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Ethics of Revolutionary Violence. A case study of the French and Russian revolutions.

Abstract

Revolution is characterized as a sudden change in the political or governmental system. The Cambridge Dictionary associates *revolution* with violence by considering the latter to often be a component of the former. Thus, revolutions often contain violence as their feature and therefore, the moral criticism of a revolution requires that we also judge the violence it contains. The following analysis arises from a paradox in the interpretation of revolutionary violence. Although we tend to positively evaluate revolutions based on their results, violence is simultaneously condemned as if a priori immoral and impermissible. To resolve this paradox, I will not attempt to impose a categorical view as a normative principle. I will instead study the examples of the French and Russian revolutions under the lens of the moral evaluation of violence. Critical opinions of thinkers concerning the morality of violence will be presented and weight will be given to the views that directly affected the conduct of the two revolutions. To evaluate the morality of those revolutions I will put forward two conditions under which violence can be ethically justified. First, the use of force must be deemed necessary for the

achievement of the revolutionary goals and secondly the result of the revolution must contribute to social progress. As the concept of social progress can be ambiguous, for this essay's purposes I define it according to the Hegelian notion, as advancement towards greater universal freedom (Hegel 2006).

Theoretical approaches to revolutionary violence

Hegel views history as the field of evolution of the Spirit. Following the dialectic, he believes that through conflict with itself the Spirit gains consciousness of itself and evolves. Since the Spirit is expressed by humanity, its internal conflict is nothing but the conflicts that take place within human history. People and their passions are a medium through which the Spirit finds ways to express itself and evolve. Violence therefore - and the suffering it causes - is simply a manifestation of the ever-evolving Spirit in its effort to make societies progressively freer. Therefore, the morality of violence as well as human passions, are negligible in the context of world history since it is progressing towards the realization of universal freedom (Hegel 2006).

We cannot ignore Enlightenment views as they formed the foundation of the French Revolution. John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau view revolution as a means of securing natural individual rights and therefore supported the right to violent rebellion against oppressive governments if deemed necessary (Kenny 2005). Contrary to the view of the above was that of Immanuel Kant, who advocated peaceful and rational means of achieving socio-political reform. He regarded violence as the unlawful infliction of harm, which did not accord with his categorical imperative. According to Kant, reform would take place "from the top down," through education and reason, rather than from

the violent masses (Hill 1997).

The views of radical thinkers who considered revolutionary violence inevitable are also worth noting. Lenin, in his book "State and Revolution" emphasizes that a revolution aiming to overthrow the ruling class, can only be violent (Lenin 2015). Of course, Lenin writes under the influence of Marx, who in the "Communist Manifesto" refers in several ways to the necessity of revolutionary violence. In the last paragraph of the Manifesto, Marx and Engels, distinctively state that the goals of the communists cannot be achieved except with the "forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions" (Marx 2017). Marxist ideas shaped the October Revolution.

Violence in the French Revolution

France in the late 18th century, supporting the ideas of freedom and democracy, decided to support the American revolution by providing military and economic aid. This worsened France's domestic situation and undermined freedom and democracy back home where the French were experiencing absolute monarchy and absolute poverty (Hibbert 2012). In 1789 France is plagued by economic crisis inflation and skyrocketing prices of bread due to the poor harvest of 1788. King Louis XVI could not manage the situation and thus peasants had to pay exorbitant taxes and became unable to meet basic needs. People put pressure on the king without them initially intending to overthrow the regime. As we shall also see in the circumstance of the Russian revolution, cooperation of the monarch, could have offered intermediate solutions and prevented the revolution. It was the rigidity of the monarchy combined with the suffocating living conditions that made revolution inevitable (Hobsbawm 1977).

To deal with the crisis, in 1789, the people of France were given the opportunity to enter the Estates General as the Third Estate, without however gaining any substantial power. This led the people to establish the National Assembly. On July 14th, the people of Paris stormed the Bastille to collect gunpowder but also to make a political statement; that the revolution had begun. The rebels killed many of the defenders of the Bastille and among them commander Bernard René Jourdan, who was beheaded and then his head was carried on a pike (Hibbert 2012). Soon after the beginning of the revolution, the need to suppress counter-revolutions arose. In this context, the September Massacres led to thousands of casualties (Hibbert 2012). Hobsbawm as a Marxist accepts the violence of the French Revolution as a condition of social change. Although it has a bourgeois nature, the French Revolution could create a capitalist regime that would be the middle ground between feudalism and communism. (1977). According to Markoff, the view that revolutionary violence undermines democracy is rejected, since even if the bourgeoisie can demand social reform peacefully, the peasants do not have that possibility (1995). According to Tocqueville, for people in the rural districts, violence was their only defense against oppression (2012).

We cannot ignore the role of the Reign of Terror (1793-1794). The Jacobins who emerged as the dominant revolutionary group, in their attempt to prevent and manage counter-revolutionary activities, ordered arrests, executions and a general suppression of individual liberty. During this phase, the queen and king were executed in January 1793. (Hibbert 2012). Although revolutionaries represented enlightenment ideals, thinkers like John Locke believed that violence should always be used as a last resort. Determining the necessity of revolutionary terrorism is a complex issue in the literature, as it

remains unknown how events would have turned out otherwise.

