

The Possibility of Revolution

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Abstract: What makes a revolution possible? The text understands this as the question for the subject that is *able* to make a revolution. Any attempt to answer this question is faced with an aporia: The subject of the revolution can neither be identified with its historically produced social form, nor can it be the subject „as such“, as the power of negativity prior to history and society. The article suggests to find a way out of this aporia in the idea of a transcendental turn of subjectivity: The revolution is the transcendental usage of the subject's historically acquired and socially formed capacities. The possibility of the revolution lies in the revolutionizing of possibilities (as abilities).

Keywords: Crisis, discipline, enablement, evolution, revolution

The revolution is back: in many programs of publishing houses, feuilletons, talk shows, seminar discussions, in many theatres-programs and, of course, in art exhibitions. If, a generation ago nothing filled our time more than aestheticians, since around five years it is teeming with revolutionaries. Many believe now (and also state and write) that a revolution will come because it must.

Crisis and Revolution

This is nothing surprising for those historians who have had in their view the conceptual history following the 18th century. It appears to be a return to modern normality. Thirty years ago, Reinhart Koselleck wrote in a journal: “Since the enlightenment, the word and the concept *revolution* are fashionable – in an alternating but continuous fashion.”¹ Revolution – that is “revolution”, the concept and discourse – has always existed in modernity. But not in the same manner. In comparison with its last conjuncture, the present one thereby implies a fundamental transformation of its meaning. Its last conjuncture was located around the year 1989 when the overthrow of the Soviet regime in middle and eastern Europe was interpreted from the perspective of the French Revolution's bi-centenary anniversary. Therefore people also only spoke of the contemporary revolution in a retrospective manner. The only revolution that still seemed possible and legitimate was the one that was “catching up”² (Habermas): The revolution already *had* taken place. The only actual revolution was the bourgeois revolution that had enforced,

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1 Koselleck 1985.

2 Habermas 1990, 181.

together with capitalism, the constitutional state and the sovereignty of the people. The revolutions of the present thus appeared merely as attempts at “returning”, re-connecting: as a revolution for the last time, a revolution through which the liberal hope was that “the epoch of revolution will end.” After this this catch-ing up no further, no other revolution would be needed. This explains why its “peculiar trait” was the “nearly complete lack of innovative, future-oriented ideas.”³ Precisely herein lies the major difference to the latest conjuncture of revolution: the thinking of revolution has regained its futuristic, progressive sense that was so completely lacking in the debates and events of 1989. We are again looking ahead. The revolution is again within present thought and directed into another future.

But it is also precisely here where the problem of the present conjuncture of revolution lies. It talks about revolution as the step into another future, all the while remaining within the spell of a bad present. This present it experiences as crisis. The present is under the sign of escalating crises which appear increasingly insoluble: financial, economic, political, ecological, demographic, moral, legitimacy crises. This is the ground on which the present conjuncture of revolution thrives. The revolution is supposed to be the escape from crisis. But thereby the revolution remains a mere *expression* of crisis. The definition of revolution is here: the act or change which is supposed to solve the crisis. The idea is: the revolution will come – because it *must* come. The revolution appears as the necessary consequence of crisis.

But crisis and revolution are not identical. Certainly, they are related – there is no revolution without crisis – but the crisis does not bring forth the revolution by itself. Wolfgang Streeck uses this sobering insight to rain on the parade of all the talk concerning the coming revolution. Streeck answers the question, “how will capitalism end?” in this way: Capitalism can also end through its crises but without its decline necessitating in a revolution. For revolution is supposed not only to mean the end of capitalism but the beginning of something new, different. But the assumption “that capitalism as historical appearance can only end if a new, better society is in sight” is merely a “prejudice.”⁴ Crisis urges the revolution, even necessitates it but it cannot make a revolution, it cannot generate it.

This leads to the blind spot, to the unthought of the present conjuncture of revolution: here, revolution appears under the sign of necessity. Or it holds that revolution is something that must necessarily

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3 Ibid.

