REVOLUTION AND THE MILLENIUM

China, Mexico, and Iran

James F. Rinehart

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To the memory of my mother and father

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Acknowledgments

My fascination with millenarianism and political violence began long before I considered writing this book. Both subjects have been, and remain, sources of profound interest and curiosity to me. In some small way it is my goal that this text will assist in furthering our understanding of the relationship between these profound sociopolitical phenomena.

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Revolution and the Millennium

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Introduction

The idea of the end of the world offers humankind a tantalizing, yet confusing, appeal. On the one hand, such a notion provides us with a certain amount of definition and precision to the otherwise ambiguous and sporadic nature of the human experience. The cosmological nature that surrounds the notion of a final reckoning between good and evil—between the moral perfection of God triumphing over the anti-God, the embodiment of all that is evil in the world—is perhaps the most compelling of all human conceptions. It offers final solutions to seemingly unanswerable questions about the meaning of life. And generates a profound sense of renewal and inspiration that humans are generally incapable of otherwise sensing in the temporal world.

On the other hand, the anticipated achievement of this final epoch of paradise and absolute freedom leaves us profoundly bewildered, restless, and overwhelmed. There are simply too many unanswered questions. Will there truly be an end time? If so, when will it happen? What will be its nature? What will follow? And perhaps most important, what role will humans perform in such an event? What should be done to prepare the way for the final days? Will humans be actively involved in events or merely innocent bystanders?

Such questions sustain our anxiety about our present condition and, at the same time, energize our imaginations about the possibility of a better, or perhaps even perfect, existence following the end time.

This is a study of how humankind has attempted to answer some of these questions. It is a study of the relationship between millenarianism and revolution. As such, it will consider the connection between two distinctly different social phenomena, both of which represent what one could consider the extreme within their respective ideological categories. On the one hand, revolution embodies the

extreme state of sociopolitical behavior, in the sense that through such a process humankind explicitly seeks to thoroughly and radically transform the institutions and values of society.[1] On the other hand, if we define ideology as a doctrine regarding the right and wrong ways in which social power and authority can be used and in what direction society should be headed, then millenarianism must be understood to be ideology in its most extreme form.[2] It may be described as an ideology of perfectionism grounded in the belief that divinely-inspired power is capable of bringing about a form of heaven on earth.

Nonetheless, revolutionary groups and millenarian-inspired sects are compatible extremists. Indeed, they generally share some common characteristics. For example, both revolutionists and millenarians emerge in the presence of pervasive social disorientation—when conditions within the community are abnormal and unsettled, and the polity as a whole is in a state of "disequilibrium."[3] Such disorientation may be either perceived or real—it really doesn't matter to the revolutionist or the millenarian. To them, perception is reality.

During harsh and difficult social circumstances, both revolutionists and millenarians anticipate massive social change. They come to believe that society cannot continue on under such pressures. Indeed, both revolutionists and millenarians seem to recognize, long before most other people, that society may be in some form of danger; that the end of what now exists may be near. Not only is a complete overturning of existing conditions possible, it is imminent, they are convinced.

The ultimate goal of the revolutionist and the millenarian is social rescue and salvation. Nevertheless, both believe that this salvation must be preceded by the complete elimination of what has been before and are convinced that a new era, age, or epoch in history is about to begin—one that will be free of the pain, suffering, and indignation of the previous stage.

Finally, the journey of both the revolutionist and the millenarian is expected to end in social harmony, regularity, dignity, and tranquility. Both possess an unshakable belief in the inevitability of their activities, and the sacred nature of their mission provides a lofty and definitive significance to those who participate.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the presence of millenarian doctrine has been asserted to be an important component in the process of revolutionary change in both the East and the West.[4] It has been argued that millenarian doctrines "lie at the heart of all revolutions, at least for that inner circle of zealots whom Crane Brinton calls 'the extremists.' "[5]

MILLENARIANISM: AN ANCIENT AND MODERN NOTION

The first meaning of millenarianism, and the context most often associated with the phenomenon, was a limited, religious-inspired one. The Christian world has always anticipated the end time, and its teachings reflect this expectation. Originally, millenarianism referred specifically to the belief held by some Christians (who literally interpreted the Book of Revelation) that after his Second Coming,

Jesus Christ will create a messianic kingdom on earth and will reign over it, with the help of a select or "chosen" people, for a thousand years preceding the Final Judgment.[6]

Most human beings, not just Christians, confront the idea of the end of the world at some time or another—connected, in large part perhaps, to the human necessity for coming to grips with one's individual mortality. How each of us comes to rationalize some vague philosophy, whether it be religious or secular in scope, regarding the likelihood and character of the end time—how will it happen? what will take place? when will it occur? what will follow, if anything?—represents our own possible personal brush with millenarianism. It is a powerful concept that is culturally grounded in superstitions, myths, and even magic.[7] Nonetheless, it represents the most important manifestation of the uniquely human quality of hope.

