

Revolutions

By Jamie Eves • March 17, 2020

I have been thinking a lot about revolutions lately. Partly, this is because I am teaching the American Revolution — we got it in before the coronavirus crisis switched us from classroom-based to distance learning — in my three freshman Early United States History classes, two at Eastern Connecticut State University and one at the University of Connecticut. But it is also because my Facebook feed is alive with calls for revolution from many of my virtual colleagues, deeply disillusioned with the world as it is.

I begin my university classes on the Revolution by playing a YouTube clip of the Beatles song “Revolution,” written in 1968 by John Lennon. I was born in 1955, so I experienced the 1960s firsthand. And in 1968, it seemed that revolution was indeed in the air in many parts of the world, including the United States. The 1968 Presidential election was my introduction to American politics, and even though I was only thirteen, I chose up sides and proudly wore a Eugene (not Joe) McCarthy button. I remember the television coverage of the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago: the floor fight over which Mississippi delegation to seat (the white supremacist old guard, or the mostly African American Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party contingent, which I rooted for), the gruff face of Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, and the disappointment of McCarthy’s reform-minded followers when Vice President Hubert Humphrey (whom I would later discover once had been a staunch progressive, and who played a major role in the Senate passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964) secured the nomination. But mostly I remembered the spirited protests outside the convention hall, as legions of young reformers demanded change, and Daley’s Chicago Police Department sought to disperse them with tear gas.



Because the Beatles, like McCarthy, are associated with 1960s/70s youth culture, my students therefore expect Lennon's song "Revolution" to be pro-revolution. But in fact, it is not. Although Lennon was a strong advocate of social reforms, he nevertheless was afraid of revolutions, afraid that they were too violent, that too many people would be hurt. "Revolution" is actually a plea for gradual change ("evolution") rather than revolutionary upheaval. The lyrics make Lennon's feelings clear, but he also went on record as confirming that he intended the song to be pro-reform but anti-revolution.

REVOLUTION

You say you want a revolution. / Well, you know, / We all want to change the world. / ... / But when you talk about destruction / Don't you know that you can count me out.

You say you got a real solution. / Well, you know, / We'd all love to see the plan. / ... / But if you want money for people with minds that hate, / All I can tell you, brother, you have to wait.



So, I ask my students, was Lennon right? Are revolutions by definition violent? Is gradual change better? Do revolutions unleash forces that are too destructive, too unexpected, to make them justifiable?

One place to go to begin to address such questions is the work of the historian Clarence Crane Brinton (1898-1968). One of the 20th century's most important historians, Brinton was a child of Connecticut, born in Winsted. His family moved to Massachusetts when he was young — we can perhaps forgive him that — and he eventually went to Harvard, earned a Ph.D. in history in 1923, remained there to teach, and became a world authority in French History, especially the tumultuous history of the French Revolution. Brinton wondered whether all revolutions were similar, or was each one unique? And if they were similar, in what ways? In 1938 he published his classic *Anatomy of Revolution*, a comparative analysis of the English, American, French, and Russian Revolutions. Brinton concluded that similarities indeed existed, that all four degenerated into violence, and that three of the four — the American Revolution being the exception — had resulted in dictatorships. Brinton's book is dated, but it is amazing how many of his insights still hold. Indeed, most historians of revolution continue to follow his broad outline.

(During World War II, Brinton — an accomplished linguist — served as Chief of Research and Analysis of the London office of the O.S.S., the forerunner of the C.I.A.)



According to Brinton, revolutions follow a common pattern. They begin as “revolutions of rising expectations,” with a disgruntled middle class pushing for change. The rich and powerful rarely support revolution, Brinton wrote, because they prosper under the old order. But neither, he argued, are they begun by the most oppressed, most exploited people in society. The downtrodden, he wrote, lack the time or resources to organize revolutions. Instead, it is the middle class — often the upper middle class — that takes the lead. Unlike the poor or working class, the middle class has the education to produce revolutionary literature. It has the leisure time to debate social improvement. And it holds at least some leadership positions in society. The middle class becomes revolutionary, Brinton believed, when its members, who had expected their lives to get better — that their economic situation would improve as they aged, that they would be respected by the upper classes, that an era of peace and prosperity was at hand — find those expectations dashed. Their disappointment is usually exacerbated by a government crisis of some sort — an argument between king and Parliament over taxes to fight a foreign war, a large debt left by a previous war, or the failure to successfully fight a current war. But the underlying cause is middle-class disappointment that they have less than they believe they deserve. Is it true that all revolutions have been such middle class-led revolutions of rising expectations? Not quite. A good example of a revolution led by the most oppressed people in society is the Haitian Revolution, which was actually a slave revolt. Despite what Brinton thought, revolution can come from the bottom as well as from the middle. But most often he was right; most revolutions do indeed begin with the unmet rising expectations of a disgruntled middle class.

