unexpected. But when we sense that the rules of the game are suddenly changed, and we no longer know what to expect, that is confusion. To attempt a more formal definition: confusion is the recognition of deinstitutionalization.

3. PEOPLE INVOLVED IN REVOLUTIONS ACT LARGELY IN RESPONSE TO THEIR BEST GUESSES ABOUT HOW OTHERS ARE GOING TO ACT

A long series of psychological experiments has shown that people tend to conform to the judgments of others under conditions of uncertainty (Sherif 1935; Spencer and Houston 1993). The subjects in these low-salience experimental settings may not have been aware of this process, but in high-salience situations of widespread confusion, there is considerable reason to believe that this process is frequently conscious.

In the study of social movements, both collective action and critical mass approaches emphasize the intersubjectivity of decision making, that is, the importance of individuals' estimations of how other individuals are going to act. One aspect of this intersubjectivity is the estimation of hostile acts—whether troops will open fire on the protesters, for example. Another aspect, which may trump the first one (Kurzman 1996, 160-64), is the estimation of collaborative acts. In this regard, there is a crucial distinction between the collective action and critical mass approaches: as a movement attracts increasing numbers of participants, gaining momentum and looking as though it may actually succeed, the collective action model expects the remaining nonparticipants to be free riders, that is, less likely to join in (why bother if the movement is going to win without them having to lift a finger?). The critical mass model expects the remaining nonparticipants to be more likely to join in (they will have greater safety in numbers and a chance to make history by doing what they consider to be the right thing).

Surely both processes may occur, though the evidence for free riding is generally by inference, not admission. Evidence for critical-mass bandwagoning is more explicit. In routine political contestation, such as democratic elections, there appears to be little bandwagon effect (Mutz 1998, 179-96). In nonroutine situations, by contrast, the evidence is consistent and significant. People who say that they

expect larger numbers of protestors to turn out are more likely to engage in protest themselves, according to surveys of a Dutch union movement in the 1970s (Klandermans 1984, 592-96), a West German antinuclear movement in the 1980s (Opp 1988), and the East German revolution of 1989 (Opp, Voss, and Gern 1995, 196-202). This is confirmed by abundant anecdotal evidence for the Iranian Revolution, as demonstrated in my interviews with Iranians who participated in the revolution (Kurzman 1996, 166-67), as well as other researchers' reports:

Interviewer: How did you come to take part in the demonstrations?
 Hasan K., an old peasant who recently migrated to Tehran: During the revolution, I saw people throw themselves into the streets and, one month later, the streets were full. Nobody could have imagined that this would happen. (Vieille and Khosrokhavar 1990, 2:248)

Anonymous demonstrator: A sort of fear was in our being, above all in public services. But after the demonstrations and events of September 8, people realized that there wasn't anything to it, and people expressed their inside on the outside, . . . no longer fearing their hierarchical superiors or subordinates, [no longer fearing] high or low. Fear had left them. [From this moment,] the demonstrations got bigger and bigger. (Khosrokhavar 1997, 159)

A worker at a cement factory near Isfahan: When I was certain that the people were not for the shah, I spoke up . . . (Boroumand 1979, 63; also in Vieille and Khosrokhavar 1990, 2:7)

It may sound circular to say that protest movements attract participants through increased participation. But participants do not know ahead of time exactly what is going to happen. At the moment they decide to protest, or not to protest, they cannot be sure how many other people are going to join in. The decision is made in a context of hearsay, rumor, conflicting predictions, and the intense conversations that characterize periods of widespread confusion.

These conversations may be viewed as a form of lay social science. People are constantly asking their family, friends, acquaintances, strangers, "What's going on?" "What are you planning to do?" "What if . . . ?" And the greater the break from the routine, the more important these surveys become to us. When things are getting weird, we really need to know what folks are planning to do, so that we can figure out what to do ourselves. As the stakes get higher, people break out of their usual social circles and sample opinions more widely, striking up conversations at every possible opportunity. One of the most

widespread observations to come up in my interviews with people who lived through the Iranian Revolution was the politicization of everyday conversations. People stopped talking about topics that had come to seem frivolous and spoke obsessively about politics. In November 1978, as rumors of impending armed uprisings circulated around Iran, "everyone is asking everyone what is going to happen," the shah's security police reported (*Faraz'ha'i* 1989, 296).

