Comparative and Multidisciplinary Approach to Study of Modern Revolutions
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History

Course and Students
Revolutions in the Modern World (43.344) is a new course that looks at a number of revolutions in the “modern world” to try to identify common patterns among them and to gain an appreciation for the complexity and long durations of revolutionary processes.

Approach:
• Global, Comparative History
• Multidisciplinary: History and Political Science

Major Goals
• As the reaction of the press about the Arab Spring of 2011 demonstrated, Americans tend to have a naïve optimism about the brevity and outcomes of revolutions. We wish to correct any such misconceptions
• Sensitize students to the possibilities and challenges of comparative history and of combining historical and political science approaches to the subject.
• Introduce students to the histories of a number of revolutions in the “modern world” in some depth.
• Undergrad, writing intensive (300 level)
• OCE Course taught face to face.
• 14 students, various ages, mostly upper division history majors, registered this semester. Students are curious about revolutions because of their drama and their relevance to understanding current events.

DESCRIPTION
In this course we look at some revolutions since the late 18th century to study their complex structures and to try to find patterns in their causes, courses, and outcomes.

This semester we are looking at the following revolutions:
France: 1789 – 1799
Russia: 1917 - 1923
Vietnam: 1945 – 1975
Iran: 1979 – 2000
Arab World: 2011 –

We look at the works of narrative historians as well as more theoretically inclined historians and political scientists.

Comparative history is appealing since it offers the possibility of finding historical laws. However, the complexity of comparing the real world at different periods provides many challenges. Nevertheless, the comparative approach suggests issues which historians must consider when looking at specific historical or new revolutionary phenomena. It also helps historians of a revolution from basing their explanations on overgeneralized theories.

An example of an overgeneralized theory is that the fall of an old regime is always followed by a revolution. It was in Russia in 1917 but not

Some questions studied:
Under what circumstances do revolutions occur?
What role do peasant/landlord relations played in the outbreak and course of modern revolutions?
What role do ideology, poverty, authoritarianism play?
Do revolutions have a tendency to become more radicalized over their course?
Should we be looking for a “bourgeoisie” or for “marginalized educated classes” as drivers of revolutions?
What causes Reigns of Terror and how similar are these from revolution to revolution? Do they always occur?
Do revolutions sweep away impediments to modernization or create turmoil that delays modernization? Are they worth the costs? When do they lead to democratic governments?
Do revolutionary societies “recover” and become reintegrated into international environments?
How should the international community react when a revolution breaks out?

Some authors studied:
Some political scientists whose works we study:
Theda Skocpol, Samuel P. Huntington, Charles Tilly, William Goldstone, Karl Marx

Some comparative historians: Crane Brinton, William B. Sewell, Jr.

APPLICATION and EXTENSIONS
It might be good to combine forces with another instructor from Political Science to teach this class and to cross-list it in the catalog. It might also be useful to offer an extended version of this course as a graduate seminar once the history department has a graduate program. Students from Peace and Conflict Studies might also find it relevant.

Each semester, I also hope to change the list of revolutions. It will help to test some of the generalizations arrived at in previous semesters and to deepen my own understanding of revolutions.

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