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Are There Lessons for Us to Learn?

The mixture we now see of unbridled and irrational authority, of rationalized technology and demagogic propaganda, presents a caricature of the kind of inhumane society that could come about. The decline of democratic institutions, the crisis of capitalist economies . . . together with the degeneration of traditional values, culminate in the present situation, where everything remains to be done because everything is called into question.

—RAYMOND ARON IN 1939¹

Those who make peaceful revolutions impossible will make violent revolutions inevitable.

—JOHN F. KENNEDY IN 1962²

PRESIDENT KENNEDY LEFT A MEMORY of what an ideal liberal president should be, though his soaring rhetoric was not always matched by actual accomplishments. Were he alive today, he would undoubtedly be shocked by the level to which American politics have descended in recent decades, and also by the general decline of democracy in much of the world. Raymond Aron might not be. From World War II until his death in 1983, Aron was probably France's leading liberal intellectual (in the more classical, moderate European sense as is defined in the next paragraph below). Having witnessed the polarization and debasement

of Europe's democratic politics in the 1930s, he understood what that could lead to. His essay is as relevant today as it was in 1939.

We are returning to a pre–World War II world of unbridgeable polarization and doubts about the foundational ideals of democratic liberalism. What are those basic ideals that are under threat today, as they were in the late 1930s? They have five principal aspects.

1. A respect for individual human rights that still recognizes human variability
2. A belief in the capacity of democratic but not excessive government institutions to find solutions for major problems
3. Faith in the capacity of market economies with suitable limits and controls to deliver healthy outcomes that help the large majority of people without trying to enforce radical equality
4. Confidence that better education and the search for knowledge are essential
5. And, finally, a conviction that necessary reforms should nevertheless remain respectful of the best traditions and institutions that create a sense of solidarity and mutual respect between members of any nation

The French Revolution started off with these ideals, though in the late eighteenth century there was as yet little appreciation of what might happen if extremists came to power. The first half of the twentieth century saw both fascist and communist revolutions that utterly rejected liberal moderation. As we know, the end of the century appeared to many of us to mark a kind of ultimate triumph of liberalism, but that quickly turned out to be a vain hope. The opposite is happening as even in the democratic West there is a turn against the Enlightenment tradition that was long the basis of American and European democracy.

We may not be there yet, but Benjamin Carter Hett's analysis of the rise of the Nazis sounds almost as if it were written about today when he points out that "the rejection of rationality went hand in hand with the rejection of the liberal, capitalist West."³ So did the constant lying, the contempt for the law, and the call to violence.

Today's seeming paralysis of liberal democracy also brings to mind Mancur Olson's prescient book, which is even more relevant today than when it was first published, *The Rise and Decline of Nations*.⁴ Olson argued that over time powerful interest groups grow stronger and defend their wealth and privileges by blocking essential change and innovation. Only a rude shock, at worst a catastrophe, can unfreeze the resulting political and economic stagnation. This insight is useful in explaining the first of the eight main conclusions of our own study of revolutions.

CONCLUSION ONE. As we have seen in all of the revolutionary episodes, a kind of "Olson blockage" had occurred. States' political institutions solidified and became encrusted as those with power protected themselves by preventing reforms that risked endangering their wealth and privileges. That did not prevent social and economic change from occurring, as technologies, ideas, population size, the international environment, the natural environment, and many other conditions varied over time, but it did prevent the necessary political reforms from being carried out. Eventually the ensuing crises shook old systems loose. But unfortunately, when unresolved crises turned into revolutions, the potential for a catastrophic outcome rather than a peaceful set of reforms rose rapidly.

CONCLUSION TWO. It is possible to overcome a crisis if there are strong institutions that can be used by a self-aware political elite capable of understanding that change is necessary. England had these in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. France in 1788, like Russia in 1917 or Iran in 1978, did not. In the absence of these two requirements, there is inadequate reform, and the probability of eventual revolution rises dramatically because social changes that come with economic and cultural modernization require political adaptation as well. War or severe economic downturns obviously increase that probability as the failure to reform hurts ever-larger numbers of people.

