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 Hanley 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 visors 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 Eaton 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 have 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 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.


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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, in the simplest or grossest way, 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

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. 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-
There is first an objection which might come from a vantage point, on the French Revolution, we can make calculations about the long term effects of our revolution against our oppressors. What we cannot do 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 rebellion is far short of the attempt at the mass overturn of the social order that goes with revolution.

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 revolutions had a mass base. The Jacobs, 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 must not 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, or if 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 important circumstances at least, we can have some idea of the probable consequences of revolutionary activity. Certainty, or even anything like it, is, 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 higher order simply informative, the case we 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 our 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 as a matter of action quite independently of any calculations of our chances or of what our revolt would lead us into.

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 horror and baselessness of it, to a principled commitment to always stick to reformism. They renounce violence and revolutionary activity as an instrument of social change, they reject the idea that violence can be countenanced and they, 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 rebellion is far short of the attempt at the mass overturn of the social order that goes with revolution.
mass terror, oppression and lies than we can be con
fident in any theory which makes predictions about the emergence of the second stage of communism
from its first stage. We must, he argues, encour-
age scepticism about such claims of a necessary human potential and above all 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, do 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. 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 anguish 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. And 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)
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 Revolu-
tion,' in Philosophy and Political Action,
ed. by Virginia Held, Kai Nelson and Charles
Parsons (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1972),
p.21-28.
4 J. M. Cameron, 'Ethics of Violence,' in
The NewReview of Books, Vol.XV, No.1 (July
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