

Reflections on Revolution in Theory and Practice

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The term “revolution” means different things to persons. To the social scientist, it refers to some grand change or structural alteration in a society as exemplified by the French revolution of 1789, the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the Cuban Revolution of the 1950s. The word revolution has a tendency to erroneously invoke in minds nothing short of the gaining of political power; for instance, during the coup d’etat. The seizure of political power, it should be noted, is a crucial element in the revolution. A political phase is necessary in every revolution because, the class at the helm of affairs still seeks to safeguard the obsolete production relations and the political system which consolidates such relations. A viable revolution, therefore, must seek to crush this obsolete political system to enable the emergence of new political and socioeconomic structure. Thus, the pursuit of political power, in a revolution, is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, a means of the structural transformation of the society, which is the reasonable end of all social revolutions. This paper has attempted to examine the role of the political sphere and the transformative imperative of revolutions which makes it different from the political uprisings.

Keywords: Seizure of Political power, Structural transformation, political uprisings, structural change, coup d’etat.

INTRODUCTION

Revolution tends to mean different things to different people, depending on the disciplinary perspective and the orientation of the scholar. This tendency has made the term largely ambiguous. Even more confusing is the continual application of the word to describe the act of change in a number of fields and areas; for instance, technological revolution, fashion revolution, scientific revolution, and religious revolution among others. Even at the level of the social sciences, the concept has been used to describe various and sometimes contradictory events. The ambiguity surrounding the term has compelled scholars to make significant attempts at classification, aimed primarily at singling out what revolution is from what revolution is not. A number of scholars, such as Hannah Arendt and Charles Tilly, have, through scholarly volumes, made significant efforts to draw the lines of contrasts between revolution, and other forms of political uprisings such as coups, civil wars, and revolts. To these scholars, a revolution is one that transforms the economic and social structure as well as political institutions of a society (Lewis, 2015).

The classification and definition mentioned above tend, however, to raise further concerns. If a revolution is in essence, not merely the gaining of political power, why did notable mass revolutions, such as the Russian, Chinese, and

Cuban revolutions centres primarily on the seizure of state power? To decipher this mounting vagueness, it is of importance to examine rigorously, the meaning of revolution, theoretical basis for revolutions, the role of the political sphere, as well as the transformative essence of revolution which makes it different from other political uprisings. These constitute the primary tasks of this paper.

The Meaning of Revolution: Conceptual Clarifications

“Revolution” belongs to that expanding list of English words whose manifold meanings make any precise usage elusive, if not impossible. Apart from the problems posed by the misuse and abuse of the term “revolution” in ordinary communication, the flexibility of the term in scholarly writings makes reasonable discourse across disciplinary lines a colossal task. Etymologically, the word “revolution” (From the Latin “revolution” – a turnaround) surfaced in French as “revolution,” by the 13th century, and came into the English vocabulary by the 14th century, as a term used in describing the revolving motion of celestial bodies (Online etymology.com). Revolution, as such, was originally an astronomical term which increasingly became significant in the natural sciences through

Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus Orbium Celestium* (Arendt; 1990).

The term, however, was first used in the political context in 1660, after the overthrow of the Rump Parliament, and at the occasion of the "restoration" of the monarchy. The term was used again in 1668, when the Stuarts were expelled and royal powers shifted into the hands of Williams III and Mary – an occurrence described as "the Glorious Revolution" (Arendt: 43). On the meaning of revolution, Robert Weir (1978) avers in a rather humorous tone:

Of course the question may, like the question of truth, be unanswerable because of its complexity. It is certainly possible that were an interdisciplinary group of authorities on the subject of revolution to be sequestered in a room until they could agree on what counts as a revolution they might never see their families again.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines "revolution" as, "a major, sudden, and hence typically violent alteration in government and in related associations and structures (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2011). The need to differentiate revolution from other forms of political insurrections, and equally integrate into the revolutionary circle occurrences such as a revolutionary coup (example, the Turkish revolution of 1919), has compelled scholars to seek comprehensive definitions of revolution which include the category of mass revolution, such as the 1917 Russian revolution and equally allow for the possibility of a continuum. Jeff Godwin (2001), to this end, defines the term broadly as "any and all instances in which a state or political regime is overthrown and thereby transformed by a popular government in an irregular, extra constitutional and/or violent fashion. To Robert Weir (1978), revolution is a form of political violence that is purposive in aim, is characterized by illegality, mass participation, and rapidity of change and is directed primarily at a society's established political regime while also reflecting changes in the economic, legal and social institutions of that society. Further attempts will be made elaborate on the meaning and nature of revolution subsequently.

