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## REVOLUTION AND TRADITION

By **MARCIN KRÓL**

*The paper examines mutual connections between revolution, radical change and tradition. Historical points of reference for this analysis are French Revolution and Bolshevik Revolution. The author claim that however revolutions fail in terms of its intended goals, they in fact make the radical social change possible. Tradition is an important condition of lasting character of this changes. The Author conclusion is that there are two prevailing forces of social and political history: revolution and tradition and contrary to the prevailing opinion, in longer periods of time they can not only coexist but also, by mutual provocation, become stronger and more effective.*

Key words: revolution, tradition, social change

### REVOLUTION AND RADICAL CHANGE

Everything changes. Change occurs at the moment when I am writing these words. What is the difference between this kind of change and radical change? There are no clear boundaries. Without revolution we often neglect changes that are radical from social or political point of view, such as, for example, vanishing of the peasantry in the twentieth century (not in Poland). Therefore radical change can happen without revolution, but revolution cannot be successful without radical change. It creates some problems. The most important question is the following: are revolutions inevitable and even welcome if we think that in certain circumstances radical change is necessary? Radical change that we can feel, observe, apply, and be happy with. In other words, if we feel that radical change is needed, do we try to inspire, provoke, or perhaps only suggest a revolution?

To answer this question, which is – in my opinion – a really pertinent one, we have to look back and see how it was in the case of two great revolutions – the French and the Soviet. The need for change and the expectation of change preceded the outburst of both revolutions. In France in the 70s and 80s of the eighteenth century, practically every aspect of common life is wrong: politics, economy and social system, which is rigid and closed. Additionally, government is stupid enough to decide to ask citizens what is wrong (*Cahiers de doléances*). Everybody expects change but nobody knows where the change is coming from and how to make a change. The Bastille event is totally unprepared and its consequences are unpredicted. In the past it would have been just another revolt. But now it is the beginning of a revolution. Why? It is totally unclear. There is no known connection between the revolted *populace* of Paris and reasonable demands of

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a constitutional monarchy. And when a constitutional monarchy is soon established, the demand for change is not diminished. It is fascinating to observe how new answers to the demands for change produce new solutions, which in their turn produce new demands, etc. It is impossible to establish, to define what was the final aim of this change. When in 1794-1795 Robespierre tries to stabilize the state and establish central institutions that are supposed to complete the new order and, at the same time, to mark the end of the Revolution, his fate is obvious – he has to leave. He is decapitated. Napoleon Bonaparte – if we limit our description to the problems of the state – fulfils the same idea that Robespierre wanted to implement. He builds a new state but he destroys the Revolution – something that Robespierre was not willing and not able to do. The need for change lasted only ten years and produced something very different from the initial, vague intentions.

In the case of the Soviet Revolution, no matter how different it was, the development of the very idea of change and the outcome are, in a way, similar. The state, economy, and society are in turmoil. Everything needs to be changed and the people – those who can read and write and those who cannot – expect a change. While they expect a change, only one thing is clear: the Tsarist regime must end. Many descriptions, diaries, memoirs, and letters of the era provide mixed evidence. The idea of a constitutional and democratic regime is supported by those few who have a clear project, yet it does not have enough support from the many who have no clear project. The very day of the Soviet Revolution is similar to the attack on Bastille. The soldiers and the mob that take over the Winter Palace do not imagine they are starting a revolution. This unimportant event was cunningly used by Lenin as the basis for the building of a new revolutionary state. The difference is in experience. Lenin knew that he had to start from building the state and then proceed to make changes; Robespierre found this out too late. But Lenin, although he had a kind of project (the Marxist project of revolution was very vague), initially did not understand the need for change. From what we know about the mood and the debates in the revolutionary councils in the army and in the towns and villages, the idea of change took very disperse and unclear shape – from the new coming of a new, popular tsar, to the reign of all and no reign at all. It was, by the way, one of the successful periods of anarchist projects. Lenin, once he understood the situation, immediately introduced institutions (secret police) that helped him build the state. So the question that we do not have an answer to is the following: revolution first or change first and then the revolutionary state?

## **THE NEW BEGINNING AND BREAKING WITH TRADITION**

Every change means that something new is coming, yet the question is: how new? In hindsight we realize that changing everything is impossible. Some changes are lasting and perceived by societies as changes, some are so quickly integrated into the former system that people soon forget that something changed or that there once was

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an intention to change. The revolution of 1968 in the West and the United States is a very good example of an effort to change that was either quickly forgotten or adapted to the system. It does not mark a beginning of a new historical period. That is so even though it was a clear signal of the forthcoming change.

