

The Multiple Meanings of Revolution

Upheaval, crisis and imponderables

Jean-Clément MARTIN

Though the age of historic upheavals and major political crises seemed to be over, the word “revolution” has made a recent comeback in Georgia, in the Ukraine and in the “Arab Springs” of 2011. Should we revise the concept of revolution? What, if anything, do these contemporary revolutions have in common? Can they be compared to the great revolutions of the past: namely the French and Soviet revolutions?

When the Berlin Wall came down and the tanks took over Tiananmen Square, it was hard to imagine that “revolution” would become a buzzword (again) a quarter of a century later. It seemed as though everything had already been said, as though the end of history were as definitive as the wax seal on an envelope: the history of antagonistic forces, of the dialectic process, had been consummated. We were entering into a different world in which crises would no longer give rise to dialectic upheavals. From 1974, the Carnation Revolution in Portugal set the tone with columns of tanks actually stopping at red traffic lights. The only revolutions that did take place were “Velvet”, as in Czechoslovakia, “Orange” in the Ukraine, a “Rose revolution” in Georgia and a “Tulip revolution” in Kyrgyzstan. These “revolutions” appeared to be the culmination of actions taken by student movements, NGOs, opposition coalitions and the independent media. Moreover, these events promoted democracy by giving rise to “mediascapes” that discredited previous forms of power. We might add, however, that these revolutions also legitimized themselves by playing on the strategic rivalries between the United States and Russia.

But that image was blurred by the revolutions in the Middle East. Iran staged two revolutions: one in 1979 when Khomeini drove out the shah with backing from the French left that had rediscovered the virtues of a spontaneous populace, and another in 2009 when the Islamic Republic staged a counter-revolutionary revolution to shore up the establishment. In many cases, the “jasmine” revolutions of the “Arab Spring” in 2011 initially prompted comparisons to the “great” revolutions – the French, of course, but also the Soviet Revolution – with a desire to show that the age of revolution had returned. And some commentators condemned those who pointed out that already in 1789–1799 the movement had been neither unified nor patently effective, and that even the word “revolution” had had a hard time gaining currency as a term endowed with a clear-cut meaning. The developments in Tunisia and Egypt in late 2012, however, do not substantiate any claims that the age of revolution has returned and that the world has rediscovered the long-forsaken recipes for social regeneration.

As the use of the word has becoming increasingly widespread, this might be a good opportunity to revisit our conception of revolution and retrace its trajectory since the days when the term “revolution” came down from the heavens, from the movements of the stars, to describe terrestrial crises, coups d’état, palace revolutions and other political upheavals.

Celestial vs. terrestrial revolutions

In the 1760s and '70s, when the word “revolution” came to be used to describe political overthrows throughout Europe, even as far away as Siam¹, it did not entirely lose its traditional meaning of the revolving of celestial bodies and of a return to an original state of existence. Amid the resultant ambiguity of the term, “revolution” became a derogatory epithet for the fiscal reforms undertaken by Louis XV and his ministers led by chancellor Maupeou. The members of parliament, defending the vested interests of the French nobility, disparaged Maupeou’s “revolution” as an act of oriental despotism, thus equating revolution with a power play. The preceding Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England had been all the more glorious in that it had re-established the country’s political and religious traditions, and with little bloodshed. Revolution at that time still coincided with a return to origins, but that no longer seemed the case at the close of the 18th century. Was this to be the beginning of a tidal wave of revolution that was to engulf the Western nations on either shore of the Atlantic – culminating in France in 1789? Contrary to what is often claimed, the answer is not entirely clear.

The “American Revolution” was a war of independence, as it is still called on the other side of the Atlantic, and it would be hard to find many revolutionaries there during most of the conflict. Technically speaking, it wasn’t the first of its kind, since some of the popular revolts of the 1770s and '80s against authoritarian (albeit reforming) Spain had already taken place in South America. The fact that historians use the word “revolution” to encompass all that doesn’t prove anything except that the same problems had arisen everywhere, including in Austria, Russia, Denmark and France: economic boom, social diversification and burgeoning trade had fuelled population growth, overturned hierarchies and spread unprecedented challenges to the rigid stratification of society. All these governments without exception were alive to the fundamental untenability of the prevailing system and had made efforts to modernize and rationalize their administrative apparatus, which in turn only aggravated the tensions. How were they to organize a strong and effective state based on traditional powers when the measures they were taking would necessarily erode those powers, weaken their influence and release whole populations from obligations of obedience hallowed by several centuries of established custom? That was the question they all faced.