4. THESE GUESSES AND RESPONSES CAN SHIFT SWIFTLY AND DRAMATICALLY, IN WAYS THAT PARTICIPANTS AND OBSERVERS CANNOT PREDICT

Critical-mass models of collective action may raise hopes that we can predict the emergence and extent of protest activity through surveys. Ask three questions and tabulate the results: (1) Do you support protest (on a given subject)? (2) Would you get involved if the protest was of a certain size? (3) Do you expect the protest to get that big? Critical-mass models are generally explicit in treating answers to these questions as constant and exogenous.

The problem with this approach is that each person's answers to these three questions may vary drastically over the course of a protest movement, as a result of the protest movement, thereby violating assumptions of constancy and exogeneity in potential protestors' preference structures. In Iran in 1977, only heroes, fools, and provocateurs would have told a surveyor that they supported revolution against the shah, that they knew of a threshold past which they would participate in such a revolution, and that they expected protests to pass this threshold. The huge majority of Iranians would surely have declined to answer at all, out of fear of the regime's security forces.

This is not simply a case of undermining the "spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann 1974) or "pluralistic ignorance" (Katz and Allport 1931, 152; Miller, Monin, and Prentice 2000)—hiding a widely held attitude because of the erroneous belief that everyone else disapproves. It is not simply a case of "private preferences" for protest (Kuran 1995, 17) or "hidden transcripts" of resentment (Scott 1990, 4-5) coming out of hiding. Preferences changed.

People who, previously, had not wanted to oust the shah suddenly decided that they did want to oust the shah. Mehdi Bazargan, the liberal oppositionist, favored a constitutional monarchy in the years before the revolution; in early September 1978, he continued to favor

this outcome, saying, "I don't believe that religious scholars can run a government" (*Faraz'ha'i* 1989, 120). Then in October 1978, as described above, he changed his position and threw in his lot with Khomeini. An anonymous leftist woman underwent catharsis at a major demonstration: "two weeks ago, the first large demonstrations took place, with millions of participants. I was very surprised and happy and saw that Islam is a great religion, because it makes all things possible" (Bani 1980, 41). A man in Tehran described the conversion of his wife to Islamist activism—"a woman who up to a year ago had no truck with such things, whose biggest problem was clothes, which were sent to her from London along with various items of cosmetics" (*Ayandegan*, February 8, 1979, 6). For some, shifting outlooks could resolve the sense of confusion by providing a newfound sense of confidence in fate, divinely inspired or otherwise. A factory worker in Qazvin, for instance, recalled a massive shift in September 1978: "The people, from that point on, knew that this revolution would be victorious, 100 percent" (Vieille and Khosrokhavar 1990, 2:156). For many others, as noted above, the sense of confusion remained until the very end and did not preclude participation in revolutionary protests. In any case, it appears that periods of unrest may be high-torque environments for preferences: deinstitutionalization may subject preferences to stresses that are generally absent in routine situations.

These people did not predict their own personal transformations, and they did not foresee the conditions under which such transformations would occur. Even Khomeini did not appear to think in September 1977 that he would live to see a revolution. "When humans get old and senility overtakes them, all of their faculties grow weak," he apologized (Khomeini 1977, 5). Before the whole country seemed to be rising up against the regime, it would have been meaningless to ask Iranians, "What would you do if it looked like the whole country was rising up against the regime?" Think about such a question in your time and country—can you give a meaningful answer? I can't. Even though I study revolutions, I can't really imagine living through one myself, in my own country. I am not one of those rare people—mainly professional revolutionaries and big wigs with exit strategies, I would guess—who give much thought to such strange and remote possibilities. And even if I try to give it some thought, I could not possibly summon up all of the permutations that might seem of supreme importance if the revolution were actually taking place—the particularities of the leaders' ideologies, the positions each of my relatives

will take, the reliability of the friend who whispers to me, "Everybody is going to be there."

With more routine forms of protest, such predictions are less difficult. I might be able to list issues for which I would join a march on the Mall in Washington, D.C., and the minimum number of marchers that would make it worth my while. I can envision a petition on a variety of subjects and the number of signers (even some particular individuals) that I would want to sign with me. I know what these experiences feel like, and I am fairly confident that the parameters will remain constant for the foreseeable future. With these actions, I am unlikely, for example, to be arrested or beaten or shot. There are causes for which I am willing to risk imprisonment and injury, but it is difficult for me to specify the conditions under which I would do so.

Even with routine situations, however, people are not particularly good at predicting their future behavior—a considerable literature in the field of psychology has established this repeatedly (Slovic 1995). The less routine the situation, the harder it is to visualize. The harder it is to visualize, the more difficult it is to predict how one would act. And if individuals cannot predict their own behavior, then our survey strategy will not work. We might be able to predict the routine, but for breaches of the routine, we'll get too many respondents saying, "I don't know" or "It depends." I imagine that is what I would say.