Revolutionaries in France and in Russia understood that making change was not enough, that there was a strong need for demonstrating to the society that change had been made or was in the making. New calendars are the best symbols and manifestations of this kind of political thinking. It is of no importance that the Soviet new calendar was never practically accepted and finally was revoked. A revolution must bring about a new beginning, it must create everything anew. That is the theory. During the French revolution, after the regicide, efforts were undertaken to create a new past. French history was put aside – Athens, and later Sparta, were supposed to be the only predecessors. However, this new historical politics was unpopular; the new beginning took a different shape. With the emergence of hundreds of thousands of new people, new citizens, the new beginning was situated in the present time, in new ways of acting, communicating, welcoming each other, judging, killing, and fighting. While the new past never became popular, the new present dominated every public event. Therefore, we can say that the French Revolution had no past and no future, but lived in the present time. It was a fantastic occasion for the appearance of new people. Immense social change produced all kinds of sly manipulators from all social strata. Marat was a lump, Desmoulins was a known journalist, Saint-Just came from a local aristocracy. The next wave – the Thermidorians who were all thieves and manipulators – proved corrupted to the core. That was the new beginning. The rule of chaos was inevitable because of the lack of any political or social purposes. From this point of view, historians are right when they argue that Napoleon saved the Revolution from itself, although he used – fully consciously – some of the most corrupted former leaders, most notably – Fouché.

Lenin and later Stalin quite seriously promoted the idea of the 'New Soviet Man'. Although historians are still debating whether Soviet Russia was some form of the continuation of the Tsarist regime or something totally new, it was obviously new. There were philosophical arguments for the new beginning, for the creation of a new human being. If we treat seriously the Marxist utopia as a project of communism, then we must admit that the idea of a free, authentic human being that is endowed with all possible abilities was a philosophical background of the new beginning. For example, in the new world, free from the capitalist pressure, in fact free from any pressure whatsoever, everybody was supposed to be able to sing, paint, etc. In my first year of primary school I happened to be an unhappy victim of these singing experiments.

But there remains an important question to ask: do these Soviet experiments or the French reduction of everything to the present time mean that the thread of tradition had been broken? This is the famous opinion of Hannah Arendt. Although the writings of Arendt have been extremely important for the intellectual development of many of

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us, I tend to disagree with the author. A radical change, including revolution, does not annihilate tradition. Of course, it may seem so from the point of view of its participants, but afterwards we see that, first, the tradition of high culture survived even in Soviet Russia and, second, something contradictory happened. Revolutions as a rule help to resuscitate tradition. What Edmund Burke called pre-sentiments and pre-judgments defining our social life are questioned and we have to rethink their uses and abuses, recreating the tradition. That is why Martin Malia suggested that revolutions are 'history locomotives'. Questioning a tradition, which can never be complete, serves this tradition. The fear, shared by the reactionary conservatives of the first half of the nineteenth century that revolution is going to change former ways of life is reasonable, but we, members of Western society, cannot live conserving only the former ways of life. So, to stress it once more, revolutions did not kill tradition, tradition can be annihilated only by a combination of masses, mediocrity, and stupidity. Whatever we think about the revolutionaries, they were neither mediocre nor stupid.

## **REVOLUTION, SOCIAL CHANGE, TOTALITARIANISM, AND THE FUTURE**

There is a widespread opinion that revolutions may lead to a totalitarian regime. The famous book by Jacob Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1986) influenced many researchers. Talmon looks at the past and finds powerful sources of totalitarian democracy in Rousseau and the French Revolution – a highly debatable idea that I strongly oppose. In my opinion, the notion of 'totalitarian democracy' is nonsense, and Rousseau's idea of democracy was a founding idea of substantive democracy (as opposed to procedural democracy). It had no influence on people's consciousness during the French Revolution and the fact that the name of Rousseau was often evoked at that time does not mean that Rousseau's *The Social Contract* was read or understood.

Secondly, the French Revolution was not totalitarian. There were very despotic periods and cruel decisions were taken but they had nothing to do with totalitarianism. Totalitarian regimes were and are possible only when the means of mass communication are controlled by governments. It makes no sense to mix up despotic and authoritarian regime with totalitarian ones. Totalitarianism is above all an ambition to control the minds of all people. In this context Orwell's *1984* presented a reality more totalitarian than has ever been implemented, because neither the Soviets nor the Nazis were able to gain full control of the minds of their people.

