

## Revolution and the Idea of Force (1963)

By Hannah Arendt<sup>1</sup>

Gottschalk<sup>2</sup>:

1. Definition of Revolution: Distinction from Rebellion, possible only after dissolution and disintegration of government.

Political term: Industrial revolution metaphorically speaking.

Revolution from below; no coup d'Etat.

Major change in form of government and social fabric

Force: Secondary and necessary, but no decisive

2. Second Revolution now: non-violent doubtful: Pressure and threat of violence. Also: Boycotts of violence.

3. Colonial Revolutions: Is that not only a change of one administration—foreign one—to another, the natives? Is a new form of government involved? How about its successes?

Ad 1:

Power must be in the street which means: Police and army no longer reliable—something one usually does not know until tried out.<sup>3</sup> True: Amazingly easy to succeed in the beginning. But: These conditions are not enough; there must be men eager and prepared to take upon themselves the responsibility.<sup>4</sup> These in the 18th century the men of letters. Today we have these people in many countries and they are trained: The professional revolutionist, a specialist in revolution. Hence, decline of power more dangerous than ever before, more unlikely that opportunity will pass without anybody bothering.

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1 Typescript (single-spaced with handwritten corrections and additions) dated by Arendt "October 25, 1963" with the indication "UNESCO". As her correspondence with *The United States National Commission for UNESCO* allows to conclude, Arendt prepared the paper for the Ninth National Conference of the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO from 23<sup>rd</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> October 1963 at the University of Chicago. She was invited as commentator and discussant. The main topic of the conference was "The New Europe and the United States", Arendt participated together with Prof. Louis Gottschalk, who was also invited as discussant, in a symposium titled "The Force of Revolution and the Idea of Force" on October 26th.

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Arendt's wording, spelling, and punctuation are left untouched, except for some minor corrections put in brackets.

2 Cf. note 1.

3 Handwritten addition above the line: defeat in war—

4 Several lines of handwritten additions on the left margin start here: Violence / Grievances / Program / Differences / Sense: wards / (Counter-Revolution) / America: / Area of agreement.

These men are usually not from below<sup>5</sup> although they are pushed from below. No revolution was ever made by the downtrodden themselves. Only when the disowned and oppressed had the chance of developing a kind of upper class with political ambitions, did a revolution occur. In other words, when they were on the upswing.

Absent in G[ottschalk]'s definition two things which originally played great role:

a) Freedom: The aim of revolution was freedom, or the foundation of institutions for freedom. Freedom meant: participation in government. The missionary element connected with it: The grandeur of Man as against the pettyness of the great. Freedom meant: A new dignity: There is a realm where man is master of his destiny, and this realm is the sphere of human affairs or of politics in the widest sense. Hence: Republics and no Monarchies: The issue was: Citizens versus subjects.

b) This arrival of freedom as tangible entity was felt to be something altogether new: The enormous pathos of novelty in both French and American revolutions. *Novus Ordo saeculorum*.

Ad 2:

The great good fortune of America that social question, stark naked poverty, was absent. It did not get into the way of the Founders. As against French Revolution where, I think, the attempt to solve social question by force sent it to its doom—as almost all other revolutions. Robespierre: “La Monarchie? La République? Je ne connais que la question sociale.”<sup>6</sup>

The enormous force of violence inherent in the social question: Lord Acton: The women on their march to Versailles “played the genuine part of mothers whose children were starving in squalid homes, and they thereby afforded to motives which they neither shared nor understood the aid of a diamond point nothing could withstand.”<sup>7</sup> (Oct. 89 [October, 1789]) Or less elegantly: “The rebellions of the belly are the worst.”<sup>8</sup> (Bacon) They helped the Revolution with a greater force than it possessed, the force of necessity. Terror—attempt to regulate economic questions by force. “Les malheureux sont la puissance de la terre.”<sup>9</sup> Set into motion by those who are not malheureux. Le malheur itself is destructive.

Insofar as it [the second revolution, according to Gottschalk] is a revolution, it is against Society, not against Government exc.[except] in the South. Federal Gov. [Government] and Constitution are on the side of the Negroes.<sup>10</sup>

The two faces of the present Revolution: It is political and social; political in the South and social in the country as a whole. In the South, political because of the necessary repeal of legislation—laws and ordinances. It should have a higher priority as it is some-

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<sup>5</sup> Handwritten note above the line: – non-official.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from Albert Ollivier, *Saint-Just et la Force des Choses* (Paris, 1954), p. 165.

