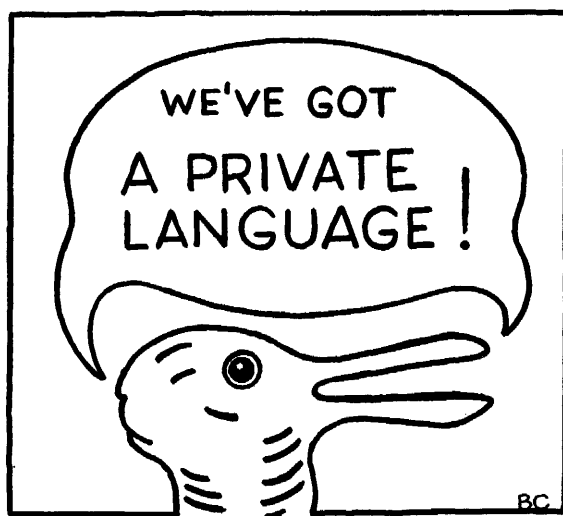


became more apparent to him. Tom never acted wrongly 'without feeling and suffering for it'.

- 18 It will perhaps be evident to some readers that I am making a point parallel to the point which leads Wittgenstein to reject the possibility of 'private' assignments of names to referents. The parallel is complex, and hardly worth drawing out at length here.
- 19 *Tom Jones*, Book VI, Chapter 1.
- 20 Thus, see for example *An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men*, Works Henley edn. v.XIV, p283: 'Thus, while the crafty and designing part of mankind, consulting only their own separate advantage, endeavour to maintain one constant imposition on others, the whole world becomes a vast masquerade, where the greatest part appear disguised under false vizors and habits; a very few only showing their own faces, who become by so doing, the astonishment and ridicule of all the rest.'
- 21 There is located somewhere here a major dividing line between Puritanism and other versions of the Christian tradition. Puritanism is, in effect, the view that a man should want nothing but to be morally justified. Compare this with Traherne's 'Your Enjoyment of the World is never right, till you so Esteem it, that every thing in it, is more your Treasure, than a King's Exchequer full of Gold and Silver' (*Centuries* I.25), and the following:
- 'Socrates was wont to say, *They are most happy and nearest the Gods that need nothing*. And coming once up into the Exchange at Athens where they that Traded Asked him, What will you Buy; what do you lack? After he had Gravely Walkt up into the Middle, spreading forth his Hands and turning about, *Good Gods*, saith he, *who would hav thought there were so many Things in the World which I do not want...* Socrates, perhaps being an Heathen, knew not that all things proceeded from God to Man, and by Man returned to God: but we that know it: must need All things as God doth that we may receive them with Joy, and liv in His Image.' (*Centuries* I.40)
- 22 See, for example, W. R. Irwin, *The Making of Jonathan Wild*, Columbia University Press, 1941, Ch.2.
- 23 *Tom Jones*, Introduction to Book XV.
- 24 *Tom Jones*, Book IV, ch.6.
- 25 *Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men*, Works, Henley edn.v.XIV, p285.



On the ethics of revolution

Kai Nielson

It was said long ago that politics is the art of the possible. That does not suppress our initiative: since we do not know the future, we have only, after carefully weighing everything, to push in our direction. But that reminds us of the gravity of politics; it obliges us, instead of simply forcing our will, to look hard among the facts for the shape they should take.

Merleau-Ponty

When a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the market of the world and the modern powers of production, and subjected them to the common control of the most advanced peoples, then only will human progress cease to resemble that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain.

Marx

I

What are the degrees of moral outrage by a government which justify resistance by violent, and also by illegal, means? One would be where our basic liberties were being taken from us and where we had no effective legal or non-violent means of redress. If we were deprived or where being deprived of such basic liberties as freedom of speech and assembly, the right to stand for public office, liberty of conscience and freedom of thought, including the right to print, circulate and promulgate our beliefs, and there was no effective legal or non-violent, non-legal way, such as by civil disobedience, to correct this situation, then we would be justified in violent rebellion or revolution, if we could not by so acting bring on even a greater injustice and/or more suffering all around.

