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The Politics of the Study of Revolution

Sheldon S. Wolin

The study of revolution has become a well-organized and defined undertaking in the United States during the last quarter century. It is now a specialized field in which a considerable number of political and social scientists have invested substantial time and energy. Government, foundations, research centers, and universities have supported the enterprise and helped to institutionalize it. As a result of these and other influences, the study of revolution has acquired greater homogeneity both in approach and methods, turning from historical and political explanations and adopting the techniques and concepts associated with contemporary social science. Quantitative methods and computer techniques have been introduced, along with the spare language of "variables," "indices," "J-curves," and "correlations." A serious effort is being made by contemporary students of revolution to develop a general theory that will account for the "data," provide an explanation of why revolutions do or do not occur, and possibly serve as the basis for predictions about the likelihood of revolutions under specified conditions.¹

The above sketch is obviously in need of qualifications if one is to avoid imputing more coherence and uniformity to the study of revolution than exists in fact. Many of the scientific techniques have only begun to be applied; there is much diversity in approaches and conceptual schemes; and social scientists working in this area have tended, on the whole, to advance somewhat guarded claims about the scientific quality and potential of their work. Nonetheless, after these and other qualifications have been entered, it is accurate to say that considerable progress has been made toward ordering the field. In terms of methods, conceptual language, identification of the problems in need of explanation, and the status of previous studies on the subject, there is something

¹ For general surveys of the recent literature, see Lawrence Stone, *The Causes of the English Revolution 1529–1642* (New York, 1972), chap. 1, and the excellent study by Isaac Kramnick, "Reflections on Revolution: Definition and Explanation in Recent Scholarship," *History and Theory*, XI (1/1972), 26–63. More specialized material may be found in Reidar Larsson, *Theories of Revolution. From Marx to the First Russian Revolution* (Stockholm, 1970).

like a set of shared understandings. Without implying that the study of revolution has achieved paradigmatic status, it can be described as a tolerably well-defined field of investigation which displays important continuities in research and theorizing.

These commonplace observations are intended to call attention to a simple fact of considerable importance—that revolution is being systematically investigated from an increasingly well-defined point of view, that of social science. Emphasizing this fact might seem to be a belaboring of the obvious, since there is nothing peculiar about these developments. For some time now political scientists have employed similar methods to study such subjects as modernization, voting behavior, legislative bodies, and decision-making processes. Accordingly, there seems to be no *prima facie* reason for believing that the subject of revolution is privileged in a way that exempts it from, or makes it uncongenial to, the language, methods, and theoretical viewpoints that have become standard among political and social scientists.

Is it possible, however, that a crucial difference exists between studying revolutions, especially twentieth-century revolutions, and studying, say, voters? Does it matter that, in the case of revolutions, one is perforce studying forms of behavior organized to subvert or destroy existing legal, political, and social structures, while in the case of voting one is studying forms of behavior whose meaning is constituted by those structures and whose purpose is to legitimate them? And, in turn, does this suggest that it may be misleading to assume that social science simply “studies” phenomena by means of certain methods; but that, instead, what it studies has a prior constitution, a complex of meanings and practices definitive of the objects of study? To study voting behavior, for example, is not to study *any* form of behavior, but behavior with a definite form created by the beliefs and practices of the society.² By definition, however, revolutionary behavior and action stand, so to speak, outside and against the system and its supporting ideology. How, then, shall it be understood? What is the source of meaning and practices which constitutes its significance?

Before attempting to explore these questions, I wish to call attention to one item on the list of subjects currently being studied by political scientists. It is the study of modernization or development, which occupies a special status bearing on the subject of revolution; and it shares two features in common with the study of revolution. First, it, too, has been a growth industry in the scholarly economy and characterized by

² Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” *Review of Metaphysics*, XXV (September 1971), 3–48, and more generally, by the same author, *The Explanation of Behavior* (New York, 1964).

