

Faculty of Arts, Celtic Studies & Philosophy NUIM

Revolution

Author(s): Matthew O'Donnell

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The Maynooth Review / Revieú Mhá Nuad*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Jun., 1976), pp. 3-21

Published by: [Faculty of Arts, Celtic Studies & Philosophy NUIM](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20556880>

Accessed: 21/01/2013 06:42

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Faculty of Arts, Celtic Studies & Philosophy NUIM is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Maynooth Review / Revieú Mhá Nuad*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Matthew O'Donnell

Revolution

The word 'revolution' has been devalued by being so widely spread. One hears of revolutions not only in political organisation and technology, but also in tastes and toothpaste. Even when one confines the term to political revolution the phenomenon is still one of impressive complexity and variety. In this article I shall not attempt any comprehensive treatment of revolution, but only to indicate certain general characteristics of it which I believe to be relevant to its evaluation.

CONDEMNATION AND ACCLAMATION

Revolutions are frequently greeted, at the time, by condemnation; and subsequently, if successful, by acclamation. In this year of 1976 the American Revolution has few detractors, and the French Revolution and the Irish Revolution of 1916 have equally few. But in their various times they were very generally condemned.

This suggests that the evaluation of revolution presents a problem. If it is right, it is right in its time; and there should be some way whereby that rightness can be recognised at the time. The later emergence of a consensus is of no use to the contemporaries who must decide whether to support, resist or ignore the revolution. In fact it seems that contemporaries seldom recognise a good revolution in its time; which is remarkable, for recognition is not generally handicapped by one's being present.

I would suggest that there are a number of reasons why people tend to condemn a revolution in its time and acclaim it subsequently.

(1) The successful revolution incorporates itself in the traditions of a people, and thus acquires a kind of sanctity. Veneration is paid to it as one source of the values enshrined in one's society. This veneration, however, does not necessarily imply that the present supporters of the historic revolution would have been supporters at the time; nor does it guarantee that they would support revolutionary measures in the present

situation or in any conceivable situation. Contemporary condemnation and later veneration are not continuous; they are not judgements about the same thing. The one is a judgement about a revolution which is currently impinging on the judge, the other is a component in the overall patriotic reaction of a citizen.

(2) Another line of explanation is that people judge badly in areas where they are unaccustomed to making judgements. An ornithologist will recognise a bar-tailed godwit, a fisherman the signs of an approaching storm, a stockbroker an attractive investment prospect, because in each case he is accustomed to making such judgements. As the citizen is not accustomed to judging of revolutions, it is not really surprising that he should judge badly.

(3) A third line of explanation is that we tend to favour the old familiar ways. There is a kind of principle of inertia in our judgements whereby the familiarity of the old can outweigh the obvious virtues of the new. The dice will always be loaded against the approval of revolution by the people it affects, simply on account of the radically disturbing nature of revolution. This influence, however, does not bear on subsequent generations; for the radical disturbance is away in the past, and it has contributed to producing the present state of affairs. The past revolution is tame and familiar. It is entirely understandable that it does not produce the fear and hostility generated by a presently operative revolution.

(4) A fourth explanatory consideration is that revolution, to its contemporaries, is a project, a promise, a hope. It is an offering on the altar of an idealised future. The future may be better or worse than the present as a result of the revolution; but while the revolution is in progress no one knows. It is much easier for later generations to approve of the revolution on account of the changes which it *has* wrought.

ADMIRATION AND REVULSION

The historical variation in people's judgement of revolution is paralleled by an ambivalence within the individual's judgement. The revolutionary may provoke admiration and revulsion simultaneously in the same person.

There is a natural sympathy with the revolutionary as the underdog. He is the one on the run, living in fear and discomfort, who survives against the odds. There is also admiration for the revolutionary. This relates to his efficiency, but even more importantly to his qualities of courage and self-sacrifice. In fact admiration is

often accorded to courage and self-sacrifice even if efficiency is lacking. The revolutionary is also admired as the one who has broken out of the rut. His is seen as a life of excitement, exhilaration, intensity, which contrasts to the dullness of routine. And the violence that he practises can be seen as a kind of thrust and initiative which contrasts to the passivity and drift of most men's lives. There is no need to labour the point. People admire revolutionaries even though they might not ever join them, or support them or even formally approve of what they do.

This admiration however is balanced by revulsion at the revolutionary's killing and destroying; balanced, but not cancelled. It is saddening that men – any men – should die; and for any reason. And it is saddening that men – any men – should kill; and for any reason. The destruction of property is saddening too, for property is the spore of human living. Its destruction is saddening because it deprives someone not of a possession but of part of what his life has been. Politically motivated destruction is only incidentally a modification of the material environment; it is essentially the hurting of people in order to coerce them. To stamp out a child's sandcastle is not principally to deprive him of something but rather to negate what he has done. It is less a deprivation than an affront.

