

The Political Revolution

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1842

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We are reproached often enough that our most ambitious fantasies really go no further than to a restoration of the French Revolution: Here, among the anarchists of 1793, we sought our ideals and the Jacobins are our heroes. Indeed those who say so are mistaken: Our business then would be indeed nothing but a reaction; and a reaction has never in history brought any good with it. Are we, then, held to be blind? Are we believed to be unable to see the consequences of the Revolution? The consequence of the Revolution was the empire of Napoleon and [the Bourbon restoration with] the installation of Louis XVIII. An alert historian will perceive that even a new, purely political revolution will only arrive at the restoration of legitimacy.

Generally, there is nothing to gain from such a returning toward the so-called original good. Yet the Reformation once affirmed that it only wanted to return to the pure Christianity which had been deformed by tradition and human institution. But what resulted from this reaction? They arrived at a new religious tyranny, a Lutheran papacy which was equally zealous in its accusations against heretics.

The Reformation has given us the great precept that we cannot radically heal any evil within an organism unless we submit the entire organism to new laws of life. The Reformation wanted to undertake a transformation within religion; however, it did not know that religion will always continue in the same evil, in papacy and force. Therefore the Reformation was only fulfilled when it was preserved, cancelled, and raised to a higher level according to its essence, and when the struggle was directed against religion itself.

Similar is the case of the Revolution. As it returned toward the so-called original human rights, it wanted to bring these rights to recognition within the state; it was nothing but the attempt — as if it were possible — to make man free in the state, and its result proved that this is not possible. If revolution is to be fulfilled, then freedom must become more widely apprehended and it must slough off its exclusively political character.

We substantiate this through a scrupulous consideration of the Revolution.

The Revolution was a result of the life of the state. Revolution will never desist from uniting within itself two contradictory sides: on the one hand, privilege, law sanctified by tradition, the claim of trust and obedience — the religious side; on the other hand, the striving for freedom, which, of course, will always remain an illusion in the life of the state, the consciousness of self-reliant action, the insight into my rights as a man, which the state patronizes because it above all is that which absorbs me into a societal life of the species. These two sides were in conflict as they entered the Revolution, and the beginning of the Revolution was — as always — an attempt at mediation. The freedom party proceeded from the opinion that everyone must take part in the life of the state; it made the word ‘people’ into its pretentious display and declared the people to be the sole legitimate power in the state. Let the individual not be tolerated, calling himself to a higher traditional right, to claim title to all state power, to have exclusively the enjoyment of freedom, but then to make the living conditions of the people dependent upon his mere grace. Let there be no law to which the people’s reason has not assented. Let there be no right which does not find its confirmation in the advantage of the state and in the demand of universal equality. The freedom party was in the right. But the other party was in the right too, for itself, on its own terms. It demonstrated that state power has its natural representative in the king, that the king’s right to mastery could not be allowed, and that the law would be shaken if the inherited rights of many citizens no longer found support in him.

The beginning of the Revolution was, as said above, the constitutional mediation between both parties, a truce in which the rights of each were pared somewhat, i.e., each was done an injustice.

Kingship retained the privilege of its hereditary succession; however it was no longer appointed by God but by the people. Kingship was to be concluded, but only in accordance with the laws which had been debated by the so-called people's representatives. But then the people only half perceived their power over kingship; and to the contrary, they reduced this power of theirs to a mere illusion, since they pronounced kingship to be hereditary. The people were supposed to give themselves their laws through their representatives, but they withheld the negative vote from kingship. Kingship was weakened, for the glorious halo of its divine legitimacy had been taken from it. The people's right was ridiculed, for an exclusive, untouchable power still was to persist against it. The constitutional truce was nothing but the beginning of the dispute; it was a pause in which the people's right sought to recover from its first exertion, as kingship sought to recover from its first defeat. It was only the prospect of greater struggles: Should the stability of the state be preserved, or should the striving for freedom, which of course was still in the dark as to how it would be completely satisfied, proceed toward an ever more vigorous abrogation of what existed? These were the questions which the constitution raised. In it, the essence of the state was already halfway infringed — and that is generally the sole good of a constitution — for there still indeed remained a sort of stability in kingship, but at the same time, according to the principle, the laws had been made dependent upon the developing reason of the people. The demand of freedom, without itself being clear about it, pointed beyond the state. Yet even if the people did, through their representatives, raise themselves above the 'rights' of private property, still for all that they annulled the inherited rights of life, spiritual and worldly privileges. Where was the security of the life of the state when I was endangered in what had become sacred to me by the right of possession?

