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# 1

## Revolution as Tragedy

It seems as if the doctrine that all kinds of monstrous cruelties must be permitted, because without these the ideal state of affairs cannot be attained—all the justifications of broken eggs for the sake of the ultimate omelette, all the brutalities, sacrifices, brain-washing, all those revolutions . . . all this is for nothing, for the perfect universe is not merely unattainable but inconceivable, and everything done to bring it about is founded on an enormous intellectual fallacy.

—ISAIAH BERLIN<sup>1</sup>

Men or groups who possess unlimited power become drunk on that power . . . in no circumstances is unlimited power acceptable, and in reality, it is never necessary.

—BENJAMIN CONSTANT<sup>2</sup>

ON MARCH 29, 1794, the imprisoned Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, marquis of Condorcet, died, probably poisoned. It was a tragedy, not only because France lost one of its greatest-ever thinkers, but also because his death symbolically marked the ultimate collapse of liberalism in the French Revolution. Was it suicide to escape being guillotined, or was he murdered by the Jacobin revolutionary authorities who had ordered his arrest? He had been hiding for months but had finally been caught on March 27. His death two days later spared the government the embarrassment of publicly murdering one of the early

heroes of the 1789 Revolution, known as a leading philosopher throughout Europe.

Condorcet was an outstanding, versatile Enlightenment philosopher. He was a great mathematician, a defender of women's rights who considered women to be men's intellectual equals at a time when such an opinion was rare, a strong proponent of democracy, and an adversary of slavery. His brilliant thinking about economics, politics, and history was in tune with Adam Smith's liberal ideas. He was a very well-connected nobleman close to the most reformist members of France's royal government before 1789. Recognizing the need to modernize the monarchy and make politics more inclusive, he nevertheless accepted the revolution and became one of its early leaders. Skeptical of religion, believing in the perfectibility of human societies, Condorcet was the ultimate rational liberal. Though his ideals were for his time radical, he was opposed to the bloodshed, terror, and extreme, polarizing means that the radical Jacobins used once they gained power, and that is why they condemned him to death.<sup>3</sup>

Condorcet's tragic end at the hands of extremists was a violent act that would be replicated over and over in the great revolutions of the twentieth century, from Mexico's in 1910 to Iran's in 1979. The reason is that the great revolutions all had something in common. Most sidelined and typically purged the first wave of more moderate revolutionaries.

Almost two years before Condorcet's death, in mid-August 1792, the Marquis de La Fayette, also one of the early leaders of the French Revolution as well as a heroic figure in America because of his youthful service in its revolution, fled France. On August 14 Georges Danton, the minister of justice in the new radical Jacobin government, had issued a warrant for his arrest. The Jacobins considered La Fayette to be a defender of the monarchy, and untrustworthy. To save himself from a certain death sentence, he crossed over into Austrian territory (in what is now Belgium, but at that time ruled by the Austrian Habsburgs). The Habsburgs were then France's main enemy and sought to save Louis XVI and his Habsburg wife, Marie-Antoinette. Because La Fayette had participated in the revolution, led some of its armies, and was considered to be a dangerous, radical antimonarchist, he was arrested and held in prison for five years. In fact, he was neither the reactionary monarchist the Jacobins

saw, nor the drastically antiroyal revolutionary the monarchists and their European allies thought he was. He was, instead, the quintessential moderate liberal reformer who had tried to mediate between the demand for more democracy, in which he passionately believed, and King Louis XVI, whose life and throne he wanted to preserve. He thought that a limited, constitutional monarchy was the solution. He admired the kind of democratic limitations on executive power the Americans were pioneering with their new Constitution. But the king and his court never willingly accepted his proposals and decided La Fayette was a traitor to the monarchy. On the contrary the more radical revolutionaries distrusted moderation and felt that La Fayette was really an ally of antirevolutionary reaction and foreign intervention.<sup>4</sup>

There are lessons to be drawn today from what happened to Condorcet and La Fayette, particularly at times when political extremism once again rejects rational, moderate solutions to political, social, and economic problems. By looking at revolutions of both the right and the left and considering why so many slid into destructive extremism, I hope to show by the end of this book what we can gain by studying them.

### The La Fayette Syndrome: Liberals Beware

La Fayette was certainly not the intellectual equal of Condorcet, and his enemies considered him a self-serving mediocrity. Nevertheless, at the start of the revolution he was one of the leading liberal aristocrats, was very popular, and was given command of the National Guard. In trying to protect the royal family while remaining true to his democratic inclinations, he was willing to use force to control extremism. So he gradually lost the trust of the revolutionary Parisian masses and of the men he commanded. His fall, which will be discussed in more detail below, was actually a turning point that foreshadowed the Reign of Terror and all that entailed, including the murder of not just Condorcet but many other luminaries—including, eventually, Georges Danton himself, who had issued the warrant for La Fayette's arrest.

