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On the Meaning of the Word “Revolution”

When I was invited to speak at a conference commemorating the 30th anniversary of the 1956 revolution, which was to be held in István Eörsi's flat, I came up with the idea of translating Condorcet's article published on May 31, 1793. To refresh people's memory about the historical significance of the date, the Jacobins seized power on that day. (Although the Jacobins preferred to call it a revolution, it was really a *coup-d'état*, every bit as unsubtle as 18 Brumaire.) According to legend, it was Danton's warning on June 1, which saved Condorcet from the fate of his less fortunate Girondist friends, who were arrested in an operation that served to turn the Jacobins, previously a minority in the Convent, into a majority. In the aforementioned essay, which was to be his last publication, Condorcet subjected the words “revolutionary/revolution” to a semantic analysis. His final conclusion was that “by definition, a revolutionary change must increase liberty, i.e. the only legitimate aim of a revolution is freedom”. By branding the Jacobins' action the opposite of revolution, Condorcet in effect delivered a verdict on the Jacobin movement, which, in its own admission, wanted to reduce freedom and curtail civil liberties in the name of equality and under the battle cry of “the country is in danger”. (Condorcet left the brand name “counter-revolution” for the royalist Catholics, who proudly owned to it.) Obviously, by translating Condorcet's essay, I took issue with the official designation of 1956 as a counter-revolution, a view that was still virulently upheld in 1986 (see Berecz's book). My intentions were so transparent that it was not until the summer of 1989 that my favorite magazine, *Világosság*, had worked up enough courage to publish my “revolutionary” translation, by which time the official terminology had been changed to “uprising” and in any case, under the aegis of the 200th anniversary my work had an easy job of sailing through. If I were to apply Condorcet's criterion to the regrettable events that took place on the 50th anniversary of 1956, then these would in all probability fail to pass the test of revolutionarism. Even if we remove the football hooligans with limited political awareness from the equation, the majority of the protesters explicitly demanded to curtail the freedoms that the country had won in 1989: the idea of dedicating Hungary to the Virgin Mary make the legal status of non-Christians (and even of non-Catholics, for that matter) rather precarious, and then we

have still said nothing about the constitutional principle of the Holy Crown, which does very little to increase people's personal freedom.

This marginalized bunch of lunatics failed to strike genuine fear in me, even when they set up their childish people's tribunals on Kossuth Square. Mind you, I still do not know that if a few dozen peaceful protesters had gotten into their heads to pay a visit to the homes of the people whose names and detailed addresses had been read out publicly – the names of suspected Jews and self-confessed liberals – then who would have been there to protect them.

In their defense, I should point out that in the 18th century the word “revolution” had another meaning. Tom Paine, a liberal democrat who was among the ideological fathers of the American revolution, still used the word in that latter sense in his work *Common Sense*, published in 1776, interpreting the word *revolutio* as a return to an earlier stage in accordance with the theory of circular motion. The aim is to recover our ancient freedoms lost long ago, and to return to the golden age before the subjugation of our race. With respect to England, the author identified this period with the times before the Norman Conquest: the oppressor could be identified not only as a noble, but also as an outsider, i.e. a racial stranger. While I have nothing to contribute to the discourse on the niceties of Saxon freedom, since my knowledge comes exclusively from the legend of Robin Hood, I can affirm that Paine was not alone with his rhetoric identifying the revolution with the notion of a *status quo ante*. In his famous pamphlet entitled *What is the Third Estate?*, Abbé Sieyès branded the members of the first and the second estate not only as oppressors, but also as an alien body within the nation: from the fact that they descended from the Franks who had conquered the native Gaul population, Sieyès concluded that “the third estate alone constituted the nation.” Luckily, once he had been in America, Paine forgot all about his ethnic definition of the oppressor and in his draft constitution for the State of Pennsylvania he enlisted the entire intellectual arsenal of liberal democracy and individual liberties, propped up by an extremely radical version of the idea of “minimal state”. However, all this earned him very little credit in France, where he was unfortunate enough to land right in the middle of the bloodbath of September. The radical democrat Paine had a distinguished conservative debating partner in the person of the “old whig” Burke, who likewise defined revolution as a return to the old ways in connection with the Glorious Revolution. (The aim of the revolutionaries in 1688 was to recover the old freedoms, and the process beginning with the *Magna*

