

Withdrawing the Mandate

review of *Revolutionary Change*
by Chalmers Johnson (1966, 1986)

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The revolution of 1848 offers an example. . . . [E]lites of continental Europe prevented urban demands for republican government and rural demands for altered rules of land tenure from joining hands. . . . Having perceived the situation, bought off the peasantry, and neutralized the proletariat, the elites of Germany, Poland, Italy, and parts of the Austrian Empire easily defeated the nationalist insurrections. Had they taken no steps at all, they might have succumbed to a general revolution, had they adopted still more appropriate reforms, they might have avoided even the middle-class revolts.

— Chalmers Johnson, *Revolutionary Change*,¹ pp. 95-96

Chinese culture teaches the lovely concept of the *mandate of heaven*, by which the legitimacy of a ruler is justified. According to Chalmers Johnson² in the intro-

¹ <https://www.worldcat.org/title/revolutionary-change/oclc/251351828>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chalmers_Johnson

duction to *Revolutionary Change*,³ the Chinese term for revolution may be translated as “to withdraw the mandate.” (p. 2) Johnson has little further to say directly regarding the mandate of heaven, preferring to dwell on a systems-theoretical notion of “synchronization” between values and the division of labor in a society. I emphasize the ancient teaching, and I like to imagine Johnson, as a Western scholar of Asia, would not object, although the academic conventions of his era would not permit an elegant and poetic (hence non-scientific) notion to take center stage.

Johnson is mostly remembered nowadays for his writings around the concept of blowback,⁴ in which nefarious US government actions abroad are later reflected in consequences back home. Perhaps less well remembered is this little book he originally wrote in 1966, with revision and republication in 1986. Johnson analyzed the origins and prospects of revolution using the tools of his day, leaning heavily on systems theory, which was in its heyday bank in the sixties, with perhaps its apotheosis in the career of Robert McNamara, Chairman of Ford Motor Company and Secretary of Defense at the height of the Viet Nam war. Why might we concern ourselves with such a dated text today? Curious to imagine that while writing in the early 1960s, insurrection and revolution were things that happened elsewhere. By the time he revised the text in the early 1980s, the domestic upheavals of the intervening time may have weighed on his mind. In 2021, in the heart of our most sacred democratic institution, we are told of “scenes of rage, violence and agony are so vast that the whole of it may still be beyond comprehension.”⁵ So maybe the teachings of a wise elder from the last century might be

³ <https://www.worldcat.org/title/revolutionary-change/oclc/251351828>

⁴ <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/blowback/>

⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-ap-top-news-michael-pence-nancy-pelosi-capitol-siege-14c73ee280c256ab4ec193ac0f49ad54>

useful in thinking about our prospects today in the Land of the Free.

Withdrawal of the mandate must be understood in the context of the mandate itself. For Johnson, in a “viable, functioning” (p. 3) society the mandate of heaven is properly bestowed. What determines social viability and functionality is the “synchronization” connecting the *division of labor* to the *system of values*:

In considering whether or not relations of conflict will lead to social violence, the main dynamic condition we must explore is the synchronization between the value system and the division of labor. (p. 40)

In a well adjusted society, the inevitable discrepancies of wealth, status, and power that are implied in a division of labor are mitigated by a system of values in which those in the commanding roles are legitimized by their service or by some other means (e.g. hereditary aristocracy). When the balance between values and social roles breaks down (“desynchronization” per Johnson), the possibility of revolution arises.

In preference to division of labor, I would emphasize the *distribution of social goods*, including wealth, security, dignity, and power. Along with social goods I would also call attention to the *distribution of social ills*: unemployment, sickness, violence, homelessness, etc. The synchronization between social values and distribution of social goods seems a better measure of social viability. When most of the social goods are flowing to the ruling class and its minions, and social ills are increasing in the wider populace, legitimacy is eroded and the mandate may be withdrawn.

