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The Resurgence of Liberation Theology in the 21st Century

Angely Montilla

Introduction

The emanation of the Christian right as a political constituency is not new to modern American politics. In the 1970's, the religious right cultivated a spirit of revivalism emphasizing a restoration of American morality; a concerted effort to preserve and nurture a collective conservative identity. Contemporary politics followed suit. By the time Ronald Reagan's administration came along, this movement was energetically combatting the emergence of liberal ideals with a sense of pious nostalgia. Propelled by a shared grief for an America in decline, many argue that Reagan's presidential campaign centered around a longing to make and keep America "great." Of course, this slogan advocating for American greatness sounds eerily similar to Donald J. Trump's "Make America Great Again" which for his 2020 re-election campaign has evolved into "Keep America Great."¹ In comparing the both administrations' slogans alone, the movement seems eerily congruous to the political escalation of Donald J. Trump. Though both odes to American greatness may sound irreligious and Reagan and Trump certainly differ in many ways, Trump's politically conservative platform is reminiscent of Reagan's nostalgia for an America that was. A return to American greatness, according to them both, looked like a spiritual renewal that necessitated political conservatism.

On the other hand, and in an arguably less religious manner, the 1960's and 70's birthed a contrasting political movement amongst the Christian left. In the United States, the message of liberation theology gained particular traction due to the many Christian voices of the civil rights movement like Martin Luther King Jr., James Cone and Howard Thurman. They presented a type of liberation theology usually called black theology. This presentation of the Christian gospel emphasized the role of God as an advocate for the oppressed and the marginalized. At a time during which much of the (white) American church opposed the fight for civil rights, these voices channeled a version of Christian theology that advocated for the 'other,' and it was often accused of sympathizing with socialism, tolerating communism and being inherently un-American. In the 21st century, a similar resurgence of left-leaning, politically engaged Christianity has arisen in the United States. Coined "emerging Christianity," it has gained greater traction in the post-Obama era. Political polarization has concurrently helped fuel polarization amongst Christians on either side of the political spectrum. This paper will argue that the modern movement of emerging Christianity has grown as a resurgence of 20th century liberation theology, rooted as a reaction to a more secularized American Christianity.

The Emergence of Liberation Theology

¹ Watkins, Eli. "Trump: 2020 Slogan Will Be 'Keep America Great!.'" *CNN*, Cable News Network, 11 Mar. 2018, www.cnn.com/2018/03/10/politics/trump-campaign-slogan/index.html.

Liberation theology is a current of Christian thought that was born in Latin America during the 1960s and 70's. Its central claim is that the gospel requires a preferential option for the poor, stemming as a moral reaction to the poverty and social injustice in the region. Inspired by the timeliness of the Cuban Revolution of 1959, clergy members began to debate the Church's future and political role. In this effort, the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) organized the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican. These meetings took place from 1962 to 1965, emphasizing an evolving church future, one that reconsidered existing priorities and welcomed progress.² The Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez first coined the term "liberation theology" in his paper, "Toward a Theology of Liberation," at a 1968 meeting in Medellín. In this paper, he gave voice to a commitment to actions and expressed the importance of theology as critical evaluation of societal realities.³ Gutiérrez then further explained the term in his seminal work, *A Theology of Liberation*, in 1971⁴. After said meeting in Medellín, a broadly interconnected cohort of religious leaders started a movement to align Christianity with the distress of the impoverished.⁵

The greater historical and political context that contributed to this movement is worth noting. In both Latin America and globally, the Catholic Church historically oriented itself with the elites. The great Latin American independence movements of the mid twentieth century vowed to combat such realities, with the promises of a more equitable society. Earlier decolonization movements claimed to advocate for liberation through imperial rule, but these movements predominantly improved the lives of elites and routinely neglected the needs of the masses.⁶ Nationalistic rebellions against these injustices led the Catholic church to disassociate with such movements, consequently identifying itself with the wealthy⁷. In addition, religion had played a crucial role in the initial conquering of the region, further establishing the Church's ties to the upper class instead of the people.⁸ As the 20th century progressed, Latin American countries started to rapidly industrialize. This gave way to growing pressures for parallel congruous societal reform, in the ecclesiastical sphere as well as the political sphere.⁹ The establishment of the Catholic Action movement played a very important role in this, especially since it aided in connecting left-leaning thinkers and leaders who would contribute to the establishment of liberation theology. As a movement, the Catholic Action movement sought to

²"Documents of the II Vatican Council." *The Holy See Archive*. Web. 10 May 2010. <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.ht>.

³ Brown, Robert McAfee. *Gustavo Gutiérrez*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1980, pp. 11.

⁴ Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation (Teología de la liberación: perspectivas, 1971)* trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988) paperback.

⁵ Muskus, Eddy José. *The Origins and Early Development of Liberation Theology in Latin America with Particular Reference to Gustavo Gutiérrez*. Jan. 1995. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsble&AN=edsble.683134&site=eds-live.pp. 73.

⁶ Tombs, David. *Latin American Liberation Theology*. Boston: Brill Academic, 2002, pp. 26.

⁷ Brown, Robert McAfee. *Gustavo Gutiérrez*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1980, pp. 9.

⁸ Tombs, David. *Latin American Liberation Theology*. Boston: Brill Academic, 2002, pp. 14.

⁹ *Ibid*, 48.

combat the moral laxity of the church. The intention was to regain backslidden Catholics among the working classes. According to Gerd-Rainer Horn's work on contextualizing Catholic Action, the movement did inadvertently instill an increasing sense of self-empowerment that facilitated political radicalization which outgrew the soteriological motivations with which Catholic Action began.¹⁰ The more controversial vein of the liberation movement in general, however, was that those more politically involved embraced Marxist economic theory in the explication of the gospel message. Because of this previously mentioned preference for the poor, the restructuring of institutional structures is integral to fullness of human flourishing and of a presentation of the good news where the Savior "liberates" on behalf of the neediest.¹¹

In response to left-leaning Liberation Theology, American missionaries and religious organizations evangelized throughout Latin America. The Assemblies of God World Missions, Gospel Outreach, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association--even U.S. President Ronald Reagan's Administration in conjunction with Rios Montt and *El Verbo*--all provided support for these missionaries.¹² As the disenchantment of the mid-20th century clergy and the oppressed classes of Latin America coalesced, liberation theologians worked to reimagine the relationship between both Church and state and Church and people.

Explaining *The Theology of Liberation*

In Gustavo Gutiérrez's foundational work, *A Theology of Liberation*, he explains true liberation as threefold. First, Gutiérrez claims that it involves political and social liberation, which is fully embodied in defeating the immediate causes of poverty and injustice. Next, liberation includes emancipating the poor and those oppressed from all "those things that limit their capacity to develop themselves freely and in dignity."¹³ Third, liberation theology involves liberation from selfishness and sin, which necessitates the reconciliation of all things between God and human beings, and the saving of their souls.¹⁴ This lens through which he explicates Scripture calls for a notable sense of human agency that was revolutionary to theology at the time. Encouraging individuals to actively participate in developing their own destiny was controversial, since it fought for freedom and liberation from earthly injustices, not merely for the expectation of future liberation for believers in the heavenly realm.

Gutiérrez, in *The Theology of Liberation*, goes on to describe three levels of genuine liberation that marry history and an innovative approach to Biblical interpretation. The first level is that the poor were to find liberation from exploitation, centered on overcoming poverty. The

¹⁰ Horn, Gerd-Rainer. *Western European Liberation Theology, 1924-1959*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print, pp. 11.

¹¹ Harmon, Katharine E. "The Liturgical Movement and Catholic Action." *Empowering the People of God: Catholic Action before and after Vatican II*, by Jeremy Bonner et al., Fordham University Press, 2014, pp. 32–51.

