COORDINATION, IDEOLOGY, AND OPPRESSION

One of the oldest questions in political theory is how those in power are able to maintain their rule over those they oppress. Many important thinkers have argued that oppressors cannot rule by means of force alone.1 To put it simply, the minority lack the resources to control the majority they oppress. There simply are not enough police or army members to control a large population that unequivocally desires a change of regime. Oppression can only be sustained if a substantial number of the oppressed come to hold beliefs that their oppressors’ rule is legitimate.2

This view of oppression has been challenged over the last decade. Theorists such as Russell Hardin, Joseph Heath and Michael Rosen have tried to defend the idea that oppression can be maintained by force alone by challenging the assumption that if the oppressed are enlightened about their condition, they can quite easily and straightforwardly act as a coherent political force against their oppressors and so overthrow them.3 This view however assumes that the oppressed can simply unite in opposition to their oppressors. It ignores the fact that the oppressed face a coordination problem amongst themselves. Thus even if each oppressed individual understands clearly that he is oppressed and wishes to remove his oppressors, it is nevertheless not rational for him to act because he has no assurance that his fellow oppressed will also so act. Although it is in the collective interest of all to take part, it is not in their individual interest to do so. The result is the survival of the regime.

According to coordination theorists, an organized minority that has a virtual monopoly of force can rule a majority for a long period of time with relatively few resources because of the sanctions it can concentrate on subversive minorities. Russell Hardin sums up the theory as follows: “In a relatively orderly state, most individuals cannot expect to benefit from seriously transgressing the law, because the police, weak as they may be, can be expected to apprehend a significant proportion of the transgressors. That remarkably, may be all that the gunman theory of state requires for its success. The gunman theory might be called the coordination theory of power or even the dual-coordination theory. It depends on coordination at the level of government and on lack of coordination at the level of any potential popular opposition. The state need not compel everyone at gunpoint, it need merely make it in virtually everyone’s clear interest individually to comply with the law even though collectively it might be in their interest to oppose the law”.4

The implication is that ideology, to all intents and purposes is irrelevant to the survival of oppressive regimes. In an article contrasting ideology critique with coordination theory, Joseph Heath writes: “the most common error that critical theorists have made, in my view, is to mistake the outcome of a collective action problem for an
effect of ideology”.5 Michael Rosen concurs: “As far as the question of compliance goes, I would want to make the point that it does not have to be true that the oppressed actually accept the legitimacy of the existing social order not to rebel against it. It may be that they are like a group of hostages held by a lone gunman. Each hostage knows that, if all of the hostages were to pool their resources, they could overcome the gunman, but they cannot find a way to do so. In other words, their compliance is the result of a coordination problem, not an irrational acceptance of oppression”.6

The practical implication of coordination theory is that oppressive regimes can ignore ideological questions altogether. However it is arguable that this would be a strategic mistake for surely ideology can be an important instrument in the arsenal of oppressive regimes. To take a simple example, oppressors can benefit by engaging in disinformation campaigns by exaggerating their power or by suggesting that many of the oppressed are more loyal to the government than is actually the case. There is little doubt that such campaigns might be fruitful for continued rule. Yet, coordination theorists, if they acknowledge this point, are nevertheless committed to the idea that coordination problems alone are sufficient for stable and secure rule.

A final introductory remark is in order. Although the coordination approach has been proposed by a number of different theorist, to a greater or lesser degree, it has never been systematically discussed. It is therefore necessary to set out the basic assumptions of the theory before discussing it in detail.

II

Coordination theory relies on two key premises. Firstly, the ruling elite possesses the resources necessary to suppress any minority of would-be revolutionaries. It has greater coordinated power than any subversive minority is likely to have. The elite’s chief task is to prevent the coordination of the majority in opposition to it. The state, as Hardin puts it, must prevent widespread and simultaneous revolt: “To wreck the state, it is not enough that anarchy break out a little bit at a time. If it is prevail against threatened sanctions, it must break out all at once. It must be pervasive. A moderately organized state can typically keep its citizens under control without going to Orwellian extremes.”7 If revolt is not simultaneous and widespread, the oppressed will lack the power to overthrow their oppressors for it is only strength of numbers that can compensate for the state’s superior coercive resources.