For Johnson, the shared values of a society are what justify the inevitable inequalities resulting from division of labor (i.e. unequal distributions of social goods and

ills):

One irreducible characteristic of a social system is that its members hold in common a structure of values. A value structure symbolically legitimates—that is, makes morally acceptable—the particular pattern of interaction and stratification of the members of a social system. (p. 14)

So what happens when the distribution of social goods and ills becomes “desynchronized” from the system of values? Elites have policy options that they may attempt. Redistribution of goods and alleviation of evils by way of genuine reform may serve to resynchronize; the New Deal of Franklin D. Roosevelt is an obvious example.

Co-option of potential revolutionaries is another time-proven tactic.

One of the most common “barely adequate” policies is the loosening of norms of social mobility in order to co-opt in to the elite the actual or potential leadership of a group of organized status protesters. This often has the effect of resynchronizing the system under the the old values, but it also constitutes an instance of social change because, to be effective, the criteria of the elite must be redefined to include the upwardly mobile leaders (e.g. the creation of new peers in England, and the rise of *noblesse de la robe* in seventeenth-century France). . . . The cooption of persons specially gifted with intellect has long been recognized as a sound antirevolutionary measure since it neutralizes one obvious group of people who, if they are unreconciled to their status, are capable of creating a revolutionary ideology. (pp. 98-99)

Elite embracement of “diversity” of leadership exemplifies this tactic.

Along with or in lieu of reform, adjustment to the system of values may be undertaken by elites. This can take the form of effective propaganda or identification of internal or external enemies to bear the blame for social ailments. Changing

social values is a long-term project which is likely to result in painful social rifts between adherents of “traditional” values and those advancing new value schemes. Sometimes denoted “cultural revolution,” perhaps one can be forgiven for seeing exactly this sort of attempt in the Great Reset.⁶ Even the American dream of home ownership has come under narrative attack.⁷

The option of doing nothing is always available, especially when elites are well-insulated from prevailing social conditions:

The incompetent politics of an elite are more often the result of isolation than of its anti-social intentions. Nepotism, caste, dynastic decay, blocked channels of social mobility, and evolutionary changes in the norms governing authority may isolate an elite and prevent it from becoming fully aware of conditions in the society. In these cases, the elite will be intransigent inadvertently—that is to say, it will adopt policies incommensurate with the problems it faces. (p. 99)

When policies fail (or are never attempted) and unrest arises, the preservation of a desynchronized system requires increasing applications of force. At the same time, the failure of elites to address the underlying causes of discontent results in a loss of legitimacy of the leadership. As the mandate of heaven is withdrawn, the preconditions for revolution are fulfilled. Johnson describes this situation as “power deflation.” But it’s not enough to engender a revolution. Leaders can still rely on ever more forceful repression, producing a police state.

What’s finally needed to make a revolution when the mandate has been withdrawn is a trigger, or an “accelerator,” in Johnson’s terminology. The accelerator can take the form of an army mutiny, or a bold strike by a group of revolutionaries.

⁶ ../tessa-great-reset.html

⁷ <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2021/02/wall-streets-rental-gambit/>

Disputed elections are a well-proven trigger. A natural disaster: drought, plague, earthquake, etc. Military losses in a foreign adventure could also serve. I was inspired to reanimate this essay after months of inactivity by the humiliating withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, which bids fair to enter history as a pivotal moment.⁸

You probably don't need to go looking for this text at abebooks. Systems theory, one of the hallmarks of technocracy, is rather quaint by now, although not without its merits; my world view certainly embraces much of its teachings. But I'm old and obsolete, so there! Still, more history and less theory would better suit my tastes. Johnson posits the centrality of synchronization between the division of labor and the system of values. The mandate of heaven postulates a moral basis for the legitimacy of a ruler or ruling party. We may do best to try to recover our moral bearings, ideally with a recognition of the fundamentally religious nature⁹ of this sort of thinking. Meanwhile, events are racing along at the end of the American century.

⁸ <https://tinkzorg.wordpress.com/2021/08/16/farewell-to-bourgeois-kings/>

⁹ [../theological-engineering.html](https://tinkzorg.wordpress.com/2021/08/16/farewell-to-bourgeois-kings/..//theological-engineering.html)