a rather strong consensus concerning appropriate techniques, questions, and conceptual apparatus. Second, its rise to a position of academic prominence was not coincidentally related to a parallel extension of American power abroad and to a sudden but natural interest on the part of American policy-makers in the problems of "modernizing" societies. The same parallelism exists for the study of revolution. What makes these parallels suggestive relates to the current state of modernization studies, particularly in political science departments. It is common knowledge that they are in shambles or at least in great confusion. The main explanation for the paucity of results appears to lie with the underlying assumptions that have governed studies of developing countries. These assumptions have been shown to be either the product of American policy considerations, that is, the inquiries have been shaped so as to produce knowledge useful to decision-makers; or they have been assumptions derived from Western experience and ideologies. The relevance of this latter point is that the constitutive principles used to investigate the phenomena of modernization have been borrowed from another and alien context, which proved to be a matter of some embarrassment when the underdeveloped societies being studied were recognized as having rich and ancient traditions—that is, their own forms constitutive of behavior. The result is a stand off: the underdeveloped society understands itself in one way, while social science understands it in another.

The dilemma is equally sharp for the study of some revolutions. For more than a century there has existed a distinct tradition of revolutionary writings, flourishing, for the most part, outside academic and scholarly communities. These writings are typically labelled "revolutionary doctrines," "revolutionary ideologies" or "isms," in order to distinguish them in quality, content, and purpose from the writings of political and social scientists. Examples of the genre include Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, Castroism, and the like.

Broadly speaking, the contrasts between revolutionary ideologies and the social scientific study of revolutions tend to be established along the following lines: the ideologies are hortatory, whereas social science writings strive to be explanatory; the former are action-oriented, the latter detached; and while the former seek their justification by the criterion of practical success, the latter would feel vindicated by the achievement of a scientifically tenable theory of revolution.

As one reflects upon these contrasts, they seem less compelling. Why is this so? The simplest and most facile answer is to claim that ideological elements can be detected in many of the revolutionary studies produced by political and social scientists. In support of this claim one can adduce

from the literature many statements expressing disapproval of revolutionary movements, as well as numerous counsels on how to avoid, prevent, or scotch revolutionary outbreaks.³ One might conclude, therefore, that the social scientific study of revolutions also has an orientation which is hortatory, activist, and practical, the difference being that the orientation is counterrevolutionary. For empirical evidence in support of this conclusion, one might draw upon the history of Project Camelot.⁴

The defenders of the social scientific approach might respond in several ways. They might defend the practice of giving counterrevolutionary advice by relying upon analogy. Just as technology is sometimes an application of pure or basic scientific theory, they might say, so counterrevolutionary advice can be the application of social scientific theory without necessarily impugning the scientific status of the latter. As one writer in the field has said of his work, "This theory is not devised for these [practical] applications, but many of the characteristics that make it suitable for scholarly inquiry similarly suit it to policy purposes."⁵ Reasoning in this way, one might conclude that the distinction still holds between the social scientific study of revolutions and revolutionary ideologies.

A second line of defense would be simpler. It maintains that the genuine social scientist has no business tendering practical advice. When he does so, he has violated the norm of scientific disinterestedness. This response, too, preserves the integrity of the distinction between science and ideology.

However baldly stated, the effect of these responses is to establish, if not a line, at least an appreciable distance between the two approaches to revolution. If the two are clearly distinguishable, it makes good sense to insist upon the difference between them. But is the distinction tenable, or, at best, is it a weak distinction strongly held? Does the conviction with which it is held serve to distort our understanding of both social science and revolutionary ideology by assuming that thought and action are easily separable so that we can speak, for example, of the latter as the "application" of the former?

³ Chalmers Johnson, *Revolutionary Change* (Boston, 1966), pp. 166-72; Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, 1966), pp. 344 ff; Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, 1971), pp. 352-53; Harry Eckstein, "On the Etiology of Internal Wars," *History and Theory*, IV (2/1965), 153-63.

⁴ Irving Louis Horowitz, ed. *The Rise and Fall of Project Camelot* (Cambridge [Mass.], 1967); Robert A. Nisbet, "Project Camelot and the Science of Man," *Tradition and Revolt* (New York, 1970), pp. 247-82; Ralf Dahrendorf, *Essays in the Theory of Society* (Stanford, 1968), pp. 259-72. On the concept of counterrevolution, see the fine essay by Arno J. Mayer, *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe, 1870-1956* (New York, 1971).

⁵ Gurr, p. x.