The Revolution went further. The contradiction which lies in constitutional organization made itself felt. The cause of freedom was victorious and the tenth of August¹ demonstrated the power of the people to tear down what was legitimate, stable, and, moreover, what insisted upon being maintained in the state. Kingship was abolished. The execution of Louis XVI should have taught all nations that it is a crime to be called king in a free state, and that nothing holy and inviolable may be permitted to stand before the people. Now, they believed, the free state, the true republic, had been won.

Anarchy, which is the beginning of all good things, was there at least: Events moved toward a hopeful demolition; religion was cancelled, preserved, and raised to a higher level. But that anarchy was an anarchy within the state. Could the state endure without stability, without police supervision, without stern military command? Certainly not! And that was the mistake, the only mistake, of the revolutionaries. They believed that true freedom is to be realized in the state, and they did not see that all of the endeavors of freedom since the beginning of the Revolution had proceeded, according to their nature, against the state. Robespierre surely wanted a universal equality and wanted even the sans-culotte, the have-not, to be taken into the life of the state and to have his voice in it. But could this equality have been accomplished as long as the differences in position and possession still evoked a difference in thinking and knowing? A communal education is required for a social life of equality, as is an equal opportunity to satisfy the higher demands of the spirit. But, considering the inequality of possessions, this opportunity was not

¹ On August 10, 1792, a mob sacked the Tuileries and the Assembly imprisoned the royal family, thus initiating the brief rule of Danton, which included, on September 21, 1792, the formal abolition of the monarchy and, on January 21, 1793, the execution of the king.

to be made common; thus the Revolution, because it did not go far enough, because it could not go far enough, had to go very quickly backwards. No doubt Robespierre saw himself forced in that direction. He decreed the existence of God, the reintroduction of a supreme being; and the village dwellers lit bonfires to celebrate the returned God; through all France rang the cry, 'Vive l'Eternel!' Even the desperate and magnificently striving terrorists soon had to reach their end in order to maintain equality through the guillotine. The people disentangled themselves from politics, which, after all, had not brought them any freedom; they turned back to their humdrum, everyday interests and every door was opened to reaction, i.e., to the attempt to form a state and to make it sacred again.

Therefore Napoleon's tyrannical empire was a necessary result of the inconsistent Revolution. If ever someone wanted to live in a state, then, by all means, he also had to get accustomed to its differences, its domineering police, its surveillance, its stability, its medals, and its privileges. Terrorists willingly accepted their medals from the emperor, inveterate republicans gladly allowed themselves to be made counts and dukes — and almost without becoming inconsistent; at least it was the state and the circumstances which made them inconsistent. Indeed the reaction was not satisfied even with the empire; for had it not been the Revolution which created this empire?

In 1791 a woman from a village near Paris gave birth to triplets. At their baptism she named the first People, the second Freedom, and the third King. People and Freedom died after a few days; King remained vigorous and healthy. In this little incident the course of the whole Revolution was indicated — at its end stood legitimate kingship.

And you want to assert that the political revolution is our exemplar? No; it is not our exemplar because nothing old, nothing settled, may be the goal of our efforts. If the political revolution does not know how to overcome itself, then it does not understand how to order the abstraction of the state to depart, and how to proceed to the understanding of full, communal freedom — hence it will forever arrive at legitimacy and at the tyranny of stability. What exists will always place itself above the freedom of the spirit and with perfect right, for freedom is dangerous to it.

The political revolution serves us as nothing further than as a proof that it alone does not finish the project — it is an instructive example, and that may be enough. It is a historical phenomenon, complete in itself; it cannot and may not recur as it once was.

No, says the radical; the Revolution was not complete in itself: Do you not see that the July Revolution² was the beginning of the repetition of the French Revolution in an improved way, the beginning of the now historical elaboration of that which, in its swift run, was almost a celestial apparition? We are now in the era of the constructive assembly. Everyone knows that another tenth of August will be a long time coming.

All right, we do not deny that the eternal strivings of revolution — in search of freedom — will work continuously in history; we do not deny that the course of these strivings will be similar to the course of the Revolution; but we do deny that the lessons of the Revolution will pass away in history without a trace, and we deny that the development of modern history will arrive at the same abstract goal at which the Revolution remained stationary in order to go downhill.

We believe that the new experiments with political freedom which the people of many nations perform are useful just precisely to show mankind that there is nothing of value in political

² The July Revolution was the armed revolt in Paris from July 27 to July 30, 1830, which overthrew the last Bourbon king of France, Charles X, and thus established, on August 7, 1830, the 'bourgeois monarchy' of Louis Philippe, the 'citizen king', who was on the throne at the time of this polemic.

freedom or in the exalted constitutional and republican forms of the state. The attempts at a state, for which these various peoples now toil, will finally lead them beyond the state. The very word, 'freedom', is repugnant to the state — so history will teach.

