
THE POETICS OF REVOLUTION

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Abstract: This paper will begin with a discussion of Aristotle's conception of revolution, leading into a Marxist discussion of the framework of revolution and an analysis of the major elements which form a revolution. I will then move on to a discussion of the play – *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco and analyse how the theoretical framework of the revolution resonate with the text of the play.

Keywords: Marxism, Revolution, Rhinoceros.

Introduction: The Greek philosopher Aristotle first defined revolution as a response of dissatisfied people to their social system, defining it in a broader sense:

“The universal and chief cause of...revolutionary feeling is...the desire of equality, when men think that they are equal to others who have more than themselves; or, again, the desire of inequality and superiority, when conceiving themselves to be superior they think that they have not more but the same or less than their inferiors.” (Politics)

Gustave LeBon sees revolutions as sudden transformations, whether of beliefs, ideas or doctrines and not just sudden political changes. Since the object of the present essay is to analyze the nature of a revolution, throwing light on the apparatuses (that I call “distractions”), that play a significant role in most revolutions- herd mentality, rhetoric and theatrical elements, the meaning of revolution can be derived keeping all this in mind. Revolution, thus is a response to the select few by the majority masses to bring about a change; a phenomenon that usually begins with an anti-authority ideology but soon loses its nobility of purpose as the individual loses his consciousness in the face of a powerful “unconscious personality of the crowd” (LeBon), gets easily swayed by rhetoric and starts believing more in symbols rather than the ideology, posing a threat to the success of the revolution. There is still another understanding of revolution based on a powerful twentieth century ideology that the German philosopher Karl Marx propounded. Marx based his idea of a revolution in the class struggle between the capitalists and the proletariat, as the only instrument that the working class has to oppose the hegemony of the class that owns the means of production. The importance of an ideology, which is/should be the sole foundation and driving force of a revolution is emphasized by Marx too, when he says- “the ideas of

the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.” Though for a class to rule, it has to own the means of production, the role of an ideology cannot however be ignored. In the Marxist framework, the material control lays the foundation for class rule but this

alone is not sufficient. To maintain their control in the society, the ruling class needs to put forward their ideologies and imprint them in the minds of the masses. Only then will they be able to sustain their hegemony.

Antonio Gramsci too believes that the proletariat, representing the majority can shake off the ideological servitude by building up a counter-ideology of its own as an antidote to that of the ruling class and as an essential preliminary to its capture of control of the State.

Clearly, the germ of any revolution is an ‘idea’: an idea that strikes a chord with the majority of people, an idea that galvanizes mass opinion, an idea that creates a rupture in society and encourages people to fight oppression. As long as the revolution remains true to the idea, any kind of mass movement as well as violence (that it entails) can be justified in some sense.

However, as the movement gains momentum and reaches more and more people, the quality of the revolution begins to decrease as it begins to lose focus. This is because the ‘distractions’ push the idea to the background.

Undoubtedly, the distractions dilute the nobility and credibility of the revolution since they shift focus away from the main aim but the irony is that it is impractical to think of a revolution without the paraphernalia that surrounds it.

I will now consider the major elements that form the structure of a revolution, that are essential for its success but lower its dignity.

Firstly, given the meaning of a revolution, it is imperative that it will involve a mass of people. As Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society* points that, masses were a new word for mob, retaining the traditional characteristics of the mob: gullibility, fickleness, herd-prejudice, Lowness of taste and habit. Gustave LeBon has commented extensively on the psychology of the crowd in *The Crowd and French Revolution and the Psychology Of Revolution*. He argues that the crowds, by the aid of which great movements of history are accomplished, have characteristics absolutely different from those of the

individuals who compose them. He points out that “material contact is not absolutely necessary to produce in the individual the mentality of the crowd. Common passions and sentiments provoked by certain events are sufficient to create it.”