The second premise of the theory is that the oppressed majority is composed of predominantly prudentially rational individuals, that is, individuals who only participate in revolt if the expected payoffs are positive. And the payoffs are only positive when a substantial number of oppressed individuals revolt simultaneously for this state of affairs greatly reduces the risk of any particular individual facing sanctions by the repressive apparatus of the state. The problem is that the typical oppressed individual has no good reason to expect that a large number of his fellow oppressed individuals will also take part and so it is not prudentially rational for him to revolt. Overthrowing the oppressive regime has the structure of the famous prisoner’s dilemma. In a prisoner’s dilemma each agent would be better off if both cooperated but since there is no assurance this will happen, each agent is better off not cooperating whatever the other does. The dominant strategy for each agent is non-cooperation.8 Consider a typical oppressed individual. If
he revolts and insufficient others do, there will be no revolution and he will suffer costs without any gains. If he does not revolt and sufficient others do, he will gain the benefits of revolution without incurring personal costs. Either way it is rational for him to remain inactive. All his fellow oppressed will reason the same way. The result is an n-person prisoner’s dilemma whose effect is to maintain the oppressive regime.

Nevertheless, revolutions do occur and coordination theory must be able to account for this. Hardin and Rosen each address this issue. In Hardin’s analysis the key factors are the rulers’ behaviour and the mass actions that tip events in favour of revolution such as the spontaneous demonstrations that brought about Ceausescu’s downfall. The former refers to a decline in the repressive capacity of the regime. This can be caused by defeat in war (a classic case of this is the Russian revolution), splits within the ruling elite (the ending of Apartheid) or the death of a leader (the Shah of Iran). Critical to the success of the revolution is an effective leader who can mobilize the population (examples include Khomeini and Lenin). Success depends on both a weakened state and a well-coordinated mass opposition.

This account, useful as it is, fails to address the question of how the oppressed ever achieve coordination. How in fact is it possible for the oppressed to move from an n-person’s prisoner’s dilemma to a situation of general assurance? According to Rosen, a revolution is only possible if at least some members of the oppressed act non-prudentially, that is, without any reasonable expectation that the majority will support them. Revolutions are started by people motivated by ideals (secular or religious) who act without any concern for whether assurance is likely. Let us call them the “idealists”.

From a prudential point of view, the behaviour of the idealists is irrational. Nevertheless, without it revolution is impossible. The actions of the individuals demonstrate that resistance is possible and this leads ordinary members of the oppressed to join the revolt. Eventually the level of mass action is too large for the repressive apparatus to manage and revolution is a distinct possibility. Though revolution is possible, it is rare. Oppressive societies are stable most of the time because the regime has the means to deal with the small number of individuals who are not prudentially rational and who might decide to revolt irrespective of the possibility of success.

It is useful to summarize the coordination theory of oppression in terms of the following argument:

1) Overthrowing the regime is in the best interests of the oppressed.

2) The oppressed in general believe this to be so.

3) The majority of the oppressed are motivated by prudential considerations.

4) The oppressors are relatively well coordinated and have the resources to deter subversives (the idealists).

Conclusion: the regime will be sustainable.

Let us call this Model A.
Claim 1 is part of the definition of oppression. To say that revolution is in the best interests of the oppressed means that revolution is in their interests, all things considered. For example, there might be short-term collective costs in participating in revolt (such as losses in income and security) but these are outweighed by the long-term benefits of regime change.

Claim 2 indicates that a large number of oppressed individuals accept the validity of claim 1. Claim 2 asserts that the oppressed clearly understand that they are oppressed and, other things being equal, desire their oppression to be removed. When these two claims are combined with claims 3 and 4, the conclusion follows.

Claim 2 is clearly controversial. Theorists who believe ideology is an essential part of oppression would deny it. For them beliefs of the oppressed in the legitimacy of the regime are a key factor in the sustainability of oppression. We will take claim 2 as given for the moment since our chief aim is to evaluate coordination theory on its own terms, even though we will say something about this question later.

Thus the key claims to assess are 3 and 4.

III

Probably the most critical claim is 4. Nevertheless, it is worth commenting on claim 3 first. Prudential rationality is taken by many to be the epitome of practical rationality. But there are doubts that most people behave exclusively as expected utility maximizers. Empirical work concerning people’s attitudes towards providing public goods indicates that individuals will often justify foregoing personal gains for the sake of non-maximizing goals.14

In addition, it seems impossible to explain large-scale collective actions designed to realize public goods on the assumption that individuals are utility maximizers. Instead, collective action of this sort requires non-prudential reasoning on the part of the agents involved. Motivations can include acting out of moral duty, acting for altruistic reasons, and acting for the sake of the in-process benefits gained from participation such as solidarity and the excitement of being involved in large-scale actions.15