¹² Turek, Lauren. To support a "Brother in Christ": Evangelical groups and U.S.-Guatemalan relations during the Ríos Montt regime. 2015. *Diplomatic History*, 39(4), pp. 689-719. doi: 10.1093/dh/dhu039

¹³ Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, pp. 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 7-13.

following level was to be liberated from fatalism, which was to be found in free will. Lastly, at the solely theological level, Gutiérrez asserts that liberation from sin results in ultimate liberation and communion with God.¹⁵ These three levels illustrate the varying ways Gutiérrez believed in applying Christian teachings, allowing for a true political and spiritual liberation. Liberation theology supported work towards systemic change and even the possibility of revolution as a means of freeing the poor from oppression. This appreciation for liberation by means of revolution was expressed in the ways the church worked to push class boundaries and this was done with the use of formal religious theology to promote the political and social influence of the Church in the empowerment of the poor.¹⁶ The scriptural basis for social activism largely emphasizes the New Testament mission of Jesus Christ, as bringing a sword (social unrest), instead of bringing peace (social order). This biblical interpretation is a call to mobilize in opposition to poverty, and the sin feeding it, to play a role in Jesus Christ's mission of justice in this world.¹⁷

As a bishop, Gutiérrez and his ideas articulated in this book faced harsh Papal scrutiny, as Vatican II challenged scholars to question their theology and traditional interpretations of biblical study. His work was integral to a movement that led to a renewed realization of Christ's presence among the poor and oppressed, especially in the effort to combat injustice. Although Gutiérrez himself was surprisingly not censored, many other liberation theologians were, particularly due to perceived ties between liberation theology and leftist groups in the region. Most notable were ties to the *Sandinistas* in Nicaragua. Many liberation-minded priests were also killed in Central American countries during the wars and civil conflicts of the 1980s.¹⁸ Among the most notable martyrs was archbishop Oscar Romero who was assassinated due to his theological leanings during a mass in 1980. His life efforts of incorporating social justice into theological priorities has linked him to the progressive theological lens, and it motivated his violent, public murder. The murder was ordered by an avid opponent of liberation theology named Roberto D'Aubuisson, who trained at the U.S. Army School of the Americas.¹⁹ Further, liberation theology became quite popular in the early years of Guatemala's civil war which pitted the right-wing regime in opposition to the leftist rebels. Fearing that this new (and seemingly dangerous) current of Christian thought could inspire indigenous populations to join the rebel forces, the dictatorship of General Ríos Montt looked to suppress the movement inside Guatemala. In the context of the Guatemalan civil war, the military dictatorship of Ríos Montt used the opposing tenants of Fundamentalist Protestantism to counter liberation theology,

¹⁵ Tombs, David. *Latin American Liberation Theology*, pp. 123-125.

¹⁶ Hillar, Marian. "Liberation Theology: Religious Response to Social Problems. A Survey." Ed. Marian Hillar and H. Richard. Leuchtag. *Humanism and Social Issues: Anthology of Essays*. Houston: Humanists Involved in Greater Houston, 1993.

¹⁷ Meredith, Harvey. "The Pope and Liberation Theology." *The Search: Looking for Truth in the Christian Religion*, by Harvey Meredith, Xlibris, 2016, pp. 154–176.

¹⁸ Montagne, Renne, and John Allen. "Examining Catholicism's Controversial Liberation Theology." *NPR*, NPR, 25 May 2015,

www.npr.org/2015/05/25/409421365/examining-catholicisms-controversial-liberation-theology

¹⁹ "Examining Catholicism's Controversial Liberation Theology."

particularly the *sine qua non* of institutionalized sin and respect for authority.²⁰ This grew increasingly complicated because by 1984, nearly half of 800 million Catholics worldwide lived in developing nations, making the message of liberation theology a resonant and appealing one. The New York Times, in addressing the spread of liberation theology asked, "If Marxism, even of a mild sort, flourishes in these lands, and if it were to be officially blessed by Catholicism, two powerful symbolic forces would then have joined hands. What would be the actual consequences of such a merger? Would the revolution - for that would be the first effect - truly eradicate past traditions of political oppression and poverty? Would liberation theology truly liberate?"²¹ This question illustrates the apprehension with which many viewed Gutiérrez's ideas, as dangerous and filled with the potential to disturb existing structures in a threatening way.

Liberation Theology's First Iterations in the American Church

As this movement spread in Latin America, a different but similar version of liberation theology, called black theology, gained traction in the United States. Similar to the class struggle in Latin America, the shared plight of being black in America resonated with Americans who were exposed to the politically charged Christian thought. According to a definition of black theology formulated in 1969 by the National Committee of Black Church Men in the middle of the civil rights movement,

"Black theology is a theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the Gospel is commensurate with the achievements of black humanity. Black theology is a theology of "blackness." It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism, thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says "no" to the encroachment of white oppression."²²

Throughout the civil rights movement, black churches worked ardously to combat racial discrimination as a symbol of oppression that was not of God; combatting it as a bind from which they were to escape. James Cone is considered the founder of black liberation theology. In perhaps his most well known book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, he presents a new perspective to theology in the United States. Contending that theology grows out of a God that honors human dignity, he attacks the way Western European theology had been misused to serve the oppressors. Instead, he invites African Americans to fight for their liberation, a liberation of oppression grounded in the true teachings of Jesus Christ himself. Cone writes, "American white theology is a theology of the Antichrist insofar as it arises out of an identification with the white

²⁰ Manewal, Bryan (2007) "Religion in the Trenches: Liberation Theology and Evangelical Protestantism as Tools of Social Control in the Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996)," *McNair Scholars Journal*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 8.<http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mcnair/vol11/iss1/8>, pp. 49.

²¹ Novak, Michael. "The Case Against Liberation Theology." *The New York Times*, 21 Oct. 1984, pp. 51.

²² Bradley, Anthony B. "The Marxist Roots of Black Liberation Theology." *Acton Institute*, 2 Apr. 2008, www.acton.org/pub/commentary/2008/04/02/marxist-roots-black-liberation-theology.

community, thereby placing God's approval on white oppression of black existence."²³ Cone calls for a contextual analysis of the gospel that considers the individual's experience on earth in its application. For African Americans, it is an experience defined by oppression. According to Cone, no theology can call itself true Christian theology if it does not center oppressed communities. True Christianity theology ought to interpret Jesus' work as that of freedom and of completing the work of liberation. He goes on to argue that while black theology is a theology of liberation, it sadly also a theology of survival. It must equip people of color to handle white dominance and establish their legitimacy separate from whiteness. Cornel West and Howard Thurman were also powerful names of the time. Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* makes a similar argument to Cone, asserting that the gospel ought to be a manual of resistance for the poor and disenfranchised.²⁴ It is well-known that Martin Luther King Jr. carried his copy of *Jesus and the Disinherited* in his pocket during the Montgomery bus boycott,²⁵ and viewed it as a thorough guide for true liberation of the full person and particularly the oppressed person. Thurman speaks of Jesus' existence as savior and friend as an embodiment of his care for the oppressed and that His example offers a remedy to prevent the fall into complete moral nihilism. Only through love for God and of one another can God's justice prevail, and Thurman claims that is the message of the gospel and, concurrently, of liberation.²⁶

Of course, the Marxist leanings of these theological concepts are pretty easy to delineate. In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone writes that Karl Marx's major contribution is "his disclosure of the ideological character of bourgeois thought, indicating the connections between the 'ruling material force of society' and the 'ruling intellectual' force." This is relevant to Marx because it permits black theologians like Cone to criticize American racial issues on the premise of power and revolution.²⁷

In Anthony Bradley's book *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America*, Bradley comments on Cornel West's 1979 essay titled "Black Theology and Marxist Thought," drawing parallels between the class struggle and the race struggle due of the experience of victimization that oppressed peoples share. Bradley attributes West's correlation between black theology and Marxist thought to "both focus on the plight of the exploited, oppressed, and degraded peoples of the world, their relative powerlessness and possible empowerment."²⁸ This common focus calls for a dialogue focused on the prospect of

²³ Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Orbis Books, 2020, pp. 6.

²⁴ Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Beacon Press, 1996.

²⁵ Haines, Errin. "KING MENTOR ALSO DREAMED." *Orlando Sentinel*, Orlando Sentinel, 24 Oct. 2018, www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-2004-01-19-0401190135-story.html.

²⁶ Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited*, pp. 17.

²⁷ Cone, James Hal. *God of the Oppressed*. Orbis Books, 1997.

²⁸ Bradley, Anthony B. *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America*. Crossway Books, 2010, pp. 92.

"mutually arrived-at political action."²⁹ In conjunction with Cone's assertions, while it is possible to be both black and Christian, racism or white supremacy cannot coexist with true Christianity. If God, according to liberation theologians, is for the oppressed, His people ought to be as well.

In comparing liberation theology to Marxism, Enrique Dussel theorizes that one must consider four dimensions: the presuppositions of praxis; the political dimension consisting of the relationship of faith to recent [Latin American] historical reality, the epistemological dimension of theory; relationship between faith and social sciences, and criticism from within and outside the Church (including the Vatican's 1984 *Instructions*); and the potential fruitful use of Marxism by liberation theology.³⁰ These are arguably applicable to an assessment of black liberation and Marxism as well, as the parallels once again make the two quite comparable.

Though on a different level as it pertains to pedagogy, but also involving a liberation of self, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* similarly incorporates a Marxist class analysis to study how the colonizer and the colonized relate to one another. Freire presents a theory of oppression and the path to finding liberation, which he deems to be a heightened degree of awareness and an enlightened process of thought. He proposes a call to action, similar to the invitation of black theologians or of Latin American liberationists. The invitation is to find freedom through a liberated education prioritizing personhood and partnership.³¹

The Irony of American Christian Activism

Lillian Calles Barger writes about a long standing tension that has existed in Western Christian theology. She calls it the tension between transcendence and immanence. These are differences in how we imagine God--whether he is present and intervenes or distant and detached from earthly happenings.³² As has been previously established in this paper, variations of liberation theology spread across the Americas throughout the 20th century. With this spread, theologians on both the left and the right moved in the latter direction, emphasizing a God involved in the everyday. Both the conservative right and the progressive left used this belief to justify greater political involvement with religious motivations. Liberation theologians placed God among the poor and the disinherited, while conservatives placed God as the one who entitles

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 94.

