

TURBULENCE IN SOCIAL GOVERNANCE PROCESSES: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Social turbulence differs from social change when societies experience relatively unusual or dramatic internal and/ or external discord and pressure to change (Sztompka, 2000; Weinstein, 2010; Harper and Leicht, 2018). As long as there has been social governance, groups, tribes, and nations have experienced turbulence from time to time (Chua, 2019; Drews, 1995). Turbulence in social processes varies greatly in sources, intensity, and perspective (Tarrow, 2022). This essay reviews the fundamental aspects of social turbulence in order to frame current issues creating contemporary turbulence, and in this essay, we pay special attention to internal turbulence trends by providing examples in various types of governments from autocratic to democratically oriented.

Keywords: social turbulence, extremism and radicalization, political upheaval, radicalism, social governance process.



1. Intensity of social turbulence

Some degree of social change and friction is essentially inevitable in all societies, even those considered ‘stable’ (Sztompka, 2000). Stable economic, social, legal, military regimes may either mitigate the need for social dynamism, or simply mask underlying dynamic tensions inherent in society. For example, the ‘Edo’ period in Japan (1603 to 1868) was a long peaceful and prosperous era with little social turbulence, and only ended when Western powers began forcing economic engagement starting in the late 1850s (Beasley, 2000). Moderate internal social turbulence occurred after the Meiji Revolution for the next 75 years which led to the establishment of an empire. Social chaos followed World War II, but was followed only a few decades later by the reestablishment of a successful economic restructuring and new social stability (Drucker, 1986).

Another class of examples of the social turbulence is when substantially different ethnic and religious groups live together because of increased likelihood of feelings of uncertainty (Hogg, 2021). For long periods a group may live and even thrive with different groups in close proximity, and yet when the conditions are ripe, social turbulence may erupt leading to conflict, ethnic cleansing, or even genocide (De Nevers, 1993). Jews in Europe have thrived for long periods in the occupations and areas that they have frequently been limited to, only to be occasionally subjected to pogroms, expulsions, and holocausts (Anderson, Johnson and Koyama, 2017). Northern Irish Catholics’ resentment of English ‘plantations’, established in the late 1500s and 1600s when Catholics’ land was confiscated by English and Scottish settlers, erupted in the 1960s into a low-level civil war for 30 years to the extent that walls had to be built to separate Catholic and Protestant communities (Cairns and Darby, 1998). The breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s led to a series of massive ethnic cleansing campaigns and outright atrocities in areas in which Christians and Muslims had lived in relative harmony under the dictatorship of Josip Tito for 35 years (Hayden, 2013).

For this essay, we will consider social turbulence to be periods in which *social frictions have escalated to a point in which tensions are at the surface of society, and at least occasional demonstrations of violence occur due to individual acts* (e.g., sectarian murders or assassinations) *or social outbursts such as riots*. Social turbulence inevitably means a more polarized society, with various groups more aware of differences and grievances, and less interested in social equanimity (Iyengar *et al.*, 2019; Guterres, 2021). Extreme social turbulence results in mass migrations, desires for secession, rebellions, revolts, wars, and so on (Ayers, 2005; Doyle, 2010; Nacos, Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon, 2020; Barnes, 2021; Greenblatt, 2022).

2. Fundamental sources of social turbulence

Social turbulence primarily derives from three main sources: natural causes, external causes and internal causes. These causes are not exclusive; in fact, the overlap of these sources is a primary reason for increasing intensity, and potentially social confusion about the original source of social turbulence (Sachs, 2006; West, 2016; Blight, 2021).