<sup>7</sup> Lord John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, *Lectures on the French Revolution* (1910; New York, 1959), p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> Francis Bacon, “*Of Seditions and Troubles*,” in Idem, *The Essays or Counsels. Moral, Economical, and Political* (London, 1818), p. 53.

<sup>9</sup> Phrase by Louis de Saint-Just. Arendt uses it as motto to Chapter II (“The Social Question”) of her book *On Revolution*.

<sup>10</sup> The whole paragraph is inserted by hand.

times assigned to. This would complete the American Revolution in its two stages—Revolution and Civil War.

The social question in the long run more explosive: There are necessities involved—the fight against poverty and ignorance. On the other hand: it happens within a framework of prosperity, at a time when poverty can be handled by technical means. The fight against ignorance will be more difficult than the fight against poverty—slums etc. Insofar as the social question consists in this fight against slums etc., it has priority, just as eating and having a roof over your head has priority over all other considerations, even Southern legislation. But the other side is probably a long process: We want everything and we want it now—can be dangerous. This is the language of threat, if not of armed violence, of implied violence. In non-violent fight there is the following: You can fight us only with massive armed violence, we dare you to do it. If you do it, you will have changed your own form of government. It was the implication of the Indians' fight for independence and ended with the liquidation of imperialism. England did not dare to use violence because of boomerang effects.

Ad 3:

The first colonial revolution of course in this country. And it was supposed, in the words of Jefferson, to lead one people after the other “to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature's God entitle them.”<sup>11</sup> This is basically what we are confronted with now all over the world. “Separate and equal,” in its own identity, even if only an exchange of personnel. An enormous change for those concerned, no matter how it looks to the outsider. To come into one's own—which is the soundest basis of all nationalism. Comparatively late—after nation-state has been discredited, enormous difficulties—civilisation, language, tribal organizations, no identity of people and territory, floating populations, ignorance and poverty—but inevitable. There are the two elements present which we found at the beginning of revolution and which almost have been lost: Freedom from Occupation if not from oppression; and new beginning: for all these people, the revolution brings something unheard of, unprecedented. They start only now their own history. This especially true for Africa.

Concluding remarks:

I don't accept fascist revolution or the later stages of the Bolshevist revolution as revolutions because element of freedom is altogether lost. But also because the notion of founding something new and stable, a new house as it were, has been lost: Permanent revolution. Those who rose to power—under conditions as in all other revolutions, the powers-that-be being hopelessly discredited—had behind them a Movement and this movement was not supposed to cease being in motion when in power. The aim of these revolutions, on their own terms were never achieved. Lenin: Originally claimed the aim to be: Electrification (abolition of poverty and backwardness) plus soviets (a new form of government). But the revolution did not come to an end and it did not produce an end.

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<sup>11</sup> From the introduction of the Declaration of Independence.

They were declared in permanence—a rapid<sup>12</sup> permanent revolution is either a contradiction in terms or totalitarianism.

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Ad 2:

Maroon, 9/27/63: “Until the Mayor and other city officials understand the Revolution, it can enjoy only limited success.”<sup>13</sup> This sounds very funny—unless one remembers that this Revolution is indeed concerned with the unfinished business of the American Revolution—that is, not against the Government but with it. And only in this aspect has the Revolution any chances to win: In other words, the Negroes speak as citizens, not as rebels.

The opposite from Philadelphia: Cecil B. Moore, criminal lawyer, head of the NAACP<sup>14</sup>, of which he said: “Don’t say I’m the head of the NAACP here, I am the NAACP.” He also said: “Up here in these northern cities we don’t need laws [which in a sense is true and would be fine without the following, H.A.]: When things aren’t right, my people come to me, and I throw out picket lines. That’s how we get things done.” (National Observer, Oct. 21, 1963.) The point are not the picket lines but the unwillingness to cooperate with city officials, which may or may not be the fault of Philadelphia. It is dangerous language.

*Transcribed, edited, and footnoted  
by Oliver Bruns*

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<sup>12</sup> “Rapid” is added in handwriting.

<sup>13</sup> “Maroon” is a Chicago student-magazine. Arendt pasted a press clipping with the quotation in her *Denktagebuch* and added in handwriting “*Chicago Maroon*, 9/27/63, in an article on Civil Rights by M. Stevens”. Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch, 1950 bis 1973*, edited by Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann (München, 2002), Book XXIV, No. 23, p. 628.

<sup>14</sup> National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, founded in 1909.