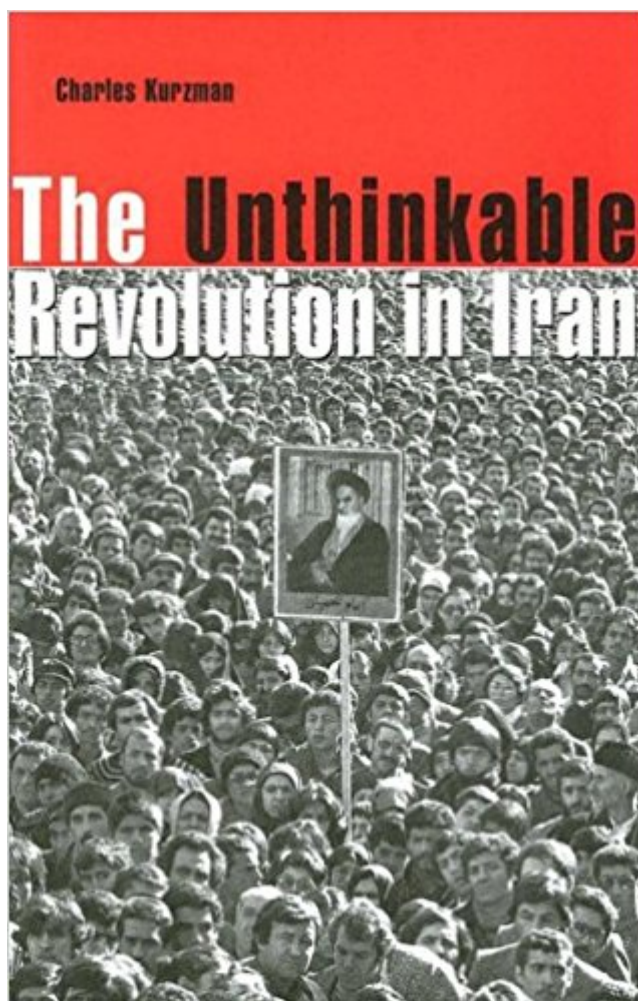


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# The Unthinkable Revolution In Iran



## Synopsis

The shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, would remain on the throne for the foreseeable future: This was the firm conclusion of a top-secret CIA analysis issued in October 1978. One hundred days later the shah--despite his massive military, fearsome security police, and superpower support was overthrown by a popular and largely peaceful revolution. But the CIA was not alone in its myopia, as Charles Kurzman reveals in this penetrating work; Iranians themselves, except for a tiny minority, considered a revolution inconceivable until it actually occurred. Revisiting the circumstances surrounding the fall of the shah, Kurzman offers rare insight into the nature and evolution of the Iranian revolution and into the ultimate unpredictability of protest movements in general. As one Iranian recalls, "The future was up in the air." Through interviews and eyewitness accounts, declassified security documents and underground pamphlets, Kurzman documents the overwhelming sense of confusion that gripped pre-revolutionary Iran, and that characterizes major protest movements. His book provides a striking picture of the chaotic conditions under which Iranians acted, participating in protest only when they expected others to do so too, the process approaching critical mass in unforeseen and unforeseeable ways. Only when large numbers of Iranians began to "think the unthinkable," in the words of the U.S. ambassador, did revolutionary expectations become a self-fulfilling prophecy. A corrective to 20-20 hindsight, this book reveals shortcomings of analyses that make the Iranian revolution or any major protest movement seem inevitable in retrospect.

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## Customer Reviews

When Elias Canetti, the Nobel-prize winning theorist, spoke of a people's "propensity to incendiarism," he had in mind one of the most dangerous traits of mass gatherings: their potential for unpredictable combustibility. Iran's Islamic revolution, like many other uprisings, was a consummate instance of this, Kurzman argues, and he continues in Canetti's tradition by using the Shah's overthrow to engage in his own meditation on crowds and power. Kurzman's investigation propelled him to the Islamic republic, where he conducted countless interviews, in an attempt to chart the eddies and undercurrents of one of the world's most complex and sudden social upheavals. Along the way, he takes a critical tour of canonical political and sociological theory. The result is a thought-provoking combination of journalism and analysis that offers an atypical juxtaposition of voices: shopkeepers, lawyers and high school students share their views on what happened, as do academics and policymakers. Perhaps the most intriguing voice is Kurzman's. His interviews and reading lead him to conclude that any historical approach that seeks to restore "20-20 hindsight" to Iran's revolutionary movement is mistaken; "explanations in general," he decides, are problematic. Instead, he says, one should embrace history in all its specificity, and accept that anomalous behavior and confusion are norms that cannot be neatly decoded. "I propose anti-explanation," he says, coining a term that "means abandoning the project of retroactive prediction in favor of reconstructing the lived experience of the moment." Unquestionably, some readers may feel cheated by this intellectual back flip, especially since this is, unavoidably, an explanation in its own right. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

When the shah of Iran was overthrown in 1979, it was something of a surprise to the CIA and the Carter administration, who as recently as October 1978 saw only a strong ruler and inconsequential protests; legacy of this intelligence failure has plagued the state department ever since. What if, however, revolutions like that which put the Ayatollah Khomeini in power were unpredictable? What if even the best intelligence misses the scent of possible uprising because even the people uprising don't know uprising is possible until they start doing it? Sociologist Kurzman addresses five familiar sets of explanations about why the Iranian revolution took place--political, organizational, cultural, economic, and military arguments--and finds each valuable but flawed, offering instead an "anti-explanation" that foregrounds anomaly and characterizes the revolutionary moment as confusing, unstable, and as unpredictable for participants as it is for outside observers. Despite this, optimism is in order; there is, after all, exciting potential in moments in which the unthinkable

suddenly becomes thinkable. Brendan Driscoll Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Haven't read it yet but the value is there.

