Reform and revolution have frequently been seen in either-or terms, as rival approaches to bringing about social change. Indeed, this tendency to see some degree of mutual opposition between them has been visible since the very emergence of the modern concept of revolution, often traced to 1789 France (Sewell 1996). From this point onwards, questions over the fate of the state and social structures bequeathed by the pre-revolutionary ancien régime fuelled passionate debates between Jacobins, Girondins, and other political factions, within and outside of France’s National Assembly. This dispute would only intensify over the next 150 years or so, as their revolutionary and reformist heirs debated whether it was really possible or even desirable to supplant the system they now called capitalism, or whether it would be better simply to tame and modify it – a question which caused major splits among socialists and social democrats in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, epitomised by the polemical duels between Eduard Bernstein and Rosa Luxemburg around the turn of the century. ‘Revisionists’ like Bernstein (1899) believed that certain aspects of Marx and Engels’ analysis of capitalism had been proven incorrect; that capitalism was much more supple and resilient than they had thought, and its collapse not inevitable. Thus the task for socialists and the workers’ movement was to incrementally reshape capitalism via reforms that improved the lot of the proletariat. To Luxemburg (1908) and likeminded Marxists, this was anathema: the point of the workers’ movement was not to make capitalism more palatable to the proletariat; it was to forcefully seize power in a great revolution and replace a decadent capitalism with socialism. The role of strikes and worker organising was to build class consciousness and raise the proletarian movement to the point that it could achieve that goal. In the meantime, working within the bourgeois political system to win reforms for workers could be politically useful, but any striving toward an amelioration of capitalism for its own sake was a futile distraction – especially since capitalism was expected to collapse sooner or later under the weight of its own contradictions.

While Luxemburg and Bernstein are among the best-known interlocutors within the reform-versus-revolution debate, much of the Western Marxist canon would ultimately take shape in its shadow. When Luxemburg’s attempt to rerun the October Revolution in Germany was crushed in 1919, Western Marxists faced a quandary: how to countenance...
revolution amid social and political conditions patently different from those found in Russia in 1917 – when the Bolsheviks had stumbled, against all odds, into a situation where a rapid conquest of state power was possible – or indeed those described by Marx and Engels. Karl Kautsky (1918) staked out a middle ground position, harshly criticising the impetuousness of Luxemburg's Spartacists in 1918–19, while refusing to renounce the goal of revolution as such. Antonio Gramsci's (1971) oeuvre was run through by many of the same tensions, from his vision of revolution in the West springing from a long and painstaking 'war of position' (rather than simply the breakneck 'war of maneuver' seen in Russia), to his concept of 'passive revolution' – or how elites sometimes undertake significant modifications to the status quo at their own behest, unhurried by any imminent or, as it were, 'non-passive' revolutionary threat. As the twentieth century wore on, dilemmas around the popular front policy, the 'historic compromise' in Italy, Eurocommunism and other issues would reprise similar themes.

Regardless of where one stands on these matters, what is at stake may seem straightforward enough. On the face of it, the reform-versus-revolution debate is about a fundamental strategic and tactical choice – namely whether those who seek social change should focus on reforming the status quo, or spurn this as so many half-measures, and bet everything on revolution instead. But in reality, that very dilemma is balanced precariously on a series of deeper questions, ambiguities, and paradoxes.

One of those deeper questions is as follows: if reformist and revolutionary strategies are as mutually exclusive as some twentieth-century socialists believed, then why do reforms seem to have precipitated revolution in some historical cases? Of course, some scholars would reject the thesis that they did, even as unintended consequences. They would argue that doomed attempts at reform under, say, King Louis XVI or Tsar Nicholas II were simply 'too little and too late' (Goldstone 2016, p. 318), and at most decorative add-ons to the revolutionary processes already in train in those societies. Goldstone (2016) suggests that Tocqueville (1955) was wrong in identifying Louis XVI's last-ditch reforms as causal in 1789, and that Machiavelli (1952) had been closer to the mark:

Machiavelli ..., not Tocqueville, best described the realities of reform when he advised rulers that they should act while still strong, if reforms are needed, and not wait for overwhelming pressures to arise—for by then ‘you are too late for harsh measures; and mild ones will not help you, for they will be considered as forced from you, and no one will be under any obligations to you for them’.

Indeed, scholars such as Goldstone would go further, and point to other cases where, rather than precipitating revolution, reforms seemed to have held it off – even if such reforms were sometimes sufficiently radical as to be labelled ‘revolutionary’ by contemporaries, as in England’s Glorious Revolution of 1688 (Hertzler 1997).

Thus, beyond the rather general reform-versus-revolution question that we started out with, we now confront two more specific and indeed converse questions: (1) Can reform cause revolution? and (2) Can reform stop revolution in its tracks?

In one way or another, these are questions about reform as a substitute or surrogate (in the sense of proxy) for revolution. But more recent events of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries force us to turn these questions on their head, and ask yet another. That is, can revolution – or at least a simulacrum of revolution – be a surrogate for reform?