What lies behind these questions is the widely acknowledged fact that, ever since the Puritan revolution of the seventeenth century, ideology has been a recurrent feature of revolutionary outbreaks and that, if anything, it has become even more evident in twentieth-century revolutions. This suggests that some important relationship has come to obtain between belief and action, a relationship that cannot be accounted for if a certain type of belief, that is, a certain type of ideology, is categorized as a "value," or as a "subjective preference," or as the expression of "alienation." Nor perhaps can revolutionary action be accounted for if it is analyzed as the product of "frustration," which then somehow finds its appropriate ideological "rationalization." What needs to be investigated is the relationship between thought and action, or, more accurately, the new relationship signified by the fact that modern revolutions have tended increasingly to be accompanied by revolutionary ideologies. Stated in this way, however, the full force of the fact is lost because it implies a parallelism between revolutionary actions and ideologies, whereas what is involved is a constitutive relationship. In a constitutive relationship action is inseparable from its meaning. An ideology such as Marxism is not only a system of meanings, but one which conceives action as expressive of that system. An actor who is, so to speak, in-formed by that system of meanings understands what he is doing or what is happening to him and to others by virtue of a coherent prior understanding of what revolutionary action means.

This formulation needs to be tightened and made more specific if one is to avoid the error of thinking that some loose and general relationship has emerged between revolutions and ideologies such that one can reasonably talk about the latter as an "influence" upon the former. That relationship has been conditioned by the striking historical fact that, ever since the nineteenth century, there has existed a *tradition* of revolutionary thought that has flourished in a symbiotic relationship with revolutionary action. It is this fact of a tradition that is worth reflecting upon.

By a tradition I mean a body of knowledge, organized by distinctive concepts and theories, that has been consciously cultivated and extended over time. The tradition includes more than Marxism. It begins with such writers as Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen and goes on to include Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Louis Blanc, Michael Bakunin, and many others. Eventually it was dominated by Marxism, or, more accurately, it was Karl Marx who, in a sense, created the tradition. Every reader of Marx is familiar with his devastating criticism of Proudhon and Bakunin; but the sense in which Marx was a tradition-maker tends to be overlooked.

Marx made frequent acknowledgement of his debts to his predecessors

and contemporaries and tried to show what was original and valuable in their writings and how these contributions fitted in with his own. The result of his efforts was to establish a kind of map which showed the relationship between his own theories and various "schools" of socialism, communism, and classical economics. The identity of these schools and their historical situation were largely his own creation and, of course, that of Engels.⁶ Marx further consolidated the tradition, and his hold on it, by extending it, so to speak, retroactively. Early on in their careers he and Engels began to study previous revolutions, to analyze them in terms of the categories and methods being developed by the two collaborators, and to locate them in a line of revolutions which led toward their own theory and their own times. Equally important, their historical investigations into earlier revolutions inspired a large number of historical studies by later Marxists. As a result, the tradition came to comprise more than a body of ideas and theories; it included, too, a tradition of historical and empirical investigation. Finally, there was the close and continuing association which Marx and Engels established with various revolutionary actors and movements. Learning the "lessons" of revolutionary experience, incorporating them into theoretical form, searching for the close integration of theory and *praxis* became permanent features of the tradition.

Marxism's distinctive combination of theory and action, embedded in a tradition of revolutionary inquiry and experience, has presented certain difficulties for the social scientist's understanding of revolutions. Marxism runs counter to certain powerful beliefs present in the culture of American social science. The most important of these is a pragmatic view of action which predisposes the social scientist to the belief that action can be abstracted from ideology and analyzed under a separate category. Once the abstraction is accomplished, it is then possible to substitute for the ideology a different set of constitutive principles, such as "frustration," *déclassement*, or alienation. The distortions are particularly severe if the actions in question acquire their meaning from an ideology as coherent as Marxism. At the same time, the operation of abstraction works also to distort the meaning of the ideology, for the latter is now stripped of its symbiotic relationship with action. Once this is accomplished, the ideology can be assigned some bland category, such as "values," "the rationalization of demands," or "world-views."

