

## *“Chewing sand to find the beginning of a counterinsurgency process”*

In doctrine (FM 3-05.201), we define an insurgency as “an organized resistance movement that uses subversion, sabotage, and armed conflict to achieve its aims” (p. 1-3). A resistance movement is described as “either nonviolent or violent. Nonviolent resistance involves acts such as ostracism, tax evasion, boycotts, strikes, or other types of civil disobedience. Violent resistance includes sabotage, subversion, and guerrilla warfare. People usually resist nonviolently at first. However, they may willingly take up violent resistance if a subversive cadre provides them with a cause they perceive to be both worthy and achievable. If the sociopolitical conditions are oppressive enough, resistance may develop into an organized resistance movement” (p. 1-3). Therefore, in short, the insurgency represents the militarized arm of a resistance movement or revolution. Doctrine is authoritative, but it has to come from somewhere, and one contributor is always academia.

There is a relatively new theoretical movement in which scholars attempt to study how and why revolutions occur. If insurgencies are the militarized arm of the revolution, then understanding how and why revolutions occur can also explain the origin of insurgencies. A counterinsurgent strategist may find these theoretical tools to be powerful assets in facing his or her irregular enemy.

Surveying the literature on revolutionary theory, there are currently three general schools of thought: (1) the Structuralists (aka the state-centered approach); (2) Social Movement theorists (aka resource mobilization theory or framing theory); and (3) the Rationalists (aka the Individualists). As with any theoretical literature, each approach has its strengths and weaknesses.

The structuralists evaluate how a state’s internal and external structures set the conditions (or create social or political problems) that foment revolution. These theorists argue—correctly—that without states (and the conditions or problems they create), one wouldn’t have revolutions. Obviously, their unit of analysis in investigating these social phenomena is the state or regime itself. They analyze the various levels of government, the methods and types of governance, intergovernmental affairs, inter- and intra-governmental relations, relations with other stakeholders to the government, and more. The end result is broad array of theories that explain how a particular regime’s actions create (and in some cases, facilitate) revolutions against it. Structuralists admit that their theory cannot account for collective beliefs of specific peoples (norms, values, opinions, decisions, cultures, etc); social networks and organizations; and materiel resources, despite the otherwise strength of their theories. (Authors? Theda Skocpol, Jeff Goodwin)

The individualists analyze how individuals make rational choices to join insurgencies. They believe—correctly—that without the aggregation of several individual choices to join an insurgency, there would be no revolution regardless of what the state structures and conditions are. They analyze how individuals weigh costs and benefits, conduct risk analysis, and mobilize others to join resistance movements. They tend to pay particular attention to social networks and

collective beliefs, two admitted weaknesses of the structuralist approach. Many of these theorists in turn admit that individuals are reliant upon certain structures, like groups and communities, to make individual rational choices significant. (Authors? Sam Popkin, Michael Taylor)

Finally, social movement theory, the newest among them, uses organizations as the unit of analysis for understanding how and why revolutions occur. They examine how political opportunities, organizational structures, and “framing processes” facilitate collective action among individuals. They argue—correctly—that without organizations, the innumerable insurgents would have no control or coordination to accomplish anything. In particular, they pay attention to how organizations, people, and resources are managed—the third weakness of the structuralist approach. They also acknowledge that organizations must be particular to the culture within which they exist. (Authors? Doug McAdam, Charles Tilly)

The theoretical literature is quite intriguing from an academic point of view. However, for those of us who tend to find theoretical literature comparable to chewing sand, sifting through these books can be challenging. Nevertheless, for counterinsurgency strategists it can be well worth the effort. These literatures focus on how and why insurgencies develop. Therefore, the counterinsurgency strategist can explore methods that reverse these phenomena, and then taper them to the particular dynamics of an enemy insurgency (see any doctrinal insurgency or counterinsurgency publication for an example list of seven dynamics to an insurgency).

