

REVOLUTIONARIES

CONTEMPORARY ESSAYS

E. J. HOBBSAWM



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CONTENTS

PREFACE	vii
I COMMUNISTS	
1 Problems of Communist History	3
2 Radicalism and Revolution in Britain	11
3 French Communism	16
4 Intellectuals and Communism	25
5 The Dark Years of Italian Communism	31
6 Confronting Defeat: The German Communist Party	43
II ANARCHISTS	
7 Bolshevism and the Anarchists	57
8 The Spanish Background	71
9 Reflections on Anarchism	82
III MARXISM	
10 Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement	95
11 The Dialogue on Marxism	109
12 Lenin and the 'Aristocracy of Labour'	121
13 Revisionism	130
14 The Principle of Hope	136
15 The Structure of Capital	142
16 Karl Korsch	153
IV SOLDIERS AND GUERRILLAS	
17 Vietnam and the Dynamics of Guerrilla War	163
18 Civilians versus Military in Twentieth-Century Politics	177
19 Coup d'État	192
V INSURRECTIONARIES AND REVOLUTION	
20 Hannah Arendt on Revolution	201
21 The Rules of Violence	209


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HANNAH ARENDT ON REVOLUTION

The phenomenon of (social revolution) is one with which all of us have to come to terms in a century which has seen more and greater revolutions than any other in recorded history. By the very nature of their impact, however, revolutions are very difficult to analyze satisfactorily, surrounded as they are and must be by a cloud of hope and disillusion, of love, hatred and fear, of their own myths and the myths of counter-propaganda. After all, few historians of the French Revolution who wrote before the 100th anniversary of its outbreak are now read, and the real historiography of the Russian Revolution, in spite of some accumulation of preliminary material, is only just beginning. The scientific study of revolutions does not mean dispassionate study. It is fairly certain that the major achievements in this field will be 'committed' – generally to sympathy with revolutions, if the historiography of the French is any guide. Committed study is not necessarily mere pamphleteering, as Mommsen and Rostovzeff demonstrated. Yet it is natural that in the early stages of the investigation of social revolutions the market tends to be swamped by pamphlets, sometimes simple, sometimes masquerading as serious historical and sociological work, and therefore demanding serious criticism. Their public is normally not that of the experts or the serious student. Thus it is perhaps not without significance that the four encomia printed on the cover of Miss Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution*¹ come not from historians or sociologists, but from literary figures. But of course such works may hold great interest for the specialist nevertheless. The question to be asked about Miss Arendt's book is whether it does.

The answer, so far as the student of the French and most other

¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York and London, 1963.

modern revolutions is concerned, must be no. I am not able to judge her contribution to the study of the American revolution, though I suspect that it is not great. The book therefore stands or falls not by the author's discoveries or insights into certain specific historical phenomena, but by the interest of her general ideas and interpretations. However, since these are not based on an adequate study of the subject matter they purport to interpret, and indeed appear almost to exclude such a study by their very method, they cannot be firmly grounded. She has merits, and they are not negligible: a lucid style, sometimes carried away by intellectual rhetoric, but always transparent enough to allow us to recognize the genuine passion of the writer, a strong intelligence, wide reading, and the power of occasional piercing insight, though of a sort better suited, it may seem, to the vague terrain which lies between literature, psychology and what, for want of a better word, is best called social prophecy, than to the social sciences as at present constructed. However, even of her insights it is possible to say what Lloyd George observed of Lord Kitchener, namely that their beams occasionally illuminate the horizon, but leave the scene in darkness between their flashes.

The first difficulty encountered by the historian or sociological student of revolutions in Miss Arendt is a certain metaphysical and normative quality of her thought, which goes well with a sometimes quite explicit old-fashioned philosophical idealism.² She does not take her revolutions as they come, but constructs herself an ideal type, defining her subject matter accordingly, excluding what does not measure up to her specifications. We may also observe in passing that she excludes everything outside the classical zone of western Europe and the north Atlantic, for her book contains not even a passing reference to – the examples spring to mind – China or Cuba; nor could she have made certain statements if she had given any thought to them.³ Her 'revolution' is a wholesale political change in which men are conscious of introducing an entirely new epoch in human history, including (but

² Cf: 'That there existed men in the Old World to dream of public freedom, that there were men in the New World who had tasted public happiness – these were ultimately the facts which caused the movement ... to develop into a revolution on either side of the Atlantic' (p. 139).

