

**Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989**



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# NOW OUT OF NEVER

## The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989

By TIMUR KURAN\*

### I. UNITED IN AMAZEMENT

“OUR jaws cannot drop any lower,” exclaimed Radio Free Europe one day in late 1989. It was commenting on the electrifying collapse of Eastern Europe’s communist regimes.<sup>1</sup> The political landscape of the entire region changed suddenly, astonishing even the most seasoned political observers. In a matter of weeks entrenched leaders were overthrown, the communist monopoly on power was abrogated in one country after another, and persecuted critics of the communist system were catapulted into high office.

In the West the ranks of the stunned included champions of the view that communist totalitarianism is substantially more stable than ordinary authoritarianism.<sup>2</sup> “It has to be conceded,” wrote a leading proponent of this view in early 1990, “that those of us who distinguish between the two non-democratic types of government underestimated the decay of Communist countries and expected the collapse of totalitarianism to take longer than has actually turned out to be the case.”<sup>3</sup> Another acknowledged her bewilderment through the title of a new book: *The Withering Away of the Totalitarian State . . . And Other Surprises*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Gwertzman and Michael T. Kaufman, eds., *The Collapse of Communism, by the Correspondents of “The New York Times”* (New York: Times Books, 1990), vii.

<sup>2</sup> For an early statement of this thesis, see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2d ed. (1951; reprint, New York: World Publishing, 1958), pt. 3. Arendt suggested that communism weakens interpersonal bonds rooted in family, community, religion, and profession, a situation that makes individuals terribly dependent on the goodwill of the state and thus blocks the mobilization of an anticommunist revolt.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Pipes, “Gorbachev’s Russia: Breakdown or Crackdown?” *Commentary*, March 1990, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, *The Withering Away of the Totalitarian State . . . And Other Surprises* (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 1990). A decade earlier Kirkpatrick had articulated a variant of Arendt’s thesis, insisting that the communist system is incapable of self-propelled evolu-

Even scholars who had rejected the concept of a frozen and immobile region were amazed by the events of 1989. In 1987 the American Academy of Arts and Sciences invited a dozen specialists, including several living in Eastern Europe, to prepare interpretive essays on East European developments. As the *Daedalus* issue featuring these essays went to press, the uprisings took off, prompting many authors to change “whole sentences and paragraphs in what were once thought to be completed essays.” *Daedalus* editor Stephen Graubard remarks in his preface to the issue: “A quarterly journal has been obliged to adapt, inconveniently, but in some measure necessarily, the techniques of a weekly or even a daily newspaper.”<sup>5</sup> Graubard proudly points out that even before the last-minute revisions the essays offered remarkable insights into the intellectual, social, and political stirrings that were transforming the region. But he concedes that neither he nor his essayists foresaw what was to happen. Recalling that in a planning session he had asked whether anything could be done to avoid publishing “an issue that will seem ‘dated’ three years after publication,” he continues: “Was this passage a premonition of all that was to follow? One wishes that one could claim such extraordinary prescience. Regrettably, it did not really exist.”<sup>6</sup>

Wise statesmen, discerning diplomats, and gifted journalists were also caught off guard. So too were futurologists. John Naisbitt’s celebrated *Megatrends*, which sold eight million copies in the early 1980s, does not predict the fall of communism.<sup>7</sup> As the *Economist* observed even before the East European Revolution had run its course, 1989 turned out to be a year when “the most quixotic optimists” were repeatedly “proved too cautious.”<sup>8</sup>

Within Eastern Europe itself the revolution came as a surprise even to leading “dissidents.” In a 1979 essay, “The Power of the Powerless,” Václav Havel recognized that the regimes of Eastern Europe were anything but invincible. They might be toppled, he wrote, by a “social movement,” an “explosion of civil unrest,” or a “sharp conflict inside an ap-

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tion. See Kirkpatrick, “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” *Commentary*, November 1979, pp. 34–45.

<sup>5</sup> Graubard, “Preface to the Issue ‘Eastern Europe . . . Central Europe . . . Europe,’ ” *Daedalus* 119 (Winter 1990), vi.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, ii.

<sup>7</sup> Naisbitt, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives* (New York: Warner Books, 1982). The months following the East European Revolution saw the appearance of John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene, *Megatrends 2000: Ten New Directions for the 1990’s* (New York: William Morrow, 1990). This sequel characterizes the East European developments of the late 1980s as an unforeseen “political earthquake” and then *predicts* that the 1990s will witness the further erosion of communism (chap. 3).

<sup>8</sup> *Economist*, November 18, 1989, p. 13.

parently monolithic power structure,” among other possibilities.<sup>9</sup> This essay is at once a brilliant probe into the communist system’s stability and a penetrating prognosis of its ultimate demise. Yet it steers clear of speculation on the timing of the collapse. It is replete with statements such as “we must see the hopelessness of trying to make long-range predictions” and “far-reaching political change is utterly unforeseeable,” although it ends on a cautiously optimistic note: “What if [the ‘brighter future’] has been here for a long time already, and only our own blindness and weakness has prevented us from seeing it around us and within us, and kept us from developing it?”<sup>10</sup>

Eight years later Havel himself would exhibit “blindness” to events that were ushering in a “brighter future.” Less than three years before the revolution he commented as follows on the rousing welcome given by a Prague crowd to visiting Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev:

I feel sad; this nation of ours never learns. How many times has it put all its faith in some external force which, it believed, would solve its problems? . . . And yet here we are again, making exactly the same mistake. They seem to think that Gorbachev has come to liberate them from Husák!<sup>11</sup>

In late 1988, with less than a year to go, Havel was still unsure about the direction of events:

Maybe [the Movement for Civil Liberties] will quickly become an integral feature of our country’s life, albeit one not particularly beloved of the regime. . . . Perhaps it will remain for the time being merely the seed of something that will bear fruit in the dim and distant future. It is equally possible that the entire “matter” will be stamped on hard.<sup>12</sup>

Other Czechoslovak dissidents were just as unprepared for the revolution. In November 1989 Jan Urban suggested that the opposition contest the national elections scheduled for June 1991—only to be ridiculed by his friends for making a hopelessly utopian proposal.<sup>13</sup> Within a matter of days, they were all celebrating the fall of Czechoslovakia’s communist dictatorship.

<sup>9</sup> Havel, “The Power of the Powerless” (1979), in Havel et al., *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, ed. John Keane and trans. Paul Wilson (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1985), 42.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 87, 89, 96.

<sup>11</sup> Havel, “Meeting Gorbachev” (1987), in William M. Brinton and Alan Rinzler, eds., *Without Force or Lies: Voices from the Revolution of Central Europe in 1989–90* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1990), 266.

<sup>12</sup> Havel, “Cards on the Table” (1988), in Brinton and Rinzler (fn. 11), 270–71.

<sup>13</sup> Sidney Tarrow, “‘Aiming at a Moving Target’: Social Science and the Recent Rebellions in Eastern Europe,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 24 (March 1991), 12.

A few months before the revolution, in neighboring Poland negotiations were under way between the communist regime and Solidarity, the trade union that for years had been demanding political pluralism. To the surprise of almost everyone, the regime agreed in April 1989 to hold open elections for a pluralistic parliament. In elections scheduled for June all 100 Senate seats and 161 of the 460 Assembly seats would be contestable. Exceeding the wildest expectations, Solidarity won all but one of the Senate seats in addition to all of the Assembly seats it was allowed to contest. Stunned by the enormity of this success, Solidarity officials worried that the electorate had gone too far, that victory would force Solidarity into making bold political moves simply to satisfy raised hopes. They feared that such moves would provoke a communist crack-down. The significant point is that neither the government nor Solidarity was prepared for such a lopsided result. The April accord was designed to give Solidarity a voice in Parliament, not to substantiate and legitimate its claim to being *the* voice of the Polish people.<sup>14</sup>

We will never know how many East Europeans foresaw the events of 1989—or at least the impending changes in their own countries. But at each step, journalistic accounts invariably painted a picture of a stunned public. For example, two days after the breaching of the Berlin Wall, the *New York Times* carried an article in which an East German remarks: “It’s unfathomable. If you had told me that one week ago, I wouldn’t have believed it. Mentally, I still can’t. It will take a few days before what this means sinks in.”<sup>15</sup>

I know of only one systematic study of relevance. Four months after the fall of communism in East Germany, the Allensbach Institute asked a broad sample of East Germans: “A year ago did you expect such a peaceful revolution?” Only 5 percent answered in the affirmative, although 18 percent answered “yes, but not that fast.” Fully 76 percent indicated that the revolution had totally surprised them.<sup>16</sup> These figures are all the more remarkable given the “I knew it would happen” fal-

<sup>14</sup> On the elections and the reactions they generated, see the reports of John Taglibue, *New York Times*, June 3–6, 1989. The events leading up to the April accord have been chronicled and interpreted by Timothy Garton Ash, “Refolution: The Springtime of Two Nations,” *New York Review of Books*, June 15, 1989, pp. 3–10. He observed: “Almost no one imagined that the great gulf between ‘the power’ and ‘the society,’ between Jaruzelski and Walesa, could be so swiftly bridged” (p. 6). For another informative account of Poland’s political transformation, see Elie Abel, *The Shattered Bloc: Behind the Upheaval in Eastern Europe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), chap. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *New York Times*, November 12, 1989, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Question 36 on the East German Survey of the Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, February 17–March 15, 1990, Archive no. 4195 GEW. I am indebted to Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, director of the institute, for agreeing to insert this question into a broader survey on East German political opinions.

lacy—the human tendency to exaggerate foreknowledge.<sup>17</sup> Even trained historians succumb to this fallacy, portraying unanticipated events as inevitable, foreseeable, and actually foreseen.<sup>18</sup> In view of this fallacy, if East Germans had been asked a year before the revolution, “Do you expect a revolution in a year’s time?” the percentage of unqualified negative answers would undoubtedly have been even higher.

The events that sealed the fate of East Germany’s communist regime took off in the final days of summer, when thousands of East German vacationers in Hungary took advantage of relaxed border controls to turn their trips into permanent departures for West Germany. The East German government responded by restricting its citizens’ access to Hungary, only to see thousands show up at the West German embassy in Prague. In the ensuing days it acceded to a series of face-saving arrangements by which the vacationers could depart for the West, but only after first returning home. Each new concession prompted further waves of emigrants, however, confuting the government’s expectation that the exodus would taper off quickly.<sup>19</sup> The government was not alone in failing to anticipate where events were headed. Thousands of East German citizens rushed to join the exodus precisely because they felt their chances of reaching the West would never again be so good. Had they known that the Berlin Wall was about to come down, few would have left in such haste, leaving behind almost all their possessions, including their cars.

It might be said that some very knowledgeable observers of the communist bloc *had* predicted its disintegration before the century was out. As early as 1969, for instance, the Soviet dissident Andrei Amalrik wrote that the Russian Empire would break up within a decade and a half. Although it is tempting to credit Amalrik with exemplary foresight, a rereading of his famous essay shows that he expected the Soviet Empire to meet its end following a protracted and devastating war with China, not through a string of popular upheavals. In fact, he explicitly stated that the Soviet system of government had left people too demoralized

<sup>17</sup> Baruch Fischhoff, “Hindsight ≠ Foresight: The Effect of Outcome Knowledge on Judgment under Uncertainty,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* 1 (August 1975), 288–99; and Baruch Fischhoff and Ruth Beyth, “‘I Knew It Would Happen’—Remembered Probabilities of Once-Future Things,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 13 (February 1975), 1–16.

<sup>18</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), chaps. 6–8.