In recent years the term has been substantially broadened by some social scientists who have attempted to understand millenarianism outside of its religious foundations. Armed with an expanding body of research about non-Christian movements that nonetheless exhibit the characteristics of millenarianism,[8] researchers have come to view the phenomenon in increasingly secular terms—as a collective social response to massive upheaval and disorientation such as that engendered by natural disasters or the disorientation resulting from the clash of highly dissimilar cultures.[9]

As a result, millenarianism is now perceived of in a more liberal sense. In the context of this study, millenarian movements are powerfully emotional social movements whose members anticipate a unique type of social salvationism—an immediate, collective, total, this worldly, supernatural rescue, and subsequent transformation of society.[10] Millenarians expect the complete destruction of the existing social, political, and economic order. And they are convinced that such an all-encompassing calamity and social disaster will be immediately followed by a new and perfect society.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to assume that the millenarian's belief in the inevitability of a perfect world is the exclusive influence on his or her actions. While such a belief dominates millenarians' day-to-day perspective and performs an important function in how they interpret events in the world, it is not the only factor impinging on their lives. Indeed, millenarian expectations never exist in a psychological or social vacuum. They always coincide with and blend into concurrent social influences and inspirations.[11] It is this amalgam that, perhaps, contributes to the wide variations in form, scope, and actions of millenarian-inspired groups.

Millenarian beliefs, and their adherents, in varying degrees and forms, are present in all true revolutionary upheavals,[12] and little scholarship has been devoted to the functional role they tend to perform in such conflicts. It is this void that this study will attempt to fill.

Using a comparative analysis of historical events in China, Mexico, and Iran, I will explore the functional role of millenarianism in the stages and process of revolution. I will argue that pervasive millenarian expectations were an important component of all three revolutions. I will identify and expand upon the functions

performed by millenarianism in these conflicts and will seek to answer the question: What specific roles and functions does millenarianism discharge as a society accelerates toward and ultimately becomes embroiled in revolution?

At first blush it would appear that the twentieth-century revolutions occurring in China, Mexico, and Iran would be unlikely candidates for a comparative study of revolutionary conflicts. After all, China, existing for centuries in a largely self-imposed insular position in relation to the West and only recently thrust into world affairs through the obtrusive process of European imperialism, would not seem to possess any sort of commonality with the unique, Islamic-dominated culture of Iran, or the ethnic and class conflicts that characterized Porfirista Mexico.

However, it is no mere coincidence that revolutions erupted in these three countries early in the twentieth century. These revolutionary conflicts (Iran in 1905, Mexico in 1910, and China in 1911) became episodic upheavals that, particularly in China and Iran, manifested in later revolutionary violence (1927-28 and 1945-49 in China and 1978-79 in Iran), achieved varying degrees of sociopolitical and economic transformation in all three societies, and have affected international events throughout the twentieth century.

In reality, these three seemingly diverse states shared many remarkable features that offer us the opportunity for a meaningful comparative study of revolution.

The specific, historical focus of this study will be on a comparison of the processes surrounding: (1) the emergence of Chinese Communism, its ascendance to power, and its revolutionary transformation of Chinese society; (2) the Indian component of the Mexican Revolution; and (3) the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79, which resulted in the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Nonetheless, it is important to understand that these specific events did not occur in a vacuum. The revolution that came about in each of these societies may trace its origin to factors that existed prior to the twentieth century and did not end with the cessation of violence.

First, the peoples of China, Mexico, and Iran have traditionally been imbued with a powerful sense of historical destiny. Each of these societies had once risen to great power and then declined—the powerful Chinese dynasties, the Aztecs and Mayans of Mesoamerica, and the Persian empire—yet each held on to a firmly settled, unbroken, preindustrial societal framework.[13]

Second, the intrusion of Western imperialism, as it had in other societies, introduced new socioeconomic and political ideas into China, Mexico, and Iran, ideas that challenged and in many ways threatened their social and cultural systems. Constitutionalism, Christianity, capitalism, and later the Western concept of human rights all represent important examples of Western imported ideas that engendered both intellectual and social stress in all three societies.

