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The end of history?

Revolutions and Counter-revolutions

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While revolutions are historical facts of life, counter-revolutions are likewise undeniable realities. Indeed, counter-revolutions seem regularly to follow revolutions as night follows day. Etymology confirms this paradox. The very concept of "revolution" originates from the sciences of astronomy. The movements of planets evolve in an orbital manner, returning to the point of departure.

Hence the suggested analogical conclusion: the role of revolutions as great accelerators, as locomotives of history, is just an optical illusion of short-sighted and superficial observers, not to say utopian day-dreamers. It is precisely such an interpretation (denigration) of revolutions which is compatible with the great Italian historian Vico's cyclical conception of world history.

Under the influence of the victorious counter-revolution in England in 1660, the great political philosophers of the 17th century, above all Hobbes and Spinoza, developed a basically pessimistic view of human destiny. Revolutions are doomed to fail: "Plus ça change, plus ça reste la même chose." Two thousand years earlier, Greek and Chinese political philosophers had arrived at similar conclusions. There is supposedly no way out for human destiny but the search for individual happiness under inevitably bad social conditions, be it happiness through self-discipline (Stoics, Confucians, Spinoza) or through hedonism (the Epicureans). [1]

In the 18th century, the Enlightenment questioned both the empirical and the theoretical roots of dogmatic skeptical pessimism. [2] The belief in the perfectibility of humankind (only sophists or dishonest critics identify perfectibility with actually attaining a final state of perfection, be it said in passing), in historical progress, and thus likewise in the progressive turns of revolutions, re-emerged. Revolution indeed looked beautiful in times of reaction. But already before the outbreak of the revolution of 1789, the camp of the Enlightenment had split between the basically skeptical and socially cautious, if not outright conservative, bourgeois like Voltaire ("cultivez votre jardin") [3] and the more radical petty-bourgeois ideologues like J.J. Rousseau, who would inspire the Jacobin revolutionists. This split deepened in the course of the revolution itself. After the successive stages of counter-revolution (Thermidor, the Bonapartist Consulate, the Empire, the Bourbon restoration) the reversal to 17th century skepticism became general including erstwhile enthusiasts for revolution, exemplified by the English poet Wordsworth (but not Shelley). Only a tiny minority continued to pin their hopes on future revolutions and to work for them. [4] The near-consensus was: the overhead of revolution is too large, especially given the fact that they achieve very little. [5]

The Russian revolution's Thermidor and its tragic aftermath, the horrors of Stalinism, reproduced the same revulsion towards revolutions, first in the late nineteen-thirties and the forties, then, after a temporary reprieve in the sixties and the early seventies, on a generalized scale from the middle seventies on. The Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia and especially Cambodia and Afghanistan, but more generally the reflux of the revolutionary wave 1968-1975 in Europe, from France through Czechoslovakia, Italy, Portugal, strengthened this political retreat. The near-consensus can again be summarized in the formula: revolutions are both useless and harmful from every point of view, including that of progress towards a more humane society. Indeed, this is one of the key platitudes of today's prevailing neo-conservative, neo-liberal and neo-reformist ideologies.

It is, however, based upon obvious half-truths, if not outright mystifications. The idea that revolutions revert to these historical points of departure, if not to situations worse than the pre-revolutionary ones, is generally based upon a confusion between social and political counter-revolutions. While a few social counter-revolutions have indeed occurred, they are the exception, not the rule. Neither Napoleon nor Louis XVIII restored semi-feudal socio-economic conditions in the French countryside, nor the political rule of the semi-feudal nobility. Stalin did not restore capitalism in Russia, nor did Deng Xiaoping in China. [6] The restoration in England was quickly followed by the Glorious

Revolution. The compromise of the American constitution did not lead eventually to the generalization of slave labor but to its suppression, after the civil war. The list can be extended ad libitum.

To this objective balance-sheet, the problems of subjective choice are closely related. They confront the skeptics and the pessimists with a real dilemma. Counter-revolutions are not simply “natural” reactions to revolutions, the product of an inevitable mechanical yo-yo movement so to speak. They originate from the same exacerbation of a system's inner contradictions which give rise to the revolution, but with a specific shift in socio-political relations of forces. They reflect the relative decline of political mass activity and efficiency. There is indeed a “natural law” operating here. As genuine popular revolutions generally imply a qualitatively increased level of political mass activity, this cannot be sustained indefinitely, for obvious material and psychological reasons. You have to produce in order to eat, and when you demonstrate and participate in mass meetings, you don't produce. Also, great masses of people cannot live permanently at a high level of excitement and expenditure of nervous energy. [7]

To this relative decline in mass activity corresponds a relative rise of activity and efficiency of the old ruling classes or strata and their various supporters and hangers-on. The initiative shifts from the “left” to the “right,” at least momentarily (and not necessarily with total success: there have been defeated counter-revolutions as there have been defeated revolutions.) [8] There are likewise preventive counter-revolutions: Indonesia 1965 and Chile 1973 may be taken as examples. But precisely these preventive counter-revolutions clearly reveal the pessimistic skeptic's dilemma. They are generally very costly in terms of human lives and human happiness—much more costly than revolutions. It stands to reason that much more repression, much more bloodletting, much more cruelty, including torture, is needed to suppress a highly active, broad mass of ordinary people than to neutralize a small group of rulers. So by abstaining from active intervention against a rising counter-revolution—on the pretext that revolution itself is useless and bad—one actually becomes a passive if not active accomplice of bloody counter-revolution and large-scale mass suffering.

