Social scientists studying revolutions have increasingly argued that explanations of revolutions that do not include subjective factors, such as culture, are inadequate. The failure to explain the anti-Communist revolutions of 1989 is forceful testimony to this inadequacy. But the way in which cultural aspects are being added to existing approaches tends to undermine past advances in studying revolutions. Recent historiography of the French Revolution provides an example of a more thorough-going approach to political culture. A productive synthesis that both preserves past advances and better explains the revolutions of 1989 is achieved by analyzing the effects of cultural change on state elites.

Social scientists have increasingly sought to improve their explanations of revolution by incorporating, or reincorporating, previously slighted notions, including political culture, legitimacy, and ideology. They have set themselves the right goal, but many are going about it in the wrong manner. The most convincing testimony to the inadequacy of those earlier models of revolution that exclude the role of ideas, ideology, and the like and rely instead on state and opposition actors strategically mobilizing resources in a competition for power is the failure to explain the anti-Communist revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe. In trying to remedy these shortcomings, many scholars have tended to compromise past progress in analyzing revolutions, made by dint of detailed empirical research and trenchant theoretical arguments, by looking to “bolt on” cultural variables to existing explanatory frameworks rather than re-thinking fundamentals. Revisionist history of the French Revolution
provides an illustrative counterpoint in the way that the historiography of 1789 has moved away from Marxist accounts to privilege the study of culture, ideas, and discourse, in the process effecting a much more radical break than have those seeking to amend social scientific models of revolution. The aim of this article is to sketch out how to best incorporate cultural factors while also safeguarding existing insights on the nature of revolution. The argument is developed around the fall of Communism of 1989, focusing on the way ideational change eroded state elites’ self-legitimation and sapped their will to employ their overwhelming coercive resources to suppress the unorganized and initially fragile opposition movements.

The remainder of this article is devoted to expanding on and supporting four basic points, developed with reference to the Eastern European revolutions of 1989. First, that existing “third generation” models do a very poor job of explaining (let alone predicting) the collapse of Communism in Europe. More than 10 years on, these events constitute a standing indictment of approaches that explain revolutions predominantly by means of resource mobilization by actors making strategic decisions and political process frameworks. Second, that the conventional wisdom identifying a neglect of ideas, ideology, culture, and related concepts as an important weakness of earlier attempts to explain revolutions is correct, but that just incorporating culture as an extra variable is not the solution. This additive approach undermines some of the still-persuasive findings of the resource mobilization vein of work, particularly explaining how popular disaffection may coincide with political stability as well as leading to conceptual stretching and tautology. Third, that revisionist historiography of the French Revolution provides an example of wholesale theoretical renewal based on new ideas about culture and is suggestive in the way cultural and political changes interact with each other in the context of revolutions. Fourth, that the valid conclusions of earlier approaches to explaining revolution can be combined with a greater sensitivity to cultural factors, by exploring how ideational change undermines the legitimacy of the elite in their own eyes and thus erodes their willingness to employ force to hold onto power in the manner strategic actors “ought” to do. This approach helps to explain how such weak opposition movements triumphed over such strong states, the central unresolved question in studying the revolutions of 1989.
The Failure to Explain 1989

The failure to predict the collapse of Communism has proven to be a considerable embarrassment for scholars of many persuasions, one commentator noting: “By now, analysts share almost a tradition of poor economic and political forecasts on Eastern European developments” (Greskovits 1998: 1). But explanations of the revolutions of 1989 after the fact have also often left a lot to be desired. Sidney Tarrow (1995: 238–39) has succinctly stated the major problem posed by the fall of Communist regimes across Europe: “The irony of the movement against state socialism in the late 1980s in East-Central Europe was that it pitted extremely weak and poorly organized movement organizations against the most massive bureaucratic states that have ever been created—and they succeeded! How can this result be explained?” Many scholars have asked similar questions, with good reason.

The character of these opposition successes runs against the conventional wisdom of how political actors making decisions in a strategic manner are assumed to behave. Most striking was the failure to employ the massive coercive forces available to each of the regimes in the region, and the way elites seemed to give up, content to hand over power and see themselves abolished, despite the Leninist fixation on seizing control of the state and holding it against all comers. The resources available to opposition forces were far inferior to those available to governments, despite the economic difficulties of the time and despite the withdrawal of Soviet support (which is in itself part of the puzzle). Poland possessed a large and active underground trade union movement in the form of Solidarity, but all the other countries of the region had little or no opposition, ranging from tiny circles of dissidents in Czechoslovakia and East Germany to almost nothing in Bulgaria and Romania.