Are there dangerous prerevolutionary situations in today's turbulent world? Perhaps not yet in the democracies, though even in the United States and much of Western Europe there is growing political paralysis and an inability to pursue necessary changes. That is creating fertile

ground for extremism that could eventually lead to unexpected upheavals. In much of the rest of the globe, especially in the Middle East, in Central and South Asia, and in parts of Africa and Latin America, the situation is more explosive. Russia and China, aside from their problems with corruption and a drift back into totalitarianism, have become almost classic fascist powers: militarily aggressive, nursing a bitter sense of grievance against Western democracies, and resolutely hostile to liberalism. As we have seen, important parts of formerly communist Eastern Europe are on the same track to illiberal autocracy. It is impossible to predict where disaster will strike next, but plausible to say that it will happen somewhere sooner or later in a way that could have dramatically bad results. (See Conclusion Three and note 5 below.)

CONCLUSION THREE. Most commonly in the early stages of modern revolutions moderate liberals come to the fore, but as was explained at the start of the book, the “La Fayette syndrome” is likely to marginalize them. In the dire circumstances of institutional collapse under the strains of wars, violence, and social disruption, liberals tend to underestimate both the anger of previously powerless masses and the growing appeal of those who propose radical solutions. That was why Condorcet, for all his brilliance and early popularity, fell victim to the radicals, as earlier had happened to La Fayette. Kerensky’s fate in Russia in 1917 was the same, and, under different but partly analogous conditions, so was Shapour Bakhtiar’s in Iran in 1979. These were not just individual failings. Liberal movements in general, like the Kadets in Russia, never quite understand how quickly revolutions that begin as relatively moderate demands for reform can spin out of control. Nor did Francisco Madero fully grasp the depth of desires by peasants and workers for more reform than he was willing to countenance. Madero also failed to see the great danger posed by the reactionary opponents of the Mexican Revolution. Die-hard conservatives conflate moderate reform that threatens their interests with far more dangerous radicalism that wants to exterminate them, and therefore are willing to turn to violent repression to stop necessary change. That is what happened in most very early revolutionary situations, thus making it more likely that extremists would take over.

Reading about the shocked reaction of European and American liberals to rising populist anger in their own countries is a good reminder that something analogous is starting to happen in the Western democracies. Why this is happening has been well analyzed by others and is not within the purview of this book. Nevertheless, we can see some distressing similarities with past liberal failings, and we may wonder whether we are fated to see something similar.⁵ This is why studying the next stage that occurred when liberal reform failed and led to revolution is both instructive and alarming.

CONCLUSION FOUR. It is not just moderate liberals who lose control because they do not fully grasp what very radical extremists have in mind. Conservative German politicians brought Hitler to power because they considered an alliance with the Nazis preferable to making compromises with the very moderate social democrats of the center left—only too late did they see what this led to. The democratic left during the Russian Revolution believed it should be allied to Lenin's Bolsheviks to ward off conservative forces and subsequently found out they had committed suicide. The same dynamic is at work even within revolutionary parties. The French Reign of Terror, like Stalin's Russia, Mao's China, the Khmer Rouge regime, and Khomeini's Iran are leading examples. In the fraught circumstances that bring radical utopians to power, the leader who emerges is likely to be ruthless about enforcing his vision, and those who do not totally agree, even if they were once allies and friends, are at great risk.

It may seem natural for those on the right to think that the extreme right is a more reliable ally than the moderate left, or for the moderate left to suppose that the very radical left is a better partner than the moderate right, but when that happens, it becomes more probable that the ultimate winner will be one of the extremes.

CONCLUSION FIVE. Wars, whether with outside powers or internal civil war, invariably enhance the power of the radicals who can claim to be fully committed to the revolution. But if there is no actual war, and little threat of civil war, extremists in power will fabricate such dangers, or provoke them as a way of solidifying their power. The Nazis were masters of such tactics. So was Stalin in the early 1930s when he

calumniated his supposedly treacherous domestic enemies, accusing them of foreign alliances, to justify massive purges.

Today putative autocrats in the West foment hysteria about the manageable problem of immigration and terrorism. Even more drastically, Iranian theocrats, Russia's Putin, and Saudi Arabia's would-be totalitarian prince actually engage in low-level war to justify their abuse of power, and they obsessively claim to see immediate threats from foreign sources.