³⁰ Dussel, Enrique, et al. "Liberation Theology and Marxism." *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1992, pp. 50–74., doi:10.1080/08935699208658023.

³¹ Freire, Paulo, et al. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Bloomsbury, 2018.

³² Miller, Eric C. "The Radical Rise of Liberation Theology: An Interview with Lillian Calles Barger." *Religion & Politics*, 20 Nov. 2018, religionandpolitics.org/2018/09/25/the-radical-rise-of-liberation-theology-an-interview-with-lilian-calles-barger/.

them to defend their causes.³³ It is important to note that before the 1970s, even the most fundamentalist sects of the U.S. Christianity focused on appealing to the individual souls and hearts of persons, with salvific concerns at the forefront. As liberation theologians presented a vision with political implications, conservatives mobilized accordingly. Conservatives then moved from a prioritization of soteriological ambitions to campaigns of morally indignant renewal.

An noteworthy example of this shift exists in Jerry Falwell Sr.'s transformation. The founder of the Moral Majority, Falwell had previously expressed deep disdain for the convergence of political advocacy and religion. The Moral Majority was an influential political organization in the United States often credited with the formation of the New Christian Right. Not only was it crucial in mobilizing conservative Christians politically, it also helped ensure Republican victories throughout the 1980s.³⁴ Falwell once preached a sermon called "Ministers and Marches," during which he questioned the Christianity legitimacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., James Farmer and the likes due to their investment in political transformation. But by the mid-1970s, Falwell was the face of conservative Christian activism.³⁵ As conservative Christians, many took a stand across denominational lines against their more liberal brothers and sisters in Christ. Claiming to advocate on God's behalf, they invested their efforts in redeeming American culture from falling down the wrong path.³⁶

This evidences a point in which American Christianity became broadly secularized, as its mobilizing factors shifted from salvific, soul-saving missions to concern for politics on both sides of the spectrum.³⁶ This seems comparable to Gutiérrez's Latin America, where economic dependence on raw materials, monopolized economies, corruption and authoritarian regimes gave way to an agitation that found its fuel in politicizing scripture to advocate for the needy.

Emerging Christianity as the New Liberation Theology

By the 1990s, the Moral Majority no longer existed, made unnecessary thanks to the established conservative political presence the 70's and 80's created. Liberation theology, in its fiery nature from the height of Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lewis, seemed toned down to moderatism in the political scene. The election of Barack Obama and the growing lean left that followed may have changed that. When in 2008, Obama's minister Reverend Jeremiah Wright's sermons went viral, which caused an uproar. Condemning the white man on a general scale and

³³ Williams, Daniel. "The GOP's Abortion Strategy: Why Pro-Choice Republicans Became Pro-Life in the 1970s". *Journal of Policy History* 2011, pp. 513–539. doi:10.1017/S0898030611000285.

³⁴ "Moral Majority". *Columbia Encyclopedia*. 6th ed. Columbia University Press. 2004. Archived from the original on August 19, 2008.

³⁵ Sutton, Matthew Avery. *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2013, pp. 57–60.

³⁶ Barger, Lilian Calles. *The World Come of Age: an Intellectual History of Liberation Theology*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

angrily repeating “God damn America” for its injustices toward the ‘other,’ liberation theology had a public moment once again. Pope Francis now embraces the ideals of liberation theology, publicly praising Gutiérrez and inviting him to the Vatican in recent years³⁷ and even canonizing liberationist martyr Oscar Romero in 2015.³⁸ These happenings in and of themselves signal a tolerance and even appreciation for a theology that had been vehemently rejected in the past.

As the election of Donald Trump has fortified the conservative right in the United States, it has also galvanized and pushed the left to mobilization and to a degree of radicalization. This shift is seen in the Christian left as well. This circumstance presents the possibility that liberation theology would become relevant once again. The movement of emerging Christianity has emboldened in response to the rise of the right. This is an opposite occurrence to what occurred when liberation theology grew to prominence in the mid 20th century, at which point the right mobilized the combat the increasingly political left. The emerging Christian movement is characterized by a value of social justice and the liberation of individual self. Rooted in an emphasis on community, deconstructing the damage of the traditional church experience, and general discontentment with what has become the evangelical norm, the movement questions what Jesus would practically be doing in the world should he be physically alive today.³⁹ Leaders embrace the process of “deconstructing” and have called the #exvangelical their own. This term does not only apply to those who have left the faith altogether, but also includes online communities run rampant and an increasing number of churches proudly announce their skepticism, inclusivity and progressiveness. The term is a bit of a large umbrella, and includes former Evangelical Christians who have left the faith altogether as well as individuals still in the process of deconstructing and finding their place in the faith.⁴⁰ Brian McLaren, the author of the popular *The New Kind of Christian*, suggests that this movement calls for refocusing on the meaning of “thy Kingdom come”— through embracing the role of individual Christians to bring heaven (His Kingdom) to earth by way of charity, social justice, service, and loving and advocating for the ‘other.’⁴¹ This current of Christian thinking has also been advanced by progressive theologians like Dallas Willard, Richard Rohr, Rachel Held Evans, Tony Campolo and other emerging leaders.⁴²

³⁷ Gibson, Davis. “Liberation Theology Founder Gustavo Gutierrez Basks in a Pope Francis Inspired Rehabilitation.” *America Magazine*, 22 June 2015, www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/liberation-theology-founder-gustavo-gutierrez-basks-pope-francis-inspired.

³⁸ Elie, Paul. “The Martyr and the Pope.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 7 Nov. 2018, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/11/the-martyr-and-the-pope/570835/.

³⁹ Scopino, A.J. “The Religious Left in Modern America: Doorkeepers of a Radical Faith.” *Religious Studies Review*, vol. 107, no. 1, Mar. 2020, p. 107., doi:10.1093/jahist/jaz578.

⁴⁰ Onishi, Bradley. “The Rise of #Exvangelical.” *Religion & Politics*, Religion and Politics, 6 Aug. 2019, religionandpolitics.org/2019/04/09/the-rise-of-exvangelical/.

⁴¹ McClaren, Brian D. *New Kind of Christian: a Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey*. AUGSBURG FORTRESS, 2019.

⁴² Reed, Randall W., and G.Michael Zbaraschuk. *The Emerging Church, Millennials, and Religion*. Cascade Books, 2018. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1948206&site=eds-live.

Patrick Todjeras describes the movement as “*a transition for the protagonists in order to shape their individual processes of resistance as well as the processes of disentanglement in regards to their own religious orientation... an “alternative space,” which is best seen in five motifs: the change of religious alignment; the significance of community; specific theological themes and strategies; dealing with different “contexts” in the conversation; and the emphasis of values, attitudes, and practices.*”⁴³ Most notable to this study is the word *resistance*, which further emphasizes the movement’s growth as a response to something else (in this case, the growing conservative right).

For these reasons, it seems fitting to consider that the growing emerging church could actually be a resurgence of liberation theology with a new name. Its emphasis on social injustice as it affects LGBTQ communities, racial minorities, women, immigrants, and others reveals a dedication to liberation that is quite familiar to anyone who has been acquainted with iterations of liberation theology in the Americas over the course of the past 80 years. To ignore the potential role of the religious left in the fight for progressive ideals would be a shame, especially as groups like the Poor People’s Campaign have aligned themselves to the same movements. Worth noting are modern political progressives like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who has often highlighted her leftist politics as integral to her leftist Christian faith.⁴⁴ Though often overlooked by the usually more staunchly religious right, the Christian left holds a political tradition of combating oppression and advocating for liberation. Time will tell if this iteration will enact as much change as the others have, but it is indispensable to keep watch as liberation theology reimagines itself amongst progressive Christians the 20th century.

⁴³Todjeras, Patrick. “The ‘Emerging Church’ Conversation: A Movement and a Religious Expression in Western Christianity.” *International Review of Mission*, vol. 108, no. 2, Nov. 2019, pp. 290–310. EBSCOhost,

search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=reh&AN=ATLAI14200217000837&site=eds-live.

⁴⁴Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on Her Catholic Faith and the Urgency of Criminal Justice Reform.” *America Magazine*, 19 Apr. 2019, www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2018/06/27/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-her-catholic-faith-and-urgency-criminal.