This mismatch is not only surprising from a casual observer’s point of view but also profoundly destructive of prevalent theories of collective contention and “third generation” theories of revolution (Foran 1993), which share a concern with actors pursuing calculated actions in a strategic fashion while responding to the supply of available resources. Four basic assumptions are common to strategic or resource mobilization conceptions of contentious politics, as expressed in Charles Tilly’s (1978: 99) classic work From Mobilization to Revolution: that collective action is costly, that contenders count costs, that such action is undertaken in pursuit of collective goods, and that contenders weigh up expected costs against expected benefits (see also, Olson 1965). Because disaffected groups are assumed to be ubiquitous, it is
the supply of resources that explains variations in the occurrence and success of collective dissent.

The political process model includes a prominent structural aspect in that changes in the political, social, and economic contexts are held to create opportunities that may provide the initial conditions for the emergence of waves of protest and social movements (Tarrow 1994; Traugott 1995; McAdam et al. 1996; Meyer and Tarrow 1998). But the “conceptual framework is still actor-centered, and [the] . . . argument hinges on the strategic problem of getting ‘from here to there.’ . . . [It] is essentially about a variety of resources which organisers or leaders draw upon to constitute a movement” (Munck 1995: 670). Structure tends to be conceived of as a constraint “on an otherwise natural dispositional force,” namely, agency (Somers 1998: 751 n. 20). Although formal rational choice language is rare, and the commitment to methodological individualism sacrificed as groups take center stage, the political process model does share the emphasis on strategic actors (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994: 1428; Skocpol 1994: 322; Goldstone 1998: 841).

The examples of state elites giving up power when they had the means (a massive preponderance of resources) and motive (by assumption, the universal preference for retaining power) to win has prompted a re-examination of the prevailing approaches to studying revolution (Chirot 1991; Bauman 1994; Tismaneanu 1999). Apart from those taking heed of cultural factors (dealt with below), others have tried to tweak the extant framework, but while often illuminating one aspect of the events these treatments have produced less than convincing results overall (Bunce 1999). One hypothesis is that the upper stratum of the nomenklatura realized that there would be more profitable opportunities in a clientelistic capitalist order than in a decrepit socialist one (Goodwin 1994a: 592–93; Kotz and Weir 1997). Another is that the very weakness of the opposition movements was a strength, for it was precisely the diffuseness and informality of ties between the public that gave rise to such broad movements, while the lack of leadership prevented the secret police from breaking the opposition with selective arrests (Tarrow 1995).

While many from the old regime have indeed succeeded in re-inventing themselves and amassing great riches, crediting the leadership with this amount of foresight and tolerance for risk in the heady days of autumn 1989 seems implausible and highly anachronistic. Why would elites take a chance on a new order when they are on top of the old? (To answer that they recognized the “inevitability” of revolution merely begs the question.) And while
it may be plausible to argue that “weak ties” are more conducive to contentious collective action (Granovetter 1973), for those who have also held that a strong formal organization facilitates protest, this claim smacks of theory saving (see Tilly 1995 on “improving the model”).

Recent accounts from a rational choice perspective have attempted to cope with the problem of how, in such a short span of time, public conformity could be replaced by massive popular defiance of the government by employing various threshold, critical mass, informational cascade, or bandwagon models. Space precludes a proper explanation of these interesting models, but, in brief, they all rely on the idea that an initially small change may create a self-reinforcing chain of public protest: as more and more people join, others in turn are impelled toward participation (see in particular Kuran 1991, 1995a, 1995b; Lohmann 1994; Opp 1994). Despite the sophistication of these models, the unwillingness or inability of the government to crack down on protests and disrupt the chain reaction remains a mystery. The assumption is that once protests have reached a certain size, the government will fall and the opposition will have won.

Including Cultural Factors in Light of 1989

It would be wrong to claim that those studying revolutions began to look at ideational factors again and reconsider notions of legitimacy only after 1989 (the Iranian revolution had already pushed interest in this direction 10 years earlier), but the difficulty of explaining the Eastern European revolutions with narrower approaches gave a strong impetus to this shift. Thus, in an article reviewing the field, Jeff Goodwin (1994b) urges scholars to increase the attention devoted to questions of culture and ideology, how these factors influence the formation and conduct of the state and actors in society, and the reciprocal influences these groups have on each others’ identities, and he reiterates this point in a later article with James Jasper (Goodwin and Jasper 1999). John Foran (1993, 1997) similarly argues that ideologies are crucial for successful collective dissent. Jack Goldstone admits that he has modified his previous conception of revolutions contained in Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World to give greater prominence to the role of revolutionary ideologies and feelings of alienation among the populace (Goldstone and Useem 1999: 995). Furthermore, Theda Skocpol (1985: 91, 1994) has qualified her previous hard line against such subjective features as ideology and
legitimacy. Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, three of the
most prominent scholars in the field, hold that “structuralist, rationalist and
culturalist work in the field of contentious politics . . . cry out for theoretical
synthesis” (McAdam et al. 1997: 142).

