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A response

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# On Generations of Revolutionary Theory: A Response

Jamie Allinson

## 1 | INTRODUCTION: A NOTE OF GRATITUDE

Few things in academic life are as satisfying as encountering an engaged critique of one's work. In that spirit, I was delighted to read the rigorous and thoughtful replies to my review essay 'A Fifth Generation of Revolutionary Theory?' by Ben Abrams (2019) and, responding to both of us, Colin Beck and Ritter (2021). Their critiques have prompted me both to rethink what I have got wrong—as well as clarify and defend what I still think I have right, as I argue below—and the limitations of the entire exercise of delineating 'generations' of social theory about revolutions. They also do so in ways that open up new directions for the study of revolution: a challenge I seek at least to begin to take up in this brief reply. (Figure 1)

There is much common ground between us. In this reply I will focus first on my substantive disagreements with Abram's contention that a fifth generation is yet to come—namely the implicit difference between 'modelling' explanatory variables and identifying interactive processes and a genuinely different object of investigation, both present in his 'long' fourth generation. I then take up Beck and Ritter's advice to turn away from literature reviews and back to developing novel substantive questions that also (as Abrams rightly enjoins us) have some political bearing on the practice and outcomes of revolutions. Taking some issue with Beck and Ritter's claim that the question of the object of study in revolution theory has been settled, I suggest that underlying all of this meta-debate is a deeper question: whatever happened to social revolution? I will sketch out the beginning of an answer based on the transformation of agrarian relations in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the implications of this transformation not just for revolution but for its understudied correlate, counter-revolution. In doing so, even in preliminary and tentative form, I hope to advance the common project of substantive research on revolutions which this debate has revealed as the common concern amongst its participants.

## 2 | WHAT'S IN A GENERATION?

Abrams and Beck and Ritter's response to my piece differ in their levels of critique. Abrams' central case is that I am wrong to identify a fifth generation of revolutionary theory. Beck and Ritter that the endeavour of identifying such generations is itself misguided. Both make points that hit the mark, or with which I already agree, but before outlining those I will first defend my claim to identify a fifth generation.

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Abrams argues that I am wrong to identify a fifth generation for the following reasons: that I have conflated a putative fifth generation with a long extension of the fourth, the object of study I identify with the former 'non-violent political revolutions' forms 'precisely the domain of the latter'; the relational-interactional approach I identify with the fifth generation in fact represents the 'defining leap' of the fourth and 'an agenda to which fourth generation theorists have consistently returned over the past three decades'; and the processual understanding of revolution represent a 'well-established fourth-generation perspective' (Abrams, 2019, p. 379).

Abrams' critique of my position is both forceful and well-argued, but I would defend the case for a fifth generation against each of these points. First, the object of study as non-violent political revolutions does not form 'precisely the domain' of fourth generation theorists. The examples that Abrams gives demonstrate this point. The section of Goldstone's canonical article to which Abrams refers does recognise such political revolutions as one part of a much more capacious object of study, to which it is worth referring at length.

Revolutions are sometimes distinguished by outcomes, sometimes by actors. Revolutions that transform economic and social structures as well as political institutions, such as the French Revolution of 1789, are called great revolutions; those that change only state institutions are called by political revolutions. Revolutions that involve autonomous lower-class revolts are labelled social revolutions (Skocpol, 1979), whereas sweeping reforms carried out by elites who directly control mass mobilization are sometimes called elite revolutions or revolutions from above (Trimberger, 1978). Revolutions that fail to secure power after temporary victories or large-scale mobilization are often called failed or abortive revolutions; oppositional movements that either do not aim to take power (such as peasant and worker protests) or focus on a particular region or subpopulation are usually called rebellions (if violent) or protests (if predominantly peaceful). Despite these differences, all of these revolutionary events have similar dynamics and characteristics. (Goldstone, 2001, p. 142)

Whatever we make of the precision of this definition—and it includes six different categories of 'revolution' as well as four different axes (social-political, above-below, victory or success, power-oriented or rebellious) on which these can be distinguished—it cannot be reduced to one of the categories identified within it. 'Political revolutions' that 'change only state institutions' are covered by this domain but clearly not identical to it. Goldstone is clear here that the universe of 'revolutionary events' with which he is concerned are those that bear the 'similar dynamics and characteristics' he then outlines—not just one of the sub-categories of these.

