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The Study of Revolutions

There are three major, and quite distinctive, ways of studying revolutions. One is to study them in depth, each one in isolation as a unique event. This has by now become thoroughly unfashionable, particularly among non-historians; and generally with justification. Yet to look at revolutions in this way has at least the merit of ensuring that those features of a revolution that distinguish it from any other — and there are such features — are not lost sight of.

A second method is to place all revolutions, or near-revolutions, arising within a given span of time within a common horizontal framework. In this way the English Revolution of the 1640's, the two Frondes and the Catalan revolt all become related in "the Crisis of the seventeenth century."[1] Similarly, the American and French revolutions and all the subsequent late eighteenth-century revolutions and commotions that took place in Germany, Italy, Poland, Ireland, Holland, and Belgium are given the common label of a "democratic" or "Atlantic" revolution or of a "revolution of the West".[2] The French have an expression for this: it is *noyer le poisson*; and it is perhaps not surprising that to see their own revolution "drowned" in this manner has not aroused any great enthusiasm among the French.

However, it is the third way of looking at revolutions that more particularly concerns me this evening. It is that of placing all revolutions — and not only those falling within a comparatively limited time-span — within a common framework; this is, to relate all revolutions, regardless of time or place, to a single "revolutionary" model. To say "all" is, of course, to exaggerate — particularly as some historians or political scientists are more selective than others. Crane Brinton, the American historian, for example, if it can be said that he creates a "model" at all, creates a strictly vertical one into which he fits the four great classical revolutions of the West — the English, the American, the French and the Russian (the first edition of his book, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, goes back to 1938) into a single chronological pattern. So, having looked at each one of his four revolutions in turn, Brinton picks out half-a-dozen "pre-conditions" that, taken together, lead into the actual revolutionary outbreak or the point when (to quote his own words) "the fever of revolution has begun". These preliminary symptoms are as follows and appear roughly in the following order: an economically advancing society arrested by a sharp and sudden crisis; growing class and status antagonisms — not necessarily all from the side of the com-

mon people; the desertion of the intellectuals; a crisis within the ruling class; a crisis of leadership or of government; and, finally, a financial crisis that serves directly as a curtain-raiser to the explosion itself.[3] After the outbreak the fever-analogy is resumed; and the patient's condition works up "to a crisis, frequently accompanied by delirium, the rule of the most violent revolutionists, the Reign of Terror. After the crisis comes a period of convalescence, usually marked by a relapse or two. Finally, the fever is over, and the patient is himself again" [4]

Charles Tilly, the American sociologist and historian, who cites this passage in a recent paper, calls such a stage-by-stage presentation a "natural history of revolution". Its distinctive hall-mark, he argues, is that "it works backward from outcome to antecedent conditions" and thus, like a self-fulfilling prophesy, has the advantage of never being able to be proved entirely wrong.[5] Brinton's stage-by-stage model was the first of the kind to enter the field; but recently it has been joined by several others. Two of the best-known are Neil Smelser's theory of collective behaviour and Chalmers Johnson's study on *Revolutionary Change*. Smelser is not specifically concerned with revolutions but with all types of "non-normative" group behaviour; but, like Brinton, he has a set of six conditions that have to be fulfilled before it can be said that an act of "collective behaviour" has taken place. They are (1) the *structural conduciveness* of a given society to engage in a given form of collective behaviour; (2) *structural strain* within that society; (3) the growth and spread of a *generalized belief*; (4) *precipitating factors*; (5) the *mobilization* of participants for action; and (6) the operation of *social control* (which is a rather loose expression for anything, like the army or police or the use of the media, that may check or delay the given act of behaviour).[6] Chalmers Johnson is both more simple and more complex than Brinton and Smelser: he also sees revolution as a kind of disease whose outbreak he explains in terms of three clusters of "disequilibrating" factors which, unfolding in succession, lead to the point of explosion.[7]

Apart from their evident bias in stressing revolution-as-aberration, all such all-embracing models (even one of a more limited and selective kind like Brinton's) have the evident disadvantage of leaving a whole number of "variable" factors out of account. They tend to overstress origins — the point at which the "pre-conditions" reach fruition — and pay far less attention to such important questions as how revolutions continue beyond a certain point in time and how and why they end. They give little thought to the typology of revolution: is the fact that one revolution may be "bourgeois" and another peasant or "proletarian" of little or no concern? Moreover, the human element itself is inclined to get left out: "Again," Tilly writes in his criticism of Smelser, "we face the Case of the Absconded Actor." And for "Actor" read not only the mass of the participants — say the workers or *sans-culottes* or peasants — but also their leaders and allies; not to mention what goes on in their heads.