The insufficiency of resource mobilization and similar accounts thus has
led to the inclusion of intangible factors such as ideology or legitimacy. But
such eclecticism may produce further problems. Specifically, there is a dan-
ger of running afoul of earlier critiques of relative deprivation accounts that
helped to establish the credentials of the resource mobilization approach and
those concentrating on the free-rider problem in the first place. For example,
in the past, several scholars in the field have presented convincing critiques
of the concept of legitimacy as having serious flaws, being regarded as too
tangible and tautological. It is held to be tautological in the way revolutions are
said to be explained by a failure of legitimacy, but the evidence for the failure
of legitimacy is the revolution itself.4

The assertion of relative deprivation accounts that discontent beyond a
certain level or threshold is sufficient to produce revolution is central. The
major improvement claimed for resource mobilization theory and many of
those approaches formulated as a response is that they provide a reasonably
small, identifiable set of prerequisites for revolutionary activity. In contrast,
relative deprivation works do not seem to account for the mismatch whereby
relative deprivation and popular discontent are very common, but revolutions
are quite rare. Resource mobilization does provide an explanation of discontented yet passive populations, in pointing to the necessity of some measure
of organization and tangible assets, without which no protests occur. Revolu-
tions and public contention are thus said to vary with the availability of
resources to malcontents.

Despite the relative narrowness of the view sketched out above (in ex-
cluding culture or including it only as a resource), there do seem to be some
important features that are both worth holding onto and under threat from
more recent attempts to marry diverse concepts. The notion that people may
be completely alienated from their government, and the official legitimating
ideology, but also powerless to do much about it is theoretically valuable and
has considerable empirical support, not least from looking at Eastern Europe
in the decades before 1989. Also, the very narrowness of the resource mobi-
lization approach makes it possible to see what kind of evidence counts as
a disconfirmation; it is not infinitely elastic or so diffuse as to “explain” all
conceivable events. Resources are a finite set of organizational and physical assets. In Skocpol’s (1979) classic account of social revolutions, for example, a crucial resource is held to be autonomous peasant village governments or a peasant-based vanguard movement, such as the Chinese Communist Party. The steady expansion of the number of variables included in more recent accounts, and the increasingly broad conception of these variables, make it difficult to imagine what a disconfirmation would even look like, a concern that is developed below.

How have analysts sought to hybridize resource mobilization theory with conceptions of political culture, legitimacy, and ideology in the face of the failure to explain the fall of Communism? One out has been to redefine resources more broadly, as including intangible symbolic factors or ideological “framing processes” in addition to access to weapons, media exposure, elite patronage, financial backing, a stream of recruits, and so on (Maheu 1995; Zald 1996). Thus the central proposition that dissent varies with access to resources rather than the level of deprivation or fluctuations in legitimacy can be maintained.

The difficulty with this modification is that it leaves resources as an extremely vague concept, comprising everything from military forces to a strong neighborhood identity. It then becomes easy to retrospectively “find” resources, especially intangible ones, and thus to save the core claims of much of this literature. The problem occurs when the presence of sufficient resources for successful collective action cannot be determined empirically or in advance (because many resources are intangible) and instead is inferred on a post hoc basis by the fact of the successful collective action itself, producing the same sort of circularity as in relative deprivation accounts. Furthermore, in broadening the scope of resources, there is also a tendency to endow nearly all populations with sufficient means for successful revolution. It is all very well to argue for “a more nuanced view of the relationship of organization to protest or revolution” in which “organization may be a facilitating factor, but it seems neither necessary nor sufficient for protest or revolution, or for their success” (Goldstone and Useem 1999: 998), but in this case what does explain their success, and failure? Even the most oppressed populations in prisons or concentration camps or those who have been enslaved or enserfed for generations have informal networks and opportunities to build “hidden transcripts,” ideologies, or discourses critical of the powers that be and fore-shadowing a more just alternative order (Scott 1990). If the prerequisites for
successful revolution are so minimal and/or ubiquitous, we are once again, as with relative deprivation theories, in the position of having to ask why there are so few revolutions and why so many people endure repression and unjust government for so long.

One last approach to synthesis that has a strong prima facie relevance to the revolutions in Eastern Europe is to focus on explaining high-risk collective action, that is, where participation in a movement leaves the individual at risk of being physically assaulted, incarcerated, or even killed (McAdam 1986; Calhoun 1991; della Porta 1988; Loveman 1998). Demonstrating against continued Communist rule in Eastern Europe certainly seems to fall into this category, particularly in the early stages. Because it is often unconvincing to attribute self-serving goals to those, like revolutionaries, terrorists, and human rights activists, who run the risk of state repression, those studying high-risk collective action have stressed how people's identities change through their experience of participation as mediated through informal personal networks of friends and peers. Through a process of gradual radicalization, people make deeper commitments to the cause, making it incompatible with their new identity to lapse into passivity even in situations of great personal danger. While this sort of account seems to enjoy a good fit with the way pre-1989 dissident circles arose in some countries of the Communist bloc, the sheer speed with which protest mushroomed from almost nothing in 1989, and the massive size of the protests, argue against a process of incremental resocialization. But in the formerly Communist countries, our attention is drawn to the beliefs and identities of those at the apex of power rather than at the base.

