
About Revolutions

It is agreed that the world is knee-deep in a social revolution. What is not so obvious is that embedded in the present revolution are the seeds of another. Yet that must be so simply because it was always so. No sooner do men settle down to a given set of ideas, a pattern of living and thinking, than fault-finding begins, and faultfinding is the taproot of revolutions.

Many reasons are offered in explanation of this historical restlessness. One reason that will serve as well as any other is that we are born young, very young. It is the natural business of the young mind to ask *why*, and since nobody has answered that question with finality, the field for speculation is wide open. And so, as soon as youth finds flaws in the going answers he makes up his own, and because they are new, as far as he is concerned, they are guaranteed against flaw. Somehow, the flaws do show up and another generation mounts its hobbyhorse in quest of the Holy Grail, the Brave New World. Revolution is inherent in the human makeup.

Suppose we came into this world with all the disabilities and disillusiones of, say, the age of sixty. In that event, mankind would never have moved out of its cave apartments, never

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would have heard of the atom bomb or the New Deal. The only function of old men—or, at least, their only occupation—seems to be to find fault with the panaceas that possessed them in their youth. The price of experience is loss of faith. With disillusionment comes resistance to change, and the obstinacy goes so far as to find fallacies in the infallible panaceas of their sons. Nevertheless, youth hangs on to the ideas in which it has a proprietary interest, and change does come.

A revolution is a thought pattern born of curiosity and nurtured on an ideal. Every generation thinks up its own thought pattern, but because the preceding generation hangs on to what it is used to, the transition from the old to the new must be gradual. From the perspective of history it seems that on a certain date one revolution died and another was born. We think of the nineteenth century, with its tradition of natural rights, and its laissez-faire doctrine, as suddenly ushering in a reversal of the feudal tradition. But Voltaire, Adam Smith, Rousseau, and others were plowing and planting some time before 1800, and if you do some digging you'll find the roots of the nineteenth century in much earlier times. Even so, while we are enjoying, or rueing, our own revolution, it is a certainty that youth is critical of it and is building its successor.

There is a measure of fun, if you are inclined that way, in trying to discern in the prevailing current of ideas the direction of the next revolution. It is an interesting game, even if you know you cannot be on hand to say "I told you so." It is a game that takes the bitterness out of disillusion and robs pessimism of its gloom.

THE CURRENT TRADITION

Our own revolution, the one that seems to have started on the first day of January 1900, is identified by the doctrine of collectivism. Briefly, the doctrine holds that improvement in

our way of living is attainable only if we discount the individual. The mass is all that matters. The doctrine does not deny the existence of the individual, but relegates him to the status of a means, not an end in himself. To support itself, the doctrine insists that the individual is only the product of his environment, which is the mass, that he could not exist outside of it, that he could not function except as an accessory to the mass.

The mass, on the other hand, is lacking in self-propelling force, and needs pushing. For this purpose a political machinery comes into existence, presumably by way of something called the democratic process. The individual serves the march of progress by submitting himself to the direction of that device. In the end, the doctrine holds, the individual will prosper because of the equal distribution of the abundance that comes from collective action.

That is the central idea of our current tradition. It is the idealization of the mass and the negation of the individual; its panacea, its method of realization, is political direction; its goal, as always, is the undefined good society.

So dominant is this doctrine in our thinking that it amounts to a dogma. It is implied, if not explicitly stated, in every field of thought. The aim of pedagogy today is not to prepare the individual for his own enjoyment of life, but to enable him better to serve the mass machine; the psychologist makes adjustment to mass thought the measure of healthy thinking and living; jurisprudence puts social responsibility ahead of individual responsibility; the concern of the scientist in the discovery of principles is secondary to his preoccupation with mass production; the economist studies institutions, not people; and philosophy rejects speculation as to the nature of man or the purpose of life as effort that might better be put to the practical problems of society. Ours is the culture of "the all," rather than "the one."

The end result of this kind of thinking, the practical result, is the worship of the state. This is a necessary consequence of the idealization of the mass, for since the mass can operate only under political power, then that power becomes the necessary condition of all life. It is a self-sufficient agency. It operates on a plane higher than not only that of the individual but also that of the mass. It is not only superpersonal, it is supermass. Without the state the mass could not function, even if it could exist. The state, then, is the modern golden calf, with this essential difference, that its power is demonstrable, not assumed; it can and does guide, direct, and harbor all of us. Hence, we adore it, make sacrifices to it, and never question its infallibility, even if we detect imperfections in its hierarchy. The current president may be in error, but the state can do no wrong.

OUR FATHERS' TRADITION

Just how far our revolution has gone along this path is seen when we make comparison with that of the nineteenth century. The dominant doctrine of that era held the individual to be the be-all and end-all of all life. He was the only reality. Society was not a thing in itself, but merely an agglomeration of individuals working cooperatively for their mutual betterment; it could not be greater than the sum of its parts. The individual was not the product of his environment, but the responsible master of it.

The nineteenth century had a dogma too, and it went by the name of "unalienable rights." These were held to be personal prerogatives, inhering in the individual by virtue of his existence and traceable to God alone. Government had nothing to do with rights except to see that individuals did not transgress them; and that was the only reason for government. Its func-

tions were entirely negative, like a watchman's, and when it presumed to act positively it was not minding its business; it should be called to account.

