

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF REVOLUTION

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Introduction: The Revision of History.

The present age is not merely an epoch of discovery; it is also a period of revision of the various elements of knowledge. Having recognised that there are no phenomena of which the first cause is still accessible, science has resumed the examination of her ancient certitudes, and has proved their fragility. To-day she sees her ancient principles vanishing one by one. Mechanics is losing its axioms, and matter, formerly the eternal substratum of the worlds, becomes a simple aggregate of ephemeral forces in transitory condensation.

Despite its conjectural side, by virtue of which it to some extent escapes the severest form of criticism, history has not been free from this universal revision. There is no longer a single one of its phases of which we can say that it is certainly known. What appeared to be definitely acquired is now once more put in question.

Among the events whose study seemed completed was the French Revolution. Analysed by several generations of writers, one might suppose it to be perfectly elucidated. What new thing can be said of it, except in modification of some of its details?

And yet its most positive defenders are beginning to hesitate in their judgments. Ancient evidence proves to be far from impeccable. The faith in dogmas once held sacred is shaken. The latest literature of the Revolution betrays these uncertainties. Having related, men are more and more chary of drawing conclusions.

Not only are the heroes of this great drama discussed without indulgence, but thinkers are asking whether the new dispensation which followed the ancien régime would not have established itself naturally, without violence, in the course of progressive civilisation. The results obtained no longer seem in correspondence either with their immediate cost or with the remoter consequences which the Revolution evoked from the possibilities of history.

Several causes have led to the revision of this tragic period. Time has calmed passions, numerous documents have gradually emerged from the archives, and the historian is learning to interpret them independently.

But it is perhaps modern psychology that has most effectually influenced our ideas, by enabling us more surely to read men and the motives of their conduct. Among those of its discoveries which are henceforth applicable to history we

must mention, above all, a more profound understanding of ancestral influences, the laws which rule the actions of the crowd, data relating to the disaggregation of personality, mental contagion, the unconscious formation of beliefs, and the distinction between the various forms of logic. To tell the truth, these applications of science, which are utilised in this book, have not been so utilised hitherto. Historians have generally stopped short at the study of documents, and even that study is sufficient to excite the doubts of which I have spoken.

The great events which shape the destinies of peoples — revolutions, for example, and the outbreak of religious beliefs — are sometimes so difficult to explain that one must limit oneself to a mere statement.

From the time of my first historical researches I have been struck by the impenetrable aspect of certain essential phenomena, those relating to the genesis of beliefs especially; I felt convinced that something fundamental was lacking that was essential to their interpretation. Reason having said all it could say, nothing more could be expected of it, and other means must be sought of comprehending what had not been elucidated.

For a long time these important questions remained obscure to me. Extended travel, devoted to the study of the remnants of vanished civilisations, had not done much to throw light upon them.

Reflecting upon it continually, I was forced to recognise that the problem was composed of a series of other problems, which I should have to study separately. This I did for a period of twenty years, presenting the results of my researches in a succession of volumes.

One of the first was devoted to the study of the psychological laws of the evolution of peoples. Having shown that the historic races — that is, the races formed by the hazards of history — finally acquired psychological characteristics as stable as their anatomical characteristics, I attempted to explain how a people transforms its institutions, its languages, and its arts. I explained in the same work why it was that individual personalities, under the influence of sudden variations of environment, might be entirely disaggregated.

But besides the fixed collectivities formed by the peoples, there are mobile and transitory collectivities known as crowds. Now these crowds or mobs, by the aid of which the great movements of history are accomplished, have characteristics absolutely different from those of the individuals who compose them.

What are these characteristics, and how are they evolved? This new problem was examined in *The Psychology of the Crowd*.

Only after these studies did I begin to perceive certain influences which had escaped me.

But this was not all. Among the most important factors of history one was preponderant — the factor of beliefs. How are these beliefs born, and are they really rational and voluntary, as was long taught? Are they not rather unconscious and independent of all reason? A difficult question, which I dealt with in my last book, *Opinions and Beliefs*.

So long as psychology regards beliefs as voluntary and rational they will remain inexplicable. Having proved that they are usually irrational and always involuntary, I was able to propound the solution of this important problem; how it was that beliefs which no reason could justify were admitted with out difficulty by the most enlightened spirits of all ages.

The solution of the historical difficulties which had so long been sought was thenceforth obvious. I arrived at the conclusion that beside the rational logic which conditions thought, and was formerly regarded as our sole guide, there exist very different forms of logic: affective logic, collective logic, and mystic logic, which usually overrule the reason and engender the generative impulses of our conduct.