All the countries undergoing this revolution of industry and trade², determined in part by the boom in colonial exploitation, had to cope with what was not a “revolution”, but a “crisis”. Almost all the sovereigns of the Western World reacted to that crisis according to the common norms of what subsequently came to be termed “enlightened despotism”: they reformed institutions, reinforced centralism, streamlined taxation and public services, unified society and enjoined the support of the literate elite who were devoted to the public welfare and capable of standing up to the powerful nobility as well as to archaic countryfolk. It was the failure of these policies, in North and South America, in Ireland, Belgium and ultimately in France, that liberated the “modernizing” forces in society from the tutelage of monarchs deemed incapable, unworthy or traitorous and prompted them to embark on a different, autonomous path, which was called revolutionary at the time.

Revolutions without revolutionaries

To put it differently, almost all these revolutions began, strictly speaking, without revolutionaries. The world was riddled with millenarian expectations of a return to a golden

¹ The 1688 revolution in Siam received considerable attention in France.

² What would subsequently be referred to as the Industrial Revolution.

age without nobles or taxes, or of religious and social regeneration. Natural law, whether rooted in a Christianity that legitimized the assassination of “tyrants”, or in a “modernity” that legitimized egalitarian demands, was discussed in the universities and salons and disseminated in newspapers and pamphlets. The various currents of the Enlightenment gave rise to fervent philanthropic and abolitionist movements, or were steeped in the mystical quests of the “enlightened”. The intellectual and spiritual ferment of the period was prodigious, yielding such outlandish phenomena as Parisian workers embracing radical Jansenism or peasants in western France defending on the contrary the exaltations of the cult of the Sacred Heart, while an influential clerical current proclaimed that one couldn’t be Christian without being “patriotic”, even hoping to re-establish the pure, poor and regenerated “Early Church”.

In this maelstrom, it was only over the course of the ensuing conflicts that the various groups radicalized their stances – or more precisely secularized them, which enabled them to refuse, on purely political grounds, to make any compromises whatsoever. Although all power rested on religious, even eschatological foundations, and although all reform was rooted in a longing for a Christian Golden Age and the popular uprisings justified their demands by denouncing the monarch’s breach of the compact between the Crown and its subjects, politics was severed from religion after 1782-1785 in America, after 1784 in Ireland, 1790 in Belgium and 1792 in France. Even if the ensuing revolutions subsequently rediscovered eschatological aspirations and practices, the discourse that eventually prevailed was rational, secular and “political” in the sense the word took on at the time and has retained to this day, and it fundamentally changed the shape of things to come.

Still, the crises, all of which were different in substance and similar in principle, had to mount to a point of no return. The “enlightened despots” who were not immediate victims of such radicalization – namely the Grand Duke of Tuscany, the Emperor of Austria in his Central European dominions and the Russian tsarina – were not faced with educated organized masses and, especially the latter two, were able to resort to traditional violence to crush both the opponents of their reforms and, above all, the rebels calling for unprecedented entitlements. This intervening period needs to be taken into account in respect of the French experience of 1788–1791. During these years, “revolution” and “regeneration” were practically synonymous, interchangeable virtually throughout society, except among émigrés and “aristocrats”, on the one hand, and, on the other, the urban and rural minorities demanding an end to taxation, as well as some intellectual circles hoping for the establishment of a republican system inspired by antiquity. The real revolution, the one that altered global consciousness, was that of 1792, when violence broke with all existing arrangements, inventing a republic that owed nothing to Sparta or Rome, and a regime that in order to survive was to spread throughout the rest of Europe, at least.

Revolution and crisis

This cursory outline of the history of European revolution, emphasizing the crisis, or crises, that preceded and ushered in “modern” revolutions leads to a conception of revolution as something other than a single uniform process: in the context of a given period, this process then developed variously according to circumstances, but causing reproducible mechanisms to get replayed everywhere and every time. We could even turn the proposition around and say revolution is more a potential result of crisis, so it is sometimes the concatenations of a crisis that spark revolutions. Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge is a case in point: it enables us to see that the Cambodian revolution had no meaning at the outset, but was the result of the rise to power of a group that took advantage of a political gridlock, millenarian expectations and

unlooked-for convergences. Unless one insists on explaining everything in terms of effects of the collective imagination, this was not a French- or Bolshevik-style revolution. The Marxist-trained “authentic revolutionaries” counted for little in fact as against the unschooled who controlled the country. Using the word revolution to make comparisons is more of a facility than an explanation.

And there are a number of advantages to distinguishing between a crisis-based approach and one based on revolution. In the first place, it enables us to think about how a revolution may come about where it is not expected, as in France in 1789 or Russia in 1917. In both cases, the revolutions, in stages leading up to their radical apogees in 1792-1793 and October 1917-1918, came about because the governments in place were incapable of coping with difficulties they themselves had engendered. In places where revolution could have been expected, in 18th-century parliamentary England or, later, in 19th-century Germany agitated by the most organized and powerful Social Democratic party in the world, it was averted by the quality of the militants’ reflections and their aptitude for taking part in public debate, as well as by the necessity of the groups that had come to power to distrust the extremists on either side of the political spectrum. It was only when the crisis had obliterated all points of reference, introduced unfamiliar exigencies and necessitated unity to ensure the very survival of the nation, in France in 1792 and in Russia in the summer of 1917, that the revolution was able to organize and take power.