Having noted some of these weaknesses in what he terms the "natural-history" model, Charles Tilly and his co-author James Rule, in investigating the origins and course of the French revolution of 1830, seek to correct them by set-

ting up a model of their own. They call it a "political process" model because the outbreak of revolution is explained in almost exclusively political terms, in the struggle of rival "contenders", both incumbents and challengers, for control of the state. The new model has the undoubted virtue of simplicity and of keeping the reader's eye glued to the central problem of the seizure of power. It also presents challengers as acting in cooperation (thus not neglecting the important question of allies); moreover, it finds a far more plausible explanation of the tendency of revolutions to move leftwards than the hoary old Brintonian *cliché* of "the most violent revolutionists" coming out on top and instituting a Reign of Terror to keep themselves in power by putting in its place the notion that what keeps the pot boiling — and most often drives the revolution leftwards in the process — is the multiplicity of contenders (deprived and lower-class groups included) that gradually enter the fray.[8]

All this (and quite apart from the wealth of new evidence that Tilly and his collaborators have unearthed in tracing the course of the revolution of 1830 from its earliest beginnings) is pure gain and should command the serious attention of all scholars in the field. But, alas, the Actor, except as a statistical phenomenon, still remains a remarkably illusive figure. It is not that Tilly has failed to draw up an almost endless series of personal case-histories: even the most diehard opponent of the computer-using historian could hardly expect that of him. But the question "who?" — admittedly something of an obsession of mine — plays all too small a part in his presentation as it does in those "natural-history" presentations whose shortcomings he so rightly condemns. And by "who" I mean, as I said before, both leaders and followers and something of their ideology or what went on in their heads.

As a counter-model to Tilly's and to those whom he rightly criticizes I wish to draw your attention to the model drafted by Lenin in 1915 — which, therefore, was a clear two years before the October Revolution began.[9] (So there was no question of the supreme strategist of revolution merely being wise after the event.) Admittedly, Lenin is, in this case, only concerned with revolutionary situations and what he saw as the necessary requirement for them to move forward to the next and final stage — to the revolution itself. As is well known, Lenin's model has four points, but it is the fourth point that concerns me particularly here. The first three points cover ground that is similar to Brinton's (though, in his case, we can hardly say that he was indulging in a "natural-history" type of reconstruction as he was writing down pre-conditions for what had not yet taken place!). The three include (and I am not quoting textually) a crisis within the ruling class; an acute stage in the suffering and resentments of the common people; and increasing political activity of all dissident groups whether they belong to the ruling class or not. All this sounds familiar enough and it would not be difficult to read something of the kind in the situations in England in 1640, in France in 1789 and again in 1830 and 1848 (though clearly not in England in the 1830's and 1840's, Chartism notwithstanding, as there was no acute government or ruling class crisis at the time). But, Lenin tells us, according to his formula, there were also revolutionary situations in Germany in

the 1860's and in Russia in 1859-61 and again in 1879 and 1880; and yet no revolution followed. (We might perhaps add from our own experience of more recent events that something similar happened, or failed to happen, in Italy in 1920 and in Germany in 1923 or 1931). Why was this? It was, says Lenin, because a fourth, and crucial, point in his model was missing: the "subjective" or human factor. This was (in his own words) "the ability of the revolutionary class to take revolutionary mass action, strong enough to break (or dislocate) the old government which never — not even in a period of crisis — falls if it is not toppled over." In short, what was missing was an alternative focus of leadership willing and able to take over, rather as Lenin later declared that the Bolsheviks most confidently were in a famous scene at the First Congress of Soviets in Petersburg in June (?) 1917. This is the factor so often omitted in the models of the "dysfunctionists", the "break-down" theorists of revolution, and even by so acute an observer of revolutions as Ernest Labrousse who has been inclined to explain the point of explosion in purely "natural", rather than in "anthropomorphic", terms.[10]

And yet the lessons of history are there for all to read as to what happened in the case of revolutionary situations from which this fourth, human, factor was missing. In Russia, after the brave attempts of 1904 and 1905, a few concessions were won, but substantially the old autocratic-feudal system continued as before. In Spain, Italy and Germany in the 1920's and 1930's, for lack of this vital missing link, it was not only a matter of returning to the old pre-revolutionary situation with the old governments conducting their business as before, but something far worse — sometimes mistakenly called an alternative type of "revolution" — took its place.