This fact well established, it seemed to me evident that if a great number of historical events are often uncomprehended, it is because we seek to interpret them in the light of a logic which in reality has very little influence upon their genesis.

All these researches, which are here summed up in a few lines, demanded long years for their accomplishment. Despairing of completing them, I abandoned them more than once to return to those labours of the laboratory in which one is always sure of skirting the truth and of acquiring fragments at least of certitude.

But while it is very interesting to explore the world of material phenomena, it is still more so to decipher men, for which reason I have always been led back to psychology.

Certain principles deduced from my researches appearing likely to prove fruitful, I resolved to apply them to the study of concrete instances, and was thus led to deal with the Psychology of Revolutions — notably that of the

French Revolution.

Proceeding in the analysis of our great Revolution, the greater part of the opinions determined by the reading of books deserted me one by one, although I had considered them unshakable.

To explain this period we must consider it as a whole, as many historians have done. It is composed of phenomena simultaneous but independent of one another.

Each of its phases reveals events engendered by psychological laws working with the regularity of clockwork. The actors in this great drama seem to move like the characters of a previously determined drama. Each says what he must say, acts as he is bound to act.

To be sure, the actors in the revolutionary drama differed from those of a written drama in that they had not studied their parts, but these were dictated by invisible forces.

Precisely because they were subjected to the inevitable progression of logics incomprehensible to them we see them as greatly astonished by the events of which they were the heroes as are we ourselves. Never did they suspect the invisible powers which forced them to act. They were the masters neither of their fury nor their weakness. They spoke in the name of reason, pretending to be guided by reason, but in reality it was by no means reason that impelled them.

“The decisions for which we are so greatly reproached,” wrote Billaud--Varenne, “were more often than otherwise not intended or desired by us two days or even one day beforehand: the crisis alone evoked them.”

Not that we must consider the events of the Revolution as dominated by an imperious fatality. The readers of our works will know that we recognise in the man of superior qualities the rôle of averting fatalities. But he can dissociate himself only from a few of such, and is often powerless before the sequence of events which even at their origin could scarcely be ruled. The scientist knows how to destroy the microbe before it has time to act, but he knows himself powerless to prevent the evolution of the resulting malady.

When any question gives rise to violently contradictory opinions we may be sure that it belongs to the province of beliefs and not to that of knowledge.

We have shown in a preceding work that belief, of unconscious origin and independent of all reason, can never be influenced by reason.

The Revolution, the work of believers, has seldom been judged by any but believers. Execrated by some and praised by others, it has remained one of those dogmas which are accepted or rejected as a whole, without the intervention of rational logic.

Although in its beginnings a religious or political revolution may very well be supported by rational elements, it is developed only by the aid of mystic and affective elements which are absolutely foreign to reason.

The historians who have judged the events of the French Revolution in the name of rational logic could not comprehend them, since this form of logic did not dictate them. As the actors of these events themselves understood them but ill, we shall not be far from the truth in saying that our Revolution was a phenomenon equally misunderstood by those who caused it and by those who have described it. At no period of history did men so little grasp the present, so greatly ignore the past, and so poorly divine the future.

... The power of the Revolution did not reside in the principles — which for that matter were anything but novel — which it sought to propagate, nor in the institutions which it sought to found. The people cares very little for institutions and even less for doctrines. That the Revolution was potent indeed, that it made France accept the violence, the murders, the ruin and the horror of a frightful civil war, that finally it defended itself victoriously against a Europe in arms, was due to the fact that it had founded not a new system of government but a new religion. Now history shows us how irresistible is the might of a strong belief. Invincible Rome herself had to bow before the armies of nomad shepherds illuminated by the faith of Mahommed. For the same reason the kings of Europe could not resist the tatterdemalion soldiers of the Convention. Like all apostles, they were ready to immolate themselves in the sole end of propagating their beliefs, which according to their dream were to renew the world.

The religion thus founded had the force of other religions, if not their duration. Yet it did not perish without leaving indelible traces, and its influence is active still.

We shall not consider the Revolution as a clean sweep in history, as its apostles believed it. We know that to demonstrate their intention of creating

a world distinct from the old they initiated a new era and professed to break entirely with all vestiges of the past.

But the past never dies. It is even more truly within us than without us. Against their will the reformers of the Revolution remained saturated with the past, and could only continue, under other names, the traditions of the monarchy, even exaggerating the autocracy and centralisation of the old system. Tocqueville had no difficulty in proving that the Revolution did little but overturn that which was about to fall.