The revolutionary provokes revulsion because he is a destroyer. He may destroy to rebuild better, and the better may be badly needed, and there may be no better way. But the revolution remains and will always remain in the realm of the regrettable.

The moral evaluation of revolution, however, is quite independent of one's emotive reaction to it. The person who is appalled by it is not committed to moral disapproval, and the person who admires it is not committed to moral approval. Furthermore, these opposite emotional reactions are not incompatible. Both the admiration and the revulsion are uncritical untutored reactions, and neither determines the moral judgement.

Prior to detailed reflection one is then inclined to regard revolution neither as simply right nor as simply wrong. There is a question mark against it. Such question marks may be left there for ever, unless one feels called on to take a stand. Most of us do not feel obliged to hold views on the value of the cultural achievements of the Ming dynasty. But in this country at this time one surely is called to try to arrive at some rational convictions concerning the morality of revolutionary violence.

To do this one must first stand back a little from the problem, to

enquire what kind of thing revolution is, why it is engaged in and what its purpose is.

SOCIETY AND PATRIOTISM

Revolution is a procedure for drastically reorganising a state for the benefit of its people. It is a truism that men are social beings but not a triviality. It points to the essential character of human sociability. Sociability is not something superadded to an individuality which is a total humanity; sociability is rather part of what it is to be human.

So society, in the sense of a coming together of men is both a unity and a multiplicity. It is not the nominal unity and real multiplicity of a heap of stones, nor the instinctive unity of a herd. Neither is it the logical unity of a class of humans – like the class of whole numbers – with humanity as the membership determinant; for belonging to society is part of humanity. Society is a union of persons which expresses itself as the equality and interdependence of the many.

Such an approach to society is, no doubt, an attractive ideal, but it is not what happens. In fact people are jealous, selfish, uncooperative and lazy, and society is the area in which they exercise these qualities.

Society, in other words, contains the seeds of its own destruction. The wonder is that it survives at all. But it must be made survive because men would be truncated without it. The state is the necessary source of supervision and coercion which are needed to ensure that the individual has a reasonable chance of achieving in society what he can and should achieve. It is there to ensure that the anti-social tendencies of men shall not prevail; that human fellowship will have an opportunity to flourish.

This is the line of thought that is summed up in the old adage ‘the state is a natural society’. It is in the nature of things that there be states; it is not the result of chance or human decision. That there be states is dictated by the imperative need of association for human development, and by the need for the organisation and supervision of such association.

States are inevitable; but the number, extent and political structure of individual states are not predetermined in any way. These can change, and have changed very radically in the course of history. Compare today’s map of Europe, for instance, with what it was in Roman times and in the early years of this century.

States change for many reasons, because of empire-building, wars, dynastic accidents, economic factors, decadence – and, not least, by

revolution. If we discount the sheer *coup d'état*, revolution is always motivated by dissatisfaction with the state's performance; it is not doing for its citizens what it is there to do. Its function is, in the traditional phrase, 'to promote the common good' or, in the words of the 1916 Proclamation 'to cherish all the children of the nation equally'.

It is hardly possible to specify this function very much further in general terms. The state is not directly concerned with organising and directing the perfecting of individuals. Its role is rather the provision of facilities, the establishment of an environment conducive to human happiness and development.

Looked on in this way, from the viewpoint of the relation of a state to its citizens, revolution presents itself as a technique for the reform of society to make it minister to its citizens as it should; a reform that contrasts to the more usual evolutionary type.

One can, however, also consider revolution from the opposite point of view, that of the citizen relating himself to the state. The correct or ideal attitude towards one's country has been given a name – patriotism. It is important to realise that the fixing of a definition does not prove anything or close any questions. By resolving to use the word 'patriotism' to refer to an admirable attitude to one's country, one has not determined what this attitude is. One must still enquire what patriotism is and what it demands – whether to die or to refuse to die, to overthrow or to improve from within, to adulate or criticise, to work for or avail of.

In fact, however, patriotism as it occurs is always something less than the ideal. It may in fact be a very unadmirable thing, a boastful overweening attitude of superiority, or it may be degraded to the hatred of a neighbouring nation. This is a human failing; but the failure to achieve ideals shows their importance, not their irrelevance.

Revolution may appear as a patriotic action by the revolutionary, or even a patriotic duty. Alternatively it may be regarded as an unpatriotic action, or even as a crime against patriotism. But in either case it presents itself as patriotic; this is the standard by which it wishes to be judged.