The classic case is voting. Since in large-scale elections an individual vote makes no appreciable difference to the outcome, the rational thing to do is stay home instead of incurring the loss in utility involved in casting one’s vote.16 Yet, despite its being prudentially irrational to vote, people regularly turn out to vote in large numbers. To account for the voting phenomenon, it has been suggested that voters might vote for various moral reasons, for example, to express their identities as free citizens or to register protests against unjust policies.17 The same kind of analysis can explain large-scale strikes. For strikes to occur, workers must ignore prudential considerations in favour of ethical considerations such a commitment to socialism or the duty to support fellow workers who have helped them in the past.18

Because of considerations such as these, both Rosen and Elster have proposed the relaxation of the idea that all oppressed individuals will behave as expected utility maximizers. For a revolution to occur, it is necessary that at least a small minority motivated by non-prudential considerations starts the ball rolling. This creates a situation in which it becomes prudentially rational for others to join in, and from that point on, revolution is a real possibility.
However this is not a satisfactory argument. It is left unclear how a small minority of idealists can create a situation in which it is prudentially rational for a large number of individuals to engage in revolutionary activities. Prudentially rational individuals will not participate merely because a few dissidents have taken enormous risks to express their dissatisfaction with the regime. The payoff structure has not been altered for the majority by a few individuals acting non-prudentially.

The only way to explain the possibility of revolution is to relax the general assumption of prudence. For revolution to be possible, contrary to coordination theory, much more than a small minority must be prepared to act out of non-maximizing considerations. Certainly, only a few will be prepared to take large risks to initiate revolt. Still, others might be prepared to take smaller risks even if assurance has not been reached but there is some possibility it might. Dropping the assumption of exclusive prudential motivation means that threats to the regime are likely to come from a much larger percentage of the oppressed population than coordination theory would lead one to believe. The threshold for participation of a large number would be lower than would be the case if prudential motivation were the rule. This means that the state is faced potentially with a broad threat from the population overall.

Even so, relaxing the assumption of general prudence will not necessarily lead to widespread revolt. If the state’s repressive machinery is well organized, the majority will be still reluctant to act due to the fact that they are unwilling to forego all prudential considerations. A well-functioning state will be able to make the costs of participation too large for most oppressed individuals to take part. Nevertheless, a non-prudential account of motivation still has important implications for the sustainability of oppressive regimes, a point we take up later.

IV

We now discuss directly claim 4, that is, the idea that a minority with effective coercive instruments will be able to control a majority exclusively by such means.

Model A presupposes a certain approach to the question of political power, namely that power can be effectively maintained by a state with a modicum of repressive force. This is indeed the point of Rosen’s hostage analogy. The analogy suggests that oppression can be maintained by means of limited coercive resources efficiently targeted against any would-be conspiracy. Subversives can be easily detected and suppressed with relatively few resources. By concentrating effective force on isolated groups of subversives the state can prevent revolt from becoming large enough to threaten the regime. Let us call this account simple power.

There are reasons to doubt that simple power is a satisfactory description of the way most regimes maintain their rule. Power seems a much more complex process, involving a variety of different functions which need to be implemented at many different levels. Maintaining law and order, for one, requires that a number of officials perform a variety of duties. These include surveillance, arrest, detention, the running of prisons, and the operation of the judicial system. There is also the need to manage government administration in general. Although power was by no means a simple affair in pre-modern societies 19, in modern societies it is especially complex since officials are also needed to ensure that people pay their taxes, respect laws of property and contracts, and
operate health, educational and transport systems. Many individuals are required to enforce rules in the private sphere as well. Stability depends also on the effectiveness of businesses, trade unions, churches, and private educational institutions. Thus maintaining rule requires a large number of individuals to carry out a variety of functions across society. Let us call this latter account complex power.

Maintaining rule in a situation of complex power requires a much larger number of individuals. On this account, it is likely that the ruling elite would have to rely on the support of many outside its own narrow circle. This is likely to involve reliance on members of the oppressed group. Employing the services of many individuals is however a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the employment of a large number of people in principle provides the ruling class with sufficient resources to rule over the oppressed class and to gain the benefits from doing so. On the other hand, it increases the chances of instability for members of the oppressed who carry out duties on behalf of the oppressors are potentially unreliable allies.

In terms of the assumptions of coordination theory, it is difficult to explain why members of the oppressed class should take the side of the oppressors against their own group. Model A cannot rely on the possibility that certain oppressed individuals would ally themselves with their oppressors because they believe in its legitimacy. Recall that claim 2 implies that a large number of oppressed individuals believe the regime is illegitimate.