If in reality the Revolution destroyed but little it favoured the fruition of certain ideas which continued thenceforth to develop. The fraternity and liberty which it proclaimed never greatly seduced the peoples, but equality became their gospel: the pivot of socialism and of the entire evolution of modern democratic ideas. We may therefore say that the Revolution did not end with the advent of the Empire, nor with the successive restorations which followed it. Secretly or in the light of day it has slowly unrolled itself and still affects men's minds.

The study of the French Revolution to which a great part of this book is devoted will perhaps deprive the reader of more than one illusion, by proving to him that the books which recount the history of the Revolution contain in reality a mass of legends very remote from reality.

These legends will doubtless retain more life than history itself. Do not regret this too greatly. It may interest a few philosophers to know the truth, but the peoples will always prefer dreams. Synthetising their ideal, such dreams will always constitute powerful motives of action. One would lose courage were it not sustained by false ideas, said Fontenelle. Joan of Arc, the Giants of the Convention, the Imperial epic — all these dazzling images of the past will always remain sources of hope in the gloomy hours that follow defeat. They form part of that patrimony of illusions left us by our fathers, whose power is often greater than that of reality. The dream, the ideal, the legend — in a word, the unreal — it is that which shapes history.

Part I: The Psychological Elements of Revolutionary Movements.

Book I: General Characteristics of Revolutions.

Chapter I: Scientific and Political Revolutions.

1. Classification of Revolutions.

We generally apply the term revolution to sudden political changes, but the expression may be employed to denote all sudden transformations, or transformations apparently sudden, whether of beliefs, ideas, or doctrines.

We have considered elsewhere the part played by the rational, affective, and mystic factors in the genesis of the opinions and beliefs which determine conduct. We need not therefore return to the subject here.

A revolution may finally become a belief, but it often commences under the action of perfectly rational motives: the suppression of crying abuses, of a detested despotic government, or an unpopular sovereign, etc.

Although the origin of a revolution may be perfectly rational, we must not forget that the reasons invoked in preparing for it do not influence the crowd until they have been transformed into sentiments. Rational logic can point to the abuses to be destroyed, but to move the multitude its hopes must be awakened. This can only be effected by the action of the affective and mystic elements which give man the power to act. At the time of the French Revolution, for example, rational logic, in the hands of the philosophers, demonstrated the inconveniences of the ancien régime, and excited the desire to change it. Mystic logic inspired belief in the virtues of a society created in all its members according to certain principles. Affective logic unchained the passions confined by the bonds of ages and led to the worst excesses. Collective logic ruled the clubs and the Assemblies and impelled their members to actions which neither rational nor affective nor mystic logic would ever have caused them to commit.

Whatever its origin, a revolution is not productive of results until it has sunk into the soul of the multitude. Then events acquire special forms resulting from the peculiar psychology of crowds. Popular movements for this reason have characteristics so pronounced that the description of one will enable us to comprehend the others.

The multitude is, therefore, the agent of a revolution; but not its point of departure. The crowd represents an amorphous being which can do nothing,

and will nothing, without ahead to lead it. It will quickly exceed the impulse once received, but it never creates it.

The sudden political revolutions which strike the historian most forcibly are often the least important. The great revolutions are those of manners and thought. Changing the name of a government does not transform the mentality of a people. To overthrow the institutions of a people is not to re-shape its soul.

The true revolutions, those which transform the destinies of the peoples, are most frequently accomplished so slowly that the historians can hardly point to their beginnings. The term evolution is, therefore, far more appropriate than revolution.

The various elements we have enumerated as entering into the genesis of the majority of revolutions will not suffice to classify them. Considering only the designed object, we will divide them into scientific revolutions, political revolutions, and religious revolutions.

2. Scientific Revolutions.

Scientific revolutions are by far the most important. Although they attract but little attention, they are often fraught with remote consequences, such as are not engendered by political revolutions. We will therefore put them first, although we cannot study them here.

For instance, if our conceptions of the universe have profoundly changed since the time of the Revolution, it is because astronomical discoveries and the application of experimental methods have revolutionised them, by demonstrating that phenomena, instead of being conditioned by the caprices of the gods, are ruled by invariable laws.

Such revolutions are fittingly spoken of as evolution, on account of their slowness. But there are others which, although of the same order, deserve the name of revolution by reason of their rapidity: we his instance the theories of Darwin, overthrowing the whole science of biology in a few years; the discoveries of Pasteur, which revolutionised medicine during the lifetime of their author; and the theory of the dissociation of matter, proving that the atom, formerly supposed to be eternal, is not immune from the laws which condemn all the elements of the universe to decline and perish.