4 Streeck 2015.

arrive within crisis. To think revolution as necessity is to think it as mere occurrence: as something that eventuates. But this is avoiding the essential question: for if revolution in its modern understanding no longer concerns the orbit of stars and constitutions in which the same inevitably returns, if it instead means to posit a “new beginning” (Hannah Arendt), if it is supposed to be able to open up a “new horizon” (Koselleck), then revolution must be *made* (but, how and from whom?). Revolution is a “word of action [*Tatwort*]”; revolution means “revolutionizing”.⁵

An occurrence can be determined through its necessity (or contingency), actions however need to be comprehended within their possibilities. If there is a transformation taking place, one can limit oneself to the question of its desirability or even its necessity. Concerning a transformation that is performed or done – that is, that it exists only in being performed or done – the question arises, if this is possible or what makes it possible: what makes it possible that it be made; if, how and from whom it *can* be performed and done. That capitalism (or whatever we want to call our society) is in a crisis and that it even might have to “end” (Streeck) according to its own immanent logic, does not suggest anything about revolution: it does not decide anything about its possibility.

Enablement and Discipline

That the present discourse on revolution represses or skips the question of its possibility is no mere omission. It is a faithful expression of the difficulty into which all attempts are led to answer this question. If one clings to the theoretical discussions of the left (and there seem to be no other discussions about the revolution), the situation seems desperate: any positive determination of *possibility* proves to be incapable of thinking it as a possibility of the *revolution*.

In classical Marxist articulation, the question of the possibility of revolution is the question of its subject. And the classical Marxist answer to the question of the revolutionary subject is that it is generated by precisely the society that will end in crisis; its decay will at the same time produce progress. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri write that the “Empire”, the existing world-order creates in the “dark night” of crisis itself the “potential for revolution because it presents us alongside the machine of command with an alternative.”⁶ Following the same logic, Lenin had declared the postal office (in *State and Revolution*) to be an

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5 Koselleck 1979.

6 Hardt & Negri 2001, pp. 386, 394.

“example of the socialist economic system” and stated as the next goal “to organize the whole economy along the lines of the postal service....”⁷ As ludicrous as this sounds, the idea behind this proposal is simple and compelling: the revolutionary re-organization of society can only be done from what “capitalism has already created.”⁸ “Capitalism... creates the *preconditions* that *enable* ‘all’ to take part in the administration of the state.”⁹ And Capitalism achieves this by the “training and discipline of millions of workers.” This disciplinary act certainly *aims* at the exploitation of the laborers, but – a cunning of reason – leads to their enablement. In this way capitalism itself generates the subject of its revolutionary overthrowing.

Beginning with Rosa Luxemburg, “Western” Marxism has seen in this Leninist idea the germ cell for the later reversal of the revolution into oppression. To prove the “proximity, facility, feasibility”¹⁰ (Lenin) of the revolution, Lenin must immediately identify the revolutionary subject with that which capitalist disciplining has already produced: the revolutionary subject *is* the disciplined subject. It can be no surprise that the state brought about by this revolution will then be occupied with nothing but the disciplining of its subjects. Lenin was so much concerned about securing the revolution under existing conditions that he thereby dissolves it: the revolution is indeed secured but precisely in this way no longer liberating.

One can understand the development of left theory in France in the last two or three decades – its development into post-Marxism – as the consequence of this paradox of the Marxist theory of revolution. For herein a paradox is repeated that is inscribed into Enlightenment as such. Michel Foucault called it (in his essay “What is Enlightenment?”) the “paradox of the relations of capacity and power.”¹¹ The optimistic premise of Enlightenment states that the “growth of autonomy”¹² coincides with the “acquisition of capabilities”¹³, and that the former follows from the latter. Enablement (*Befähigung*), this is the premise of Enlightenment that Lenin’s determination of the revolutionary subject perpetuates,

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7 Lenin 2014, p. 87f.

8 Ibid., p. 87.

9 Ibid., p.139f.

10 Ibid., p.105.

11 Foucault 1984, p. 47

12 Ibid., p. 48.

13 Ibid., p. 47.

means liberation. However, this relation is “not as simple”¹⁴ (Foucault). For there is no capacity at all without disciplining. And disciplining is the opposite, the blockage of liberation. The reality of disciplining scatters the optimistic identification of enablement and liberation.

Consequentially, the subject of revolution cannot be the one that is already given because it was produced by means of the social processes of training and disciplining. More fundamentally, the subject of revolution cannot be the subject as bundle of socially produced capacities. It cannot be at all the subject in its socially produced, historically determined shape. To understand the possibility of the revolution as liberation from the existing conditions one must question even the Enlightenment’s concept of subjectivity.