³ e.g.: 'Revolutions always appear to succeed with amazing ease in their initial stage' (p. 112). In China? In Cuba? In Vietnam? In wartime Yugoslavia?

only, as it were, incidentally) the abolition of poverty and expressed in terms of a secular ideology. Its subject matter is 'the emergence of freedom' as defined by the author.

Part of this definition allows her, after a brief bout of shadow-boxing, to exclude all revolutions and revolutionary movements before 1776 from the discussion, though at the price of making a serious study of the actual phenomenon of revolution impossible. The remainder allows her to proceed to the major part of her subject, an extended comparison between the American and French revolutions, to the great advantage of the former. The latter is taken as the paradigm of all subsequent revolutions, though it seems that Miss Arendt has in mind chiefly the Russian Revolution of 1917. The 'freedom' which revolutions exist to institute is essentially a political concept. Though not too clearly defined – it emerges gradually in the course of the author's discussion – it is quite distinct from the abolition of poverty (the 'solution of the social problem') which Miss Arendt regards as the corrupter of revolution, in whatever form it occurs; which includes the capitalist.⁴ We may infer that any revolution in which the social and economic element plays a major role puts itself out of Miss Arendt's court, which more or less eliminates every revolution that the student of the subject might desire to investigate. We may further infer that, with the partial exception of the American revolution which, as she argues, was lucky enough to break out in a country without very poor free inhabitants, no revolution was or could have been able to institute freedom, and even in eighteenth-century America slavery placed it in an insoluble dilemma. The revolution could not 'institute freedom' without abolishing slavery, but – on Miss Arendt's argument – it could not have done so either if it had abolished it. The basic trouble about revolutions in other words – her own – is therefore this: 'Though the whole record of past revolutions demonstrates beyond doubt that every attempt so solve the social question with political means leads into terror, and that it is terror which sends revolutions to their doom, it can hardly be denied that to avoid this fatal mistake is almost impossible when a revolution breaks out under conditions of mass poverty.'

The 'freedom' which revolution exists to institute is more than

⁴ 'Since [the United States] was never overwhelmed by poverty, it was "the fatal passion for sudden riches" rather than necessity that stood in the way of the founders of the republic' (p. 134).

the mere absence of restraints upon the person or guarantees of 'civil liberties', for neither of these (as Miss Arendt rightly observes) requires any particular form of government, but only the absence of tyranny and despotism.⁵ It appears to consist of the right and possibility of participating actively in the affairs of the commonwealth – of the joys and rewards of public life, as conceived perhaps originally in the Greek polis (pp. 123–4). However – though here the author's argument must be reconstructed rather than followed – 'public freedom' in this sense remains a dream, even though the fathers of the American constitution were wise enough, and untroubled enough by the poor, to institute a government which was reasonably secure against despotism and tyranny. The crux of the genuine revolutionary tradition is that it keeps this dream alive. It has done so by means of a constant tendency to generate spontaneous organs capable of realizing public freedom, namely the local or sectional, elective or direct assemblies and councils (soviets, Räte), which have emerged in the course of revolutions only to be suppressed by the dictatorship of the party. Such councils ought to have a purely political function. Government and administration being distinct, the attempt to use them, e.g. for the management of economic affairs ('workers' control') is undesirable and doomed to failure, even when it is not part of a plot by the revolutionary party to 'drive [the councils] away from the political realm and back into the factories'. I am unable to discover Miss Arendt's views as to who is to conduct the 'administration of things in the public interest', such as the economy, or how it is to be conducted.