2.1. Natural causes

In prehistoric and ancient times, natural causes were frequently the single most important reason for social turbulence (Drews, 1995; Caseldine and Turney, 2010). Natural causes could include floods, droughts, and pandemics. Flooding of the Euphrates, Nile, Ganges, Indus, Yangtze, Yellow River, etc. brought soil regeneration in good times, but catastrophic flooding could displace entire populations for a generation. All societies have flood myths based on single events or a combination of events that severely disturbed civil society (Dundes, 1988). Early emperors, such as Emperor Gun and his son Yu the Great of China (about 2200 BCE) were made or dethroned based on their flood control efforts (Lewis, 2006). As late as 1931 the Great Flood of Central China weakened China in repelling the Japanese invasion of Manchuria (Luo *et al.*, 2015).

Long-term droughts cause large-scale turbulence in agricultural societies (Maughan *et al.*, 2022). Egyptian Pharaohs and Roman Emperors were held responsible for providing large granary storage for use in times of extended drought (Papazian, 2013; Cheung, 2021). While the Biblical story of Joseph (in the Book of Genesis) being the vizier in charge of grain storage for an unnamed Pharaoh was much embellished, it does point to the widespread belief in Egypt and Rome that their rulers were responsible for mitigating widespread famines through planning. Even today the price of basic foodstuffs can bring down poor and struggling incipient democratic societies such as the fledgling Menshevik socialist Russian government who were brought down by the Bolsheviks whose slogan was ‘peace, land, and bread’ (Phillips, 2000).

Pandemics cannot only create social disturbance, but change the course of history for societies (Piret and Boivin, 2021). Native American societies were obliterated by a series of deadly diseases introduced by Europeans including smallpox, bubonic plague, chickenpox, cholera, diphtheria, influenza, malaria, measles, scarlet fever, typhoid, and tuberculosis, among others (Ramenofsky, 2003). These diseases were potent in European communities, but had far greater levels of morbidity in American communities in which no social immunity existed, a phenomenon known as the ‘virgin soil effect’. Individual epidemics would frequently wipe out a quarter to a half of the native population, but the accumulated effects of these pandemics would substantially contribute to a population decline that has left Native Americans just 2% of the population (Thornton, 1987). The social turbulence faced in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic, interacting with political ideologies, provide evidence that pandemics are still potent sources of social turbulence when they occur.

2.2. External sources of social turbulence

Social turbulence frequently occurs because of aggressive or hostile interactions with other nation states. Wars of conquest—for colonization, land and strategic resources—cause social disturbance. When nation states are the recipient of military strikes to damage them or invasions, the social turbulence caused is generally immense. Even the threat of attack is disruptive. Europe is full of historical examples of regime change such as invasions

by Germanic and Slavic people slowly overwhelming the Roman empire, Normans decapitating Anglo-Saxon society in 1066, and the Islamic incursions into the Balkans and Spain reaching as far as France and Vienna (Gibbon and Milman, 2003; Howard, 2009). Economic dominance by some countries can also be disruptive, especially when a local economic elite aligns itself more closely with rich countries than the poor of their own nation (Cardoso and Faletto, 1979).

Even when nations are the aggressor, social turbulence within them often occurs. The most famous example in the twentieth century was the case of the Soviet Union culminating in 1991, which had continually overextended itself after the Second World War in competing with the West (Sakwa, 2005). Without a military aggressor, the overreach of the Soviet Union against the West in terms of military spending, subsidizing vassal states, and an incompetently managed control economy led to the collapse of its ‘empire’ and the complete overhaul of its economic system (Zubok, 2021).

2.3. Internal sources of social turbulence

Internally generated types and sources of internal turbulence—the primary focus of this article—include economic, social, and national security concerns. Economic concerns that can cause significant social disturbance include economic downturns, economic domination or various types of work serfdom, and increasing economic competition. Economic downturns are most likely to cause social frustrations if the results of the recession and hardship are felt by some groups such as the poor or minorities, more than others leading to grievance, such as, famously, the recession in France just prior to the French Revolution and accompanying food riots (Sanyal, 2002). When downturns occur over a prolonged period, they may lead to the abrogation of rights of certain groups targeted as less powerful, indolent or being a drain on society. Prolonged downturns provide a fertile environment for demagogues, racists, and authoritarian leaders (Abel, 1986). Mature and growing economies may seek to leverage their wealth over other external groups using economic power or outright force to extract work at below-market valuation, leading to long-term resentment (see for example, the case of Asian woman workers in Kuwait: Shah, Al-Qudsi and Shah, 1991). Finally, increased competition can also result in the abrogation of the rights of some relatively powerless groups to enhance the position of a dominant group by changing laws or exercising political power to force economic stringency. This frequently leads to the ‘sweatshop’ phenomenon (Zwolinski, 2007).