Another aspect of Brinton's theory of revolutions is that revolutions tend to occur in three stages. They begin with a moderate stage, in which the disgruntled middle class organizes for reform. In the American Revolution, this stage was characterized by the colonial leaders' attempts to persuade Parliament to repeal various laws they opposed: the Sugar Act (which lowered tariffs on imported molasses), the Proclamation of 1763 (which forbade settlement of the Ohio Valley), the creation of Vice Admiralty Courts (which did not have juries), the Stamp Tax, the Townshend taxes, the Tea Act (which lowered taxes on some teas), the Coercive Acts, the Quartering Act, and the Quebec Act (which established a government for the new colony of Quebec that did not have an elected legislature). Colonial leaders also sought to reshape the structure of the British Empire by giving colonial legislatures more authority to establish colonial laws.

When Parliament and King George III at last refused to grant the reforms colonial leaders sought (Parliament had twice backed down repealing first the Stamp Tax and then the Townshend taxes), the struggle passed from a moderate, reform stage to a radical stage. Convinced that it was not possible to achieve the reforms they sought by working within the system, American leaders resolved instead to overthrow the system. They now espoused independence, a republic rather than a monarchy, and — under the United States' first constitution, the Articles of Confederation — a radically libertarian form of government that was extremely decentralized, had very short (one year) terms of office, and strict rotation in office. Under the Articles, the new central government had no real executive or judicial branch, could not tax without the states' consent, and had no practical way to maintain a standing army without the support of all of the states. The radical stage also saw the passage by the Continental Congress of the (probably unintentionally) radically egalitarian Declaration of Independence, which proclaimed all people equal, and averred that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were universal rights. The radical stage also saw the first concerted efforts to end slavery in the northern states.

Indeed, in order to win, it had been necessary for the Patriots (the reformers who now became revolutionaries) to create a broad coalition of about 2/3 of Americans. The coalition included poor white men, free men of color, women, and even enslaved people. And in order to form this coalition, it had been necessary to offer everyone in it something they wanted.

I ask my students to imagine a scene. It is 1776, the British Army has arrived by ship at New York City to seize the port. George Washington and his small, untrained, ragtag army prepares for a desperate defense of the city. Seeking to fire up morale, Washington has the newly enacted Declaration of Independence read to his assembled troops. Imagine this motley army, drawn up. There are the officers, mostly well educated men of wealth, resplendent in their crisp blue uniforms. If Washington himself is horsed, the bridle is held by one of his slaves. Other enslaved men are present. The ordinary soldiers are poor men, most of them lacking uniforms. They include landless whites, free blacks, some Native Americans, and even some enslaved men from New England, promised their freedom in return for their service. And behind the men stands a phalanx of women, so-called camp followers, the nurses, water carriers, and cooks of the army, who themselves will come under fire in battle. As they hear the words, “all men are created equal,” what do those words mean to each of them? Do they dismiss it as just so much talk? Or do they consider it a promise?



Revolutions, Brinton believed, are inherently violent. Men and women fight and die. And revolutions have a great potential to end badly. The English Revolution produced the dictatorship of Oliver Cromwell, the French Revolution the imperium of Napoleon, and the Russian Revolution the trauma of Lenin and Stalin. And had Brinton in 1938 been able to examine the German Revolution that created the Weimar Republic but culminated in the Nazi Third Reich, or the Chinese Revolution that led to Mao Zedung, he would have found dictators even more the rule. And every revolution, Brinton believed, had its counter revolution — the Restoration of the English monarchy, the monarchical rule of Napoleon followed by the restoration of the Bourbon dynasty, and the rule of Stalin not so different from that of the tsars. The counter revolutions did not always produce dictatorships, but they always undermined the revolution's goals. Eventually, Brinton argued, the moderates find themselves unable to tame the whirlwinds they unleash. First radicals (the left) and then reactionaries (the right) seize power, a political whipsaw that leaves everything in flux. Even in America, which at first seems the exception, the radical Articles of Confederation was ultimately replaced by the more reactionary Constitution, which (contrary to the goals of the radicals) strengthened rather than weakened central government, ensured that the elite would control most branches of government (thus establishing an oligarchy, not a democracy), and protected slavery in the South. Old radicals like Sam Adams went to their graves bemoaning that the true revolution had been co-opted and betrayed, that it was not the radicals but the counter revolutionaries who ended up in power.

More than 80 years ago a Connecticut-born historian began an academic discussion about the meaning of revolutions. Are they always violent? Are they always co-opted? Is there always a counter revolution? Do they always end badly? Historians still wrestle with these questions, just as John Lennon wrestled with them thirty years after Brinton, and more than fifty years before us.