Miss Arendt's argument tells us much about the kind of government which she finds congenial, and even more about her state of mind. Its merits as a general statement about political ideals are not at issue here. On the other hand, it is relevant to observe that the nature of her arguments not merely makes it impossible to use in the analysis of actual revolutions – at least in terms which have meaning for the historian or social scientist – but also eliminates the possibility of meaningful dialogue between her and those interested

⁵ However, Miss Arendt appears to forget her distinction when she observes later (p. 111) that 'we also know to our sorrow that freedom has been better preserved in countries where no revolution ever broke out, no matter how outrageous the circumstances of the powers that be, than in those in which revolutions have been victorious'. Here 'freedom' appears to be used in a sense which she has already rejected. The statement is in any case open to question.

in actual revolutions. In so far as Miss Arendt writes about history – about revolutions, as they may be contemporaneously observed, retrospectively surveyed, or prospectively assessed – her connection with it is as incidental as that of medieval theologians and astronomers. Both talked about planets, and both meant, at least in part, the same celestial bodies, but contact did not go much further.

The historian or sociologist, for instance, will be irritated, as the author plainly is not, by a certain lack of interest in mere fact. This cannot be described as inaccuracy or ignorance, for Miss Arendt is learned and scholarly enough to be aware of such inadequacies if she chooses, but rather as a preference for metaphysical construct or poetic feeling over reality. When she observes 'even as an old man, in 1871, Marx was still revolutionary enough to welcome enthusiastically the Paris Commune, although this outbreak contradicted all his theories and predictions' (p. 58), she must be aware that the first part of the sentence is wrong (Marx was, in fact, fifty-three years old), and the second at the very least open to much debate. Her statement is not really a historical one, but rather, as it were, a line in an intellectual drama, which it would be as unfair to judge by historical standards as Schiller's *Don Carlos*. She knows that Lenin's formula for Russian development – 'electrification plus soviets' – was not intended to eliminate the role of the party or the building of socialism, as she argues (p. 60). But her interpretation gives an additional sharpness to her contention that the future of the Soviet revolution ought to have lain along the lines of a politically neutral technology and a grass-roots political system 'outside all parties'. To object 'but this is not what Lenin meant' is to introduce questions belonging to a different order of discourse from hers.

And yet, can such questions be entirely left outside? In so far as she claims to be discussing not merely the idea of revolution, but also certain identifiable events and institutions, they cannot. Since the spontaneous tendency to generate organs such as soviets is clearly of great moment to Miss Arendt, and provides evidence for her interpretation, one might for instance have expected her to show some interest in the actual forms such popular organs take. In fact, the author is clearly not interested in these. It is even difficult to discover what precisely she has in mind, for she talks in the same breath of politically very different organizations. The ancestors of the soviets (which were assemblies of delegates, mainly

from functional groups of people such as factories, regiments, or villages), she holds, were either the Paris sections of the French Revolution (which were essentially direct democracies of all citizens in public assembly) or the political societies (which were voluntary bodies of the familiar type). Possibly sociological analysis might show these to have been similar, but Miss Arendt refrains from it.⁶

Again, it is evidently *not* 'the historical truth of the matter . . . that the party and council systems are almost coeval; both were unknown prior to the revolutions and both are the consequences of the modern and revolutionary tenet that all inhabitants of a given territory are entitled to be admitted to the public, political realm' (p. 275). Even granted that the second half of the statement is tenable (so long as we define the public realm in terms which apply to large modern territorial or nation states, but not to other and historically more widespread forms of political organization), the first half is not. Councils, even in the form of elected delegations, are so obvious a political device in communities above a certain size, that they considerably antedate political parties, which are, at least in the usual sense of the term, far from obvious institutions. Councils as revolutionary institutions are familiar long before 1776, when Miss Arendt's revolutions begin, as for instance in the General Soviet of the New Model Army, in the committees of sixteenth-century France and the Low Countries, or for that matter in medieval city politics. A 'council system' under this name is certainly coeval with, or rather posterior to, the political parties of 1905 Russia, since it was they who recognized the possible implications of the soviets for the revolutionary government of nations; but the idea of decentralized government by autonomous communal organs, perhaps linked by pyramids of higher delegate bodies, is for practical reasons extremely ancient.