CONCLUSION SIX. We all need to be reminded to pay attention to what political leaders write and say, and never assume that what sounds like extremism is just opportunistic exaggeration. This is another classic error made by centrist reformers and even relatively more moderate revolutionaries. Surely, so the moderates say, smart, educated people can't seriously believe in all those extreme viewpoints, lies, and hysteria. These are just tactics to mobilize their supporters, and once in power those who have peddled such ideas will behave more reasonably. In retrospect it seems almost incomprehensible that moderate leftists failed to grasp in time how utterly ruthless and determined Lenin was. His voluminous writing and policy positions had made that perfectly clear. The same can be said of Hitler. His conservative allies who were not Nazis were hardly liberal, but had they retained power, there would have been no Holocaust. Had they not read *Mein Kampf*? Or did they just not take it seriously? What about Khomeini's writing asserting the need to create a theocratic state where the leading Islamic jurists, led by someone like him, would have the ultimate say in political matters? Did some of his more moderate religious followers forget his position because he was shrewd enough to downplay it when necessary?

What leaders write and say is crucial, but their ideology is also reflected by the symbols they manipulate, and they have to be taken just as seriously. Hitler and Mussolini reveled in the violent symbolism of their brutish street tactics that clearly promised much more nastiness if they took power. The hateful images of their enemies propagated in newspapers, pamphlets, and posters were a warning of what could come. In revolutionary France, Marat's journalism was deliberately vio-

lent, so when Robespierre's radical Jacobins took power, it should not have come as a surprise that there would be more bloodshed. Mao was a master of symbolic propaganda, and its violence prefigured his most extreme policies.

What was true then remains the case today. Read carefully what potential political leaders write and say, and if it sounds extreme, do not dismiss their words as mere political posturing. Assume that any approval or encouragement of violence is a prediction of future policies, not just a temporary tactic.

CONCLUSION SEVEN. This book has emphasized the behavior of political elites and how they responded to institutional blockages and crises, and then how they behaved in revolutionary circumstances. But all along there has been another aspect that has come up repeatedly: how ideas were also shaped by cultural and intellectual elites who were not identical to political ones, though the two sets frequently overlapped. Antonio Gramsci's central point in his adaptation of Marxist theory was that the bourgeoisie, or in fact any ruling class, does not rule merely through its economic and political power, but also by imposing cultural values that legitimize its rule.⁶ Gramsci wanted to educate the working class in order to create a counterhegemonic culture. We have seen, however, that within the ranks of the very cultural elites who are supposed to defend the system, counterhegemonic philosophies that are precursors of revolutionary change may flourish when necessary reforms are blocked. Enlightenment philosophers in France prepared the way for the revolution by changing ideas well before the late 1780s, and the British and French Enlightenment was part of American elite thinking before the 1770s. Russian opposition among the country's intellectuals to absolutist tsarist rule had been growing for decades before the Revolution of 1917. The rejection of democratic liberal capitalism as too corrupt and compromised began in late nineteenth-century Europe and would eventually play an important role in bringing fascism to power after World War I. Oppositional ferment among Iranian intellectuals should have been a sign to the shah by the early 1970s that all was not well. Antiestablishment ideas do not alone produce revolutions,

but they may prepare the ground in delegitimizing existing established political systems and providing theoretical models for new ones, most obviously in revolutionary situations.

What was true in the past remains as true today. The attacks from both the right and the left that today seek to delegitimize liberal capitalist democracy have been at work undermining democracy for decades and now appear to be stronger than ever. It is therefore necessary to pay attention to changing fashions among cultural and intellectual elites to better understand what might happen.⁷

A FINAL, EIGHTH CONCLUSION. If you want a revolution, beware of how it might turn out, because you might one day rue the one that you get. Gradual change, compromise, and flexibility are better ways to adapt to demands for reform. But if there is a revolution, it will take unusual skill, good analysis, and determination by moderate reformers to keep it from turning into tragedy.

These conclusions are so obvious that there should be no need to repeat them or demonstrate their validity. But if the past proves anything, it is that unfortunately those are lessons too often forgotten, or never learned at all. So demonstrating that they are as valid today as ever is necessary, and will be for a long time to come.