However, while this is one standard situation in which persons would be justified in resistance to a government - indeed here a tyranny - by violent means, this is not the only situation in which revolutionary activity would be justified. The other situation is where one class, a ruling, small elite, runs society (including, of course, the government) in its own interests and exploits another class or group making up the vast majority of the people. In short, in Marx's terms where we have a ruling class of capitalists exploiting and oppressing proletarians (who are the vast majority of the people), then, when they reasonably can without bringing about even greater all around misery and injustice, they should make a socialist revolution.

The qualification in both cases about 'greater injustice and/or more suffering all around' and 'even greater all around misery and injustice' is crucial and we should be quite clear about what is intended here. I think, as Marcuse has recognized, that here we must make rough historical calculations about the consequences of revolution and about the consequences of continued acquiescence in an exploitative and repressive status quo.¹ My claim is that, where practically feasible, a socialist revolution would be justified where by making it less suffering for the mass of mankind would obtain and greater satisfaction of desire would occur and where this would obtain under the constraints of -

be compatible with - a form of egalitarian justice, namely a system of justice committed to the following two Rawlsian principles: (1) that each person has an equal right to the most extensive equal liberties and opportunities compatible with similar liberties and opportunities for all and (2) that inequalities in liberty are justified, as hopefully temporary necessary evils, only when and to the extent that they are in everyone's advantage and most particularly they must be to the advantage of the least advantaged stratum of society.² The addition of such a principle of justice is necessary, for if the revolution were to lessen suffering (when everything was considered) only slightly over a previous state of affairs - but to do so at the expense of an enhanced suffering for a small oppressed but relatively powerless Lumpenproletariat, say Metis, Indians or Blacks, then that revolution would not be justified. When the general conditions I have characterized obtain, and it is practically feasible, then and only then is revolution justified.

II

What I would now like to do is to turn to an examination of criticisms of such a cryptically drawn view. There is first an objection which might come from a certain sort of revolutionary. He would say that all such calculations of consequences are far too unrealistic. When we look back, from our historical vantage point, on the French Revolution, we can indeed say that its long range effects were in sum beneficial to humankind: the sum total of human oppression and suffering was lightened. We can see that, the objector grants, but just before the revolution, during the revolution and during the early reactionary restorations the agents involved could not have known that. It is only from the long hindsight of a considerable historical distance that this could be known. What we can and must do, the objection would continue, if we are to be revolutionaries working for a socialist revolution and a truly humane socialist society, is to revolt when we can see around us intolerable conditions of repression and de-humanization. That is to say, in such circumstances we are to attempt to make a revolution against our oppressors. What we cannot and should not do in such a situation is to try to make calculations about the long term effects of our actions. It will only cripple our resolve to act.

I understand and indeed sympathize with the sentiment that goes into this. It is linked with a revulsion against injustice and inhumanity and tries to affirm one's sense of human dignity by refusing to acquiesce in one's own de-humanization or the de-humanization of those around one. And in such a situation, it stresses the necessity to act and to act with resolve. Yet there are many ways to resist tyranny and oppression and even personal rebellion is far short of the attempt at the mass overturn of the social order that goes with revolution.³

If people live in indignity and severe oppression and yet conditions are such that an attempt at revolution or revolt against their oppressors will only result in their increased oppression and indeed spread it, then it is irresponsible and, I believe, effectively counter-revolutionary to call at that time for the attempted seizure of power that goes with a revolution. Marx, correctly I believe, stressed the folly of trying to make a revolution before the socio-economic conditions were ripe and before the revolutionaries had a mass base. The Jacobins, he thought, made the crucial error of trying to impose by sheer force what was not yet inherent in their situation. It is true that a very cautious waiting for the time to be right may have the effect of endlessly putting off, through rationalization, revolutionary activity. It can, that is, be rationalized into a kind of waiting for Godot. And indeed that is a practical difficulty which needs to be faced squarely. But an awareness

