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Revolution and World Politics: the Rise and Fall of the Sixth Great Power

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Revolution is a phenomenon that has haunted the pages of history, whether as reality or as a Spectre conjured up by Karl Marx. Of late it has traveled far and wide, and Fred Halliday has followed it to far-off places - Cuba, southern Arabia, Iran - in the quest of history in the making. Among the many revealing points he takes note of are the names that men have given to it (pp. 29 ff). Greeks spoke of *stasis*, 'standing up', or *neoterismos*, 'innovation'. India's patriots, with no native term of their own, borrowed an Arabic word, inquilab, 'a turning'. We even learn the Quechua term employed of late by Peruvian Indians for their *Sendero Luminoso*, 'Shining Path', - *q'eqikuy*. There is little point in hunting for a general theory to explain revolutions at large, Halliday feels (184-5). What is called for is the study of particular cases: each has a character of its own, though features common to a number of them are often to be found. His leading concern is with international factors. Insurgent leaders have often hugged hopes of world-wide conflagrations to be kindled from their own bonfires; at times exaggeratedly, but it remains true that 'revolutions are always in some degree international events' (6). Both they and their opponents, the 'status quo powers', have found arguments to justify intervention as well as propaganda (14-15). They have sought, in a famous phrase of the 1790s, to 'export revolutions' - or counter-revolution.

Halliday sets the boundaries of successful modern revolution at 1789 and 1989, when Soviet power virtually abdicated (130). True revolutions have been 'relatively rare events' (310). They have taken place in countries already embarked on social-economic advances, but still at an early sage (326). For Halliday their era ended in effect as early as the defeats of 1848-49, even though the greatest of all revolutions was yet to take place. History had not come to an end, but the day of the barricade was over. As a veteran of 1849, and a student of military history, Engels had an inkling of this before his death in 1895, and was groping for a substitute. It was Marxism that did most, as Halliday writes, from the 1840s, to give modern concepts of revolution a

distinct shape (40); it 'recognized the centrality of revolutions in the formation of the modern world' (321). Their function was to clear away the dominant classes now out of date, and open the way for their successors, along with new 'modes of production'. Halliday does not forget Sorel's eight-volume demonstration of how much litter of the Ancient Regime had survived the whirlwind of the 1790s, most visibly in foreign policies and diplomatics, and in the officer corps. Still, the essential work had been done.

During the American War of Independence valuable and perhaps decisive aid was given to the rebels by France. There had been many earlier attempts by France or Spain to stir up or support Irish or Highland rebellions against England. Now was the grand success, France's revenge on England for its gains and France's losses in the Seven Years' War of 1756-63. For this satisfaction the monarchy was to pay a heavy price. It was the cost of the war, and its subversive effect on French public opinion, that in 1789 compelled the government to hold the first general election since 1614, and thereby inaugurate the Revolution. In course of time such moves on the chessboard as the French aid to General Washington became familiar, but might come to look perilous to those who made them, as well as to their opponents. Halliday has much to say about all this, and the 30,000 French muskets shipped across the Atlantic before the battle of Saratoga (184); he couples with it a much later gamble, the German government's sending Lenin back to Russia in 1917 in the famous 'sealed train'.

1789 and its sequel have been hailed by many historians as the archetype of 'bourgeois revolution', fitting into the Marxian classification as one that transfers power from a landed aristocracy to industrial capitalism, which in turn, by calling into existence a large working-class, will prepare the way for proletarian revolution and socialism. But 'bourgeois revolution', it has become necessary to recognize, is a far from adequate title by itself, and needs many refinements. Revolt by the better-off peasants, or rural middle class, compelled the new government to abolish - with no great alacrity - the old feudal dues. It is doing too much credit even to the Jacobins, the extremists of the 'official' Left, to say that they were trying to 'turn French society upside-down' (261); they did indeed want to give it a good shaking up, and some were genuine idealists, but the common run of them were middle-class property - owners and hunters of government jobs.

Where the men of that time were true iconoclasts was chiefly in wanting to sweep away customs and institutions which had long been out of date, but which the supposedly all-powerful monarchy had failed to abolish. Free of these encumbrances, the way would be open for capitalism to expand and flourish, though that was not how contemporaries expressed it: they talked abstractedly of Liberty, like Congressmen at Washington today. They aimed at a complete reshuffling of the infrastructure, as well as of ideas; their horizons were those of intellectuals. Weights and measure were standardized for the whole country, under a decimal system which Britain was to adopt a couple of centuries later.

France's new politicians overflowed with colourful rhetoric, alarming to the comfortable classes everywhere. Attacks on Church and monarchy were painful shocks to conservative feeling, not among Catholics only. In 1792 France was attacked by an ill-framed alliance of Continental states, joined next year by Britain and others. In September 1792 the French won an unexpected success at Valmy. France was being pushed into the most extreme phase of the Revolution, under the Convention and the 'Terror', and the government instructed its generals to catty out sweeping anti-feudal reforms in all occupied territories.

