



FORUM APRIL 1, 2024

American Counterrevolution

DANIEL MILLER

Revolution is a religious and recurrent phenomenon transposed into modernity as political ideology.

“If one wishes to avoid the horrors of a revolution, one must will it and make it oneself.”

– Antoine de Rivarol

THE TERM *REVOLUTION* IS ONE OF THE MOST MYSTIFIED concepts in the modern conceptual lexicon and also one of the most fundamental. The word was originally an astronomical term designating the regular motion of celestial bodies that acquired intellectual prestige through Copernicus’s *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*. Today it stands as the sigil of a modern cosmological vision

that underpins every intellectual and cultural field in the same way that Christian theology underpinned medieval science and culture.

Modernity is the epoch of revolution unbound. Beginning with the overthrow of scholastic authority by the natural philosophers of the Royal Society, and extending to the digital revolution still unfolding today, every modern scientific and cultural project is articulated as a revolutionary overcoming of obsolete methods and paradigms. An identical attitude has defined Western art for more than two centuries. From romanticism to conceptualism, every artistic movement in every artistic medium has announced itself as the revolutionary surpassing of an exhausted tradition.

Modern revolutionary ideology crystalizes a meaning in direct contradiction to its original associations. The classical world grasped the concept of the revolutionary cycle of regimes as the political analogue of the eternal cycles of nature. As Hannah Arendt notes in her 1963 book *On Revolutions*, the Latin term *revolutio* is a perfect translation of the Greek term *anacyclosis*, which was used in astronomy before being employed by Polybius in his famous reflections on the decompositional cycles of government. Revolution today carries the opposite meaning. Revolution no longer refers to a cycle but to a singular event in a rectilinear history in which nothing comparable has happened before and nothing can ever be the same again.

Revolution inaugurates a rupture in the continuum of history itself: all the old laws are suspended; everything is made new. This messianic delusion is recurrent to the revolutionary phenomenon but almost nothing in history is less singular. Despite the invariable rhetoric of the radically groundbreaking, an identical cycle repeats itself endlessly whenever revolution appears. Even the digital revolution has obeyed this trajectory from the naive utopianism of the nineties to the global surveillance state that cradles the planet today. From ancient rebellions to implosions of postmodern cults, the story is always the same because revolution is the opposite of what ideology thinks: not a political or modern phenomenon, but a religious and recurrent phenomenon transposed into modernity as political ideology at the moment when politics became crypto-religious.

“Eventually the nation stepped into the shoes of the Prince,” writes Ernst Kantorowicz in his 1955 essay *Mysteries of State*, “but not before the Prince himself had stepped into the pontifical shoes of Pope and Bishop.” What existed in the Middle Ages as a caduceus of temporal and sacerdotal power integrated into the mystical absolutism that emerged in the sixteenth century before migrating to the new revolutionary collectivities and national states that succeeded it.

The new Royalist administration did not directly confront traditional feudal authority but gradually spread to occupy all its space.

By the beginning of the Renaissance, the Papacy was a temporal power; by the end of the Reformation, the State was quasi-divine. The boundaries, domains, and identities of the spiritual and the secular were accordingly thrown into question. Medieval Europe had developed through a countervailing recognition between two different institutions, existential attitudes, forms of language, and forms of power, neither ever wholly succeeding in subordinating the other. By contrast, absolutism, according to its great apologist Jean Bodin, sacralized the sovereign monarch as “the most high, absolute, and perpetual power over the citizens and subjects in a commonwealth.”

The century of witch trials that accompanied this shift—trials supported by Bodin, who denounced its critics as patrons of witches and criminal of the devil—offered a preview of the revolutionary convulsions to come. The sovereign had become the embodiment of both power and law at the cost of his transcendent authority. “The truth of the matter,” remarks Arendt, “was that when the Prince ‘had stepped into the pontifical shoes of Pope and Bishop,’ he did not, for this reason, assume the function and receive the sanctity of Bishop or Pope; in the language of political theory, he was not a successor but a usurper.”

Henry IV, the vanishing mediator between the traditional feudal monarchy and the new absolutist monarchy, survived twelve assassination attempts before he was finally murdered in 1610. Under his successor Louis XIII, the French Monarchy implemented a policy to systematically undermine both aristocratic power and urban democratic power in order to establish what Richelieu called “the royal monopoly of force.” The nobility were deracinated, bribed, and ensconced in the Palace of Versailles and their traditional functions of government were transferred to a new Royalist administration composed of bureaucrats dependent upon the regime for their position.