Perhaps some of the oppressed might be induced to work for the system in return for extra benefits such as higher wages, privileges and perks, but due to the demands of complex power, it is doubtful that there will enough benefits for all required to keep the system going. In addition, the extra benefits will have to be such as to overcome the dislike for the regime that these individuals are likely to have due to the fact that they share the belief along with their fellow oppressed that the regime is illegitimate. It is certainly possible that the regime will not be able to afford the price of betrayal of sufficient numbers of the oppressed.

The only other means of getting support from the oppressed is by coercing them to serve the regime. Perhaps the regime can raise the costs of not complying to a point at which it becomes prudentially rational to help the regime. This strategy firstly, is dangerous (such individuals will not be the most reliable of allies and indeed could desert the regime when the payoffs of doing so are positive) and secondly, it is likely to be self-defeating for using scarce resources to force certain members of the oppressed class to use repression against their own class merely deprives the oppressors of resources that can be used to repress the population directly. Such diversion of repressive capacity can only weaken the regime’s overall ability to deal with subversion.

Complex power raises the possibility that revolt is also likely be complex. Complex power means that the state cannot easily repress would-be dissenters for instead of revolt being sparked off by a small number of isolatable individuals, it can originate at various points in the system. Diverse points of resistance could develop across the country, coordinated by local leaders. Since revolt could emerge from a number of quarters, the regime will in all probability not possess sufficient resources to suppress resistance.

As stated above, the repressive capacity of the state is not the only factor determining the stability of oppressive regimes. To recall claim 3, the motivations of the
oppressed are important too. The relative weakness of the state will be different depending on whether the oppressed are in general prudential in their orientation. If they are, a less than fully effective security force might be able to maintain control in the normal scheme of things. For even if there are a number of minority groups that initiate actions, the majority might still be reluctant to join in. To see this consider the following. Firstly, even if the state does not have much capacity to suppress resistance in a certain location at a particular point in time, it might well have such capacity after it has managed to restore order elsewhere. Secondly, since the majority are prudentially motivated, the typical individual will have doubts about the willingness of his fellow oppressed to reciprocate his actions. Thus even if resistance begins in some location, the average individual might choose inaction due to uncertainties of these two kinds. Hence in the case when the majority of the oppressed are exclusively prudential rational individuals, an oppressive state may be able to survive intact even if its security apparatus is less than fully effective.

However in the case in which the assumption of general prudence is relaxed, the prospects for the regime’s survival are poor. Because many oppressed individuals are motivated by ideals as well as prudence, a substantial number might be willing to take risks even when there is no definite prospect of success. For such a scenario the state could be faced with a potentially large number of individuals who are willing to risk revolt in the absence of general assurance. Given this scenario, the state is unlikely to be able to contain revolt. Once revolt happens, it is likely to spread quickly. Also, as the state’s repressive forces are stretched further, the leaders will have more freedom to coordinate actions so that a significant challenge to the state’s authority becomes a distinct possibility. Effective central coordination which is vital to bring at the final stages becomes a real possibility. At this point, other things being equal, revolution is quite possible.

V

Since there are good reasons to doubt both claims 3 and 4, Model A, I submit, does not amount to a convincing account of oppression. Coordination problems alone will not maintain oppression. This being so, it is worth returning to the ideological theory. Let us then develop a model that incorporates ideology as an indispensable element in the sustainability of oppressive regimes.

Consider the following argument:

5) Overthrowing the regime is in the best interests of the oppressed.

6) The oppressed in general do not believe this to be so.

7) The majority of the oppressed are motivated by both prudential and non-prudential considerations.

8) The oppressors are relatively well coordinated and have the resources to deter subversives (the idealists).
Conclusion: the regime will be sustainable.

Let us call this Model B.

Note that claim 1 of Model A is retained here as claim 5. Claim 6 means that oppressed individuals’ political commitments are unlikely to be a threat to the regime. Since the majority believe the regime is legitimate they will be disinclined to revolt. The reluctance to revolt can derive from positive endorsement of the regime in terms of either secular or religious notions of justice to mere acceptance of the regime because there is no other possible way of organizing society or because the regime represents the natural order of things.

Claim 7 means the majority of the oppressed are not exclusively utility maximizers. This means that oppressed individuals will not only be prudentially rational but will also be willing to engage in political action for the sake of realizing non-maximizing goals. Such goals could be pro-regime or anti-regime. The former is the case in Model A, the latter in Model B.

Finally, claim 4 is retained as claim 8.