<sup>19</sup> For a compilation of pertinent reports from the *New York Times*, see Gwertzman and Kaufman (fn. 1), 153–84. Superb eyewitness accounts include Timothy Garton Ash, “The German Revolution,” *New York Review of Books*, December 21, 1989, pp. 14–19; and George Paul Csicsery, “The Siege of N6grádi Street, Budapest, 1989,” in Brinton and Rinzler (fn. 11), 289–302.

and too dependent on authority to participate in a spontaneous uprising.<sup>20</sup> So Amalrik did not really foresee the events of 1989. Like a broken watch that tells the correct time every twelve hours, he got the timing of the first crack in the empire essentially right, but on the basis of a spurious forecast of events.

This is not to suggest that the East European explosion came as *total* surprise to everyone. Though most were astonished when it happened, and though few who saw it coming expected it to be so peaceful, a small number of commentators had prophesied that the revolution would be swift and remarkably bloodless. Havel, despite his above-quoted remarks, is one of these. And Vladimir Tismaneanu, a Romanian émigré living in the United States, came close to predicting major change. About a year before the collapse of the Romanian regime, he depicted it as “probably the most vulnerable” in Eastern Europe. Sensing an “all-pervasive discontent,” he observed that “the Braşov riots in November 1987, when thousands of citizens took to the streets, chanted anti-Ceauşescu slogans and burned the dictator’s portraits, represent an unmistakable signal for Moscow that uncontrollable violence may flare up in Romania.”<sup>21</sup> Tismaneanu failed to place the Romanian uprising in the context of an upheaval spanning all of the Soviet Union’s Warsaw Pact allies. Nor did he predict that Romania would be the last Soviet satellite to overthrow its government. It is remarkable nonetheless that he diagnosed the Romanian regime’s vulnerability. Like Havel, he succeeded where many Western observers failed, because he understood the weaknesses that underlay the apparent stability of the communist system. This understanding prepared him for the type of explosion that eventually occurred, although, as discussed further on, it did not endow him with the ability to predict when the revolution would break out.

While the collapse of the post-World War II political order of Eastern Europe stunned the world, in retrospect it appears as the inevitable consequence of a multitude of factors. In each of the six countries the leadership was generally despised, lofty economic promises remained unfulfilled, and freedoms taken for granted elsewhere existed only on paper. But if the revolution was indeed inevitable, why was it not foreseen? Why did people overlook signs that are clearly visible after the fact? One of the central arguments of this essay is precisely that interacting social and psychological factors make it inherently difficult to predict the out-

<sup>20</sup> Amalrik, *Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?* (1969) (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), esp. 36–44.

<sup>21</sup> Tismaneanu, “Personal Power and Political Crisis in Romania,” *Government and Opposition* 24 (Spring 1989), 193–94.

come of political competition. I shall argue that the East European Revolution was by no means inevitable. What *was* inevitable is that we would be astounded if and when it arrived.

"The victim of today is the victor of tomorrow, / And out of Never grows Now!"<sup>22</sup> Brecht's couplet captures perfectly our central paradox: seemingly unshakable regimes saw public sentiment turn against them with astonishing rapidity, as tiny oppositions mushroomed into crushing majorities. Currently popular theories of revolution offer little insight into this stunning pace; nor for that matter do they shed light on the element of surprise in previous revolutions. All lay claim to predictive power, yet none has a track record at veritable prediction. The next section briefly critiques the pertinent scholarly literature. Without denying the usefulness of some received theories at explaining revolutions of the past, I go on to present a theory that illuminates both the process of revolutionary mobilization and the limits of our ability to predict where and when mobilizations will occur. Subsequent sections apply this argument to the case at hand.

The term *revolution* is used here in a narrow sense to denote a mass-supported seizure of political power that aims to transform the social order. By this definition it is immaterial whether the accomplished transfer of power brings about significant social change. With regard to the East European Revolution, it is too early to tell whether the postrevolutionary regimes will succeed in reshaping the economy, the legal system, international relations, and individual rights—to mention just some of the domains on the reformist agenda. But even if the ongoing reforms all end in failure, the upheavals of 1989 can continue to be characterized as a regionwide revolution.

## II. RECEIVED THEORIES OF REVOLUTION AND THEIR PREDICTIVE WEAKNESSES

In her acclaimed book *States and Social Revolutions*, Theda Skocpol treats social revolutions as the product of structural and situational conditions.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, she argues that a revolution occurs when two conditions coalesce: (1) a state's evolving relations with other states and local classes weaken its ability to maintain law and order, and (2) the elites harmed by this situation are powerless to restore the status quo ante yet

<sup>22</sup> Bertolt Brecht, "Lob der Dialectic" (In praise of dialectics, 1933), in *Gedichte* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1961), 3:73; poem translated by Edith Anderson.

<sup>23</sup> Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).



strong enough to paralyze the government. Through their obstructionism the elites generate a burst of antielite sentiment, which sets in motion an uprising aimed at transforming the social order. The appeal of Skocpol's theory lies in its invocation of structural causes to explain shifts in the structure of political power. It does not depend on such "subjective" factors as beliefs, expectations, attitudes, preferences, intentions, and goals, although these do creep into structuralist case studies, including those of Skocpol herself.

Tracking emotions and mental states is a treacherous business, which is why the structuralist school considers it a virtue to refrain from appealing to them. Social structures are ostensibly easier to identify, which would seem to endow the structuralist theory with predictive superiority over "voluntarist" theories based on "rational choice." Theories that fall under the rubric of rational choice have certainly been unsuccessful at predicting mass upheavals. What they explain well is the rarity of popular uprisings.<sup>24</sup> The crucial insight of the rational-choice school is that an individual opposed to the incumbent regime is unlikely to participate in efforts to remove it, since the personal risk of joining a revolutionary movement could outweigh the personal benefit that would accrue were the movement a success. It is generally in a person's self-interest to let others make the sacrifices required to secure the regime's downfall, for a revolution constitutes a "collective good"—a good he can enjoy whether or not he has contributed to its realization. With most of the regime's opponents choosing to free ride, an upheaval may fail to materialize even if the potential revolutionaries constitute a substantial majority. Yet from time to time revolution does break out, and this presents a puzzle that the standard theory of rational choice cannot solve. The standard theory simply fails to make sense of why the first people to challenge the regime choose selflessly to gamble with their lives.<sup>25</sup>

With respect to the East European Revolution in particular, the standard theory illuminates why, for all their grievances, the nations of the region were remarkably quiescent for so many years. It does not explain why in 1989 their docility suddenly gave way to an explosive demand for change. For its part, the structuralist theory elucidates why the revolution broke out at a time when the Soviet Union was emitting increasingly convincing signals that it would not use force to try to preserve the East

<sup>24</sup> The seminal contribution is Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (1965; rev. ed., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>25</sup> This point is developed by Michael Taylor, "Rationality and Revolutionary Action," in Taylor, ed., *Rationality and Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 63–97. Taylor also offers an illuminating critique of structuralism.

European status quo. But it explains neither why the old order collapsed so suddenly in several countries at once nor why the events of 1989 out-distanced all expectations.

Neither school has come to terms with its predictive weaknesses. That granted, can the deficiencies in question be overcome by incorporating additional relationships into these theories? It would seem, on the basis of reasons developed below, that perfect predictability is an unachievable objective. The theory developed here accommodates some of the major features and implications of these two theories, with the added virtue, however, of illuminating why major revolutions come as a surprise and why, even so, they are quite easily explained *after the fact*.

Like all unanticipated revolutions, the East European Revolution is generating multitudes of retrospective explanations that draw attention to its diverse causes and warning signs. To cite just one example, an essay written shortly after the fall of the East German regime begins with a flashback to April 1989: two passengers on an East German train, mutual strangers, share with each other their negative feelings about the regime, within earshot of others—a highly uncommon event, because of the ubiquity of informants. This opening gives the impression that East Germany was *obviously* reaching its boiling point, although the rest of the essay makes clear that the East German uprising was in fact scarcely anticipated.<sup>26</sup> Like so much else now rolling off the presses, this essay leaves unexplained why events seen in retrospect as harbingers of an imminent upheaval were not seen as such before the actual revolution.

Not that signs noticed in retrospect are necessarily fabrications. The *availability heuristic*, a mental shortcut we use to compensate for our cognitive limitations, highlights information consistent with actual events at the expense of information inconsistent with them.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, events considered insignificant while the regime looked stable may suddenly gain enormous significance after it falls. Among all the events that are consistent with a particular outcome, those that fit into the models at our disposal will be the ones that attract attention. Thus, a structuralist will be predisposed to treat as significant the structural signs of the coming revolution. These signs need not be imaginary, but there is nothing in

<sup>26</sup> Edith Anderson, "Town Mice and Country Mice: The East German Revolution," in Brinton and Rinzler (fn. 11), 170–92.

<sup>27</sup> On the availability heuristic, see Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Availability: A Heuristic for Judging Frequency and Probability," *Cognitive Psychology* 5 (September 1973), 207–32. The biases that this heuristic imparts to the use of historical knowledge are discussed by Shelley E. Taylor, "The Availability Bias in Social Perception and Interaction," in Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, eds., *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 190–200.

the structuralist theory—or, for that matter, in the standard theory of rational choice—that explains why it is better at explanation than at prediction. This paradox is seldom appreciated, partly because the authors of retrospective accounts do not always concede *their own* bafflement. They generally write as though their favored theory shows the revolution to have been inevitable, seldom pausing to explain why, if this is so, they themselves had not offered unambiguous, unequivocal forecasts.

If one *bête noire* of the structuralist school is the rational-choice approach to the study of revolutions, another is the relative-deprivation approach. According to this third approach revolutions are propelled by economic disappointments, that is, by outcomes that fall short of expectations. If the consequent discontent becomes sufficiently widespread, the result is a revolt.<sup>28</sup> With respect to the major revolutions she investigates, Skocpol correctly observes that they began at times when levels of discontent were by historical standards not unusual. More evidence against the relative-deprivation theory comes from Charles Tilly and his associates, who find that in France the level of collective violence has been uncorrelated with the degree of mass discontent.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the relative-deprivation theory neither predicts nor explains. The reason is simple. While relative deprivation is doubtless a factor in every revolution in history, it is too common in politically stable societies to provide a complete explanation for every observed instability. By implication, to treat relative deprivation as an unmistakable sign of impending revolution is to subject oneself to a continuous string of alarms, mostly false.

### III. PREFERENCE FALSIFICATION AND REVOLUTIONARY BANDWAGONS

So mass discontent does not necessarily generate a popular uprising against the political status quo. To understand when it does, we need to identify the conditions under which individuals will display antagonism toward the regime under which they live. After all, a mass uprising results from multitudes of individual choices to participate in a movement for change; there is no actor named “the crowd” or “the opposition.”

<sup>28</sup> For two of the major contributions to this approach, see James C. Davies, “Toward a Theory of Revolution,” *American Sociological Review* 27 (February 1962), 5–19; and Ted R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

<sup>29</sup> David Snyder and Charles Tilly, “Hardship and Collective Violence in France, 1830 to 1960,” *American Sociological Review* 37 (October 1972), 520–32; and Charles Tilly, Louise Tilly, and Richard Tilly, *The Rebellious Century: 1830–1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975). For much additional evidence against the theory of relative deprivation, see Steven E. Finkel and James B. Rule, “Relative Deprivation and Related Psychological Theories of Civil Violence: A Critical Review,” in Louis Kriesberg, ed., *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1986), 9:47–69.

The model presented here is in agreement with the rational-choice school on this basic methodological point, although it departs in important ways from the standard fare in rational-choice modeling.