What then is patriotism? The word itself provides a key. It denominates one's country as a fatherland, and suggests that one's attitude towards it should be a filial one, a mixture of gratitude and affection. Everyone derives very real benefits from his social environment. He takes on the identity and character of a people; he is moulded by a history, a literature, a language, an economy. What he is and can

hope to become is largely determined by the society that supports and challenges him.

In this viewpoint patriotism is a realistic thing. The patriot realises that he has benefitted; he appreciates it, and is willing to acknowledge it, to attempt in some measure to requite it, and perhaps even to sacrifice himself for it. Patriotism is realistic because the benefits are real.

There is however an air of business, of horse-trading, about this approach to patriotism. It is made to appear like a contract – *do ut des*. One's relations with one's parents are not business relations. If they were they would be utterly degraded. A business relationship with God would be similarly degraded.

In addition to the recognition of favours there is also in patriotism a kind of personal and emotional attachment. The medievals had a concept they called *pietas* which lacked the exclusively religious connotation and the rather depreciative tone of the derived English word 'piety'. Patriotism as *pietas* is a recognition of benefits received combined with an attachment which is emotional and personal. Patriotism is a feeling for the people, the race, the nation.

Let me emphasise the contrast between the two elements of patriotism as they emerge here. Patriotism is least of all a hard-headed, realistic assessment of benefits received, and a recognition that a certain response is due: a response of loyalty, cooperation and perhaps sacrifice. All of this is on the level of calculation. Notice that the assessment must be critical. No country is perfect; all are to some extent warlike, barbaric, illiberal. Patriotism not only permits of but demands the recognition of faults. We have inherited some of our faults as well as some of our values.

In addition, patriotism is loyalty to one's country, even in spite of its faults. It is loved 'warts and all'. This is the affective, emotional aspect of patriotism. It is non-rational, non-critical, non-calculating. This does not make it irrational, any more than the love of a parent for a child is irrational. Rather it is a relation of service which is essentially independent of any mutual benefit.

I would suggest that these twin elements in patriotism – the calculation of utility and the personal involvement that spurns calculation – are matched by a parallel distinction within the object of patriotism. One's country is or should be both state and nation. The patriotic attitude to the state is critical and calculating; the patriotic attitude to the nation is affective.

When one speaks of love of country, the word 'country' is ambig-

uous. There is the community of people – call it the nation; and there is the state, which is the organisation of the people. That we do regard state and nation as different things may be variously illustrated. For instance, we regard recent emigrants as still belonging to their own nation even though they become subjects of a new state. Similarly, in states that comprise several distinct nations — such as the United Kingdom prior to 1916, or the Austro-Hungarian Empire prior to 1918 – and in nations comprising several states – such as Germany today – nationalistic patriotism is inevitably anti-state. Clearly then state and nation must be recognisably distinct entities. Patriotism can be for or against a state. Therefore it is not directed primarily to a state at all, but to something else which the state is regarded as serving well or ill. That something else is what I am calling the nation.

‘Nation’ is a very vague word indeed. Various attempts have been made to define it, most commonly in terms of race, language, culture or religion. But perhaps it can be adequately distinguished from the state in a simpler way.

The state is the organisation of the people, the machinery of administration and law. This is a technical thing, of which one can think dispassionately. It seems to me that there is little scope for emotion here. Every state is imperfect and in need of constant repair. It may become so decrepit that replacement is the sensible course. In particular it will be necessary to think of replacing it if it becomes an instrument of repression, if it is restricting instead of promoting the development of the people.

The nation, on the other hand, *is* the people apart from their political organisation. For people are not brought together by a state; the state is the subsequent organisation of people who already possess some kind of unity. People are social, and new people are born into this society. They grow in a people, just as a plant grows in the decayed remnants of former growth. It is with the nation that one’s loyalty lies. There is no disowning it, no alternative to it. There should be a feeling for the nation, for it is one’s own people. This is the origin of the affective element in patriotism.

However, I do not mean that there should be no critical component in one’s attitude to the nation. Of course there must. Some peoples are lazy, others are dull or ambitious or unreliable; and all have a selection of skeletons in their historical cupboards. One is not called on to give unconditional approval.

Similarly it is not true that there should be no emotional attachment to the state. Clearly there will be. Such things as the flag, the national

anthem and traditional ceremonials will be valued independently of utilitarian considerations.