What jubilation there was in 1830 when France again received its 'freedom', when the people became aware of their own 'sovereignty', when they deposed the king who ruled by divine right and chose their own king! And what arose from that freedom? The state has asserted more and more its power to stagnate; the majority of property owners, who profit from no alteration, rule; ideas are suppressed; trials in the press persecute free expression; and the free spirit who loves the fresh air of agitation sighs under the burden of a dull, bourgeois, egoistic administration. Thereto leads a constitution, and thereto must it lead: Only give it enough time and it will become just as oppressive as any other form of the state; its laws will generally invest themselves with the tyranny of law.

Certainly time is not lacking for freedom, grown smart through experience, to rebel against these laws. Constitutional organization, however, will not sign its own death warrant; it will not voluntarily surrender its laws to the progress which criticizes them.

It is therefore clear that there can never be anything but struggle, specifically, the life-and-death struggle through which those laws will be destroyed. But supposing that freedom begins this devastating struggle, will it itself contradict itself and will it consecrate new laws? Or will it finally tear down everything completely?

The free community

You ask: 'But then what do you want? Can you proclaim for us a form of life which will be more suitable to freedom after the perishing of the institutions of the state? Can you construct for us a society in which private property will be cancelled, preserved, and raised to a higher level? Which gangs are to hold humanity together if the laws of Christian ethical life are despised, if every sense is relaxed and left merely to its arbitrary comfort, if the institution of marriage does not protect chastity, if genial family life neither makes a person's first years happy nor makes him receptive to delicate feelings, if it is not obedience to the authority of the state which checks passions? Do you offer us any other prospect besides anarchy, murder, and robbery? Show us a free, safe form of life and we would gladly agree with you.'

To this I respond quite simply that it is not our business to construct. Indeed, can any new crop sprout up as long as the old weeds thrive luxuriantly? Thus you must first exterminate the old weeds. And surely no new thoughts can come into the world before the old ones have been overcome, can they? Do you know that you are like a group of Ph.D.s who believe that we want to give the people a philosophy with propositions, conclusions, and concepts? Nonsense! In any case, our philosophy exists only for the purpose of clearing away the traditional ideas of belief from human heads; thus, just at first, we can do nothing further than to criticize political forms, political concepts, and the religio-political trust, and to be satisfied if our critique is accurate and if it has proven that it is a contradiction to want to win freedom within the context of existing forms. Then in spite of all that, everyone and his brother may come and say: 'But my God, there must be religion, there must be a state, there must be righteousness, there must be law.' This outcry does not bother us, since it proceeds against critique out of fear, out of the presuppositions of

faithfulness; there is no other way to refute it than by referring to history. Now those people are just naturally deaf to deductive arguments for a rational freedom.

‘No private property, no privilege, no difference in status, no usurpatory regime.’ So reads our pronunciamiento; it is negative, but history will write its affirmation.

Therefore you ask me what ‘the free community’ is, what it looks like, how it is possible. To that I can give you no answer, for who is permitted to think beyond his own time? Our time, though, is only critical and destructive.

You question further: ‘But then what do you want to do? Nothing depends on forms, everything depends only on people. You want to make people free and rational very well, existing institutions are oppressive only because of the wickedness of mankind, but surely good people will live freely within them. Imagine, for example, a wise, good king: Will anyone experience any tyranny under him? Imagine an administration composed of rational men: Will it restrict the freedom of the spirit in any way, and will it fail to know how to insure that no-one starves in physical or emotional need? Imagine that all men are good; then can their marriages be unhappy? Will they educate their children to be narrow-minded and commonplace fellows? Forms are of no importance; people are the main thing and those forms are only necessary in order to check the human propensity to commit crimes.’

That sounds very convincing, except that it is only sentimental chatter. Forms are not at all accidental; they are creations of the human spirit and therefore they are only suitable to this or that determined content of spirit. If people change, then the forms of life must also change. We set ourselves directly against our determined institutions, because the spirit of non-freedom (*Unfreiheit*) manifests itself in them. We do not bear ill will toward kings, but toward kingship; strip this man of the glitter of the throne, and he will be harmless. We do not accuse wicked married couples, but marriage, the vulgar exclusivity, the religious control of the form, the reciprocal constraint, the dominion which one sex exercises over the other, the aristocratic use which one intends to make of the other. You say that a wise administration will rule wisely. Very smart! But we say that it lies in the nature of administration to assume police supervision and to resist critique.

