

Historical Rebellion, Albert Camus

Freedom, "that terrible word inscribed on the chariot of the storm,"¹ is the motivating principle of all revolutions. Without it, justice seems inconceivable to the rebel's mind. There comes a time, however, when justice demands the suspension of freedom.

Then terror, on a grand or small scale, makes its appearance to consummate the revolution. Every act of rebellion expresses a nostalgia for innocence and an appeal to the essence of being.

1 Philothee O'Neddy.

But one day nostalgia takes up arms and assumes the responsibility of total guilt; in other words, adopts murder and violence. The servile rebellions, the regicide revolutions, and those of the twentieth century have thus, consciously, accepted a burden of guilt which increased in proportion to the degree of liberation they proposed to introduce.

This contradiction, which has become only too obvious, prevents our contemporary revolutionaries from displaying that aspect of happiness and optimism which shone forth from the faces and the speeches of the members of the Constituent Assembly in 1789. Is this contradiction inevitable?

Does it characterize or betray the value of rebellion? These questions are bound to arise about revolution as they are bound to arise about metaphysical rebellion. Actually, revolution is only the logical consequence of metaphysical rebellion, and we shall discover, in our analysis of the revolutionary movement, the same desperate and bloody effort to affirm the dignity of man in defiance of the things that deny its existence.

The revolutionary spirit thus undertakes the defense of that part of man which refuses to submit. In other words, it tries to assure him his crown in the realm of time, and, rejecting God, it chooses history with an apparently inevitable logic.

In theory, the word revolution retains the meaning that it has in astronomy. It is a movement that describes a complete circle, that leads from one form of government to another after a complete transition. A change of regulations concerning property without a corresponding change of government is not a revolution, but a reform. There is no kind of economic revolution, whether its methods are violent or pacific, which is not, at the same time, manifestly political.

Revolution can already be distinguished, in this way, from rebellion. The warning given to Louis XVI: "No, sire, this is not a rebellion, it is a revolution," accents the essential difference. It means precisely that "it is the absolute certainty of a new form of government." Rebellion is, by nature, limited in scope. It is no more than an incoherent pronouncement.

Revolution, on the contrary, originates in the realm of ideas. Specifically, it is the injection of ideas into historical experience, while rebellion is only the movement that leads from individual experience into the realm of ideas.

While even the collective history of a movement of rebellion is always that of a fruitless struggle with facts, of an obscure protest which involves neither methods nor reasons, a revolution is an attempt to shape actions to ideas, to fit the world into a theoretic frame. That is why rebellion kills men while revolution destroys both men and principles. But, for the same reasons, it can be said that there has not yet been a revolution in the course of history.

There could only be one, and that would be the definitive revolution. The movement that seems to complete the circle already begins to describe another at the precise moment when the new government is formed. The anarchists, with

Varlet as their leader, were made well aware of the fact that government and revolution are incompatible in the direct sense.

"It implies a contradiction," says Proud-hon, "that a government could ever be revolutionary, for the very simple reason that it is the government." Now that the experiment has been made, let us qualify that statement by adding that a government can be revolutionary only in opposition to other governments. Revolutionary governments are obliged, most of the time, to be war governments.

The more extensive the revolution, the more considerable the chances of the war that it implies. The society born of the revolution of 1789 wanted to fight for Europe. The society born of the 1917 revolution is fighting for universal dominion. Total revolution ends by demanding we shall see why the control of the world. While waiting for this to happen, if happen it must, the history of man, in one sense, is the sum total of his successive rebellions.

In other words, the movement of transition which can be clearly expressed in terms of space is only an approximation in terms of time. What was devoutly called, in the nineteenth century, the progressive emancipation of the human race appears, from the outside, like an uninterrupted series of rebellions, which overreach themselves and try to find their formulation in ideas, but which have not yet reached the point of definitive revolution where everything in heaven and on earth would be stabilized.

A superficial examination seems to imply, rather than any real emancipation, an affirmation of mankind by man, an affirmation increasingly broad in scope, but always incomplete. In fact, if there had ever been one real revolution, there would be no more history. Unity would have been achieved, and death would have been satiated.

That is why all revolutionaries finally aspire to world unity and act as though they believed that history was concluded. The originality of twentieth century revolution lies in the fact that, for the first time, it openly claims to realize the ancient dream of Anarchasis Cloots of unity of the human race and, at the same time, the definitive consummation of history.

Just as the movement of rebellion led to the point of "All or Nothing" and just as metaphysical rebellion demanded the unity of the world, the twentieth-century revolutionary movement, when it arrived at the most obvious conclusions of its logic, insisted with threats of force on arrogating to itself the whole of history. Rebellion is therefore compelled, on pain of appearing futile or out of date to become revolutionary.

It no longer suffices for the rebel to deify himself like Stirner or to look to his own salvation by adopting a certain attitude of mind. The species must be deified, as Nietzsche attempted to do, and his ideal of the superman must be adopted so as to assure salvation for all as Ivan Karamazov wanted.

For the first time, the Possessed appear on the scene and proceed to give the answer to one of the secrets of the times: the identity of reason and of the will to power. Now that God is dead, the world must be changed and organized by the forces at man's disposal. The force of imprecation alone is not enough; weapons are needed and totality must be conquered. Even revolution, particularly revolution, which claims to be materialist, is only a limitless metaphysical crusade.