The Failure of the Chechen Rebellion

Mason Palissery

Introduction

The Chechen rebellion was a social revolutionary movement that met its demise as a result of many factors. The Chechen Republic in Russia's North Caucasus region has gone to war with the Russian state numerous times, but no previous crisis reached the level of atrocity of the Second Chechen War (1999-2009). In this paper, I seek to define the structure of the Chechen rebellion through frameworks built by several authors of revolutionary theory. I will then show the weaknesses of the rebellion, and, ultimately, identify the reasons for the Chechen rebellion's failure. To this end, this paper uses a comparative structural analysis of the Peruvian Sendero Luminoso and the Chechen rebellion. In both cases, the rebellions led participants to become radicalized toward distinct ideologies which motivated violence in Peru and Chechnya.

This paper begins with a brief overview of the Russo-Chechen wars and an explanation of the importance of Chechen involvement in Salafist Islam. Following this is the application of Jeremy Weinstein's revolutionary analysis, which serves as the source of structural comparison between the Sendero Luminoso and the Chechen rebellion. John Foran's work on the sociology of "third-world revolutions" is a final analytical tool employed in this assessment of the Chechen rebellion's failures. I conclude with a final acknowledgment of the various elements affecting the Chechen rebellion, as well as the vast amount of work left to be done on this subject.

Background

Chechen society exemplifies a case of nationalism gone wrong.⁴⁵ The Russo-Chechen wars of the 1990s to 2009 point to the fact that Chechnya's separatist aspirations had transformed into a more potent movement. What began as a national secession movement became a mission to create an Islamic state in the North Caucasus. In the 1990s, Chechen society was divided between Sufi and Salafi Islamic sects. Several factors led Sufi Chechens to convert to Salafism, but the main reason for conversion was the draw of jihad as it served as both a form of protest and a source of financial security for young Chechens.⁴⁶ The dearth of economic opportunities available to young Chechens in the post-Communist era drove many to seek financial security from jihadi institutions, While the initial organization of Chechens into Islamic sects did not occur until the 19th century, socio-religious ties served as an important factor for recruitment into the Chechen rebellion against Russia.

Analysis

⁴⁵ See James Hughes, *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fhzhw, Chapter 6, among others.

⁴⁶ Emil A. Souleimanov, "Jihad or Security? Understanding the Jihadization of Chechen Insurgency through Recruitment into Jihadist Units," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 17, no. 1 (June 2014): pp. 86-105, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2014.986375>

Several requirements must be met for rebellions to succeed in the form of a revolution. Jeremy Weinstein's 2006 work *Inside Rebellions* serves to provide a framework for this success through the example he elucidates in his second chapter: the Sendero Luminoso, or Shining Path, in Peru.⁴⁷ While not a successful revolutionary movement, the case of the Sendero Luminoso provides a salient example to compare with the Chechen case because of commonalities in the structure of the rebellions. This comparison also helps us to conceptualize the failures of the Chechen rebellion because of the significant differences in dates and locations of each movement.⁴⁸

The first commonality between the two rebel movements is the status of the national governments under which they were governed. The Sendero Luminoso rebelled in Peru during a time of widening political opportunity, as a new democratic government was being created.⁴⁹ With the nascent government struggling to establish legitimacy among rural populations, the Sendero Luminoso was able to use several recruitment tactics that were duplicated in the case of the Chechen rebellion. The Sendero Luminoso was also able to take root in rural Peru due to widespread economic decline. Peru's ailing economy led rural communities to distrust the national government, which provided a channel for the spread of Sendero Luminoso's ideology.⁵⁰

Similarly, the Chechen rebellion attracted youth- and civilian-recruits due to the ailing Chechen economy. The rebellion was headed by foreign fighters from Middle Eastern states; they intended to spread Salafism to aid Chechens in their goal of creating an independent Islamic state.⁵¹ However, the relationship between rebellion leaders and states such as Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan yielded a secondary outcome: financial support and incentives for members of the Chechen rebellion.⁵² Like the case of the Sendero Luminoso in Peru, the Chechen rebellion became a lifeline for Chechen youths who saw few channels of future employment. It became a way to stave off the suffering often caused by economic downturn in countries that experience a youth bulge.

The Sendero Luminoso was well-organized, and advantaged over the Peruvian government because of the way that its leadership chose to promote loyalty to the group. Weinstein's research on the Sendero Luminoso shed light on the values promoted by the group

⁴⁷ Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 61-95.

⁴⁸ The Sendero Luminoso were active in Peru from 1980-1992, while the Chechen Rebellion was active from 1991-2007. The time difference between these movements is large enough to have allowed for the Chechen rebellion to learn best practices, as the Sendero Luminoso was disbanded when the Chechen rebellion was still being constructed.

⁴⁹ Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.95

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵¹ Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 5 (April 15, 2008): pp. 412-433, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100801993347>, p. 418-420

⁵² Souleimanov, "Jihad or Security? Understanding the Jihadization of Chechen Insurgency through Recruitment into Jihadist Units," p. 88.

during the economic downturn, which came as a result of the installment of Peru's first democratic government.⁵³ Unfortunately, the Peruvian economic crisis detrimentally affected the progress of the Peruvian government in spreading education and health services to those who needed them most.⁵⁴ Rural peasants were largely ignored while the democratic government focused on education in cities and established towns.⁵⁵ Because the government was unable and unwilling to provide basic goods and services to its people, the Sendero Luminoso was free to offer education and services to rural communities. The power vacuum in rural Peru was thus an obvious inlet for the Shining Path to begin indoctrination of the Peruvian people.⁵⁶

Similarly, the Chechen rebellion's leadership sought to promote its ideology in an educational setting. While the Sendero Luminoso was focused on educating members on the ideology of its leader, Chechen rebels were paid to attend courses where they were expected to partake in religious and weapons training.⁵⁷ The Chechen rebel leadership saw Chechen youths as a great source of potential advancement of the movement. As such, religious education became a staple tactic of indoctrination in the Chechen rebellion, especially after the first Chechen war.

Another comparison that should be made to better understand the downfall of the Chechen rebellion is in the state of the governments of Peru and Chechnya during these rebellions. The Peruvian government was initially attacked by the Sendero Luminoso during its transition to democracy. The Peruvian government initially refused to acknowledge the existence of the Sendero Luminoso. Then-president Belaúnde did little in the way of providing aid and support to peasants in rural communities, and as a result, the Shining Path slowly made inroads (initially through violence) in neglected rural communities.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, after losing much of the public's support, Belaúnde turned to brutality in his bid to regain control of rural Peru. Human rights violations skyrocketed during this period, and Belaúnde's tactics only bolstered the resolve of many peasants in their support for Sendero Luminoso guerillas.⁵⁹

Similarly, the Chechen government was in flux after the first Chechen war. With Chechen rebels' victory in 1996 after Dzhokhar Dudayev's death, Aslan Maskhadov's 1997 government was the first Peruvian regime to be both democratically-elected and recognized by the Russian government. However, Maskhadov's connection to, and power over, the Chechen people was curtailed by the rebellion leaders Shamil Basayev and Ibn al-Khattab. Chechnya's ensuing economic downturn also led many Chechens to lose faith in the central government. This was all potent recruitment material for rebel leaders. The central government under Maskhadov was opposed by Islamists and members of the rebellion who advocated for an

⁵³ Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, p. 95.

⁵⁴ Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, p. 84.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Moore and Tumelty "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment," p. 419.

⁵⁸ Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, p. 87.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Islamic state governed by Sharia law.⁶⁰ These factors combined in a way that strengthened the rebellion while weakening the regime in the interbellum period.

The comparison between the Chechen case and that of the Sendero Luminoso in Peru serves as an example of how different rebellions can have multiple factors work in their favor and still see failure. However, the case of the Chechen rebellion was renewed in a second war with Russia from 1999-2009. This implies the Chechen rebels had additional reasons to believe that their movement would see broader revolution and maintained their organizational structure. While the Russian government was the victor of the second war within Chechnya, Russian involvement in the Chechen conflict in 1999 began as a response to Chechen terrorist movements in different Russian cities.⁶¹

It can be argued that the Chechens felt superior at the outset of the second Chechen war because of the loyalty that they incurred from peasants outside of the rebel movement. The Chechen rebels were organized on the principle of asymmetric information. Though Chechnya began to fracture under an ineffective leader, and clan tensions rose during its brief period of independence,⁶² the rebellion retained the upper hand against the Russian government because it had the element of surprise in its attacks. This would not have been possible without the involvement of Chechen civilians, however divided. Recruitment incentives such as education, employment, and financial gain doubled as incentives for civilians to cooperate clandestinely with the rebellion.

As rebels provided services to their civilian counterparts throughout the first war and the brief period of independence, civilians were enticed to cooperate with the rebels also through the rebels' provision of material goods to non-combatants. This mutually beneficial situation was amplified by the break in cooperation among clans, as civilians were more likely to provide essential goods to their clan-members while the conflict between the rebellion, Russia, and other Chechens intensified.⁶³ ⁶⁴ For many civilians, support for the rebels and clans became a choice between the lesser of two evils: the Russian government versus fellow Chechens. Under Prime Minister Putin, the Russian government initiated a crackdown on Chechen rebels of all types after the rebel bombings of Moscow, Makhachkala, and Volgograd.⁶⁵ Thus, civilians were tasked with supporting their fellow Chechens throughout the dissolution of the Chechen state, as

⁶⁰ Moore and Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment," p. 419.