Obviously, for you, forms are only something external, because you consider them superficial. But we seek to fathom their character and to prove that they are not harmonious with the demand of freedom. Forms which have arisen out of egoism will create, in their turn, as long as they exist, egoistic people. Therefore they are not of no importance.

The human propensity to commit crimes! You must know that crimes are always a result, a product, of these determined conditions; crimes are the complements of institutions, their reverse image. Robbery and murder are a result of private property, because this possession itself is a kind of robbery; and the egoism of privilege commits, not daily, but hourly, the murder of the soul of a poor, oppressed person, deprived of cultural sophistication. So-called immorality is nothing but a reaction which natural freedom instigates against the artful and supernatural pretensions of Christian ethical life. Prostitution is a result of marriage, because...

If this determined possession is for one, then the necessary complement of that is that it is for all who feel themselves wronged by it, who hold it to be usurpation, and who seek to appropriate it.

If this woman is for one, then there will be other women who are for all.

Here you interrupt me and say: ‘Then your whole plan for the improvement of the world thus amounts to you wanting to make us all into thieves, and all women into prostitutes; you want

to abolish robbery while you make it universal, and abolish prostitution while you transform it from the exception into the rule.’

Now, now, I have already told you truly that the existing relationships themselves generate the crimes which correspond to them. Whether these relationships will now perish through these so-called crimes; whether, for example, private property in a general theft, marriage in a general prostitution, will find their ends — who can say? But the one will cease to be only with the other.

‘Do you therefore want,’ you say further, ‘to remedy by general murder the aristocrat’s murder of the poor person’s soul?’

Favete Unguis?³ When kings lead entire nations into war, are murder and manslaughter then contained in their plan? Have they not rather higher aims; are there not principles in the service of which the peoples’ blood is shed? You are much too willing to make us into preachers of the universal bloodbath. And we are indeed nothing but the servants of thought who, as honestly and as truthfully as possible, seek to articulate what critique says to them. Do you want to hold kings accountable for every drop of blood which has flowed from their slaughters? No, here you are not sentimental, here you unfeelingly tally up the thousands who have fallen in battle. Indeed you celebrate properly your lord’s great military glory. But if blood flows in the service of freedom, or in the struggle of principles, then do you want to hold these things accountable? The crowns of your kings always radiate beams of pure splendor, and their wars may have cost just as many human lives; but freedom and its axioms are to be stained forthwith if egoism and human obstinacy force them to do battle! If it is true that no great cause can succeed without thoroughly vigorous strife, without blood, then, by all means, history accuses any such cause of moving forward according to these laws, or, better, history complains to you about the human half-deafness which is insensitive to the voice of freedom and reason.

‘And then here we stand again,’ you say, ‘and we still do not know what you understand by your free community.’ But I want to tell you of something distinct from the life of the state.

Only with revolution, which begins the destruction of the forms of the state, does genuine history commence, because here it becomes conscious. Although peoples have hitherto comported themselves religiously, even over against history, and, because they did not understand history, have seen in it the governance of a divine spirit; although they were unconsciously driven forward, and were at one time the plaything of kings, then of priests, then of a blind religious fanaticism; we know now that it is human beings alone who make history. The modern pressure to busy themselves with politics — what is it other than the consciousness that history is something human, communal, and that nothing higher drives them except the spirit of society?

From now on history is a self-conscious history, because mankind knows the principles by which it moves forward, because mankind has history’s goal — freedom — in sight.

Mere political curiosity is already properly hostile to the state, since a person signifies thereby that he no longer is fully confident to let only the holy power of the state conduct business, and that he wants, in spite of all that may happen, to be present at hand with his insight.

And that is the characteristic of the free community. It knows what it is doing.

On this account the designation ‘people’ really no longer fits it; ‘people’ is a political concept, a word of the heart; ‘the people’ is the trusting flock which allows itself to be led. What prevents a tyrant from perpetrating his deeds in the name of the people? What prevents a people

³ Horace, Odes, Book III, Ode i, line 2. Literally, ‘Favor your tongues’, a call for the laymen or the uninitiated in a religious order to use their silence to avoid saying anything foolish, blasphemous, or ill-omened.

from standing up for and shedding blood for a determined reigning family? Thus, the concept of freedom is not yet included in the political concept of people. Indeed, the people is merely this external union, this messy bundle of conditions and individuals, begotten on this determined ground, grown up in this climate, according to these laws. Indeed, for the most part, the people finds its representation outwardly only in a certain national pride, in national fads.

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Retrieved on May 26, 2011 from www.marxists.org
Source: *The Young Hegelians, An anthology*, edited by Lawrence S. Stepelevich , Cambridge University Press, 1983 p.263–274; first published in *Critique's Quarrel with Church and State*, 1842, by Edgar Bauer.

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