This point is not (merely) scholastic pedantry. The distinction between different types of revolution, particularly social or 'great' revolutions and more limited political revolutions was central to key works of the fourth generation (Foran, 2005, pp. 7–8; Goodwin, 2001, pp. 8–9; Parsa, 2000, p. ix). They may compare and contrast these two types of revolution to find the reasons why one results rather than the other but they do not restrict themselves to the domain of non-violent political revolutions. Moreover, where fourth generation theorists focus on political revolutions these tend to be not, for the most part, forms of non-violent regime change based among a diverse urban mass but rather anti-colonial guerrilla movements (Foran, 2005; Goodwin, 2001). Goldstone's central work is concerned with what he calls 'state breakdown' in the early modern world, but it is clear that by this he means a 'worldwide crisis of agrarian absolutist states that affected both Eastern empires and Western monarchies' rather than non-violent political revolution (Goldstone, 1991, p. 2).

These phenomena are different to the predominant object of study of the fifth generation, even if those forms of revolution are also discussed in fourth generation works. This point is important because this shift in focus in the literature reflects an actually-existing change in the world: the puzzle, to which I return below, of a near half-century of increasing levels of mass mobilization accompanied by a striking decrease in—indeed, disappearance of—instances of revolutionary social transformation. The shifting object of study between fourth and fifth generation is important not in its own right but because it indexes this empirical change: the 'end of the Jacobin-Bolshevik revolutionary epoch', in Abrams' engaging phrase (Abrams, 2019, p. 385).

The second part of Abrams' objection to my claim to have identified a fifth generation of revolutionary theory is largely concerned with method. The processual, interactionist and relational ontology I identify in the fifth generation, Abrams argues, is more properly considered the defining characteristic of the fourth. In an acute critique of the methodological approach of the fourth generation, Abrams takes to task the latter for producing 'models' rather than, in the manner of the third generation of Skocpol *et al.*, 'theories' (Abrams, 2019, p. 381). These are, indeed, different approaches—but the break between fifth and fourth generation in this regard represents a clarification as the fifth generation left behind the hybrid model-theorising of the fourth. A model is a form of ideal-typical thinking: a representation of a class of phenomena derived from experience. Theories, at least in the way that Abrams seems to be contrasting them to models, offer to explain rather than represent the world. In other words, they produce nomothetic explanations across cases or at least causal explanations of 'robust processes' (Goldstone, 1991, p. 54). The typical investigative strategies of the fourth-generation are best characterised not as model-building (although proclaimed as such) but rather quite intricate theories: under conditions  $y$ , conjunctions of factors  $x$ ,  $z$  and  $a$  produce outcomes  $a$ ,  $b$  or  $c$  and so on (for examples of exactly this form of reasoning, see Foran, 2005, pp. 16–17; Goldstone, 1991, pp. 10–11; Goodwin, 2001, pp. 3–5). That fourth generation theorists circumscribe the conditions in which these relationships apply, and greatly expand the number of explanatory factors ('multi-causality' in the idiom of these works) does not alter the basic logic. Antecedent conditions, duly specified, produce subsequent outcomes. The commitment of leading works of the fourth generation to the production of falsifiable hypotheses means necessarily implies this sort of argument (Goldstone, 1991, pp. 11–12; Goodwin, 2001, p. 9).