Although the parallel here suggested is not rigid, it is worth stressing on account of the disastrous consequences that follow from the reversal of the appropriate patriotic attitudes to state and nation. An unduly emotional attachment to the state – the organising coercing element – will surely lead to totalitarianism, expansionism, militarism. And an unduly detached critical attitude to the nation could lead to exaggerated cosmopolitanism, rootlessness, and in the long run, a general impoverishment of the spirit through the loss of the sense of belonging. If humanity is reduced to pure individuality it is a poor and stunted thing.

There is one other characteristic of patriotism which I think is worth stressing – that it is relatively autocratic, intolerant; and that it is an uneasy bedfellow of democracy.

Patriotism is intolerant of oppositon and of indifference. The reason is that it is felt to be something imposed, not in any way optional. If it is imposed on me, then it is imposed on all, because all have benefitted and all belong to the nation. Simple lack of interest is not regarded as a good defense. The person who is bored by football or bull-fighting may be pitied or despised, but he is not usually dragooned into conformism. He is perfectly entitled to be uninterested. But patriotism does not admit a right to be unpatriotic.

In some ways the problem of patriotic intolerance is even more intractable than that of religious intolerance. For one can claim that religion is largely a matter for the individual, whereas patriotism is concerned precisely with the community. Hence the political community can tolerate religious non-conformism or indifference on grounds that cannot be adduced in justification of patriotic non-conformism or indifference – i.e. that it is a private and not a communal concern. Furthermore it is possible at least to attempt a clear partition between politics and religion, whereas no such partition is possible between politics and patriotism.

Patriotism presents itself as a protestation that we are all our brothers' keepers. What a person does on patriotic grounds he does not for himself but for the community; and the community may not want it. But the fact that what he does for the community is repudiated by the community does not apparently prevent his doing it on patriotic grounds. The patriot who endeavours to 'awaken' his community appears untroubled in his patriotism by the fact that the community regards itself as wide awake already, or by their emphatic preference

for the allegedly unawakened state. Patriotism then can be an undemocratic thing, in that the patriot can be tempted to act on behalf of the people without asking the people, or even against the wishes of the people. He knows what is good for the people, and the fact that they repudiate it shows that they need to be coerced, not consulted. At its furthest extreme the patient's protestations of good health prove the seriousness of his illness.

Of course one should not regard the difficulty that patriotism has in getting along with democracy as automatically condemning it. As far as I know there is no country in the world today that does not claim to be a democracy. In that case the word 'democracy' must be almost meaningless. And, even in our own type of society, it is only in a rather global way that political decisions are taken by popular vote. Nevertheless the relative intolerance of patriotism is particularly important in a revolutionary situation. There may be revolutions that have massive popular support; but there are many, defended on patriotic grounds, that lack any substantial support. It should however be remembered that generally the revolutionary cannot campaign for support. The surprise on which he relies for success is also liable to ensure lack of popular support.

Furthermore, revolutions sometimes occur in situations where there are no accepted democratic procedures. For instance, supposing there were an attempt to incorporate Gibraltar into Spain by revolutionary means, it might reasonably be pointed out that there are no recognised procedures whereby the citizens of Gibraltar, Spain and Britain can be consulted instead and the wishes of each given their proper weight.

It is a fearful responsibility for a small number of people to take on themselves to destroy the society that most people are content to live and die in. No doubt that society is not perfect; no society ever was or will be, in spite of all the best-intentioned revolutions.

VARIETIES AND STATISTICS

Before going on to speak of the morality of revolution let me say something of its varieties and statistics.

There are two general categories of revolution – the nationalistic and the reformist. All nationalistic revolutions spring from the alleged discrepancy between state and nation. Where several nations are incorporated in a single state or empire there is pressure by the various nations to achieve independent statehood. The more distant colonies are often the first to succeed, for instance the United States and the

Spanish possessions in South America. These de-clonising revolutions have been concentrated in the past century, and there can be very few left to occur; but there is another type of nationalistic revolution which is still very much with us. Nations which have become incorporated in a strongly centralised and geographically compact state find it much more difficult to achieve independence. Contemporary examples would be the Scots, Serbs, Croatians and Basques.

It is these nationalistic revolutions that generate most passion, and which are the most likely to degenerate into civil war when they are partly successful. They spring from an ideology of freedom and a long-remembered distinctiveness. This becomes sufficiently disseminated among the people to generate a political movement. This in turn produces a military movement to further the political aim. When some military success has been achieved there can arise a clash between the politics and the ideology. The ideology is an idealism which, while striving to be timeless, is in fact conditioned by the past. Politics, on the other hand, is the art of what is possible now. The acceptance of a partial independence which is offered can be seen as the repudiation of the ideal which is not fully attainable now. People who share a common ideology can differ on matters of political decision, and even resort to arms to 'settle' their differences.