⁶¹ Valery Tishkov, "Dynamics of a Society at War: Ethnographical Aspects," in *Chechnya: From Past to Future*, edited by SAKWA RICHARD, 157-80, London: Anthem Press, 2005, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gsmzcc.14.158, p. 158.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Eli Berman, Joseph H. Felter, and Jacob N. Shapiro, *Small Wars, Big Data: the Information Revolution in Modern Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), p.62-65, and Tishkov, "Dynamics of a Society at War: Ethnographical Aspects," p. 158.

⁶⁴ Note: Members of the Chechen rebellion became strictly defined by their jihadist aspirations around 1999, after sufficient indoctrination by the Khattab camp. Thus, not every armed Chechen was a member of the rebellion, and vice versa. The breakdown of Chechen society into clan-based rival armed factions created more armed Chechens in addition to rebels, and reiterated the distinction between civilians/peasants and armed fighters.

⁶⁵ Tishkov, "Dynamics of a Society at War: Ethnographical Aspects," p. 158.

the Russian government moved forces into place in the autumn of 1999.⁶⁶ Chechen civilians with knowledge of the movements of Russian forces provided information to Chechen rebels. This created a situation amounting to asymmetric information benefitting the Chechen rebellion. The role of civilians with asymmetric information was therefore a boon to Chechen troops (as much as it could be during a war), and a hindrance to the Russian government and armed forces. However, recruitment, retention, organization, and asymmetric information were not adequate factors for Chechnya to maintain its independence, and the rebellion failed again during the Second Chechen War.

John Foran provides a final addition to this analysis of the Chechen rebellion's failure with his examination of five causal factors that affect the success of a revolution.⁶⁷ These factors are valuable because they can be applied to analysis of many cases; the absence of any one of them adds to the case that a state is unlikely to see a successful revolution. While the Chechen case is complex in its myriad actors and relationships, Foran's causal factors provide a helpful framework with which to analyze the rebellion's course and ultimate failure. The first causal factor Foran points to is "dependent development," which is a process that may be characterized as one of "growth within limits," referring to economic development occurring in tandem with social inequality.⁶⁸ Chechnya undoubtedly experienced dependent development during its interbellum period from 1996-1999. As it struggled to create an environment that would foster good governance and prosperity, the republic was plagued by inequality and economic downturn. The republic mainly suffered from the drawbacks associated with dependent development because of the fractures in the social fabric. These fractures were the result of the rebellion's entanglement with clan-based armed factions within the state.

The second of Foran's causal factors is a "repressive, exclusionary, personalist state." The Chechen government "possess[ed] an elective affinity for dependent development because [it was] good at guaranteeing order, at least for a time, but [it] also tend[ed] to exacerbate conflictual relations between state and civil society."⁶⁹ The Chechen government's inability to maintain cohesion and control over the populace during the interbellum period points to conflict between the state and civil society. Armed factions of Chechens divided by clan began to reject national cohesion in favor of solitary action. Chechnya can easily be defined as a repressive, exclusionary, personalist state during the latter part of the interbellum period. In addition, the rebellion, with its leaders and purpose turning increasingly to the jihadist cause, was far outside the control of the Chechen government. The Chechen people had only been loosely united in a

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ John Foran, "THE COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY OF THIRD WORLD SOCIAL REVOLUTIONS: Why a few succeed, why most fail," in *Theorizing Revolutions: New Approaches from Across the Disciplines*, edited by John Foran, p. 221-261, Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 1997, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 222-223.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 223.

nation before incorporation in the USSR; the unraveling of the republic seemed likely from the outset.⁷⁰

The third of Foran's factors for social revolution is "the elaboration of effective and powerful political cultures of resistance."⁷¹ The Chechen case may have possessed this factor, but it was far from the main reason for the lack of revolution in Chechnya. It would seem likely that the only possessor of a powerful political culture of resistance was the Chechen rebellion, which was not representative of broader Chechen society near the end of the interbellum period. As noted, the Chechen rebellion took on a jihadist cause at the behest of leaders Khattab and Basayev.⁷² Therefore, while the rebellion may have been resistant to the Chechen government's rule of law, there is little evidence that the rest of Chechen society was unified in this resistance. This possible lack of unified resistance is where Chechnya fails Foran's prescriptive factors for revolution.

This analysis has already taken into account the importance of Chechnya's economic downturn (Foran's fourth factor) in the strengthening of its rebellion. While a poor economy provided many civilians with an impetus to join the rebellion, Foran's fifth causal factor worked to encourage revolution in Chechen society. Foran's fifth factor is a "world-systemic opening," which can be understood as an opening in external powers such that burgeoning change may find a place in the global landscape.⁷³ The Chechen rebellion certainly found such an opening after the First Chechen War, with former Russian Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin explicitly welcoming the Chechen separatist regime to the arena of nations and states.⁷⁴ However, by 1999 the rebellion had changed to adopt Islamic extremism, and the rest of the Chechen populace was forced to flee or brace for the ensuing Russian invasion.⁷⁵

Conclusion

This paper is by no means a comprehensive assessment of every aspect of the Chechen rebellion. There is much more work to be done in analysis of the actors, history, and societal structure. However, this paper has provided a framework through which to assess the rebellion using modern revolutionary theory. The Chechen rebellion lacked several necessary traits needed to ensure successful rebellion. The comparison drawn between the Chechen rebellion and the Peruvian Sendero Luminoso serves to illustrate that even when causal factors seem appropriate for revolution, a movement must be in command of the perfect factors if it is not to be quashed.

The analysis provided in this paper takes into account the importance of a good relationship between the civilian populace and a rebel movement. The Chechen rebel movement

⁷⁰ Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra, "Kashmir and Chechnya: Issues in Terrorism," *India Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (April 2006): 228–68, doi:10.1177/097492840606200209, p. 235.

⁷¹ Foran, "THE COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY OF THIRD WORLD SOCIAL REVOLUTIONS: Why a few succeed, why most fail," p. 223.

⁷² Moore and Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment," p. 419.

⁷³ Foran, "THE COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY OF THIRD WORLD SOCIAL REVOLUTIONS: Why a few succeed, why most fail," p. 224.

⁷⁴ Tishkov, "Dynamics of a Society at War: Ethnographical Aspects," p. 158.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

had the tools necessary to enhance its relationship with Chechnya's civilian populace, as it relied on civilians for any number of goods and services. However, the rebellion was unable to capitalize on any positive aspects of its relationship with Chechen civilians because of the damage that it brought on during its wars with Russia. Chechen civilians at first may have supported the rebellion in its separatist stance, but the violence that accompanied the Russian attacks on Grozny proved too harsh for many to endure.

Finally, while the Chechen rebellion may have started as a social movement among Chechens at the collapse of the USSR, Chechen society lacked a broad culture of political resistance. Chechen civilians were far from united during the interbellum period, and as a result, they were outmatched by the firepower of the Russian government. Previously noted was the massive human flight that occurred at the onset of the second Chechen war.⁷⁶ While initially Chechen civilians may have been inclined to support a separatist rebellion in its purest form, many could not continue to support the rebellion as it devolved into an Islamic terrorist movement. Chechen society had fractured to the point that the continuation of a united revolutionary movement would be nearly impossible to organize.

⁷⁶ Tishkov, "Dynamics of a Society at War: Ethnographical Aspects," p. 158.

Book Review:

China's Conservative Revolution: The Quest for a New Order, 1927-1949, by Brian Tsui. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. v+291 pp. £75.00 (cloth).

Sayani Sinha

The two decades of Guomindang rule -- from 1927 to 1949 -- began with the anti-Communist coup by the Nationalists and ended with the Communist coup that led to the Nationalists' retreat to Taiwan.

As the author rightly observes, the Nationalist government in Nanjing was already a result of revolution—a product of the incomplete national revolution (*guomin geming*), launched by Sun Yat-sen in 1924. While the original moment of revolution saw the transformation of Chinese society specifically in terms of monarchy and statehood, dynasty and republic, it also bred the idiomatic principles of such change. It is not a stretch to argue that notions like state, nation, and even society came into being precisely as and at the moment of revolutionary transformation. But the event of unbecoming and becoming, as revolution is wont, follows its own specific logic. The Chinese National Revolution was enunciated at the birth of the nation—as envisaged by Sun in his *Three Principles of the People*--nationalism, democracy and people's livelihood. The Revolution thus sought to imagine, invent and/ invoke *the People* as an accessory to nationalism. Of course there is no nation without people, but the Tsui shows how the politics of the Guomindang hinged upon the inversion of this common sense: no people without a nation. This not only meant that the Nationalists would automatically be the legitimate representatives of the nation, and therefore *the People*, but also that, the Communist Party in not being Nationalist possessed no authentic claim on the Nation and its people, and had to be eliminated as an enemy of *the People*. (To quote the author here, “Nationalism and statism, Peter Zarrow observes, undergirded modern China's participation in the international system, as the Qing empire transformed into a “people””⁷⁷).