Raymond Williams, however complicates the meaning of masses. He argues that there are in fact “no masses”, just, “ways of seeing people as masses.” However, these ‘ways’ are shaped by the society we live in, which sees the other as masses. So within the framework of the society the idea of masses is very real. It is also known that Williams was influenced by the Marxist philosophy, his view that there are no masses, therefore, comes as no surprise. Be that as it may, it cannot be refuted that a revolution cannot be orchestrated by a single individual.

Change can only be pressed for when a collective mass of people are unified in sentiments and wills and are moved to action simultaneously. This necessarily results in the formation of a herd mentality since collective consciousness negates the individual self. This seriously undermines a revolution. People become rhinoceroses, to use the metaphor of Eugene Ionesco. In an interview with Claude Bonnefoy, Ionesco lays out his disillusionment with the idea of masses or crowds:

“Look at the crowds, they’re depersonalized, people don’t have ‘faces’ in a crowd.

People become faceless when they form groups that are too large; or if they have a face, it’s a collective face, and monstrous. It is the face of anger, of destruction, the face of hell.” (Conversations with Eugene Ionesco)

In his play *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco attacks all collectivities using the metaphor of rhinoceros. In the absurd play, all characters except Berenger metamorphosis into rhinoceroses, one by one. By the third act, swarms of beasts are heard roaming the streets. Through the use of rhinoceroses (a thick-skinned, one-horned aggressive animal that tramples over anything that comes in its way, Ionesco not only exposes the contagion that spreads like an epidemic among people but also the mechanical behavior implicit in mass reaction- for instance, the similar reactions of people when they see a second rhinoceros in Act 1. Even Berenger, who chooses not to join the herd in the end is initially tempted. He even laments that he is not a rhinoceros:

“Oh, how I [Berenger] wish I was like them! I haven’t got any horns, more’s the pity!... I should have gone with them.” (*Rhinoceros*, Act 3, p.105)

Eventually, he decides to oppose the brutal force of the herd, which B.Mangalam in his essay ‘Who’s Afraid Of Rhinoceros’ sees as an affirmation, a heroic stand vindicating human courage over herd mentality. For Ionesco:

“All armies are armies of rhinoceroses. All soldiers of just causes are rhinoceroses... Justice is the doing of rhinoceroses. Revolutions are doing of rhinoceroses.” (Present Past Past Present)

He might be stretching it too far but the reason behind it is what I want to highlight. Since the individual freedom to think is greatly compromised in a crowd, they become amenable to persuasion through rhetoric (which I will study in the next section) besides exposing themselves to mental contagion.

Rhetoric is another distraction that dilutes the quality of a revolution. Rhetoric, as is understood, is the art of persuasion. The term persuasion, according to The Oxford Dictionary means to make somebody believe that something is true. By implication, rhetoric then is the art of convincing people to come out of their natural beliefs to make them believe in something that they don’t originally believe in. Peter Munz in ‘The Rhetoric Of Rhetoric’ points out that though rhetoric is essential in persuading people, even when truth can be exhibited, the questionable merit of rhetoric is that it can be employed successfully even when the statements, which people are persuaded by, by rhetoric, to give their assent to, are no true. According to me, both these functions of rhetoric are problematic. The first presumes that truth is not a value in itself but needs the services of rhetoric to convince people about its truthfulness. The latter, on the other hand, points to deceiving the people by convincingly justifying that which is false. Rhetoric is used, especially by people leading the revolution to awaken the hopes of the masses, which will induce them to action, since mere rational logic cannot persuade the crowd, according to Gustave LeBon. It necessarily involves exaggeration as well as the use of heroic language to sway the people and arouse them. Rhetoric, the not only dilutes the revolution but is also capable of changing the course of a revolution, thus playing into the hands of those with vested interests who get an opportunity to manipulate the masses.