All three countries, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were experiencing socioeconomic and profound cultural intervention by the Western industrial powers. At the same time, their national political regimes pursued public policies that enlarged and enhanced their political and economic rule over "traditionally de-centralized" populations. Also, at the same time, these regimes sought

to promote and foster their relationship with the Western great powers in an effort to achieve economic development.[14] Yet in all three cases, this development was pursued solely for the benefit of a foreign entrepreneur-host government partnership, and not for the peoples of the nation as a whole. This foreign intervention combined with local government complicity provoked antagonism among the large peasant classes and an emerging labor class that, in all three cases, consisted primarily of former peasants. Discontent among these groups emerged as the result of three primary factors: (1) reduced sociopolitical autonomy, (2) economic dislocation, and (3) the perceived violation and corruption of ancient and sacred social values, mores, and customs threatened by Westernization.

Third, China, Mexico, and Iran had each suffered defeat in a disastrous nineteenth-century war with a Western power (the Opium War between China and Britain, the Mexican War with the United States, and a series of wars between Iran and Russia, and Iran and Great Britain). These conflicts left the peoples of these countries both humiliated and bitter. Each country lost important territory to their adversaries. However, perhaps more significant, many Chinese, Mexicans, and Iranians came to perceive of themselves as subjugated by the superior forces of Western imperialism, forces that were casting an increasing influence on their economy and culture.

Following their defeat by the British in 1842, for example, the Chinese people were forced (through the provisions of the Treaty of Nanking) to: (1) make burdensome reparations to the British treasury; (2) allow the British, and eventually other Western powers, to establish enclaves in certain major coastal Chinese cities as treaty ports; (3) permit British commercial interests to market opium and other goods in China—a move that exacerbated declining moral values by increasing the incidence of drug addiction and, in addition, significantly weakened the peasant handicraft production system; and (4) permit Western Christian missionaries to proselytize their faith and seek converts in China.[15] Such concessions had harmful moral and economic effects on Chinese society and significantly contributed to both urban and rural discontent.

Fourth, China, Mexico, and Iran were each ruled by powerful, well-entrenched, repressive, autocratic regimes that had become rigidly bureaucratic and corrupt after many years of political control. These regimes dominated all aspects of society, effectively eliminated public opposition, and drove dissident political movements underground.

The power of these existing regimes was often identified by a large portion of the national population to be the result of their close association with Western governments. Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Iranian Shah, as well as Porfirio Diaz, the Mexican dictator, were both seriously compromised by their close ties with the United States, for example. Indeed, the power of the Shah became almost absolute following a government coup in August 1953, aided by the United States Central Intelligence Agency and British Intelligence.[16] In addition, "American military and economic presence" as well as the occurrence of a "large European work force" were important catalysts for "mass mobilization" during the Iranian Revolution in

the 1970s.[17] The Manchus, who had ruled China for three centuries, were foreigners themselves and, though thoroughly Sinified in their customs, were viewed by many Chinese as alien.[18] This foreign domination was deeply resented by a majority of the population in all three societies.

A fifth factor—and the focus of this study—was the presence of a lengthy and durable history of pervasive, religiously inspired millenarian beliefs in each of these societies. These beliefs had frequently manifested themselves, since the ancient period, as radical protest movements bent on rebellion, which tended to emerge following episodes of extreme social stress or conditions that had a catastrophic effect on some or all segments of society.

An important aspect of this study is not only to identify significant similarities in these three cases, but equally so, to identify important variations and their bearing on the origins and process of revolution.

For example, the cultures of these societies were significantly diverse. The religious origins of millenarian beliefs, though similar in concept, emerged from different types of sources.

Additionally, the role of the specific movements under analysis—the Maoists, the Zapatistas, and the supporters of Khomeini—varied significantly in their impact upon these upheavals. The Maoists, for example, were central to the Chinese Revolution, yet the Zapatistas, as we shall see, were only a secondary component in the Mexican case.

Finally, the consequences of revolution in all three societies varied dramatically.

The primary methodology to be employed in this study will be a cross-cultural and cross-historical comparison of three non-Western revolutionary societies that were profoundly impinged upon by European and American imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Analytically, it attempts to identify and characterize the nature of the millenarian components of all three cases.

There is a certain methodological difficulty in transferring sociopolitical concepts localized in time and place to whole societies in which revolutionary change is engendered. Problems arise when one attempts to transfer concepts that are more clear for small, localized movements to whole societies undergoing revolution, where a greater social complexity and competing concepts offer a differing analysis of what is going on.

For example, the Chinese Communist revolutionary movement operated at three different levels to transform Chinese society: as an ideology, as a cult of Mao Tse-tung, and as a factional political organization—the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). To characterize it along only one of these dimensions creates the potential for both oversimplification and overgeneralization of its broader characteristics. In an effort to avoid such problems, I seek to identify the nature and composition of competing sociopolitical streams that existed in these societies during the stages and process of revolution.

This study will not attempt to advance a general theory of millenarian revolution. Such an undertaking would require an effort well beyond the analysis of merely three cases. Rather, I seek to pursue a more limited investigation that uncovers

common threads of millenarian-inspired social change as well as variations of revolution in these societies.