The other kind of revolution I call reformist. In this there are no problems of nationality or territory; the grievance is rather that the state is not functioning satisfactorily. One can distinguish several forms. There is first of all a radical changing of the whole form of the state, on the grounds that the existing structures are unsuitable or outdated or instruments of repression. The modern Cuban revolution is an example. There are other revolutions in which the structures are left unchanged, but the leaders, who are alleged to be misbehaving in some way, are replaced. Finally there is the sheer take-over of power, by power. This is of no theoretical interest.

The reformist type of revolution promises to be more common in the future than the nationalistic. Nationalism appears to be evolving in the direction of internationalism, whereas reform is a perennial need. Systems of political organisation tend to ossify, whereas the ensuring of justice and liberty demands a constant adaptation to changing circumstances. It is contended, for instance, that Western society today is lacking in justice because it perpetuates a gross maldistribution of wealth on a global scale. It is further contended that it is lacking in liberty because it is based on the creation of artificial needs and the pressuring of people to pursue them. Where, it is asked, is the liberty

of people who will inevitably waste like everybody else, work the same hours as everybody else, submit to the same education and communications, and indulge in the same leisure, suburban living, commuting, insuring and labour saving as everybody else?

Reform is a constant political demand. Ideally it should be a rational evolution; but if evolution is frustrated revolution presents itself as an alternative means.

There have always been revolutions – consider Barrabbas for instance who was amnestied in unusual circumstances – but they have recently become more common, more successful and less dangerous. The old-style revolution was often a spontaneous demonstration of frustration, and often deliberately induced by the government to strengthen its own position. Typically it was unsuccessful, and was followed by savage, extensive and indiscriminate revenge. But things have changed. The *coup d'etat* type of revolution has now become much more skillful. Ideally nobody should be killed, and shooting has gone quite out of fashion. The important elements are closing airports, capturing radio stations and issuing proclamations.

The most revolutionary area of the world in recent times has been South America. In the twenty years 1945 to 1964 there were forty six revolutions there, of which twenty nine succeeded; whereas the remainder of the world shared forty two in that time, of which twenty seven succeeded. Africa and Asia are the next most prolific continents. North America and Australia, on the other hand, have had no revolutions at all in recent times. We tend not to think of Europe as a revolutionary area, but in fact there has been a great deal of revolutionary activity there in this century, even if you leave Ireland out of account. Portugal had a revolution last year, Spain in the 1930s, Greece in 1946 and 1967, Czechoslovakia in 1948 and 1968, Hungary in 1956, Turkey in 1960, Cyprus in the 1950s and again in 1972; and there has been sporadic revolutionary trouble in Brittany, Spain, Greece, Gibraltar, Wales, Scotland, Italy and Yugoslavia. That is a formidable tally for an area which we tend to regard as politically stable.

While revolution is a very varied phenomenon, it is nevertheless possible to define the term: I would suggest the following:

A revolution is a violent and allegedly patriotic attempt to radically reorganise the state with which a nation coexists territorially, on the grounds that the common good is being neglected and will be better promoted by the post-revolutionary state.

This definition is really geared to the nationalistic variety of revolution. It excludes the sheer take-over of power, which arguably should not be called revolution at all. Finally, if it is to fit the non-radical reformist type of revolution one should not insist on the phrase 'radically re-organise'.

MORALITY AND REVOLUTION

In the early stages of the Christian era the moral theory of revolution got very little attention. It received its main development only in medieval and more especially in modern times. Early Christianity was not political reformist, and in any case regarded the earthly city as rather unimportant. The breakthrough came in medieval times with the recognition that a ruler who commanded what God prohibited, or *vice versa*, had no standing. He could be disobeyed, or even superseded. Aquinas reached this point, a very limited and reluctant allowance of revolution.

The Reformation further developed the theory, for it was itself a revolution. If you agreed with it you regarded it as justified; if you did not you regarded it as the most unjustified of all. Revolt against a mere earthly potentate palled into insignificance compared to revolt against God's arrangements for salvation.

The reformers respectabilised revolution in another way. They accorded to the civil ruler a large measure of control over religious affairs, with the proviso that the ruler should be suitably 'godly'. The effect of this was to reverse the control; for certain religious persons would have to decide whether their ruler was a suitable person to exercise religious power over them. This means that in certain circumstances one might be obliged to revolt against one's ruler and to replace him. It is this aspect of the theory that is operative in seventeenth century England where, largely on grounds of religion, one king was executed and another forced to flee: and this in a country that has not been revolutionary before or since. At the end of the seventeenth century in England you get some very careful discussion of the morality of revolution. It has to be careful, lest the theory which justifies the deposition of the former king might also justify the deposition of his successor.