Interesting to note is that academics have found that the reasons why insurgencies and resistance movements develop are hardly ever military. As expected, military aspects to the organization—the insurgency—become one of a multitude of means through which the revolution attempts to achieve its goals. Those goals tend to be related to solving the problems that led to dissent, and time and again, the academic literature shows those problems to have been social or political. Thus, insurgencies ultimately fight, like a lot of military units, to achieve political or social ends. Thus, we see that doctrine’s approach to insurgency is consistent with the results of the academics. We also see why comprehensive efforts to defeat insurgencies must go deeper than simply destroying the insurgent organization. If the causes of the insurgency remain, the resistance potential will simply continue in the form of a second or newer insurgency.

If you feel underwhelmed by some of these fundamental arguments, then don’t be alarmed. First, the literature is far deeper than I have time or space to develop it here, and I only wanted to orient you to the general distinctions between them. If you would like to examine these literatures in detail and see how a counter-insurgent strategist can use them to his or her advantage, then I invite you to do so. If you can trudge through the epistemology, you will find it all to be a rich and helpful set of theoretical tools.

Second, realize that despite the seemingly obvious nature of these conclusions (however cursory I may have provided them), many strategists throughout time have neglected them. Military organizations time and time again have struggled to come to grips with defeating insurgencies, and our military system in particular has been humbled time and again even with our own heritage of irregular war.

For example, consider this: the most macro level of analysis that any revolutionary theorist has provided is that of the state or regime. Interestingly, these theorists acknowledge that they cannot account for some significant micro-phenomena within the “how” and “why” insurgencies occur. From this alone, a military scientist can conclude that every insurgency is particular—at the most macro level—to the state within which it exists. Based upon the other theoretical types, we can conclude that insurgencies can be unique down to the organizational and individual levels, where culture, timing, languages, leadership, customs, and values become SIGNIFICANT variables for strategists to consider. Thus, every insurgency is unique: different from the last and the next.

At the same time, as obvious as this seems, military scientists are quick to survey past examples of successful counterinsurgency operations, scouring for tactics, techniques, and procedures that brought success. Thereafter, strategists might recommend the rapid implementation of those discoveries into their own contemporary efforts. I call this the “Bill Gates-cut-and-paste” method of strategizing. Somebody reads about a tactic or strategy that worked somewhere else at some other time against some other insurgency, and instead of evaluating how or why it worked, they simply change the dates, update the format, and “cut-and-paste” that approach to their theater. What’s wrong? They have pasted a solution to a problem that is different from the one they are facing.

Right now, I get the sense from within our army that the Malaya and Phillipines (Huk Insurrection) case studies are getting a lot of attention as past successes. That’s great—they are excellent examples. Unfortunately, too often I hear recommendations that we should employ tactics or strategies used in those efforts in our contemporary fight. Truthfully, they may work, but not because of any forethought. We cannot assume that our enemies—either the global insurgency in al Qaeda or the state insurgency in Iraq—are similar enough that these cut-and-paste methodologies will work. In some cases, it is clear to see how the situation might worsen.

So, as painful as revolutionary theory may be for some to read, letting it guide us—even when it seems obvious—may help prevent us from falling recklessly into traps that are contrary to what these theorists have found. If every insurgency is unique, then every counterinsurgency must also be unique: different than the last or the next. There is no one “silver-bullet” approach that will work every time. In the study of counterinsurgency, emphasis should be on the PROCESS of determining which strategies and tactics will be most effective. Revolutionary theory provides some great theoretical tools to begin this process. Evaluating the theory of “how” and “why” the insurgency began without reliance on rigid templates, cut-and-paste, or mindless checklists can bring efficient and effective results. Finally, integrating all three theoretical perspectives of revolutionary theory into our analysis affords us the most comprehensive vantage through which we can theoretically understand and defeat the political, social, and military origins of our enemy. If chewing sand secures us a victory in this war, then please pass me a big helping.