

Revolutions—Spurious and Genuine (1964)

By Hannah Arendt¹

I.

Not my title. I would hesitate to distinguish. For practical purposes distinctions very necessary, and one can say a coup d'Etat is not a revolution; on the other hand, the Cuban Revolution, even though we don't yet know the outcome, most certainly is.

In contrast to revolutions[,] which are relatively new phenomena, change and even violent change in politics is quite old. To know about them is important because most of them have stayed with us, and since we also know revolutions, there is always the danger of mistaking one for the other.

Revolutions in the modern sense of the word—after the model [sic] of both France & America—imply first [of] all a change radical enough to be experienced as an entirely new beginning: *Novus Ordo Saeclorum*. And this was impossible in antiquity, in Greek antiquity because the time concepts was [sic] cyclical, there was no beginning strictly speaking, hence, change too was cyclical: From one form of government into the other: Monarchy became oligarchy, and oligarchy became democracy, whereupon democracy went full circle back to monarchy. There was constant change, but this change itself and, more importantly, its pattern, was sempiternal. In Rome, on the contrary, there was a strong feeling of a definite beginning (almost as strong as in Hebrew antiquity with the Creation myth—In the Beginning), and this was the founding of Rome: *ab urbe condita*, that is how every Roman history started: But because of the sacredness of this beginning, there could be no second beginning: If things went bad in Rome, then it was a question of “refounding Rome” and not of “founding Rome anew.”

The second condition for calling something a revolution is that the change is radical enough to change the whole fabric of government and/or² society—and not of just putting a different set of people at the head of the government or of permitting some segment of the population to rise into the public realm. If the change occurs within the ruling clique properly speaking and is engineered therein, we speak of a palace revolution

1 Typescript (single-spaced, with typed and handwritten corrections and additions) of notes for a lecture dated by Arendt „Chicago, 5/27/64.“ Between the title and the beginning of the text, Arendt wrote by hand: “Simplify – outrageously so.”

The transcript is published here by courtesy of Jerome Kohn, executor of the Hannah Arendt Bluecher Literary Trust; it is based on the scans available at The Hannah Arendt Papers online at the Library of Congress, Speeches and Writings file, 1923-1975, n.d., Images 1-4, nos. 023447-023450, all images displaying offsite. Arendt's wording, spelling, and punctuation are left untouched, except for some minor corrections put in brackets. Arendt's original typescript contains many underlinings, which have not been documented here, since their purpose is not to emphasise certain words or passages, but to make it easier for Arendt to find catch phrases while lecturing.

2 „/ or“ is a handwritten addendum. – Arendt's corrections or additions are documented here only if they imply shifts in meaning, not if they are merely corrections of incorrect English.

(something we had in South Vietnam) and if it comes from some other branch of government, f.[for] i.[instance] the military against civil government we speak of a coup d'Etat. The amount of violence can be greater than in a real revolution, but the change effected is less. Or – to give another example: You know of medieval and later Christian³ teachings about the right of resistance to tyranny and even of tyrannicide – John of Salisbury, Policraticus, 12th century, and Aquinas to the *Vindiciae contra tyrannos* of the 16th century by a Huguenot writer and Francisco Suarez, a Jesuit, early 17th century—: This could very well lead to the beheading of a King, it could never lead to a revolution: For in a revolution, the claim is not: we are badly ruled, but: We wish to rule ourselves—We—who always were subjects now wish to rise to the rank of citizens. Or We [sic]: who always belonged to the subject peoples⁴ now wish to rise to nationhood—“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.”⁵ In the West⁶ where foreign oppression was either absent or played a minor role—the American colonies probably enjoyed more freedom from King and Parliament than Englishmen in their own country—the question became: Republic versus⁷ Monarchy – and republic implied rule by law and not by men, and administration of affairs by all citizens, that is, “participation”.