Consider a society whose members are indexed by  $i$ . Each individual member must choose whether to support the government in public or oppose it; depending on his public acts and statements, each person is perceived as either a friend of the government or an enemy, for the political status quo or against. In private, of course, a person may feel torn between the government and the opposition, seeing both advantages and disadvantages to the existing regime. I am thus distinguishing between an individual's *private preference* and *public preference*. The former is effectively fixed at any given instant, the latter a variable under his control. Insofar as his two preferences differ—that is, the preference he expresses in public diverges from that he holds in private—the individual is engaged in *preference falsification*.

Let  $S$  represent the size of the public opposition, expressed as a percentage of the population. Initially it is near 0, implying that the government commands almost unanimous public support. A revolution, as a mass-supported seizure of political power, may be treated as an enormous jump in  $S$ .

Now take a citizen who wants the government overthrown. The likely impact of his own public preference on the fate of the government is negligible: it is unlikely to be a decisive factor in whether the government stands or falls. But it may bring him personal rewards and impose on him personal punishments. If he chooses to oppose the government, for instance, he is likely to face persecution, though in the event the government falls his outspokenness may be rewarded handsomely. Does this mean that our individual will base his public preference solely on the potential rewards and punishments flowing from the two rival camps? Will his private antipathy to the regime play no role whatsoever in his decision? This does not seem reasonable, for history offers countless examples of brave individuals who stood up for a cause in the face of the severest pressures, including torture.

On what, then, will our disaffected individual's choice depend? I submit that it will depend on a trade-off between two payoffs, one external and the other internal.<sup>30</sup>

The external payoff to siding with the opposition consists of the just-discussed personal rewards and punishments. In net terms, this payoff is apt to become increasingly favorable (or increasingly less unfavorable)

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed analysis of this trade-off, see Timur Kuran, "Private and Public Preferences," *Economics and Philosophy* 6 (April 1990), 1–26.

with  $S$ . The larger  $S$ , the smaller the individual dissenter's chances of being persecuted for his identification with the opposition and the fewer hostile supporters of the government he has to face. The latter relationship reflects the fact that government supporters, even ones privately sympathetic to the opposition, participate in the persecution of the government's opponents, as part of their personal efforts to establish convincing progovernment credentials. This relationship implies that a rise in  $S$  leaves fewer people seeking to penalize members of the public opposition.

The internal payoff is rooted in the psychological cost of preference falsification. The suppression of one's wants entails a loss of personal autonomy, a sacrifice of personal integrity. It thus generates lasting discomfort, the more so the greater the lie. This relationship may be captured by postulating that person  $i$ 's internal payoff for supporting the opposition varies positively with his private preference,  $x^i$ . The higher  $x^i$ , the more costly he finds it to suppress his antigovernment feelings.

So  $i$ 's public preference depends on  $S$  and  $x^i$ . As the public opposition grows, with his private preference constant, there comes a point where his external cost of joining the opposition falls below his internal cost of preference falsification. This switching point may be called his *revolutionary threshold*,  $T^i$ . Since a threshold represents a value of  $S$ , it is a number between 0 and 100.

If  $x^i$  should rise,  $T^i$  will fall. In other words, if the individual becomes more sympathetic to the opposition, it will take a smaller public opposition to make him take a stand against the government. The same will be true if the government becomes less efficient, or the opposition becomes more efficient, at rewarding its supporters and punishing its rivals. In fact, anything that affects the relationship between  $S$  and the individual's external payoff for supporting the opposition will change his revolutionary threshold. Finally,  $T^i$  will fall if  $i$  develops a greater need to stand up and be counted, for the internal cost of preference falsification will then come to dominate the external benefit at a lower  $S$ .<sup>31</sup>

This simple framework offers a reason why a person may choose to voice a demand for change even when the price of dissent is very high and the chances of a successful uprising very low. If his private opposi-

<sup>31</sup> The theory outlined in this section is developed more fully in Timur Kuran, "Sparks and Prairie Fires: A Theory of Unanticipated Political Revolution," *Public Choice* 61 (April 1989), 41-74. A summary of the present formulation was delivered at the annual convention of the American Economic Association, Washington, D.C., December 28-30, 1990. This presentation appeared under the title "The East European Revolution of 1989: Is It Surprising That We Were Surprised?" in the *American Economic Review, Papers and Proceedings* 81 (May 1991), 121-25.

tion to the existing order is intense and/or his need for integrity is quite strong, the suffering he incurs for dissent may be outweighed by the satisfaction he derives from being true to himself. In every society, of course, there are people who go against the social order of the day. Joseph Schumpeter once observed that in capitalist societies this group is dominated by intellectuals. Their position as “onlookers” and “outsiders” with much time for deep reflection causes them to develop a “critical attitude” toward the status quo. And because of the high value they attach to self-expression, they are relatively unsusceptible to social pressures.<sup>32</sup> The same argument applies to noncapitalist societies. As a case in point, a disproportionately large share of the East European dissidents were intellectuals.

Returning to the general model, we can observe that individuals with different private preferences and psychological constitutions will have different revolutionary thresholds. Imagine a ten-person society featuring the *threshold sequence*

$$A = \{0, 20, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 100\}.$$

Person 1 ( $T^1 = 0$ ) supports the opposition regardless of its size, just as person 10 ( $T^{10} = 100$ ) always supports the government. The remaining eight people's preferences are sensitive to  $S$ : depending on its level, they opt for one camp or the other. For instance, person 5 ( $T^5 = 40$ ) supports the government if  $0 \leq S < 40$  but joins the opposition if  $40 \leq S \leq 100$ . Let us assume that the opposition consists initially of a single person, or 10 percent of the population, so  $S = 10$ . Because the nine other individuals have thresholds above 10, this  $S$  is self-sustaining; that is, it constitutes an *equilibrium*.

This equilibrium happens to be vulnerable to a minor change in  $A$ . Suppose that person 2 has an unpleasant encounter at some government ministry. Her alienation from the regime rises, pushing her threshold down from 20 to 10. The new threshold sequence is

$$A' = \{0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 100\}.$$

Person 2's new threshold happens to equal the existing  $S$  of 10, so she switches sides, and  $S$  becomes 20. Her move into the opposition takes the form of tossing an egg at the country's long-standing leader during a government-organized rally. The new  $S$  of 20 is not self-sustaining but self-augmenting, as it drives person 3 into the opposition. The higher  $S$  of 30 then triggers a fourth defection, raising  $S$  to 40, and this process

<sup>32</sup> Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 3d ed. (1950; reprint, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), chap. 13.

continues until  $S$  reaches 90—a new equilibrium. Now the first nine individuals are in opposition, with only the tenth supporting the government. A slight shift in one individual's threshold has thus generated a *revolutionary bandwagon*, an explosive growth in public opposition.<sup>33</sup>

Now consider the sequence

$$B = \{0, 20, 30, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 100\},$$

which differs from  $A$  only in its third element: 30 as opposed to 20. As in the previous illustration, let  $T^2$  fall from 20 to 10. The resulting sequence is

$$B' = \{0, 10, 30, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 100\}.$$

Once again, the incumbent equilibrium of 10 becomes unsustainable, and  $S$  rises to 20. But the opposition's growth stops there, for the new  $S$  is self-sustaining. Some government supporters privately enjoy the sight of the leader's egg-splattered face, but none follows the egg thrower into public opposition. We see that a minor variation in thresholds may drastically alter the effect of a given perturbation. And in particular, an event that causes a revolution in one setting may in a slightly different setting produce only a minor decline in the government's popularity.

Neither private preferences nor the corresponding thresholds are common knowledge. So a society can come to the brink of a revolution without anyone knowing this, not even those with the power to unleash it. In sequence  $A$ , for instance, person 2 need not recognize that she has the ability to set off a revolutionary bandwagon. Even if she senses the commonness of preference falsification, she simply cannot know whether the actual threshold sequence is  $A$  or  $B$ . Social psychologists use the term *pluralistic ignorance* to describe misperceptions concerning distributions of individual characteristics.<sup>34</sup> In principle, pluralistic ignorance can be mitigated through polls that accord individuals anonymity. But it is easier to offer people anonymity than to convince them that the preferences they reveal will remain anonymous and never be used against them. In any case, an outwardly popular government that knows preference falsification to be pervasive has no interest in publicizing the implied fra-

<sup>33</sup> Lucid analyses of bandwagon processes include Mark Granovetter, "Threshold Models of Collective Behavior," *American Journal of Sociology* 83 (May 1978), 1420–43; and Thomas C. Schelling, *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).

<sup>34</sup> Under the term *impression of universality*, the concept was introduced by Floyd H. Allport, *Social Psychology* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1924), 305–9. The term *pluralistic ignorance* was first used by Richard L. Schanck, "A Study of a Community and Its Groups and Institutions Conceived of as Behavior of Individuals," *Psychological Monographs* 43-2 (1932), 101.

gility of its support, because this might inspire the disaffected to bring their antigovernment feelings into the open. It has an incentive to discourage independent polling and discredit surveys that reveal unflattering information.

We have already seen that the threshold sequence is not fixed. Anything that affects the distribution of private preferences may alter it, for instance, an economic recession, contacts with other societies, or intergenerational replacement. But whatever the underlying reason, private preferences and, hence, the threshold sequence can move dramatically against the government without triggering a revolution. In the sequence

$$C = \{0, 20, 20, 20, 20, 20, 20, 20, 60, 100\}$$

the average threshold is 30, possibly because most people sympathize with the opposition. Yet  $S = 10$  remains an equilibrium. It is true, of course, that a revolution is more likely under  $C$  than under  $A$ .  $C$  features seven individuals with thresholds of 20,  $A$  only one. A ten-unit fall in any one of the seven thresholds would trigger a revolution.

The point remains that widespread disapproval of the government is not sufficient to mobilize large numbers for revolutionary action. Antigovernment feelings can certainly bring a revolution within the realm of possibility, but other conditions must come together to set it off. By the same token, a revolution may break out in a society where private preferences, and therefore individual thresholds, tend to be relatively unfavorable to the opposition. Reconsider the sequence  $A'$ , where the average threshold is 46, as opposed to 30 in  $C$ . Under  $A'$  public opposition darts from 10 to 90, whereas under  $C$  it remains stuck at 10. This simple comparison shows why the relative-deprivation theory of revolution has not held up under empirical testing. By treating the likelihood of revolution as the sum of the individual levels of discontent, the relative-deprivation theory overlooks the significance of the distribution of discontent. As our comparison between  $A'$  and  $C$  indicates, one sufficiently disaffected person with a threshold of 10 may do more for a revolution than seven individuals with thresholds of 20.

Imagine now that a superpower long committed to keeping the local government in power suddenly rescinds this commitment, declaring that it will cease meddling in the internal affairs of other countries. This is precisely the type of change to which the structuralist theory accords revolutionary significance. In the present framework, such a change will not necessarily ignite a revolution. The outcome depends on both the preexisting distribution of thresholds and the consequent shifts. Since the postulated change in international relations is likely to lower the ex-



pected cost of joining the opposition, people's thresholds are likely to fall. Let us say that every threshold between 10 and 90 drops by 10 units. If the preexisting threshold sequence were  $A$ ,  $B$ , or  $C$ , the result would be an explosion in  $S$  from 10 to 90. But suppose that it were

$$D = \{0, 30, 30, 30, 30, 30, 30, 30, 100\}.$$

The structural shock turns this sequence into

$$D' = \{0, 20, 20, 20, 20, 20, 20, 20, 100\}.$$

Fully four-fifths of the population is now willing to switch over to the opposition but *only if someone else goes first*. No one does, leaving  $S$  at 10.