This may sound paradoxical, but it is not an exercise in wordplay. Rather it reflects the fact that, since the 1980s, events have transpired which exhibited many apparently ‘revolutionary’ motifs – euphoric crowds in the street singing protest songs and popping flowers in soldiers'
Reform and Revolution

gun barrels, photogenic young couples kissing in front of barricades, heads of government fleeing in helicopters or resigning under duress — but which had aims that were, in a sense, decidedly ‘reformist’. An early example was 1985’s Yellow Revolution in the Philippines, which aimed at (and to some extent achieved) the democratisation of the state, rather than a thoroughgoing ‘revolutionary’ overhaul of society and economy at large (McAdam et al. 2001, pp. 107–120). This sense of ‘revolutionary form as proxy for reform’ was accentuated by the toppling of socialist governments in the East Bloc from 1989 through the early 1990s — events famously dubbed ‘refolutions’ by Timothy Garton Ash (1990, p. 14) to reflect their ambiguous blurring of the line between reform and revolution. These ‘reformist revolutions’ were not aimed at bringing about the abolition of feudalism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, or any other utopia — except perhaps an unselfconsciously utopian vision of perfect markets and democracy, based on a rose-tinted ideal of life in the capitalist West. Aimed at undoing the work of nominally revolutionary Marxist cadres long in power, this transnational movement was as much a rejection as an embrace of the notion of revolution.

More recently, the line between reform and revolution has become even blurrier, shaping profoundly the very meaning of the word revolution in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the precedent set since 2000 by the various ‘colour revolutions’ and ‘Arab Spring revolutions’ has arguably made this relatively new notion of the ‘reforming’ or ‘democratising’ revolution the dominant sense of the term, pushing out the older sense of ‘great’ or ‘total’ or ‘social’ revolution — which Skocpol (1979, p. 4) captured in her famous definition of social revolutions as ‘rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures … accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below’. This meant epoch-defining events like the French Revolution (c. 1789), Russian Revolution (c. 1917), and Chinese Revolution (c. 1949) — and when, as recently as the early 2000s, scholars openly speculated that the era of revolutions had come to an end (Foran 2003, pp. 1–2), it was no doubt great ‘social revolutions’ like these that they had in mind. But less than two decades later, history has made a sharp volte-face. Now we hear about new ‘revolutions’ breaking out so frequently that the term has gone from something between exotic and quaint, to something almost banal. But when these contemporary ‘revolutions’ happen, the expected goal is more likely to be some kind of reform of the existing state apparatus (e.g., democratisation), or simply the removal of the incumbent at its head, than its complete collapse and replacement — let alone the radical remoulding of underlying social structures. Furthermore, when states facing supposedly revolutionary challenges today do experience something like total collapse, the direct handmaidens of such events are as likely to be missile-dispensing North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) pilots as modern-day sans-culottes.

The wave of Arab ‘revolutions’ declared in 2011 is illustrative here. These achieved mixed results, and the relatively peaceful attainment of democratising reforms in Tunisia was widely hailed as the great success story of this ‘Arab Spring’. In Egypt, on the other hand, the main outcome was a personnel reshuffle at the apex of the state, along with a retrenchment of the power of the military therein. But where some of these uprisings did go the way of open conflict, several became highly militarised with the help of third-party state actors. Syria’s internal strife was compounded by regime change efforts from outside, and multiple state and non-state actors vied with each other — frequently by proxy — in the ensuing cockpit. Control of much of the national territory was temporarily wrested from the Damascus government, but the state eventually bounced back with the help of its allies, and managed to survive. Yemen also attracted extensive foreign intervention, becoming the battleground for a host of state and non-state actors, and experiencing a humanitarian crisis even more acute than that of Syria. The Yemeni state today, such as it exists, struggles to exercise any authority — let alone realise
the ‘monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory’ mentioned in Weber’s (1968, p. 56) famous definition of statehood. In Libya, meanwhile, Muammar Gaddafi may have been captured and killed by a motley crew of armed ‘revolutionaries’, but they had an important assist from the NATO aircraft that blasted his convoy minutes beforehand. Indeed, long before his assailants got anywhere near him, much of Gaddafi’s governmental and military infrastructure had been destroyed from the air by the self-same NATO forces, handily empowered by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 to effectively act as the air force of the jihadi ‘revolutionaries’ on the ground. The ensuing destruction of the Libyan state was quite total, and more than ten years on it would be difficult to claim that any real state now exists there, whether by Weber’s definition or any other.

These observations lead us to ask: is ‘revolution’ in its classic sense – that of the ‘great’ or ‘total’ or ‘social’ revolutions as per France c. 1789, Russia c. 1917, or China c. 1949 – now only of historical interest? Today we hear frequently – perhaps more than ever – about revolutions breaking out around the world. But are these really revolutions in the classic sense of the term? Or has the revolutionary form collapsed into reform at one end of the spectrum, and proxy inter-state conflict and regime change at the other?

In fact, this question cannot be satisfactorily answered yet, because any answer would depend on the outcomes of some highly contingent processes that are still working themselves out, and which may yet have decades left to run. These outcomes will determine whether or not the global capitalist system as we know it, as well as the world order predicated upon it, can be sustained in something like its current form. If it can, then we may continue to see the occasional Libya-style state collapse – perhaps helped along by outside military and/or paramilitary intervention, and branded ‘revolution’ for public relations purposes – and we may see many more ‘refolutions’, ‘colour revolutions’, ‘negotiated revolutions’ (Lawson 2005), and ‘tipping point revolutions’ (Collins 2013). But ‘great’, ‘total’, or ‘social’ revolutions in the classic sense may stay on the endangered species list. If, however, the proverbial ‘centre’ cannot hold, and the current order cannot sustain itself, then we may see a wave of state breakdown events to make the great social revolutions of the past look like dinner parties, to mangle Chairman Mao’s phrase.