In attempting to avoid the fundamental mistake of classical Marxism, thinkers as different as Miguel Abensour, Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière see the first step to a different concept of politics, avoiding the fundamental mistake of traditional Marxism. This fundamental mistake consists in nothing else but thinking in terms of social theory; the mistake consists in the “social incorporations of political classes”, the “representation of the social in politics.”¹⁵ French left theory draws radical methodical consequences from the failure of Marxism. The consequence is: one must put an end to social theory. The (political) subject is not a category of the social; the revolutionary subject cannot be understood as socially produced and therefore also not as a historically specific subject. Rather, the revolutionary subject is nothing but *the* subject. The “potential for revolution” (Hardt / Negri) cannot be found in the specific capitalist shape of the subject – as in Lenin’s educated and disciplined postal officer – but in the *being* of the subject: not in the historical shape of subjectivity, rather in subjectivity as such. Revolutionary are not the specific capacities produced by capitalism; rather, revolutionary is rather the capacity of subjectivity as such: the indeterminate capacity or the capacity of indeterminacy, the force of negativity to abstract from everything and to say no to anything. Revolutionary is the subject only as an instance of indeterminate freedom and empty equality.

But along with this consequence from the critique of Lenin’s answer, the question of the possibility of revolution is missed yet a second time. Lenin cannot explain how the capitalist disciplined subject can *change* the conditions; his subject is not revolutionary because it merely perpetuates the discipline of capitalism. Inversely, post-Marxists cannot

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14 Ibid., p. 48.

15 Rancière 2004; Badiou 2008.

explain how a subject of indeterminate freedom and empty equality can change *anything*, especially the existing conditions. What political act is such a subject capable of? It is the “insurrection” (Étienne Balibar), at best: the permanent insurrection. But insurrection is not revolution. The revolution is more than the break with the old order: it is the founding of a new one. This is what the subject of empty, indeterminate freedom cannot do, for it is *capable* of – nothing.

This is one of the reasons why Slavoj Žižek demanded a couple of years ago, to the amazement of some and to the indignation of the others, that today, after all the criticisms, we must return to Lenin. More precisely: we do not need to just return to Lenin but we also must “repeat Lenin.”¹⁶ For the “‘political’ crisis of Marxism” leads us, according to Žižek, only to “‘pure politics’”¹⁷: that is, to a politics of insurrection, of rebellion, subversion or transgression. But Lenin wanted to think revolution, and to think revolution – and here Žižek would agree with Hannah Arendt – means to think the foundation of the new. Lenin’s question is according to Žižek: “What kind of power will there be after we took power?” How can the revolution be thought of as establishing a new political power that does not only interrupt existing conditions but also change them? How do “institutions of a principally different kind”, of which Lenin spoke, look? And who is their subject? What capacities does one need to both create and maintain them? The subject of the revolt which asserts indeterminate freedom and empty equality will not be able to do it.

This is the aporia in which attempts become entangled to think the revolution not only as an occurrence but also as an act and therewith in its possibility: Either they give a positive determination of the capacities and of the power that is realized by the revolution – but then the revolution only perpetuates the social shape of the subject. Or the subject is understood trans-, extra- or unhistorically as force of negativity, of liberation of its social shape, but then all it can do is rupture, insurrect and revolt. The subject is in both versions incapable of revolution. The revolution becomes impossible as the act of a subject. Here all we are left with is the “longing for an event”: “It will happen, happened once. It will all be different, everything is already different.”¹⁸

Revolution and Evolution

That history and thus transformations can only occur and cannot

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16 Žižek 2002, p. 310.

17 Ibid., p. 271.

18 Trawny 2011.

be made is the contention that inheres one of the central concepts of present thinking. This is the concept of evolution. Evolution, the thought of transformation as evolutionary occurrence, is the foundational category that is shared by the sciences of social and of natural life, by sociology and biology. Evolution is henceforth *the* anti-revolutionary concept.

Evolution and revolution do not mainly differ concerning their temporality or pace. Rather, they differ with regard to their modality – due to their ontology. They are opposite understandings of historical transformation. In an evolutionary fashion everything can change, sometimes even quickly. Evolution means contingency: everything could become different and will become different. But the concept of evolution is anti-revolutionary because it excludes the transformative act. Sociology and biology tell us this: we have been different and we will become different, but we cannot change anything. According to Luhmann, “everything could be different – and it is nearly nothing that I can change”;¹⁹ this is the resigning insight that both generate. Sociology and biology join forces to occlude the possibility of revolution by thinking evolutionarily.