The new administration did not directly confront traditional feudal authority but gradually spread to occupy all its space. Tocqueville describes a policy of “dividing men from each other the more completely to rule over them.” By the eighteenth century, the regime had developed to the point that “the whole nation was no longer anything more than one homogeneous mass whose parts were, however, no longer linked together. Nothing was arranged any longer to hinder the government any more than it was to shore it up. The result was that the whole structure of the king’s greatness could collapse together and all at once, as soon as the society which served as its foundation started to tremble.”

This was the situation which the French Revolution inherited and exacerbated. Writing in 1789, the Abbé Sieyès interposed the figure of the nation into the absolutist position the sovereign monarch had claimed. “*La nation*,” wrote Sieyès, “*existe avant tout, elle est l’origine de tout. Sa volonté est toujours légale, elle est la Loi elle-même.*” [“The Nation exists above all, it is the origin of everything. Its will is always legal, it is the Law itself.”] However, the substitution only intensified the central problem. Even surrounded by courtiers, or what Hegel called *ornaments*, the King is finally a person with a physical body, in the last instance bounded by physical limits. By contrast, a nation is a mysterious multitude combining various interests that need to be harmonized through representative spokesmen deliberating to establish its will. But this process can only be effective insofar as the moral and political structures of society are intact. If they are not, the national government becomes the purest expression of the force of corruption it is meant to prevent, and resolve. This was the situation in 1789, and it also is the case today.

Devoid of Any Higher Principle

In his increasingly influential 1984 study *Political Ponerology*, Andrew Lobaczewski describes the general dynamic of revolutionary society through the language of modern psychology: “Characteropathic individuals adopt ideologies created by doctrinaire, often schizoid people, recast them into an active propaganda form, and disseminate it with their characteristic pathological egotism and paranoid intolerance for any philosophies which may differ from their own.” This ideology is

not a coherent intellectual and ethical system but an aggregate of symbols and images channeling power, and especially the power of fear.

In the witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a pivotal role was played by the terms “Waudenses” after the exterminated Vaudois heresy and Gazarii, after the massacred Cathars. The symbols had survived as terms of force despite the fact, or rather because of the fact, that their original objects had vanished. Today the jargon of racism, fascism, and the far-right fulfill the same function and reflect the same situation: a general collapse in, or abuse of, the significant power of language and its degeneration into a weapon of violence.

This mobilized jargon is not itself a religion but a pseudo-religion deploying half-mutilated religious material in the service of other objectives. The problem is not “spiritual” in the sense of individual and emotional, but ethical and intellectual. Contra Feuerbach and Marx, religion is not an inversion of reality, as if reality was a primordial object, but its speculative compositional matrix.

The term *religion* comes from the Latin verb *ligere*, to bind: what it binds are phenomena into conceptual objects and forms in order to constitute a thinkable world. Every cosmogony from Genesis to Plato to the Popol Vuh recounts the same story: the creation of the cosmos from the “tohu-va-bohu” or “khora” or “Xibalba” of chaos and fear through unfolding distinctions of metaphysical thought. Revolution is this process in reverse: the collapse of reality into a vortex of impulses that can no longer be stabilized into ethically intelligible structures.

In *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, Tocqueville notes the “universal discredit into which all religious beliefs fell at the end of the last century exercised without any doubt the greatest possible influence upon our Revolution. ... It was the disorder in people’s minds ... that brought men of that age to entertain such extraordinary excesses of behavior.” As the Revolution progresses, disorder intensifies. “Since religious laws had been abolished at the same time as the civil laws had been overturned, the human mind entirely lost its bearings, no longer knowing what to cling to or where to stop. We saw an unknown type of

revolutionary who pushed audacity to the point of madness, who was not taken unawares by any novelty, not slowed down by any scruple, never hesitating before the execution of any plan.”

The pandemonium of cynicism, fanaticism, narcissism, and nihilism that now animates Western culture is a contemporary expression of this same dynamic. All the distinctions which structured Western thought for millennia are in crisis. Between the public and the private, between men and women, between the profane and the sacred, and between the guilty and the innocent is now a *vague terrain* of frenzied wills to power, devoid of any principles or higher goals. The silhouette parade of current things that flash across the news and social media and are forgotten three weeks later; the incessant promotion of the trivial at the expense of the significant; the hunger for scapegoats and the worship of criminals; the imposition of madness under the slogan of science and sickness in the name of health; the degeneration of art into propaganda and desire into pornography; the corruption of language and the perversion of justice: all this follows from and further aggravates our shredded nerves and our shattered critical faculties.