Doubtless it might be pointed out that distortion is the price exacted

⁶ The following works by Marx and Engels bear on this point: *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*; *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*; *The Holy Family*; *The Poverty of Philosophy*; and *Theories of Surplus Value*.

by any use of abstractions. If this were all that is at issue, the objection would hold. But revolutionary ideology and action, particularly in the Marxist form, are victimized precisely because they are revolutionary. A revolutionary ideology is, in simple terms, truly antithetical to the values represented by the order which it opposes. Similarly, revolutionary action is extreme; its aim is to destroy the existing order. Now, in a subtle way, social science is drawn into a political contest with revolutionary ideology. The methods, concepts, and theories of social science become weapons to blunt and defeat revolution symbolically. Sometimes this is accomplished by using categories which trivialize or devalue revolutionary thought and action, as we have just seen. Sometimes psychological or psychoanalytical notions are invoked to make revolutionary movements appear as a species of mental illness. Sometimes, in order to account for the fact that revolutions occasionally succeed, they are assimilated to the "ongoing process" of social change and become a more extreme method by which society reestablishes its equilibrium.

In suggesting that there is a "politics" to the study of revolution, I do not mean to imply that political and social scientists have been hired as academic auxiliaries, or that their scientific credentials have been compromised. On the contrary, I wish to argue that the politics in question is consistent with, and may even be the most important expression of, the tradition of social science itself. For the tradition of social science is that of a science of order. A brief historical sketch will perhaps make my meaning clear.

The phrase, "science of order," was coined by the founder of modern social science, Auguste Comte, who viewed it as the antithetical alternative to all theories which maintained that progress and justice could be promoted by revolutionary means. In Comte's system, revolution had no meaning except through the concepts which explained and defined the nature of order. There was no science of revolution, only a science of order. Comte's formulation was accepted by the two greatest social scientists of the early twentieth century, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, who went even further. They retained order as the focal point of social science, but practically eliminated the subject of revolution. In the volume of Max Weber's writings edited and translated by A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons there is a revealing footnote in which Weber promised to provide "a chapter on the theory of revolutions." The editors have commented that "this projected chapter was apparently never written and no systematic account of revolution is available either in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* or elsewhere in Weber's published work."⁷

⁷ *Max Weber: The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. and ed. A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York, 1947), p. 385, fn. 59.

Although this assertion requires qualification, particularly in the light of Weber's essays dealing with the Russian revolution of 1905, it is generally correct.⁸ Durkheim is even more interesting in this regard. Despite his deep preoccupation with *anomie* and a partially finished work on nineteenth-century socialism, he never attempted systematically to address the topic of revolution, even though, in a sense, all of his writings were intended as an antidote.

Both Weber and Durkheim helped to develop a tradition of social science which has been rich in the language of order. One thinks of Weber's discussions of bureaucracy, organization, and authority, as well as of Durkheim's notions of solidarity and collective representations. But concerning revolution, there was no corresponding richness, only silence. For this reason the contribution of Parsons, the most famous theorist of contemporary social science as well as the official interpreter of Weber to American readers, becomes significant. Parsons' achievement was to accommodate revolution to the requirements of order. He accomplished this by a strategy which tacitly rejected both the Marxist conception of revolution as radical transformation of man and society as well as the older understanding of Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville which had pictured revolutions as convulsive and dramatic, heroic and/or satanic, and, above all, as extraordinary. Parsons brought revolution literally within the "system" by treating it as a species of "social change." His concept of change, in turn, was derived from his famous construct of "the" social system. The social system, according to Parsons, seeks a state of "equilibrium" and it is within the confines of this search that revolution acquires meaning, not from what the revolutionaries may happen to think either about the system or their own intentions.