II

Second set of distinctions: I said to change political or social fabric, from which follows: There are social and political revolutions. I usually prefer to reserve the term revolution to political change—the foundation of a new body politic. But for our purposes today—in one short hour—I shall not go into that, and for once shall conform with everybody, and speak of social revolution. Here again: We have known social rebellions as far back as recorded history from the side of oppressed peoples or segments of the population. But these rebellions either wished merely to reform or, more frequently, a slave population (the Spartakus [sic] rising in Rome) wished to occupy the position held by the ruling class (as we would say today). The first notion that revolution may be possible—namely the abolition of the state of slavery or the condition of poverty—came from the astounding prosperity of the New World and its “lovely equality”. The social upheavals during the French Revolution had as their spring already the notion that perhaps poverty and misery can be abolished altogether—no mere exchange—; and later Marx's classless society conceived not of a society where the former workers would exploit the former exploiters but, on the contrary, where there would be no exploitation. Hence, the fabric of society itself would be changed. Decisive is that this abolition of exploitation of man by man (as the former abolition of rule of man over man) could be achieved only when industrialization had reached the point of abundance – something which M.[Marx] believed was inherent in capitalistic production as such (hence his great admiration!) and which actually came about through technical progress, as distinguished from mere economic developments.

3 Handwritten correction for “late medieval.”

4 Typed correction for „nations.“

5 This quote is taken from the first paragraph of the Declaration of Independence.

6 Handwritten correction for “Europe.”

7 Typend correction for „or.“

III

Social Revolution since French Revolution, Political Revolution since American [Revolution] as well as the beginnings of the French Revolution. The political Revolution in America unhindered by social question—partly because of the abundance of the continent, partly because of the absence of classes[.] The class system in Europe, which only now is more or less abolished, is the direct heir of feudalism: Capitalism, as understood in Europe, is industrialization under the conditions of feudal system: The feudal estates become then classes.

However, in America also a social question, only hidden in the “peculiar institution”, the institution of slavery. [sic] And you see how extremely hard to change a class structure is when you consider that the Negroe [sic] condition has resisted not all, but quite a bit of change: time and again the immigrants could be absorbed, but these remnants of what could be called the specific feudal quality in American society remained where they were—at the bottom of society. All the more remarkable in this country of extreme mobility. Also—the enormous amount of emotions, strengthened, to be sure, because of race question [sic]. This is the social question in its worst and most dangerous form. But it is still a social question.

Social turmoil in the Negroe [sic] fight, but is it a revolution? There is no claim to change the fabric of society as it exists, only to be admitted to it. For the position of the Negroes today is in contradiction with the foundations on which society and politics rest; it is not necessary to change, only to remove the inherent contradiction. A revolutionary aspect only in the fight against those laws and ordinances of states which are openly discriminatory – and in this political fight, the Federal government is on the side of the Negroes.

Yet though the political fight is revolutionary and the social not, I think we all know that the social side of this matter is by far more dangerous, also and especially in terms of violence.

And one of the reasons for this violence in the social realm is clearly indicated by Machiavelli who said that you can rather kill a man’s father with impunity than even threaten to take his property away. Expropriation—begun in the French Revolution with the confiscation of the property of the emigrés [sic] and then of the suspects—has never solved the predicament of poverty although it has, at least momentarily, sometimes promoted the cause of equality. And in the sense of Machiavelli, Tocqueville was right when he said that most men on the side of the revolution wished more for equality than for liberty. But where equality is not intimately linked to liberty⁸—in the sense that one can be free only among one’s equals, that is, where no one rules or is ruled – the passion for equality can be very murderous indeed. The passion for equality can be inspired either by the “I am as good as you” or by the love for company and freedom: Company is company among one’s peers, without superiors or inferiors, hence without comparison. It is the gratitude for the fact that we live together, keep each other company.

8 Handwritten addendum on margin: “minded the status of a nobleman more than the office of the King.”

IV

Let me now turn to the question of how revolutions develop. There exist a number of myths. The most widespread⁹ one being that conspiracies lead to revolutions. No conspiracy, secret or not-secret, has ever brought about a revolution. Second in importance is that the more people are oppressed the more they are likely to rise in rebellion. No revolution was ever made by the downtrodden themselves. To rise in rebellion is the sign that things are on the upswing and usually that the oppressed people or class had been permitted to develop a kind of upper class among themselves. Even more likely, that the upper class—for various reasons—let loose a liberation movement.