This is morally revolting, as it means tolerating, aiding and abetting the violence and exploitation of the oppressors, while finding all kinds of rationalizations for refusing to assist the oppressed in their self-defence and attempted emancipation. And it is political counter-productive as well as obnoxious. In the end, it often proves to be suicidal from the point of view of the skeptics' alleged devotion to the defence of democratic institutions and reforms.

The most tragic example in that respect was that of German social-democracy at the end of World War One. Under the alleged motive of “saving democracy”, Ebert and Noske kept the Imperial army's hierarchy and the Prussian officers' corps intact. They conspired with it against the workers-first in Berlin itself, then in the whole country. They made the generals of the Reichswehr into the political arbiters of the Weimar Republic. They permitted them to create and consolidate the Freikorps from which a good part of the later SA and SS cadres were recruited. They thereby paved the way of the rise and eventual conquest of power by the Nazis, which in turn led to the social-democrats' destruction. They thought they could contain regression and reaction in the framework of a democratic counter-revolution. [9] History taught the bitter lesson that democratic counter-revolutions in the end often lead to much more authoritarian and violent ones, when the sharpening of the socio-economic contradictions makes a total instead of a partial suppression of the mass movement into an immediate goal of the ruling class.

This again is not accidental but corresponds to a deeper historical logic. The essence of revolution is often identified with a widespread explosion of violence and mass killings. This is of course not true. The essence of revolution is not the use of violence in politics but a radical, qualitative challenge—and eventually the overthrow—of prevailing economic or political power structures. The larger the number of people involved in mass actions targeting these structures, the more favorable the relationship of forces between revolutions and reaction, the greater the self-confidence of the first and the moral-ideological paralysis of the second, and the less the masses are inclined to use violence. Indeed, widespread use of violence is counter-productive for the revolution at that precise phase of the historical process.

But what does occur most often, if not always, at some point of the revolutionary process, is the desperate recourse to violence by the most radical and the most resolute sectors of the rulers' camp, intent on risking everything before it is too late, because they still have human and material resources left to act in that way. At some culminating point, the confrontation between revolution and counter-revolution thus generally does assume a violent character, although the degree of violence largely depends upon the overall relationship of forces. In answer to reaction's violence, the masses will tend towards armed self-defence. Disintegration, paralysis and disarming of the counter-revolution paves the way towards revolutionary victory. Victory of counter-revolution depends upon disarming the mass. [10]

When the chips are down, when power relations are stripped of all mediations and are nakedly reduced to bare essentials, Friedrich Engels' formula is then borne out by empirical evidence: in the final analysis, the state is indeed a gang of armed people. The class or layer which has the monopoly of armed force possesses (either keeps or conquers) state power. And that again is what revolution, and counter-revolution, are all about. Sitting on the sidelines cannot prevent this confrontation. Nor can it contribute to delaying for ever the day of reckoning. In the last analysis the skeptics' and reformists' revulsion from revolution covers an implicit choice: the conservation of the status quo is at best a lesser evil compared to the costs and consequences of its revolutionary overthrow. This choice reflects social conservatism, not a rational judgment of empirically verifiable balance-sheets of "costs" of historical, i.e. real, revolutions and counter-revolutions.

No normal human being prefers to achieve social goals through the use of violence. To reduce violence to the utmost in political life should be a common endeavor for all progressive and socialist currents. Only profoundly sick persons-totally unable to contribute to the building of a real classless society-can actually enjoy advocating and practicing violence on a significant scale. Indeed, the increasing rejection of violence in a growing number of countries is a clear indicator that at least some moral-ideological progress has occurred in the last 70-75 years. One has just to compare the wild and brazen justification of war by nearly all the leading Western intellectuals and politicians in the 1914-1918 period to the near universal revulsion towards war today in the same milieu to note that progress.

Double moral standards still reign supreme in inter-class and inter-state relations, but the legitimacy of widespread use of violence by the rulers is at least increasingly questioned in a systematic and consistent way by a much greater number of people than in 1914-1918 or 1939-1945. The future, indeed the very physical survival of humankind, depends upon the outcome of this race between increasing consciousness about the necessary rejection of armed confrontation on the one hand, and increasing de facto destructiveness of existing and future weapons on the other. If the first does not eliminate the second through successful political action, the second will eventually destroy not only the first but all human life on earth.