Violence in the Russian Revolution

To understand the role of violence in the Russian Revolution of 1917, we need to understand its historical context. Peasants and workers had already begun mobilizing as early as 1813, and by 1845 strikes were considered illegal. In 1905 a group guided by a priest, intended to demand civil rights from the czar but before they could reach the Winter Palace, they were shot by the police. This led the strikes and uprisings to intensify until they turned into a universal political protest (Gross 1957). Despite the extent of the 1905 events, no radical systematic change was brought.

Tzar Nicholas II was unable to calm the internal unrest that intensified after Russia's involvement in the First World War while the presence of the controversial Rasputin in the palace, augmented the distrust towards the czar (Lindemann 2012). In February 1917 both women and men poured into the streets of St. Petersburg, initiated not by any political group, but rather by hunger, misery, war and fatigue (Gross 1957). During these events, the tsarist army refused to turn on the protesters and fraternized with them (Hobsbawm 2015). The February revolution, unlike that of 1905, achieved a spectacular result, the rupture of the regime. According to Hobsbawm, during this phase, the violence was primarily exerted by the regime and not so much from the revolutionaries (2015). Tsarist autocracy was replaced by a provisional government that also failed to respond to the demands of the people. The revolution had not yet been Marxist in character. Workers demanded their rights, but not within the framework of a proletariat state. It was the Bolsheviks who expressed Marxist elements during the October Revolution, in 1917. This time, the revolutionaries led by Lenin, used violent

means to overthrow the Provisional Government. Lenin considered violence necessary for a revolution of this kind. (Lenin 2015). Hobsbawm, although a Marxist himself, refers to intense use of violence by the Bolsheviks (2015), while Lindemann states that Kerensky's provisional government was so weakened that it failed to offer any significant resistance and thus bloodshed was avoided (2012).

The bloodiest phase of the revolution unfolded during the Civil War. The Red Army, trying to defend the Bolshevik government, conflicted with the White Army and the national independence movements. During the Red Terror, atrocities occurred against civilians as well (Hobsbawm 2015).

Examining the two conditions

The French Revolution expressed the liberation of modern ideas from the shell of the old regime. They could be freed only by crushing it, and the shuttering was bloody. Both Hobsbawm and Markoff view violence as necessary. The lack of space for peaceful protest combined with the inability of the regime to share the power, made violent revolution inevitable. Accordingly, the Russian and especially the October revolution, was an intention to break with Russia's past at the level of both social structures and governance, as at the time Russia was a remnant of the old feudal system in an otherwise progressive Europe. During early peaceful uprisings, the results in terms of progress were limited. The radical change came from the Bolsheviks who, being Marxists, considered violence a component of their action. I consider the violence used in the beginning of both revolutions to have been necessary in causing political change, as in non-democratic regimes people tend to have no other means except violence to make their demands heard. The most violent phase for both revolutions came in the form of revolutionary terrorism in 1793 and

1918 respectively, intended to suppress counter-revolutionary activities. The use of violence during these phases is the most ambiguous. The terror was part of the objective need to maintain the revolution but also a result of the inevitable corruption of the revolutionaries who suddenly found themselves with power in their hands.

As far as historical progress is concerned, both revolutions induced significant changes. A few weeks after the invasion of the Bastille, the "Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen de 1789" was established by the National Assembly. Although the revolutionary regime was not maintained for long, the declaration influenced the later constitutions. In the case of Russia, the 1918 Constitution was enacted to provide freedoms and guarantee rights that did not exist under tsarist rule. More pragmatic and less romantic than the French declaration, the Russian constitution focused on giving power to the working class. Both revolutions have been accused of being pointless since the political systems that succeeded them resembled the old status quo. However, Napoleon's imperial France and Stalin's totalitarian Russia did not actually lead to a revival of the old regime. It was during its imperial phase that France chose not to return to the past, but neither to abandon its pre-revolutionary existence and tradition. The Napoleonic Code gave rights to the bourgeoisie that could never have been institutionalized the feudal France of the 18th century. In the case of Russia, as attractive as it may be, a simple explanation that the strictness of the Soviet Union comes from the return to tsarist practices, does not apply. In fact, elements, such as the centrally planned economy, that made the Soviet Union strict were based on Marxist ideas of the revolutionary Bolsheviks and not on the monarchy (Deutscher 1952).

In conclusion, violence is in both cases morally acceptable since it was necessary for their realization while it also contributed to historical progress. That happened through the establishment of revolutionary constitutions which, even if they were not preserved, bequeathed their values to Europe, shaping its political future. Even though the Russian revolution did not have a liberal character, the overthrow of the monarchy and the acquisition of workers' rights are progressive elements. There was never a return to the old status quo in either case. Even the bloody Napoleonic battles and the repression of the Stalinist regime contributed, at least according to the Hegelian conception, to the historical development of the world Spirit and the establishment of a comparatively greater universal freedom.

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