The multiple meanings of revolution

Let us take this line of reasoning a step further. The failure of Weimar Germany and disappointed Italy in 1918 to satisfy the violent conflicting aspirations born of crises in public opinion provided fertile ground for the rise of Fascism and Nazism, two movements bizarrely linked to revolutionary traditions. They were able to carry out what the revolutionary right had been unable to do in late 19th-century France and in both of those countries at the beginning of the 20th century: i.e. take power by means of a conservative revolution. And this is what subsequently occurred in Spain with Franco, in Portugal with Salazar and in Hungary with Horthy.... The point is that there was never a single historical meaning attached to revolution, contrary to what Hegel expounded in his approximations, analogies and demonstrations (whose sheer complexity culminates in confusion), all of which was taken up and revamped by Marx in his quest for a *modus operandi*.

As philosophies go, Joseph de Maistre’s may well be the most efficient. The man and his doctrine were rejected by the left and by a whole bloc on the right, a consensus that should give food for thought. But apart from the ways in which others co-opted his thought, often in order to justify a divine order that Maistre himself called into question, his propositions on violence and the executioner’s role do not deserve the anathemas they regularly incur. He asserts to begin with that since divine will is unknowable, human actions can only be understood on their own merits – as it happens, that they ought to be viewed through an anthropological-type prism. He clearly rejected the views of Rousseau, who wanted to establish a metaphysics of Nature and to moralize politics, which Maistre deemed simply impossible for a human race attached to symbols and irrationality. It is this dimension that explains the place of sacrifice in political life, as well as the place of “men of genius” who embody collective expectations. And this is the key to understanding how violent upheavals come about, because these positions are not inalterable or divine, as some would have us believe, but simply legitimized by the use of violence adapted to the particular circumstances. It is crisis that is the nature of history, revolution being only one of several possible resolutions to a crisis.

It remains to be seen how, at the end of the 18th century, a further meaning was assimilated into the concept of revolution. World intellectual history changed after the 1770s, when the word revolution combined this new meaning of political upheaval with the old meaning of the revolving of the stars. In seizing upon this term, the protagonists of the period broke new ground and *de facto* shook off structural fatalities linked to crisis, projecting themselves into an unforeseeable future and casting themselves in the role of veritable agents of history. Herein lies the paradigm shift brought about by introducing revolution into the course of human history: thus creating both an event and a new awareness of time, breaking with the past, requiring a reassessment thereof so as to highlight the decision to embrace radical change in the wake of the revolution.

This new awareness is the fleeting moment at which erstwhile legitimacies come to be deemed obsolete and the risk of illegality incurred by innovation is accepted. This is what makes revolution –whether progressive or reactionary in nature – a scandal in and of itself, breaking with any solutions to the crisis that involve compromise or dealmaking.

Is violence inevitable?

This position is bound to be shocking. The dissociation of crisis and revolution, clarified head-on by recourse to Maistre's thought, nonetheless makes it possible to think differently about the relationship presented as consubstantial, but inexplicable, between violence and revolution. This was, as we know, one of the themes of Hegel and later Engels, which ended up justifying the role of violence in History. Except that even now, in the 21st century, the question is still far from resolved and the connection appears at once inevitable and never justified in the end. Admitting that revolution might arise out of crisis reverses our perspective on the matter. The political and social 18th-century crisis as described above was combined with a deeper crisis of identities, both collective and individual; some critics even detected a "crisis of pleasure" and of "intimacy"³. It would not be difficult to see the depth of this type of crisis in Russia, Germany or Italy at the beginning of the 20th century, compounded by World War I. The revolutions, French or Bolshevik on the one hand, Fascist or Nazi on the other, grew out of these crises, bearing different, often opposite, conceptions of human history, but drawing largely on all the practices of violence that made them possible.

We need to draw the moral consequences of all this. That the revolutionary ideals were warped, even contaminated, by the conditions leading up to their elaboration, and then by the constraints on their implementation, does not discredit them *ipso facto*. No revolution can avoid brute violence, an inevitable concomitant of any crisis. Nevertheless, crisis and its inescapably grim sides must make us consider how the more enlightening aspects of revolution can actually prevail, and how these two dimensions are ultimately, necessarily, inevitably and fearfully joined together. One of the tasks of history is to address precisely this question, without shying away from facts, without being deceived by future benefits, and without sidestepping those "violent" individuals who were consigned to the scrapheaps of history after use.

Published by La Vie des Idées, 5 March 2013. Translated by Eric Rosencrantz with the support of the Institut français and published by Books&Ideas, 13 May 2013.

©booksandideas.net

³ Peter Cryle, *La Crise du plaisir, 1740-1830*, Lille, Septentrion, 2003. Re honor and slander, see Charles Walton, *Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution*, Oxford University Press, 2009.