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Introduction

Rachel Hammersley

'Revolution' is a concept that occupies a key position within the political culture of the modern world. Born out of the struggles in the Netherlands and England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the modern concept of revolution grew to maturity in the eighteenth century, being shaped and coloured by events in North America and Europe. Indeed, the revolution in France formed the basis of an archetype. The concept continued to be deployed and developed in the nineteenth century, being strongly influenced by the events of 1848 and by the development of socialist and anarchist ideas. A fresh spate of revolutions at the beginning of the twentieth century gave new fuel and direction to the concept. The Russian Revolution, in particular, provided another influential model and greatly boosted the importance of Marxism (both as a political doctrine and as a tool of historical analysis). Indeed, revolution came to be so closely linked to Marxism that, with the decline of the latter in the late twentieth century, observers could be forgiven for predicting the concomitant demise of the concept of revolution itself. Yet, just like the early years of the twentieth century, so those of the twenty-first have witnessed a new burst of revolutionary activity with the Occupy movements in New York, London and a number of other cities across the globe; the Arab Spring; and even a series of events that have been explicitly labelled as revolutions including: the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003); the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004); the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005) and the Green Revolution in Iran (2009).

This recent resurgence of revolutionary activity demonstrates the continuing relevance of the concept of revolution to the contemporary world, thereby reinforcing the importance of a proper understanding of the theory and practice of revolutions. Moreover, by extending both the chronological and geographical reach of the concept, these recent examples underline the fact that revolution is a remarkably flexible idea that has been adapted to a wide variety of contexts. There is, therefore, particular justification for adopting an avowedly historical approach to the study of revolutions; one that pays attention to contextual

nuances and differences, as well as to similarities, and also to the connections between different revolutions and revolutionaries.

While revolution as a collective phenomenon has most commonly been approached from a theoretical social science perspective, the idea of adopting a more empirical, historical approach is not new. In 1979 such a transformation was proclaimed by Theda Skocpol in her ground-breaking, but controversial, book *States and Social Revolutions*.¹ Skocpol's structural and state-focused perspective was designed as a corrective to previous sociological accounts and her 'comparative historical analysis' was intended to offer explanations of revolutions that were both 'historically grounded and generalizable beyond unique cases'.² However, as well as provoking criticisms from both social scientists and historians, Skocpol's structural approach meant that she paid little attention to the important role that ideas play within revolutionary movements. Furthermore, despite a recent resurgence of interest in intellectual history, which has even resulted in the production of a number of intellectual histories of individual revolutions, most historically focused works comparing revolutions published since 1979 have also neglected the role of ideas.³

This volume takes a rather different approach. In the spirit of the series to which it belongs, the emphasis is on addressing the history of revolutions by focusing on key texts – the ideas they presented and the role they played – rather than focusing primarily on providing narrative accounts of particular revolutions. The contributors were asked to select a short extract from an important revolutionary text and to use it as a springboard to offer a fresh interpretation of the text and the ideas of its author or authors. The earliest text to be analysed here dates from 1647 and the latest one from 1974. While the term revolution only took on its modern meaning in the late seventeenth century, that definition owed much to the events of the mid-century English Revolution and consequently it is an appropriate starting point. Within this time frame, particular attention has been given to those revolutions and revolutionary thinkers that did most to give shape and direction to the concept of revolution. At the same time, the range of texts examined is deliberately broad. The volume encompasses revolutionary documents (such as the Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen); speeches and pamphlets written by revolutionary activists in the heat of revolution or with a view to influencing events (e.g. Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès's *What is the Third Estate?*, Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* and Deng Xiaoping's 'Three Worlds' speech to the UN); and more reflective or philosophical works by leading political thinkers and theorists who have strongly influenced revolutions (for instance, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's

Social Contract; Alexander Herzen's *The Development of Revolutionary Ideas in Russia*; and Peter Kropotkin's *Modern Science and Anarchism*). Together, therefore, the chapters offer an overview of the ways in which the concept of revolution has changed and developed since the seventeenth century and explore its adaptation to fit different circumstances and its development by particular individuals.