Structural factors are thus part of the story, yet by no means the whole story. While they certainly affect the likelihood of revolution, they cannot possibly deliver infallible predictions. A single person's reaction to an event of global importance may make all the difference between a massive uprising and a *latent bandwagon* that never takes off. So to suggest, as the structuralists do, that revolutions are brought about by deep historical forces with individuals simply the passive bearers of these forces is to overlook the potentially crucial importance of individual characteristics of little significance in and of themselves. It is always a conjunction of factors, many of them intrinsically unimportant and thus unobserved, if not unobservable, that determines the flow of events. A major global event can produce drastically different outcomes in two settings that differ trivially. Structuralism and individualism are not rival and mutually incompatible approaches to the study of revolution, as Skocpol would have it. They are essential components of a single story.

We can now turn to the question of why with hindsight an unanticipated revolution may appear as the inevitable consequence of monumental forces for change. A successful revolution brings into the open long-repressed grievances. Moreover, people who were relatively content with the old regime embrace the new regime, and they are apt to attribute their former public preferences to fears of persecution.

Reconsider the threshold sequence

$$A' = \{0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 100\}.$$

The relatively high thresholds in  $A'$  are likely to be associated with private preferences more favorable to the government than to the opposition.<sup>35</sup> Person 9 ( $T^9 = 80$ ) is much more satisfied with the government than, say, person 3 ( $T^3 = 20$ ). As such she has little desire to join a move-

<sup>35</sup> Relatively high thresholds may also be associated with relatively great vulnerability to social pressure.

ment aimed at toppling it. Remember that public opposition settles at 90, she being the last to jump on the revolutionary bandwagon. The important point is this: person 9 changes her public preference only after the opposition snowballs into a crushing majority, making it imprudent to remain a government supporter.

Having made the switch, she has every reason to feign a long-standing antipathy to the toppled government. She will not admit that she yearns for the status quo ante, because this would contradict her new public preference. Nor will she say that her change of heart followed the government's collapse, because this might render her declared sympathy for the revolution unconvincing. She will claim that she has long had serious misgivings about the old order and has sympathized with the objectives of the opposition. An unintended effect of this distortion is to make it seem as though the toppled government enjoyed even less genuine support than it actually did.

This illusion is rooted in the very phenomenon responsible for making the revolution a surprise: preference falsification. Having misled everyone into seeing a revolution as highly unlikely, preference falsification now conceals the forces that were working against it. One of the consequences of postrevolutionary preference falsification is thus to make even less comprehensible why the revolution was unforeseen.

The historians of a revolution may appreciate the biases that afflict people's postrevolutionary accounts of their prerevolutionary dispositions without being able to measure the significance of these biases. Consider the sequence

$$C' = \{0, 10, 20, 20, 20, 20, 20, 20, 60, 100\}.$$

Like  $A'$ , this sequence drives  $S$  from 10 to 90, implying that nine out of ten individuals have an incentive to say that they despised the prerevolutionary regime. If thresholds below 50 reflect private support for a revolution, and those above 50 private satisfaction with the status quo, eight of the nine would be telling the truth, the one liar being person 9 ( $T^9 = 60$ ). It follows from the same assumption that four of the nine would be lying if the threshold sequence were  $A'$ . But once again, because thresholds are not public knowledge, historians may have difficulty determining whether the prerevolutionary sequence was  $A$  or  $C$ —or for that matter, whether the postrevolutionary sequence is  $A'$  or  $C'$ .

Before moving to the East European Revolution, it may be useful to comment on how the foregoing argument relates to three sources of controversy in the literature on revolutions: the continuity of social change, the power of the individual, and the significance of unorganized crowds.

The proposed theory treats continuous and discontinuous change as a single, unified process. Private preferences and the corresponding thresholds may change gradually over a long period during which public opposition is more or less stable. If the cumulative movement establishes a latent bandwagon, a minor event may then precipitate an abrupt and sharp break in the size of the public opposition. This is not to say that private preferences change *only* in small increments. A major blunder on the part of the government may suddenly turn private preferences against it.

Such a shift could also occur in response to an initial, possibly modest, increase in public opposition. The underlying logic was expressed beautifully by Alexis de Tocqueville: "Patiently endured so long as it seemed beyond redress, a grievance comes to appear intolerable once the possibility of removing it crosses men's minds."<sup>36</sup> In terms of our model, Tocqueville suggests that the threshold sequence is itself dependent on the size of the public opposition. If so, a revolutionary bandwagon may come about as the joint outcome of two mutually reinforcing trends: a fall in thresholds and a rise in public opposition. Imagine that public opposition rises sufficiently to convince those privately sympathetic to the government that a revolution might be in the making. This realization induces many of them to think about possible alternatives to the status quo. Their thinking starts a chain reaction through which private preferences shift swiftly and dramatically against the government. The consequent changes in the threshold sequence cause the revolutionary bandwagon to accelerate.

The theory depicts the individual as both powerless and potentially very powerful. The individual is powerless because a revolution requires the mobilization of large numbers, but he is also potentially very powerful because under the right circumstances he may set off a chain reaction that generates the necessary mobilization. Not that the individual can know precisely when his own choice can make a difference. Although he may sense that his chances of sparking a wildfire are unusually great, he can never be certain about the consequences of his own opposition. What is certain is that the incumbent regime will remain in place unless someone takes the lead in moving into the opposition.

As we saw in the previous section, the standard theory of rational choice depicts the potential revolutionary as paralyzed by the realization of his powerlessness. Many social thinkers who, like the present author, accept the logic of collective action have struggled with the task of explaining how mass mobilizations get started. One of the proposed expla-

<sup>36</sup> Tocqueville, *The Old Régime and the French Revolution* (1856), trans. Stuart Gilbert (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), 177.

nations rests on a cognitive illusion: the individual overestimates his personal political influence. Another invokes an ethical commitment: the individual feels compelled to do his fair share for the attainment of a jointly desired outcome.<sup>37</sup> The approach used here, which is not incompatible with these explanations, places the burden of sparking the mobilization process on the individual's need to be true to himself. This approach is consistent with the fact that revolutionary leaders tend to be surprised when their goals materialize. The cognitive-illusion explanation is not: people who challenge the government out of an overestimation of their personal ability to direct the course of history will not be surprised when their wishes come true. The approach of this essay is also consistent with the fact that some people risk their lives for a revolution even as the vast majority of the potential beneficiaries refrain from doing their own fair share.

Finally, the outlined theory accords organized pressure groups and unorganized crowds complementary roles in the overthrow of the government. Organized oppositions enhance the external payoff to dissent, both by providing the individual dissenter with a support network and by raising the likelihood of a successful revolution. They also help shatter the appearance of the invulnerability of the status quo, and through propaganda, they shift people's private preferences in favor of change. Charles Tilly is therefore right to draw attention to the structural and situational factors that govern a society's pattern of political organization.<sup>38</sup> But as Pamela Oliver warns, we must guard against overemphasizing the role of organization at the expense of the role of the unorganized crowd. A small difference in the resources at the disposal of an organized opposition may have a tremendous impact on the outcome of its efforts.<sup>39</sup> This observation makes perfect sense in the context of the theory developed here. Where a small pressure group fails to push a bandwagon into motion a *slightly better organized* or *slightly larger* one might.

#### IV. EAST EUROPEAN COMMUNISM AND THE WELLSPRING OF ITS STABILITY

Communist parties came to power in Russia, and then in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, with the promise that "scientific socialism" would pio-

<sup>37</sup> Each of these is developed by Steven E. Finkel, Edward N. Muller, and Karl-Dieter Opp, "Personal Influence, Collective Rationality, and Mass Political Action," *American Political Science Review* 83 (September 1989), 885-903.

<sup>38</sup> Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

<sup>39</sup> Oliver, "Bringing the Crowd Back In: The Nonorganizational Elements of Social Movements," in Louis Kriesberg, ed., *Research in Social Movements, Conflict and Change* (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1989): 11:1-30.

neer new dimensions of freedom, eliminate exploitation, vest political power in the masses, eradicate nationalism, and raise standards of living to unprecedented heights—all this, while the state was withering away. They did not deliver on any of these promises. Under their stewardship, communism came to symbolize repression, censorship, ethnic chauvinism, militarism, red tape, and economic backwardness.

The failures of communism prompted a tiny number of Soviet and East European citizens to criticize official policies and established institutions. Such dissidents expressed their frustrations through clandestine self-publications (*samizdat*) and writings published in the West (*tamizdat*). Given the chasm between the rhetoric of communism and its achievements, the existence of an opposition is easily understood. Less comprehensible is the rarity of public opposition—prior, that is, to 1989. The few uprisings that were crushed—notably, East Berlin in 1953, Hungary in 1956, and Czechoslovakia in 1968—are the exceptions that prove the rule. For most of several decades, most East Europeans displayed a remarkable tolerance for tyranny and inefficiency. They remained docile, submissive, and even outwardly supportive of the status quo.

This subservience is attributable partly to punishments meted out by the communist establishment to its actual and imagined opponents. In the heyday of communism a person speaking out against the leadership or in favor of some reform could expect to suffer harassment, lose his job, and face imprisonment—in short, he could expect to be denied the opportunity to lead a decent life. Even worse horrors befell millions of suspected opponents. Just think of the forced-labor camps of the Gulag Archipelago and of the liquidations carried out under the pretext of historical necessity. “We can only be right with and by the Party,” wrote a leading theoretician of communism, “for history has provided no other way of being in the right.”<sup>40</sup> Such thinking could, and did, serve to justify horrible crimes against nonconformists.

Yet official repression is only one factor in the endurance of communism. The system was sustained by a general willingness to support it in public: people routinely applauded speakers whose message they disliked, joined organizations whose mission they opposed, and signed defamatory letters against people they admired, among other manifestations of consent and accommodation. “The lie,” wrote the Russian novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn in the early 1970s, “has been incorporated into the state system as the vital link holding everything together,

<sup>40</sup> The words of Leon Trotsky, cited by Arendt (fn. 2), 307.

with billions of tiny fasteners, several dozen to each man.”<sup>41</sup> If people stopped lying, he asserted, communist rule would break down instantly. He then asked rhetorically, “What does it mean, *not to lie*?” It means “*not saying what you don’t think*, and that includes not whispering, not opening your mouth, not raising your hand, not casting your vote, not feigning a smile, not lending your presence, not standing up, and not cheering.”<sup>42</sup>

In “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel speaks of a greengrocer who places in his window, among the onions and carrots, the slogan “Workers of the World, Unite!” Why does the greengrocer do this, Havel wonders.

Is he genuinely enthusiastic about the idea of unity among the workers of the world? Is his enthusiasm so great that he feels an irrepressible impulse to acquaint the public with his ideals? Has he really given more than a moment’s thought to how such a unification might occur and what it would mean?

Havel’s answer is worth quoting at length:

The overwhelming majority of shopkeepers never think about the slogans they put in their windows, nor do they use them to express their real opinions. That poster was delivered to our greengrocer from the enterprise headquarters along with the onions and carrots. He put them all into the window simply because it has been done that way for years, because everyone does it, and because that is the way it has to be. If he were to refuse, there could be trouble. He could be reproached for not having the proper “decoration” in his window; someone might even accuse him of disloyalty. He does it because these things must be done if one is to get along in life. It is one of the thousands of details that guarantee him a relatively tranquil life in “harmony with society,” as they say.<sup>43</sup>

So our greengrocer puts up the assigned slogan to communicate not a social ideal but his preparedness to conform. And the reason the display conveys a message of submission is that every submissive greengrocer has exhibited the same slogan for years. By removing the poster—or worse, replacing it with one that reads “Workers of the World, Eat Onions and Carrots!”—our greengrocer would expose himself to the charge of subversion. He therefore displays the required slogan faithfully and fends off trouble. In the process, he reinforces the perception that society is solidly behind the Party. His own prudence thus becomes a factor in the willingness of other greengrocers to promote the unity of the world’s

<sup>41</sup> Solzhenitsyn, “The Smatterers” (1974), in Solzhenitsyn et al., *From under the Rubble*, trans. A. M. Brock et al. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975), 275.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 276; emphasis in original.