5. EXPLANATION INVOLVES RETROACTIVE PREDICTION: IT IMPLIES IF WE HAD RECOGNIZED CAUSAL FACTORS A, B, OR C AT THE TIME, WE WOULD HAVE EXPECTED SOME ENSUING DEVELOPMENT

What do people do when they are surprised? According to Harold Garfinkel (1967, 11-18), they seek to reduce their anxiety about a world that seems out of control by assiduously generating explanations that make the world make sense again. He gives the example of a suicide hotline, where attendants deal with unthinkable tendencies by cubbyholing them into pat explanations: one case is attributed to money problems, another to a troubled love life, another to childhood abuse.⁴

4. See also the field of "attribution theory" in psychology, which has documented subjects' search for causal meaning in numerous experimental settings (Försterling 2001).

The more unexpected the event, the greater the effort needed to make sense of it. Protest movements pose particular difficulties because they intentionally challenge the expectations of routine social behavior. Predicting these movements retroactively is thus one of the greatest quests in social science: to discover the regularities underlying irregularity—the rules underlying behavior that flouts the rules (Kurzman 1996, 166). Among the most dramatic of rule-flouting events are those massive protest movements that manage to take over the state and earn the title of “revolution,” the greatest of which are able to resist cognitive control for generations. Indeed, this may be a measure of their greatness. The French Revolution of 1789, the quintessential revolution, has attracted academic attention like a hypnotic Rorschach test for more than 200 years. Each generation returns to it and projects new meaning upon it, expresses dissatisfaction with older approaches and devises new ones. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 may also prove, by this criterion, to be great. Despite a language barrier and evidentiary difficulties that limit Western scholarship, the Iranian Revolution has already, in less than one generation, offered observers at least half a dozen faces.

After the Iranian Revolution, those who had failed to predict it became preoccupied with understanding how they could have been so mistaken.⁵ Mehdi Bazargan (1984, 25) concluded that he had misjudged U.S. support for the shah. Quoting Henry Kissinger approvingly, he argued that Jimmy Carter had abandoned the shah and allowed the revolution to occur. The U.S. government also engaged in a self-critique. The Central Intelligence Agency commissioned a still-classified review of its performance even before the shah fell (Mooney 2000, 39). In the following several months, a congressional subcommittee faulted intelligence gatherers and policy makers for not heeding warning signs (U.S. House of Representatives 1979), an internal State Department analysis argued that “we were unprepared for the collapse of the Pahlavi regime because we did not want to know the truth” (National Security Archive 1990, Doc. 2629, 12), and a partisan debate emerged over who “lost” Iran (*Economist*, February 10, 1979, 31).

The social sciences make a profession of this sort of second-guessing. They take unexpected events and try to make them less unexpected, after the fact. Explanation, I propose, is a matter of retroactive

5. Contrapuntally, some of the shah’s advisers subsequently claimed to have foreseen the revolution and to have bravely warned the shah to mend his ways.

prediction: had we known A, B, and C ahead of time, we would have expected the event. This is not to say that history is the sort of apparatus in which causes lead automatically to outcomes. Nonetheless, explanations are evaluated by how well they reduce the residual element of unpredictability: a successful explanation leaves little to chance and free will; a less-successful explanation leaves more. Social scientists may never achieve retroactive prediction, but they aspire to it.

I propose that all explanations, and not only positivistic approaches, involve retroactive prediction. Explanations may be deterministic or probabilistic, universalizing or limited in scope, focused on mechanisms or processes or laws, static or dynamic, large unit or small unit. It does not matter. They all posit preconditions that “invariably” or “generally” or “under certain conditions” are said to “cause” or “tend toward” or “be associated with” outcomes.⁶ Max Weber, to pick an influential example of someone who has criticized the search for generalizing laws of the social world, nonetheless defended the search for “causal components” whose “effect . . . ‘would be expected’” (Weber [1905] 1949, 171; see also Ringer 1997, 71). Retroactive prediction seems to be invoked explicitly in the phrase “would be expected.” It is the assertion of a link between cause and effect, however tenuous, that draws social science into the project of making unexpected events expected, retroactively.