The power of Nationalists was institutionalised in two steps: first, the deposition of the Beiyang regime; and second, the brutal neutralisation of the CCP on April 12, 1927. While both movements are instances of the irreversible social transformation that the national revolution ushered in, the second and more decisive turn led to the movement's unification. It was at this precise moment when the national revolution, that as a movement belonged both to the Nationalists and the Communists, produced the Nationalist government (the GMD party-state) that the revolution became in retrospect a legacy of the Nationalists.

a revolution of belonging whereby the Nationalists and the Communists were compromising, compensating or competing for a common goal (institutional power) underwent an ideological shift to the belonging of revolution, whereby Shanghai Massacre reclaimed and legitimised the

⁷⁷ Tsui, Brian. *China's Conservative Revolution: The Quest for a New Order, 1927-1949*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Chinese 'nation-state' as exclusively belonging with the Nationalists, such that this acquired legitimacy was dependent not only on the ownership of a past historical identitarian revolution. The revolution thus retroactively became a Nationalists' revolution, aiming to manifest its ideological necessity in response to "the threat of revolutionary socialism". Responding to the threat becomes, the author observes, "the one leitmotif that underpinned the Nationalist administration that lasted for half a century...". The "conservative revolution" is not simply an extension of the national revolution (one asks for the efficacy of a revolution within a new socio-political order that is always, already a product of revolution); it is a 'Nationalist' revolution. The "conservative revolution" as a Nationalist project of nation-building was a process of the constant search for and vindication of political legacy and legitimacy. The author writes: "If the coupling of nationalist and social revolutions defined Chinese Communism, the GMD led a nationalist revolution that had decidedly conservative socio-economic goals." Here however, the notion of revolutionary politics practised by the established political order is revealed to be a form of revolution that is conservative and precisely for that reason, cannot be revolutionary.

The nationalist revolution, by contrast, hinged upon nation-building, and is best understood as a revisionist undertaking. It would imply a revision of the nation formed and officiated by the national 'revolution' and its legitimate offspring, the Nationalists. The 'nation' that this ideological unification appeals to, obliterates disharmony, class conflicts and dependence, and as the author notes, "Instead of confronting the capitalist system, it appealed to the nation and, by extension, Eastern civilisation as aestheticised communions in which acute class tensions were imagined away, citizens worked harmoniously under an apparently apolitical state's tutelage and China's independence was achieved through alliances....". And as a revolutionary formation, this nation has no past. It stands for erasure of all history up to and including its conception.

Since there is no heritage to revolution, and revolution is not inherited, when "conservative revolutionaries appealed to precapitalist and archaic forces" it is not to revoke and conserve a romanticised past, but neither, as the author contends, is it "to create it for the first time." In tune with revisionism, this creation is a renewed rendering with some obfuscation, some revision and some qualification; the result also of an aestheticization with its complementary ossification.

As part of an ideological-political project, the conservative revolution's invocation of traditions (pre-capitalist/archaic) is also the invention of these.

Breaking the Cycle of Riots: Democracies in Crisis

Rahul Thayil

Introduction

The world's democracies are in crisis. There are a growing number of strongman leaders in power, who enact exclusionary practices that encourage isolated ethnocentric populations of nations. In many countries, this results in mass protests and civil unrest, with many nation states experiencing revolutions and regime changes, for better or for worse. India is one such state, often considered one of the most institutionally stable democracies of the world. In December 2019, India's right-wing regime faced protests against its new policies promoting religious exclusion. The protests have turned violent and threatened the secularity of the state, but they have yielded no tangible reform against the current regime, and no revolution has taken place. This case study presents a historical analysis of India and its protests and assesses why the protests have not resulted in any major change despite large-scale engagement. For effective analysis, I apply modern fourth generation revolution theory as a lens. In addition, utilizing DeFronzo's 2015 book *Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements*⁷⁸ as a framework, this paper argues that India has experienced insufficient revolutionary multi-class cohesion and motivation as protests have not resulted in any major change; despite large-scale engagement. In addition, social media has been utilized to manipulate the frustration between societal groups in India. Through propaganda campaigns and viral support, the current regime has found space for self-preservation at the cost of national unity.

Furthermore, with reference to Morozov's quintessential book, *The Net Delusion*,⁷⁹ this paper will highlight the pitfalls of social media. Social media has been instrumental in allowing the current government to prevent mass mobilization beyond the online community. The mobilization of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as the party of India has allowed for the monopolization of nationalist intent amongst the political parties. While this alienates some elites, it also momentarily prevents periphery and grassroots support for elites that do not seem to represent the national will.

Finally, India suffers from fragmentation that inhibits the spread of information and the growth of protests. The movement for reclaiming the secular state has co-opted crises across India. . Groups involved remain stratified--amplifying the issues caused by the distance between protests. India's urban core also lacks support from rural areas where the military has more power, which puts protest movements at higher risk of decline.

While contentious politics, even organized mobs, have been fairly normal throughout Indian political history, the contemporary government has shifted from secular to nominally

⁷⁸ DeFronzo, James. *Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2014.

⁷⁹ Morozov, Evgeny. *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*. Public Affairs. 2011. 99-112

Hindu. In this manner, I argue that previous theory, including Michael Mann's lauded theory on riot cycles in India,⁸⁰ may slowly be deteriorating. I also posit that a cycle of protest will not fade into obscurity, but instead may result in nonlinear growth of national frustration and state instability.

DeFronzo's 5 Elements of Success for a Revolution – In India

DeFronzo's 5 elements of success were developed in his seminal work, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements*.⁸¹ Providing a nomothetic framework, DeFronzo asserted that every revolution requires five elements: mass discontent, alienated and dissident elites, unifying multiclass motivations, a crisis/spark where there is a weakening of the pre-revolutionary state, and a permissive world context. Considering India within DeFronzo's framework provides insights for the lack of revolution despite civil unrest.

A. Mass discontent

While the majority of DeFronzo's analysis has led to Marxist revolutions with majority uprisings over a minority, aligning heavily with structuralists like Skocpol and Trimberger, it is important to acknowledge that mass discontent and frustration should be amended. Rather than demanding a majority participating in mass discontent to lead to the revolution, a vigilant minority must encourage unrest of the majority, either in juxtaposition or in unity. It's estimated that only “~a motivated 25% of a population” is required to push on an issue before “a tipping point [is] triggered, before the minority group succeeds in changing established social convention,” according to an Annenberg Institute study.⁸² In this manner, it is worthwhile to examine discontent in nucleated areas whereby civil unrest occurs along state lines, as opposed to demanding a protest of 500 million people considering the size and population of India.

There is a long history of communal violence in India. According to analyses by Varshney, Sharma, and Banerjee, India, with over one billion people and a vast multicultural space, has remained the most stable multi-ethnic nation-state since its formation.^{83,84} While there have been surges of ethnic violence, none have progressed to civil war. However, in the last decade, a worldwide rise of populism has affected India, with the ‘landslide’ victory of the BJP in 2014 and concurrent victory in 2018 propagating a right wing ‘Hindutva’ movement across the subcontinent. The ‘Hindutva’ movement across India involved a majoritarian wave of religious support that has resulted in oppression of minority groups in the form of physical, political, and economic violence. As a far-right Hindu nationalist movement, it adheres to the concept of a homogenized majority and propagates cultural hegemony.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Mann, Michael. *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*. Cambridge University Press, 2005, 17.

⁸¹ DeFronzo, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements*, 5th ed, 2014, 17-57.

⁸² Centola et al, “Experimental Evidence for Tipping points in Social Conventions” 1119.

⁸³ Varshney, A. *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (London, Yale University Press, 2002), 17.

⁸⁴ Banerjee S., *Civic and Cultural Nationalism in India*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2002) 53.

⁸⁵ Patnaik, P. “Fascism of our times” *Social Scientist*. 21. 1993. 69-77.

While communal violence has become the chosen method of expressing discontent, burgeoning economic crises, famine, and corruption have rapidly created a hostile and discontent environment amongst the majority of citizenry.⁸⁶ The minority has been focused on action against the government, which has retaliated with populist rhetoric to weaponize the anger of its voters against the minority opposition camps, labelling them as a “corrupt elite.”⁸⁷ It is evident, from the rapid increase in Twitter followers of both the BJP and Congress (the secular and second strongest party) that the same polarization seen in the US is occurring as political participation and access increases (see Figure 1).