France remained a republic of sorts until the end of the century, and continued to proclaim its liberating ideals abroad. It failed, as Halliday says, to live up to its fraternal idealism in practice; it was only in much later days, when other countries in or outside Europe were ready for revolutions of their own, that the example of France could become a true inspiration (103). Under Napoleon's sway French conquests continued to carry the doctrines of modernism far and wide. One of them was the duty of all men within his reach to submit to conscription. Joseph II of Austria, who died in 1790, has been called the 'Revolutionary Emperor'; he closed monasteries, granted religious toleration, and plunged into a long, useless war. Napoleon may deserve the same title; and Halliday sees the French Revolution as coming to an end only at Waterloo (224, etc.). Yet on his last battlefield Napoleon seems to have suffered from as many misgivings about the Jacobins lurking in Paris as about Wellington. Clearly 'revolution' can have many meanings.

In any case, as Halliday observes, currents of counter-revolution, national or international, have bee 'a universal accompaniment' of revolution (207). That great game of musical chairs, the Congress of Vienna of 1814-15, restored much of the old order as it could. But much was beyond restoration, and after 1815 revolutionary thinking, and sometimes shooting, continued to circulate, in spite of all efforts by the 'Holy Alliance' of reactionary regimes and their police. Everywhere there were parties or movements ready to take them up, and individuals like Mazzini to idealize them and give them a more Romantic colouring. Hobsbawm has spoken of a loose 'Liberal International' at work. A Socialist International would be ready before long to supplant it. In Paris in 1848, besides a pallid imitation of 1789 there was a rising of hungry workers; it was crushed without delay by the army, but prophetic of a long future. Halliday points out that an original concept of 'revolution' as circular repetition was giving way to thought of continuous progress, with its 'ever unresolved combination of deterministic and voluntaristic elements' (36).

1789 had been a shift of class power, and a bringing up to date of machinery of government; 1917 was the first attempt, in the wake of a disastrous war, at fundamental social change, a leveling of all classes. Its Bolshevik leaders were dreaming of an upheaval spreading, as Halliday emphasizes, to the whole world (103). They needed this in Europe, at least, to rescue them from isolation; but Europe after three years of senseless destruction was unequal to the effort. It was morally exhausted, and many of those who might have joined in were dead. When in 1920 a Polish attack instigated by the Allies was thrown back, an attempt was made to carry the struggle into Poland, and the revolution with it. Polish peasants might be expected to hail this as a liberation, but they did not, and any thought of further such attempts had to be abandoned. One may recall a scene in Moliere of a man beating his wife, a stranger intervening, the wife making common cause with her husband.

Some moves on the world scene - Khruschev's foray into Cuba the boldest, or most reckless - may have been intended to compensate for the shortcomings at home. Halliday remarks that it was the sluggish Brezhnev who proved the readiest to challenge the hostile West (109, 139), by building up the navy and taking sides in foreign feuds. He was happiest, it appears, when driving in the fast cars presented to him; it may have given him a pleasing illusion of the Soviet Union still moving at full speed, when in reality it was stagnating. Yet it should be said - Halliday does not say it clearly enough - that wherever Russia showed itself in the outside world, it was still consistently on the side of progress, while Communist China was sometimes, and the West almost invariably, on the wrong side. This was so even near the end, in Afghanistan, where feudal reaction and fanaticism, sustained by opium-growing and smuggling, were backed by arms from America, passed on with additions by Pakistan. A pathetic glimpse in a news-reel, as the Taleban closed in on Kabul, was of girls in a high school, to whom education was opening the door to a better life, lamenting that soon their school would be closed and they would be sent back to the kitchen.

Halliday gives way too much at times to the temptation to make the most of the 'terrible crimes' of Marxism in power (41). He does not notice nearly as much as he might have been expected to the blemishes of the capitalism realm, where so many dozen governments have made torture a routine item of their methods of ruling. Hitler and Franco and Pinochet are only very briefly mentioned. Westerners manage to forget what a ghoulish age they have been living in, by getting a Jinn to transport its crimes eastward and dump them inside the Soviet frontier. A time may come, nevertheless, when the Soviet Union is looked back on as humanity's greatest effort to build a world fit for human beings to live in.

Halliday questions whether the collapse of Communism constituted a 'revolution' (51ff.). He thinks not, because its opponents wanted nothing more than to ape the West. They brought about only chaos, ruled by vultures in search of pickings. There was no rebellion against communism, only an example of how a society may simply run down, peter out from inanition, lack of defenders, in a new era where the soil it grew from, the air it breathed, no longer exist. Such a fading-out overtook, much more quickly, the English Commonwealth, and may today be overtaking another Britain.