Charta through the *Petition of Rights* right up the *Bill of Rights* was seen a gradual evolution and an organic extension of rights, while the French Revolution, with its “metaphysical declarations” to create a historical *tabula rasa*, simply wrote itself out of the uniform and organic course of European development. Well, I would be the last one to try to thrust Burke’s classical conservative position on my fellow countrymen who were engaging in a pathetic remake of 1956, especially since one of their first actions was to remove the European Union’s flag flying above the entrance of the television headquarters and to replace it with the red-and-white banner of the House of Árpád. Sadly, I cannot recall any analogous incidents from English or French history. If King Arthur or Charlemagne had military ensigns, these were certainly not used as backdrops for the Holocaust in the 20th century. But more importantly, while we are having a good time here analyzing the etymology of the word “revolution”, we must never forget that there were many old ladies living in the neighborhood of the synagogue, who watched the October performance of the street vandals in horror, thinking that they were witnessing another *Kristalnacht*.

But even this consideration could not induce me to embrace Saint-Just’s position, who claimed that “the enemies of freedom deserve no freedom at all”. As we all know, this assertion leads to the “tyranny of freedom”, in other words to non-freedom, and, therefore, also to the opposite of the revolution, when judged by Condorcet’s criterion. It was one of the greatest tragedies of the 20th century that the liberal (and also the social democratic and Christian democratic) intellectuals were unable to find an answer to the problem of how far the “freedom” of the extra-parliamentary forces challenging the parliamentary freedoms should be tolerated. When the march on Rome reaches Rome, it is already too late. However, when the aggression is only verbal, we would violate the sacred principle of the freedom of speech, if we tried to prevent people from venting their anger. Can we apply the legal principle of “clear and present danger” to the protesters chanting anti-constitutional slogans in front of the Parliament in the same way that Mill and Laski applied it to the crowd protesting against the liberalization of grain prices in front of the homes of grain merchants? And how should we, who have been excommunicated from the national fold, deal with the tradition bequeathed by red and white Jacobinism, according to which “there are only two parties in France: the people and the enemies of the people” (Robespierre)? How should we deal with the suggestion that since “there are only two parties in France: the national side, the party claiming that “France is for the French”,

and the “antifrançais” party representing the international conspiracy of aliens, Jews and liberals, the electoral system, which represents the majority of private interests, should be eliminated in the name of “the people’s real interests” (Rousseau-Robespierre) and “the latent will of the people” (Ch. Maurras). Incidentally, the discreet charm of the latter proposal is that any group, no matter how small, grotesque or hideous, can appoint itself to be the sole legitimate representative of the nation (in view of the claim that the “empirical” majority is illegitimate). In this way, it is possible to demolish every constitutional institution of a parliamentary system in the name of direct democracy – for the time being, only verbally, but we heard it at a verbally aggressive mass rally in front of the Parliament that nothing could stand up to a hundred thousand pairs of strong arms, only at the present time we do not (yet?) want to break into the house of representatives in the vaguely defined name of the people.

Actually, we know it from Comte de Gobineau, the father of racial theory, that the use of rational argument, which is the only legitimate instrument according to the political etiquette of liberalism, is proof itself that the person who wields it is ethnically and intellectually “sématisé”, i.e. he or she comes from an inferior race. An Aryan hero would never sink to the level of debating: he would simply strike his opponent down with his sword. We have already moved past the first strike. Paraphrasing Bence’s old conference title, I see the crowds gather for an onslaught on the constitution of freedom. And I feel utterly helpless.