Etiology of Revolution: A Theoretical Approach

Just when are revolutions likely to occur? Scholars, over time, have debated over what constitutes the causes and driving forces of revolutions; this constitutes an attempt to ascertain the factors or conditions that make revolution both necessary and possible. From the Marxian perspective, the roots of social revolution lie in an increasing antagonism between forces of production and the production relations which have become obsolete. It is this class conflict that constitutes the driving force of a revolution. To Fanon, however, a revolution does not emerge merely from class antagonism, but materializes when "a society fails to serve man's needs through its institutions." He calls this kind of waning society "nonviable society" (Blackey, 1974). Theorists of revolution tend to trace the roots of revolutions to poverty and lack, hope and despair and other states of economic deterioration which produces a primitive necessity that makes revolution inevitable. Writing about the French Revolution, Hannah Arendt has noted; "under the absolute dictate of their bodies; it was under the rule of this necessity that the multitude rushed to the assistance of the French Revolution, inspired it, drove it onward, and eventually sent it to its doom, for this was the multitude of the poor (Arendt, 60). The socialist theoretical standpoint – that progressive degradation of the industrial working class would finally reach the point of despair and inevitable revolt – has

been too prevalent in the scholarly circle. As regards the precondition of revolution, (Davies 1962) ascribes the basis of revolution, not to the progressive degradation of the proletariat but rather, to an improvement in worker's economic condition which do not keep pace with the growing welfare of capitalists and therefore produces social tension.

While scholars such as Arendt increasingly trace the roots of revolution to poverty and economic downturns, other scholars hold quite contrary views. To Allan Todd (2003), revolutions – as opposed to revolt – tend to occur when situations are beginning to improve, rather than when poverty and oppression are becoming ever more severe. This, he states, is because revolutionaries realize that poor or deteriorating conditions produce demoralization and apathy amongst the masses. In his words, "if poverty and oppression were sufficient recipes for revolution, then the whole of human history would be one of almost continuous revolution (Todd: 23). In James Davies' view, however, revolution does not stem from objective causes, from the absence or presence, abundance or inadequacy of supplies, but from subjective responses of people to those external variable. To him, "political stability and instability are ultimately depended on a state of mind". He says this to the end that, "it is the dissatisfied state of mind rather than the tangible provision of adequate or inadequate supplies of food, equality, or liberty which produces the revolution (Davies, 13).

Characteristics Features of Revolution

Although the goals, participants and leaders of revolutionary movements and the responses of status quo regimes, differ from one revolution to another, it is crucial to note that certain features are common to revolutions. Efforts at analyzing revolutionary changes, as such, will be enhanced if there can be some agreement as to what these characteristic features are. One key feature of revolutionary movements is the use of violence to produce change in a social system. It is generally held that an "irreducible element of any revolution is the resort to, or acceptance, of violence (Johnson; 1966). The employment of violent means as a last-resort political strategy is a characteristic feature of revolution because nonviolent direct action (for example, civil disobedience) basically produces meager result, especially on occasions where the ruling elites are unwilling to relinquish power voluntarily. Conversely, though terrorism, acts of sabotage, torture and political assassinations are equally violent activities frequently directed against an established government and its supporters; revolutionary violence, involves actions that disorient systems and the behavior of persons. A second feature of a revolution is the *illegality* of all recourses to violence outside the rules of conflict set up by society. Revolutionary change is never legal, even though it is sometimes legitimate. Revolution, unlike reformism, constitutes an effort to cause changes in a social system by operating outside the boundaries of a legal system judged to be invalid (Weir; 1978).

Furthermore, revolutions (as first emphasized by Lenin) do not occur without the deliberate calculations of a conspiratorial or Vanguard group. Revolutions, in contrasts to rebellions and urban riots, are characterized by organization, planning, and a definite sense of direction. This necessarily involves a significant level of participation by the masses. Mao Zedong, the revolutionary leader of China, to this end, is credited with the assertion that, without the participation of the masses, revolutionary elite is only an insignificant group of insurgent "fish" without a demographic "sea" in which to operate (Weir: 18). A feature of revolution which is greatly

crucial to the concerns of this paper is *the rapidity of change*, which often occurs within social frameworks that have been torn apart by collective acts of political violence. The suddenness of revolutionary change is clearly evident in the revolutions of short duration (such as the Russian and Cuban revolutions), but less evident in revolutions that take place over a relatively long period of time, as in the case of the Chinese Revolution. This rapidity of change aims at the establishment of new structures and values in the society. Commenting on George Washington's role in the American Revolution, Brooks Adams (1913), writes, "Taken for all in all, I conceive General Washington to have been the greatest man of the eighteenth century, but to me his greatness chiefly consists in that balance of mind which enabled him to recognize when an old order had passed away, and to perceive how a new order could be best introduced (Adams; 1913). What is clear, here is that revolution represents something new, a transformation, a departure from the known, the ordinary, and the common.