of this capacity for and indeed propensity towards rationalization can put one on guard against it. But it still remains the case, taking all accessible factors into consideration, that what we must do is to learn to make a realistic appraisal of the situation. While it is the case that we cannot know with any considerable exactitude the future consequences of such actions, it is also true that we are not entirely in the dark about them. If in the United States, ghetto Blacks were to attempt an armed uprising, we can rather safely predict the general consequences of such action. Any revolutionary programme which urged them at the present time to fight their oppression by an armed uprising could only ensure that those Black revolutionaries would be crushed along with other progressive Blacks and that it would very likely be the case that even harsher oppressive measures would be directed against the Black population. Indeed it *might* have the spin off effect of raising the consciousness of Blacks, but this can be done by other means as well and it is also known that in parallel situations sometimes such harsh oppression, after an abortive uprising, only deepens despair and apathy and leads to an utter withdrawal from political struggle. The central point at issue here is that in some important circumstances at least, we can have some idea of the probable consequences of revolutionary activity. Certainty, or even anything like it, is not, of course, at issue, but this is generally true in the social arena. What we need to see is that while our understanding is not of any high order here, it is often not the case that we simply must take a kind of Kierkegaardian leap in the dark. That is, it need not be the case that we either have faith in the efficacy of revolution or we do not. It is indeed true that we should not let concern for certainty cripple practice but we need not and indeed should not view ourselves as simply responding to our heart-felt anguish at the spectacle of injustice and oppression and then rebelling quite independently of any calculations of our chances or of what our revolt would lead us into.

III

There is, ironically enough, a parallel objection to my account of justifying revolution which sometimes comes from conservatives but often comes from even left leaning people and indeed even extreme revisionists who have reluctantly come, after reflection on the costs of revolution and the horrors of war, to a principled commitment to always stick to reformism.⁴ They renounce violence and revolutionary activity as an instrument of social change. They reject the idea that violence can be justified by beneficial results for the future; they reject the idea that violence is justified even if it does lead to the abolition of violence and to a more egalitarian and humane society.

One of the more interesting statements of this view comes from Leszek Kolakowski, a Polish 'Marxist' revisionist.⁵ (I do not use 'revisionist' as a term of abuse.) Referring to a set of arguments by Merleau-Ponty, which bear some family resemblance to mine, Kolakowski argues that in deciding what is to be done 'we would do well ... to justify our decisions not by appeals to historical reason but only by the simplest moral considerations.'⁶ We should not think in terms of any philosophy of historical progress but we should reason in this domain with a scepticism about 'grand schemes' concerning human liberation. Where such a revolutionary theory conflicts with our reflective, rock bottom moral responses, the theory, not our moral responses, should give way. Arguing in a way that resembles Pritchard, Kolakowski contends that these simple moral considerations are more reliable than any ramified abstract moral arguments involving such historical moral calculations as the ones I have made above. We can be more confident, he tells us, that brotherhood and freedom will not emerge from

mass terror, oppression and lies than we can be confident of any theory which makes predictions about the emergence of the second stage of communism from its first stage. We must, he argues, encourage scepticism about such claims of a necessary human development and above all we must undermine naive beliefs in the universal efficacy of violence to improve the human condition. We must rather take our stand as something which is morally speaking rock bottom in a commitment to the protection of the most basic human rights and decencies.

We must remember that Kolakowski writes out of a deep first hand experience with Stalinism and we should also, I believe, acknowledge that he is most probably right in his belief that brotherhood and freedom will not emerge from mass terror, oppression and lies. But why assume that a commitment to a revolutionary strategy commits one to anything like that or even tolerates it? Marx repeatedly criticized terrorism. The use of terror, lies and propaganda are only desperate devices used in an attempt to impose a revolution from above when the conditions for its occurrence are not ripe. Moreover, we should remember that the terrible experiences of the Russian Revolution have not been the general run of socialist revolutions: contrast the Russian Revolution with the Chinese, Cuban and Yugoslavian Revolutions. The revolution in Indo-China is the hell and slaughterhouse it is, not because of socialist revolutionaries but because of the counter-revolutionary invasion first by the French and then by American imperialist forces. They are the ones who have devastated the country and murdered the population. We must not allow ourselves to be conned into an utter rejection of revolution as a possible humane alternative for social change and reconstruction by our awareness of the terrible toll of the Russian Revolution and its grotesque aftermath. There are not even nearly sufficient grounds for thinking that this is the model for revolution.

In arguing that a revolution is justified, if there are good reasons for believing that by making it less suffering and greater realization of human potential and happiness will be achievable in the long run, there is no commitment to or acquiescence in the methods of Stalinism that Kolakowski rightly decries. It is evident enough that lies only breed contempt and utter scepticism about human progress, that terror may push a population into line but that it will not produce co-operation and brotherhood, let alone socialist persons. But nothing of this Stalinism need be or should be part of a revolutionary programme for socialists.