But all this is of secondary importance. Most important is the breakdown of authority prior to the revolution.¹⁰ And this is not the result of revolutionary preparations, but on the contrary, it is the condition for the revolution. No revolution can succeed where the loyalty of the armed forces, police and army, is intact. This is not only so today because of the nature of the weapons, this has always been true. The armed uprising never occurred except when the army joined (or could reasonably be expected to join) the rebels. This is the condition *sine qua non*.

However, no revolution ever came about through the disintegration of the body politic. On the contrary, these disintegrating bodies—corrupt, without authority, lacking the confidence of the citizens—can be of an extraordinary longevity. There must also be men eager and prepared to take upon themselves the responsibilities of power – waiting in the wings. These people in 18th century were the *homme [sic] de lettres*. Since then: the professional revolutionists. These are usually not from below, and they are pushed from below only after the revolution started. The people in the coffeehouses in Vienna and Zurich and London, or the great Libraries. Without them, disintegration (Hapsburg Empire¹¹) and even chaos (China) can go on for a very long time.

V

Who are the revolutionists? Here, I shall fall back upon the title and distinguish between the genuine and the spurious ones, but not in the sense that these are ideal types, but rather as the result of very real historical developments. You can think of them, as it were, in terms of the 18th century, and then they are the founding fathers; or you can think of them, as we usually do, in terms of 19th century [sic], and then you will see them in the frame of the political spectrum, which itself is the result of the French Revolution.

The central concept which dominates our political spectrum from right to left is the concept of Progress [sic]: The conservatives are those who are against it, the liberals are for it up to a point, and the revolutionists believe (with Marx) that all progress comes about through violence—in the old metaphor of birth. The pangs of birth must accompany the development. This progress is infinite, it is an infinite process which the revolutionists hope to accelerate. The acceleration is done through violence. I am speaking about the ideologies[,] which are very potent, no less potent than the metaphors. They were all born, especially the notion of this infinite progressing process which comes about by necessity, during the French Revolution when it became so very obvious that men, and

⁹ Handwritten correction for “important.”

¹⁰ Typed addendum on margin: “all gvt. [government] rests on Obedience = Consent, Story of czar as autocrat.”

¹¹ Handwritten addendum.

very good men, had lost control. When the Revolution devoured its own children like Saturn and was like a gigantic Lava [sic] stream on whose surface the actors were born[e] along for a while, only to be sucked away by the undertow of an undercurrent mightier than they themselves. Permanent Revolution.

The other concept comes from the American Revolution and means: The revolutionist, as a founder, is a kind of architect who builds the house in which future generations, his posterity, will live. This house must be stable precisely because those who inhabit it are futile, come and go, in an infinite process of succession which may or may not be ruled by the law of progress. These revolutionists, because they knew that theirs was a Novus order [sic] saeculorum, were of course by the same token conservatives, because how could they not hope that their new work would be preserved, that this new building—the new body politic, the new institutions of liberty—would prove stable enough to withstand the onslaught of time, and of change to which all things mortal are subject[?]

I could have made the same distinction by relating it to the distinction between social and political revolutions. The sphere of the social is by definition the sphere of life and of change, the sphere of the political is there to house this life and the change of life. To the extent that freedom needs a space to be manifest and institutions to be guaranteed, it will need stability of institutions the freer, as it were, it is. Or to put it less paradoxically: The more stable a body politic is, the more freedom will be possible within it.¹²

What you experience in a genuine revolution is this beginning of something altogether new. But this experience is actually the experience of action and of freedom. The two great dangers of every revolution are that they either are declared in permanence, and then simply lose their aim, or the revolutionary spirit is lost: that is[,] the institutions which were built to make free acting possible petrify, the spaces of freedom are deserted, no one even wishes to begin something anew within the stability of the old¹³. Until finally, a new revolution occurs—perhaps—the disintegrated building, deserted by the spirit it once housed, is torn down, and a new body politic is founded.

*Transcribed (with the help of Frances Lee),
edited, and annotated by Thomas Wild*

¹² Handwritten note on margin: “We move in a world to outlast us: this our interest qua political.”

¹³ “within the stability of the old” is a handwritten addendum.