Model B, by contrast with Model A, I submit, is a valid argument. Consider the following. A crucial difference between the two models concerns the basic attitude to revolt on the part of the majority of the oppressed. In Model A the oppressed will have a basic disposition to revolt. Indeed if it were prudentially rational to revolt, they would.

In Model A the state is always faced with the possibility that the masses will take action if circumstances change and revolt becomes more favourable. In Model B oppressed individuals will not necessarily act even when circumstances are favourable because they lack the basic desire to revolt.

Because of the role of ideology, oppressive regimes can be secure under conditions of complex rule. Firstly, even though there will be opportunities to revolt because the regime will lack the capacity to intervene simultaneously at all points in the system, few individuals will take the opportunity because few will desire regime change. Secondly, even assuming that revolt gets under way to the point where it is prudentially rational to take part, many individuals will refuse to join because of pro-regime beliefs. Examples of this include women being reluctant to engage in collective action to improve their circumstances even when expected payoffs are positive, because of beliefs that feminism undermines the maintenance of family or devalues women’s interest in being attractive, or workers failing to go on strike when it is prudentially rational to do so because of their susceptibility to ethnic or nationalist appeals.

Thirdly, the state will be strengthened by oppressed individuals who help to maintain the regime’s rules because of commitments to it. Support for the regime can range from merely refusing to participate in subversive activity to actively siding with the oppressors to suppress it. The political commitments of some oppressed individuals may motivate them to join the security forces to protect what they consider to be a legitimate regime. This is a critical factor for, as we saw before, oppressive regimes depend for their survival on the contributions of personnel from the oppressed group.

Fourthly, ideology is important for oppressive regimes for another reason. Oppressive regimes with coherent ideological schemes help maintain the unity of the ruling class. Not only does a common ideology prevent intra-elite conflicts that can
weaken the regime’s capacity to rule; it also helps to reduce the likelihood of privileged individuals with useful skills giving up their privileges for the sake of joining the oppressed class in its struggle for liberation.23

Thus ideology seems essential to the maintenance of oppression. Oppression is not maintained because oppressed individuals face a public goods problem in trying to overthrow the state but because a large number of oppressed individuals, influenced by ideological beliefs, do not essentially desire revolution. There may well be some individuals who regard revolution as desirable but won’t revolt because they are not assured that sufficient numbers will join them in doing so. However, the reason is not, as in the case of coordination theory, because of problems of practical rationality but because of ideological influences. And it is important to note, in addition, that even if some individuals manage to initiate revolt to the point at which assurance actually becomes possible (that is, the conditions of practical rationality are satisfied), there is no certainty that other individuals will join them. Hence ideology can help prevent revolt even when in terms of the assumptions of coordination theory, revolt is more or less inevitable.

As a final point, just as it was necessary for Model A to be able to explain the possibility of revolution, so to is it necessary for the ideological model to be able to do so. Revolution is possible in terms of the assumptions of Model B. But, as expected, its logic will be different from the account of revolution implied by Model A.

Central to the possibility of revolution in Model B is ideological struggle. An essential focus of activists will be on lessening the power of ideological beliefs amongst the oppressed. Consciousness raising is as important as organizational work. The more enlightened members of society will try to persuade the majority of the oppressed that the regime is fundamentally illegitimate, because it is exploitative, unfree or the like. If their consciousness raising efforts and organizational activities bear fruit, revolt is likely to break out in certain sectors. It is important to note that many individuals will be willing to take part in terms of non-prudential considerations. This includes not only those who initiate actions but those who join in once revolts have already occurred. Many will decide to participate because they are inspired by the moral example of the more intrepid activists and political leaders who shown that is possible to challenge the regime. Thus it seems ideological theory turns out to be superior to coordination theory on two counts, explaining the persistence of oppression, and the possibility of revolution.
NOTES


2. A classic statement of this comes from Hume: “No man would have any reason to fear the fury of a tyrant, if he had no authority over any but from fear; since, as a single man, his bodily force can reach but a small way, and all the farther power he possesses must be founded either on our own opinion, or the presumed opinion of others”. Hume, *Political Essays*, pp.17-18.


11. Hardin, *One for All*, p.35.


22. For an excellent account of different types of ideological acceptance on the part of oppressed groups, see Goran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1980), pp.93-100.

23. This was an important feature of opposition to Tsarist rule. See J. N. Westwood, *Endurance and Endeavour: Russian History 1812-1992* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp.112-119. As is widely known, white dissidents played an important role in the long struggle against apartheid.