La Fayette and Condorcet's dilemma, to be caught between intransigent resistance to reform by the king and royal court and equally

uncompromising revolutionary radicalism, is the danger commonly faced by liberal moderates; but it is particularly acute in the kinds of chaotic environments that produce revolutions. Francisco Madero, the first president of Mexico after its revolution began in 1910, and also Russia's Alexander Kerensky, the major leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution before the Bolsheviks seized power, suffered the same fate for similar reasons. The former was murdered by an antirevolutionary general, and the latter fled into exile when Lenin's Bolsheviks overthrew him. Shapour Bakhtiar, the liberal politician who ushered the shah of Iran into exile in 1979, was subsequently repudiated by Ayatollah Ruhola Khomeini and also had to flee into exile. Iranian government agents eventually murdered him in Paris.

The quandary faced by moderates does not always end in their defeat. Great Britain industrialized, went through drastic social change, and democratized in the nineteenth to mid-twentieth century without a revolution. Nevertheless, when established institutions are failing and societies become too dramatically polarized—as happened in the revolutionary situations we are going to examine in this book—La Fayette's and Condorcet's failures look like the probable fate of those like them who tried to steer a middle course in turbulent times. That is as true today as it was in the French Revolution. Why?

The classical liberalism that emerged from Enlightenment thinking in the eighteenth century, and has remained since then at the core of democratic moderation and progress, relies on a few basic assumptions. The most important is that there are scientific truths that can be discerned in both the natural and the human world, and these should be deployed to devise policies to better society. But discovering these truths is not easy and requires constant questioning and revision as new evidence becomes available. This is difficult. Humans are not naturally predisposed to live with the uncertainty of always reexamining reality; nor do they always understand what is best for them. Economic *laissez-faire* claims that private interests in competition with each other will yield more efficient and generally beneficial economic outcomes. The underlying assumption about the value of democratic politics is similar. Allowing competing political goals to peacefully compete will let the best win, if not at first, then eventually as publics learn what is better or

worse. That is the fundamental theory behind democracy. For Condorcet democracy would work because, according to the laws of probability, a properly enlightened public would eventually come up with a majority in favor of the best solution.<sup>5</sup>

What liberalism finds hard to cope with is fanaticism that relies on a fixed, unchangeable idea so certain of itself that it is closed to rational testing. In other words, liberal skepticism about any definitive solution is unable to persuade those who reject science itself. Nor can liberalism easily counter systematic lying if that is done skillfully enough to persuade people to deny evidence that runs counter to their beliefs. To any moderate, not only liberal ones but also conservatives, extremist ideology too often seems preposterously unreasonable. So the danger is recognized too late. In a well-educated, relatively stable society with freedom of expression and a basic faith in science, the fanatics and liars can be marginalized. But when these beneficial conditions no longer exist, and when at the same time critical problems can no longer be successfully handled, moderate reformism will no longer prevail.

La Fayette may not have been the great philosopher and writer that Condorcet was, but he had an innate faith in reason and the power of democratic consensus. In France after 1791 his belief that his nation could find the right political balance between the extremes of reaction and radical change resulted in the kind of blindness that might be labeled the “La Fayette syndrome.” This illusion has destroyed many a moderate, more liberal proponent of democratic change in revolutionary times.

## Revolutions, Progress, and Bad Outcomes

“Revolution” is so widely used a word that I should explain how I will use it in this book. Revolutions are inspired by ideals that call for the building of a better society by deliberately and quickly changing, at a minimum, key political rules and institutions. In most but not all cases the intention is also to transform economic and social relations. Revolutions have leaders who do not place much faith in gradual, piecemeal reforms. Gradual reform of legal, economic, and social institutions and habits may over time produce changes as drastic as actual revolutions,

but those kinds of relatively slow evolutionary transformations will not be considered actual revolutions.

All important changes meet some opposition from people defending their interests, but when revolutionary transformations threaten to upend a whole political or social order, resistance is almost certain to provoke violence. There have been a few notable cases when violent reaction was avoided; but almost all of the examples used in the book, including the best-known modern revolutions since the late eighteenth century, turned into civil wars. While a few exceptions will be discussed toward the end of the book, such anomalies cannot negate the more common occurrence of widespread revolutionary and counterrevolutionary violence.