In the practical affairs of life, doctrines and dogmas have a way of losing their virtues; even integrated philosophies fall apart when men start applying them. The individualism of the nineteenth century suffered considerable mayhem, even from those who paid it most homage—the advocates of *laissez-faire*. Their insistence on their right to do as they pleased turned out to be the right to exploit others, a right they could not exercise without the help of the very state they were pledged to hold in leash. They built up the power of the state by demanding privilege from it.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, this privilege business had given individualism a bad character. The reality was far short of the earlier dream. Youth was quick to detect the fallacies in individualism as it was practiced, condemned it, and went to work on a replacement. The cure-all they hit upon was the doctrine of egalitarianism. Curiously, they promoted this new idea in the name of natural rights: if we are all endowed with an equal amount of natural rights, then it follows that we all have an equal right to what everybody else had. That was, at bottom, not only a revolt against the injustices of privilege, but also a rationalization of covetousness. At any rate, egalitarianism called for an extension of privilege, not the abolition of it; and since privilege is impossible without political enforcement, the egalitarians turned to state power for help. All kinds of reforms were advocated, and all of them strengthened political power at the expense of social power. It never occurred to those who, like Dickens, struck a blow for bigger and better “poor laws” that they were preparing the ground for social security, which reduces the individual to wardship under the

state. Meanwhile, Karl Marx was developing his rationale of collectivism. The collectivistic revolution was born in the matrix of individualism.

REVOLUTIONS BREED REVOLUTIONS

That is the point to keep in mind when we speculate on the future, that revolutions are born in revolutions. And they are always being born. Curious youth never fails to detect inadequacies in the tradition it inherited and is impatient to write a new formula. On paper, the formula is always perfect, and perhaps it would work out just as predicted if the human hand did not touch it. Take the case of liberalism, which was the political expression of the individualistic thought pattern. At the beginning of the last century, when liberalism was emerging from adolescence, its only tenet was that political intervention in the affairs of men is bad. It traced all the disabilities that men suffered from to the power of the state. Hence, it advocated the whittling away of that power, without reserve, and proposed to abolish laws, without replacement. This negativeness was all right until the liberals got into places of power, and then it occurred to them that a little positive action might be good; they discovered that only the laws enacted by nonliberals were bad. The fact is—and this is something the state worshippers are prone to overlook—that the comforts, emoluments, and adulation that go with political office have great influence on political policy; for the state consists of men, and men are, unfortunately, always human. And so, liberalism mutated into its exact opposite by the end of the nineteenth century. Today it is the synonym of statism.

Who knows what revolutionary ideas youth is toying with right now? We live entirely too close to the present to judge the

direction of its currents. We are either pessimists or optimists, and in either case are poor witnesses. Those of us who are enamored of "the good old times" point to the prevalence of socialistic doctrine, particularly in classrooms and textbooks, as evidence that the "world is going to hell," while the proponents of socialism take the same evidence as proof of the immediacy of their millennium. Both sides are probably in error. It should be remembered that the present crop of teachers, who are also the textbook writers, are the product of the socialistic tradition built up during the early part of the century, and are necessarily convinced of its virtue. Their denial of natural rights, for instance, is as natural as was the espousal of that doctrine by the teachers of 1850. However, the pessimists can take comfort in this fact, that though the professors do exert some influence on their students, they cannot stop curiosity. If the history of ideas is any guide as to the future, we can be sure that a change is in the making, that youth is brewing a revolution; it has been at the job throughout the ages.

To predict with any accuracy the tradition of the twenty-first century would require the equipment of a prophet. But, and here again relying on the evidence of history, we are on safe ground in anticipating a renaissance of individualism. For, the pendulum of sociopolitical thought has swung to and fro over the same arc since men began to live in association, and there is no warrant for believing that it will fly off in a new direction. Modern absolutism—going by the various names of communism, fascism, nazism or the less frightening "controlled economy"—is in many superficials quite different from "the divine right of kings"; but in their common rejection of the individual the two frames of thought are alike. Or, the individualistic doctrine of salvation that tarnished the glory of Rome had none of the economic overtones of nineteenth-century individualism;

but, though the theologian might object to the observation, the underlying idea of salvation is the primacy of the individual, not the collectivity, and that is the underlying idea of any form of individualism. A discarded tradition never returns in its former garb; in fact, it takes a lot of disrobing to recognize it. Only a historical expert can trace the New Deal of modern America to the New Deal of ancient Rome, or recognize Sparta in Moscow.

THE INEVITABLE FUTURE

Whatever the character of the coming revolution, it will not show itself until the present revolution has run its course. There is some disposition to try to stop it in its tracks, but that is in the nature of things a futile occupation. Even the opposition to the present collectivistic trend is tainted with it, as it must be. Those who fight socialized medicine tooth and nail would fight equally hard against a proposal to drop socialized education, unable to see that both institutions are cut from the same cloth; and those who view with alarm the teaching of collectivistic doctrine in our public school are simply plugging for a politically managed curriculum more to their own liking. Likewise, the "free enterprisers" rail against the subvention of farmers but are strong for the subvention of manufacturers through protective tariffs. We are immersed in the prevailing tradition, and until it wears itself out and is replaced by another, nothing can be done about it. The best we can do is to find fault, which is the necessary preliminary to the coming revolution.

Of this, however, we can be sure: enrolled in some nursery or freshman class right now is a Voltaire, an Adam Smith, a Locke, or a Godwin, some maverick who will emerge from the herd and lead it. Youth, as always, is in a ferment, is dissatisfied

with things as they are. Well, since the only direction youth can go is away from the current collectivistic tradition toward its opposite, those who cherish individualistic stock of values must try to peddle them to these embryonic revolutionists. We must polish up our ancient arguments, apply them to the current scene, and offer them as brand new merchandise. We must do a selling job. Youth will not buy us out, lock, stock, and barrel, but will be rather selective about it; they will take what seems good to them, modernize it, build it into a panacea, and start a revolution. God bless them.