Renewed Soviet interest in revolutionary movements abroad, and readiness to assist them, accompanied the flaring up of resistance to Western imperialism in the Third World. Khruschev at great risk saved Cuba from

further direct efforts at invasion, and then from the effects of economic blockade. Washington soon found another target in Vietnam: again Moscow played an important play in foiling it. Cuba did not shrink from continuing its call to other fettered peoples to rebel, or from giving them active help. Halliday makes a realistic appraisal of how much Fidel Castro was able to achieve abroad; it was not negligible, and stretched over thirty years (118 ff, 141). When Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as President in 1994, Castro was 'a particularly honoured guest' (123).

With Iran we come on another minor country that has dared to defy the wrath of Washington. Halliday is (unlike his present reviewer) an expert on the Iran of our time. His very favourable estimate of its progress, since the fall of the monarchy in 1979, is likely to surprise most readers, who will have heard little about Iran except for the Salman Rushdie affair (50-1). After all, very few regimes anywhere, which have made a religion their chief plank, have deserved to be called progressive, from any common-sense point of view. Halliday might have given more detail (he has done so elsewhere) about the Khomeini movement, for instance about how the clergy are recruited, and the social differences within their ranks. They are described here as well organized, through the 'mosque network', with funds from the merchantry, and with a strongly nationalist spirit (188-9).

Communist China's appearance on the scene, under Mao's erratic guidance, brought in a new force. In its first three decades it showed, in Halliday's view, a real wish to promote revolutionism outside (113). It must be said on the other hand, though it was seldom recognized by Maoists at the time, that the new China's foreign policy was always thoroughly self-regarding and opportunist. This fact ought to have been made clear quite early by the close entente with Pakistan's series of right-wing military dictators (Communism was banned from the start), - and through them at times with America - , against a very much more progressive India. It was this that led Washington on by degrees to the happy thought of 'playing the China card against Russia'.

Had Russia and China held together, the world would now be a very different place. But China was soon challenging Russia for the leadership, while trying in the early 1960s to push Moscow into the post of danger by advocating a bold atomic confrontation with America: Halliday understates this (113). There was unseemly competition in collecting satellites; China was in a hurry to become once more the 'Middle Kingdom', the centre of civilization. Halliday is noticeably more lenient to China's faults than to Russia's; though Roderick MacFarquhar's latest volume (1997) shows that the costs in human life of the Great Leap Forward, and then the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, were on a terrific scale. Of these catastrophes the first at least began with promises of prosperity; the second seemed to show Mao pledging his people to a life of perfect equality, and holy poverty. It may be no wonder that the abandonment of socialism has been submitted to so meekly; or that Peking could soon feel free to launch an armed attack on, of all countries, Vietnam. There were of course centuries for both sides to look back on of Chinese attempts to subjugate Vietnam.

There was a time, in the far-off 1920s, when capitalism, even in the United States, seemed to have lost its expansionist urge, as Communism was to do later. Halliday sees that it was jerked back into life by America by the early challenge of the Soviet Union and its Five Year Plans (155). He sees also that however revolutions turn out in the end, they can 'effect permanent change in societies'. Thus the French Revolution 'transformed European and world politics', and the Soviet enterprise has left behind it at least a potent memory (336). Revolutionary communism was moreover a challenge to the Western empires, and 'helped to bring about the end of colonialism' (202).

Equally Halliday can say that capitalism, thus stimulated, has shown more ability than Marxism allowed for to remodel itself, or its disguises, both economic and political (321-2). But there are many more pitfalls for today's glossy version to sink into. Halliday argues that economic failure in Russia and China was due to 'endemic corruption and low morals' (281). This sounds almost laughable, when every day's news brings its fresh budget of scandals high or low among our own financiers, businessmen, politicians, military men. It begins to seem that the machinery of modern life simply cannot run without the lubricants we hear of, the more and more copious greasing of palms. When no one can trust anyone else, 'Things fall apart' indeed. It is

not hard to guess that the ultimate cause of capitalism's demise may be this gangrene of egotism and dishonesty. And this may leave any possible successors with an insoluble problem of rebuilding.

The French Republic was almost brought down by the Staviski scandal, the discovery of huge bribery of politicians by a foreign swindler, and the furious rioting it provoked in Paris. There could not be a better time to read and profit by this unusual book, covering or at least visiting so many far-apart places and viewpoints. Any reader, whatever he may agree or disagree with, will be able to find rich fare in it. Halliday is interested in the role of guerrilla warfare in modern times, all the more because it may be waged by parties of either Left or Right. He has many comments to make on other scholars who have worked in his field; one is Theda Skocpol. He discusses the shallow thinking of a man like Kissinger , all the more dangerous because blind to 'any causation of revolutions by the social and economic structures of society' (292).

A searchlight on the state of affairs in Halliday's world now has been the thunderous demonstrations, provoked by police conduct into rioting, against the World Trade conference at Seattle in early December 1999. It was a revelation of the strength of feeling against 'globalizing', the new title for the rule of multi-national corporations. Popular instinct is reacting against it as Hamlet did to the Denmark or world of his time - 'It is not nor it cannot come to good.'

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