The next epoch of revolutionary theory centres on the American and French revolutions, and the more generalised outbreak of nationalism in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. Thereafter you are down to our own times. This is the era of nationalist, anti-colonial revolutions,

such as those in Algeria and Cyprus and Angola, and of revolutions springing from a demand for reform such as those in Cuba and China. There is the emergence of other new revolutionary theories, such as that of communism, that concerned with the unequal division of wealth on a world-wide scale, and that which claims the need for revolution to break the depersonalising character of western capitalism.

Over the centuries there has evolved a theory of the morality of revolution which has won very general acceptance. It is closely akin to the traditional Just War Theory, and like it regards revolution as permissible provided certain conditions are fulfilled. There is no definitive list or formulation of these conditions, but the following would, I believe, be generally accepted.

1. There must be a situation of grave tyranny.
2. Other means of redress must have been exhausted.
3. There must be some probability of success.
4. The evil caused by the revolution should be outweighed by the good that will be done or the evil that will be suppressed.
5. There must be some popular support.

In evaluating a theory of this sort one must first of all determine what precisely it is that the theory can offer. One must then refrain from presenting it as offering more than it can deliver; and one must equally refrain from criticising it for not being what it does not purport to be.

Let me explain. There are all sorts of situations where a decision can be reached by the application of objective, impersonal tests. The litmus paper will differentiate acids and alkalis; and the make-up of the spinal fluid will tell if its owner has meningitis. Such procedures provide an answer which is totally unrelated to one's wishes. You may like or dislike what you find out, but preference has nothing whatever to do with what you find out. Your personal attitude of approval or disapproval of the meningitic condition of spinal fluid is totally irrelevant to your judgement that the person has or has not meningitis. One does of course speak of evaluating the results of tests in such situations. This is merely a perversity of usage. The whole point of such tests is that they take place exclusively within the factual realm. Non-factual evaluations ('my favourite virus'!) are out of order.

The traditional moral theory of revolution presents itself as a test whereby one is enabled to determine whether any given revolution is justifiable or not. But here the test is not, and cannot be, a purely factual one. One man's 'grave tyranny' is another man's 'firm govern-

ment'. In contrast it is not the case that one scientist's 'virus X' is another scientist's 'virus Y'. Even if there were total agreement on the facts of a given political situation, the question whether this political situation constituted grave tyranny could not be resolved by a definition, as it can be in the case of scientific tests. An evaluative judgement must intervene. It is because, among other reasons, the political situation is adjudged iniquitous or intolerable that revolution in the circumstances is regarded as morally permissible. In other words, the criteria of the morality of revolution are moral criteria, not factual criteria. Nor is this difference an accidental one. Even if we supposed that everyone in all circumstances agreed on what was and was not grave tyranny, one still has not matched the scientific situation; for the criterion of grave tyranny is still an evaluative and not a factual one.

To insist that the moral theory of revolution presents a moral rather than a scientific test is not to dismiss the theory either as false or as useless, but rather to point to its true character as a moral theory. It is to be expected, for instance, that people whose valuations of political situations and revolutionary practices differ will also differ in the conclusions they derive from this theory – even if they all equally accept the theory. Such a state of affairs would be unacceptable if one were dealing with a scientific test.

The traditional theory of revolution does not provide a test of such a kind that if several people apply it to the same situation and arrive at different judgements, the test is not thereby shown to be inadequate or the users of it incompetent or deceitful. What the theory does is to present the various values that must be taken into account in making a moral evaluation of revolution. As such it is a series of headings; these headings denominate matters of great complexity. In pointing to this complexity one is not refuting the theory, but rather explaining and expanding it.

All five conditions point, in different ways, to the central role of the common good. Tyranny is the spurning of it. Non-revolutionary means are to be preferred as less disruptive of it. Probability of success is demanded because one may not take foolish risks with it. The reason for the insistence that the good must outweigh the evil is that otherwise it will suffer. And the demand for consent emphasises its communal nature.

In addition, these five traditional criteria point to certain values and anti-values which help to indicate whether a revolution will promote or militate against the common good. Let us consider these in turn.

(1) Grave tyranny is restriction of liberty beyond the demands of security and organisational efficiency. The judgement concerning the kind of political situation which constitutes grave tyranny, while not arbitrary, is still a matter of personal evaluation. There is no factual system of measurement which will determine how much oppression of how many for how long will constitute grave tyranny. This condition presents the claims of liberty. This is a value which must not be sacrificed to security and efficiency. Despotism is not saved by being benevolent, nor foreign domination by its providing efficient administration.