Explanations for the fall of Communism that include cultural factors, whether reformulations of the notion of legitimacy or broadened conceptions of what constitutes resources for collective dissent, thus reflect a significant retreat from earlier advances and leave the resultant theories vulnerable to the same charges of being vague and tautological that led to the eclipse of their predecessors. Yet the need to confront the questions of belief and culture seems inescapable. The question is, at this preliminary stage, is it possible to identify the outlines of an approach that includes important notions of culture, while at the same time preserving earlier insights and avoiding theory-saving auxiliary hypotheses?

The problem in general terms is as follows. Social peace exists because people are (1) genuinely happy with their governments, (2) unhappy with
their governments but unable to do anything about it, or (3) fooled into supporting their governments. The third option, which relies on the ability of elites to inculcate the masses with false consciousness and to establish an unquestioned ideological hegemony, has been subjected to several decisive critiques (for example, Abercrombie et al. 1980; Scott 1985) and deservedly has fallen into disrepute. Option one is self-evidently wrong for many countries and for many times in history and would be true only under a particularly naïve and universalistically pluralist view. Option two is clearly most plausible, and the best explanation of this situation is that there are certain prerequisites or necessary resources for the development of collective dissent and that these resources are more often absent than present. In the context of recent Eastern European history, the implications are that state-centered theories of revolution maintain their value (a conventional conclusion) but also that the impact of cultural and ideational changes on the elite is much more important than delegitimation or revolutionary ideologies (a much less conventional claim). Thus despite increasingly creative solutions to the puzzle posed by the strange death of Communism, we remain with both an uncertain grasp of cultural factors and an uncertain fit between these considerations and the existing social scientific theories of revolution. It is these shortcomings that prompt an examination of cultural explanations of the French Revolution, which for the past two decades have looked at just this link between cultural shifts and political change.

New Historiography of the French Revolution

What social scientific theories of the collapse of Communism in Europe have often lacked is a convincing explanation of the decline of Communist legitimacy. Any explication of this process must deal with the failure of an idea, resulting in a fundamental change in the self-conceptions of Communist Party authorities and involving interactions between state and society, and the material and the ideal. The vast amount of effort devoted by historians of the French Revolution to explaining the decline of the old regime gives valuable clues (though not, of course, a blueprint) as to how to go about forming such an explanation. Concepts drawn from the study of the French Revolution of 1789 demonstrate how cultural and social interactions constitute actors’ identities and interests. However, despite important parallels between the two, the different emphases of these bodies of work also mean that there
are limits to the extent to which social scientists may adopt techniques or concepts in a modular fashion.

Until the 1980s those dealing with eighteenth-century French history anchored their empirical work in Marxist theory, with the revolution of 1789 representing the transition from feudal to capitalist class relations as the bourgeoisie displaced the nobility in line with changes in the underlying economic base. As part of a move away from socioeconomic laws, scholars now stress the importance of politics and particularly political culture. The politics and culture of revolution are no longer reduced to underlying economic factors, or portrayed as reflecting grand theoretical laws (Furet 1981; Hunt 1984: 1–18, 1989; Censer 1989a, 1989b; Baker 1990; Chartier 1991; Lewis 1993: 57–90; Sewell 1994). Marxist versions of early modern French history determined historical actors’ motivations and interests under the rubric of class struggle and relationship to the means of production. Beyond Marxism, there was the seemingly commonsense assumption, also found within a large body of social scientific work past and present, that interests were relatively simple and universal; down through the ages, people have preferred wealth to poverty, power to powerlessness, and if pushed sufficiently far have been willing to rebel against governments that persistently fail to deliver.