This means that the most vexing reform-versus-revolution question of all – the one that split the socialist movement in the twentieth century – is still in play. This question concerns the very viability of the global capitalist system, and whether or not it can be reformed to the point of sustainability. Some would have said that this question had been resolved by the time of the postwar era, as it became clear that the leading economic classes in capitalist states could, at a push, bring themselves to cede significant demands to workers in the interests of social peace. In hindsight, that social deal looks like it was not just a triumph of reformism, but also a dividend of revolution in a certain sense – at least indirectly. More precisely, these were the dividends that capitalists were willing to share with workers as they eyed the twin dangers of nominally revolutionary socialism spreading within the capitalist world, and nominally revolutionary socialist states on the international horizon – some of them nuclear-armed. But with that revolutionary danger no longer in evidence, this social deal, already fraying before the end of the Cold War, has by now significantly unravelled. Alas, thirty post-Cold War years of capitalist hegemony have not stabilised the system; economically, ecologically and politically it looks less stable now than ever, with even many capitalists expressing grave concerns for its long-term viability (Jaffe 2019, Osnos 2017).

Thus, in the wake of this historical turnaround, Marxists can claim with at least some degree of plausibility that perhaps they were right all along – that capitalism ultimately is irreformable, that the mid-twentieth-century social democratic deal was a historical blip,
Reform and Revolution

and that this state of affairs will only be transcended when capitalist states and economies begin to collapse under the weight of their own contradictions, and as revolutionary situations arise.

All of the above questions would easily warrant their own dedicated article–or-book-length treatments. But in the spirit of this volume, they will be unceremoniously bundled together in what follows. Thus we will ask: whether reform has been more likely to accelerate or arrest revolutionary processes in the past; how we can make sense of contemporary processes that are dubbed ‘revolutions’, but which lead to, at best, mild reforms or personnel changes, and at worst, the collapse of the state into warlordism; and where we have landed in relation to the great reform-versus-revolution debate in its widest sense. That is: can our current ailing system be reformed? Or will it take a revolutionary crisis – perhaps greater than any previous revolutionary crisis – to be transcended?

Can reforms prevent revolution? France and England compared

The short answer to the question of whether reforms promote or constrain revolution is that: ‘It depends’. Plus: ‘It’s complicated’. In the early-to-mid twentieth century, students of revolution often assumed that the right policy choices could indeed ward it off – but later scholars often took a more sceptical view (Goldstone 1980, p. 430). From the mid-1970s on, various authors pointed out that the causes of revolution could not be reduced to a handful of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ policy choices here and there. Choosing the right policies and reforms might be important, but revolutions tend to emerge out of deep, long-term structural processes (Goldstone 1980, pp. 430–450). From this perspective, the tectonic shifts leading to revolutionary pressures are beyond the purview of any individual policy-maker or would-be reformer – not to mention revolutionary – however clear-sighted they may be. These scholars pointed to different kinds of underlying structural processes. Some, more or less influenced by the Marxist tradition, insisted on the fundamental importance of the gradual evolution in society’s economic base, and its implications for the relations between social classes. According to the classic Marxist formulation, as feudalism transitions to capitalism, the social power balance between the nobility and bourgeoisie also shifts, leading to long-nineteenth-century-style ‘bourgeois revolutions’. The eventual crisis of the bourgeois capitalist economic system, it was posited, would in turn lead to proletarian revolution, and the transition to socialism and ultimately communism. Not all revolution scholars of the era shared this Marxist vision, but many agreed that the basic emphasis on changing economic structures and attendant class struggle dynamics was important in understanding the causes of revolution.

Thus Theda Skocpol, in her groundbreaking (1979) study of the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions, did not break entirely from a Marxist-style emphasis on class, even if she focused more on peasants than on proletarians, and on state structures as much as economic ones. But Jack A. Goldstone (2016), the next great pioneer in the field, moved yet further away from the Marxist framework. His approach to explaining revolutions was still resolutely structural, and he saw economic, class, and state structures as essential elements in the causal mix leading to revolutionary outbreaks, but he saw an even deeper and more fundamental structural layer underlying and shaping these – namely society’s demographic structure. Economic and class dynamics mattered – and more specifically, it mattered whether society was producing enough food for people to eat, and at reasonable prices; whether tight or loose labour markets meant real wages and unemployment were high or low; and whether upward or downward social mobility was manageable, or creating major social tensions. But deep down, all of these dynamics were driven by shifting demographics.
Thus in Goldstone’s demographic structural theory (DST), the causes of revolution arose fundamentally from deep, long-term, macro-level structures – difficult to discern, difficult to fully explain, and certainly difficult for policy-makers and would-be reformers to grapple with. However, Goldstone did not entirely rule out the significance of reforming actions taken by states. Deep structural processes formed the basic conditions that made revolutionary pressures more or less probable – but how individual states opted to deal with those structural pressures was another question. Thus it was possible to make a state more or less resilient to such pressures via astute policies and reforms – but it was not easy, and it was not a matter of short-term policy fixes.

Goldstone (2016) illustrated this point through his comparison of France and England between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. As per other European and Eurasian countries, France and England experienced similar, and similarly timed demographic pressures in the mid-seventeenth century, late eighteenth century, and early nineteenth century. Each of these bouts led to corresponding upsurges in domestic political unrest: in the mid-seventeenth century the Fronde and the English Revolution; in the late eighteenth the French Revolution and lesser-known but significant outbreaks of political and religious ferment in Britain, including the 1768 St. George’s Fields Massacre, the 1780 Gordon Riots, the Church and King Riots of 1791, and the anti-press-gang violence of 1794; and later the 1820s and 1830s revolutions in France, overlapping with the Reform Crisis in England. These waves of unrest necessarily shaped state policy, but in very different ways in either country. Goldstone points out that in the most serious of these episodes, the demographically induced pressures on the economy led to state fiscal crises, precipitating revolutionary or near-revolutionary situations. But repeatedly, the English political system managed to outfoot the socio-demographic tremors, becoming more resilient for the next round. This was despite England’s demographic growth being considerably more dramatic than that of France – its population more than tripling from a paltry five million or so in 1650 to perhaps sixteen million by 1850, while France’s grew from about twenty-five million to thirty-three million in the same period (Hinde 2003, p. 183).