To take a representative fifth generation example, George Lawson elucidates a quite different approach to this implicit multivariate reasoning of the fourth generation:

the meaning and practice of revolutions has changed over time, depending on the contexts in which they emerge and how events unfold. This does not mean that revolutions share no similarities, just that these similarities are not timeless properties or fixed attributes. As such, the study of revolution requires a shift from an 'attribute ontology' to a 'process ontology' (Jackson 2010), premised on the particular sequences through which revolutionary events take place. From these sequences of events, it is possible to abstract causal pathways that serve as a baseline for examining diverse episodes of revolution. (Lawson, 2019, p. 44)

'Causal pathways' are clearly distinct from general causes here. If revolutions do not represent things in their own right, then they cannot be correlated with the presence or absence of other such things, however many of them there are in however specific a conjunction. 'Pathways' may offer a guide through the sequence of experiences that come to be classified as revolutionary, but only that. The strongest version of this claim is found in Charles Kurzman's work on the Iranian revolution of 1979. Revolutions, Kurzman claims, being the outcome of the interactions of confused human subjects acting in situations of profound ignorance, any attempt to explain them in causal-retroactively to predict them in other words—is undermined by understanding this experience (Kurzman, 2004).

I make no necessary case for either of these ontological and epistemological approaches. Indeed, Abrams' call to return to bold theorising based on substantively different cases is an attractive one. My point here is merely that the two perspectives outlined above are different and therefore it is not unjustified to identify a fifth generation of revolutionary theory. Abrams is completely correct in his criticism of my unwarranted neglect of Charles Tilly (Abrams, 2019, p. 379). Tilly's characterisation of revolutions as having regularities rather than laws, in which the only generalisable elements are mechanisms rather than causes, does indeed form a well-spring of the fifth generation approach (Tilly, 1996, p. 281). The continuing influence of Tilly throughout all of the 'generations' lends credibility to the thrust of Beck and Ritter's critique of my piece: that thinking of revolutionary theory in terms of generations is no longer, if it ever was, very useful or desirable.

The debate between myself and Abrams, Beck and Ritter claim, is based on 'false premises.' Repeating the method of Goldstone's literature review, they write, imposes 'a straitjacket that never fully represented the history of revolution theory in the definitive sense that has been assumed' and 'that limits our ability to assess what has been discovered about revolutions and prevents us from seeing where the future lies' (Beck & Ritter, 2021, p. 1). A better alternative is to see not generations but recurrent themes and debates within the literature: the particular questions of what we are talking about when we talk about revolutions, whether to aim for depth of understanding or breadth of coverage of cases and whether to focus on 'the distal causation of underlying conditions or the process of revolution itself' (2021, p. 3).

These recurring questions notwithstanding, Beck and Ritter argue that knowledge of revolutions has been accumulated and major issues settled. First, in a claim that I argue below bears more unpacking, the object of study has been established as 'attempted and successful shifts in , at the very least, regimes or political structures that occur through mass mobilization' (2021, p. 7). The question of which method to adopt has been settled, they argue, with the relatively pluralistic adoption of mixed methods by most researchers in the field. Unsettled is the issue of understanding revolution as 'resulting from broad causal conditions' versus 'a dynamic process': but this is a refraction of the broader question of structure versus agency in social enquiry, which is not going to be solved by revolution theorists on their own (2021, p. 9).

Although I would contest Beck and Ritter's claim that Abrams and I are debating on false premises—the body of literature to which we refer is certainly present and influential and both of us I believe are making reasonable, if in some cases incompatible, claims about it—their injunction to 'free ourselves' from generational thinking and 'chart a more fruitful future for the study of revolution' is a welcome one (2021, p. 11). Abrams' reminder that 'revolutions are not toys' nor 'scholarly miscellanea' providing a 'dataset for "productive" analysis' but rather 'bloody, brutal and dramatic social process' is surely intended in the same vein (Abrams, 2019, p. 385). In my own piece, the claim about the fifth generation was intended—although clearly I did not succeed, given that this part of the article attracted little of the focus of my critics—as a hook upon which to hang an argument about the nature of the Arab revolutions of 2011. This common ground of turning away from meta-studies of the literature and back to substantive and politically relevant questions about actual revolutions is, it seems to me, the most important part of our exchange.