Generally, however, the early stages of revolutions, as in France, began less radically and at least somewhat more peacefully. But the first wave of more moderate, typically liberal reformers were ousted. The first stage was therefore not the end point but only the first in a series of developments that ultimately led to revolutionary tragedies. Of course if you believe that human history is generally a march toward greater progress despite occasional backsliding, you might not agree that the outcomes of the most dramatic revolutions were headed for catastrophe once the moderate reformers were sidelined. You believe instead that the great revolutions since the late eighteenth century were necessary if often painful steps that had to be taken when progress was blocked by reactionary political and social forces. That is how Marxist theory and practice interpret history. Most non-Marxist progressives who might decry the excessive bloodiness of Stalinism and Maoism still think that the Russian and Chinese revolutions were necessary and ultimately positive steps.

That is what liberal thought eventually settled on in interpreting the most paradigmatic of all modern revolutions, the French one of 1789. It turned into a brutal civil war that killed hundreds of thousands. It ended with Napoleon's military dictatorship that caused about a million French war deaths and several times that among other Europeans. Napoleon set France back economically and demographically so badly that it fell behind its main European rivals and never really caught up. Marxists think that the French Revolution went wrong when its most radi-

cally egalitarian Jacobin activists lost power in the Thermidorian reaction of 1794 against the Reign of Terror, and even more with Napoleon's coup d'état on the 18th of Brumaire at the end of 1799. But at least, so the claim goes, it broke the bonds of feudalism in much of Europe and so allowed capitalism to progress and thrive. Liberals who hate the memory of the Jacobin Reign of Terror in 1793 and 1794 basically agree that despite all its failings, that is exactly what the French Revolution did, and that therefore it allowed the rise of a new kind of freer, more rational, more progressive society. Undoubtedly all of the great revolutions, like the French one, occurred in societies that badly needed more reform than those in power were willing or able to grant, so of course they can be justified by their supporters. Our question, however, is whether so much violence could have been avoided to produce better long-term outcomes. Was all that suffering really necessary? Did the ends justify such drastic means?

Americans do not argue as much about the consequences of their revolution of 1775–1783 and mostly see it as an unambiguous success. But by leaving in place its ruling social classes, the American Revolution left unsolved the problem of slavery. That eventually caused the vastly bloodier Civil War of 1861–1865. The failure after that to deal satisfactorily with the legacy of racism has ever since bedeviled the United States. So even the American Revolution's obvious success in creating what would become the modern world's first democracy also failed in some important ways. Nevertheless, understanding why it was not immediately as bloody or disruptive as the subsequent French Revolution can tell us much about why so many later revolutions turned so quickly into tragedies.

After the first modern revolutions in the late eighteenth century, the American and French, the most momentous have been in the twentieth century. The Russian, Chinese, and other successful communist revolutions were inspired by Marxism and killed tens of millions in order to achieve an impossible egalitarian ideal. Mexico's somewhat less studied revolution that began in 1910 and lasted ten years—or longer, according to some—slaughtered hundreds of thousands. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 created a uniquely theocratic regime unlike any previously known. It too has been bloody and ultimately corrupt as it has tried to spread its brand of radical Islam beyond its borders. Many if not all of



the anticolonial revolutions in the second half of the twentieth century wound up creating authoritarian, repressive, corrupt regimes in much of Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.<sup>6</sup>

To the list of catastrophic revolutions it is necessary to add transformative fascist regimes, particularly Nazism. Hitler and Mussolini may have been helped to power by conservatives hostile to communism and to more moderate social democracy, but both dictators intended to seriously revolutionize their countries by creating original, totalitarian social orders with new fascist political elites. Hitler went about this much more thoroughly than did Mussolini, though he had less time in power and was defeated long before completing the transformation. It is too easy to simply dismiss fascist idealism as mere reactionary hostility to social change combined with extreme imperial ambitions. On the contrary the extreme, aggressive brutality of fascism was as much a part of the tragic twentieth century's revolutionary legacy as was communism.<sup>7</sup>

Understanding fascism's radical goals and why it can attract support is particularly relevant today because, since the demise of European communism, most of the rising radicalism in Europe and much of the rest of the world is tending toward a new kind of fascism.

It does have to be said that despite the tragic consequences of so many revolutions, it is not only inaccurate but also morally obtuse to deny that most of them, even the most violent, were justified, at least at first. If so, why did they descend into so much destructive violence?

