



A Revolting Development



Instructions: Study the following material and show evidence that you have done so. Based on this material prepared to take a true/false quiz next time on this material. You are only allowed to get two wrong, so be prepared!

Are you a revolutionary? Are you dissatisfied with your school, your family, the way things are in your society? Are you often critical of the way people do things or fail to do things as you think they should? Do you feel that you are treated unjustly by your friends, your parents, or your teachers? Do you feel sure that things could be better than they are? Would you like a change?

If you can answer "yes" to these questions, you have the basic ingredients of the revolutionary within yourself. You feel vaguely discontented with the social situations of which you are a part. You desire a change. The question is how to do something about your desire to change things. If you think you have a better idea and it should be applied at once, you may possess the final ingredient of the revolutionary; he desires rapid change so that things will become as he thinks they should be.

It would seem that all men have a little of the revolutionary within them. All men find some reason to be dissatisfied. But this does not mean that they all take up the cause of change. They may grumble and complain, but most men accept things as they are.

It is only over the course of the past several hundred years that dissatisfaction with things as they were joined with opportunities to bring about sudden, overwhelming changes in society. We look back with awe upon these great social and political upheavals. Men took to violence in order to gain change; slaughter followed slaughter. Often the original goals of the revolutionaries were lost sight of in the struggle. Often questions remained to haunt men: "Was the revolution worth the effort? Could change have been brought about without the violence?"

Many of us have an image of the revolutionary as sinister-looking with intense, flashing eyes, unkempt hair, beard, and clothes; someone slightly mad. But George Washington was a revolutionary, as was Thomas Jefferson. Gandhi in India was a revolutionary in the sense that he wished to overthrow British rule in India. Though passive resistance was the extreme measure through which his goals were achieved, it was nonetheless revolutionary. Karl Marx, the father of modern communism, inspired men to revolt in order to achieve their goals.

One might expect poor men to become revolutionaries. It is not so. The history of the major revolutions in the West is crowded with men who were born in either aristocratic or middle-class surroundings. Many of these men joined with others from lower social classes to initiate and carry through revolutionary movements.

One might expect that revolutions are caused by extremely poor living conditions. But when we examine major revolutions we find that they

occurred at times when men were better off financially than they ever were before. One might expect revolutions to occur whenever a government has become extremely oppressive. Quite the contrary; revolutions seemed to take place when governments grew more lenient and when men felt more free.

When a revolution results in a change of leaders through the use of force, we call it a coup d'etat; most of the people are not involved and there are no changes in social and economic systems. This is simply a change of faces of the men who lead the state. The kind of revolution we are concerned with involves large numbers of people of all social classes. The people as a whole rise up to bring about changes in the ways they try to satisfy their basic needs and hopes. It may involve an overwhelming change in the ways men view other men, their society, nature, or the unknown. Economic systems, such as capitalism or mercantilism, may be swept away. Religious institutions such as a state church may be changed. Concepts of the family or even the calendar may be altered. The whole organization of the government may be transformed.

The revolutions which took place in England in the middle of the seventeenth century, in France at the end of the eighteenth century, and during the beginning of the twentieth century in Russia are revolutions of universal importance. These three stand out because they have influenced succeeding generations, not just the people living at those particular times in those particular countries. Men today are still being affected by the ideas and the changes produced by each of these revolutions. Each revolution included great acts of heroism and horrible acts of savagery. Brother fought brother; father fought son; selfish men as well as idealistic men gave their lives for what they believed to be right.

Why would large numbers of people risk their lives in revolution? Would you risk yours? Why were thousands willing to die? Who starts revolutions? Why do they start at one time and not at another? Is there any pattern? Can we learn from the past to predict situations which stimulate men to rebel? Is it possible by understanding the causes of revolution to recognize the danger signals before men turn upon their society in open rebellion? . . .

These questions concern each of us. Revolutions are frightening experiences; there is no limit to fear and anger. While men rage in the street, often in mortal combat with the police, the army, or other citizens, most men try to hide their dear ones from the violence. Romance may color certain revolutionaries, but revolution itself is no laughing matter; it involves the life and death of a society. In the struggle, men, families, property, and cherished beliefs are sacrificed

In order to gain some understanding of the problems and questions surrounding revolutions, it is important to realize that the path of revolution is long and involved. It is often closely associated with a series of changes in outlook on the part of a whole civilization. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were just such periods. A new civilization was emerging from the roots of the past. While most men look back to their traditions, others begin to think of what might be; in other words, continuity with the past, as well as change from the past, seem to be characteristic of our modern era.