In the spirit of developing the novelty called for by Beck and Ritter, I dedicate the rest of this piece to a preliminary sketch of what I argue is the big underlying puzzle of scholarship on revolution since the late twentieth century: whatever happened to social revolution? This is not a question I can hope to answer in the remaining sections of a brief rejoinder but I shall attempt some pointers at a way it might be asked. In doing so I hope to begin to develop some of the 'new ways of understanding' or 'changing the direction of the conversation' that Beck and Ritter encourage (Beck & Ritter, 2021, p. 14). Asking this question will, perhaps, help to restore some of the political relevance to the study of revolution upon which Abrams insists. In a world faced with multiple concurrent and congruent crises—of health and social reproduction, of growth and capitalist productivity, of white supremacy and of imperialism, and above all of total environmental collapse caused by anthropogenic climate change—social revolution as total and transformative change has surely never been a more relevant topic. Its apparent absence as a horizon of collective mobilization is therefore both a puzzling and an urgent question.

## 2.1 | The return to revolution: paths to a research programme

Underlying the debate in *Journal of Historical Sociology* is a more interesting empirical and political puzzle<sup>1</sup>. If revolution means mass mobilization leading to, at a minimum, 'attempted and successful shifts in ...regimes or political structures', to borrow Beck and Ritter's terms, then the world has been becoming steadily more revolutionary throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century. In fact, the first two decades of the twenty-first have proved more 'revolutionary' than any other. Across the world, anti-government protests increased by 11.5% year on year throughout the 2010s: all of the five largest demonstrations in US history occurred during the decade

(Brannen et al., 2020, p. 1). The Arab uprisings of 2011 represented not a regional exception but 'a near-vertical inflection point in which two decades of relative calm instantly reversed into several years of elevated global unrest' (GDELT Project, 2019). The 2011 uprisings led to 'a wave of global protest intensity, decreasing through 2016, a second wave in 2017 and then a new wave beginning in late 2018' that continued until the end of the decade (GDELT Project, 2019). The 2010s were a decade of protests and uprisings: mass protests increased by an annual average of 11.5% from 2009-2019: the Middle East and North Africa saw the 'largest concentration of activity' and sub-Saharan Africa the 'fastest rate of growth'; a dip in protest activity in 2013-2017, coinciding with the high-point of the Arab counter-revolutions, was followed by a renewed expansion of protest leading to 290.5% more protests at the end of the 2010s than at the start (Brannen et al., 2020, pp. iv, 8). By the second decade of the twenty-first century, the world had become a far more 'revolutionary' place—in the sense of the prevalence of mass mobilizations overthrowing incumbent governments—than it had been a century before.

Mark Beissinger's database of revolutionary situations offers an outline of this trend:

Four peaks, prior to the Arab revolutions—which rank with the periods surrounding the establishment and fall of the Soviet Union in terms of new revolutionary episodes per year—are visible in this table. The first peak is the revolutionary wave that preceded and then was accelerated by the Russian Revolution in 1915-1919, continuing into the early 1920s; the second, smaller and more chronologically isolated, at the end of the Second World War; the third, counter-intuitively at its height in the early 1960s (corresponding to the wave of anti-colonial revolutions) and then slightly decreasing in the latter part of the decade; and the fourth beginning its upward ascent after 1975 to peak in the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the early 1990s. Most notable of all is the general upward trend in revolutionary episodes.

The first part of this cycle produced exemplars of social transformation—the Russian Revolution for the post-World War 1 wave, and the Chinese 1949 revolution for the de-colonizing wave. After roughly 1975, however, with the arguable (and highly significant) exception of the Iranian revolution, structurally *new and enduring* social forms ceased to emerge from revolutionary episodes. Whether one sees the pre-1989 regimes of Eastern Europe as an example of 'actually existing socialism' or, as I do, varieties of state capitalism, there is no question that the regimes that replaced them after 1989 were not of a new type but rather versions of parliamentary market democracy.