These scientific revolutions in the domain of ideas are purely intellectual. Our

sentiments and beliefs do not affect them. Men submit to them without discussing them. Their results being controllable by experience, they escape all criticism.

3. Political Revolutions.

Beneath and very remote from these scientific revolutions, which generate the progress of civilisations, are the religious and political revolutions, which have no kinship with them. While scientific revolutions derive solely from rational elements, political and religious beliefs are sustained almost exclusively by affective and mystic factors. Reason plays only a feeble part in their genesis. I insisted at some length in my book *Opinions and Beliefs* on the affective and mystic origin of beliefs, showing that a political or religious belief constitutes an act of faith elaborated in unconsciousness, over which, in spite of all appearances, reason has no hold. I also showed that belief often reaches such a degree of intensity that nothing can be opposed to it. The man hypnotised by his faith becomes an Apostle, ready to sacrifice his interests, his happiness, and even his life for the triumph of his faith. The absurdity of his belief matters little; for him it is a burning reality. Certitudes of mystic origin possess the marvellous power of entire domination over thought, and can only be affected by time.

By the very fact that it is regarded as an absolute truth a belief necessarily becomes intolerant. This explains the violence, hatred, and persecution which were the habitual accompaniments of the great political and religious revolutions, notably of the Reformation and the French Revolution.

Certain periods of French history remain incomprehensible if we forget the affective and mystic origin of beliefs, their necessary intolerance, the impossibility of reconciling them when they come into mutual contact, and, finally, the power conferred by mystic beliefs upon the sentiments which place themselves at their service.

The foregoing conceptions are too novel as yet to have modified the mentality of the historians. They will continue to attempt to explain, by means of rational logic, a host of phenomena which are foreign to it.

Events such as the Reformation, which overwhelmed France for a period of fifty years, were in no wise determined by rational influences. Yet rational influences are always invoked in explanation, even in the most recent works.

Thus, in the General History of Messrs. Lavisse and Rambaud, we read the following explanation of the Reformation: —

“It was a spontaneous movement, born here and there amidst the people, from the reading of the Gospels and the free individual reflections which were suggested to simple persons by an extremely pious conscience and a very bold reasoning power.” Contrary to the assertion of these historians, we may say with certainty, in the first place, that such movements are never spontaneous, and secondly, that reason takes no part in their elaboration.

The force of the political and religious beliefs which have moved the world resides precisely in the fact that, being born of affective and mystic elements, they are neither created nor directed by reason.

Political or religious beliefs have a common origin and obey the same laws. They are formed not with the aid of reason, but more often contrary to all reason. Buddhism, Islamism, the Reformation, Jacobinism, Socialism, etc., seem very different forms of thought. Yet they have identical affective and mystic bases, and obey a logic that has no affinity with rational logic.

Political revolutions may result from beliefs established in the minds of men, but many other causes produce them. The word discontent sums them up. As soon as discontent is generalised a party is formed which often becomes strong enough to struggle against the Government.

Discontent must generally have been accumulating for a long time in order to produce its effects. For this reason a revolution does not always represent a phenomenon in process of termination followed by another which is commencing but rather a continuous phenomenon, having somewhat accelerated its evolution. All the modern revolutions, however, have been abrupt movements, entailing the instantaneous overthrow of governments. Such, for example, were the Brazilian, Portuguese, Turkish, and Chinese revolutions.

To the contrary of what might be supposed, the very conservative peoples are addicted to the most violent revolutions. Being conservative, they are not able to evolve slowly, or to adapt themselves to variations of environment, so that when the discrepancy becomes too extreme they are bound to adapt themselves suddenly. This sudden evolution constitutes a revolution.

Peoples able to adapt themselves progressively do not always escape revolution. It was only by means of a revolution that the English, in 1688, were able to terminate the struggle which had dragged on for a century between the

monarchy, which sought to make itself absolute, and the nation, which claimed the right to govern itself through the medium of its representatives.

The great revolutions have usually commenced from the top, not from the bottom; but once the people is unchained it is to the people that revolution owes its might.

It is obvious that revolutions have never taken place, and will never take place, save with the aid of an important fraction of the army. Royalty did not disappear in France on the day when Louis XVI was guillotined, but at the precise moment when his mutinous troops refused to defend him.

It is more particularly by mental contagion that armies become disaffected, being indifferent enough at heart to the established order of things. As soon as the coalition of a few officers had succeeded in overthrowing the Turkish Government the Greek officers thought to imitate them and to change their government, although there was no analogy between the two régimes. A military movement may overthrow a government — and in the Spanish republics the Government is hardly ever destroyed by any other means — but if the revolution is to be productive of great results it must always be based upon general discontent and general hopes.