Notice that retroactive prediction is different from predicting the future: A, B, and C are frequently not known, or even knowable, ahead of time, but only after the fact. It is possible to argue that revolutions—or social phenomena in general (Elster 1989, 8-10)—are explainable afterward but inherently unpredictable beforehand. Nikki Keddie (1995, 9-10), one of the foremost historians of Iran, has made just such an argument. The acts of prediction and explanation, she has written, “are entirely different.” Citing chaos theory and other naturalistic analogies, she suggests that revolutions may be the product of tiny initial causes and an infinity of subsequent turning points and interactions that can be narrowed down or identified only in hindsight. But for revolutions as for the weather, the difficulties involved in prediction do not prevent explanation: “while long-range prediction is now generally considered impossible by scientists, these

6. Some philosophers have suggested that explanation may be quasi-causal (Wright 1971, 139-43) or noncausal (Mahajan 1997, 94-96), but I am using a broad, nontechnical definition of causation that incorporates all sorts of cause-effect explanations.

scientists could, at least if they had enough information, trace back the development of a hurricane to its earlier and calmer stages." Causal analysis can proceed because "back-tracing" "should make it possible to see what the key factors were in making one country revolutionary and others not." Bunge (1996, 160-61) makes a similar argument: some events, such as wars and revolutions, may be explainable in hindsight, even though they are unpredictable.⁷ What happens, though, when the factors we identify as "key" do not seem to matter much for the lived experience of the revolution?

6. TO THE EXTENT THAT REVOLUTIONARY
EXPERIENCE IS CHARACTERIZED BY CONFUSION,
THEN UNDERSTANDING THIS EXPERIENCE
MAY DISCONFIRM ALL EXPLANATION

What are we to do if subjective and objective approaches differ? Scholars have offered at least four reasons to privilege social scientists' perspectives over their subjects':

1. The attempt to understand subjects' perspectives involves difficult epistemological barriers. Since the 19th century, subjectivist philosophers have emphasized the importance of reliving in some way the experience of the people they seek to understand. But this reliving is a personal act that other scholars cannot reproduce. As a result, interpretive hypotheses cannot be confirmed (Bunge 1996, 150-55; Bunge 1999, 19-20; Martin 2000, 41-69).
2. People's statements about their inner states, especially retrospective statements, may not reflect their actual inner states. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels ([1846] 1976, 62) ridiculed historical work that "takes every epoch at its word and believes that everything it says and imagines about itself is true": "Whilst in ordinary life every shopkeeper is very well able to distinguish between what somebody professes to be and what he really is, our historiography has not yet won this trivial insight." Context affects statements, as do intentions, narrative tropes, forgetfulness, and any number of other factors.

7. Bunge (1996, 160) is confusing about the scope of hindsight. Some phenomena, he says, cannot be explained after the fact: "retrodiction will be impossible . . . in the case of an irreversible process approaching a state of equilibrium," where "one and the same final state may be reached from different initial states. (Think of life histories or events with more than one possible cause.)" Events with more than one possible cause would seem to be numerous in the social world. Two paragraphs later, Bunge proposes "the optimistic thesis that all facts can be explained, if not right now, then later on."

3. People may not accurately understand how their own minds work, or the causes of their own actions, as demonstrated in numerous psychological experiments (Nisbett and Wilson 1977; Wegner 2002; Wilson 2002). In Bourdieu's ([1993] 1999, 620) pithy words, "Social agents do not innately possess a science of what they are and what they do."
4. People may not sufficiently understand the people around them. They have no training in sampling methodologies, so their information may be biased. They have no access to the archives or statistics that shed systematic light on the contexts of their lives. Certain knowledgeable respondents may have enough information about their social settings to be considered credible "informants," but even they should be relied on only when more systematic data are unavailable.

These are serious challenges. But the first three of them apply just as forcefully to much objective evidence as well.⁸ Many of these forms of evidence are also based on subjects' statements about their inner states (Porter 1995). Surveys elicit statements about opinions and memories. Unemployment statistics cumulate the statements of people who claim to be seeking work. Gross domestic product estimates extrapolate from statements about payments made with certain intentions of retail exchange, as distinct from payments made with the intention of gift giving and wholesaling. One might try to avoid these problems with strictly observational methods, either behaviorist or physiological. But this process involves its own epistemological difficulties, which are often overcome in practice by checking against subjects' statements: physiological lie-detector tests, for example, were originally deemed accurate in large part because they elicited and were corroborated by confessions (Alder 1988).

