

A Theory of Revolution

The great Harvard historian Crane Brinton in 1938 published *The Anatomy of Revolution*, which argued that all revolutions pass through similar stages. He compared several revolutions, but his main model was the French. Brinton's stages are as follows:

The old regime loses its governing effectiveness and legitimacy. It becomes inept and indecisive. Intellectuals especially become alienated from it. An improving economy provokes discontent and jealousy.

The first stage of revolution comes with the growth of antiregime groups. Triggering the revolution is a political problem — such as whether the three estates should meet separately or together — that the old regime can't solve. Rioting breaks out, but troops sent to crush it de

Moderates initially seize power. They opposed the old regime, but as critics rather than as revolutionaries. They want major reform rather than total revolution. Extremists accuse them of being weak and cowardly, and true enough, they are not ruthless enough to crush the extremists.

Extremists take over because they are more ruthless, purposeful, and organized than the moderates. In what Brinton likened to a high fever during an illness, the extremists whip up revolution to a *frenzy*, throwing out everything old, forcing people to be good, and punishing real or imagined enemies in a reign of terror. In France, this stage came with Robespierre; in Iran, with Khomeini.

A "Thermidor," or calming-down period, ends the reign of terror. Brinton named Thermidor after the French revolutionary month — the revolutionaries even devised a new calendar — in which Robespierre fell. Every revolution has a Thermidor, which Brinton likened to a convalescence after a fever, because human nature can't take the extremists and their revolutionary purity for too long. Power usually then falls into the hands of a dictator, who restores order but not liberty.

Brinton's theory became a classic and has largely stood the test of time. Revolutions do seem to pass through stages, although their timing cannot be predicted with accuracy. Iran, as we shall see, has followed the Brinton pattern.