(2) The demand that other means be exhausted before revolution is embarked on is an insistence that the violence of revolution is an anti-value. As such it is never accepted with enthusiasm but only with reluctance and as a last resort. Of course the exhaustion of other means is metaphorical, for political organisation and agitation may go on endlessly. It is people who become exhausted, when they demand success in the short term. There is no factual way of determining how many people must have tried for how long and with what degree of actual and prospective success for this demand to be met. What it does is not to present a factual test, but rather to insist that violence, because it is an anti-value, should not be resorted to unless one is satisfied that no other means has any prospects of success.

(3) The third condition, that there be some probability of success, emphasises the subordinate, instrumental character of revolution. It is acceptable, if it is acceptable at all, not for what it is, but only for what it accomplishes. This is another factor to be taken into account, but again there is no applicable measurement system. One cannot quantify the chances of success, nor the degree of success. There is no scope for precision and great scope for disagreement. Inevitably, the kind and degree of prospective success that will satisfy one person will not satisfy another. It is even possible to rate total military failure as adequate success, on the grounds that it may keep alive the spark of national identity. In general, this condition demands that if revolution is to be justified, the prospects of success and the degree of envisaged success must be such as would satisfy a reasonable man. The reasonable man, in this context, is he who assigns due weight to all the relevant values. Such judgements cannot be cut and dried and beyond controversy.

(4) The fourth condition, that the good to be achieved by revolution should outweigh the harm that it causes, is an insistence that revolution is a mixture of good and bad, and that one cannot justify it without regarding the evil as tolerable for the sake of the good. This patently evaluative procedure is expressed metaphorically as the comparison of

two quantities; but there are no units of good and evil and no externally observable method of comparison.

That revolution may do good is the whole purpose of it. The good is the social reform that is envisaged, and the resultant benefits accruing to the citizen. But the evil is equally real, and much of it is ineradicable. There is the obvious harm of injury and death and destruction, of imprisonment and outlawing, of the disruption of business and family life, of lasting bitterness and hatreds. There is also the more far-reaching harm of social disruption. Society is a delicate web of relationships and trusts which once fractured is not easily repaired. The laws may be harsh and cruel but there may still be more discernment to them than to a gun in the hands of a man grown callous of violence. Society is a delicately balanced fragile thing, and it is easier to bring violence into it than to take it out again. The confidence that lets men sleep unafraid of every sound in the night, that lets them walk the streets or speak their minds without fear – these are delicate and valuable things, and they are not easily restored.

(5) The final condition, that there be some degree of popular support, emphasises the communal nature of revolution. It is concerned with the better organisation of the people's society for the people's benefit. Revolution, in other words, is a representative function not a private initiative. There are many things that do not need to be justified; one does not argue for the toleration of virtue and education and family loyalty. But revolution is not in this category. Even though it presents itself as the irruption of heroism and unselfishness into the petty wrangle of politics, it is not there as of right. Its standing derives from its necessity as recognised by the people.

The revolutionary is not merely accountable to the people, he stands in need of some kind of mandate from the people. However, revolutionaries are not elected, and frequently they dare not canvass support. In fact the more need and justification there is for revolution the less the support is liable to be. The really efficient tyranny is the one that stifles the will for freedom.

Here again we encounter the impossibility of precision. To demand majority support in advance of revolution is in many cases to demand the impossible; and it would be a very unreasonable moral theory which would extend moral support to a tyrannical regime on account of its efficiency in suppressing the will to resist. To delete the demand for popular support, on the other hand, would be to ignore the communal nature of revolution. Between these extremes one must insist on such

support as can be reasonably expected in the circumstances. Here again there is no scope for precision and much for disagreement.

This traditional theory of the morality of revolution leaves many people with the feeling that it is in some way inadequate or incomplete. One main reason for dissatisfaction is, I think, the misunderstanding of the possibilities of moral theory to which I have been referring. A more important source, however, is the feeling that the theory constitutes only the final stage of a more complete theory. Such a theory might be outlined in three stages as follows:

(1) Revolution is a resort to violence, and violence is an anti-value, a failure of human relations. Even if it is the best available alternative revolution is still regrettable; it should not be clothed in a robe of glory. Killing and destruction are bad. This is the primary moral consideration which tends to be forgotten on account of its simplicity.

(2) Society must exert itself to establish procedures which will make revolution unnecessary and preferably impossible. This might be done by an international authority. Alternatively, and perhaps better, it might be done by an intra-state body. This would, of course, present enormous difficulties, but one should not assume that these are insuperable. Such a body would need sufficient independence and authority to impose its will on both the state organisation and the prospective revolutionaries. The independence and power presently afforded to the judiciary, the Ombudsman, the Director of Public Prosecutions, and the electoral boundaries commission (in Britain) would suggest that the project is not entirely unrealistic.