Social concerns that can lead to social turbulence include various societal divisions, decreasing acceptance of inequality or inequities, or a rise of nationalism (Alexander, 2012). Social divisions can be based on race, class or caste, gender, religion, regions, and so on. When social exclusion is increasing, such divisions lead to racism, gender discrimination, religious intolerance, and even phenomena such as ethnic cleansing and genocide (Quarles, 1999; Pfundmair, 2019; Renström, Bäck and Knapton, 2020; Finkel *et al.*, 2020; Druckman, *et al.* 2021). While social divisions may be accepted for generations and centuries by those subject to various types of overt and covert discrimination or outright exclusion, various events or trends can trigger frustrations and angst and thus fuel social

disturbances and lead to social agitation, riots, and rebellions (Hayden, 2013). Extreme nationalism cannot only lead to external bellicosity, but cause substantial internal social disturbances as certain groups are viewed as more patriotic, and others viewed with suspicion (Mylonas and Tudor, 2021). Extreme nationalism encourages the advancement of militaristic leaders in democratic states, which in turn may even lead to changing to quasi or full dictatorships (Ben-Ghiat, 2020).

National security concerns refer to those cases in which external threats are perceived or demonstrated by other countries. Like extreme nationalism, national security threats encourage turning to military leaders and the suspension of some civil rights, although generally from a sense of protection and survival, rather than a sense of expansion, conquest, etc. (Patapan, 2022). Notably, the ancient Greeks and Romans suspended democratic conventions when invasions were imminent, and ‘elected’ a dictator who subsequently had relatively absolute rule until the emergency was over. Lucius Cincinnatus was elected by his fellow Romans to be a dictator for six months while fighting the Aequi in 458 B.C. (Ghibu, 2022). He quickly defeated the enemy, brought the rebel leaders to Rome in chains, resigned his dictatorship, and returned to his farm—within 18 days after his appointment! Unfortunately, for many young democracies, the return of power by ‘temporary’ dictators frequently does not occur (Ben-Ghiat, 2020). Before we examine the mechanisms of social turbulence, we take a brief look at the opposite—at what leads to a tighter, more cohesive society.

3. Factors reducing social resentment and the likelihood of turbulence

There are certainly many ways to conceptualize what leads to social cohesion and a sense of social inclusion in modern, democratic states that do not rely on force or religious edict (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Bellah *et al.*, 1992; Galbraith, 1997; Roberts, 2020; ICCCR, 2020; Jackson, 2020). Here we will follow the general conceptualization utilized by Putnam and his colleagues/followers in various writings (e.g., Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti, 1994; Putnam, 2000). Nine concepts characterize social inclusion, which in turn reduce the likelihood of internal dissention. They are: (1) broadly shared norms and values, (2) a common identity, (3) perceptions of fairness across society, (4) a general sense of trust, (5) social reciprocity even with those of opposing ideologies, (6) bridging organizations and networks, (7) meaningful opportunities for participation in a variety of social contexts, (8) shared channels of communication and facts, and (9) an overall sense of cultural inclusion.

Examples of these ‘inclusion’ concepts are: (1) belief that no one is above the law, (2) pride of nation more than pride in region, (3) belief by the less advantaged that society is nonetheless just, (4) groups in society do not fear the power of other groups, (5) there is respect for one’s opponents, (6) numerous organizations crosscut society regardless of class, ethnicity, etc., (7) social mobility exists, (8) the bulk of the news media report on news events in relatively unbiased manner, and (9) there is a sense that regardless of class, religion, ethnicity and so on, society pulls together for shared goals. (These concepts can

also be reversed, creating negative social capital and leading to enhanced differences in society (Satyanath, Voigtländer and Voth, 2017; Van Wart, McIntyre and Hall, 2023).