Terror emerges in the midst of this maelstrom as the lowest common denominator of political power and the ultimate truth of revolutionary ideology: the point it begins from, and where it seeks to return. In his 1958 book, *The Counter-Revolution*, Thomas Molnar describes a terroristic action as a gesture “through which a traditionally sacred person, office, institution, or symbol is desecrated. Its chief effect is not that it results in the physical destruction of a person or persons, but that it shakes a community in its belief in accepted values and habits, and, behind them, in the permanent nature of things.” Terrorism effectively liquidates the normative bases for judgment by destroying all reference points of acceptable moral conduct. With every fresh outrage, more extreme outrages become plausible, even necessary, in the context of a struggle for power without limits or rules.

Revolution exhibits a paradoxically regular structure, an *order in disorder*, because it attacks *all* consistency as it pursues its inevitable path toward destruction.

The slide into chaos in France following the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793 established the pattern which all subsequent revolutions repeated. In February, conscription was introduced across France, and a Royalist revolt began in the Vendée. In April, perceiving conspiracies everywhere, the Committee of Public Safety was established with a mandate to eradicate all opposition. By October, it had liquidated the leadership of the first year of the Revolution, and by December, it had moved beyond the guillotine and was organizing mass drownings in the Loire. “If the basis of popular government in peacetime is virtue,” Robespierre exclaimed, “the basis of popular government during a revolution is both virtue and terror.” By the time the moment arrived for his own execution in July 1794, 16,594 death sentences had been carried out in France, 12,000 people had been killed without trial, and 10,000 had died in prison.

In the middle of all of this, the Temple of Reason had been consecrated with great fanfare in the fall of 1793 in an illumined Notre Dame. At the climax of the celebration, a spotlight was turned on a prostitute impersonating reason, dressed as a Roman goddess. Six months later, the Festival of the Supreme Being at the Tuileries Palace on June 8, 1794, would include the ritual destruction of an effigy of nothing. Two days later, the Terror entered its final phase: Investigations were eliminated so that citizens could be charged merely by being denounced, and the accused were deprived of their right to an attorney and to cross-examine witnesses. Over the next six weeks, 1,400 cases brought before the Paris Revolutionary Tribunal ended in execution.

This confection of absurdism, spectacle, mass murder, and *nothing* typifies the revolutionary experience. In his 1796 book *Théorie du Pouvoir politique et religieux*, one of the earliest attempts to grasp the logic of the sequence that had started in a mood of optimism seven years earlier, Louis de Bonald traced the origin of the Revolution back to a crisis

of authority that had started almost three centuries earlier. Luther introduced a doctrinal schism that destroyed the traditional authority of the Church by insisting on the authority of the text over the authority of the priest. Subsequently, the Republic of Letters produced an intellectual schism, which destroyed the cultural authority of the monarchy by acquiring dominance over the new sphere of public opinion. Finally, the Revolution itself, the schism of schisms, irrupted as the terminal phase.

The critical factor was the social and psychological climate in which these doctrines were circulating. As Tocqueville observes, almost all the theories of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, from Rousseau to the physiocrats, turned on an effort to isolate man in an abstract or natural state against the piecemeal contingencies of the haphazard, half-broken tradition they confronted in the decaying regime. They appropriated the discourse of science and laid claim to leadership of a universal humanity in lieu of anything substantial: their utopian theories reflected the deracinated conditions of their own situation in which they had no share in the public life of France, and their seductive appeal reflected the state of that public.

The Revolution in this sense was a collision of two voids each using the other to conceal its own emptiness: on the one hand, a monarchy isolated at the Court of Versailles, surrounded by a swarm of courtiers repeating an empty language of flattery and an intellectual class clustered in Paris generating hysterical agitation in the form of phantasmatic proposals. The problem was not, as the *philosophes* argued, the destruction of a unitary source of authority but a vacuum of authority confronted by its pale reflection. The centralized monarchy had “siphoned off to Versailles the near-totality of the aristocrats who became parasites living in luxury, not fulfilling their local functions as landlords, judges, or prelates,” writes Thomas Molnar. In this zone of dysfunction emerged maladjusted lawyers and demagogues channeling a mixture of motives into incendiary slogans.

