

This Week's Citation Classic

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Davies J C. Toward a theory of revolution. *Amer. Sociol. Rev.* 27:5-19, 1962.
[California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, CA]

Revolution is most likely to occur when a prolonged period of rising expectations (material and nonmaterial) and rising gratifications is followed by a short period of sharp reversal, during which the gap between what people want and what they get quickly widens and becomes intolerable. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*[®] (SSCI[®]) indicates that this paper has been cited over 195 times since 1966.]

James C. Davies
Department of Political Science
University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403

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"In the mid-1950s I was teaching political psychology and American history at the California Institute of Technology and was nurturing an interest in the causes of civil disturbances (strikes, riots, full-scale revolutions). Looking for antecedents of the 1894 Pullman strike in the Chicago area, I found in the US Bureau of Census' *Historical Statistics of the United States, 1789-1945* that real wages rose steadily during the post-Civil War period, until the 1894 recession. Then working people were suddenly out of jobs or had much lower take-home pay. I drew an inverted J on a piece of paper and left the idea to simmer on a back burner of my mind.

"Using such data as were available, I found that the phenomenon of suddenly frustrated rising expectations appeared in major revolutions like the Russian of 1917, the Egyptian of 1952, and very likely the American of 1775 and the French of 1789. In a seminar I taught on revolution at the University of California at Berkeley in 1959, one student found that the J-curve fit Dorr's Rebellion in Rhode Island in 1842—and another could get no significant quantified data about China before its 1949 revolution. But the idea did fit events preceding Leis-

ler's Rebellion in New York in 1689. The idea seemed so elementary and so universal that I hurried to be the first to spell it out, in June 1960. It took me three days to give birth to a brainchild that had gestated about four years. It took almost two years to get its legitimacy acknowledged by publication.

"Most statistics I could find pertained to material goods, to prices, and to wages and hours. For this reason, and because the inference gap is greater when interpreting the nonmaterial wants of people (like social and political equality)—and because I really feared that editors would reject as out of hand a psychologically based theory that related basic human wants to political behavior—I phrased the original abstract in socioeconomic rather than overtly psychological terms. For similar reasons, I introduced the essay by integrating some of the complementary theorizing of Marx and de Tocqueville, on the suggestion of Seymour Martin Lipset.

"I like to think that the article is cited because the J-curve is simple, goes to the heart of those causes of revolution that 'start' in people's minds, and is neither so holistic as to be banal nor so vague as to be mystical and untestable. While no theory can be definitively verified, the invalidations of it that I have thus far seen have been sadly unsystematic, either because they confused expectations and gratifications or because they showed no understanding of cycles. In a 1969 article,¹ I established 1940 as the starting point for the final long rise of expectations of black people in the US, when blacks were afforded more equal economic opportunity in war industries and when lynchings were rapidly declining. Three people in 1977 wrote an article in which they said the J-curve didn't fit the Black Rebellion, because their data, for the years 1956-1968, showed no J-curve. Without saying why, they started their cycle 16 years later than I did, apparently because that was when their data commenced.^{2,5} But the J-curve remains testable, and thanks to over 25 editors and authors who have presented the theory, it also remains alive, well, and visible."

1. Davies J C. The J-curve of rising and declining satisfactions as a cause of some great revolutions and a contained rebellion. (Graham H D & Gurr T R, eds.) *The history of violence in America: historical and comparative perspectives*. New York: Praeger, 1969. p. 690-730.
2. Miller A H, Bolce L H & Halligan M. The J-curve theory and the black urban riots: an empirical test of progressive relative deprivation theory. *Amer. Polit. Sci. Rev.* 71:964-82, 1977.
3. Miller A H & Bolce L H. Letter to editor. (Reply to Crosby.) *Amer. Polit. Sci. Rev.* 73:818-22, 1979.
4. Crosby F. Letter to editor. (Rejoinder.) *Amer. Polit. Sci. Rev.* 73:822-5, 1979.
5. Davies J C. Letter to editor. (Comment by Davies.) *Amer. Polit. Sci. Rev.* 73:825-30, 1979.