

# Jack Goldstone's Model and the English Civil War

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Review of *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* by Jack A. Goldstone. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991. Pp. xxix+608; bibliography, index. \$29.95 (paperback).

During the Early Modern period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, there have been periodic waves of state crises, civil wars, and rebellions across the Eurasian continent. These are the “state breakdowns” that Jack Goldstone describes in his work *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*. Goldstone splits his study of these state breakdowns into sections of theory and then focuses on specific cases of state collapse during the period. His theory attempts to explain why these breakdowns of large agrarian monarchies occurred in waves during the early modern era. The cases he studies to prove this theory include breakdowns in France, China, the Ottoman Empire, and the English Civil War, which is the study upon which this paper is focused. These cases span cultural and geographic borders to represent a unifying theory of rebellions on the Eurasian continent in the early modern world. This work is a major challenge to established Marxist and revisionist theories of these revolutions, and, as Goldstone contends, it can help explain contemporary uprisings and possibly predict future state breakdowns.

Before the publication of this work, a large range of scholarship on the subject existed, and Goldstone first discusses the shortcomings of these groups of thought on the rebellions of early modern Europe. The Marxist school contends that the state breakdowns in Eurasia were the result of long-term economic and social factors. The Marxist scholarship argues that the English Civil War can be traced to the growth of capitalism and the rise of an English bourgeoisie. This theory of long-term social conflict between the Crown and the capitalist middle class do not hold up because evidence shows that the Crown was a leader in raising rents, enclosures, and the search for profits. There was nothing anti-commercial about the Crown, so no conflict existed with the bourgeoisie. Goldstone claims that this erodes the Marxists' claims and has led to the rejection of long-term causes by “revisionist” scholars.

The Revisionist school claims that the state breakdowns of the era were not the inevitable response to social influences but were the result of poor judgments in policy by the Crown in relation to the gentry. They explain, in the context of the English Civil War, that Charles I's mistakes directly produced the revolution. Revolutions are sudden events, and this, as Goldstone explains, is proportionally related to sudden causes. This idea supports the revisionist theory, which looks for a trigger. Goldstone uses what can be described as his “earthquake model” to challenge the revisionist idea of a sudden cause for revolutions. Earthquakes are sudden events and seem to have sudden causes. An earthquake is triggered by the piece of rock that breaks off at the fault line and releases each side. The immediate cause is the rock, but the breaking off of this rock and the subsequent release was originally caused by the pressure that had built up over time along the fault line. The pressure built up in the structure and then suddenly gave way, releasing pent-up forces.

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Goldstone attempts to use this “earthquake model” to explain the state breakdowns of the early modern world. After discrediting the Marxist view that this long-term cause is simply comprised of social and economic factors, Goldstone instead posits that the effect of population growth is the source of this pressure. Goldstone is not the first to use population as a means to explain dramatic changes in society. Crude Malthusian thought, as Goldstone describes it, claims that large population growth is limited by shortages in food supply and resulting starvation. He claims that Malthus’ model does not apply to the early modern period simply because this limit is never truly reached.

The role that population increase plays, however, is more an underlying cause for three trends that triggered the revolutions of the era. First, pressures increased on the Crown’s finances. When the population rose, the relative prices of agricultural goods also shifted dramatically upward. This caused the rise in expenses since the main cost of the state was food for its armies. To combat the effects of this rise in costs, monarchs attempted to maintain themselves by raising revenue in a variety of ways. Their ability to raise taxes was restricted by the gentry and other local elites, so the Crown began to sell off land, offices, royal favors, and title of nobility. This still did not cover their costs, so the Crown was forced to fight with the gentry over the levels of taxation. These methods of fundraising alienated elites, peasants, and urban consumers and failed to prevent increasing debt and eventual bankruptcy.

