

Anatomy of Revolution (adapted from Crane Brinton)

I. Causes: All societies have tensions and signs of discontent; the US of the 30's saw labor unrest, unemployment, crime, and attacks on civil liberties--but no revolution. Why then did it occur in the 18th century France, 18th century America, or 20th century Russia? In this synopsis, we will concentrate on the question of why revolution occurred in France, but to varying degrees the ideas are sound for analyzing any revolutionary movement.

First Brinton notes three major points about France prior to 1789:

- (1) France was financially sound in 1789. The middle class was prosperous but led the revolution! The government was near bankruptcy after a series of wars from 1740 to 1783, but attempts to reform taxes was vetoed by the nobles.
- (2) Intellectuals were alienated from the Old Regime; Societes de pensee, originally formed as discussion groups to read the works of the philosophers, became revolutionary "cells." Intellectuals normally attack the ills of society, but their numbers and the intensity of their attack indicated a serious problem.
- (3) The upper class itself was divided and inept. Nobles like the Marquis de Lafayette saw the injustice of their position and supported change. Many nobles did strongly fight to retain their class privileges, particularly monopoly of high offices (military, church, and, to a lesser extent, bureaucracy), blocking the rise of men of ability from the lower and middle classes. Public careers were increasingly closed to men of talent, and the middle class deeply resented their lack of political power.

Thus, says Brinton, we may formulate a broad theorem: When in time of prosperity, a middle class of wealth and ability has emerged and (a) feels a sense of injustice regarding its economic position, (b) begins to coalesce into "cells" and gain the support of intellectuals, and (c) begins to meet obstacles in making its economic power felt directly in political sphere, and the government is financially weak and inefficient (including a sense of its own unworthiness [après moi, la deluge]), revolution may result. An additional factor may be aid for revolutionaries by foreign nations seeking to weaken a rival--especially in the US and Russian Revolutions but not so true in the case of the French.

II. The First Stage of Revolution

A. Revolutions in their first stages seem to have basic similarities:

- (1) The first concrete actions are taken against unpopular taxation.
- (2) The first stages bring two rather definite groups into clear opposition.
- (3) The revolution is led by a small, active, able body working on a majority which feels grievances--but there is an absence of centralized planning.
- (4) The government ultimately is led to use force to prevent revolution, but always employs it on the principle of "too little, too late."
- (5) The reigning monarchy shows a clear inability to rule.

B. Revolutionaries cannot easily be cast into types. Studies of the Jacobin clubs of Paris indicate that French revolutionaries were from all classes; their average age was 42; they typically represented the more able, ambitious, successful in society. But, Brinton says, we can identify some interesting sub-sections of the revolutionary species:

- (1) Gentlemen: members of the elite of society, who join for many reasons.
- (2) Band-wagon climbers: like Talleyrand, they see a good thing and join in to further personal aims (rather than from conviction, from idealism.)
- (3) Outcasts, non-Conformists: men unable to rise in the old society.
- (4) Able: practical men who would have risen to prominence in any society.
- (5) Terrorists: men of blood, interested in gaining power for its own sake.
- (6) Idealists: men willing to do anything, give anything for the revolution and their ideals--like Robespierre or Lenin.
- (7) Revolutionary Orators: crowd-leaders, crowd-pleasers like P. Henry.

III. The Second Stage of Revolution

In the second stage, moderate and radical revolutionaries clash. In France, the moderates of the National Convention gradually lost control to the better organized, more aggressive, more unscrupulous Jacobins. In each revolution the new legal government is formed by the moderates came to share the unpopularity of the old because it refused to reject all the old ways. Moderates grant their enemies freedom of speech, press and assembly, and radicals take advantage to gain control of the revolutionary government. The moderates are opposed both by right and left, and they are forced to fight a foreign war, which they botch. The pressures of war especially a losing war, destroys the moderates.

The extremists win because they are well-organized, disciplined, principled, and fanatical, with a nearly religious sense of vocation. Once in power they have no qualms about the ruthless use of force. They save the nation by their dictatorship, but their inefficiency leads to suspense and fear. Those who follow are frequently as bloody, but they are more efficient in their blood-letting and they have better propaganda techniques.

The radical period is known as the Terror. The life of the average citizen. For the "outsider," or average citizen, life is changed: there is a passion for renaming cities and streets and even people-as Praise-god, Charity, Hope, or even Libre Constitution. Rulers are ascetic and idealistic, attempting to eradicate minor vices--laziness, drunkenness, gambling. This Reign of Virtue puts a severe strain on the "outsider," and the gossip and hatreds of everyday life are greatly accentuated.

For the "insider" or "true believer," there is a religious devotion to the revolution. They desire perfection and work with religious fervor to bring a harsh, discipline, and ascetic life to society. Early Bolsheviks, for example, prohibited vodka and took steps against gambling, prostitution, and pornography to attempt to create a society of cleanliness, self-restraint, hard work and high moral standards. Revolutionary parties believe in the inevitability of their victory. But: "Those whom God, nature, or science has chosen are quite willing to advertise the fact of this choice, and . . . seem very anxious to help the inevitable to come about." They spread their gospel of truth, usually in the form of a messianic, aggressive nationalism; they see themselves as the Elect, and their enemies are sinners to be eliminated. "If there is but one truth, and you have that truth completely, toleration of differences means an encouragement to error, crime, evil, sin. Indeed, toleration . . . is harmful to the tolerated..." Each revolution has its own brand-name heaven' each, too, has its saints, and each has its own symbolism.

What makes the Terror? The habit of violence, building from the pressures of foreign invasion and civil war, especially when the danger of defeat is greatest. There is also the newness of the machinery of revolutionary government, and inexperience in dealing with problems. Conditions are aggravated by economic crisis as well, plus the long held prejudices and hatreds of class antagonisms. Finally, the element of quasi-religious faith aggravates feelings to a fever pitch. The result is a period of Terror.

IV. The Final Stage of Revolution

Each society in revolution ultimately sees the ebb of fervor and the development of a Thermidorian Reaction. In France, the reaction began with the death of Robespierre on July 27, 1794--or the ninth day of Thermidor in the Revolutionary Year Two. Robespierre fell because other Jacobins feared the "Incorruptible" would turn on them for their war profiteering and other unrepugnant vices. With the Reaction, life returns towards normal. But almost universally a dictator comes to power who ultimately brings back a revised version of the old regime, ultimately restoring some of its personnel, too. Radicals and radicalism are denounced, and become scapegoats for the difficulties of the new government. And while the gospel fervor of the radicals is gone, the new regime continues to spread the word--now in the form of an imperialistic nationalism. Formal religion once again regains a place in society, and people return to their comfortable pleasures and vices.