The Political Phase of Revolution

From the preceding discourse, it has been deduced that revolutions are concerned with the panoramic transformation of societal structure. However, for a revolution to be utterly successful, it must spread to the political sphere of the society. In other words, the revolution in question needs to affect to a large extent the political structure of the society it seeks to transform. In Marxist parlance, a political phase is necessary in every revolution because, some classes at the helm of affairs still seek to safeguard the obsolete production relations and the political system which consolidates such relations. A viable revolution, therefore, must seek to crush this obsolete political system to enable the emergence of new political and socioeconomic structure. The restoration or transformation, which is the noble goal of every revolution, is in Hannah Arendt's view, primary, "the restoration of denied liberties as a result of the government's temporary, lapse into despotism. Karl Marx's theory of social revolution centres to a large extent on the political sphere of the society, even though the economic substructure occupies a foremost place. Significant mention is made of the need to shift state power from the hands of the bourgeois into the hands of the proletariats. Nonetheless, he, alongside Engels, is often identified with the notion that the state would wither away. However, according to Engels, the bourgeois state does not "wither away", but is "abolished" by the proletariat in the course of the revolution. What withers away after this revolution is the proletarian state or semi state (Lenin 1918).

A revolution which is successful, according to Raymond Tenter, (n.d) occurs when, as a result of a challenge to the governmental elite, insurgents are eventually able to occupy principal roles within the structure of the political authority (Tenter and Midlarsky n.d) Robert Weir renders this point in more lucid words:

Regardless of other ramifications it may have in the social system, revolutionary change invariably brings about, first, a reconstruction of the political order through a forcible relocation of political power and second, a reordering of political authority.

Revolution involves a forcible relocation of political power because power is the central ingredient of political life (Weir; 17).

Taken together, the relocation of political power and the reordering of political authority, which Robert Weir speaks of above, provide legitimate terrains for victorious revolutionary

elites to enforce new governmental policies and experiment with new political institutions.

Revolution, Coup d'état and Reforms

In spite of the political nature of revolutionary movements, revolution differs significantly from other forms of political uprisings such as coups and revolts; it spreads its tentacles beyond the spheres of mere political reforms. This section seeks to elaborate on these points. A coup d'état, according to Allan Todd (2003) is, "essentially the seizure of power by a relatively small group of people, often involving sections of the military... the main aim (being) to replace one group of rulers with another. In her book, *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt clearly states, "Revolutions are more than successful insurrections... we are not justified in calling every coup d'état a revolution or even in detecting one in each civil war (Arendt; 34). What then are the distinguishing marks between coups, insurrections and revolutions? Revolution can be distinguished from a coup d'état, and other means of gaining power, in several respects. In the first place, while those engaged in a coup d'état employing violence to substitute one ruling group for another, revolutionaries use violent means to initiate a new beginning in the distribution and control of political power. In most cases, those engaged in a rebellion employing violence to carry on tradition, rather obsolete, structure of society to their own favour, revolutionary groups use violent means to realize some ideals, and visions, which involve alterations in the existing patterns. Using James Rosenau's phraseology, "whereas a revolution may be conceived by its planners as an 'authority' war launched against a regime or a 'structural' war directed against the foundation of a social system, a coup d'état is a 'personnel' war whose limited aim is the replacement of governmental leaders (Rosenau in Weir, 1978:15).

Secondly, a coup differs from a revolution in the number of persons directly involved; a coup does not depend upon a mass following. Sometimes referred to as a "palace revolution", a coup is fundamentally elitist in nature. In most cases the general public usually knows little about the attempted coup until the struggle has ended and often shows some kind of apathy towards the outcome. Furthermore, the strategy and tactics of a coup also make it different from a revolution. To overcome the possibility of a general strike or another attempted coup, the plotters of a coup often attempt to gain positions of respect in order to add an element of legitimacy to their undertaking. The principal tactic employed in a coup is the sudden seizure of the system's political elite, followed by their exile or death. With these points in mind, one can conveniently aver that reform coups such as the Syrian Coup of 1956, the Argentine uprising of 1955, and the Jordanian coup of 1957, as well as the numerous coups experienced on various occasions by African states, do not typically belong to the category of revolution. There is also a tendency to confuse a social revolution with a political reform. It is imperative to assert empathetically that political reform is not revolution. No matter how sudden or drastic or unprecedented, changes brought about by reforms do not represent a revolution in the society in which it occurs. The goal of reform groups is not the attainment of liberty through the establishment of a new social order, but merely the achievement of more equitable living conditions by incorporating more people into the existing system as holders of economic and political power (Weir; 14). It should be noted, however, that some coups, as history has shown, have been quite revolutionary. To this end, classical examples can be drawn from the Turkish, Nazi, and the Egyptian coups of 1919, 1933, and 1952 respectively. Such coups, referred in scholarly

terms as “revolutionary coups,” may in a sense be called “revolutions” because of their tendency to transform the economic and socio-political structures of the society in some ways. Revolutionary coups, however, lack the characteristic features of mass or major revolutions such as the Russian, Cuban, French and Chinese revolution.