It is inherent in such a study that it must transcend any single social science discipline. At its foundation, the study of millenarianism is the study of a society's hope for a better future. Millenarians believe that societal perfection, as the result of a divine deliverer at the end time or, as we shall see, the efforts of a chosen people, is possible. An understanding of the functional role that this belief performs in the process of revolution must include not only the facts of these revolutionary events as recorded by the historian, but also the constructs of the political scientist, the anthropologist, and the sociologist, who have studied these events from their individual scholarly perspectives.

It is not my purpose, for example, to rewrite the history of these events. Rather, it is my goal to evaluate the available facts regarding these events in an attempt to uncover the millenarian stream that ran through these revolutionary societies. Such an analysis must rely on largely secondary historical sources. And this raises some additional methodological issues.

Religion and politics, as we all know, are particularly volatile subjects, even among friends and relatives. Any discussion of these topics usually requires us to bring along our own doctrinal and dogmatic "baggage." And scholars in their search for the truth are not immune to such emotional traps.

For example, most of the available firsthand accounts of traditional folk religions in China and Mexico were written by individuals who went to these regions specifically to bring about religious change: Western Christian missionaries. As a result it is often difficult to penetrate doctrinal and ethnocentric biases in an attempt to understand what truly went on or what these cultures were really all about. One of the primary goals of this study is to remain aware that the potential for this methodological problem is not only real but, indeed, very likely to occur. As a result, I pursue and evaluate as many sources and perspectives as possible regarding the critical events leading up to and surrounding the three revolutionary cases.

It is important that we distinguish revolution from other forms of social change. Many social movements have sought to improve the circumstances within their societies through such diverse mechanisms as reform or violent rebellion. The difference between these forms of social change and true revolution is found largely in their consequences. Reform movements seek to institute social improvement without revolutionary change. Such movements attempt improvement through the abolition of abusive or defective social conditions.

Rebellion, although it involves violence, also leaves the fundamental elements of government and society intact. Rebels bent on change and reform do not seek to alter the foundations of their society. Indeed, in many instances, rebel movements come to perceive of themselves as the protectors of traditional social values against those who seek to destroy them.[19]

In contrast, a revolutionary movement is a social movement committed to drastically altering or destroying existing institutions in a society. For example, the

Communist-led Chinese Revolution transformed China's economy by giving ownership of the country's basic industries to the state, taking it from private individuals.

The notion of revolution used in this study involves a complete transformation of a society's fundamental values, its social and political institutions, its leadership, and its public policy.[20] Indeed, following a true revolution, few remnants of the previous regime remain intact.

It is precisely this transformative aspect of revolutions that makes them such a fascinating topic of study. Why is it that members of a society, who generally look upon any type of change as something to be avoided, are inclined at certain times to willingly, collectively, abruptly, and totally transform the structure of their social institutions—institutions that have often become well entrenched and have developed over long periods of time?

THE STRUCTURAL THEORY OF REVOLUTION

Since the late 1970s, scholarship about revolutionary conflict, seeking to explain the origins and nature of revolutions, has come to be dominated by structural theorists. Structural theory argues that revolutions are not solely the result of the subjective characteristics of a state—such as commonly held sociopolitical values or pervasive ideological belief systems—but rather, they emerge out of specific objective conditions involving the political, economic, or social structure of the state.[21] Structural theorists hypothesize that revolutions are caused by weaknesses in the structural relationships of a society, for example, between political regimes and elites, peasants and landlords, or the state and international actors.

Millenarian-inspired peasant rebellions are frequently characterized by structuralists as social agitations that are essentially primitive, archaic, and "pre-political" in form. Indeed, they are portrayed as anachronistic, backward-looking, and defensive in outlook. Rather than possessing a radical new vision of a desired new society, it is argued, they primarily seek only to recapture a perceived lost "Golden Age," which they idealize as superior to the present economic and social conditions surrounding them. Participants in such movements are represented as little more than social bandits who articulate sociopolitical goals that are ill defined, naive, vague, and irrational. Peasants, for example, who find themselves caught up in the throes of revolutionary change have been described as simply actors participating in events beyond their control, who are thrust into more important political and social processes occurring independently of them at the center of society.[22]

In addition, structuralists argue that a phenomenon as involved and complicated as revolution should not be studied merely from its domestic dimensions. Any analysis should include an evaluation of external events, including international institutional structures, that may impinge on the internal affairs of a society:

> If a structural perspective means a focus on relationships, this must include transnational relations among differently situated groups within given countries. Transnational relations have contributed to the emergence of all social-revolutionary crisis and have invariably