<sup>43</sup> Havel (fn. 9), 27–28.

workers. Moreover, it pressures farmers, miners, bus drivers, artists, journalists, and bureaucrats to continue doing and saying the things expected of *them*.

Efforts to prove one's loyalty to the political status quo often took more tragic forms than a greengrocer's display of a well-worn Marxist slogan. People tattled on each other. And they ostracized and vilified nonconformists who were saying or doing things that they admired. The Romanian dissident Norman Manea writes of authors who "persecuted their colleagues on the 'blacklist' with tireless, diabolical energy."<sup>44</sup> In the same vein, the Polish dissident Piotr Wierzbicki writes about a famous composer who went out of his way to alert the government to an anti-Soviet insinuation on the sleeve of a record by a Pole living abroad. The squealing composer knew that this information was likely to block the local performance of his fellow Pole's music. He did it to prove his loyalty to the regime—to earn, as it were, a certificate of normalcy.<sup>45</sup>

In 1977 a group of Czechoslovak intellectuals established a loose association, Charter 77, dedicated to the basic human rights that Czechoslovakia agreed to respect by signing the Helsinki accords of 1975.<sup>46</sup> The government responded by detaining the spokesmen of Charter 77 and launching a nationwide campaign against the association.<sup>47</sup> In the course of this campaign millions of ordinary citizens expressed their opposition to Charter 77 by signing statements of condemnation, sending hate letters to newspapers, and ostracizing its signatories. Many an opponent of Charter 77 did so in betrayal of his conscience.

It is true of course that some who participated in this campaign saw Charter 77 as a menacing organization bent on tarnishing Czechoslovakia's image abroad. And the tale-bearing Polish composer may well have had motives other than a desire to please the regime, for instance, jealousy or professional competition. But East Europeans turned against each other routinely even in the absence of such motives.

Let us return to the story of the greengrocer. Havel asks us to "imagine that one day something in our greengrocer snaps and he stops putting up the slogans." The greengrocer also "stops voting in elections he knows are a farce"; he "begins to say what he really thinks at political meetings"; and he "even finds the strength in himself to express solidar-

<sup>44</sup> Manea, "Romania: Three Lines with Commentary," in Brinton and Rinzler (fn. 11), 327.

<sup>45</sup> Wierzbicki, "A Treatise on Ticks" (1979), in Abraham Brumberg, ed., *Poland: Genesis of a Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1983), 205.

<sup>46</sup> The Charter 77 declaration is reproduced in Havel et al. (fn. 9), 217–21.

<sup>47</sup> See Timothy Garton Ash, *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe* (1983–89) (New York: Random House, 1989), esp. 61–70.

ity with those whom his conscience commands him to support.” In short, he makes “an attempt to *live within the truth*.”<sup>48</sup> Here are the likely consequences of this revolt:

[The greengrocer] will be relieved of his post as manager of the shop and transferred to the warehouse. His pay will be reduced. His hopes for a holiday in Bulgaria will evaporate. His children’s access to higher education will be threatened. His superiors will harass him and his fellow workers will wonder about him. Most of those who apply these sanctions, however, will not do so from any authentic inner conviction but simply under pressure from conditions, the same conditions that once pressured the greengrocer to display the official slogans. They will persecute the greengrocer either because it is expected of them, or to demonstrate their loyalty, or simply as part of the general panorama, to which belongs an awareness that this is how situations of this sort are dealt with, that this, in fact, is how things are always done, particularly if one is not to become suspect oneself.<sup>49</sup>

The brilliance of this vignette lies in its insights into the pressures that kept East Europeans outwardly loyal to their inefficient, tyrannical regimes. Official repression met with the approval of ordinary citizens and indeed was predicated on their complicity. By falsifying their preferences and helping to discipline dissenters, citizens jointly sustained a system that many considered abominable. According to Havel, the crucial “line of conflict” ran not between the Party and the people but “through each person,” for in one way or another everyone was “both a victim and a supporter of the system.”<sup>50</sup>

The same idea found vivid expression in a banner hung above the altar in an East German church: “I am Cain *and* Abel.”<sup>51</sup> The implied intrapersonal conflict is rooted of course in the clash between the individual’s drive to exercise autonomy and his need for social acceptance. Until 1989 most East Europeans tended to resolve this chronic clash in favor of social acceptance. By thus avoiding an open battle with communism, they acquiesced to battle silently with themselves. In the process, most achieved a measure of outer security, though at the expense of inner peace.

Not that communist rule managed to do away altogether with the human propensity to protest. As Wierzbicki points out, newspapers received letters of complaint in abundance—about shabby housing, the neglected grave of some poet or other, and the sloppily painted fence of a

<sup>48</sup> Havel (fn. 9), 39; emphasis in original.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>51</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, “Eastern Europe: The Year of Truth,” *New York Review of Books*, February 15, 1990, p. 18; emphasis in original.



children's playground. Yet protesters tended to stay within a Party-defined zone of acceptability: they refrained from probing too deeply into issues and avoided challenging communism itself. A schoolteacher writing furious letters about a defective appliance would not bring herself to blame the system that produces useless appliances. Nor would she sign a letter expressing solidarity with dissidents or join a demonstration for freedom of speech.<sup>52</sup>

The typical East European feigned opposition to the few dissidents, though in private he applauded their mission. Havel suggests that this admiration was coupled with a resentment: people who lacked the courage to be true to themselves felt threatened by displays of integrity on the part of others. They thus treated open defiance "as an abnormality, as arrogance, as an attack on themselves, as a form of dropping out of society."<sup>53</sup> If it is true that the "iron in the soul" of another reminded a conformist of the lack of iron in his own, this would have served as an additional obstacle to overt opposition.<sup>54</sup>

Another such obstacle was pluralistic ignorance: people alienated from the communist regime did not know how widely their alienation was shared. They could sense the repressed discontent of their conformist relatives and close friends; they could observe the hardships in the lives of their fellow citizens; and they could intuit that past uprisings would not have occurred in the absence of substantial discontent. Still, they lacked reliable, current information on how many of their fellow citizens favored a change in regime. The government-controlled press exploited this ignorance by stressing the "unity of socialist society" and its "solidarity in supporting the Party." Insofar as such propaganda led potential revolutionaries to underestimate the prevalence of discontent, it weakened their incentives to join the minuscule opposition.

Governments throughout history have recognized the significance of preference falsification and out of self-interest have tried to keep themselves informed about the private preferences of their constituents. Louis XIV told his heir that "the art of governing" consists in "knowing the real thoughts of all the princes in Europe, knowing everything that people try to conceal from us, their secrets, and keeping close watch over them."<sup>55</sup> So it is that the communist governments of Eastern Europe conducted numerous surveys to find out the true thoughts and feelings

<sup>52</sup> Wierzbicki (fn. 45), 206–7.

<sup>53</sup> Havel (fn. 9), 37.

<sup>54</sup> The metaphor belongs to Barrington Moore, Jr., *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (White Plains, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1978).

<sup>55</sup> Cited by Norbert Elias, *Power and Civility* (1939), trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 197.

of their subjects. If the fact that they kept the results secret is any indication, these were not entirely flattering to them or their policies. Information for publication "was checked beforehand and given the appropriate interpretation," to keep it from emboldening the regime's declared and potential opponents.<sup>56</sup>

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that *all* East European supporters of communist rule were privately opposed to the status quo. Some benefited handsomely from the system, and others felt threatened by major reform. Nor did those who became conscious of the failures of communism necessarily lose faith in official ideals. Even leading dissidents remained sympathetic to central planning and collective ownership and ever suspicious of the free-enterprise system.<sup>57</sup> By and large, they felt that communism was betrayed by self-serving leaders, not that it was inherently unworkable.

These observations are consistent with opinion polls of East Europeans traveling abroad conducted by Western organizations in the 1970s and early 1980s. With remarkable consistency and for each nation, the data showed that in free elections offering a full spectrum of choices, including a Democratic Socialist Party and a Christian Democratic Party, the Communist Party would receive at most a tenth of the vote, and the socialists would invariably be the winners.<sup>58</sup>

Further systematic evidence is contained in surveys conducted from 1970 onward for the benefit of the leadership by the Central Institute for Youth Development in Leipzig. Now being declassified, these surveys suggest that until the mid-1980s most East Germans accepted the official goals of socialism. In 1983, 46 percent of a sample of trade school students endorsed the statement "I am a devoted citizen of the German Democratic Republic," whereas 45 percent endorsed it with reservations and only 9 percent rejected it. And in 1984, 50 percent agreed that "socialism will triumph throughout the world," whereas 42 percent agreed with reservations and 8 percent disagreed. Between 1970 and 1985, the results showed little variation.<sup>59</sup> They may, of course, have been based on a

<sup>56</sup> Jiří Otava, "Public Opinion Research in Czechoslovakia," *Social Research* 55 (Spring–Summer 1988), 249. Every issue of the Czechoslovak government's official bulletin on public opinion stated: "We remind all researchers that this bulletin is not meant for the public, which means not even for your friends and acquaintances, but serves exclusively as internal material for poll-takers and those who collaborate with us" (p. 251 n. 2).

<sup>57</sup> See Vladimir Tismaneanu, *The Crisis of Marxist Ideology in Eastern Europe: The Poverty of Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1988), esp. chap. 4.

<sup>58</sup> Henry O. Hart, "The Tables Turned: If East Europeans Could Vote," *Public Opinion* 6 (October–November 1983), 53–57. The surveys reported by Hart cover Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria.

<sup>59</sup> "Daten des Zentralinstituts für Jugendforschung Leipzig" (Mimeograph), Tables 1 and 2. These tables were compiled by Walter Friedrich, the director of the institute, and distrib-

flawed methodology, as was much public opinion research done in Eastern Europe. But, as we shall see later, it is highly significant that after 1985 this same methodology registered a sustained deterioration both in the citizenry's attachment to the regime and in its faith in socialism.

It thus appears that while the East Europeans overwhelmingly disliked the regimes under which they were living, they were much less troubled by the principles of socialism—at least until the mid-1980s. To make sense of this finding, we need to touch on the cognitive implications of preference falsification. Disaffected citizens choosing to conform to the regime's demands typically paid lip service to official goals, used Marxist jargon, and made excuses for communism's shortcomings by pointing to the ostensibly worse failures of capitalism. In the process, they unavoidably kept their fellow citizens uninformed about those of their private beliefs that were inimical to the status quo. Worse, they knowingly exposed one another to false facts and misleading arguments. In short, they distorted public discourse. Since public discourse influences what is noticed and how events are interpreted, this distortion undoubtedly affected the evolution of East European private preferences. East Europeans subjected from early childhood to predictions of the imminent demise of capitalism and to theories of the incontrovertible superiority of communism must have become more or less conditioned to think in Marxist terms, developing some mental resistance to the fundamental flaws of their social order.<sup>60</sup>

If this reasoning is correct, Marxist discourse would also have blunted the ability of East Europeans to articulate an alternative economic order. Vladimir Shlapentokh points to a paradox here. The socialist worker mistrusts the market order, even though he obtains his treasured blue jeans through the only free market to which he has access—the *black* market. Likewise, the enterprise manager who turns regularly to the underground economy for vital spare parts dreads economic liberalization. Shlapentokh ascribes such inconsistencies to a disjunction between the “pragmatic” and “theoretical” layers of the individual mind.<sup>61</sup>

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uted to the participants at a conference held in Ladenburg in February 1991, under the auspices of the Gottlieb Daimler and Karl Benz Foundation. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann brought the document to my attention; John Ahouse translated it into English.