What is more deeply involved in Kolakowski's argument is a steadfast and correct recognition of the evil of violence coupled with a scepticism concerning our knowledge of what will be the likely outcome of revolutionary actions. And surely it is right to see violence as an evil; for a person even to be a moral agent, he needs to recognize that to do violence to someone is to harm him and that this always stands in need of a special justification. But in addition one should recognize (a) that violence is not the only great evil in the world and that in deciding what to do, that evil must be counterbalanced against other evils, and (b) that in a situation in which a revolution could be made or would be justified, there would already exist in the oppression and degradation of human beings a vast amount of violence, namely a pervasive institutionally sanctioned violation of their persons.⁷ We must remember that 'violence in human affairs is more closely connected with the idea of violation than with the idea of force.'⁸ It is a situation in which our rights as persons are being violated - a situation where we do not have the right to decide our own futures or act as self-directing human agents. In this connection, Merleau-Ponty has well said that 'Communism does not invent violence but finds it already institutionalized.'

Kolakowski might respond that while this is indeed so, we are never justified in 'fighting fire

with fire' or 'doing evil that good may come'. But, if this is the way the argument goes, we have gone past anything which could reasonably be taken as a primitive moral certainty. Both the socialist revolutionary and Kolakowski agree that violence is an evil to be avoided wherever possible. But where they appear at least not to agree is about whether one may ever deliberately kill or resort to force to bring about socialism in a repressive society where repression and exploitation are rampant.⁹ Kolakowski, like Popper, is willing to speak of a 'justified and violent resistance to violence', which contrasts with 'aggressive violence', which is not justified.¹⁰ He suggests, though he does not actually assert, what Popper indeed claims, namely that the use of violence to bring about social change is never justified. Rather violence is only justified as a response to revolutionary violence.¹¹ What is crucial to see here is that this stance is a highly controversial moral stance. There could be no appeal here to a moral certainty which will be accepted by all reflective moral agents. (It is politically questionable as well for it has the effect of reinforcing the power of the *status quo*.)

In moral situations we are sometimes faced with an anguishing choice between evils, e.g. the mother or the child in a difficult birth, the terrible choices forced on the Jewish leaders in the Warsaw Ghetto, the choice between ten lives or a hundred. I suppose a Christian could, and some would, in some of these circumstances, say 'It is all in God's hands' and forebear to do a lesser evil while knowingly allowing what they acknowledge is a greater evil. Perhaps, that is all right for a Christian or a man who believes in a God similar to the Christian God, but for one who does not, there is no other responsible act but to sometimes deliberately choose between evils, not wishing to 'play God' or indeed even doing so, but acting as a morally responsible agent in a Godless world or at least in a world which seems to him or her on an honest appraisal to be Godless. And in choosing between evils what other alternative is there but to choose what seems, on a careful and non-evasive appraisal of things, to be the lesser evil? This is surely what I was doing in laying out what I take to be the logic of a justification for revolution. This could be upset, if it could be shown that we can never have a reasonable idea of the likelihood of the consequences in human harm or well being of making a revolution or failing to. But we do in some circumstances have some understanding of the likely consequences and under those conditions we can say when a revolution would or would not be justified. We surely, in most instances, anyway, cannot say this with certainty. But moral certainty is a rare bird in the moral life.

NOTES

- 1 Herbert Marcuse, 'Ethics and Revolution' in *Ethics and Society*, ed. by Richard T. De George (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1966) Note, also in this connection, Eric Hobsbawm, 'An Appraisal of Terrorism,' *Canadian Dimension*, Vol.9, No.1 (October 1972), pp.11-14.
- 2 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), p.60. I refer to them as 'Rawlsian', for I have slightly altered their formulation from the formulation favoured by Rawls.
- 3 I have tried exactly to characterize revolution in my 'On the Choice Between Reform and Revolution,' in *Philosophy and Political Action*, ed. by Virginia Held, Kai Nelson and Charles Parsons (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp.21-28.
- 4 J. M. Cameron, 'The Ethics of Violence,' in *The New York Review of Books*, Vol.XV, No.1 (July 2, 1970), pp.24-32.

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