Both Bonald and Joseph de Maistre speak of a chariot, whose driver acquired the illusion of influence by pretending to steer it in the direction it was heading in anyway. Bonald writes of “travelers who left their homeland so as to see new places were riding without knowing too well

where they were headed. As they kept reaching on their way places that seemed nice to them, they would have wanted to get down; but, since the chariot was still in motion, they jumped down in order to stop it, and fell under the wheels.” The motive force of this chariot was collective self-misunderstanding. The purge had yet become, as it would in the twentieth century, a conscious instrument of policy, but the practical effect was the same. Everyone was playing the same game. The paranoia which began to surround the Revolution almost immediately and continued to swell as it accelerated (“Everywhere I see the same vices, the same cabals, the same methods and calumny,” Robespierre declaimed) reflected a situation in which everyone knew that everyone had nothing.

Terror was in this sense an internal state projected outwards as mass murder and rhetorical derangement. “Terror is nothing else than swift, severe, indomitable justice,” Robespierre declaimed. Monarchy, the government of France for a thousand years, is condemned by Saint-Just as “an eternal crime” and Lavoisier is guillotined because “the Republic has no need for scientists.” In the end, Joseph de Maistre has no trouble identifying the revolution with Satan: it is this “satanic quality to the French Revolution that distinguishes it from everything we have ever seen or anything we are ever likely to see in the future.” The Revolution cannot stabilize, because it is only a gruesome collection of slogans and artifices. Yet for all this, it exhibits a paradoxically regular structure, an order in disorder, because it attacks all consistency as it pursues its inevitable path toward destruction.

American Centralization

All of this is being repeated today in contemporary society.

To be sure, we are not yet seeing guillotines or concentration camps, and it is unlikely that we will. Violence now is less direct and more diffuse. Nevertheless, signs of a revolutionary social, political, and mental breakdown are increasingly impossible to ignore. Political show trials, mass automatism, bizarre rituals, flagrant corruption, and the terrorist desecration of foundational figures and symbols and their replacement

by a new revolutionary calendar and pantheon of saints are today all central features of the American-led Western Regime.

Analogous elements to the decaying French *ancien regime* and the French Revolution today exist simultaneously in combined and uneven relations. If the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy, which catalyzed the cultural revolutions of the sixties, is comparable to the 1793 execution of Louis XVI, which inaugurated the Terror, the position of the French aristocracy on the eve of 1789 is also paralleled by the current condition of establishment Conservatives and Liberals who have preserved a luxurious privilege at the price of their political power, and inured themselves to the radicalism of the revolutionary situation in the midst. In the decades preceding the Revolution, writes Tocqueville, “feudal institutions had broken down to such an extent that the nobility had retained many of the privileges, but virtually none of its political authority.” Today this reality is expressed by the concept of *white privilege*.

The most important shared fact is the presence of the centralized administration which began to replace the French nobility under Richelieu, and ultimately found itself strengthened by the French Revolution. This same phenomenon exists today in the form of a globalized administrative state incorporating a political police apparatus that now dominates cultural, political, and corporate power in every Western country.

As Tocqueville makes clear, the most important shift in France was not the revolutionary birth of the Jacobin Republic, but the earlier transition within the French monarchy itself from a regionalist feudalism to a centralized absolutism. Similarly, the key shift in the United States already took place in the twentieth century in the transition from the constitutional republic to the administrative state. Two moments in particular stand out: the initial establishment of the administrative state under FDR under the rubric of the New Deal; and the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the inauguration of the Great Society in the climate of shock and confusion following the murder of Kennedy. Taken together, both moments represent revolutionary and fundamentally

unconstitutional shifts in the structure of the American government to which contemporary events owe their origins.

In his 2020 book *Age of Entitlement*, Christopher Caldwell argues persuasively that the passage of the Civil Rights Act amounted to the passing of a new constitution, fundamentally hostile to the principles of the original founding. “The changes of the 1960s, with civil rights at their core, were not just a major new element in the Constitution. They were a rival constitution, with which the original one was frequently incompatible—and the incompatibility would worsen as the civil rights regime was built out.” Instead of a doctrine of limited government bound by natural law, the Civil Rights Acts introduced a new constitutional model in which government has arrogated to itself the power to limit natural rights in the cause of a philosophy of history imagined as a soteriology of progress. The cultural conflicts that have raged ever since amount in practice to a battle for dominance between the original constitution and the new constitution and a revolution in slow motion, in which the new constitution has steadily gained ground and left wreckage in its wake.

The stripping away of these rights has defined the grand strategy of the American revolutionary managerial state for a century, just as they defined the strategy of the French absolutist state.