In explaining England’s greater resilience, Goldstone (2016, p. 318) points out that while the republican regime that followed the English Revolution was a relatively unhappy and fractious affair, it did manage to increase the state’s tax take – a reform necessary to pay for ongoing war-making, which had helped to cause the 1640s revolution by undermining Crown finances. Goldstone (2016, p. 319) notes that the later ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688 was neither particularly glorious nor really a revolution, but did begin to stitch together a workable consensus between monarch and parliament. A century later, the confrontation with revolutionary and then imperial France was useful in distracting a restive British public from domestic woes – but a more severe test would come with the Reform Crisis of the 1820s and early 1830s. Once again, demographic growth was moving the needle on popular unrest via pressure on wages, prices and employment in both countries. In England this manifested itself in the form of significant popular violence in the cause of electoral reform (Goldstone 2016, pp. 328–333). After a number of attempts, a Reform Bill was finally passed in both houses of parliament in 1832. This was far from universal suffrage, and in practice extended the electoral franchise from about 400,000 to perhaps 650,000, or approximately one fifth of adult males (Phillips and Wetherell 1995, pp. 413–414). But in eliminating some of the more obvious and egregious abuses of the electoral system – like abolishing ‘rotten’ or ‘pocket’ boroughs and giving representation to new urban agglomerations – it placated the public to a significant degree. Goldstone identifies this as a major historical fork in the road. Up to this point, England and France had suffered roughly comparable bouts of political unrest.
in response to roughly comparable upticks in demographic growth. But from this point on, England would break this cycle – the public being assuaged with timely reforms and, thanks to an economy growing and industrialising faster than anywhere else in Europe, jobs – while France remained locked in a cycle of periodic revolt. Goldstone directly contrasts the good sense of the reforming British statesmen of 1832 with their counterparts in France. The Reform Crisis in England came not long after France’s 1830 revolution, when Charles X had chosen a very different course to that seen in England two years later. Goldstone (2016, p. 332) suggests that if William IV had acted like Charles X, dissolving parliament and using the army against ensuing demonstrations, England might well have faced her own 1830-style revolution.

Such counterfactuals are inherently debatable. But one implication of Goldstone’s analysis is clear. That is, over the course of three centuries, the governing elites of England had repeatedly been more effective than those of France in working the levers of the state to reform their way out of demographically induced, potentially revolutionary crisis – while the French had squandered opportunities to do so.

According to Goldstone’s analysis, this dynamic was evident from the immediate aftermath of the Fronde onwards – hence his scepticism that much later reforms caused the 1789 revolution. Both Louis XV and XVI did attempt reforms amid growing fiscal troubles. But in Goldstone’s view, the chance to enact English-style reforms – particularly more efficient tax collection, targeting growing sectors of the economy such as trade and manufacture, rather than relatively stagnant ones like land and agriculture – had already been missed (Goldstone 2016, p. 192, p. 199, p. 207), and the damage substantially done.

The Soviet outlier: reforming all the way to state collapse

Is Goldstone right to be so dismissive of the idea that there is a causal link between reform and revolution? Perhaps. But even if he is correct that the supposed link is typically an illusion of perspective, it is worth asking whether there might be any cases that buck this trend. The N is inherently small here: major revolutions and state breakdown events are relatively rare occurrences. They can also shape world history exponentially. That means every case really does matter, even if it is an outlier. It is thus worth looking again at one of the cases from the hybrid group of East Bloc ‘refolutions’ mentioned above, and arguably the greatest outlier of all – namely the collapse of the USSR. Like the other cases in this group (those of the Warsaw Pact satellite states), the scuppering of the Soviet mothership itself falls into the grey area between reform and revolution. However, in some respects it registers high on the revolutionary ‘Richter scale’, and even meets some of the key criteria of ‘social’, ‘total’, or ‘great’ revolutions. That is, the demise of the USSR was a major, sudden and unexpected state breakdown event; this crisis did not arise from an exogenous shock on the scale of a foreign invasion, but to a large extent from internal factors; and it led to a fundamental recasting of state, societal, economic, and class structures across the territory in which it occurred. If the skyrocketing mortality attributable to the collapse is taken into account, it even has a death toll to rival the most violent of the great revolutions – perhaps 2.5–3.4 million in Russia (Men et al. 2003, p. 1, Rosefielde 2001, p. 1159), compared to 9.7 million or so in the post-socialist space as a whole (UNDP 1999). In terms of causes, it is common knowledge that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforming zeal played an important part. But it is also commonly assumed that much more decisive than any particular reforms launched by Gorbachev was an underlying context of deep, widespread, chronic, and intractable structural problems afflicting the Soviet system. According to this view, the Soviet state was a
case study in Byzantine, bureaucratic dysfunction, the economy a basketcase, the bloated military sucking the country’s resources dry. Meanwhile an increasingly dispirited Soviet society seethed under a cloud of police state repression. From this perspective, Gorbachev’s reforms simply opened the floodgates of discontent by removing the taboos that had erstwhile prevented open discussion of the system’s inherent unsustainability, thus speeding up its inevitable breakdown. If a conventional wisdom has by now congealed around the Soviet collapse and its purported causes, this is it. And in this story, reform plays the role of revolutionary accelerant, rather than true revolutionary cause.