But such a political action can only be revolutionary and thus implies the use of at least limited armed force. To believe otherwise is to believe that the rulers will let themselves be disarmed utterly peacefully, without using the arms they still control. This is to deny the threat of any violent counter-revolution, which is utterly utopian in the light of actual historical experience. It is to assume that ruling classes and strata are exclusively and always represented by mild well-meaning liberals. Go tell that to the prisoners of the Warsaw ghetto and of Auschwitz, to the million victims of Djakarta, to the oppressed non-white population of South Africa, to the Indochinese peoples, to the Chilean and Salvadoran workers and peasants, to the murdered participants of the Intifada, to the millions and millions of victims of reaction and counter-revolution throughout the world since the colonial wars of the 19th century and the Paris Commune. The elementary human moral duty in the face of that terrifying record is to refuse any retreat into (re)privatization and to assist by any means necessary the oppressed, the exploited, the humiliated, the downtrodden, to struggle for their emancipation. In the long run, this makes also the individual participant a more human, i.e. happier person, provided he does not make any pseudo-Real political concessions and observes unrestrictedly the rule: fight everywhere and always against any and every social and political condition which exploits and oppresses human beings.

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[1] Nevertheless Spinoza, who was himself skeptical about the outcome of revolutions, explicitly proclaimed the people's right to revolution, more than a century before that same right was ensconced in the Preamble of the American Declaration of Independence first, in the French Declaration the Rights of Men and Citizens afterwards. To our knowledge, the Yugoslav Constitution is today the only one which not only contains explicitly that right, but even adds to it the duty to make a revolution under specific conditions.

[2] The dogma of the basic "evil" of humankind is based in the West on the superstition of Original Sin. Of late, it has received a pseudo-scientific veneer with the Konrad Lorenz school of the alleged universal aggressivity of human beings, which some psychologists then tend to generalize into a human trend towards self-destruction. Better psychologists, in the first place Sigmund Freud, pointed out that the human psyche combines both a trend towards cooperation and a trend towards self-destruction, Eros and Thanatos, to love and to kill. If only the second one would have prevailed, humankind would have disappeared a long time ago instead of showing an impressive demographic-biological expansion.

[3] Two thousand years ago, the Jewish philosopher Hillel expressed the contradictions of individual skepticism in a succinct way: "If I am not for myself, who is for me? And if I am for myself alone, what then am I? and if not now, then when?" Kant tried to escape that dilemma through his categorical imperative, but failed to apply it convincingly to social conflicts (see his attitude towards the French revolution). Marx found the solution in his categorical imperative to struggle against all social conditions in which human beings are debased, oppressed, and alienated.

[4] Revolutionary continuity was maintained by a handful of followers of Babeuf who, through the person of Buonarotti, helped to inspire Auguste Blanqui's Société des Saisons, which gave rise to anew revolutionary organization in the 1830s. But for nearly forty years, there were very few organized revolutionaries in the country which witnessed five revolutions in the course of a century.

[5] The debate goes on, of course. René Sedillot (*Le coûт de la révolution française*, Paris, Perrin, 1987) is the most brazen of the latter-day dragon-killers, who continue the good fight against the French revolution after two centuries. The sophisms on which he bases his argumentations are revealed by the fact that he adds the victims of counter-revolution, in the first place of Napoleon's wars, to the cost of the revolution. But he does not compare these "costs" to those of the Ancien Régime's dynastic wars: the devastation of a quarter of Germany, the big famine in France at the beginning of the 18th century, etc.

[6] The inclusion of Deng Xiaoping in this list is of course open to serious challenge. Mao was not Lenin; he was rather a unique combination of given traits of both Lenin and Stalin. Hence, Deng Xiaoping, in spite of many right-wing tendencies in his politics, cannot be considered the Thermidorian equivalent of Stalin of the Chinese revolution.

[7] Incidentally, this is one of the objective bases for the second "law of permanent revolution" formulated by Trotsky. For the revolutionary process to continue after it starts to recede in a given country, its center of gravity must shift to another one.

[8] Classical examples of defeated counter-revolutionary coups are the Kornilov one in Russia, August 1917, the Kapp-von Luttwitz putsch in Germany, 1920 and the Spanish military-fascist uprising in July 1936 in Catalonia, Madrid, Valencia, Málaga, the Basque country, etc.

[9] A democratic counter-revolution is a counter-revolution which seeks to maintain essential features of bourgeois democracy, including the legal mass labor movement, universal franchise and a broadly free press, after having beaten back the workers' attempts to conquer power and to arm themselves. Of course, while engaged in suppressing the German revolution, Ebert, Noske and Co. systematically curtailed democratic freedoms, forbade political parties, suspended newspapers, requisitioned strikers and even outlawed strikes, to preserve the bourgeois state. Moreover, Ebert cynically lied before the All-German Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils (December 1918) when he denied having brought soldiers to Berlin for repressive purposes. He had actually done so, in direct connection with the Imperial Army's High Command, behind the back of his fellow "people's commissars" (ministers) of the Independent Socialist Party. The repression started a few days later.

[10] This occurred in Germany throughout the country starting with January 1919 in Berlin. It occurred in Barcelona after the May days in 1937, in Greece starting with December 1944, in Indonesia in 1965, just to quote some examples. Courageous left socialists like the prewar Austrian social-democrats and Salvador Allende in Chile did not refuse to fight counter-revolution arms in hand, but they refused to organize and prepare

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the masses systematically for this unavoidable showdown and deliberately left the initiative to the enemy, which meant courting disaster.