Also, this rise in population caused increased inter-elite conflict. As the size of these families and inflation grew, it became more and more difficult for some elite families to maintain their status. However, at the same time, some elites were benefiting from the high prices, and this created new aspiring elites. Since the state was fiscally unable to provide for all those who sought positions, there was an increase in turnover and displacement of many elites. This caused fractionalization and conflict among those groups who constantly sought royal favor and left many elites on the margin. Thus, there was an increase in what Goldstone calls “marginal elites,” and the increase of this group destabilized the established gentry of these states. When the central authority of the crown collapsed because of its lack of revenue, the sharp division came to the forefront and resulted in heated struggles for power.

Along with both of these factors of the increase in population came a growth in popular unrest. Competition for land increased due to its scarcity in relation to the population. This led to a migration to urban areas which flooded labor markets and decreased real wages. This caused urban and rural unrest which was expressed in the form of food riots, the seizing of lands, and attacks on landlords and state agents. Also, the increase in the youthfulness of the population raised the mass mobilization of the group as well. A heightened potential for mobilization made it easy for the contending marginal elite to rally popular action in their own conflicts, and the masses often proved easy to encourage and control.

This is Goldstone’s basic model for state breakdowns: an increase in state fiscal distress, inter-elite conflict, and mobilization potential for the masses. When all three exist and are combined, the potential for state breakdown is great. But can these factors be found among the causes of the English Civil War? The state breakdown in England occurred in 1639 when Scottish troops, the Covenanters, repulsed the king’s army seeking to impose his authority and spread his reforms to the church. In 1640, they entered England. At that same time, an elite rebellion occurred. Many of the country’s leaders refused to join the army, and Parliament refused Charles I any assistance and instead raised its own force. There was popular unrest in London, and the crowds prevented bishops from attending Parliament and forced Charles I and his family to leave the city fearing violence. For the next two years, civil war swept across

Britain and ultimately ended with the execution of Charles I and the dissolution of the House of Lords. The leader of Parliament's New Model Army, Oliver Cromwell, took over as "Lord Protector," and his government lasted until the year after his death in 1659. In 1660, Charles II, the deposed king's son, was called to take his father's place on the English throne.

This is the very definition of a state breakdown. However, was it caused by the factors Goldstone discusses or what Anthony Upton calls the inept political management of Charles I?<sup>1</sup> He claims that there was no inevitability about the revolution of the 1640s. He places the blame on Charles I who, by attempting to force religious reform in Scotland, sparked the Covenanter rebellion which led to the overthrow of the monarchy. The trigger of the revolution was the rebellion in Scotland in 1648. Could this alone have caused a civil war? The king's actions in Scotland should have had little effect on popular sentiment in London, or even in Parliament really, unless there was previously built-up pressure from some other force.

So what were the causes that triggered the rebellion in Scotland and eventually the rebellion across Britain? Goldstone claims that the breakdown in England occurred at a time when all three of his factors resulting from population growth combined to reach high levels in English history. From 1500 to 1650, the population of England almost doubled, from over two million to more than five million people. It then began to subside as mortality rose, and population fell below five million. Over the next century, the population grew at a slow rate of only ten percent. The fact that this revolution occurred at the peak of England's quickest growth supports the basis of population for Goldstone's Model. This rise in population caused an increase in prices of both food and manufactured goods as demand from the larger population increased on a lagging supply. As explained in his model, this increased the costs of the Crown in funding its army. In England however, the economic situation of the Crown had deteriorated well before the uprising in 1640. It was normal for the Crown to borrow in order to finance wars and to repay those loans in peacetime, mainly through parliamentary land taxes. Their peacetime expenses would be covered by their ordinary means of revenue—customs duties and income for its lands—but this revenue alone did not cover its expenses plus its loans. This left the Crown dependent on the sale of its land, forced loans, and it eventually had to turn to Parliament.

While the Crown hemorrhaged money, the gentry prospered. The rise in food prices increased the value of their land which allowed them to raise rents, but their position of power in Parliament with taxation assisted them in not having to pay more taxes. This forced the Crown to find new ways of tapping into the gentry's wealth. The population growth increased the size of the gentry in England. Not only through birth, but also because of the increased value of land, there were more wealthy Englishmen that sought the favor of the king and higher social rank. These new additions to the wealthy class provided a market for Charles I to sell honors and titles. Also, he knighted people at record numbers, and he would fine those eligible gentry who did not take up knighthood. This caused resentment among the elite who felt the sale of these titles trivialized their social rank.