But as with many compelling stories, it has a complicated relationship with the world of fact. The weight of evidence for the claimed structural inevitability of the Soviet downfall is mixed at best, and was not noticed by any contemporary observers until the very end, when a shocked world finally realised that the superpower could disappear at any minute. Let us consider the supposedly intractable impasse that Gorbachev encountered upon assuming office in 1985. The Soviet budget deficit hovered around a modest 1.8% on the eve of his rise to power (Joint Economic Committee 1993, p. 47), which stands in stark contrast to the steep fiscal cliffs we see other states careening toward prior to the outbreak of full-blown revolutionary situations.³ Average Soviet GNP growth was also about 1.8% in the pre-Gorbachev 1980s (Joint Economic Committee 1990, p. 3), and was indeed perceived by senior Soviet officials as unacceptably low, and reflective of economic stagnation. However, bouts of low growth are anything but unusual for developed economies, especially after prolonged periods of high growth and economic expansion – as governments in the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and elsewhere have painfully found out – and Kotkin (2001, pp. 17–18) suggests that the sluggish economy inherited by Gorbachev in 1985 was going through a belated Soviet version of the ‘stagflation’ doldrums faced by the United States and other Western societies in the mid-1970s. To put things in perspective, the annualised growth rate of US real GDP from 1973 through 1976 was just 1.51% (Williamson 2020a), while the equivalent figure for the United Kingdom was −0.38% (Williamson 2020b). Low growth like this is a problem, but not necessarily of the state-collapsing kind.

As for the Soviet military, its budget was certainly high, and it undoubtedly devoured resources. But there is little evidence for the widespread perception that the budget spiked unsustainably in the 1980s, either due to a supposed uptick in the missile race with the United States over fears of a US first strike, or the Afghan war, or both. The cost of the latter had grown to perhaps 2%–2.5% of the overall Soviet military budget by 1986, according to a 1987 CIA report – some of which would have been spent anyway (Central Intelligence Agency 1987, pp. iii–iv). As for the former, ICBMs no doubt consumed a large percentage of the Soviet military budget – estimates still vary as to how much – but some key Soviet defence insiders were sceptical that high military spending was causing the USSR’s problems, and even believed the real secret of the Soviet military budget to be its modesty relative to the American one (Harrison 2008, p. 10). Following Masliukov and Glubokov (1999, p. 105), Harrison (2008, p. 11) suggests that Soviet military spending may have peaked at 8.9% of GDP in 1988, but that this was not inordinately greater than the equivalent figures for 1980 (7.4%), 1970 (7.3%), or 1960 (7.5%).

As for public sentiment, support for independence was certainly growing in some of the USSR’s fifteen constituent republics in its latter years – particularly in the Baltic and Caucasus regions. But it is not clear that majority support for dissolving the Soviet state ever existed on a Union-wide basis. As late as March 1991, when the Soviet system was already starting to crumble, a referendum held in nine of the fifteen republics (representing a large majority of the Soviet population) found 77.85% support for preserving the Union, based on a turnout
of 80% (Karasik 1992, pp. 399–400). The verdict was the same in all nine of the voting republics, albeit with significant differences in vote share. This marked an apparent victory for Gorbachev’s bid to save the Union in a new and revamped form, which had been the impetus for the referendum (Kotz and Weir 2007, p. 141, 328n). Public opinion polls carried out around the same time indicate that the prospect of a transition to liberal or free market capitalism may not have been any more popular than a break-up of the Union (Kotz and Weir 2007, pp. 132–133, 326n, Times Mirror Center 1991, p. 256.). Regardless of any such public opinion, however, the fact that six Soviet republics were able to boycott the referendum shows how far the process of disintegration had already gone. Ultimately, the referendum results would matter as little as the opinion polls, and the USSR would not see out the year.

But if the standard structural narrative does not explain the Soviet collapse, what does? In fact, the key structures of the Soviet system, including the economy, did begin to fall apart in the latter days of the USSR. But this happened after Gorbachev launched his reforms – not before. Thus annual GNP growth dropped from a lacklustre average of 1.8% between 1981 and 1985 to a catastrophic −12.8% in 1991 (Kotz and Weir 2007, p. 73), as the budget deficit ballooned from 1.8% in 1985 to 12%–14% in 1991 (Joint Economic Committee 1993, p. 47). Meanwhile the very structures of the Soviet state itself were dissolving, with a wave of independence declarations by constituent Soviet republics commencing in 1990.

The story of how this dramatic chain of events came to pass is complex, but it is difficult to discern any clear sign of these coming developments – even in embryonic form – prior to Gorbachev’s reforms. It is also difficult to know where to start in describing the cascading series of shocks that buffeted the Soviet economy, state, and society in the second half of the 1980s, since they rapidly blurred into a general crisis of the Soviet system that is hard to disentangle. What does seem clear is the line connecting most of these shocks to the reform agenda of Gorbachev. One of the first signs of trouble was a major fiscal hole created by Gorbachev’s clampdown on alcohol production and sales, launched in 1986, which led to a shortfall in state revenue of 28 billion roubles (or perhaps significantly more) in the space of three years (Schrad 2014, p. 281) – almost twice the cost of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan up to 1986 (CIA 1987, p. iii). In an economy without Western-style income taxes, state finances were disproportionately reliant on sales taxes and particularly the state vodka monopoly, possibly accounting for more than a quarter of state revenue in the late Soviet era (Schrad 2014, p. 11, p. 267) – a drop in which Gorbachev hoped would be offset by the higher productivity of a sober workforce, and by the redirection of consumer spending to other, more wholesome, Kremlin-approved outlets. It was not. (Although the black market did flourish.)