This is not to say that post-1975 mass uprisings have been without consequences. The Arab revolutions of 2011, for example, although they did not succeed in producing social or (mostly) political transformation, certainly met the criteria of being mass, class-based revolts from below that established situations of divided sovereignty in the states in which they occurred. In fact, these were the largest and broadest protest movements in the history of each of the states in which they broke out, and some of the largest in the world. Where the data is available, participation rates in the uprisings far outstrip those of paradigmatic revolutions such as France in 1789 or Russia in 1917. At least four states—Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen—experienced nationwide strike waves the largest in their history, and some of the largest in global labour history. In at least three states—Syria, Libya and Yemen—sovereign authority fractured into competing institutions while elsewhere the ruling social order was challenged by demands for 'cleansing' or a 'parallel revolution' in both public and private organisations. These were very deep revolutionary situations, brought about by mass revolts that entered into violent and divisive confrontation with the state, but nonetheless did not issue in revolutionary transformations. This is a perplexing puzzle. Mass mobilizations are greater than ever before, revolutionary situations more widespread. So why do they issue in so few—indeed no—instances of profound and lasting social transformation? Whatever happened to social revolution?

It is this puzzle that underpins the argument about generations of revolutionary theory and about the dissolution of revolution as an object of study into, on the one hand, democratic transition and, on the other, contentious politics (Abrams, 2019, pp. 382–3). Where once theories of revolution had dealt with a unified object of (at minimum) political transformation and mass mobilization, the past three decades has seen the former hived off into studies of elite transition and the latter into the tactical concerns of contentious politics. Beck and Ritter's delineation of the object of study as 'attempted and successful shifts in, at the very least, regimes or political structures that occur through mass mobilization' likewise reflects this change (Beck & Ritter, 2021, p. 7). 'At the

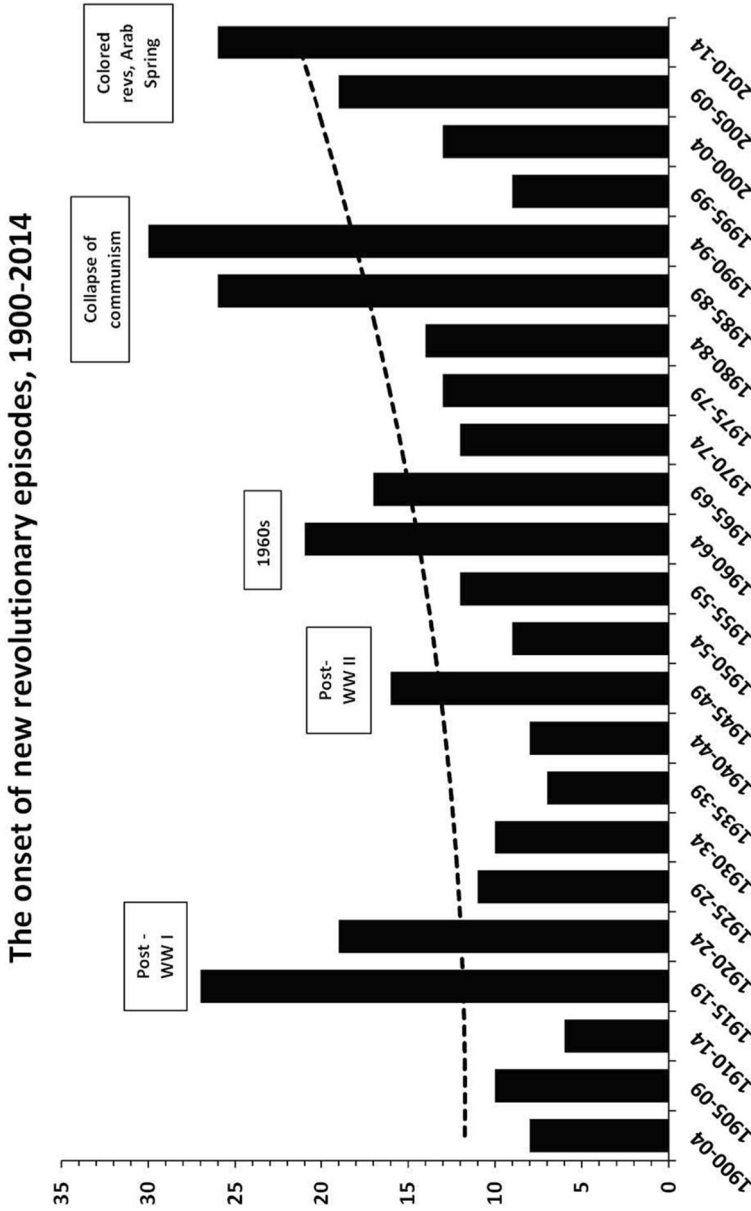


FIGURE 1 The Onset of Revolutionary Episodes (adapted from Beissinger, 2020)