Recently, however, historiography of the French Revolution has stressed the extent to which interests are very far from self-evident. In the lexicon, interests are problematized. In keeping with the hostility toward the idea of speech acts and ideological claims as being a cover or expression for underlying economic interests, historians are now at pains to point out the futility of attempting to decode political language to reach a material basis of interests, for interests are defined and constituted by political language itself (Jones 1983). People come by their political preferences in relation to the social world, through their exposure to and choices between the coexisting and competing political cultures of the day. Thus for François Furet, the pioneer of ideational and cultural history of the French Revolution from the late 1970s, the revolution itself occurred when the attacks of a centralizing and modernizing monarchy endangered traditional privileges of the nobility and guilds. The resulting “status anxiety” left groups susceptible to new ideologies, with Rousseau’s ideas of equality and the social contract emerging as dominant, thanks in large part to the homogenizing policies of the king. Interests were defined by this Rousseauistic language, because it seemed to best characterize the problems historical agents faced and offered a course of action to transcend these problems (Furet 1981).
Attempts by political scientists and sociologists to incorporate cultural and symbolic factors into studies of contentious politics have often been additive and have often characterized these concerns in excessively instrumentalist terms. This rendering places the stakes of political goals somehow beyond culture and ideology. The dominant social science metaphor for cultural aspects in political struggle is that of the tool kit: it is almost as if the prevailing culture or set of symbols in a society provides a storehouse of potential instruments to be employed in pursuit of political aims, in the context of revolutions, most usually control of the state (see Swidler 1986). Even putting more sophisticated conceptions to one side, the tool-kit view of culture suffers from two serious weaknesses. First, it assumes that culture may define available means but has little to do with ends, and second, it is unclear why symbols and culture should have any resonance with people if they are merely a set of instruments. The first shortcoming stems from the voluntarist cast of models seeking to distance themselves from deterministic conceptions of revolutions as reflecting underlying structural change, rather than as the results of human will and contingency. Yet the idea that final goals are selected and groups formed in isolation from the broader cultural milieu seems far-fetched. The unlikelihood of this separation is particularly apparent with revolutions such as those of 1789 and 1989 that had such far-reaching consequences, beyond the simple desire of groups to take power for its own sake.5 Thus, not only interests and group identities but also goals “cannot be attributed to the force of new motivations detached from... discourse—such as self-interest, competition, or a will to power” (Smith 1997: 1438).

In a similar vein, admitting that the range of cultural artifacts and rhetorical devices is finite at any given time, and that it changes only in an evolutionary fashion, does not resolve the question of why such devices carry any affective force. The instrumental selection from the available tool kit by the state or opposition groups would seem to indicate that their audiences would employ the same self-interested, instrumental logic in responding to these appeals (Elster 1985).

Explanations of revolution such as Furet’s combine attention to ideational factors in their own right, as well as material considerations, with a sensitivity to contingency and conjunction. Splits within the ruling elite result from long-term ideational changes that fatally undermine willingness to use the coercive apparatus of the state when put to the test. This decay of belief in the divine right of kings was in part a product of the regime’s own efforts to modernize itself in the face of international competition. The spread of
Rousseauian discourse of equality, going on for decades before the revolution itself, coincided with and was fostered by material factors such as struggles over taxation. The proximate cause of the revolution was indeed a conjunction of events and decisions made by strategic actors, but to understand the result of the struggle and the shape of the successor regimes it is vital to pay heed to cultural developments within and outside the elite. In this way the new historiography of the French Revolution provides a suggestive template for interpreting revolutions two centuries later.

1789 and 1989

Given these very abbreviated insights into recent work on the French Revolution, how does this treatment help to set social scientific explanations of the collapse of Communism on firmer ground? There are four main conclusions to be drawn relating to the study of the 1989 revolutions, prompted by both the shortcomings of extant approaches to the study of revolution and the presence of alternatives as sketched out in the previous section. First, legitimacy and the ideational underpinnings that justify a political regime are important but often more so at the level of elites than of publics. Second, it is unwise to assume deductively interests independent of the historical and cultural context, even when these interests relate to intuitive-sounding claims, such as the ultimate priority of a ruler’s retaining power above all else. Interests, and the identities that help to constitute them, draw from and are shaped by specific cultural milieus. Third, the implications of culture for political change, though usually giving rise to complex and indirect causal patterns, can be studied so as to support or disconfirm competing hypotheses rather than as some mystical, unseen force unattached to observable evidence. Culture, furthermore, operates as a lens or optic through which actors discern and interpret material circumstances. Fourth, just as insights from the study of the French Revolution are suggestive rather than definitive, so too social scientists should avoid the temptation, often decried yet still commonplace, to pursue invariant models and master concepts that try to explain all revolutions, all social movements, or all instances of collective action.

Taking the first of these points, dealing with legitimacy, the study of 1789 provides a stimulus that helps to reincorporate this notion in the analysis of revolutions, and it provides a better explanation of the events of 1989 without discarding or unduly deforming the insights from earlier theories of revo-
Along these lines, Giuseppe di Palma (1991) has perceptively argued that Communism in Eastern Europe was based on “legitimation from the top,” whereby the authorities were sustained not by popular support but by belief in their own special historical mission and vanguardist role, together with the inevitability of socialism. Once this belief eroded, Communist rulers lost their self-justification for repressing opposition forces. Many other commentators without a stake in upholding current sociological models of revolution have reached broadly the same conclusion in ascribing the suddenness of the end after such a drawn-out period of stagnation and decay to a failure of self-belief among the ruling elite (Garton Ash 1990; Chirot 1991; Eisenstadt 1992; Kolakowski 1992; Gellner 1994; Maier 1996; Strayer 1998; Tismaneanu 1999). Indeed, it is symptomatic of the complete delegitimation of Communist ideology that although many formerly Communist parties have returned to power all over Eastern Europe, nowhere has a party with a Marxist-Leninist platform gained office. Orthodox Communist parties in the region are tiny fringe groups.

This conclusion parallels recent historiographical trends in the study of the French Revolution whereby the beliefs of the elites in relation to political change are the predominant subject of scrutiny and debate. These examinations include state officials, the nobility, members of the court, local notables, industrialists, merchants, and so on, as well as more focused investigations of the Constituent Assembly, the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen,” and the political leaders that oversaw the progressive radicalization of the revolution. The peasants who eventually dismantled the machinery of the old regime in the countryside and the sans-culottes in Paris did not themselves unmake the monarchy through an explosion of unsatisfied grievances or a conversion to republicanism.

There is little doubt that delegitimation occurred among the population of Eastern Europe, as Communist ideology became increasingly ossified and ritualized (Kubik 1994). But as long as the elites believed in their mission, maintained a monopoly of coercion, and denied organizational resources to all other sectors, popular alienation was not sufficient to threaten the overthrow of the system. In keeping with state-centric theories, the political leadership enjoyed a high degree of autonomy from society and formidable despotic and infrastructural power (Mann 1993). In keeping with the resource mobilization approach, the population had many severe grievances, but because they were atomized and demobilized, they were also passive. What changed in the
terminal crisis of Communism was not a shift in the balance of resources that enabled insurgents to seize the reins of power, but rather the culmination of a process of redefinition by party leaders as to their identities and interests, which created a context for the mass protests that were the proximate cause of regime change.7

The second point has to do with the stability and definition of interests. The social scientific convention is generally to assume that preferences, or interests, are fixed and that explanations based on preference change are to be avoided. In the study of revolutions and social movements in particular, incumbents and challengers are generally assumed to have at the root of their interests some sort of primordial will to power. Again, the experience of 1989 casts doubt on these assumptions. The premise in the above presentation of historiographical material is an inductive approach that puts interpretations of the actors’ changing interests at the center of the explanation. From the impact of Rousseau’s writings to the pamphlets and rhetoric of Abbé Sieyes in the Constituent Assembly, interests were redefined as people began to see the world in new ways, and this redefinition in turn crucially shaped the course of events. Thus rather than seeking to explain the fall of Communist regimes by looking for variation in resources while holding preferences constant, scholars are better off looking at shifting interests and identities.

Much work has already been done along these lines from the perspective of those looking at the rise of “New Thinking” in Soviet foreign policy. Mikhail Gorbachev’s concessions that helped to bring about the end of the Cold War have been shown to be a product of innovation in the concepts of the national interest and national security, as Gorbachev became increasingly convinced by foreign policy advisers such as Aleksandr Yakolev in the wake of the failures of the Brezhnev era. Realpolitik and Marxist-Leninist conceptions of the security dilemma and zero-sum relationships gave way to ideas of a “common European home” and the declining utility of force and weapons in international relations. Networks of Soviet foreign policy experts, influenced by early experiences with détente and contact with Western European social democrats in the 1970s, found allies in the party and state who shared their aspiration for the USSR to become a peaceful and democratic member of an international community based on universal human rights. The consequences of these redefinitions were such decisions as the withdrawal from Afghanistan, deep unilateral arms cuts, and the abandonment of the Brezhnev doctrine (Kull 1992; Risse-Kappen 1994; Herman 1996; Evange-
Culture, Strategy, and State-Centered Explanations of Revolution, 1789 and 1989  15

The use of force outside the Warsaw Pact, like the use of force in Eastern Europe, came to be considered impermissible and even counterproductive in advancing the Soviet Union’s interests in the wider world. Thus both the errors introduced in saying that political leaders pursue some static, self-apparent notion of power or security as well as efforts devoted to tracing the evolution of the preferences of eighteenth-century French revolutionaries highlight the need to incorporate an examination of preference shifts among the ruling Communist elite.

One of the most intriguing accounts of this long-term ideational change in the ruling circles of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union is Jacques Levesque’s *The Enigma of 1989* (1997), which begins with the same question of how such powerful regimes collapsed so meekly, and more particularly why the Soviet Union failed to halt or reverse this process as it had done in the past. Rationalist attempts to explain this decision have emphasized that Eastern Europe had become a major liability to the Soviet Union because of the political and financial costs of garrisoning the sometimes restive satellites and the economic cost of subsidizing the energy and raw materials of Eastern Europe instead of selling such materials on the world market for much-needed hard currency (Bunce 1985). After a painstaking reconstruction of events, however, Levesque (1997: 88) convincingly argues that “in 1988 and 1989, even the most radical reformers did not envisage—behind closed doors or in public—the abandonment of Eastern Europe.”