B. Alienated and dissident elites

DeFronzo’s second element is alienated and dissident elites. There are currently eight nationally recognized political parties, with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) at the far left, and the BJP at the right. The largest opposition to the BJP is the oldest and ex-ruling party, the Indian National Congress (INC), which is a secular centre-left group. While a mainstay in the political climate, the party has waned in power, with only 52 of the 543 seats in India’s parliament compared to the BJP’s 303 seats. This has effectively led to unilateral abilities of the current regime, without checks and balances of minority-supporting parties. These six parties form the alienated and dissident elite group, vying for the reinstatement of a secular government.⁸⁸

C. Unifying multiclass motivations

DeFronzo’s third element is, arguably, the key issue with why there has not been a revolution as pertaining to the current regime. While there is a vast increase in discontent, the ensuing violence and unhappiness has been explained as mostly related to religious violence. In this manner, acts of violence breed more violent acts, allowing religious violence to proliferate. As the current dominant party in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has close ties with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The RSS is a right-wing Hindu nationalist organization. Founded in 1925, it has been banned four different times, three times in post-independence India alone for paramilitary and violent actions, most notably the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. While the RSS’ proliferation of ideology began in the 1920s, its growth accelerated in the last decade with the rise of the BJP, the availability of social media, and instigations of violence. The RSS systematically created “cow protection vigilante” groups that attend local training camps in preparation for action whereby the ideology is enforced that the cow is a symbol of the Hindu god Vishnu, and is held as restricted food in Hinduism, thus it falls to Hindu nationalists to

⁸⁶ Bhardwaj, M, Menon, M, “Indian Capitals Summer of Discontent and Anger” Reuters 2020 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-water-shortage/indian-capitals-summer-of-discontent-anger-killings-over-water-idUSKBN1JO0ZV>

⁸⁷ Chacko, P. “The Right Turn in India: Authoritarianism, Populism and Neoliberalisation, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*” 48:4, 2018 548

⁸⁸ Farooqui, A & Sridharan, E “Can umbrella parties survive? The decline of the Indian National Congress, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*”, 54:3, 2016, 331

protect what they hold sacred.⁸⁹ In 2019 alone, there were 11 recorded cases of Hindu nationalist violence, with over 26 people injured or killed. Overall, communal violence in India has increased in the last few years. In 2018, for example, the Hindutva movement burned or vandalized several churches with pro-Hindutva slogans in Delhi, the capital. Across India, there have been over 100 hate crimes committed annually against Christians since 2016 with cases increasing over time (see Figure 2).

The fragmentation on religious grounds has resulted in violent riots across India, with some of the most violent riots occurring earlier this year. In 2002, the most violent religious riot occurred in Gujarat, when the current Prime Minister was the ruling Chief Minister of the region. At the time, there were accusations and links made of the Chief Minister providing lists of Muslim properties to attack.⁹⁰ In 2020, the riots in Delhi occurred in response to the newly proposed Citizen Amendment Act, where protests had been occurring across India since 2019. The Bill proposed a method of fast-tracked naturalization for immigrants from neighbouring countries belonging to six religions: Hinduism, Christianity, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, and Buddhism. As a discriminatory bill, the protests were localized in large cities and large minority periphery states (e.g. Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Kerala). The government deactivated internet services in key uprising areas to suppress civil unrest.⁹¹ In this manner, Morozov's prediction that governments may abuse their power over the internet are correct, for two reasons.⁹² One, the censorship and limitation of internet controls the population and gives educational power to the government, and two, it allows the government to circumvent media and filtrations of the accuracy of news.⁹³ This area, in the peripheries of India, is a notably militarized zone, where internet is limited in large areas, and deliberately throttled to 2G services. The sentiment of oppression in the periphery is covered by the state, preventing cohesion of these minority communities and states on the borders of India.⁹⁴

Of these cases of communal violence, cow vigilantism has instilled a sense of fear and discontent in the minority groups, both because they fear populist actions, and because vigilantes face minimal persecution.⁹⁵ In Figure 3, it is evident that as the incidents of cow vigilantism become more frequent, the number of Twitter followers also increases. The related branches of

⁸⁹ Biswas, S. "A night patrol with India's cow protection vigilantes" *BBC News*. October, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-34634892>

⁹⁰ Murphy, Eamon. Richard Jackson; Eamon Murphy; Scott Poynting (eds.). *Contemporary State Terrorism: Theory and Practice*. Routledge. March 2011 p. 86,90.

⁹¹ Nath, H; "1,000 detained as anti-Citizenship Amendment Bill protests intensify in Assam". *India Today*. December 11, 2019

⁹² Morozov, Evgeny. *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*. Public Affairs. 2011. 46.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 99.

⁹⁴ Singh, P. 2g "Internet to be Restored" *Hindustan Times*, 2020.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/2g-internet-to-be-restored-in-kashmir-except-in-pulwama-shopian-districts-today/story-Gvi0L4LZOr5XMJRGi9N1zJ.html>

⁹⁵ Human Rights Watch, "India Cow Protection Spurs Vigilante Violence" 2017

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/27/india-cow-protection-spurs-vigilante-violence>

the RSS, who encourage and train cow vigilantes, grew the following year, suggesting the RSS radicalizes and foments laymen before they join new branches in this organization.

Furthermore, local and state governments on the right wing, aligned with the BJP, are more likely to share fake news. This has resulted in a cesspool of biased and inaccurate information, which foments violence, as much of the rhetoric suggests “Hindu power and superiority.”⁹⁶ This state sanctioned proliferation of fake news has made it difficult to develop multi-class cohesion. According to DeFronzo, any revolutionary movement has been due to broad cross-class participation as a product of nationalism, or a hatred towards a particular dictatorship.⁹⁷ The further monopolization of ‘nationalism’ as a Hindu state has muddied the waters of what it means to identify as Indian, preventing such broad cross-class participation from growing without addressing Hindutva.

D. Severe State Crisis

The fourth element DeFronzo proposes is the severe state crisis – essentially a moment that weakens in the pre-revolutionary state. DeFronzo argues that decolonization, war, partition, and economic policy failure can all weaken the state. While India is not under immediate threat, and is well post colonization, economic policy failure is a possibility under prevailing winds. Since the 2014 election of the BJP, India’s economy has slowed, with the unemployment rate at an all-time high in October of 2019. Economic growth has stagnated, due to numerous blunders such as demonetization⁹⁸, farmer isolation⁹⁹, corruption¹⁰⁰, etc.). In this space, the riots of 2020, occurring in the capital of Delhi, was the largest incident of religious violence in Delhi since 1924. However, these riots were curbed due to the social distancing guidelines. While this may have quelled the movements, not only has there been a resurgence of political action online, with polarization at the fore for the blame of coronavirus¹⁰¹, and an impending economic collapse.¹⁰²

E. Permissive world context

While DeFronzo’s fifth element is considered largely novel in the literature, in India it is moot. While it is a postcolonial nation, there is a permissive world context for revolutions in India currently, since it is democratic, with limited reliance in political, economic, or social

⁹⁶ Thaker, A, “In India, BJP supporters are more likely than others to share fake news” *Quartz, India*.

<https://qz.com/india/1461262/indias-bjp-supporters-share-more-fake-news-than-others-says-bbc/>

⁹⁷ DeFronzo, 17.

⁹⁸ Jasmine, M. “The Impact of Demonetization in India” *International Journal of Trend in Research and Development* 2394-993, 2017, 24.

⁹⁹ Merriott, D. “Factors associated with the farmer suicide crisis in India” *Journal of Epidemiology and Global Health*. 6:4. Dec, 2016, 5.

¹⁰⁰ Desai, D. “India Failing to Make Progress in Its Campaign Against Corruption” *Forbes.com* 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ronakdesai/2020/03/03/india-failing-to-make-progress-in-its-campaign-against-corruption/#556ba26ee127> - <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2019>

¹⁰¹ Apoorvanad, A. “How the Coronavirus Outbreak in India was blamed on Muslims” *AlJazeera2020* <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/coronavirus-outbreak-india-blamed-muslims-200418143252362.html>

¹⁰² Ghosh, J. “Indian economy was rolling down a hill. With Covid-19, it’s falling off a cliff.” <https://qz.com/india/1830822/coronavirus-may-push-indias-struggling-economy-off-the-cliff/>

matters from any of the usual actors (USA, China, Russia), most notably due to its size, and institutional democratic structures in place.¹⁰³

Conclusion

It is evident that India is at the cusp of a revolution, provided that multi-class and multi-area cohesion were to occur. The size, lack of minority strength, and lack of protest have resulted in riot cycles, as Michael Mann examined in his seminal work *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*.¹⁰⁴ Mann asserts that, although independent India does have consistent religious violence and protest, the religious violence and protest are perpetuated by the few elites with personal goals. This results in riot cycles with diffused moments of violence that peter out.¹⁰⁵

Much of modern theory analysing India and its democratic stability hinges on Mann's theory, presented by the fact that India's democratic institutions are entrenched in its constitution. Furthermore, Mann analyses how the BJP of the past failed to develop ethnonationalism, pandered to affiliated parties, and muted it when violent. However, this is not the same circumstances of India as was present in 2005. According to DeFronzo's model, solely multi-class motivations must occur for India to achieve a state ready for revolution. Social media, and the aggregation of political parties on social media has provided a platform for interaction, whether it be through WhatsApp or Twitter, to act and spread protests across India¹⁰⁶. Riot cycles do not account for unprecedented growth and change of political atmosphere. Mann's belief that Hindu ethnonationalism is a minor tool to be used is unfounded as it has become a widespread combative ideology, and the "loosely organized" military groups such as the RSS are now more organized than ever. Co-opting economic frustrations of the majority, who now have access to understand, examine, and process disparities on a global scale, into violence against other religious groups must result in a tipping point where one cannot just turn the other cheek. The implementation of government censorship and internet control is a means to prevent the aggregation of revolutionary sentiment. Whether or not the revolution comes, holding riot cycles at heart to stave off fears of an upheaval is insentient.