But can totality claim to be unity? That is the question which this book must answer. So far we can only say that the purpose of this analysis is not to give, for the hundredth time, a description of the revolutionary phenomenon, nor once more to examine the historic or economic causes of great revolutions. Its purpose is to discover in certain revolutionary data the logical sequence, the explanations, and the invariable themes of metaphysical rebellion.

The majority of revolutions are shaped by, and derive their originality from,

murder. All, or almost all, have been homicidal. But some, in addition, have practiced regicide and deicide. Just as the history of metaphysical rebellion began with Sade, so our real inquiry only begins with his contemporaries, the regicides, who attack the incarnation of divinity without yet daring to destroy the principle of eternity. (But before this the history of mankind also demonstrates the equivalent of the first movement of rebellion the rebellion of the slave.)

When a slave rebels against his master, the situation presented is of one man pitted against another, under a cruel sky, far from the exalted realms of principles. The final result is merely the murder of a man. The servile rebellions, peasant risings, beggar outbreaks, rustic revolts, all advance the concept of a principle of equality, a life for a life, which despite every kind of mystification and audacity will always be found in the purest manifestations of the revolutionary spiritâ "Russian terrorism in 1905, for example.

Spartacus' rebellion, which took place as the ancient world was coming to an end, a few decades before the Christian era, is an excellent illustration of this point.

First we note that this is a rebellion of gladiatorsâ "that is to say, of slaves consecrated to single combat and condemned, for the delectation of their masters, to kill or be killed. Beginning with seventy men, this rebellion ended with an army of seventy thousand insurgents, which crushed the best Roman legions and advanced through Italy to march on the Eternal City itself. However, as Andre Prudhommeaux remarks (in The Tragedy of Sparta-cus), this rebellion introduced no new principle into Roman life.

The proclamation issued by Spartacus goes no farther than to offer "equal rights" to the slaves. The transition from fact to right, which we analyzed in the first stage of rebellion, is, indeed, the only logical acquisition that one can find on this level of rebellion. The insurgent rejects slavery and affirms his equality with his master. He wants to be master in his turn.

Spartacus' rebellion is a continual illustration of this principle of positive claims. The slave army liberates the slaves and immediately hands over their former masters to them in bondage. According to one tradition, of doubtful veracity it is true, gladiatorial combats were even organized between several hundred Roman citizens, while the slaves sat in the grandstands delirious with joy and excitement.

But to kill men leads to nothing but killing more men. For one principle to triumph, another principle must be overthrown. The city of light of which Spartacus dreamed could only have been built on the ruins of eternal Rome, of its institutions and of its gods. Spartacus' army marches to lay siege to a Rome paralyzed with fear at the prospect of having to pay for its crimes.

At the decisive moment, however, within sight of the sacred walls, the army halts and wavers, as if it were retreating before the principles, the institutions, the city of the gods. When these had been destroyed, what could be put in their place except the brutal desire for justice, the wounded and exacerbated love that until this moment had kept these wretches on their feet.²

² Spartacus' rebellion recapitulates the program of the servile rebellions that preceded it. But this program is limited to the distribution of land and the abolition of slavery. It is not directly concerned with the gods of the city.

In any case, the army retreated without having fought, and then made the curious move of deciding to return to the place where the slave rebellion originated, to retrace the long road of its victories and to return to Sicily. It was as though these outcasts, forever alone and helpless before the great tasks that awaited them and too daunted to assail the heavens, returned to what was purest and most heartening in their history, to the land of their first awakening, where it was easy and right to die.

Then began their defeat and martyrdom. Before the last battle, Spartacus crucified a Roman citizen to show his men the fate that was in store for them. During the battle, Spartacus himself tried with frenzied determination, the symbolism of which is obvious, to reach Crassus, who was commanding the Roman legions. He wanted to perish, but in single combat with the man who symbolized, at that moment, every Roman master; it was his dearest wish to die, but in absolute equality. He did not reach Crassus: principles wage war at a distance and the Roman general kept himself apart.

Spartacus died, as he wished, but at the hands of mercenaries, slaves like himself, who killed their own freedom with his. In revenge for the one crucified citizen, Crassus crucified thousands of slaves. The six thousand crosses which, after such a just rebellion, staked out the road from Capua to Rome demonstrated to the servile crowd that there is no equality in the world of power and that the masters calculate, at a usurious rate, the price of their own blood.

The cross is also Christ's punishment. One might imagine that He chose a slave's punishment, a few years later, only so as to reduce the enormous distance that henceforth would separate humiliated humanity from the implacable face of the Master. He intercedes, He submits to the most extreme injustice so that rebellion shall not divide the world in two, so that suffering will also light the way to heaven and preserve it from the curses of mankind.

What is astonishing in the fact that the revolutionary spirit, when it wanted to affirm the separation of heaven and earth, should begin by disembodiment the divinity by killing His representatives on earth? In certain aspects, the period of rebellions comes to an end in 1793 and revolutionary times begin "on a scaffold."³

³ In that this book is not concerned with the spirit of rebellion inside Christianity, the Reformation has no place here, nor the numerous rebellions against ecclesiastical authority which preceded it. But we can say, at least, that the Reformation prepares the way for Jacobinism and in one sense initiates the reforms that 1789 carries out.

The end