This was merely one of the first in a series of well-meaning but ill-fated reforms, whose unintended consequences would quickly envelop Soviet society. Apart from creating a revenue shortfall, the alcohol clampdown also led to the growth of organised crime, and to shortages. A 1990s-style ‘Russian mafia’ had yet to supersede the traditional ‘vory’ criminal underworld, but many precocious early adopters got their start clearing shops of Cuban sugar and other alcohol precursors (Galeotti 2018, p. 99), while consumers were frequently poisoned by the resultant samogon (Schrad 2014, p. 282). The sugar and alcohol shortages would quickly be followed by others, as ham-fisted modifications to central planning gave state enterprises pseudo-market incentives to produce higher-profit-margin goods over basic staples (Kotz and Weir 2007, p. 79). In fact, various reforms were aimed simultaneously at democratising, decentralising, and marketising production – but succeeded only in bringing about further unintended consequences. Extra roubles were printed in order to hike wages and encourage consumption, but the concurrence of this with increasing shortages, plummeting world oil
prices, and costly relief efforts following the 1986 Chernobyl meltdown and 1988 Armenian earthquake led eventually to a rapidly growing budget deficit and (initially hidden) inflationary pressure that was unprecedented in the price-controlled Soviet system (Kotz and Weir 2007, p. 79, p. 141). The USSR’s two key central planning agencies, Gosplan and Gossnab, were even abolished in July 1991, apparently in the hope that fully formed market dynamics would emerge overnight to take their place (Kotz and Weir 2007, p. 86). They did not.

De facto private enterprises were also now allowed, often gaming the system by exporting cheap, price-controlled Soviet consumer goods to the Third World for handsome profits, once again exacerbating shortages and undermining the domestic economy (Kotz and Weir 2007, pp. 89–90). This new grey zone of the Soviet economy provided further opportunities for the emerging mafia to grow (Galeotti 2018, pp. 101–102), and rumours circulated of other shadowy schemes lurking behind the increasingly evident shortages (Kotz and Weir 2007, p. 77, p. 79).

Opportunities for graft and corruption quickly metastasised, and paradoxically, the more turmoil Gorbachev’s reforms created, the louder grew the calls for further, increasingly radical reforms. Soon the ultimate taboo – the one that had previously discouraged intellectuals from calling for the abandonment of socialism – was smashed (Kotz and Weir 2007, pp. 65–69, 83–84). This was an unintended consequence of the political and cultural side of Gorbachev’s reforms. For while perestroika (‘restructuring’) reshaped the economy, glasnost (‘openness’) transformed the political system and civil society. Tactical considerations were not far from Gorbachev’s mind, likely fearing that some senior officials might try to depose him – the fate of previous reformer Khrushchev. Seeking an alternative political base outside the existing institutions, he sidelined the Politburo and Party Central Committee while empowering civil society, diffusing more power to the republics, and breathing new quasi-democratic life into representative bodies such as the revived Soviets and new Congress of People’s Deputies (Kotkin 2001, pp. 76–77). Little did he suspect that this opening would be filled by anti-Soviet ideology and a mutinous intelligentsia.

Gorbachev also made it clear to the Warsaw Pact governments that they were now on their own, leading to the tumultuous events of 1989 and 1990, and ultimately to these states peeling away from the socialist bloc. Gorbachev may have come to regret this when the Soviet republics that identified most strongly with these Central and Eastern European buffer states – namely the USSR’s Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – took advantage of their empowerment by Gorbachev’s reforms, and the ambiguous nature of the Soviet constitution, to follow the satellites’ lead, and declare their own independence from Moscow. As the chaos ratcheted up, and as the economy went into free-fall, previously loyal Communist Party bosses in other republics started to follow suit. As the unravelling of the Soviet system picked up momentum, as talk of a pivot away from state socialism became open, and as it became clear that a critical mass among the intelligentsia and professional-managerial class (AKA ‘nomenklatura’) favoured such a move – whatever about the wider populace – the sense spread that some kind of mass liquidation of public assets was imminent. Thus everyone who could do so scrambled to be in pole position for the coming privatisation – legally or otherwise – whether that meant the acquisition of factories and oil refineries in the case of managers-turned-oligarchs, or whole countries, in the case of local Party notables declaring independence for their republics. The final straw came in mid-December 1991 when the Russian republic itself, under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, seceded from the USSR – somewhat like England declaring its independence from the United Kingdom, and just as much of an oxymoron. Gorbachev was still de jure president of the USSR, but de facto president of nothing at all. Yeltsin’s self-styled Russian government appropriated what was left of many
key Soviet institutions – frequently acting unilaterally and extralegally – and after some shady backroom dealings the USSR was formally dissolved in late December 1991.