Levesque traces the decline of Leninism in the Soviet intellectual elite through a process of “social democratization” that provided the basis of support for Gorbachev’s accession to power and subsequent reforms. This process of ideological change certainly had much to do with slowing growth rates and the failure of the command economy to adapt to new technologies and production techniques, but it was also a reflection of the waxing appeal of reformist, as opposed to revolutionary, conceptions of Marxism that had been gaining ground since the beginning of the century. Ideology could not be reduced to either a material base or a rational response to declining economic performance, but neither were developments in this sphere innocent of material and power political considerations. “Gorbachev and his team were convinced that they had understood the important characteristics of an emerging new world order and planned to give the USSR a renewed political and moral leadership role in international affairs through their new ideology” (ibid.: 10). The new social democratic identity, and the policy commit-
ments that came with it, did not allow for the use of massive repression on the model of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. By the time of the Polish roundtable talks and exodus from East Germany the Soviet elite had convinced themselves that the use of force to preserve the USSR’s Western glacis was unacceptable but also unnecessary.8

This analysis also demonstrates that constructing explanations that accord culture a central role does not mean making vague and unfalsifiable claims with little relation to available evidence. Even with all the high-flown controversy among historians over ontology and theory, successful practitioners in the field have not and cannot rely on abstruse conceptual innovations or conjectural flourishes at the expense of much spadework in the archives or elsewhere. Because “ideas do not float freely” (Risse-Kappen 1994) their development and influence leave traces that are amenable to empirical treatment. Of course there is a point at which explaining the impact of culture, legitimacy, and the like on behavior relies on unobservables, but so too do nearly all other approaches to social science (Somers 1998). As archives are opened, memoirs are published, and more interviews are conducted, the stock of primary sources on the revolutions of 1989 now provides ample material to formulate and challenge cultural accounts of these events.

Thus in Bulgaria and East Germany, interviews and archives have shown the rulers were placed under increasing strain from the mid-1980s, with their earlier devotion to the Soviet Union making it difficult to ignore Gorbachev’s reforms, morale and belief within the security organs in steep decline, and reformers mobilizing within the party. The head of Bulgaria’s Interior Ministry and State Security Service at the time of transition, General Atanas Semerijev, noted that the institution was already ripe for reform and depoliticization by December 1989 as a new generation of more-educated recruits attained senior positions and began to dismantle the old repressive structures. The use of previous draconian tactics by the Interior Ministry had become so discredited by this time that its officers were told to rely on dialogue and negotiation, even in the context of clashes between ethnic Bulgarian and Turkish-Bulgarian demonstrators in the border areas. The army too was keen to be rid of party structures; a poll in early 1990 showed that 80% of officers up to the rank of captain, 50–60% of senior officers, and 60% of soldiers favored dissolving Communist cells and the parallel command structure. On the first day of the roundtable talks initiated by the government, both sides denounced the previous “totalitarian” order (Melone 1998: 85–104). Exten-
sive material from the East German Stasi (ministry of state security) archives shows that ministry officials became increasingly demoralized as they collated and reported the deep alienation of the populace. During the Leipzig demonstrations of 9 October 1989, neither the hardliners in the Politburo nor local officials could bring themselves to issue the order to repress street demonstrations, despite their effusive praise of the Chinese regime’s crackdown earlier that year (Maier 1996). In Hungary and Poland, the rot had set in even earlier and was apparent for most of the 1980s (Clark and Wildavsky 1990; O’Neil 1996).

In each of these cases, the failure of legitimacy proceeded against a backdrop of economic hardship and institutional stagnation. Comparisons with the French Revolution are again fruitful and show another instance of the interaction of material and intersubjective considerations in leading to regime change. In France it was the efforts of the monarchy to build absolutism and centralize power as well as a fiscal crisis that combined with new ideas about politics, the state, and the individual to produce a revolutionary conjunction. An analogous interaction was the way the much-discussed economic problems of command economies had to be interpreted or classified to enter the political discourse: did falling growth rates indicate a lack of socialist zeal in the work force, the deadening grip of capitalist encirclement, or incurable systemic faults? Analysts both inside and outside the system came to settle on the last explanation. Without fitting such material data into a narrative, economic decline as such may have no effect on political stability, even in Communist systems, as Cuba and North Korea’s different experiences in the 1990s would indicate.

From this point, but only from this point, conventional social science perspectives come into their own in providing a useful and convincing account of the process of the revolutions of 1989. Of course these vary from case to case, with sharp contrasts between, for example, Hungary and Romania, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria. The national and international demonstration effects that saw the snowballing of protest are well explained by Timur Kuran’s concept of pluralistic ignorance and tipping points, as well as the idea of new political opportunity structures providing an opening illuminated by a few pioneering social movements and thereafter seized by many others following in their wake (Hall 2000). Note, however, that without some idea of what is driving the new political opportunity structures in the first place (or providing the permissive context for revolutionary bandwagons to form),
the explanation begs the most interesting questions and is radically incomplete. These approaches give a much better account of the process of regime change, which is not a strength of approaches centering on long-term evolutions of political culture, and also correctly stress the importance of contingency and chance in the timing and path of revolutionary events. This way, there is no attempt to stretch the definition of resources to such a point that somehow oppositions can overmatch rulers. Nor is the concept of political opportunity structure distorted to the extent that it soaks up almost every aspect of the environment in an effort to pin down the crucial opening. As it stands now, explanations that try to account for the revolutions of 1989 according to a standard invariant model, conventional resource mobilization, or political process approach tend to be “tautological, trivial, inadequate, or just plain wrong” (Goodwin and Jasper 1999: 28).

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the bulk of social scientific theories aimed at analyzing revolutions are incomplete in explaining the most consequential revolutions of the late twentieth century, those that resulted in the collapse of Communism in Europe, the end of the Cold War, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In large part, the difficulty of crafting a better explanation for these events relates to the necessity of incorporating cultural aspects that often do not enjoy a good fit with the rest of the existing analytical framework. Conceptions of culture as employed to analyze the French Revolution of 1789 offer an enticing series of alternative approaches to this problem, but despite some broad similarities in the intellectual development of both fields, deep differences remain. The contrasting goals of historians, on the one hand, and political scientists and sociologists, on the other, make it unlikely that methods and concepts will be freely swapped between the two. In particular, historians tend to be less interested in establishing causation and making generalizations. Robert Darnton (1984: 4) cautions that “nothing is easier than to slip into the comfortable assumption that Europeans thought and felt two centuries ago just as we do today—allowing for wigs and wooden shoes. We constantly need to be shaken out of a false sense of familiarity with the past, to be administered a dose of culture shock.”

Nevertheless, despite these contrasts and divergences, an examination of the new historiography of the French Revolution can establish a productive
tension with the social scientific explanation of revolutions, and the revolutions of 1989 in particular. Such a juxtaposition throws into relief existing deficiencies in the field and also suggests solutions to these problems. Many of these deficiencies spring from the awareness that cultural factors, variously defined, are essential to a more complete understanding of the opposition to state socialism, but the most common remedies that have been tried are flawed. Reliance on some notions of legitimacy can lead to tautology and ignores the fact that “history teems with victims who have no capability to resist” (Aya 1994: 771). Instrumental theories of culture provide the illusion of an additive solution to the incorporation of subjective factors into existing resource mobilization theories and are excessively voluntaristic. Thus because of the as-yet uncertain purchase of conventional explanations of the collapse of Communism as a revolution provides, cues from historians on how culture relates to revolution are especially useful.

Notes

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1 Here and throughout the article I refer to the regime changes across Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989–91 as revolutions, following Jeff Goodwin’s (1994a: 577) definition that “denotes a relatively rapid process in which a society’s state structure, economic institutions and transnational relations are fundamentally transformed; these changes, furthermore, are initiated and/or propelled, at least in part, by mass mobilizations, including armed movements, strikes, and/or demonstrations.” Charles Tilly (1993: 4) discusses the distinctiveness of these revolutions compared with the paradigmatic French and Russian cases.

2 For some of the best recent attempts to move beyond these shortcomings, see Baum 1994; Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Goldstone 2001.

3 Some scholars have not. Valerie Bunce (1999) for one takes the rather insouciant attitude that the collapse of Communism poses no grounds for embarrassment, soul-searching, or rethinking for either area specialists or those employing general concepts of revolution and social movements.

4 Goldstone, with Ted Robert Gurr and Farrokh Moshiri, seem to come very close to falling into this tautological use of legitimacy in their Revolutions of the Late Twentieth Century (1991).

5 Goldstone (1991) has previously argued that ideology comes into play after power has been seized, but this separation seems somewhat forced.
A further parallel in this respect is with the democratic transitions literature. This point regarding the importance of rulers’ self-legitimation marks a contrast with recent more inclusive treatments of culture in the context of contentious politics (Jasper 1997; Jasper and Polletta 2001), which avoid the pitfalls of the “culture as resource” approach but nevertheless still focus their attention on protesters and publics rather than elites.

Although key events in the Romanian revolution are still murky, this case stands out as an exception, in that the secret police, if not the army, did use force in trying to suppress demonstrations. For a parallel investigation regarding the decision whether or not to use state force in revolutionary situations, see Kurzman 1996.

It must be noted again, however, that this separation is much less sharp when considering European scholars of new social movements such as Alain Touraine (1981) and Alberto Melucci (1996), among others, who have a great deal more in common with the new cultural history and share the historian’s suspicion of universal models and over-generalization.

References