Unless it is universal and excessive, discontent alone is not sufficient to bring about a revolution. It is easy to lead a handful of men to pillage, destroy, and massacre, but to raise a whole people, or any great portion of that people, calls for the continuous or repeated action of leaders. These exaggerate the discontent; they persuade the discontented that the government is the sole cause of all the trouble, especially of the prevailing dearth, and assure men that the new system proposed by them will engender an age of felicity. These ideas germinate, propagating themselves by suggestion and contagion, and the moment arrives when the revolution is ripe.

In this fashion the Christian Revolution and the French Revolution were prepared. That the latter was effected in a few years, while the first required many, was due to the fact that the French Revolution promptly had an armed force at its disposal, while Christianity was long in winning material power. In the beginning its only adepts were the lowly, the poor, and the slaves, filled with enthusiasm by the prospect of seeing their miserable life transformed into an eternity of delight. By a phenomenon of contagion from below, of which history affords us more than one example, the doctrine finally invaded the

upper strata of the nation, but it was a long time before an emperor considered the new faith sufficiently widespread to be adopted as the official religion.

4. The Results of Political Revolutions.

When a political party is triumphant it naturally seeks to organise society in accordance with its interests. The organisation will differ accordingly as the revolution has been effected by the soldiers, the Radicals, or the Conservatives, etc. The new laws and institutions will depend on the interests of the triumphant party and of the classes which have assisted it — the clergy for instance.

If the revolution has triumphed only after a violent struggle, as was the case with the French Revolution, the victors will reject at one sweep the whole arsenal of the old law. The supporters of the fallen régime will be persecuted, exiled, or exterminated.

The maximum of violence in these persecutions is attained when the triumphant party is defending a belief in addition to its material interests. Then the conquered need hope for no pity. Thus may be explained the expulsion of the Moors from Spain, the autodafés of the Inquisition, the executions of the Convention, and the recent laws against the religious congregations in France. The absolute power which is assumed by the victors leads them sometimes to extreme measures, such as the Convention's decree that gold was to be replaced by paper, that goods were to be sold at determined prices, etc. Very soon it runs up against a wall of unavoidable necessities, which turn opinion against its tyranny, and finally leave it defenceless before attack, as befell at the end of the French Revolution. The same thing happened recently to a Socialist Australian ministry composed almost exclusively of working-men. It enacted laws so absurd, and accorded such privileges to the trade unions, that public opinion rebelled against it so unanimously that in three months it was overthrown.

But the cases we have considered are exceptional. The majority of revolutions have been accomplished in order to place a new sovereign in power. Now this sovereign knows very well that the first condition of maintaining his power consists in not too exclusively favouring a single class, but in seeking to conciliate all. To do this he will establish a sort of equilibrium between them, so as not to be dominated by any one of these classes. To allow one class to

become predominant is to condemn himself presently to accept that class as his master. This law is one of the most certain of political psychology. The kings of France understood it very well when they struggled so energetically against the encroachments first of the nobility and then of the clergy. If they had not done so their fate would have been that of the German Emperors of the Middle Ages, who, excommunicated by the Pope, were reduced, like Henry IV at Canossa, to make a pilgrimage and humbly to sue for the Pope's forgiveness. This same law has continually been verified during the course of history. When at the end of the Roman Empire the military caste became preponderant, the emperors depended entirely upon their soldiers, who appointed and deposed them at will.

It was therefore a great advantage for France that she was so long governed by a monarch almost absolute, supposed to hold his power by divine right, and surrounded therefore by a considerable prestige. Without such an authority he could have controlled neither the feudal nobility, nor the clergy, nor the parliaments. If Poland, towards the end of the sixteenth century, had also possessed an absolute and respected monarchy, she would not have descended the path of decadence which led to her disappearance from the map of Europe. We have shewn in this chapter that political revolutions may be accompanied by important social transformations. We shall soon see how slight are these transformations compared to those produced by religious revolutions.

Chapter II: Religious Revolutions.

1. The importance of the study of Religious Revolutions in respect of the comprehension of the great Political Revolutions.

A portion of this work will be devoted to the French Revolution. It was full of acts of violence which naturally had their psychological causes.

These exceptional events will always fill us with astonishment, and we even feel them to be inexplicable. They become comprehensible, however, if we consider that the French Revolution, constituting a new religion, was bound to obey the laws which condition the propagation of all beliefs. Its fury and its hecatombs will then become intelligible.

In studying the history of a great religious revolution, that of the Reformation, we shall see that a number of psychological elements which figured therein were equally active during the French Revolution. In both we observe the

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