(3) Until such time as such alternative procedures are established, there will be situations in which there is no reasonable alternative to revolution, which will then be justified provided the conditions of the traditional theory are fulfilled.

One great advantage of the traditional theory, however, is that it rules out judgement of revolution by peripheral issues. It is important that revolution be not condemned solely on grounds of malpractice or regrettable accident.

During the Easter Week rebellion of 1916, according to Mrs. Hamilton Norway, the horses at a riding-school behind the GPO were burnt to death, and various of her valuables were stolen by the insurgents. If these things happened they are regrettable, but they are not central. Terrible things happen in all revolutions, but one is not thereby committed to condemning all revolutions.

Probably the most common ground for the condemnation of revolution

is the occurrence of malpractice of one sort or another – vendettas, intimidation, theft, protection rackets and assorted other forms of injustice. I suppose there has never been a revolution in which no scores have been settled and no nests feathered. Revolution, however, is not the only enterprise beset by human frailty. Lawyers lose cases and doctors lose patients that should not be lost; teachers sometimes impress by obfuscating. But the practice is not automatically to be condemned on account of the malpractice. Revolutionary malpractice must be taken into account as one of the kinds of evil which the revolution will, hopefully, counterbalance by the reforms which it induces.

Another advantage of the traditional theory is that it invites comparison between revolution and other forms of violence, particularly war; for there is a parallel Just War Theory.

Many people are inclined to regard war as justified because it has official authorisation, and revolution as unjustified because it has not. This is perverse; principally because the nature of revolution precludes official authorisation, but also because, morally speaking, war is worse than revolution. Wars have killed twenty-five million people in this century, and it is hard to see that they have produced any counterbalancing good. Revolutions have produced no Utopias, but some of them have been influential for good in spite of their failures. The French Revolution degenerated into terror and eventually into despotism, yet the world has been the better of it.

There is more demanded of the revolutionary than of the soldier. His is an open-ended commitment with no time limit. If one attempt does not succeed he may spend twenty years in prison, and then feel compelled to start again – a terrifying prospect for a young man. There is an isolation and silence imposed, a living out of one's own resources that does not belong in war. The revolutionary must make his own decision to cross the line between law and outlaw. It is a decision which is beset with uncertainties. The grievances may be imaginary or inevitably disappearing; the constitutional way may be better; the revolution may make things worse, it may be contra-indicated, unnecessary, tragic; the rebel may be duped or misguided or misinformed. He will, at least ideally, weigh all of these factors, and his decision is unlikely to be dictated by self-interest or conformism.

LONGTERM DANGERS

In conclusion I would stress two unfortunate consequences which are liable to flow from revolution. The first is its tendency to promote the

periodic recurrence of revolutions; the second its tendency to depreciate the profession of politics.

A revolution is designed to establish a new and better political order which will render revolution uncalled for. The revolution will, at best, only partly succeed; yet the political order which it establishes will, like any conceivable political order, ban revolution. The original, relatively successful, revolutionaries will inevitably resist any revolutionary attempt to oust them; yet it can reasonably be claimed that the relative failure of the original revolution justifies a revolutionary attempt to renew or complete or reorientate or update it, or rescue it from deviationists, foreign lackeys and running dogs. Revolution, it has been well said, is like a runaway train; it acquires an impetus of its own and is extraordinarily difficult to stop. I can see no solution to this problem until people recognise that revolution — like assassination and ransom and enslavement and torture and *lettres de cachet* — is an improper political procedure; and, having recognised that, establish such machinery for the redress of grievances as will render it both impossible and unnecessary.

A further unfortunate consequence of revolution is its tendency to downgrade the status of politics. Revolutionaries are committed to condemning the politics of their time as futile and impotent. Their revolution is based on the claim that politics has utterly failed to make any progress towards the laudable ideals which they profess. But in denouncing a local and contemporary failure of politics, the revolutionary may slip into quite unjustified denunciation of the contemporary politicians. The practice of politics is always demanding, but never more so than in revolutionary times. The revolutionary has no monopoly of courage and idealism.

The denunciation of the failure of politics may extend even to the devaluation of politics itself. This is certainly wrong; for politics is a perennial need, whereas revolution is tolerable only for the political objectives which it can, sometimes, promote. When the revolution is over somebody will have to pick up the pieces. The practice of politics must go on. Hopefully the politicians of the new order will include both the politicians and the revolutionaries of the old.

MATTHEW O'DONNELL, B.D., PH.D.
Professor of Philosophy

St. Patrick's College,
Maynooth.