Using the U.S. as an example, American society evolved from a relatively militaristic, classist, and intolerant society to one that was far more inclusive by the end of the twentieth century. Examples of this overall trend include the cessation of repression of Native Americans, ending slavery, the empowerment of women, the increase in religious tolerance, the extension of education to all, increases in minority rights, and so on (e.g., Bordewich, 1997; Uslaner and Rothstein, 2016; Guterres, 2021).

Sadly, most social commentators assert that not only has the move toward the increase of social cohesion stalled some time ago (Brownstein, 2008; Mann and Ornstein, 2016), but has been subject to profound shocks since the largely unexpected election of Donald Trump as President in 2016 (Goodsell, 2019; Woodward and Costa, 2021; Barnes, 2021; Foa and Mounk, 2021; Raskin, 2022). That is, commentators of all ideological hues note the increasing social dissent and prospects for increasing turbulence. Next, we examine some of the concrete mechanisms of social exclusion and the resulting types of social turbulence that they can cause.

4. The mechanisms of social exclusion

Broadly speaking, exclusionary mechanisms fall into three broad fields: social, economic, and political. They may not seem intentional, and they may not be consciously coordinated, but they feed on each other and can easily create a cycle of increasing social turbulence.

Social exclusionary mechanisms may start with increasing religious intolerance and/or voluntary segregation of communities (Bishop, 2009; Muggah and Velshi, 2019) and educational systems (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Wallace-Wells, 2021). Partisan affiliation becomes a major factor in selective social association (Mason, 2018). News becomes segregated by political and religious beliefs (Chan, Lee and Chen, 2021). This can be further exacerbated by the sensationalizing and manipulating atypical events to suit audiences' stereotypes and play to their biases (Wilson, Parker and Feinberg, 2020). Exclusionary impetus can also be heightened by the ease and anonymity with which divisive and vicious commentary can be spread via such mechanisms as the internet (Ullmann and Tomalin, 2020). In turn, this can eventually lead to ideologically motivated crime and punishment, protests and riots, vigilantism, terrorism and extralegal community expulsions (Knapton, 2014; McAdam, 2018; Bateson, 2021).

Economic exclusion is increased by large individual and regional disparities in income and resources, especially when commodities considered basic become scarce or expensive (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 2006). Large-scale job loss is a powerful cause of social anxiety, no matter whether it is an economic cycle or shift in the structure of the economy. The erosion of savings and social safety nets makes social turbulence more likely. Economic exclusion fosters a dysfunctional economic system that in turn leads to decline in the

standard of living for many and privation for some, as well as recession and/or hyperinflation (Piketty, 2013; Saez and Zucman, 2020).

Exclusionary mechanisms that are political tend to heighten differences with unaffiliated groups or provide ‘insider’ advantages (Renström, Bäck and Knapton, 2020). The number of ‘safe’ voting districts increases, and those districts allow legislators to become more extreme in their policy preferences (Brownstein, 2008; Mann and Ornstein, 2016). Legislative coalitions become less willing to compromise and then talk through the media rather than to each other (Green, 2019). Accusations of voting fraud, electoral gerrymandering, and political irregularities become more frequent and assertive (Agiesta, 2022; Yourish *et al.*, 2022). Such trends, when combined with social and economic mechanisms of social exclusion can ultimately lead to coups and insurrections, civil wars, regional or ethnic subjection, or the splitting of entire countries (Cederman and Vogt, 2017). These more extreme political outcomes are generally the result of radicalization by a substantial portion of the population, and a greater likelihood of cultism (Tourish, 1998). The cycle of increasing extremism that leads to radicalization. See Table 1 for concrete examples of internal sources of social turbulence.