Indeed, objective analysis imputes inner states, even if it professes to be uninterested in them, as discussed in section 1. Explanations for the emergence of democracy, for example—explanations that focus on socioeconomic development, or elite pacts, or other causes—impute particular inner states to members of various social groups: certain members of this or that group wanted democracy, or tolerated democracy, or objected to democracy. The individuals need not be unanimous, and some individuals have organizational or interpersonal positions that make their inner states more influential than others, but enough individuals must share the imputed inner state for long enough to generate the specified outcome. This inner state need

8. Writing from a different perspective, Roy Bhaskar (1998, 151) has made a similar argument that there are parallel problems both with romantic notions of mind-melding with our subjects, on one hand, and claims of positivist objectivity on the other hand: both treat the relationship between observer and observed as nonproblematic.

not be conscious. It could even be autonomic, as in the physiological response of recoiling from extreme heat—though consciousness could play a significant role in “deviant” cases of failure to recoil, such as walking intentionally on hot coals.

Regardless of the status of the motivation, disagreement between objectivist and subjectivist approaches resolves into a debate over inner states. For any given episode, which motivation has the greater weight of evidence, direct or indirect, on its side? In empirical work on the Iranian Revolution, I examine a series of causal mechanisms that have been widely hypothesized as explanations. In each, the evidence for subjectivist experience swamped the evidence for individual-level objectivist mechanisms:

For example, take explanations involving political opportunity (Kurzman 1996), or the “causal mechanism” of “attribution of threat and opportunity” in the new language proposed by several leading scholars (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 92). Explanations that focus on the emergence of opportunities for protest, due to state weakness or breakdown, may or may not be accurate in objective terms. But they have an additional burden, namely, to show that opportunities spurred Iranians to protest, consciously or otherwise. Structuralists have cited a handful of comments by liberal oppositionists attesting to a consciousness of increased opportunity for protest in 1977, as well as a single speech to this effect by Khomeini. But this evidence disappears after November 1977, when the shah cracked down on the opposition. For 1978, when the revolutionary movement broadened from scattered incidents to a general strike, there is considerable evidence that Iranians did not experience the state as weakened and protested anyway. They continued to fear state repression up to the last moments of the old regime’s existence and continued to express confusion about how things would turn out. In this example, the sparse evidence for an imputed inner state, as implied by objectivist analysis, is outweighed considerably by the evidence of a contrary inner state, as elicited by subjectivist analysis.

Materialist explanations for the Iranian Revolution often focus on the resources controlled by the Iranian opposition, particularly the so-called “mosque network” (Kurzman 1994). These explanations imply that Iranian oppositionists considered the mosques to be resources and acted accordingly. But they did not. Radicals lamented the fact that leading Islamic authorities kowtowed to the regime and shooed protestors away from the mosques, fearing state retaliation. The revolutionaries ultimately commandeered most of Iran’s mosques, but

that was an end result of mobilization, not a precondition or a mechanism. In addition, the radicals never considered the mosques to be safe spaces for protest. They worried up to the end that the state would attack and repress these spaces, as it did on numerous occasions throughout the period.

Cultural explanations often focus on Shi'i Islam as a set of creeds and practices that are particularly conducive to revolt and martyrdom (Kurzman 2003a). If this was so, shouldn't Iranians have known it at the time? If they knew it, why were they confused about how the movement would proceed? Why did they agonize over their own individual decisions to protest? And why did they invent new religious rituals during the revolutionary movement?

Economic explanations often focus on inequality, inflation, the oil boom and bust, and other factors (Kurzman 2004, 77-104). If these were major factors, why was so much of the discourse of the revolutionary movement explicitly noneconomistic? And why weren't the groups most affected by economic turmoil, such as recently urbanized construction workers, more active in the revolution?

We could stop with these examples and conclude that a new explanation is needed. Or we could generalize from these examples and conclude that no new explanation is ever going to succeed. There is reason to take the latter path. If any factor was powerful enough to oust a regime, why did Iranians wonder and worry about the next stages of the confrontation? What can outside observers claim to know about the situation that Iranians didn't know at the time, other than the outcome? The confusion of the revolutionary experience threatens to wash out all explanation.

One remaining route for objectivist approaches would be to argue that confusion at the conscious level coexists with different, explainable inner states that are not so easily accessible to conscious reflection. Evidence could then be presented for these alternative states and the reason for their inaccessibility. But this approach runs counter to contemporary trends in many subject areas of social science, including the study of protest. This field has defined itself for the past quarter century by its insistence on consciously value-maximizing actors, as distinguished from its predecessor field of collective behavior, which imputed nonconscious motivations to protestors (Kurzman 2003b). This distinction has been relaxed in recent works emphasizing the role of culture in protest movements (for important statements of cultural structuralism, see Taylor 1989; Polletta 1999). This move opens the way for an objectivist argument that in times of widespread

confusion, people fall back on culturally familiar patterns of behavior while attributing their actions to purely personal decisions. Culture might then explain both the actions and the reason for the inaccessibility of the inner states associated with the actions.