¹⁰³ ...Ironically, the same democratic structures result in the tyranny of the majority internally.

¹⁰⁴ Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy*, 2005. 31

¹⁰⁵ Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy*, 2005. 33.

¹⁰⁶ Jost, J. T., Barber P., Bonneau R., Langer M., Metzger M., Nagler J., Sterling J., Tucker J.T. "How Social Media Facilitates Political Protest: Information, Motivation, and Social Networks". *Advances in Political Psychology*, 39(S1): 2018. 89.

I. Figures

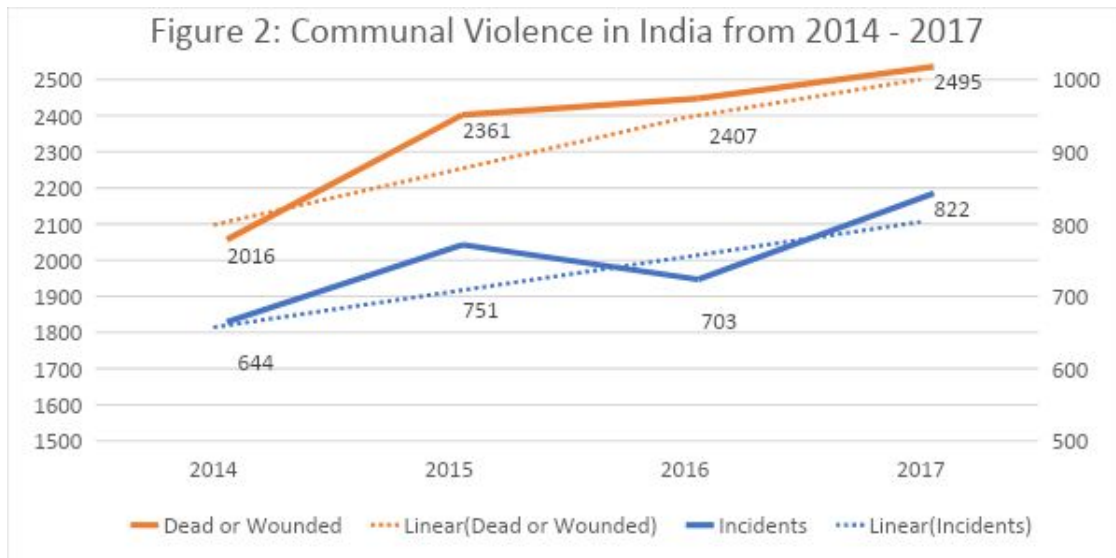
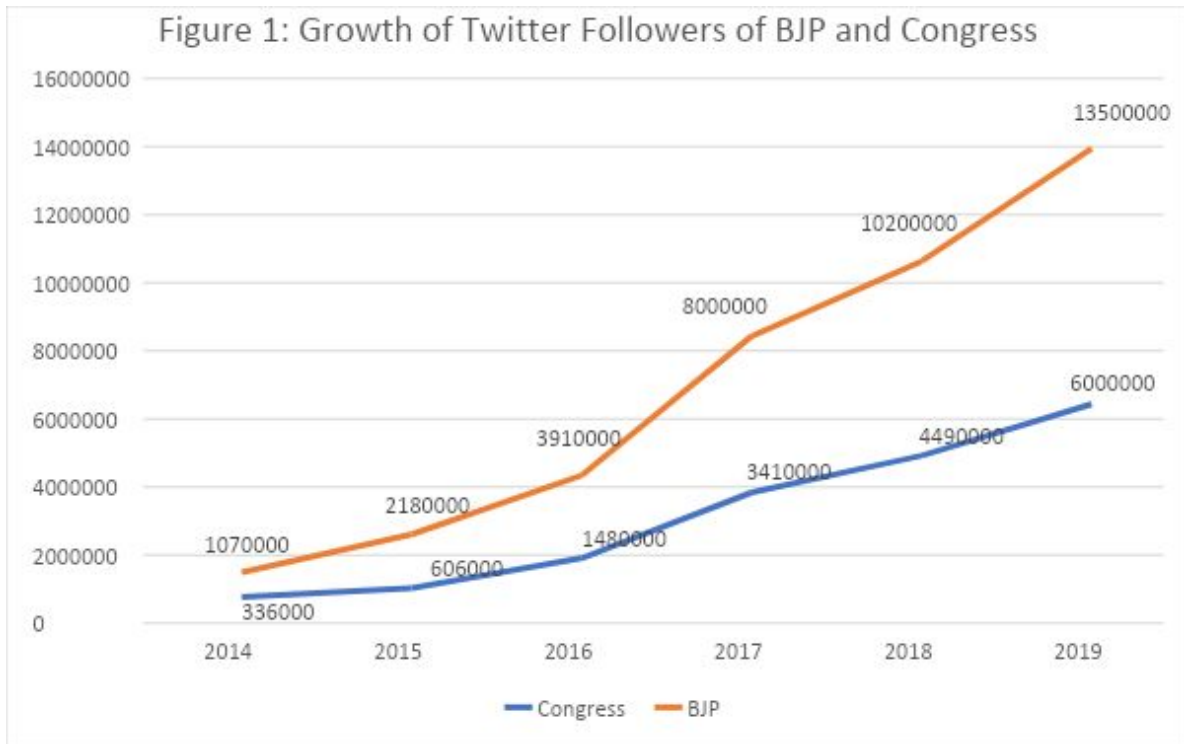
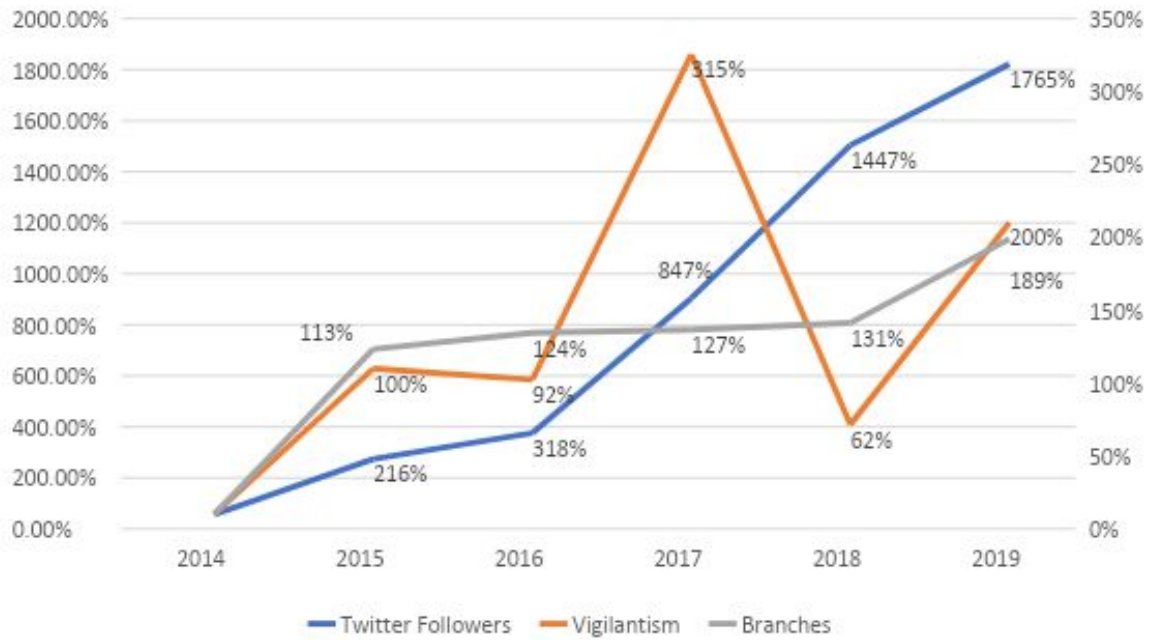


Figure 3: RSS Growth Percentage Increase Compared to Growth Percentage Increase of Incidents of Violent Cow Vigilantism from 2014



All data was obtained either via the Wayback feature on Archive.org, or through relevant annual reports from production organizations.



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