<sup>60</sup> For a fuller argument on how preference falsification distorts public discourse and how, in turn, this distortion warps the evolution of people's private preferences, see Timur Kuran, “The Role of Deception in Political Competition,” in Albert Breton et al., eds., *The Competitive State* (Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff, 1990), 71–95.

<sup>61</sup> Though Shlapentokh develops the argument with respect to the Soviet Union, it applies also to Eastern Europe. See Shlapentokh, *Soviet Public Opinion and Ideology: Mythology and Pragmatism in Interaction* (New York: Praeger, 1986); and idem, *Public and Private Life of the Soviet People: Changing Values in Post-Stalin Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Known in cognitive psychology as *mental partitioning*, this phenomenon is an inevitable consequence of the mind's limitations in receiving, storing, retrieving, and processing information. People are simply unable to incorporate into a single, comprehensive model the multitudes of variables and relationships that bear on their happiness; they thus ignore many interconnections and treat closely related phenomena as unrelated.<sup>62</sup>

For our purposes, the important implication is this: an East European confronted daily with communism's shortcomings would not necessarily have taken them as a sign of the unworkability of the system. He could easily have turned against individual functionaries without losing faith in the system in which they operated. Some East Europeans did of course recognize that specific shortcomings were part of a general pattern of failure. Many were intellectuals with much time to think and thus to make the mental connections necessary for identifying the system's fundamental flaws. But many others did not make these connections, partly because the prevailing public discourse provided no help.

So processes rooted in preference falsification kept private opposition to communism far from unanimous. This does not negate the fact that vast numbers remained outwardly loyal to communist rule primarily out of fear. But for widespread preference falsification, the communist regimes of Eastern Europe would have faced severe public opposition, very possibly collapsing before 1989. In view of its profound impact on both private and public sentiment, preference falsification may be characterized as the wellspring of the communist system's stability.

## V. THE REVOLUTION

The foregoing argument has two immediate implications. First, the regimes of Eastern Europe were substantially more vulnerable than the subservience and quiescence of their populations made them seem. Millions were prepared to stand up in defiance if ever they sensed that this was sufficiently safe. The people's solidarity with their leaders would then have been exposed as illusory, stripping the veneer of legitimacy from the communist monopoly on power. Second, even the support of those genuinely sympathetic to the status quo was rather thin. Though many saw no alternative to socialism, their many grievances predisposed them to the promise of fundamental change. Were public discourse

<sup>62</sup> See John H. Holland et al., *Induction: Processes of Inference, Learning, and Discovery* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986); and Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "The Framing of Decisions and the Rationality of Choice," *Science* 211 (January 1981), 453–58.

somehow to turn against socialism, they would probably awaken to the possibility that their lives could be improved.

But what would catalyze the process of revolutionary mobilization? With hindsight it appears that the push came from the Soviet Union. In the mid-1980s festering economic problems, until then officially denied, convinced the top Soviet leadership to call for *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (public openness). Repressed grievances burst into the open, including dissatisfaction with communist rule itself. And with Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to the helm in 1985, the Soviet Union abandoned its long-standing policy of confrontation with the West, to seek accommodation and cooperation.<sup>63</sup> In Eastern Europe these changes kindled hopes of greater independence and meaningful social reform.

Lest it appear that these developments provided a clear signal of the coming revolution, remember that Havel dismissed a Czechoslovak crowd's jubilation over Gorbachev as a sign of naïveté. He was hardly alone in his pessimism. Even if Gorbachev wanted to liberate Eastern Europe, a popular argument went, it was anything but obvious that he could. Surely, the military and hard-line conservatives would insist on retaining the Soviet Union's strategic buffer against an attack from the West.

Nor was this the only obstacle to liberation. Economic and ethnic tensions within the Soviet Union could provide the pretext for a conservative coup. There was always the precedent of Khrushchev, toppled in 1964. About the time that Havel was exuding pessimism, a joke was making the rounds in Prague: "What is the difference between Gorbachev and Dubček [the deposed leader of the 1968 Prague Spring]?" The answer: "None—except Gorbachev doesn't know it yet."<sup>64</sup> Significantly, in the fall of 1989 Moscow was rife with rumors of an impending coup.<sup>65</sup> Some observers expected Gorbachev to survive but only by reversing course and becoming increasingly repressive.<sup>66</sup> An old Soviet joke expresses the underlying thinking. Stalin leaves his heirs in the Party two envelopes. One is labeled, "In case of trouble, open this." Trouble arises and the envelope is opened ceremoniously: "Blame me."

<sup>63</sup> For details, see Robert C. Tucker, *Political Culture and Leadership in Soviet Russia: From Lenin to Gorbachev* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), chap. 7.

<sup>64</sup> *Economist*, July 18, 1987, p. 45.

<sup>65</sup> Z [anonymous], "To the Stalin Mausoleum," *Daedalus* 119 (Winter 1990), 332.

<sup>66</sup> With the revolution, the notion that Gorbachev would turn to the army and the KGB in a bid to stay in power lost plausibility. It regained plausibility in late 1990 with the resignation of his foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, who publicly accused Gorbachev of plotting with hard-liners to create a repressive dictatorship.

The other envelope is labeled, "In case of more trouble, open this." More trouble comes and the second envelope is opened: "Do as I did."<sup>67</sup>

In support of their prediction that the conservative elements in the leadership would prevail sooner or later, pessimists frequently invoked the conservatism of the Soviet people. In a widely discussed 1988 article, for instance, a Russian social scientist argued that seven decades of bureaucratic regimentation had suppressed individual creativity, reorienting the "Soviet value system away from revolutionary transformation to conservative immobility." Communism had quashed the very personal qualities on which the reformists were counting.<sup>68</sup> In June 1989 another Soviet observer would confess: "For three years I have tried to find out whether or not there is mass support for *perestroika*, and now I feel I can conclude that it does not exist." He blamed not only the individual citizen's fear of change but also the Soviet ethic that identifies social justice with economic equality.<sup>69</sup> The upshot of such comments, to which scores more from diverse sources could be added, was that Soviet citizens tended to be deeply suspicious of Gorbachev's intentions. Many commentators inferred that Gorbachev's reforms were doomed, reasoning that he could not rely on the masses for protection against a conservative challenger.

As Gorbachev was trying to restructure the Soviet Union, Poland was testing the limits of its freedom from Moscow. The struggle to legalize Solidarity had already given the country a taste of pluralism, and government censorship was being relaxed in fits and starts. Everyone recognized that this softening enjoyed Gorbachev's approval. Yet few informed people put much faith in Gorbachev's ability to push the liberation of Eastern Europe substantially forward, and once again it was not clear that he intended to try. "Dissidents throughout Europe," wrote the *Economist* in mid-1987, sound "sceptical" when talking about Gorbachev. "This is not because they question [his] reforming zeal. It is simply that many thinking people in Eastern Europe have come to believe that real change in Communist countries cannot be imposed from the top—or from outside—but must emerge from below."<sup>70</sup> Plenty of events lent credence to this reasoning. For instance, Gorbachev did not prevent

<sup>67</sup> Recorded by Daniel Bell, "As We Go into the Nineties: Some Outlines of the Twenty-first Century," *Dissent* 37 (Spring 1990), 173.

<sup>68</sup> Igor Kon, "The Psychology of Social Inertia" (1988), *Social Sciences* 20, no. 1 (1989), 60–74.

<sup>69</sup> Gennadii Batyagin, TASS, June 28, 1989, quoted by Elizabeth Teague, "Perestroika and the Soviet Worker," *Government and Opposition* 25 (Spring 1990), 192.

<sup>70</sup> *Economist*, July 18, 1987, p. 45.

the East German regime from falsifying the results of local elections held in the spring of 1989 or from endorsing China's massacre at Tiananmen Square that summer. Nor did he keep the East German regime from using force to disperse small demonstrations against these two acts.<sup>71</sup>

In sum, prior to the actual revolution it was not at all clear that the Soviet Union would sit back if its six Warsaw Pact allies tried to overthrow their communist regimes. Statements, events, and trends that in retrospect appear as unmistakable signs of an explosion in the making coexisted with many signs that pointed in the direction of inertia and continued stability. Some of Gorbachev's actions did indeed suggest that he wanted to institute fundamental reforms in many areas, including the Soviet Union's relationship with its East European satellites. But there were many reasons to expect his efforts to end in failure.

Yet since the revolution it has seemed as though Gorbachev *engineered* the liberation of Eastern Europe. In fact, he was a master at putting the best face on events that had pushed past him. In the fall of 1989 there were many reports that events were going much further and/or faster than Gorbachev wanted. He was reportedly willing to permit moves toward democracy, provided the communists were not humiliated and Eastern Europe's military ties to the Soviet Union were preserved. And like leaders in Washington, Paris, Bonn, and elsewhere, he was reluctant to support anything that might disturb Europe's hard-won peace. But when the peoples of Eastern Europe grabbed political power, pushed the communists aside, and proclaimed their intention to leave the Warsaw Pact, Gorbachev just accepted reality and gave his blessing to events generated by forces beyond his control. One is reminded of the horseman who, thrown from his horse, explains with a smile that he has "dismounted."

The point remains that the Soviet reform movement fueled expectations of a freer Eastern Europe, reducing for growing numbers the perceived risk of challenging the status quo. In terms of the model described in Section III, the movement lowered the revolutionary thresholds of East Europeans, making it increasingly easy to set in motion a revolutionary bandwagon. But no one could see that a revolution was in the making, not even the Soviet leader whose moves were helping to establish the still-latent bandwagon.

Recall that revolutionary thresholds are influenced also by people's private preferences. Since private preferences are governed to a considerable extent by public discourse, the dissent generated by Soviet glasnost

<sup>71</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, "Germany Unbound," *New York Review of Books*, November 22, 1990, p. 12.

probably pushed the private preferences of East Europeans against communism and communist rule. The East German surveys discussed above provide dramatic evidence to this effect. They show that after 1985 East German attachment to socialism steadily deteriorated. By October 1989 only 15 percent of the surveyed trade school students endorsed the statement "I am a devoted citizen of the German Democratic Republic," down from 46 percent in 1983. Fully 60 percent endorsed it with reservations and 25 percent rejected it. In the same month as few as 3 percent continued to believe that "socialism will triumph throughout the world," down from 50 percent in 1984. Just 27 percent agreed with reservations and a whopping 70 percent disagreed.<sup>72</sup> The contrast between the figures for 1989 and those for 1983–84 is striking. It points to a massive rise in discontent in the second half of the decade, a rise that must have lowered the revolutionary thresholds of millions of individual East Germans.

What specific events set the revolutionary bandwagon in motion? One must recognize that attempting to answer this question is akin to trying to identify the spark that ignited a forest fire or the cough responsible for a flu epidemic. There were many turning points in the East European Revolution, any one of which might have derailed it.