Decisive in the revolution is not what it transforms, but rather how it transforms. Or, what the revolution primarily transforms, before this and that, is how historical transformation is enforced. The revolution transforms transformation: it turns a mere occurrence into one’s own deed. The revolution does therefore neither stand within history nor external to it, but is rather the act which places us in a different relation *to* history. The revolution, before anything else, changes how we are historical: it changes our historicity. The revolution is an ontological deed. It changes not only what the things are but *how* they are: their mode of being.

This explains a phenomenon indicated by Heinrich Heine in his “History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany”: that is, the phenomenon that there exist between the political revolution in France and the philosophical revolution in Germany beginning with Kant “remarkable analogies” and a “remarkable parallelism”²⁰. According to Heine, one can only understand this if one sees that, in different ways, both are doing *the same [dasselbe]*. For the political revolution is never only “material”. The political revolution only exists as a “revolution in the way of thinking” (Kant).

Friedrich Schlegel therefore called the “French Revolution, Fichte’s Doctrine of Science and Goethe’s [Wilhelm] Meister” *together* “the

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19 Luhmann 2007, pp. 35-46, here: 44.

20 Heine 1986, p.102.

greatest tendencies of the age.” *Wilhelm Meister* is the “poetry of poetry” (Schlegel) just as the *Doctrine of Science* is the philosophy of philosophy. They are “transcendental” or “critical”. And according to Schlegel’s famous definition being transcendental or critical means “to represent the producer along with the product”²¹; to reveal and unfold in the finished product that which produced it.

Philosophy here becomes critical or transcendental when it returns thoughts to acts of thinking. Just as transcendental poetry shows in the poem simultaneously the “poetic capacity [*Dichtungsvermögen*]” that produced it, likewise, the French Revolution cannot be defined as a mere product – that is through the institutional, structural transformations that it generated. Just like there is transcendental philosophy and poetry, the revolution is transcendental history. It relates transcendently – or critically – to history. It makes appear the producing element (*das Produzierende*) that is effective in history and is obscured by its products, evolutions and changes. The revolution is the political deed that brings about itself by reconverting history back into the political deed which it once was.

Beginning beginning

What does such an understanding of the act of revolution tell us about its possibility? It tells us that the revolution is always new and at the same time it always comes too late. This is because the revolution does not only transform individual conditions and institutions, it rather changes *how there are* conditions and institutions – because it converts them into our deeds, the revolution begins a new, different history. The revolution is not the solution to any kind of crisis. It is nothing but a new commencement of a history in which there are new commencements. The revolution begins beginning.

But one cannot begin at the beginning. The revolution always comes late in history. We can ourselves set about changing something only when transformations *have already taken place*, when evolutionary change did carry itself out. Because the revolution is nothing but a new, “critical” or “transcendental” relation to history, it presupposes history as having already happened [*als geschehene*]. The “labour” of history must have been already done. To speak materialistically: the history of labour must be far advanced enough so that there can be the political deed through which we transform the existing conditions.

Thus, Lenin was right when he called the capitalist disciplining

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21 Schlegel 1971, p. 195.

through labour the precondition of the revolution. Only one who has acquired capacities of all kinds, by having become capable, that is, disciplined, is then able to perform the deed through which he or she for the first time changes things by him- or herself. One cannot make oneself able to act. To act oneself, to enact one’s own deed of transformation presupposes *having been enabled*.

However, Lenin was wrong when he, taking historical evolution as the precondition of the revolution, therefore described the revolution as the effect of historical evolution. The revolution cannot be “worked out [*erarbeitet*]”. The revolution reflects what was worked out [*das Erarbeitete*]; it relates critically or transcendently to how and what the discipline of labour has made us capable of.

The revolution is the political surpassing [*Hinausgehen über*] of social labour. This is what Hans-Peter Krüger calls (following a remark by Marx from the *18th Brumaire*) the “heroism” of revolution: “For Marx *heroism* consisted historically in the political practice in running ahead on the economic level of development up to the point of self-sacrifice.”²² Without heroism there is no revolution: that is, without – politically – doing more as one – economically, socially – is capable of. The revolution is a self-overstraining. The possibility of the revolution is insecure because it is neither within history nor external to it, but placed in between. It is the relation to history that cannot be purely historical (but rather “transcendental”). Therein the revolution is like the work of art. The artist must be able to *make* the artwork, but the artist *cannot* make it. Revolution is like art: the ability – of what one cannot do [*Können – des Nichtkönnens*].

Translated by Frank Ruda

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22 Krüger 2014.

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Volume 4 /
Issue 2