Francesca Polletta (1998) offers the compelling example of the sit-ins for civil rights in the United States in the early 1960s. Activists and supporters plotted the movement, publicly and privately, at the time and afterward, in terms of spontaneity and unpredictability: "It was like a fever," "This was a surprise (and shock)," "BOOM!—'it' hit with an unawareness that rocked the capital city [Raleigh, North Carolina]." Polletta juxtaposes these self-accounts with others that described the structural underpinnings of the movement, namely, the prior organizational work that had gone into the sit-ins. The two sets of accounts can be reconciled, Polletta argues, by recognizing the narrative of spontaneity as a powerful statement of identity and recruitment, casting participation in the movement as due to irresistible, unpredictable, life-altering forces. In this example, structure operates outside of conscious experience—or at least partially outside of it since the "objective" evidence of prior organization is also based on subjective accounts. For this reason, the subjective experience of unpredictability is discounted in favor of structural explanation—paradoxically, though, it is the structural account that restores agency to the activists, whose subjective accounts deny it.

The objectivist approach may work best when structures persist throughout the period under study. Unvarying background contexts may be so taken for granted that their operation is largely invisible. These contexts might be considered as scope conditions for the explanatory project, providing necessary if not sufficient causal conditions. To give a possibly far-fetched example: the absence of nuclear weapons in Iran prevented the revolutionaries from using nuclear warfare in their challenge to the shah's regime. Iranians did not have to think about the absence of nuclear weapons for this variable to be causally effective. But it is hard to see how invisible constants might generate anything but pale causal claims such as this. More substantively interesting scope conditions, such as the observation that patrimonial authoritarian regimes have been more likely than other regimes to undergo revolutions (Goodwin 2001), seem inevitably to operate through individual consciousnesses—in this case, the channeling of grievances and protests toward radical methods. Such explanations are once again testable by understanding subjective experience.

The greater the degree of deinstitutionalization, the harder it is to argue that people are falling back on an established pattern of behavior without being aware of doing so. To generalize the argument: the greater the break from routine, the more likely that people will be aware of the break. The more aware they are, the greater the role played by conscious decision. This is not to dismiss other inner states entirely—like a ship being repainted at sea, it is impossible to keep all aspects of one's life in consciousness at once (Kurzman 2003a). I am merely hypothesizing that breaks draw conscious attention to political action. The deliberation that results can be self-revelatory. At the same time, the greater the break from routine, the greater the experience of confusion. A corollary: the greater the confusion and self-consciousness, the greater the role of conscious decision.

These hypotheses, it should be noted, do not themselves constitute a causal explanation. Rather, to coin a phrase, they constitute an "anti-explanation," an account that abandons retroactive prediction. Deinstitutionalization doesn't cause revolution; it is part of revolution. Confusion isn't the outcome of previous factors; it signals the irrelevance of previous factors. Conscious, intersubjective decisions aren't a mechanism for revolution; they are simply part of the landscape of social life. These hypotheses may seem circular or trivial from a causal perspective: revolution succeeds when it succeeds. From the standpoint of understanding, however, anti-explanation opens up a world of research and testable hypotheses, such as the ones that I have listed.

These hypotheses cannot be tested by the single case that I have studied closely, the Iranian Revolution. With this one case, I cannot begin to establish the scope conditions of confusion, or varieties of confusion, or patterns of confusion. But if the foregoing hypotheses are confirmed across a series of cases, then they hold significant implications not just for the study of social movements but for social science as a whole. It may be the case that the methods used to study routine patterns of behavior ought to be distinguished from the methods used to study nonroutine episodes. The usual mechanisms invoked by causal explanation may have scope conditions. To the extent that nonroutine episodes are characterized by confusion, and by increased reflexiveness and intentionality, understanding such moments may undermine explanation.

Even if one does not accept that understanding undermines explanation in general—under conditions of confusion—it may also be the case that understanding undermines particular explanations. If

mechanisms “pass through the heads of people,” as Bunge (1999, 62) suggests, then understanding how they do so offers a proving ground for explanation. In this view, understanding holds a privileged position in the social sciences, and explanation without understanding can yield only correlation without causation.

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