One turning point came in early October, when East German officials refused to carry out Party leader Honecker's order to open fire on street demonstrators. On October 7 Gorbachev was in Berlin for celebrations marking the fortieth anniversary of the German Democratic Republic. With scores of foreign reporters looking on, crowds took to the streets, chanting, "Gorby! Gorby!" And the police clubs went into action. West German television immediately played these events back to the rest of East Germany. The scenes alerted disgruntled citizens in every corner of the country to the pervasiveness of discontent, while the government's weak response revealed its vulnerability. A peaceful protest broke out in Leipzig on October 9. Honecker ordered the regional Party secretary to block the demonstration, by force if necessary. But bloodshed was averted when Egon Krenz, a Politburo member in charge of security, flew to Leipzig and encouraged the security forces to show restraint. Local leaders—some of whom had already appealed for restraint—accepted this contravention of Honecker's order, and tens of thousands marched without interference. Sensing the shifting political winds, more and more East Germans throughout the country took to the streets. The East German uprising was now in full swing. As the regime tried to stem the tide through a string of concessions, the swelling crowds began to

<sup>72</sup> "Daten des Zentralinstituts für Jugendforschung Leipzig" (fn. 59), Tables 1 and 2.



make increasingly bold demands. Within a month the Berlin Wall would be breached, and in less than a year the German Democratic Republic would become part of a unified, democratic Germany.<sup>73</sup>

Another turning point came on October 25, during Gorbachev's state visit to Finland. Two months earlier a Solidarity official had formed Poland's first noncommunist government since the 1940s, following the Communist Party's stunning defeat at the polls. A legislative deputy to Gorbachev had declined detailed comment on the grounds that the developments were a domestic matter for the Poles.<sup>74</sup> The communists were in retreat in Hungary, too. In meetings with dissident groups the Hungarian Communist Party had endorsed free parliamentary elections. Then, in the belief that its candidates would do poorly running under the banner of communism, it had transformed itself into the Hungarian Socialist Party.<sup>75</sup> This was the first time that a ruling communist party had formally abandoned communism. With the world wondering whether the Soviet Union had reached the limits of its tolerance, Gorbachev declared in Finland that his country had no moral or political right to interfere in the affairs of its East European neighbors. Defining this position as "the Sinatra doctrine," his spokesman jokingly asked reporters whether they knew the Frank Sinatra song "I Did It My Way." He went on to say that "Hungary and Poland are doing it their way." Using the Western term for the previous Soviet policy of armed intervention to keep the governments of the Warsaw Pact in communist hands, he added, "I think the Brezhnev doctrine is dead."<sup>76</sup> Coming on the heels of major communist retreats in Poland and Hungary, these comments offered yet another indication that Gorbachev would not try to silence East European dissent.

If one effect of this signal was to embolden the opposition movements of Eastern Europe, another must have been to discourage the governments of Eastern Europe from resorting to violence unilaterally. This is not to say that Gorbachev enunciated his Sinatra doctrine with the intention of encouraging East European oppositions to grab for power. Nor is it to say that the revolution would have petered out in the absence of this move. By the time Gorbachev renounced the Soviet Union's right to intervene, opposition movements in Poland, East Germany, and Hungary already commanded mass support, and it is unlikely that anything

<sup>73</sup> This account draws on Ash (fn. 19); Anderson (fn. 26); and the *New York Times* reports compiled in Gwertzman and Kaufman (fn. 1), 158–60, 166–84, 216–22.

<sup>74</sup> *New York Times*, August 18, 1989, p. 1.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, October 8, 1989, p. 1. For a fuller account of the transformation, see Abel (fn. 14), chap. 2.

<sup>76</sup> *New York Times*, October 26, 1989, p. 1.

short of massive brutality would have broken their momentum and restored the status quo ante. Nonetheless, some incumbent communist leaders were seriously considering a military solution, and the proclamation of the Sinatra doctrine may well have tipped the balance against the use of force. Had even one East European government resorted to force at this stage, the result may well have been a series of bloody and protracted civil wars.

Just as we cannot be certain that a delay in announcing the new Soviet doctrine would have altered the course of history, we will never know whether the contravention of Honecker's order to shoot had a significant impact on the subsequent flow of events. What can be said is this: had Honecker's subordinates enforced his order, the growth of the opposition would have slowed, and later demonstrations would probably not have stayed peaceful. The same historical significance can be attributed to the restraint shown by the individual soldiers on duty during the demonstration and by the individual demonstrators. In the tense atmosphere of the demonstration a shot fired in panic or a stone thrown in excitement could have sparked a violent confrontation. It was an extraordinary conjunction of individual decisions that kept the uprising peaceful and prevented the revolution from being sidetracked.

The success of antigovernment demonstrations in one country inspired demonstrations elsewhere. In early November, Sofia was shaken by its first demonstration in four decades as several thousand Bulgarians marched on the National Assembly. Within a week, on the very day throngs broke through the Berlin Wall, Todor Zhivkov's thirty-five-year leadership came to an end, and his successor began talking of radical reforms.

Up to that time Czechoslovakia's communist government had yielded little to its own opposition. Conscious of developments elsewhere, it had simply promised economic reforms and made minor concessions on travel and religion.<sup>77</sup> These retreats encouraged the swelling crowds to ask for more. On November 24, just hours after Alexander Dubček addressed a crowd of 350,000 in his first public speech since 1968, the Communist Party declared a shake-up in the leadership, only to face a much larger rally of people shouting, "Shame! Shame! Shame!" The new government tried to placate the demonstrators by vowing to punish the commandant of the paramilitary forces that had roughed up protestors a week earlier. Unimpressed, the opposition leaders labeled the announced changes "cosmetic" and promised to redouble their pressure. The success

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, November 16, 1989, p. 1.

of the general strike they called for November 27 led the Communist Party to capitulate within a matter of hours to their major demands, including an end to its monopoly on political power.<sup>78</sup> “Not since the Paris crowd discovered that the dreaded Bastille contained only a handful of prisoners and a few terrified soldiers has a citadel fallen with such ease,” wrote the *Economist* a few days later. “They just had to say boo.”<sup>79</sup>

This brings us back, for one last time, to Havel’s brilliant 1979 essay. He predicted there that when the greengrocers decided they had had enough, communism would fall like a house of cards. So it turned out: when the masses took to the streets, the support for the Czechoslovak government just vanished. The mobilization process followed the patterns of East Germany and Bulgaria. Emboldened by signals from the Soviet Union and the successes of opposition movements in neighboring countries, a few thousand people stood up in defiance, joining the tiny core of long-persecuted activists. In so doing they encouraged additional citizens to drop their masks, which then impelled more onlookers to jump in. Before long fear changed sides: where people had been afraid to oppose the regime, they came to fear being caught defending it. Party members rushed to burn their cards, asserting they had always been reformists at heart. Top officials, sensing that they might be made to pay for standing in the way of change and for any violence, hastened to accept the opposition’s demands, only to be confronted with bolder ones yet.

Had the civilian leadership or the top brass attempted to resist the opposition, the transfer of power would not have been so swift, and certainly not so peaceful. One of the most remarkable aspects of the East European Revolution is that, with the partial exception of Romania, the security forces and the bureaucracy just melted away in the face of growing public opposition. Not only did state officials shy away from putting up a fight, but many crossed over to the opposition as a transfer of power appeared increasingly likely. This is highly significant, for a defection from the inner establishment is an unusually good indicator of the prevailing political winds. A Politburo member distancing himself from the Party leader does more to expose the regime’s vulnerability than a greengrocer who stops displaying the obligatory Marxist slogan. In turn, a defiant greengrocer does more harm to the regime’s image than does an obstreperous prisoner in solitary confinement.

<sup>78</sup> For an eyewitness account of these events, see Timothy Garton Ash, “The Revolution of the Magic Lantern,” *New York Review of Books*, January 18, 1990, 42–51. See also Abel (fn. 14), chap. 3.

<sup>79</sup> *Economist*, December 2, 1989, p. 55.

In the simple model of Section III the perceived strength of the public opposition is measured by  $S$ , the share of society publicly in opposition. This variable treats all individuals equally: with ten individuals, each individual carries a weight of 10 percent. But in reality, as I have argued, members of society differ in their contributions to the perceived strength of the opposition. So a more realistic measure of perceived strength would be some *unequally weighted* indicator of public opposition, where the weights correlate with levels of relative influence. Such a weighted measure would assign a Politburo member more weight than a greengrocer, and the latter more weight than a nameless prisoner. Were we to introduce this refinement into our model, the central argument would remain unaffected: with public preferences still interdependent, there would remain the possibility of a latent, unobserved bandwagon.<sup>80</sup> My reason for abstracting from this refinement in Section III was to keep the presentation simple.

Some of the officials who distanced themselves from the Party or even moved into the opposition as the uprisings took off may at heart have disliked the communist social order. Many others undoubtedly acted for opportunistic reasons rather than out of conviction. Sensing the imminent collapse of the old order, they abandoned it in hopes of finding a place in the order about to be born. A few chose to resist, but the speed of the anticommunist mobilization left most of them with insufficient time to plan and execute a coordinated response. Had the mobilization been slower, they might well have managed to mount a credible, effective response.<sup>81</sup>

Timothy Garton Ash, an eyewitness to the mobilizations in Hungary, Poland, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia, characterizes 1989 as Eastern Europe's "year of truth."<sup>82</sup> This designation is accurate insofar as it captures the end of feigned support for communism. But it conceals the push the revolution got from preference falsification on the part of those who sympathized with the status quo. As noncommunists threw off their masks in joy and relief, many genuine communists slipped on masks of their own—masks depicting them as the helpless functionaries of a repressive system, as former preference falsifiers thrilled to be speaking their minds after years of silent resentment. Yet Ash's label is meaningful in another sense as well. The flowering of anticommunist discourse has

<sup>80</sup> For a demonstration, see Kuran (fn. 31).

<sup>81</sup> The pace of events was undoubtedly a key factor also in the failure of conservative groups in the Soviet Union to block Eastern Europe's liberation. Had events proceeded more slowly, they might have had time to oust Gorbachev and order the Red Army into action.

<sup>82</sup> Ash (fn. 51).

exposed the official ideology more clearly than ever before as a heap of sophistry, distortion, and myth. It has awakened millions of dormant minds, confronting citizens resigned to the status quo with the conflicts between the pragmatic and theoretical layers of their beliefs. This is to say neither that the thoughts of every East European are now internally consistent nor that Marxist thinking has ceased. Rather, it is to suggest that the transformation of public discourse has opened many to new possibilities.

In the days following the fall of Czechoslovakia's communist regime, a banner in Prague read: "Poland—10 years, Hungary—10 months, East Germany—10 weeks, Czechoslovakia—10 days."<sup>83</sup> The implied acceleration reflects the fact that each successful challenge to communism lowered the perceived risk of dissent in the countries still under communist rule. In terms of our model, as revolutionary thresholds in neighboring countries fell, the revolution became increasingly contagious.

Had this banner been prepared a few weeks later, it might have added "Romania—10 hours." As the Czechoslovak uprising neared its climax, the executive committee of the Romanian Communist Party was busy reelecting Nicolae Ceaușescu as president and interrupting his acceptance speech with standing ovations. Three weeks later protests broke out in the western provinces, but they were brutally put down by the security forces. Confident of his ability to prevent a replay of the events that had brought down other communist regimes, Ceaușescu left for a state visit to Iran, but the protests intensified. Upon his return he organized a rally to denounce the "counterrevolutionaries," but when he started to speak he was booed. Television broadcast the look of shock on his face, and the Romanian revolt was on. The consequent change of regime turned out to be bloodier than the previous five, because the security forces responsible for the earlier massacre resisted the revolution. They caused hundreds of deaths before they were beaten by the army. Ceaușescu tried to escape but he was caught and summarily executed.<sup>84</sup>

Yet again, the world watched a nation jump with little warning from quiescence and subservience to turbulence and defiance. As the year went out, commentators were still marveling at the speed with which the political landscape of Eastern Europe had changed. Long-persecuted dissidents now occupied high government positions. In Czechoslovakia, for instance, Havel was president, Dubček, chairman of the Federal As-

<sup>83</sup> "Czechoslovakia: The Velvet Revolution," *Uncaptive Minds* 3 (January–February 1990), 11.