Or, to approach the same question in a slightly different way, it is often taken for granted that, in the conditions of the spring and summer of 1789, the French bourgeoisie should have stepped into the breach and harnessed the energies of the masses — the peasants and *menu peuple* of the towns — to a common cause; as if, in fact, to form such an alliance of classes (or of "contenders" as Tilly would say) was as easy as eating pie. Yet it happened nowhere else in Europe, except briefly at Geneva in 1781 (and this is an important ingredient in that "uniqueness" of the revolution in France in that the notion of an Atlantic Revolution is pushed aside). As John Adams, the moderate American revolutionary, wrote of the Dutch Patriots who failed to mobilize popular resistance to the Prussians and English in the crisis of 1787, they were "too inattentive to the sense of the common people". There was no revolution at the time in Holland, and there would presumably not have been one in the 1790's without the active intervention of the French. But there *was* a revolution in France and one reason for it — an important one — was that the French bourgeoisie, after dragging its feet for so long and hesitating so long before taking over the national leadership from the privileged orders, when it came to the point, were both willing and able to give the lead that was wanted and bring the masses along in their train. Had they not been willing to do this (clearly a *human* choice) there would have been no revolution in France in 1789 "as sure as eggs is eggs" and as sure as there was

no effective revolution in Germany after the autumn of 1848 because the Frankfurt Parliament (representing the German bourgeoisie) was unwilling to do what the French had done some sixty years before.

But, as I said earlier, the question "who" does not only relate to the leaders (important as these undoubtedly are) but to the masses or "followers" as well; and I have had more than once to complain that such a consideration rarely plays a part in the calculations of social scientists and other constructors of comprehensive models. It would be unfair to say that Charles Tilly is a conspicuous offender, particularly when he is so aware of the problem and so eloquently exposes the failing in others. But neither he nor those whose shortcomings he condemns is inclined to treat the participants *de base* in any but the most general terms. Least of all, as I said before, does he appear to take much interest in what goes on in their heads — in what I would term the popular ideology in revolution. The immediate — or even long-term — causes of popular participation in revolution is one thing; popular ideology that infuses that participation, and without which there can be no popular revolutionary activity at all, is something else. Elsewhere, I have tried to explain what distinguishes "popular" ideology from any other, how it is composed, how it takes shape and how it becomes transformed in the course of a revolutionary situation and beyond.[11] In more practical and more concrete terms the problem can be studied in Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down* and Albert Soboul's writings on the Parisian *sans-culottes;*[12] these are among the few historians of revolution who have given the phenomenon the attention it deserves; and, of course, it is one to which the computer, invaluable as are the other uses to which it may be put, can make only a minimal contribution. Here I certainly do not propose to explore the matter to any depth; but I should like to indicate how its study may perhaps be carried further by posing a number of questions relating to the origins of the popular revolution of 1789 and indicating how the answers may be found.

If we may assume that the popular radical ideology as it took shape before the end of 1793 owed something to the ideas directly propagated by the *philosophes* among a small group of devotees in the 1750's and 1760's and relayed to a far wider public through the remonstrances of the Parliaments in the 1760's to 1780's and the journals and pamphlets of the revolutionary bourgeoisie in the winter, spring and summer of 1788-89, we are nevertheless struck by the considerable transformation that these ideas suffered in the lengthy process of transmission. We can only guess what Voltaire or Holbach, or even Rousseau (the only real "populist" among them), would have thought of the uses to which their ideas were put by the common people of Paris a quarter of a century after they were penned; yet we have the earlier example of what Martin Luther thought of the German peasants who revolted in his name to give us a clue.