Interestingly, the perspective offered by this textual approach is rather different from the focus on definitions, models and theories that tends to arise from conventional narrative accounts of multiple revolutions. First, a textual approach draws into focus the close relationship between the enacting of revolutionary events and the development (and even transformation) of political language and key political concepts. Second, this approach highlights the extent to which later revolutionaries were influenced by earlier revolutionary events, models and ideas. Finally, it turns the spotlight on key issues that were debated by leading revolutionary theorists and practitioners, some of which were only important at particular moments in time but others of which have been of perennial concern to revolutionaries from the seventeenth to the twentieth century.

Before exploring each of these three areas in a little more detail, it is perhaps appropriate to point to a further methodological issue raised by these contributions. No doubt influenced by the Cambridge School of political thought, there is widespread emphasis here on the need to read the documents and texts in their historical context and an acknowledgement that later interpretations have often distorted the aims and intentions of the authors and distanced us from the ways in which the texts would have been understood by their immediate audiences. Moreover, several authors – particularly Robert G. Parkinson and Julia Gaffield, who deal with the American and Haitian declarations of independence respectively – emphasize the fact that certain documents were written for multiple audiences and that reading them with an eye to only one of these can distort our understanding. Similarly, several commentators, including Parkinson and Lars Lih, in his essay on Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?*, emphasize that the interpretation of a text can differ depending on which particular passages are focused on.

The textual approach adopted here highlights the frequency and importance of linguistic transformation as a common accompaniment to revolutionary action. Rachel Foxley, in her chapter on *The Agreement of the People*, argues that while the Levellers did not see themselves as revolutionaries, we might identify them as such on the grounds that their understanding of key concepts such as rights and equality challenged traditional views and pointed in new

directions. Moreover, Leveller understandings of both these terms were taken up and developed by later revolutionaries. As I argue in my chapter on *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, James Harrington was very deliberate and self-conscious in making his own linguistic transformations – indeed, I suggest that we might see him as seeking to produce a revolutionary political language to match the revolutionary circumstances through which he was living. Similarly, Tom Rodgers, in his account of *The Federalist Papers*, suggests that the transformation of language was part of the revolutionary process for James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, with conventional understandings of liberty and authority changing as a result of the American experience. Moreover, this kind of linguistic transformation was not restricted to the early years of revolutionary thought. Lih demonstrates how Lenin very deliberately took terms that were used by his opponents and transformed them, adapting them to his own purposes and ends. Similarly, Jonathan J. Howlett demonstrates that Liu Shaoqi's use of Confucian rhetoric in *How to Be a Good Communist* was a deliberate rhetorical ploy, and a means of promoting the Marxist–Leninist message, rather than an endorsement of Confucian ideology itself.

In line with this emphasis on revolutionary language, a number of the thinkers discussed here can be seen as contributing towards the transformation of certain key revolutionary concepts. Equality is one revolutionary idea that comes in for considerable examination in the chapters that follow, particularly during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Several thinkers during this period seem to shift the concept of equality in new directions. This is true of the Levellers, but also of Harrington and of Sieyès (in Michael Sonenscher's account), both of whom are presented as enacting a shift away from hereditary rule as an acceptable system and towards greater emphasis on meritocracy, social mobility and election. At the same time, both Parkinson and Hunt make the point that the promise of equality enshrined in key constitutional documents was sometimes qualified and often not honoured in practice.

Rights is another revolutionary concept that provoked much debate and has undergone various transformations. The shift from historic rights to natural rights was hinted at by the Levellers and became more entrenched during the course of the eighteenth century. In Kent Wright's essay on the Abbé Mably, for example, he refers to Mably's merging of republicanism with natural rights doctrine. However, the shift was by no means uncomplicated. As Richard Whatmore indicates, in his essay on *The Social Contract*, Rousseau followed Thomas Hobbes in seeing rights as derived not from nature but from convention. And even by the end of the eighteenth century the shift from rights as embodied

in existing laws, traditions and customs to universal and abstract human rights was not complete. While this shift is announced in theory in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, Hunt argues that in practice the French never quite moved away from the earlier understanding, and Gaffield demonstrates, through the Haitian example, that revolutions and revolutionary documents do not always work to protect individual rights. Similarly, Greg Claeys challenges our view of Thomas Paine as a thoroughly modern thinker by demonstrating the extent to which his understanding of rights in *The Rights of Man* was embedded in an older religious language.