Nor indeed have councils 'always been primarily political, with the social and economic claims playing a minor role' (p. 278). They were not, because Russian workers and peasants did not – and

⁶ If she did not, she might be less certain that soviet delegates 'were not nominated from above and not supported from below' but 'had selected themselves' (p. 282). In peasant soviets they might have been selected institutionally (as by, say, the automatic nomination of the schoolmaster or the heads of certain families), just as in British farm-labourers' union locals, the local railwaymen – independent of farmer and squire – was often the automatic choice as secretary. It is also certain that local class divisions tended *a priori* to favour or inhibit the selection of delegates.

indeed on Miss Arendt's argument could not⁷ – make a sharp distinction between politics and economics. Moreover, the original Russian workers' councils, like those of the British and German shop stewards in the first world war or the Trades Councils which sometimes took over quasi-soviet functions in big strikes, were the products of trade union and strike organization; that is, if a distinction can be made, of activities which were economic rather than political.⁸ In the third place, she is wrong because the immediate tendency of the effective, that is, urban, soviets in 1917 was to turn themselves into organs of administration, in successful rivalry with municipalities, and as such, quite evidently, to go beyond the field of political deliberation. Indeed, it was this capacity of the soviets to become organs of execution as well as of debate which suggested to political thinkers that they might be the basis for a new political system. But more than this, the suggestion that such demands as 'workers' control' are in some sense a deviation from the spontaneous line of evolution of councils and similar bodies simply will not bear examination. 'The Mine for the Miners', 'The Factory for the Workers' – in other words, the demand for cooperative democratic instead of capitalist production – goes back to the earliest stages of the labour movement. It has remained an important element in spontaneous popular thought ever since, a fact which does not oblige us to consider it as other than utopian. In the history of grass-roots democracy, cooperation in communal units and its apotheosis 'the cooperative commonwealth' (which was the earliest definition of socialism among workers) play a crucial part.

There is thus practically no point at which Miss Arendt's discussion of what she regards as the crucial institution of the revolutionary tradition touches the actual historical phenomena she purports to describe, an institution on the basis of which she generalizes. And the student of revolutions, whether historian, sociologist, or for that matter analyst of political systems and institutions, will be equally baffled by the remainder of her book. Her acute mind sometimes throws light on literature, including the classical literature of political theory. She has considerable perception about the psychological

⁷ Since the poor are, in her view primarily determined by 'necessity' rather than 'freedom', i.e. by economic rather than political motives. Actually this is also wrong.

⁸ Miss Arendt is misled by the fact that at the peak of a revolutionary crisis all organizations discuss politics for much of the time.

REVOLUTIONARIES

motives and mechanisms of individuals – her discussion of Robespierre, for instance, may be read with profit – and she has occasional flashes of insight, that is to say, she sometimes makes statements which, while not particularly well-founded on evidence or argument, strike the reader as true and illuminating. But that is all. And it is not enough. There are doubtless readers who will find Miss Arendt's book interesting and profitable. The historical or sociological student of revolutions is unlikely to be among them.

(1965)

THE RULES OF VIOLENCE

Of all the vogue words of the late 1960s, 'violence' is very nearly the trendiest and the most meaningless. Everybody talks about it, nobody thinks about it. As the just-published report of the us National Commission of the Causes and Prevention of Violence points out, the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, published 1968, contains no entry under this heading.

Both the vogue and the vagueness are significant. For most of the people likely to read books with such titles as *The Age of Violence* (as like as not about symbolist poetry) or *Children of Violence* (which is about physically rather tranquil lives) are aware of the world's violence, but their relation to it is unprecedented and enigmatic. Most of them, unless they deliberately seek it out, can pass their adult lives without direct experience of 'behavior designed to inflict physical injury on people or damage to property' (to use the American commission's definition), or even with 'force' defined as 'the actual or threatened use of violence to compel others to do what they might not otherwise do'.

Physical violence normally impinges on them only in one direct and three indirect ways. Directly, it is omnipresent in the form of the traffic accident – casual, unintended, unpredictable and uncontrollable by most of its victims, and about the only peacetime contingency which is likely to bring most people working in homes and offices into actual contact with bleeding or mangled bodies. Indirectly, it is omnipresent in the mass media and entertainment. Probably no day passes in which most viewers and readers do not encounter the image of a corpse, that rarest of sights in real British life. Even more remotely, we are aware both of the existence in our time of vast, concretely unimaginable mass destruction for which convenient symbols are found ('the bomb', 'Auschwitz' and such like), and also of the sectors and situations of society in which