More important is the way in which we can observe how one set of ideas (say the "derived" notions of the Rights of Man and the Sovereignty of the People) becomes grafted onto the indigenous or "inherent" ideas of the common people just before or just after the revolution breaks out. There must, in fact, be some

point of transition from an older to a newer stage of consciousness, or to that *mentalité révolutionnaire* of which M. Godechot speaks, that it would be of some interest to discover. In 1775, the last year of widespread popular disturbance of the Old Régime in France, there is no sign at all of any penetration of "philosophical" ideas among the poor: the documentation relating to the events of that year is rich enough to have told us if any had existed. Nor does it seem that the process had gone much further in country districts before the peasants began their own assault on the *châteaux* in the early months of 1789.

For the "small people" of the cities the case was different. For some years, particularly in Paris, a certain degree of "politization" of popular disturbance had been going on, mainly under the influence of the *Parlement*. But this politization was of a very elementary kind and was not accompanied, any more than among the small consumers of 1775, by any profound *crise de conscience* or awareness among the *menu peuple* of the need for social change. So, once more, as with the peasants, we must search for a point closer to the events of 1789; though, in this case we may stop a little earlier and look for our transition in the *révolte nobiliaire* of 1787-8 (the period that M. Jean Egret more pertinently terms "pre-Revolution") rather than twelve or eighteen months later. This, I believe, is particularly true of those cities that became most directly involved in the events, such as Rennes, Dijon, Grenoble and Paris itself. In Dijon, for example, one may trace the development of such a *mentalité* through four stages (I am indebted for this suggestion to M. Daniel Ligou): first, a preliminary "inherent" stage in the bread riots of 1775, which, as I have already observed, were entirely innocent of any political intrusion from outside; next, a degree of elementary politization in the adoption (as in Paris) of the slogan "Vive le Parlement", that began around 1784 and continued into 1788; thirdly, in 1788, a closer identification with the *Parlement* in its challenge to royal "despotism", a growing *prise de conscience* and the first assimilation of "philosophical" ideas; and, lastly, a union of *peuple* and bourgeoisie against aristocracy and absolute monarchy (thus reversing the old aristocratic-popular partnership) in the summer of 1789. We may trace a similar development in other cities under the dual impact of the "aristocratic revolt" and the pamphlet campaign of the Third Estate in the early months of 1789 — notably in Paris where one learns from the police archives that such phrases as *tiers état* had invaded popular speech by mid-April of that year. But this is only a preliminary essay; and far more scholarly work will have to be done before what is at present a tentative hypothesis may claim to become clothed in solid fact.

At this point you may well believe that what I am really saying is that all previous models should be scrapped — Mr. Tilly's included — and that I want a fresh start to be made in order to remedy such shortcomings by constructing a brand-new model of my own. No, God forbid! Nor am I recommending a return to the old discarded method of treating each revolution in isolation as a thing-in-itself. This would be to throw out the baby with the bathwater with a vengeance, and I have no stomach for such games. Frankly, I want to have it both ways: to look at the general as well as the particular; to look at the general pattern of

revolutions as well as the individual case-histories of those taking part. In short, I want to indulge in the luxury of looking through the telescope at both ends.

NOTES

[1] See T.H. Aston ed., *Crisis in Europe 1560-1660* (London, 1965).

[2] See, particularly, R.R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, 2 vols, (Princeton 1959, 1964); J. Godechot, *Les révolutions,* and (by the same) *France and the Atlantic Revolution of the Eighteenth Century 1770-1799* (New York, 1965).

[3] C. Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York, 1938, 1952).

[4] Brinton, pp. 17-18 (1952 edition); cited by Rule and Tilly (see next note), p. 45.

[5] J. Rule and C. Tilly, "Political Process in Revolutionary France 1830-1832", in *1830 in France*, ed. John M. Merriman (New York, 1975), pp. 41-85.

[6] N. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behaviour* (New York, 1963); cited by Rule and Tilly, pp. 51-3.

[7] C. Johnson, *Revolutionary Change* (Boston, 1968).

[8] Rule and Tilly, pp. 55-9.

[9] V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 45 vols. (Moscow 1960-70), XXI, pp. 213-14.

[10] C.E. Labrousse, "1789-1830-1848. Comment naissent les révolutions", *in Actes du congrès historique du centenaire de la Révolution de 1848* (Paris, 1949), pp. 1-29.

[11] G. Rudé, "Revolution and Popular Ideology", in *Revolutions in France and North America*, 1760-1800 (Lafayette, Louisiana, 1974).

[12] C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (London 1972); and A. Soboul, *Les sans-culottes parisiens de l'An II* (Paris, 1958).