The Transformative Essence of Revolution: Case Studies Russian and Cuban Revolutions

So far, efforts have been made in the paper towards arriving at the supposition that revolution is, on the whole, an *innovative* form of political violence, aimed at the establishment of a new socio-political order of an unprecedented pattern. However, it is important to further elaborate on the essence of revolution and the role of the political phase. This calls for some classical case studies, namely, the Russian and Cuban Revolutions. By looking briefly at the dynamics that characterized these revolutions, one can easily draw a concrete line between what revolution is and what revolution is not. The Cuban Revolution was a widespread uprising in Cuba that routed the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista (1952-1959) and brought the government of revolutionary leader Fidel Castro to power. The revolution established the only communist state in the western hemisphere and produced profound changes in the economic and social structure of Cuban society (Dominguez; 2008). Following the overthrow of Batista, Castro began changes that altered Cuba’s economic, social and political structure in dramatic ways. He defied the United States, which had been involved in Cuba’s internal affairs for years, and publicly announced Cuba’s venture into the socialist path. We may need to look further into some of these structural changes in the Cuban society.

The new government made significant exploits in improving the social conditions of the Cuban people. By the 1980s Cuba’s health care system was the best in Latin America, and its infant mortality rate ranked among the lowest in the world, dropping to 9.4 per 1000 live births in 1995. In addition, the policies implemented by the Castro government caused a radical realignment of power in Cuba. The private owners of the nation’s wealth lost their property and the government came to own and operate nearly all aspects of economic life. The small wealthy class that had ruled Cuba was replaced with a new elite of government officials and educated professional workers (Dominguez; 2008). The Russian revolutions of 1917, on the other hand, involved a series of uprisings by workers and peasants throughout the country and by soldiers, predominantly of peasant origin, in the Russian army. Many of the uprisings were organized and steered by the Soviets. By October 1917, during the Bolshevik revolution, many mounting factors had made the Russian revolution a necessity. Among such factors were the influx of intellectual stream from France during the reign of Catherine the Great hundred years before the revolution, the 1862 emancipation of serfs, the revolution of 1905, the disequilibrium between the population and economic supplies and the administrative flaws that plagued the Tsarist regime (Davies; 1962). The revolution swept aside the Provisional government with the goal of giving “all power to the Soviets”. The Bolsheviks hoped that their revolution would “result in more fundamental changes in Russian society and also inspire the working people of other countries to carry out socialist revolutions (Blanc; 2009).

The Russian revolution, which has been described as the most dramatic social transformation in human history, classically epitomizes the essence of revolution. It involved, among other variables, (i) the takeover of power by Bolsheviks in alliance with other working strata of the society (ii) demolition of the old political system and creation of a new political system based on dictatorship, and (iii) elimination of class antagonism. It is clear, therefore, from this case study, that political transformation of the society had a foremost place; yet, it served merely as a means to an end. The two revolutions surveyed so far suggest to us what revolution truly entails. The Russian and Cuban revolutions, respectively, conform distinctively to Allan Todd’s view that:

A revolution is when people attempt to completely transform the social, economic, political and ideological features of their society... when enough people come to see the status quo as essentially rotten and unreformable, so that the only remedy is to sweep it all away, and to put something totally new in its place (Todd; 2003).

CONCLUSION

A strictly political revolution, concerned only with the seizure of political power and independent of social transformation, does not follow the same pathway of pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary events. It may be merely a change in political authority (as in many coups d’etat) or a somewhat broader transformation of the structure of power, but not a typical revolution. True revolution, as exemplified by the Russian and Cuban revolutions, engenders widespread structural changes that cut across the social, psychological, legal, philosophical and even religious fabrics of the society. All in all, the argument raised in this paper is that: though a viable revolution necessary involves the seizure of political power from the oppressive class, the act of seizing power is not an end in itself, but a means to a larger end. While coups and other means of gaining political power entail simple replacement of one group of elites by another within the same obsolete economic and socio-political framework; revolutions have always been accompanied by widespread social, political, and economic changes.

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