These events are sometimes described in terms of ‘refolution’ – but that term is ambiguous as to the relation between the ‘reform’ and ‘revolution’ components therein. If anything, the suggestion tends to be that the basic causes of the Soviet collapse were structural, like many other full-blown revolutions in history, with Gorbachev’s reforms playing only an assisting role in catalysing them. Indeed, Goldstone is surely correct that it is usually erroneous to say that reform causes revolution. However, there is some reason to think that the Soviet case may be the exception that tests this rule. The USSR did collapse in the context of a profound structural crisis. But this structural crisis was to a significant extent of Gorbachev’s own making. Prior to 1985, the USSR faced serious structural problems, but it is difficult to see any of them representing real existential threats up to this point. It was only after Gorbachev came to power that the USSR’s problems truly spun out of control.

Some of this can be put down to bad luck, some to mundane errors of judgement. But there is a perplexing quality to many of Gorbachev’s decisions in this period. In systematically attacking the political and economic structures that held the USSR together, he made a profound structural crisis not just possible, but inevitable. Cases of revolution and state breakdown track fiscal crisis closely. There was no fiscal crisis in the USSR upon Gorbachev’s rise to power in 1985. But there certainly was by the summer of 1991, when the Soviets were begging Western governments for a financial lifeline, selling diamonds to pay for grain imports, and secretly printing money and raiding private savings to plug a 68-billion-rouble fiscal hole caused in large part by the withholding of taxes by enterprises and republics (Zubok 2021, p. 237). Such a weakening of the Soviet state and collapse of the tax system would have been unthinkable before Gorbachev’s reforms.

Creating such a profound structural crisis essentially on a whim is a remarkable feat. Losing a sixth of the world in a fit of absence of mind – and effectively ending the global communist project in the process – must count as one of the most spectacular own goals in history. This finding sits awkwardly with social scientific expectations as to how social change is supposed to work. But if it is not incorrect, it speaks to the hidden fragility of superficially robust social systems, particularly under severely inept leadership, and how easily the social ‘hardware’ can break down when the old ‘software’ (in this case socialist/communist) is swapped out for a new and vaguely-defined kind (socialism 2.0? capitalism?) overnight. It may also speak to the power of what some social scientists would call ‘micro-macro’ causal mechanisms – that is, multiple micro-level decisions or bets resulting in a certain macro-level outcome, and more specifically, that of the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ variety (Héritier 2008, p. 71) – once Party cadre saw what way the wind was blowing, and turned from loyal apparatchiks to smash-and-grab capitalists overnight.

**Conclusion: reform-versus-revolution redux**

If it is true that the ‘revolution’ against the Soviet system and the collapse of the USSR were caused more by Gorbachev’s reforms than by underlying structural factors, what are our major takeaways from this? Do we need to revisit our theories of revolution and state breakdown, which tend to be rather structuralist in nature? Do we need to think about Gorbachev’s role in terms of ‘agency’? Or should we chalk this up as one very unusual exception to the general rules as to how social change happens, reflecting a very unusual set of historical circumstances?

There is no easy answer to this question, and it is inherently debatable. But one thing is sure: if we wish to understand the terrain on which the age-old reform-versus-revolution...
question plays out today, then we must accept the odd fact that that very terrain is indelibly structured by the Soviet collapse – or, in a sense, by Gorbachev’s ‘agency’. While the Cold War period saw unprecedented anxiety about our chances of survival as a species, it also brought about unprecedented reductions in inequality and gains in human welfare on both sides of the Iron Curtain (Cereseto and Waitzkin 1986, World Bank 2016). Many predicted that things would only get better with the ‘End of History’ and the apparent victory of liberal capitalism over the communist challenge (Fukuyama 1992). Thirty years on, it is clear that such predictions were wildly off base. We now face existential threats of an ecological nature that were only dimly conceivable during the Cold War, as the extent of human civilisation’s disequilibrium with the natural world becomes ever starker. Indeed, given its possible origins in the encroachment of humanity ever further into wildlife habitats, the Covid-19 pandemic is suggestive of the likely complexity of future crises.

Furthermore, a handful of fateful decisions by certain Western states to militarily intervene in certain Muslim-majority countries have led to a generational cycle of conventional and unconventional conflict stretching from 9/11 to ISIS and beyond, that, once again, would scarcely have been imaginable during the Cold War. On top of that, the 2008 crash threatened the kind of global crisis of capitalism that Marxists had promised was just around the corner during the Cold War, but which had never quite seemed to materialise. Some of the pundits who predicted the crash have recently warned that a 2008 redux is likely at any moment – possibly much more severe this time, since the pathologies and structural weaknesses underlying 2008 were never really dealt with, and rather allowed to fester and metastasise (Bloomberg 2018, Roubini 2020). And that was before the Covid-19 pandemic injected its particular brand of uncertainty and imbalance into the world economy, and before the inflation and shortages that had become familiar by 2022. Even Europe, which was supposed to be united by the end of the Cold War, is now synonymous with crisis and division. On its eastern flank a war rages at time of writing. Even in the ‘first world’ heartlands of the West, it is now widely accepted that life is getting worse rather than better generation on generation, as wages stagnate, decent middle-class and even blue-collar jobs dwindle, welfare states creak, housing becomes wildly unaffordable, fertility falls, human height begins to decline, and the gaps between cosmopolitan metropolises and depressed rural and rustbelt hinterlands widen. For many people in the even more chaotic spaces outside these zones, however, the increasingly decrepit West still looks attractive, and 22,842 deaths of would-be migrants to Europe were recorded on the Mediterranean route alone between January 2014 and October 2021 – probably representing less than 1% of the total number attempting the trip, and certainly an undercount (International Organization for Migration, 2021). Meanwhile, lacking a Mediterranean-style moat on its southern border, the United States has built a wall and detention camp archipelago in the desert to contain migrant flows. Far-flung Australia intercepts boatloads of migrants at sea who, if they are lucky, are disgorged into offshore holding facilities beyond the niceties of domestic law. Those fleeing the war in Ukraine are ‘welcomed’ by the West, but the scale of this latest refugee crisis is still profound.

