

Book Review: You Say You Want a Revolution? Radical Idealism and Its Tragic Consequences by Daniel Chirot

John W. Lepley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Communication Commons](#), [Economics Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lepley, John W. () "Book Review: You Say You Want a Revolution? Radical Idealism and Its Tragic Consequences by Daniel Chirot," *International Social Science Review*. Vol. 96 : Iss. 3 , Article 13. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol96/iss3/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Social Science Review by an authorized editor of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

Daniel Chirot, *You Say You Want a Revolution? Radical Idealism and Its Tragic Consequences*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. ix+157 pages. E-Book, \$17.49.

Daniel Chirot asks two questions in *You Say You Want a Revolution (YSYWAR)*? How do revolutions evolve and why are they predisposed to violence and tragedy? Using a comparative analysis, Chirot synthesizes the literature of revolutions in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe to produce a provocative work. Although the title of this monograph invokes Lennon and McCartney, the focus is on Robespierre, Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao, and, of course, Lenin.

The thesis of *YSYWAR* is that revolutions have followed an arc similar to classical tragedy, an apt, yet conspicuous choice since Chirot concentrates on people, politics, and power, and eschews the arts and literature (save a reference to *Battle of Algiers* and a line from Lampedusa's 1958 novel *The Leopard*). The first 'act' of the French, Iranian, and Russian revolutions began with regimes that were incompetent, indifferent to, and ignorant of glaring problems, which inadvertently undercut reformers who could not mollify widespread anger and grievance. Here, Chirot cites the examples of the Marquis of Condorcet and Marquis de Lafayette whose efforts to establish a constitutional monarchy foundered between intransigent nobles, on the one side, and radicals who wanted to make the world anew, on the other. Condorcet was killed during the Terror; Lafayette bolted from France and was imprisoned in Austria before returning to French politics.

The three middle chapters describe the consecutive stages of revolutions. In chapter 3 ("Reaction, War, Invasion, Terror,") Chirot points out that the Thermidor—the moderate reaction that ousted the Reign of Terror—served as a warning for subsequent revolutionaries to consolidate control so as to thwart counterrevolution. Thus, in 1917 Lenin created the Checka (later known as the KGB) to suppress internal opposition, whether real or imaginary. Chapter 4 ("The Tyranny of Idealistic Certitude") broadens the scope of *YSYWAR* to Cambodia, China,

Germany, Iran, Mexico, and Vietnam. When the utopian visions of revolutionaries confronted reality, Chirot tells us, “they increasingly applied violence to reshape not only their societies but human nature itself” (p. 64). The death toll from China’s Great Leap Forward is just one example of these horrors; starvation, overwork, and disease killed anywhere from 15 to 45 million Chinese. Chapter 5 (“Revolutions Betrayed”) is a sad litany of post-colonial African nations that degenerated into failed states. “All the Arab republics born of anticolonial revolutions became corrupt autocracies. So did most of sub-Saharan Africa,” Chirot grimly notes (p. 113). The penultimate chapter on “Peaceful Revolutions” questions the legacy of the 1989 revolutions, which are no less tragic.

YSYWAR is a defense of the liberal proposition that informed, rational people can change their minds as they learn new information, and it follows that governing institutions and elites can as well. “Gradual change, compromise, and flexibility are better ways to adapt to demands for reform” Chirot remarks (p. 134). His clear and simple prose make this monograph ideal for undergraduates, and its comparative framework is a good model for graduate students to study. Breadth has a price, though. The focus of *YSYWAR* is on revolutionary stages, so historical questions about context, change over time, and contingency are only skimmed. It is also conspicuous that the Haitian Revolution is just mentioned in the context of Napoleon’s rise to power; surely some attention to this world historic event would have enhanced the overall picture. Still, social scientists will find value in Chirot’s appreciation for moderates. In some instances, radicals on the Left and Right were the loudest voices in the room, which positioned their moderate counterparts to (potentially) avert bloodletting and balkanization. Here, *YSYWAR* echoes David S. Brown’s *Moderates* (2017), which argues that such leaders played pivotal roles in making the American political system work. Chirot’s conclusions complement recent

scholarship on populism, too. In the wake of the 2016 Brexit vote and U.S. elections, a cottage industry on this fuzzy, malleable label has produced a raft of publications. An early example, *The Populist Explosion* (2016) by John Judis, announces that populism is a sign of “political crisis.” Future research might ask how populist tendencies—particularly the creation of a “people” set against an “outsider” group—figured in the revolutionary periods that Chirot examines.

Are we approaching a revolutionary period or moment of crisis? Chirot does not make any pronouncements about the present or future, but it is difficult not to ask that question while reading this wonderful book.

John W. Lepley
Independent Scholar
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania