

The United States as a "Revolutionary Society"

STEPHEN J. TONSOR

THE ASSERTION that two hundred years after a revolution reluctantly made and a Constitution which strengthened rather than weakened the conservative character of American political institutions and arrangements, American society and politics are still revolutionary is, I suggest, a rather daring thesis. Other revolutions have run their courses from high hopes to Thermidorian reaction in the passage of a few brief years and while the Russians and the Chinese have talked of "permanent revolution" they have exhibited only too clearly the ways in which revolutionary elites, while proclaiming themselves the handmaidens of popular revolution have become in fact new privileged and exploiting classes. It is odd and very nearly contradictory that a conservative revolution now two centuries old should be the only "permanent revolution" history has known, a revolution which has perennially transformed the structure and the nature of life in the United States.

It is not obvious to everyone at the present time, however, that the United States is still a revolutionary society. There have

been a good many recent assertions that American society has hardened into a totalitarian mold, that repression is the chief characteristic of American political life and that there is both less liberty and less social justice in America than in many contemporary Marxist states. Perhaps, then, I would not be ill advised were I to first present my reasons for believing America to be still and increasingly revolutionary before I go on to explore the reasons why I believe America has been able to maintain and to broaden its revolutionary base.

It is important that we demonstrate clearly the truly revolutionary character of the events of 1776 and their continuing impact upon American society. It has become fashionable on the left to assert that there was no genuine revolution or that if a revolution took place it was strangled by the ensuing conservative reaction. The study of American history has produced many stern judges and doubting Thomases. None was tempted to take a more critical attitude than were Charles and Mary

Beard. When, however, they came to make an assessment of the American revolution in their *Rise of American Civilization* (p. 296) they pointed unhesitatingly to the truly revolutionary character of the events they described:

If a balance sheet is struck and the rhetoric of the Fourth of July celebrations is disconnected, if the externals of the conflict are given proper perspective and background, then it is seen that the American Revolution was more than a war on England. It was in truth an economic, social, and intellectual transformation of prime significance—the first of those modern world-shaking reconstructions in which mankind has sought to cut and fashion the tough and stubborn web of fact to fit the pattern of its dreams.

But even without the Beards' respected view we know that there was a genuine revolution because we live out its enduring consequences and its continuing ramifications. Indeed, one of our least admirable contemporary attitudes is our retreat from the novelty and the implications of our revolutionary heritage and our search (a vain one to be sure) into what we think to be the quiet reaches of the past for a golden age of tranquillity. Surfeited on change we imagine that at some golden moment in some magical American Camelot men were free of the necessity to choose and to change; the necessity that the initial revolutionary transformation of our society has imposed on all of us. While the Left sees insufficient change of a particular socio-economic and political type, the Right rejects those changes which necessarily follow from the principles of the revolution.

That the American revolution was indeed a "world-shaking reconstruction" as the Beards insisted it was is borne out by the testimony of diverse observers of American society. Several years ago, for exam-

ple, John W. Holmes, director general of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs was interviewed by John Chancellor of NBC News. In that interview Holmes made the following important point:

The United States is a pioneer society even in its adversities. In spite of what many young Americans say, it is not counterrevolutionary—it is still a revolutionary society. It seems to me that you are going through a further and very turbulent extension of democracy. All sorts of people are participating in the policy making process who never did before, and this is a trial other countries have yet to cope with.

Mr. Holmes' observations concerning the revolutionary character of contemporary American society are not entirely original. Much the same observations were made by a Frenchman, a man of the political Left, Jean-François Revel in his book *Without Marx or Jesus*, published in 1970 at the very peak of our recent "time of troubles" and self-doubt:

. . . To my mind, present day America is a laboratory of revolution—in the sense that eighteenth century England was to Voltaire . . . (p. 266) The stuff of revolution, and its first success, must be the ability to innovate. It must be mobility with respect to the past, and speed with respect to creation. In that sense, there is more revolutionary spirit in the United States today, even on the Right, than there is on the Left anywhere else. (p. 123)

One might enlarge both the number of quotations and the number of authors. The fact is that America is a revolutionary society; has been such from the outset and derives a great deal of its revolutionary *élan* from the events and ideas of its initial revolutionary movement.

But even if we admit that the United States is a revolutionary society in which

the processes of political, economic and social transformation are constantly at work we must, in search both of historical and self understanding, ask the question "why?" There have been other revolutions in other places and other times and the consequences have been far more ambiguous; far less clear, far less progressive and optimistic. If one studies the history of France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it becomes clear that a well-intentioned and successful revolution is not enough to energize permanently the forces of progressive change in a society. For the past two centuries France has vacillated between the poles of anarchy and authoritarian Caesarism. There have been brief and extended periods of liberal and even democratic government but these have not been characterized by any high degree of certainty and self-assurance.

England alone has shown throughout this whole period of the past two centuries the continuity of development in the direction of liberal and democratic institutions comparable to the American experience, but that development has at best been tardy, grudging and complicated by ancient social and cultural encrustations and deep seated class divisions and antagonisms. One is tempted to argue that innovative and democratic societies do not often arise from liberating revolutions.

And so we must return to the question of why the revolutionary tradition has maintained its vitality in the American setting, why America in this respect has been so much more fortunate, so much more creative, and so much more dynamic than other societies which have passed through a revolutionary experience.

And no doubt good fortune, pure luck played a role. "*Amerika, du hast es besser,*" the German poet Goethe wrote in 1823. Freely translated he said "America, you're lucky," though he hastened to add

as his reasons, "the lack of inner confusion, a useless fixation on the past and vain conflict." Others have adduced different reasons for considering America a fortunate, a lucky land. There were the nearly empty continent, the favorable geographic and climatic factors, the untapped and abundant natural resources, the immense land area, the promise and the actuality of Eldorado even though the fountain of youth and the earthly paradise remained a dream. And yet it could not have been luck alone, or even chiefly, which accounted for the peculiarly American progressive dynamism. The Great Russian peoples entered the underpopulated and resource-rich vastness of Central Asia and Siberia and their authoritarian institutions were not transformed. Latin America was not so different geographically from North America and yet its political and cultural experience was wholly different. They too had liberal revolutions, often modeled on the revolution which had taken place in the Thirteen Colonies and yet they relapsed very shortly into political patterns of authority and tyranny. Even Australia and New Zealand seem stodgy and conservative in comparison with the cultural, social and political experimentation which has characterized the United States. The existence then of a great, empty, unexploited land is not the answer to our question of why the United States has been characterized by a revolutionary dynamism.

Long ago men identified a "restless temper" with the private enterprise of democratic societies; societies in which men gloried in being thrown upon their own resources and encouraged to make their own decisions. On the eve of the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War Thucydides in Book I Chapter 6, puts into the mouths of the Corinthian ambassadors to Sparta a speech concerning the Athenians

which must remind us at nearly every point of peculiarly American characteristics.

Then also we think we have as much right as anyone else to point out faults in our neighbors, especially when we consider the enormous difference between you and the Athenians. To our minds, you are quite unaware of this difference; you have never yet tried to imagine what sort of people these Athenians are against whom you will have to fight—how much, indeed how completely different from you. An Athenian is always an innovator, quick to form a resolution and quick at carrying it out. You, on the other hand, are good at keeping things as they are; you never originate an idea; and your action tends to stop short of its aim. Then again, Athenian daring will outrun its own resources; they will take risks against their better judgment, and still, in the midst of danger, remain confident. But your nature is always to do less well than you could have done, to mistrust your own judgment, however sound it may be, and to assume that dangers will last for ever. Think of this, too: while you are hanging back, they never hesitate; while you stay at home, they are always abroad; for they think that the farther they go the more they will get, while you think that any movement may endanger what you have already. If they win a victory they follow it up at once, and if they suffer a defeat, they scarcely fall back at all. As for their bodies, they regard them as expendable for their city's sake, as though they were not their own; but each man cultivates his own intelligence, again with a view of doing something noble for his city. If they aim at something and do not get it, they think they have been deprived of what belonged to them already; whereas, if their enterprise is successful, they regard that success as nothing compared to what they will do next. Suppose they fail in some under-

taking; they make good the loss immediately by setting their hopes in some other direction. Of them alone it may be said that they possess a thing almost as soon as they have begun to desire it, so quickly with them does action follow upon decision. And so they go on working away in hardship and danger all the days of their lives, seldom enjoying their possessions because they are always adding to them. Their view of a holiday is to do what needs doing; they prefer hardship and activity to peace and quiet. In a word, they are by nature incapable of either living a quiet life themselves or of allowing anyone else to do so.

Thucydides, as Herodotus before him, had no doubt that this "restless temper" which characterized Athens was a consequence of her democratic institutions. Of course democracy did play a major role both in Athens and in America in energizing the forces of innovation. But democracy alone was not the explanation, for Sparta too was, in its strange way, democratic and there are contemporary democratic societies which one could hardly describe as dynamic. The explanation for our peculiar dynamism is not democracy alone but democracy coupled to the spirit of enterprise. That "restless temper" was most manifest when it was coupled to the desire for unique individual expression and the compelling drive to self-advantage. Self-fulfillment and free choice have been in America extended into every aspect of life. From the abandonment of primogeniture, titles and hereditary status to the right of every man to build the biggest, costliest and ugliest house in the neighborhood or to live in the meanest, shabbiest shack in town, the motive has been the same. Americans have believed that every man should be free to seek his bliss and his advantage on his own terms. The basic liberal assumption that private advantage redounds to public bene-

fit has been the essential and fundamental assumption. From the outset democratic politics was related directly in fact and in theory to freedom of enterprise in economics. John Stuart Mill after reading Tocqueville on *Democracy in America* quoted with approval the lines in which Tocqueville expressed his belief that the links between capitalism and democracy were fundamental:

As soon as land was held on any other than feudal tenure, and personal property began in its turn to confer influence and power, every improvement which was introduced in commerce or manufactures was a fresh element of the equality of conditions. Henceforward every new discovery, every new want which it engendered, and every new desire which craved satisfaction, was a step toward the universal level. The taste for luxury, the love of war, the sway of fashion, the most superficial as well as the deepest passions of the human heart, co-operated to enrich the poor and to impoverish the rich. From the time when the exercise of the intellect became a source of strength and wealth, it is impossible not to consider every addition to science, every fresh truth, every new idea, as a germ of power placed within the reach of the people. Poetry, eloquence, and memory, the grace of wit, the glow of imagination, the depth of thought, and all the gifts of providence which are bestowed by providence without respect of persons, turned to the advantage of democracy; and even when they were in the possession of its adversaries, they still served its cause by throwing into relief the natural greatness of man; its conquests spread, therefore, with those of civilization and knowledge; and literature became an arsenal, where the poorest and the weakest could always find weapons to their hand.

Tocqueville saw in this movement such

evidence of inevitability that he assumed it to be the work of providence. Today we are less certain of the inevitable march of equality however basic the drive for equality may be as an element in human behavior. It is clear, however, that the energies released through the free exercise, not only of the franchise, but of every human gift and talent unencumbered by tradition and unimpeded by society or the state has transformed and continues to transform the very conditions of human existence. No doubt there are many Americans who would be delighted were that "restless temper" to be quieted, were the revolutionary energies of our society to be stilled or stopped. Sometimes as I walk across the campus I yearn to see the year when the approach of spring does not mean that the grounds will be dug up, that old buildings will come down and new buildings rise, that old ideas will not be in the discard and a band of young turks will not be pressing for change and innovation—and the campus is our society in microcosm; change is the overriding aspect of our existence. It is the most characteristic feature of our society. My purpose is not to praise or to laud change or even to assert my admiration for a society which is constantly in flux. Indeed, my own conservative sympathies lead me to mistrust change and to feel uneasy when I am caught up in some rapid transition. My personal feelings, however, are of little importance; what is important is that we recognize what the full consequences of freedom have been in our society. No doubt some of the consequences have been unacceptable to many men but we cannot doubt that there has been revolutionary change. Those who have lived through a revolution know it well enough. Things are simply different than they were before. The color, the texture and the mode of life have changed and these changes have drawn us all into their circle.

We all know, moreover, that freedom has been either the remote or the immediate cause for these changes. Revolutions have a way of petering out; their mighty currents sinking into the sand in the course of a few decades or even less. That this has not happened in the United States has been due to that "restless temper" and that in turn has been in substantial measure the reflection of a peculiarly American economic and intellectual pattern. In each generation the drive to innovation and the retasting of our institutions has been due, above all, to the institutions of a market economy and the spirit of enterprise. In the intellectual sphere it has been a reflection of our dedication to freedom of the press and general access to education. We have continued to be a revolutionary people then because we have maintained a free market in goods and a free market in ideas.

Many of the complaints which thoughtful men have lodged against private enterprise are the same arguments, or arguments parallel to those, which they have lodged against a free press. They have said that it is wasteful, that it produces a society that is materialistic, vulgar, corrupt in taste and indifferent in morals; that it produces a world in which the mediocre rather than the best prevails, that it rewards indifference to the truth and the fast-buck artist, the con-man and the literary hack. And no doubt all these charges are true. The competition of goods and the competition of ideas, are no doubt in the short run wasteful, and their effects lead some men to mediocrity and vulgarity. But this system which rewards innovation and guarantees it through free and open competition is the only method any society has of arriving in the long run at both the truth and abundance, at not only those things which are good but those things which are the best available. The central dictum of the philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce, the

key to his philosophy of science was, "Do not block the way of inquiry." As theorists of market economics have demonstrated over and over again the market is not simply an economic device but a discovery mechanism as crucial in its way for knowing as the work of scientific laboratories. We have remained politically resilient because we have rewarded innovation and difference, because we have encouraged men to do their own things and because we have asserted always that the long range welfare of the individual is more important than the short range welfare of the group. In short the founding fathers gambled on the desirability and the permanency of change.

Although the frontier alone neither produced liberty nor insured its survival, it did provide the habitat in which freedom flourished. One need not subscribe completely to the Turner thesis in one of its variations in order to accept the evidence of the impact of the American landscape and American conditions upon the political and social institutions of the United States. It was precisely in this environment where geographic mobility paralleled and fostered social mobility that our "restless temper" found its expression eased and strengthened. There was, in the very facts of geography, an invitation to expansiveness and the abundance and bounty of the land encouraged men to what must at times have seemed a wasteful experimentation. Men were induced by nature to try their luck, and life styles which were both innovative and impermanent appeared and disappeared with bewildering rapidity. Of course experimentation was not always rewarded, there have been tragedies enough in the American past to remind us of that but there have always been the bonanzas too, the big but seemingly foolish idea that paid off handsomely. Ours is a landscape which has encouraged the far out, the

grandiose, the individual, the deviant, the violent and the unusual. It has been a landscape which has seemed in natural league with the other forces of liberty to assure the continued existence of freedom on this continent; a landscape rich enough to encourage the wildest hope, and the most magnificent of ambitions, yet challenging enough to ensure that the dictum of Darius which we find in Herodotus that "soft lands make soft men," would never be applied to the American scene.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of that landscape in its impact on politics and society has been its diversity. By diversity I do not mean the "regionalism" which has played such a large role in the explanations of American politics and history, particularly in the form given those explanations by Frederick Jackson Turner and his followers. Regionalism has been based on dividing and defining differences and I am concerned with those smaller gradations and shades which make the garden I grow in my backyard different from that of my friend who lives only two hundred miles away. In Europe we take the impact of those differences for granted for there variety has been entrenched in history. In our new land with its endless variations and differences we often fail to see our daily encounter with a complex and variegated environment as a source of the most profound differences in character and mood in American political life. In periods characterized by the rapid shift of population such as has taken place during the past three decades we fail to note the influence of those differences inherent in the landscape. It is likely those great movements of population are now drawing to a close and we shall once more discover how widely we differ from one another rather than how like one another we are.

Diversity, even the subtle diversity of the landscape is an important source of liberty

and an important fount of change. One of the most important theoretical questions debated by Americans in the years of the Republic's foundation was the question of whether or not republican institutions could survive in an extended and sizeable state or, to put the question in the words of Alexander Hamilton in *The Federalist* No. 9, "the necessity of a contracted territory for a republican government." Ancient precedent and modern opinion seemed to agree that republican institutions could survive and prosper only in the narrow territories of the small state. The Federalist papers turn to this question again and again and Jay, Hamilton, and Madison each in turn deny the validity of that assertion. Their reasons for denying it are all interesting and correct but one in particular commands our attention at the present time. The chief threat to liberty in the view of the writers of the Federalist papers was the concentration of power especially as it is reflected in an unchecked and tyrannical majority. In *The Federalist*, No. 51 either Hamilton or Madison argues that the chief way of preventing such a concentration of power is through diversification of interest. The argument runs as follows:

It is of great importance in a republic not only to guard the society against the oppression of its rulers, but to guard one part of the society against the injustice of the other part. Different interests necessarily exist in different classes of citizens. If a majority be united by a common interest, the rights of the minority will be insecure. There are but two methods of providing against this evil: the one by creating a will in the community independent of the majority—that is, of society itself; the other, by comprehending in society so many separate descriptions of citizens as will render an unjust combination of a majority of the whole improbable, if not impracticable. The first method prevails

in all governments possessing an hereditary or self-appointed authority. This, at best, is a precarious security. . . . The second method will be exemplified in the federal republic of the United States. Whilst all authority in it will be derived from and dependent on the society, the society itself will be broken into so many parts, interests and classes of citizens, that the rights of individuals, or of the minority, will be in little danger from interested combinations of the majority. In a free government the security for civil rights must be the same as that for religious rights. It consists in the one case in the multiplicity of interests, in the other in the multiplicity of sects. The degree of security in both cases will depend on the number of interests and sects; and this may be presumed to depend on the extent of country and the number of people comprehended under the same government. . .

Consequently the greatest and most telling defense of size in the republic is the fact that size itself will help to guarantee diversity and multiplicity. It is diversity alone which in the long run will prevent the tyranny of the majority in any society and guarantee that freedom which has always been the great boast of our American polity. The drive to diversity in the actuality of American life was even greater than its theoretical formulation in the Federalist papers. It has been a drive, moreover, which has not slackened with time but which in our own days has taken on a sharp and powerful new meaning. The racial and ethnic claims to full and distinctive participation, not as individuals but as members of an identifiable minority group, participation in both the culture and the polity has created a wholesome check on what threatened to become an unexamined consensus. Submerged minorities, cultural, political, sexual, and social have emerged

within the last few decades to challenge an older complacency and to demand the right to participate fully after their own unique fashion in the shaping of American life. They represent a vast potential for the renewal of the American system and they provide, as the founding fathers anticipated, a dynamic to drive on the engine of liberty.

It is apparent, even from what I have so far said, that a powerful tension exists in the American polity and American society between the ideals of complete liberty and full equality. I am highly unoriginal in pointing this out. We have chosen to absolutize neither the ideal of liberty nor the ideal of equality, sacrificing the one to the other as has happened in the French, Russian and other revolutions. Rather we have tried to have it both ways; demanding achievement and status and yet insisting, perversely perhaps, upon equality; boasting of our liberty yet willing from time to time to see that liberty attenuated and diluted in order that we may all enjoy a bit more equality of condition. So much I think has often been observed and remarked on. It has not been so often pointed out, however, that this relationship of tension and reciprocity in the American system is one of the major sources of its ability to transform and to change the conditions of American life. We have remained in a state of flux because we have refused to become totalists with respect to our ideals. We have refused to succumb to the beguiling power of a single good idea and have alternated in an unseemly but very practical fashion between liberty and equality. In questions of class conflict, race, education and minority rights in recent times we have sacrificed a measure of liberty in order to secure a greater degree of equality but there are limits, as evidenced by the bus-sing controversy and the question of open admissions to colleges, to cite only two ex-

amples, chosen at random; limits beyond which the American people will not go in sacrificing liberty to equality. A shifting adjustment between liberty and equality is always in process in American life and we have managed because of it to become both more free and more equal. Whether or not in the years ahead we shall be able to maintain this feat of social prestidigitation remains to be seen. Should we lose it I believe the system itself will falter and slow and we will find ourselves like so many other political systems and sects ruined by one good idea taken to its extreme.

We now stand at the end of a decade in which anti-institutionalism has been a major force. Political, cultural, social and religious institutions during the past ten years have not only had a bad press, they have been vigorously attacked and denounced by the trendy intellectual elites of the Western world. That has happened before and is not necessarily a sign of danger. More important, however, is the fact that ordinary men and women have lost faith and confidence, in those institutions and often not without reason. The courts have not functioned well. The holder of the highest office in the land has laid himself open to charges which, if true, exhibit a contempt for the values of our system almost unprecedented in our history. To argue that these developments came at the end of a period during which federal powers have been surrendered by the states and concentrated in Washington; that in this period the office of the presidency moved from republican simplicity of manner to imperial grandeur and in this period of time more and more of the everyday decisions of our public lives were made at a great remove from the people whom those decisions effect—to say this and to add that other recent presidents appear to have acted no better, simply compounds the problem and deepens public pessimism. Nor do Con-

gress, state legislatures and state administrative officers fare better in the public estimate.

It may seem presumptuous then to argue that the basic structure of our institutions as set forth in the Constitution is sound and functioning and that the self-correcting powers of the system have asserted themselves and are, in fact, even now producing the necessary changes.

For the Constitution, conservative in temper, liberal in principle, has been, it seems to me, one of the chief reasons for ordered change in our society. That conservative temper of the Constitution is reflected in its evaluation of men and their motives and its ability to employ even self-interest in the pursuit of the common good. Federalist paper No. 51, (which surely is one of the most remarkable documents in all of the American state papers) puts the case in the following words:

. . . Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern man, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions.

Those "auxiliary precautions" have been written into the fabric of the Constitution.

They lie at the heart of our self-correcting system. It is they which, even and particularly, at the moments of greatest crisis have enabled us to proceed in our public and private lives with a measure of assurance making those changes, in the sum revolutionary, which have enabled us to live in ordered freedom. How sad, then, "the fact," as Irving Kristol recently pointed out, that, "at our major universities it is almost impossible to find a course, graduate or undergraduate, devoted to *The Federalist*." (How important those *Papers* are may be determined by anyone who cares to read No. 65 written by Alexander Hamilton on the subject of impeachment.) And so, in the final analysis, it is our basic institutions and the founding instruments of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution which have perpetuated our values and given our system its elasticity and its dynamism.

The men who made the American Revolution were reluctant rebels. They did not deliberately set out to create an ideal society and forge the fabric of a new nation in the fires of war. They were surprised at their own audacity and fearful of its consequences. And when they sought to justify their actions to themselves and to the world

at large they rested their arguments on an appeal to the British Constitution and a demand that their traditional rights as Englishmen be recognized. Few, if any, revolutions have been so conservative in their inspiration.

Yet once those liberties and historical rights were taken seriously, once they had become the central principle of a new polity, they changed and transformed the whole texture of American political and social life. It was, indeed, as though the American Revolution had salvaged the great vital principle that stood at the heart of the English historical experience and had given it new life and meaning. Far from being a break with the past and its institutions, the new American nation sheltered, preserved and quickened political ideas, constitutional forms and political institutions that were temporarily in eclipse in Europe.

Sometimes an act of conservation is a truly revolutionary action. The concrete realization of specific liberties, no matter how partial or incomplete, was in the instance of the American revolution the great device by which liberty permeated the totality of American life in the years that were to come. That process has not ended and I would like to remind you that success as well as failure exacts a price.