Finally, the texts examined here reveal fundamental transformations in the understanding of the very notion of revolution itself. With regard to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the key question is whether innovation was central to revolution. This issue is explored by Foxley in her account of the Levellers and by Parkinson in his examination of the Declaration of Independence. In both cases there is a sense of the actors doing something innovatory or revolutionary, but not really wanting to admit to doing so and therefore appealing back to an earlier golden age or to existing privileges to justify their actions. Claeys's account of Paine's debt to older, more traditional ideas is again relevant here. The key shift in this debate seems to have taken place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Marisa Linton presents Maximilian Robespierre's understanding of revolution as based precisely on the idea of forging a new path and not having to rely on historical precedent (e.g., his use of ruthless tactics is justified on this basis). A similar view is also offered in Julian Wright's account of *The Communist Manifesto*. Marx and Engels are presented as being 'revolutionary' precisely because their ideas are at odds with their age and yet this also means that they were at odds with other supposedly 'revolutionary' attitudes of the time.

This sense of there being multiple understandings of revolution circulating by the mid-nineteenth century is also worthy of note. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the understanding of revolution was largely political, though, as Mark Knights makes clear in his chapter on Sacheverell, 1688 can also be seen as having been revolutionary not just in political terms but also in other areas including finance and culture. The French Revolution and the development of socialist and Marxist ideas in the nineteenth century brought a new shift towards an emphasis on social and economic transformations, but as Christopher Read and Lih show in their examinations of the writings of George Plekanov and Lenin, respectively, the political notion did not go away and its importance was reasserted by various revolutionary writers. Moreover,

at the same time as Marx and Engels were seeking to offer a more precise and narrow understanding of revolution, Alexander Herzen, as Derek Offord makes clear, was shunning the idea of a narrow political, social or economic account and arguing in favour of a much broader ideological understanding of the term. By the twentieth century a further element is added to the mix with both Frantz Fanon and Mao emphasizing the importance of cultural transformation for the idea of revolution, as the essays by Xavier Guégan and Daniel Leese make clear.

While this book is not explicitly structured around revolutionary influences, the textual approach means that these sorts of connection are given more prominence than in conventional narrative accounts. This approach offers an ideal way into thinking about how different revolutionary thinkers and actors in the past have understood the concept of revolution, but it also highlights the extent to which earlier models and ideas were drawn upon by later revolutionaries.

A large number of the thinkers discussed in the chapters that follow were clearly aware of earlier revolutionary events and sought to learn from them. This is true right across the chronological period covered by the book. Kent Wright demonstrates the importance to the Abbé Mably of the earlier revolutions that had occurred in the Dutch Republic and in England and Mably dramatizes his intention to draw directly on previous experience by using a British Commonwealthman as one of his main characters. The French Revolution of 1789 is clearly an important precedent for a broad swathe of later revolutionaries, including Marx and Engels, Herzen, Kropotkin and even Fanon, while the Russian Revolution was an important model for Chinese revolutionaries (as Howlett and Leese make clear). Revolutionary documents also became important templates for later revolutionaries (Gaffield, for example, notes the importance of the American Declaration of Independence as a model for the later Haitian version). However, it is important to remember that influence was not always positive. As George Crowder indicates, Kropotkin's interest in 1789, 1848 and 1871 was primarily driven by his belief that their failure could be attributed to the revolutionaries' excessive reliance on the state, a point which he then used to justify his alternative anarchist understanding of revolution. Moreover, links between revolutions could also be made by counter-revolutionaries. Sacheverell, as Knights makes clear, drew a direct link between 1640 and 1688 and used the memory of the former to tarnish the reputation of the latter. In addition, several revolutionaries were influenced not simply by past revolutions but also by those through which they lived themselves. For

example, Wright demonstrates how the revolutionary theories of Marx and Engels changed as a result of their own lived experience of 1848. There is further complexity too as regards the place of the English Revolution in all this. It was, of course, not described as a revolution by contemporaries, and historians ever since have debated the applicability of the term 'revolution' to the period. And yet, as Foxley argues, it did contribute to the development of certain ideas, institutions and principles that were central to later revolutions. Foxley is careful not to imply that this was the result of the direct influence of Leveller ideas on later revolutionaries. Rather she makes the more interesting suggestion that, given the parallels, later thinkers looking back at the English Revolution, and especially at the Levellers and the *Agreement of the People*, were inclined to view them through the prism of subsequent events. This suggests that the influence of later revolutions on the historiography of earlier ones may be as important as the influence that one revolutionary moment exerts on another.