For instance, the magnificent rhetoric of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, that became the buzzwords of the French Revolution, eventually served “to cover a justification of the sentiments of jealousy, cupidity and hatred. This is why the Revolution so soon ended in disorder, violence and anarchy, according to LeBon. A movement (though a bourgeois revolution) which promised to change the entire social structure of France, especially giving hope to the peasants and working class (who joined the revolution in the hope to rid themselves of all feudal burdens, especially on land), soon got derailed. In its initial phase, the French Revolution was largely spontaneous and unconscious. The Tennis Court Oath in July 1789, an

act of defiance launched the revolution, which had national regeneration as its aim. With the collapse of monarchy, time was ripe to realize the ideals of Enlightenment, aspiring for the creation of a new social order. In reality though, it only served the interest of the capitalists who replaced the feudal order. Sadly, the condition of the working class remained unchanged.

Conclusion: In the last section, I will explore a disturbing reality that results in the failure of most revolutions in bringing a change in society. Revolutions cannot do without theatricality and appearance. As we will see through the analysis of Jean Genet's play *The Balcony*, it is this fixation with appearances that lead to the downfall of a revolution. *The Balcony* was written during a period of cold war between the Soviet Block and the American Block. It was an ideological battle fought through images. Each group tried to assert its superiority through the power of images using satellite television, advertisements and other popular media. The play also glorifies the power of appearance in a capitalist society and shows that it has so enslaved the masses that any radical uprooting of the existing social structures remains unrealized.

The play shows in Genet's word, that "power cannot do without theatricality." What Genet means by this is that political power derives its legitimacy from the force of the images it manages to implant in the minds of people. Irma's brothel (a state controlled institution, representing the nexus between the capitalists and the State) allows the system to "perpetuate its structure of morality." It provides a setting for ordinary people to indulge their fantasies of power and sex by playing the roles of various pillars of power (like Bishop, Judge, General). By allowing an expression to the discontentment that people were feeling (symbolized by the revolution outside), Irma's balcony serves the purpose of diluting the revolutionary fervor. The play also focuses on the nature of revolutions. Madame Irma is afraid that if the revolutionaries win, they will bring the reign of her " maison d illusions" to an end, since the workers, she says, are " without imagination." They have their feet firmly planted in reality- the reality of the oppressive nature of existing social relations. However, the revolutionaries too are trapped in the same capitalist structure that they wish to dislodge. They too, cannot do without images either and find it

in Chantal, a girl rescued from the brothel by Roger. The leader of the revolution, Roger, makes a striking comment, exposing the problem with revolutions. He says, "In order to fight against an image, Chantal has allowed herself to be turned into another image. The struggle is no longer taking place in reality...we have lost sight of the reasons for our revolt."

According to B. Mangalam, Genet believes that if revolutionaries do not substantially subvert the traditional centers of power in ideological terms, they would fail in their endeavor to supplant them. With the assassination of Chantal (representing the revolution), the State (represented by Irma) is victorious and the revolution disperses.

Having said this, I have also mentioned earlier that it is impractical to think of a revolution without the distractions, Let's now take a moment to look at the other side briefly. The argument that herd mentality is dangerous as it takes away individual freedom to think can be countered. It can also be argued that the power of the herd is more than that of an individual. The herd can thus offer greater resistance as well as put forward a greater challenge to the authorities as compared to an individual. A sustained effort to press for changes in the society by the collective masses would have a greater impact than an individual asking for change. It is therefore of utmost importance that the power of the masses be constructively channelized in the right direction. The leadership of the revolution assumes great responsibility since they have the onerous task to guide the masses. Rhetoric too can play a defining role in a revolution. It can be of immense value if it is used to awaken the people to fight against oppression or to instill confidence in them. It should be used only to put forward an ideology. The oratory skills shouldn't be used to 'persuade' people because inherent within it is a sense of deceit. To conclude, I would like to emphasis again on the need for a revolution since there is perhaps no other way of improving the condition of the marginalized who are subject to brutal oppression by the capitalists. But it is better, in my view to allow individuals to make use of the faculty of the mind and decide for themselves rather than mindlessly follow a herd. A revolution based on a strong ideology would have a far greater impact on the society than a one dependent on artificial means of propagation.

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