These are just some of the grave afflictions that have marked the past thirty years or so. But the point is not that these failed to be predicted by the ‘End of History’ buffs cheerleading the Soviet collapse. The point is that most of these developments would probably not have happened if not for that event. If Gorbachev had not reformed his way to a ‘revolution’ against the then world order, we would be living in a very different world. We might have very grave problems in that world, but they would to a significant extent be different problems. The 1991 Gulf War would not have happened, because the traditional Cold War balance of power would not have allowed it. (The USSR still existed during the Gulf War, but was busy tearing itself
Reform and Revolution

apart, while developing a pro-Western foreign policy.) If there had been no 1991 Gulf War, then there would probably have been no 2003 Iraq War. If there had been no 2003 Iraq War, then ISIS might today be a figment in the imagination of some mid-ranking Iraqi Army personnel after one too many whiskies in the officers’ mess, under the watchful gaze of Saddam’s portrait. If there had still been a Cold War-style balance of power, then NATO would not have been in a position to fold Gaddafi’s Libya. If Syria, Libya and now Afghanistan (again) had not been overrun by jihadis, then there would probably not be so many people drowning on the Mediterranean route to Europe. And if the USSR had not collapsed, Russia would not be at war with Ukraine. In short, well-placed reforms may help ward off revolutions – but when ill-thought-out ones collide with the right (or ‘wrong’) circumstances and structures, the ‘revolutionary’ possibilities flowing from this can be mindboggling.

The ‘End of History’ has been considerably more tumultuous than Fukuyama predicted. But was he perhaps still right in a limited way, in spite of himself? Was he correct in the sense that the old-style, ideologically driven revolutions of the past – the French 1789s, Russian 1917s and Chinese 1949s – would not repeat themselves, whatever about more general tumult? As Zhou Enlai is purported to have remarked when asked to evaluate the French revolution, it is ‘too soon to say’. Most of the purported ‘revolutions’ of the twenty-first century have up to this point been limited political revolutions at best, rather than deeper and more thorough-going social revolutions – or to use Randall Collins’ (2013) terms, ‘tipping point revolutions’ rather than ‘state collapse’ revolutions. And where states have collapsed or come close thereto, it has largely been through overwhelming military and paramilitary force mobilised by other states and their intermediaries. But serious, even unprecedented structural challenges currently afflict societies the world over, leading a number of scholars to predict that the coming decades could see major nation-states collapsing of their own accord, and perhaps along with them the world system as we know it (Turchin 2012, 2013, 2016, Turchin and Korotayev 2020, Turchin et al. 2018). Thus the kinds of structural circumstances that in the past led to great revolutions may well repeat themselves in the near future. But if the examples cited in this chapter show anything, it is that structural circumstances are not everything.

Firstly, the right reforms at the right time can sometimes quench revolutionary flames, while the wrong ones can fan them. However, it is worth noting that right now there is little sign of any significant reforms in the offing relevant to the acute structural impasse described above – either of the judicious, well-timed variety or the jittery, last-ditch type warned about by Machiavelli. Even in the comparatively wealthy and stable West, where increasingly polarised societies are visibly fraying under the relentless onslaught of the new normal, there is little indication of an appetite for meaningful structural reforms on the part of the oligarchic classes or the ruling political formations tied to them. The 2020s will no doubt be big on rhetoric about ‘new new deals’ and ‘FDR moments’ and ‘building back better’ – this rhetoric has already been mobilised – but there is little real indication of a 1930s-or-1940s-type moment whereby economic elites might be persuaded to sacrifice significant shares of their own wealth or power in the interest of maintaining social stability. It is for this reason that the classic Marxist ‘irreformability of capitalism’ thesis, having seen some tough times, now looks arguably more plausible than ever.

Secondly, objective structural circumstances may supply the kindling for revolution, but the intensity of the revolutionary flames also depends on subjective conditions such as ideology. The ideologies that fuelled many of the great revolutions of the past are now shadows of their former selves. The reform-versus-revolution question was debated by millions of socialists and social democrats in the twentieth century – whereas now such debates take place, if at all, in unfashionable micro-journals or, worse, fashionable Williamsburg brunch joints. The
resurgence of these ideologies in some form should not be ruled out—nor should the passing of the mantle to other, potentially very different revolutionary ideologies (Atran 2015). But in the absence of a meaningful revolutionary vision of remaking society, it is possible for states to collapse and then simply stay collapsed indefinitely—what we might call ‘the Libya option’, but not necessarily involving military intervention from outside, if the structural crisis is severe enough. The twenty-first century may see many more Libyas before this historical cycle has worked itself out, and some of them may be in the West.

Notes

1 For relatively recent attempts to quantify the extent of political violence seen in Britain in this period, often overshadowed by other events, see Tilly (2005) and Davis and Feeney (2017).

2 Davis and Feeney (2017) point out that other factors were probably also important in maintaining political stability in Britain after 1832 in spite of exponential demographic growth. Extremely high levels of emigration plus settler-colonialism and imperial state expansion jointly formed a safety valve for excess population. For Goldstone’s response, see Goldstone (2017).

3 This is even if such fiscal crises seem to have represented necessary rather than sufficient conditions for some of history’s great revolutions (Goldstone 2016, p. 100, p. 106, pp. 193–194, pp. 198–201).

References


Reform and Revolution