very least' is doing a lot of work in this definition, because it shifts our focus to the relationship between mass mobilization and changes in political structures or regimes rather than the possibility of social transformation. Nor is this a universally accepted move: Steven Pincus, for example, insists that '[r]evolutions must involve both a transformation of the socioeconomic orientation and of the political structures.' Transformations of state but not society represent, in this view, 'civil wars, rebellions or coups d'états: they are not revolutions' (Pincus, 2011, p. 32). Where Pincus restricts the definitional universe, others expand it by including social transformations achieved without the presence, or in conscious deflection of, mass mobilisation: 'revolutions from above' or 'passive revolutions' (Davidson, 2010; De Smet, 2016; Hesketh, 2017; Morton, 2010; Roccu, 2017; Tansel, 2018; Trimberger, 1978; Tugal, 2009). The point is that social revolution has receded from view in Beck and Ritter's definition: this recession reflects a real and empirical process in the world, but one that should therefore be addressed.

How might we go about this investigation? I can give no more than an intimation here but in order to understand the puzzle of increasing mobilization combined with decreasing social transformation, we must return to the kind of 'bold theories' about changing forms of society called for by Abrams. The last quarter of the twentieth century and the first fifth of the twenty-first have been characterised by three such large scale trends: urbanisation; the ending of the 'agrarian question of capital' although certainly not of rural poverty (Bernstein, 2006); and waves of industrialisation and then de-industrialisation in the Global South. These changes, combined with the ubiquity of mobile phones as a mobilising technology, produced first a wave of limited democratising revolutions as the most consistently democratic social force, organised labour, grew in peripheral and semi-peripheral states in which the most consistently anti-democratic and counter-revolutionary force, labour-repressive landlords were in retreat. Labour movements under reformist leadership foreshortened their horizons to merely political change, while landlords no longer had the interest or capability to stiffen a counter-revolutionary and anti-democratic coalition. This social conjunction underpinned the limited democratizing revolutions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Since the aftermath of the global financial crisis, as visible in the Arab uprisings, larger, broader but more inchoate revolutionary mobilizations have confronted successful counter-revolutions no longer based on old agrarian orders.

How might this history be traced? Twentieth century revolutions were typically directed against two kinds of enemy: landlords and colonial administrations, frequently the same thing. With the partial exception of the Russian revolution, the transformative revolutions of the twentieth century—China, Cuba, Mexico, Algeria and Vietnam—were 'peasant wars': rebellions against agrarian domination and for a wider distribution of land (Wolf, 1999, pp. ix–x). At the heart of these conflicts lay the aspiration to escape the coercive power exercised by large landowners either directly over sharecroppers and tenants, or indirectly through the concentration of holdings: colonial racial distinctions between, for example, the colons and Muslims in French-ruled Algeria, revolving around access to land.

Landlords lost the peasant wars, although it is far from certain that peasants won them. Where anti-colonial nationalist movements took power in their wake, they generally achieved the liquidation of the agrarian *ancien regime*, indigenous or foreign. Rural direct producers were freed from their previous bonds in order to participate in industrialised wage labour, although the degree of such industrialisation varied greatly across countries. Nonetheless, land reform comprised the centrepiece of most strategies of national development in the post-colonial world (Bernstein, 2004). In the second half of the twentieth century, land reform programmes affected around 1.5 billion people (Albertus, 2017, p. 268). Whether by revolutionary victory, or reformist adaptation designed to stave off such victory, the world of domination on the land passed largely into history. Land reform was followed, under neoliberal development models, by the global financialisation of landed assets, which made landowner interests more liquid and therefore less threatened by seizure (Albertus, 2017, pp. 235–242).