What the Civil Rights Act achieved was to destroy civil rights by abolishing the core political right of freedom of association in the name of a revolutionary ideology. What it also did was embolden and incentivize a class of “bureaucrats, lawyers, intellectuals, and political agitators” to become the “eyes and ears,” and even the “foot soldiers, of civil rights enforcement.”

This new administrative class had originally been placed at the heart of the American government under FDR in order to entrench what Roosevelt called “a second Bill of Rights.” As John Marini points out in his 2019 book *Unmasking the Administrative State*, FDR’s conception of the constitution as a contract in which “rulers were accorded power, and the people consented to that power on consideration that they be accorded certain rights” fundamentally altered the logic of the original constitution. The Declaration of Independence articulated *a compact made by a people with itself*, not a contract between the rulers and the ruled. The Bill of Rights proscribed the powers of government and defined its authority within the boundaries of the eternal, inalienable natural rights recognized to transcend it. There can be no second Bill of Rights, only a violation of the Bill of Rights, because the Bill of Rights derives from natural law, not historical consensus.

At the moment that a government violated natural law it destroyed the basis of its own legitimacy, and had to be reformed or dissolved. There can be no doubt that the contemporary United States government falls into this category. As a result, it has fatally destroyed the basis of its own authority, and is now in the process of cannibalizing its own power. The essence of the matter is that respect for natural law is not merely a matter of subjective taste, but critical for human flourishing, in the same way the respect for the laws of physics are critical for launching rockets. When individual rights are violated in the cause of social justice, a society

becomes incapable of unleashing the energy and individual genius of man, and increasingly concerned with attacking it. This is what we are seeing today.

The American Revolution succeeded while the French Revolution failed for the same reason that 1789 came to exert such a grip over the modern political imaginary and 1776 largely did not. The French Revolution was always a fantasy, and surrender to fantasy. The Jacobins, with no concrete experience to fall back on, pursued a vision of liberty divorced from all institutions and every existing social, intellectual and ethical tie. By contrast, the American Revolution sought and succeeded in recovering political liberties usurped by a monarchy that extended itself beyond its natural authority. Tocqueville argues that the *ancien regime* in France succumbed on the day that the French people “permitted the king to impose a tax without their consent and the nobles showed so little public spirit as to connive at this, provided their own immunity was guaranteed.” This was precisely the fate which the American Revolution avoided.

The French Revolutionaries famously promised an impossible happiness of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité* whereas the realist Founding Fathers, grounded in experience, only *the pursuit of happiness*. Jefferson’s felicitous phrase is seen today as a slogan of hedonism to the extent it still is remembered at all but there was a reason why it appears in the place of the more traditional term “property” in the formula of “life, liberty, and property” in the Declaration of Independence. Happiness in this context is happiness in classical terms: that is, the right of the citizen to participate in public affairs. It was this same right which the French aristocracy had surrendered to French absolutism for the sake of retaining their property, and for which they ultimately surrendered their heads.

Then stripping away of the political rights of the citizen has defined the grand strategy of the American managerial state for a century, just as it defined the grand strategy of the French absolutist state. The devastation it has enacted is plain to see today. Before this devastation can be reversed, these rights will need to be recovered in practice through a counter-revolutionary movement directed towards returning America to

its original terms of its compact. In 1776, writes Arendt, “inhabitants of the colonies were ‘formed by law into corporations, or bodies politic,’ and possessed ‘the right to assemble ... in their town halls, there to deliberate upon the public affairs’; it was ‘in these assemblies of towns or districts that the sentiments of the people were formed in the first place.’” Out of this natural network, an aristocracy grounded in their own localities reestablished authority by assuming the duties and manifesting the virtues that their positions demanded. America will need to generate within itself a class of leaders comparable to these men today.

Daniel Miller is the literary editor of IM—1776.

Law & Liberty’s focus is on the classical liberal tradition of law and political thought and how it shapes a society of free and responsible persons. This site brings together serious debate, commentary, essays, book reviews, interviews, and educational material in a commitment to the first principles of law in a free society. Law & Liberty considers a range of foundational and contemporary legal issues, legal philosophy, and pedagogy.

LAW & LIBERTY

PART OF THE LIBERTY FUND NETWORK

© 2024 Liberty Fund, Inc. The opinions expressed on Law & Liberty are solely those of the contributors to the site and do not reflect the opinions of Liberty Fund.

DESIGNED BY BECK & STONE