5. When increasing social exclusion leads to extremism and radicalization, political upheaval, and violence

Social turbulence often leads to heightened extremism which is when society has widely divergent notions of what is fair, who can be trusted, and how society should be organized (Jacobson, 2021; Updegrove *et al.*, 2020). Societies can live in a state of relative extremism for generations and even centuries when conditions remain stable, and force can reinforce the status quo. For example, slave revolts occurred in not only ancient Rome, but in Spanish and English-speaking America, but were generally successfully suppressed because of one-sided power dynamics (French, 2004; Rasmussen and Drummond, 2011).

Radicalism, whose etymology means ‘to the root’ is when one or more groups feel the system must be fundamentally changed, by force or violence if necessary. Radicalism, as used here, does not refer to the left or right extremes simply because they have widely divergent views within a system, nor is it necessarily pejorative. Radicalism occurs whenever a group acts on the notion that any means to make substantial changes in the system is justified, no matter whether it is extralegal to that system or not (Knapton, 2014). For example, in the U.S. those who promoted witchcraft trials, those who deemed themselves ‘patriots’ in the American Revolution (Jasanoff, 2012; Taylor, 2016), those states that seceded in the U.S. Civil War, vigilantes in the Jim Crow Era (Du Bois, 2017; Vandal, 2000), and violent protesters and anti-government terrorists of the current era are all radicals on both the left and right, no matter whether one thinks their actions were justified or not.

The most typical ‘movements’ around the world after World War II (comprised of both extremists and radicals) were those on the left (Tarrow, 2022). In the subsequent half century India, Pakistan, most of Africa and the Middle East and other miscellaneous colonies became independent because of national pressures for fundamental change. The

Table 1: Examples of internal sources of social turbulence

	US examples	International examples
Economic		
Economic downturns, willingness to abrogate freedoms	Abrogation of minority rights right after Civil War. Jim Crow	Allure of strongmen: Germany under Hitler and Italy under Mussolini
Seeking economic advantage	Chinese workers in the mid-1800s	Indians working in South Africa
Increased economic competition, tough decisions that may adversely affect some more than others	Decrease in tax progressiveness under Reagan	Thatcher: closing down national mines Fall of the Soviet Union and unfair distribution of state assets
Social		
Racism, classism, religious intolerance, gender superiority (internal)	Civil War and Jim Crow, Native Americans, slavery, Christian nationalism	Uyghurs in China Muslim minority in India
Divisive leaders supporting superiority based on race, class (caste), or religion; targeted legislation, ethnic cleansing		Ethnic cleansing of Kurds, Christians, Yazidis in Turkey Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar Muslim and Tamil minorities in Sri Lanka
Decreasing acceptance of inequality or inequity (internal), leadership of grievance	'Me, too,' movement, Black Lives Matter	Neighborhood riots in Paris
Nationalism (external)	Expansion into Native American land from 1603 to 1890	Chinese takeover of Hong Kong
Expansionist military leadership	Mexican American War, Spanish American War, annexation of Hawaii, etc.	European conquest from 1500 to 1960 in Africa, Americas, Asia, Australia and the Pacific Russian imperialism under the Czars
National security		
National security threats from other countries; turn to 'dictators'; military leaders become national leaders	Alien and Sedition Acts under John Adams, Expansionist wars under Polk, Teddy Roosevelt, internment of Japanese American citizens during World War II	Election of 'dictators' in early Greece and Rome when threatened. External threats keep strongmen in power such as Putin and Netanyahu

collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics starting in the late 1980s allowed the constituent republics to become independent states. In Europe and the U.S. most protests, riots, and civil disturbances were by those who felt dispossessed or marginalized. However, by the 1980s in the U.S. a cultural backlash was beginning under the banner of ‘family values’. The backlash was fully operationalized in 2009 when an activist Tea Party movement pushed for lower taxes, smaller government, and reduced social spending (except senior care programs). While Trump’s election was unexpected for most people, the social turbulence stoking him had been long in the making and has continued since (Norris and Inglehart, 2019)