Neither landlords nor the rural poor disappeared, but rather the relationships that led to violent social transformation attempted by the latter and resisted by the former no longer prevailed even in the Global South: these were struggles over land, to be sure, but lacking the 'systemic...significance' of the classic agrarian question, which meant the dispossession of 'classes of predatory pre-capitalist landed property' (Bernstein, 2006, p. 449, p. 449). These were the classes that had previously formed the leading cadres of counter-revolution. In the revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>



centuries landlords in command of 'rural social hierarchies', often based on personal domination over peasants or landless labourers, who proved the most consistent counter-revolutionaries (Slater & Smith, 2016, pp. 1482–1483). The scions of such landlord families aristocracies held a disproportionate number of posts in the military and administrative apparatus of European states until the Second World War – a permanent bulwark against revolutionary transformation likely to be removed only by force of arms, hence generating recurrent bouts of revolutionary-counter-revolutionary civil war that characterised the continent's history throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (Mulholland, 2016, pp. 369–371). In the Global South, settlers, colonial powers and *latifundists* typically played the same role.

Just as the most reactionary and counter-revolutionary forces were declining in the late twentieth century, so the most consistently democratising social actor—the organised and urban working class—was expanding (Eley, 2002; Rueschemeyer et al., 1992). The classic sites of Skocpol's social revolutions, semi-peripheral agrarian empires, ceased to exist: in 1961, the world population was two-thirds rural and one-third urban: by the beginning of the twenty-first century, the proportions were equal, with the crossover point reached and surpassed decades before in many countries (Ritchie & Roser, 2018). According to Marc Beissinger's historical database of revolutionary episodes, 61% of revolutions were primarily 'rural' in their locus: after 1979, they were 61% urban (Beissinger, 2020).

This urbanisation was accompanied in many, though not all states by increased proletarianization, providing the social basis for the democratizing revolutions of the late twentieth century. Before 1975 the presence of 'labour-dependent landowners' is strongly correlated with undemocratic regimes and with the collapse or overthrow of democracies. After 1975 this correlation disappears or reverses into a weakly positive effect on democratization (Albertus, 2017, p. 236). This change offers a concrete example of the shrinking horizons of social mobilization: landlords were willing to support, as a fall-back measure, democracies that would guarantee stability and property rather than threaten those interests and which they sought to shape to provide such guarantees (2017, pp. 269–271). The new life-worlds of urban migrants—closely interconnected with each other, with far higher degrees of literacy and concentrated near sites of governmental power—promoted the 'urban civic' repertoire of protest associated with the democratizing revolutions (Beissinger, 2020). An even stronger source of popular power lay in the growth of working classes and their organisational muscle, as trade unions and other working class organisations followed the same path as their European forebears in demanding democratic rights as well as wage increases (see for example Eley, 2002; Silver, 2003). Of course, by no means all the cases of democratic revolution studied by the fifth generation featured organised labour as their moving force, but the component 'waves' of democratization from the earlier 1970s to the turn of the century clustered around core cases that did (Silver, 2003, pp. 164–165).

The democratizing revolutions of the late twentieth century thus occurred in a conjuncture in which the most consistently counter-revolutionary and authoritarian social forces—highly labour-dependent landlords and colonial administrations—had been largely defeated while the most consistently democratic one—the organised urban working class—was still expanding, but under leaderships that had renounced aspirations to social revolution.

So much for the social conditions that produced the democratizing revolutions of the late twentieth and very early twenty-first century. The decade of the 2010s, however, witnessed a new trend: a continuing expansion and increase in frequency of protest based on Beissinger's 'urban civic repertoire' but faced by recharged counter-revolutionary forces unwilling to concede even limited democratic demands. The fate of the Arab revolutions of 2011 represents the paradigmatic case of this shift. These uprisings took place largely in states which were only partially industrialised or had already experienced de-industrialisation: it is notable that the one state in which an outcome closest to the classic democratic transition was Tunisia, partly under the auspices of the strong and independent trade union federation, the UGTT.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere, the separation between political and social transformation promoted at the high point of liberal democratization contributed to the success of these counter-revolutions. By the time the Arab uprisings occurred, liberal democracy had already been hollowed out. Reduced to a technical means of administration rather than