It was not only revolutionary models that influenced revolutionaries. The ideas of earlier thinkers could also provide an important source of inspiration. Mably explicitly set out the idea of a political revolution and the form it would take several decades before the French Revolution broke out, not only predicting but also endorsing the opening stages of that revolution when it occurred. Similarly, Offord demonstrates how Herzen helped to lay the foundations for Russian populism and for Russia's independent path to socialism, and Lih stresses the crucial importance of Plekhanov's ideas for Lenin. And, of course, Marxist ideas were of crucial importance to the revolutionary events in Russia, and Marxist-Leninist ideas for China. However, the relationship between revolutionary theory and revolutionary action was often complex. For example, Whatmore notes that although French revolutionaries drew directly on the ideas of Rousseau, he had not favoured revolutionary solutions and anyway regarded France as not at all suitable for the adoption of his ideas. Similarly, in the case of both Russia and China, there was much debate among revolutionaries about the extent to which they could or should follow Marxist theory or how far they should take an independent route more appropriate to their own particular circumstances.

As well as highlighting the importance of linguistic transformation to the history of revolution and drawing attention to what various revolutionaries learnt from each other, the texts analysed here also suggest certain perennial issues that seem to preoccupy revolutionaries in different times and places. The first of these is the tension between ambitions and theories, on the one hand, and practical reality, on the other. Parkinson, Hunt and Gaffield all present

the revolutionary documents that they have studied as making bold promises that cannot necessarily be fulfilled in practice and as containing within them inherent paradoxes and tensions that create problems for years to come. This was not just a feature of constitutional documents. Wright, for example, notes the ambiguity at the heart of Marx and Engels' seminal text.

Another perennial issue that seems to trouble the revolutionary writers discussed here is the question of whether revolution needs to be imposed and directed from above or whether it should be allowed to spring up from below and what the balance should be between leaders and the masses during its subsequent course. Several earlier thinkers – including Harrington, Mably and the Federalists – seem to see leadership and considerable control from above as essential, and Rousseau and Sieyès used the distinction between sovereignty and government as a means of structuring the balance between leaders and citizens and demarcating the functions of each. By contrast, Kropotkin offers the most extreme argument in favour of a spontaneous uprising, insisting that a revolution should not be led from above. Similarly, the importance of popular uprising is also emphasized by both Mao and Fanon. It is difficult to unpick the exact relationship between underlying forces and human agency in the thought of Marx and Engels, but revolutionaries inspired by Marx, starting with Plekhanov and Lenin, emphasized the need for a party and the crucial role of the intelligentsia in organizing and leading it. Other thinkers across the timeframe explored here express a related concern with how to ensure a certain kind of behaviour on the part of both the leaders (Robespierre) and the population (Liu Shaoqi and Mao).

More than anything else, adopting a textual approach to multiple revolutions demonstrates the complex, multilayered and, most importantly, constantly changing nature of the concept of revolution between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries. Not only has the meaning and understanding of the term revolution itself been adapted and developed, narrowed and expanded, during the course of these centuries, but so also have a host of other related political concepts and ideas. Yet, the evidence provided here also implies that it would be wrong to suggest that the changing nature of the concept should lead us to conclude that it has no meaning or to suggest that, for example, Mably's understanding of revolution has so little in common with Mao's understanding that the same term should not be applied to them both. It is clear that revolutionary thinkers from as early as the eighteenth century were very conscious of past revolutionary events and ideas and that they drew on them (albeit in complex ways) in their own writings. There is therefore a

clear sense if not of a revolutionary tradition then at least of a revolutionary conversation or series of conversations that have been taking place since at least the seventeenth century, and the writers discussed here have certainly been major contributors to that conversation. Moreover, it is also clear that while individuals and circumstances have changed since the seventeenth century at least some of the issues facing revolutionaries remain exactly the same. The remarkable persistence of concerns about the relationship between revolutionary leadership and spontaneous revolutionary action by the people is perhaps the most obvious example. Given this, and the fact that the twenty-first century has already seen a number of ‘revolutionary’ uprisings, it seems likely that revolution as a concept will remain relevant for many years to come, though of course when it comes to predicting in exactly what ways the concept of revolution will develop over the course of the twenty-first century it seems wise to invoke what was long believed to be Zhou Enlai’s response when asked about the impact of the French Revolution, namely that it is ‘too early to say’.⁴