It is true that there are certain similarities between revolution and a totalitarian system. Both the idea of a new beginning and the idea of people as a whole while individuals are considered unimportant, constituted the background of all revolutions. But if we choose to understand these ideas as pre-totalitarian, then we have to agree that there is a tight connection between revolution and a totalitarian order. This is a radically

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conservative idea, constructed to convey the view that all revolutions are dangerous for mankind.

Let us come back, secondly, to the purpose and nature of change, or, more specifically, of radical change that has to occur from time to time in human history. Of course, there have been efforts to reject change and we happen to live in an era when such efforts are being undertaken with a lot of determination. We are supposed to think that the world in which we are living is the best of possible worlds and, consequently, small changes and corrections will do. The future is contained in the present. No ideas, ideologies, visions, or utopias are acceptable. The fear of revolution is based on – understandably – the fear of totalitarianism. This is not only a mistake; this is a very dangerous limitation not only of acting but also of thinking.

The shadow of the French Revolution proved to be powerful and lasting. For some historians (François Furet) it lasted till the mid-twentieth century. The shadow of the two totalitarianisms is persistent too. We still live in a state of fear. But the more we reject any kind of revolution, the more unprepared we are for the revolutionary outburst that is going to happen later or – rather – sooner. The ground for such an outburst is already prepared. We, in the West, accept some mistaken notions about reality. We accept them often silently, but we still do. There is no basis for the very popular idea that the thread of tradition is broken. It seems that those who treat the atrocities of the World War II, Holocaust and Gulag as if they represented breaking with tradition, try to avoid taking responsibility for the past. The debate concerning the sources of totalitarianism, the question whether it was a legitimate child of European culture or only its bastard, is an evidence of the above mentioned fear. There is only one responsible answer: it was a fully legitimate child. The support for both totalitarian regimes – no matter how different they were – was immense.

Recently the shadow of the 30s and 40s of the twentieth century seems to disappear. Consequently, the idea of change, of radical change, becomes popular again. Until now this idea has not taken any particular shape, be it on the level of words and notions. It is clearly chaotic and not well understood even by its followers. But it is there. The first question that we should ask is – why? On the basis of so many analyses of the former revolutions as radical changes we can formulate a weak diagnosis. There is something wrong with the present state of social structure. There is an overwhelming feeling that the roads to politics are closed or that politics itself became so closed in its circle that we are unable to do anything. We are supposed to vote from time to time and that is all. There is a widespread feeling that we are not represented. The glorious idea of representation has reached the bottom. We can go on and talk about the destruction of political parties, about political lying etc., but what we really want is to change it all.

At the same time, as the thread of tradition is not broken, we would like to have some kind of democracy. Current antidemocratic movements and antidemocratic thinking are only marginal. What we should be afraid of are not the outspoken enemies of

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democracy, but rather the signs of revolt from within democracy; or, perhaps not afraid, but happy and pleased. Finally somebody says that all this is unacceptable. But due to the two shadows: that of revolution and that of totalitarianism, Europe will try, for as long as possible, to outlaw revolution.

These mistakes have their roots in the wrong understanding of the past. Radical change took place more often than we can remember or imagine. Sometimes it lasted very shortly, sometimes it took several decades. Sometimes its results were immediate, sometimes slow. Let us think about the revolutions of 1848. All of them apparently failed, all were either physically defeated or simply lost their impetus. But historians (Eric Hobsbawm) can see now how important 1848 was. It produced a radical change consisting of an enormous victory of the bourgeois. It constituted the real end of the aristocratic age and the arrival of a new age of capitalism and capitalist society.

Similar impact had the revolution of 1905. It was also quickly stopped by force and we do not even remember the names of its leaders. It was a high point in the socialist debate concerning the way of achieving socialist goals: by force or via parliament. But it changed the moral and spiritual atmosphere in Russia and – probably – without other hindrances would have ended in creating constitutional democracy in this country. Revolution failed, as did all of them, but its long-lasting outcome was very important.

These two examples show that although revolutions always finally fail to produce what was intended, they – with very few exceptions – make radical change possible. To conclude: there are two prevailing forces of social and political history: revolution and tradition. I would like to stress that, contrary to the prevailing opinion, in longer periods of time they can not only coexist but also, by mutual provocation, become stronger and more effective.