School book

very good

Working within a relatively small timeframe (1977-1979), Kurzman methodically examines five explanatory paradigms which have hitherto been mobilized to explain the success of the Iranian Islamic Revolution. Emplotting each paradigm on a brisk narrative of the revolution itself, he begins with the political explanations (attributing the revolution to increased liberalization), organizational explanations (focusing on mosque and university networks), cultural explanations (pointing to the utilization of 40 day martyrdom mourning cycle as a means of sustaining protest), economic explanations (citing the gridlock caused by the nation-wide strikes in key industries), and military explanations (pointing to the feeble attempts of the Shah's forces to restore state control). Each of these he finds inadequate and only some completely false. At best, an explanation remains partial but not compelling for the whole. Moreover, they demonstrate a consistent occurrence of the 'inversion of cause and effect', e.g., student mobilization created the utility of the mosque networks, mobilization led to the state's economic crisis, not vice versa. Kurzman attempts to cut the Gordian knot by offering his own 'anti-explanation'-namely, the revolution succeeded when it became viable in the minds of its core constituents. This 'anti-explanation', he asserts, is non-predictive because it depends on the anomalous nature of the agency of social actors. What is left for the sociologist is to strive for an understanding of a peculiar, unique event. This deconstructive enterprise is essentially a treatise against retroactive prediction that argues rather for sociological reconstructions of historical events rather an attempt to derive patterns for the sake of being able to predict when future, nascent revolutions are about to occur. Kurzman unconsciously it seems has merely constructed an argument for the values of social-history over sociology as such. Where his novel, so-called 'anti-explanation' differs from what we call 'history' eludes me. Overall, the writing in the book is fluid, lucid and accompanied by a nice balance of anecdote and analysis. His usage of jargon is sparse and rare-limited mostly to a few quotes from famous sociologists such as Bourdieu and Parsons. He demonstrates a familiarity with Persian culture and language that manifests itself in

many subtle ways through the work. General readers, historians and sociologists will find this book an immensely rewarding study.

All revolutions are "unthinkable" until they happen: in this way, Iran's literally joined the crowd. One recalls Louis XVI of France, befuddled at the noise of the Bastille drifting into the Palace, asking the Duke of Rochefoucauld: "Is this a revolt?" And receiving the reply, "No, sire, it's a revolution." Charles Kurzman seeks to explore this confusion, reiterating the old charge that revolutions amount to kicking down a rotten door. Kurzman wields an easy expertise on both Iran of the period and the literature on collective action. Like Michael Melancon's study of the February 1917 revolution in Russia, and Lawrence Goodwyn's study of Polish Solidarity in 1980, Kurzman looks at Iran's "breakthrough moment" in 1978 and rediscovers the role of spontaneity in making that moment happen. "Making the scene" becomes a rational motive force. This is substantiated in my own limited experience with Iranians. I personally recall an Iranian student in the US, just off the phone with his brother who was part of the mass demonstrations outside the US Embassy, describing it as a "big party" where "everyone was coming out against imperialism." Within 48 hours, swept by their own momentum, the party got down to business and the Embassy's occupants had become more than symbolic targets. Yet in recreating spontaneity as a motive - "everybody's doing it" - Kurzman comes to rather opposite conclusions than Melancon. It took grass roots socialist anti-war activists in Russia more than a year of hard organizing and underground agitation - even with the regime floundering in war - to push the right button. This history of dedicated minority activism by a few was necessary before the movement could catch on, while regime repression was an equally requisite catalyst. We see this also in Kurzman's description of Iranian events, as well as the necessary spade work by the mosque activists prior to the mass demonstrations. A consensus is created that things can't go on like this, we're not going to take it anymore, this is the time, and pent-up grievances are released in a special moment: a spark, perhaps dramatically symbolized by one man setting himself on fire as in Tunisia, or a longtime agitator like Lech Walesa jumping the gates at the Gdansk shipyards. All of which shows that revolutionary movements do not \*originate\* in spontaneity and confusion, but in the grunt work of a committed few and a long list of social resentments whose accumulated pressure finally springs a leak in the dikes of state. Afterward, as in France, "the deluge." So I must agree that Kurzman's "anti-explanation" is somewhat of a backflip: things happened because they happened. But - as we've recently seen in the Arab Spring - they don't \*just\* happen, and don't have to succeed. When they do it's not only from a crowd looking for action - a "big party" - but a dedicated core animated by a vision of who they are and what they

want, an opposing regime that's lost its way, and a sense of grievance that has at last found its voice. Lenin said that "history is made only where there are millions." Yet history would have been quite different without he or Khomeini on the scene. Such leaders and their core followers become embedded in horizontal relationships with "the crowd," thus making their assumptions of power much more than mere coups or "hijacking." That most people usually jump into these "springtimes" when the weather's fine is a constant of human nature. They're the field of flowers. But it's a dedicated few who are the true seeds of change. It's up to these to plant themselves so deeply in their native soil that no regime can eradicate them, to sprout in just the right season.

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