The gentry were surprisingly united against Charles during the war, but this union was gone by 1641 when a host of national and local factions formed. The fractionalization that existed was caused by the increase in the size the gentry in the years preceding the civil war. The growth of the class exceeded the availability of offices and positions for them to fill, which left many of the new gentry or the second and third sons fighting and maneuvering for a limited amount of spaces

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Upton, "Politics" in *The Seventeenth Century*, ed. Joseph Bergin, 80-111 (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001).

to fill. The gentry left out of the system are the “marginal elites” that Goldstone describes, and their ranks grew at amazing rates during the first half of the seventeenth century.

The third ingredient that existed was another marginalized group—a vast body of artisans, apprentices, traders, and workers—who formed a mobilizable body that elite parliamentary leaders could use to rally against the king. They too existed because of the population growth that, in a country of limited land, caused an urban shift in population and an increase in laborers. This decreased wages and created a depressed situation that could easily be used against the Crown by Parliament. Also, the tolerance and charity of the Puritans played to the sentiments of the “middling sorts,” and this was used fully by Cromwell in forming his New Model Army. This mobilization factor, along with the marginalized elites and fiscal pressures, were all present as causes that sparked the English Civil War.

Together they make up what Goldstone calls the *psi* factor, standing for “Political Stress Indicator” and demarcated by the Greek letter  $\Psi$ . The use of the *psi* factor seems quite quantitative for a discussion on history but proves itself useful when studying the causes of the English Civil War. Goldstone’s calculation of the *psi* factor for England spikes at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and does not rescind until after the Civil War. It seems obvious that his model should fit the English Civil War since he based it in part around it, but this provides an explanation that is sustainable as opposed to Marxist and revisionist models of the Revolution.

Goldstone applies and defends this model across Eurasia in the state break downs of France, the Ottoman Empire, and China. His theory, however, has not been applied in large by other scholars to revolutions the he does not discuss. The one exception is its application to early modern Russia’s Time of Troubles (1598-1613), when the assassination of Tsar Dmitri triggered a civil war and ended with the establishment of the Romanov Dynasty.<sup>2</sup> It, however, has not been applied outside the early modern period, except by Goldstone himself. In this work, he attempts to predict a revolution based on this model in the United States. In other works, he applies it to the revolutions of the late 1980s and even to contemporary prison riots.<sup>3</sup> The inclusion of a possible state breakdown in the modern United States seems out of place in a work on early modern Europe because it, along with the other modern applications of his model, goes against the criteria he set early in his study. He limits his population model to states with large agricultural economies, well-functioning internal markets, hereditary rulers, and a supportive elite class. This situation is not present to support the modern application of his model. The world’s markets have become globalized, industrialized, and democratized, and it is these modern cultural aspects, an element he often leaves out of his model, that restrict the application of his model to the early modern states.

In explaining the periodic waves of state breakdowns across Eurasia and in England specifically, Jack Goldstone has created a useful model of the causes of revolutions in the early modern era. His study of the effects of population growth has dispelled the arguments posited by Marxist and revisionist scholarship and has contributed to a better understanding of why these states failed when they did. The English Civil War exemplifies this model, and, as long as it is limited to states that resemble those in the early modern period, it is successful.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the Russian Tsar Dmitri and the Time of Troubles as applied to Goldstone’s Model see Chester Dunning, “Does Jack Goldstone’s Model of Early Modern State Crisis Apply to Russia?” *Comparative Studies in Society & History* 39:3 (1997):572.

<sup>3</sup> See Jack A. Goldstone and Bert Useem, “Prison Riots as Microrevolutions: An Extension of State-Centered Theories of Revolution,” *American Journal of Sociology* 104:4 (1999): 985-1029.