In the current day U.S.—in a trend also exhibited in China, India, Turkey, and numerous other countries—the push for anti-democratic measures at a minimum, and a suppression of minorities at its more extreme, is an example of widespread extremism moving to radicalization (Repucci, 2021; Abramowitz *et al.*, 2021; Calhoun, Gaonkar and Taylor, 2022; Cilliza, 2020; DiMaggio, 2022; Gidengil, Stolle and Bergerson-Boutin, 2022). Conservatives increasingly embrace the notion of providing more support for religious organizations, ‘locking up’ political opponents, using flimsy reasons to allege treason, embracing violence against liberal or ‘woke’ individuals, curbing minority political and social rights, vigilantism, and so on (Nacos, Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon, 2020; Greenberg, 2022; Rothbart and Stebbins, 2022). Part of the rationale for such beliefs—by conservatives—is that various minority and/or nonconservative groups are damaging the fundamental values of the U.S. Important values include ‘dominant’ religious mores, notions of self-help, and the historical importance of the U.S. as a White, Christian nation (Hage, 1998; DiAngelo, 2018; Jardina, 2019; Whitehead and Perry, 2020). Conservatives in the non- and less-democratic states of China, India, and Turkey condemn and repress Uyghurs, Muslims, and Kurds respectively (e.g., see Roberts, 2021). Additionally, the shift of the right from the extreme to increasingly radical has resulted in an unusual shift in international relations. The right increasingly supports relationships with authoritarian states such as Russia and North Korea, and lags in its support of the Ukraine, Palestinians, and liberal European states (Britzky, 2022).

6. The importance of understanding contemporary social turbulence

An African proverb notes that ‘there can be no peace without understanding’. So it is necessary to recognize that social turbulence usually has far deeper roots than apparent in contemporary events (Lieberman *et al.*, 2019). Social turbulence is complex, emerging from interweaving sources. And finally, social turbulence as social dissension always has two sides (Graham, Haidt and Nosek, 2009).

Since, ironically, it is contemporary conservatives who are the most radical (Failla, 2021; Frum, 2022), it is important to examine their values if a reduction in social tension is to occur and not simply be met with force or acquiescence. Conservatives often believe that there is a surfeit of democracy which leads to anarchy, excess, usurpation, and decadence (Fawcett, 2022). They feel that their historical achievements ought to be respected.

They feel that they should be allowed to live in their own, relatively pure communities. And they feel anger at the progressive loss of control over these things in a more liberal era. Conservatives are radical in that they want to return to what they perceive as a bygone era and they are increasingly willing to do what it whatever it takes to achieve these ends (Hertel-Fernande, 2019; Kingzette *et al.*, 2021).

Liberals, on the other hand, want to continue the progressive trends that have typified many nation states for the last 75 years (Fawcett, 2018). They want greater movement in social equality, climate change reforms, and personal freedoms, no matter the various costs. They want greater integration and social flexibility. They want governments that protect minority rights and provide strong social safety needs. And they frequently want past wrongs acknowledged at a minimum, if not rectified in the present (Hudson, 2012). Liberals are also willing to do what they think it takes within democratic norms, but the quandary for them in democratic states is that they often no longer have the overall social consensus to move forward, and, in fact, may be unable to resist a rollback of what they feel that they have achieved (Walter, 2022).

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, 232) note that ‘Previous generations of Europeans and Americans made extraordinary sacrifices to defend our democratic institutions against powerful external threats. Our generation, which grew up taking democracy for granted, now faces a different task: We must prevent it from dying from within’. As the frustration of those who were heretofore non-radicals grows, they will increasingly have to decide if they want to meet radicalization with understanding or their own style of radicalism or a combination of the two (Homer-Dixon, 2020; Brummel, 2021; French, 2020; Hall, 2021; Greenblatt, 2022; Kettl, 2022).

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