## The Four Acts of Revolutionary Tragedies

What follows will not consist of case studies divided into separate country chapters on their own. Rather, four main revolutionary stages, mirroring in some ways the dramatic progression of classic tragedy, will be treated in the four chapters that follow this one. Supporting evidence from some key revolutions will be used as appropriate to better illuminate and explain each stage. This means that sometimes important examples, most obviously those taken from the French and Russian revolutions, will be used in different chapters. For example, the Russian Revolution moved from the first, liberal reformist act to an early form

of idealistic if brutal Leninism. There followed a third, even more deadly Stalinist phase, and finally a slow slide into inefficient corruption and loss of revolutionary fervor. Not all revolutions follow all four of these stages, but some do, and all experience at least two or three of them.

1. Revolutions occur when existing elites fail to solve major problems and lose confidence in themselves so that order breaks down. In the ensuing chaos political actors with little governing or administrative experience become the new governing elite. Typically they are relatively moderate but as a result fail to satisfy or even fully understand the demands and anger of many who back radical change. Their failure opens the way to a next wave of revolutionaries, who are more ruthless and do not hesitate to use more violent means to seize and hold power.
2. Counterrevolutionary reaction leads to increasingly contentious politics and often civil war, foreign intervention, or both. To stay in power, the new power holders need to enhance and reinforce their repressive institutions; otherwise they are likely to be overthrown. The military and police apparatuses built up by radical regimes are then available to further the revolutionaries' hold on power.
3. Radical revolutionary leaders tend to hold unrealistic views about how malleable people and societies really are; therefore, they insist on pushing unworkable ideals. When these do not work, if the leaders possess strong repressive tools, they will use violence to force recalcitrant populations into line. They also cast blame on outside states and organizations, internal treachery, or some combination of both. Blaming others allows the radical idealists to deny that their original programs were fundamentally flawed from the start. This leads not only to greater repression, but also very commonly to purges within elite ranks as the need to identify scapegoats increases.
4. Committed revolutionaries are loath to give up their idealistic goals, but eventually, if they keep power long enough, they or their successors begin to make compromises. Repressive,

nontransparent regimes become increasingly corrupt because they lack corrective institutions that might expose their transgressions. Corruption and the abandonment of many if not all revolutionary ideals may happen quickly or slowly over time. The upshot is the same. Corruption becomes another mark of failure and may redouble repression to conceal it.

Another way to view this summary is as a chart. Not all of these developments need exist or operate together in sequence in every case, but at least several of these categories and their effects are typical of most revolutions and account for their ultimately disastrous outcomes.

How Repressive Revolutionary Extremism Develops

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Four Stages of Revolutionary Transformations	Internal Causes	External Influence
How the radicals come to power	Old regime incompetence creates chaos. Moderate liberals prominent at first don't grasp the situation and fail to quiet discontent.	Sometimes foreign powers dominate the social system directly, as in colonies, or indirectly, and help block reform.
How a repressive apparatus is built up and becomes permanently institutionalized	Counterrevolutionary civil war, threat of one, or fabrication of this danger allows radicals to increase repression.	Real foreign intervention, or exaggeration of that threat, even if fabricated, permits institutionalization of the repressive apparatus.
Radical utopianism	The ruling party's idealism leads it to refuse to admit its program's limitations, so repressive violence becomes necessary to carry it out.	Excluding outside influence and information to keep the population unaware of the real situation becomes an essential repressive tool.
Gradual slide into corruption	"Thermidorian" reactions occur soon or later.* The relaxation of revolutionary momentum opens the way to corruption, but the repressive institutions block correction.	As the population is more exposed to the outside, awareness of failure and corruption increases, but this requires more repression to keep the elite in control.

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\*"Thermidorian" reaction refers to the moderation of revolutionary violence and zeal after the French Revolution's Reign of Terror.

To explain how these stages occur and what effects they have, I will draw examples from particularly relevant cases.

Before we turn to detailed analysis, it is worth noting that in the original modern revolutions, the American and the French, the former avoided all of the listed outcomes, but the latter fell into every one of these traps. That is one reason that, ever since, the French Revolution's history has become a paradigm used repeatedly by analysts of more recent revolutions.

This book has two objectives. One is to explain the dynamics of revolutions. The other is to account for why they so often turn out tragically. To accomplish this goal, the next four chapters will elaborate on each of the stages in the chart. Then chapter 6 will offer some counterexamples that show how the most radical outcomes are hardly inevitable and can sometimes be avoided, though moderation itself may be unexpectedly destabilizing in the longer run. A final, seventh, chapter will suggest that we might be able to draw some conclusions from all this for contemporary use.

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