contest between substantively different models of society, Western liberal democracy hardly offered a means by which the demands of 'bread, freedom and social justice' could be achieved. 'How', writes Wendy Brown, 'do subjects reduced to human capital reach for or even wish for popular power?' (Brown, 2015, p. 35) In the Arab republics, many such subjects reached instead for the promise of stability and the image of a better past. The Arab counter-revolutionaries did not have to invoke, as their European counter-parts once had, an imagined pre-lapsarian past in the countryside—only the heritage of a more equitable development model still within the living memory of many of their citizens in the period of the 1960s and 1970s.

The solutions differed—counter-revolutionaries in Egypt and Tunisia were able to rely on the heritage of 'secular' national development and the class conservatism of mainstream Islamist political parties to win some of the revolutionary movement to their side. In Syria, a cross-sectarian elite—having lost the rural social base gained in the revolution from above of the 1970s—relied upon sectarianisation and repression to weld a coalition of religious minorities and much of the Sunni bourgeoisie. In Bahrain, the outlier case of a monarchy amongst the Arab counter-revolutions, a more direct sectarianism was employed to exclude the majority population and support a policy of counter-revolutionary repression. Even in those states that fractured and collapsed, Libya and Yemen, the long-term consequences of the previous revolutions from above, in the form of Field Marshal Haftar's counter-revolutionary aspirations or the rise of the Houthis to power, continued to play a role in the post-2011 conflicts.

The counter-revolutions were further underpinned by a changing international context. Such a development is not new: from Burke's declamations against the 'regicide peace' with France onwards, if not before, counter-revolution has been understood as a war conducted by the states of an existing order against one struggling to be born. In the historical conjuncture in which the Arab revolutions broke out, however, international counter-revolution against them was not widely expected. Either—for liberals—these revolutions represented the late coming of the democratizing, liberal revolutions of 1989—in which case they could expect to be welcomed into an international system dominated by such values or they were a continuation—for the opponents of liberalism—of a project of regime change directed against challengers to that system. Both these opposing arguments assumed a congruence between a liberal system under US hegemony and the events of 2011. The Arab counter-revolutions in practice refuted this assumption.

Although the NATO bombing campaign against the Gaddafi regime in 2011 was certainly animated by a version of the regime doctrine, it was neither led by the US nor the source of the uprising against the *Jamahiriyah*. The US and its allies did provide some aid to 'vetted' Syrian opposition fighters but this intervention paled by comparison even with the US campaign in the same country against ISIS and in alliance with the Kurdish PYD—not in favour of regime change. The overwhelming majority of international interventions in the region after 2011, whether the active military campaigns in Syria, Bahrain, Libya and Yemen or subtler forms of intervention in Egypt and Tunisia, served counter-revolutionary objectives. This was so whether the states involved in them were allies of the West or opponents. Rather, the Middle East was riven by competitive counter-revolutionary alliances: one headquartered in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, one in Tehran and Moscow, and one—favouring political over social revolution—in Ankara and Doha. Both the age of anti-colonial revolutions of the early and mid-twentieth century, and that of the liberal democratizing revolutions that followed it, had passed. No international camp could be relied upon as a source of aid rather than counter-revolution, and identifying with one alliance implied denigrating the revolutionary uprisings against another.

### 3 | CONCLUSIONS

This reply began with a note of gratitude for the responses to my earlier piece. It ends with one of hope: that the programme of return to substantive and politically relevant research on revolutions revealed as the common ground of the participants in this debate will be continued. Although I am guilty of adding to the pile of meta-literature on the study of revolutions, I have tried in this piece to take up the challenge raised Abrams, Beck and

Ritter and focus on a substantive question: whatever happened to social revolution? The brevity of this reply dictates no more than an impressionistic answer to the question, but I hope it can provide an example of how the contemporary study of revolution might be re-oriented.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This section draws on my forthcoming book (Allinson, 2021)

<sup>2</sup> See (Allinson, 2015) for an extended version of this argument.

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