<sup>84</sup> For the *New York Times* reports of these events, see Gwertzman and Kaufman (fn. 1), 332–39.

sembly, and Jiří Dienstbier (a Charter 77 signatory serving time as a coal stoker), foreign minister. All six countries began planning free elections and committed themselves to economic liberalization. Some even moved to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact.

## VI. THE PREDICTABILITY OF UNPREDICTABILITY

Unexpected as they were, these developments now seem as though they could easily have been predicted. Was it not obvious that the economic failures of communism had sown the seeds of a massive revolt? Was it not self-evident that the East Europeans were just waiting for an opportunity to topple their despised dictators? Did not the severe domestic problems of the Soviet Union necessitate its withdrawal from Eastern Europe, to concentrate its resources on economic reforms? Retrospective accounts of 1989 offer a panoply of such reasons why the East European Revolution was inevitable. "It is no accident that Mikhail Gorbachev declined to intervene," writes one commentator<sup>85</sup>—this, in a volume peppered with comments on how 1989 surprised one and all.

This essay has shown that the warning signs of the revolution remained cloudy until it was all over. Moreover, the unobservability of private preferences and revolutionary thresholds concealed the latent bandwagons in formation and also made it difficult to appreciate the significance of events that were pushing these into motion. The explanation for this predictive failure transcends the particularities of Eastern Europe: this is after all hardly the first time a major social uprising has come as a big surprise.

The French Revolution of 1789 shocked not only Louis XVI and his courtiers but also outside observers and the rioters who helped end his reign. Yet it had many deep causes—all expounded at great length in literally thousands of volumes. This paradox is one of the central themes of Tocqueville's *Old Régime and the French Revolution*. "Chance played no part whatever in the outbreak of the revolution," he observes. "Though it took the world by surprise, it was the inevitable outcome of a long period of gestation, the abrupt and violent conclusion of a process in which six generations played an intermittent part."<sup>86</sup>

In this century the Nazi takeover of Germany took place with astonishing speed. Within a few months entrenched political institutions were turned upside down, all democratic opposition was destroyed, and a la-

<sup>85</sup> William M. Brinton, "Gorbachev and the Revolution of 1989–90," in Brinton and Rinzier (fn. 11), 373.

<sup>86</sup> Tocqueville (fn. 36), 20.

bor movement with millions of members was driven underground.<sup>87</sup> Though it was not foreseen, there is no shortage of explanations for the rise of Nazism. The Iranian Revolution of 1979–80 offers yet another example of an unanticipated uprising. There now exists a panoply of competing explanations, including ones that invoke class conflicts, failures of governance, foreign exploitation, economic reversals, the disaffections of bazaar merchants, and Islamic ideology.<sup>88</sup> Yet for all their differences, students of this revolution agree that it stunned almost everyone—the Shah and the Ayatollah Khomeini, the CIA and the KGB, statesmen, diplomats, academics, and journalists.

The very revolution that prepared the ground for the first communist regime in history was an unforeseen event. Weeks before the Russian Revolution of February 1917 Lenin told an audience in Switzerland that Russia's great explosion lay in the distant future and that older men like himself would not live to see it.<sup>89</sup> And with just days to go, foreign observers in Petrograd were advising their capitals that the monarchy was stable and secure.<sup>90</sup> But the tsar fell, and before the year was over the communists had gained full control of the government. It has since been recognized that Marxist scholarship did not prepare us for the world's first successful communist revolution occurring in, of all places, backward, semifeudal Russia.<sup>91</sup>

Nor did Marxist scholarship—or for that matter, non-Marxist scholarship—anticipate the midcentury uprisings in the communist states of Eastern Europe. “The Hungarian uprising of October 1956 was a dramatic, sudden explosion, apparently not organized beforehand by a revolutionary center; neither outsiders nor the participants had anticipated anything like the irresistible revolutionary dynamism that would sweep the country.” Thus begins *The Unexpected Revolution*, a monograph on this failed attempt to overthrow communism that is replete with evi-

<sup>87</sup> Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life*, trans. Richard Deveson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 27–28 and passim.

<sup>88</sup> For a sample of explanations, see Hamid Algar, *The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (London: Muslim Institute, 1980); Said Amir Arjomand, “Iran’s Islamic Revolution in Comparative Perspective,” *World Politics* 38 (April 1986), 383–414; Shaul Bakhash, *The State and Revolution in Iran* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); Nikki R. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); and Robert Looney, *Economic Origins of the Iranian Revolution* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1982).

<sup>89</sup> Leonard Shapiro, *The Russian Revolutions of 1917: The Origins of Modern Communism* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 19.

<sup>90</sup> William H. Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution, 1917–1921* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 1:73–76.

<sup>91</sup> Further evidence concerning the element of surprise in the French, Russian, and Iranian revolutions may be found in Kuran (fn. 31), secs. 2, 6–7.

dence of widespread preference falsification right up to the uprising.<sup>92</sup> Prior to October 1956 writers who were to play leading roles gave not the slightest sign of opposition to the political status quo. For another example, clerical employees remained docile and submissive until the uprising in which they participated, often hiding their grievances even from family members.<sup>93</sup>

The Prague Spring of 1968 offers another example of an unforeseen attempt to crack the wall of communism. In a retrospective account, Havel writes that in 1967 the entire nation was behaving like the Good Soldier Švejk, accommodating itself to the regime's demands. "Who would have believed . . . that a year later this recently apathetic, skeptical, and demoralized society would stand up with such courage and intelligence to a foreign power!" "And," he continues, "who would have suspected that, after scarcely a year had gone by, this same society would, as swiftly as the wind blows, lapse back into a state of deep demoralization far worse than its original one!"<sup>94</sup>

This tally of unanticipated uprisings could be expanded, but the point has been made: the revolution of 1989 was not the first to surprise us. Time and again entrenched authority has vanished suddenly, leaving the victors astonished at their triumph and the vanquished, at their defeat.

Should we conclude, along with John Dunn, that revolutions are ineluctable "facts of nature," events that fail "to suggest the dominance of human reason in any form"?<sup>95</sup> In other words, is the culprit human irrationality? The argument developed in this paper does not point in this direction. It suggests, on the contrary, that predictive failure is entirely consistent with calculated, purposeful human action. Underlying an explosive shift in public sentiment are multitudes of individual decisions to switch political allegiance, each undertaken in response to changing incentives. So just as a failure to predict a rainstorm does not imply that the clouds obey no physical laws, a failure to predict some revolution does not imply individual irrationality.

Dunn also suggests that revolutions have too many determinants to make them amenable to a grand, comprehensive theory. Shunning the futile exercise of constructing a theory with universal applicability, we ought to focus, he says, on the particularities of each situation. Although

<sup>92</sup> Paul Kecskemeti, *The Unexpected Revolution: Social Forces in the Hungarian Uprising* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1961), 1.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 60, 84–85.

<sup>94</sup> Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hviždala* (1986), trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 109.

<sup>95</sup> Dunn, *Modern Revolutions: An Introduction to the Analysis of a Political Phenomenon*, 2d ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 2–3.



I agree that revolutions are complex events brought on by a symphony of interacting variables, I depart from Dunn on the usefulness of general theorizing: obstacles to forecasting particular revolutions do not preclude useful insights into the *process* of revolution. Even if we cannot predict the time and place of the next big uprising, we may prepare ourselves mentally for the mass mobilization that will bring it about. Equally important, we can understand why it may surprise us. There are other spheres of knowledge where highly useful theories preclude reliable predictions of specific outcomes. The Darwinian theory of biological evolution illuminates the process whereby species evolve but without enabling us to predict the future evolution of the gazelle. Sophisticated theories of the weather elucidate why it is in perpetual flux but without making it possible to say with much confidence whether it will rain in Rome a week from next Tuesday.

Such general theories have a common virtue: they reveal the source of their predictive limitations. The reason they cannot predict infallibly is not simply that they contain large numbers of variables. In each theory variables are related to one another *nonlinearly*; that is, a *small* perturbation in one variable, which normally produces *small* changes in other variables, may under the right set of circumstances have *large* consequences. Consider the theory of climatic turbulence developed by Edward Lorenz. It shows that a sparrow flapping its wings in Istanbul—an intrinsically insignificant event—can generate a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico. This is because the weather at any given location is related to its determinants nonlinearly. In other words, its sensitivity to other variables, and their sensitivities to one another, are themselves *variable*. Accordingly, variable  $x$  may be impervious to a jump in  $y$  from 20 to 200, yet exhibit hypersensitivity if  $y$  rises a bit higher, say, to 202. It may then start to grow explosively, effectively feeding on itself. The notion that small events may unleash huge forces goes against much of twentieth-century social thought, with its emphasis on linearity, continuity, and gradualism. But in contexts as different as technological diffusion and cognitive development it is the key to understanding a host of otherwise inexplicable phenomena.

What endows intrinsically insignificant events with potentially explosive power in the context of political change is that public preferences are interdependent. Because of this interdependence, the equilibrium levels of the public opposition are related to the underlying individual characteristics nonlinearly. A massive change in private preferences may leave the incumbent equilibrium undisturbed, only to be followed by a tiny change that destroys the status quo, setting off a bandwagon that will culminate in a very different equilibrium. Partly because of prefer-

ence falsification, the nature of the interdependence is *imperfectly observable*. This is why a massive rise in public opposition may catch everyone by surprise.

Because preference falsification afflicts politics in every society, major revolutions are likely to come again and again as a surprise. This is not to assert the impossibility of accurate prediction. If we possessed a reliable technique for measuring people's revolutionary thresholds, we would see what it would take to get a revolution started. And if we understood the determinants of these thresholds, we would know when the required conditions were about to be met. For all practical purposes, however, such information is available only in highly incomplete form. In any case, there is an irremovable political obstacle to becoming sufficiently knowledgeable: vulnerable regimes can block the production and dissemination of information potentially harmful to their own survival. Censorship and the regulation of opinion surveys—both widely practiced in prerevolutionary Eastern Europe—are two of the policies that serve these objectives.

I have deliberately characterized the source of unpredictability as *imperfect* observability, as opposed to *unobservability*. The degree of imperfection obviously constitutes a continuum. Societies with strong democratic traditions exhibit less imperfection than ones with nonexistent or fragile democratic freedoms. This is because there is less preference falsification in the former group, at least with respect to the political system itself. Accordingly, one can track the course of antigovernment or anti-regime sentiment more confidently for Norway, Switzerland, or France than for Pakistan, Brazil, or Ghana. This is why developments in Pakistan are more likely to catch the world off guard than are developments in Norway; by implication, Norway's political future can be predicted with greater confidence than can that of Pakistan. Most countries of the world lie closer to Pakistan than to Norway as regards the significance of preference falsification in sustaining their political regimes.

This emphasis on unpredictability should not be considered offensive to the scientific spirit: accepting the limits of what we can expect from science is not an admission of defeat. On the contrary, establishing these limits of knowledge is itself a contribution to the pool of useful knowledge. It is also a necessary step toward charting a realistic scientific agenda. "To act as if we possessed scientific knowledge enabling us to transcend [the absolute obstacles to the prediction of specific events]," wrote Friedrich Hayek in his Nobel Memorial Lecture, "may itself become a serious obstacle to the advance of the human intellect."<sup>96</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Hayek, "The Pretence of Knowledge" (1974), *American Economic Review* 79 (December 1989), 6.

The prediction of unpredictability is not to be confused with the unfalsifiability of the underlying theory. The theory developed in this essay is fully falsifiable. It implies that political revolutions will continue to surprise us, so a string of successful predictions would render it suspect. Simply put, it can be falsified by developing some theory of revolution that forecasts accurately. In principle, if not in practice, the presented theory can also be falsified by showing that preference falsification was not a factor in unanticipated revolutions of the past.