Parsons gives his most detailed account of revolutions in *The Social System*, where it is to be found under the heading, "The Ascendancy of the Charismatic Revolutionary Movement." He discusses two types. The first is identified with "the sudden alteration in the major balance of equilibrium of the social system" produced "by the ascendancy of a 'revolutionary' movement which organizes a set of alienative motivational orientations relative to the main institutionalized order." He follows this with a list of conditions that have to be present if the movement is to succeed. The list is revealing of how Parsons domesticates the problem of revolution, whether by refusing to probe the sources of revolutionary discontents, by classifying the revolutionists as deviants bordering on the psychopathic, or by discounting the radical nature of revolutionary ideology. Thus, one condition for a successful movement

⁸ Max Weber, *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*, 2d ed., ed. J. Winckelmann, (Tübingen, 1958), ss. 30-108.

is that the “alienative motivations” must be “sufficiently” intense, widespread, and “properly” distributed. Such motivations are attributed to “strains”; but if we ask what produces the strains which encourage revolutionary motivations, Parsons replies only that the origins of strain are “various” and that they “cannot concern us here.” The reason for his silence on a matter which we normally assume to be at the heart of any revolutionary movement is related to the fact that his primary, indeed his sole, political example of a revolutionary movement is the Nazis.

The implications of his choice of example become clear when Parsons turns to another condition—revolutionary potential. The terms in which he conceives that potential are revealed by the ways in which he describes its possible dissipation: “phantasies,” “crime, mental disease, and psychosomatic illness.” The remaining core of potential which escapes dissipation and the “mechanisms of social control” may then persist as “a deviant sub-cultural group or movement.” For members of a deviant group to grab power or, in Parsons’ phrase, gain “ascendancy,” another condition is stipulated. They need an ideology, but one which forms a “bridge” between the revolutionists and the existing order. So the ideology must be one “which can successfully put forward a claim to legitimacy in terms of at least some of the symbols of the main institutionalized ideology.” With this conception of ideology it is then possible for Parsons to emphasize the extent to which the deviant’s ideology incorporates preexisting symbols of the status quo and to neglect practically all the features of ideology and action which we discussed previously in connection with the Marxist tradition.

Parsons’ second type of revolution requires only brief comment. It is represented by a revolutionary movement which succeeds in seizing power and then tries to adapt itself by making “concessions” to the pragmatic demands of staying in power. It should come as no surprise that Parsons devotes exactly double the number of pages to the process of revolutionary adaptation that he does to the charismatic movement; or that he should display particular interest in describing how revolutionary regimes have been compelled to surrender or modify their “utopian” elements because of “functional” exigencies; or that he should be impressed by the “re-emergence of conformity needs associated with the old society as such.”⁹

Although variations have been introduced upon the Parsonian theme, as well as alternative conceptions of “system,” all are essentially themes

⁹Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (New York, 1964), pp. 520–35. For a stimulating alternative conception of revolution, which rejects the notion of revolution as a species of social change, see Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 1962).

derived from the science of social order. As one social scientist has declared, "I retain the conviction that revolution is always avoidable if only the creative potentialities of political organization can be realized."¹⁰ This acknowledgement is perfectly consistent with a science of order. But what is interesting is that it is the subject of revolution that reveals the nature of social science and compels it to make political gestures. Because revolution is an attack on the existing order and a radical challenge to its values, suppositions, and constitutive principles, there is no neutral language available to talk about revolution, no language except that of revolution or of order. Order is a political conception, replete with values and constitutive principles. Hence the analysis of revolution from the viewpoint of a science of order is a truly symbolic act.

In the concluding part of this article I shall consider a possible modification of the position just outlined—that no neutral language exists for theorizing about revolution. In the last twenty-five years an important change has occurred within the tradition of revolutionary ideology, a change that has been reflected in revolutionary movements, and, as a result, in social science discussions of revolution. When we ponder the fact that revolutionary ideologists and social scientists alike have been increasingly prone in recent years to describe revolutions in terms of warfare, the distinct possibility arises that a "third language" is now available to each side, a language growing out of studies of "internal war," "guerilla war," or "insurgency" and "counter-insurgency." Instead of lingering over the irony of this situation, it may be more fruitful to inquire whether this linguistic change may be related to more fundamental changes in the contemporary world that have been gradually altering the conditions for revolution.

The revolutionary ideologies of the contemporary world owe varying debts to the Marxist tradition. Yet figures like Mao Tse-tung, Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, Frantz Fanon, Régis Debray, and the like have more in common with Lenin than with Marx, for they have been deeply preoccupied with the practical problems of seizing power. More often than not, this has meant "making" war on the existing system. Let us consider for the moment the notion of "making" rather than the notion of "war," in order to see if it illuminates certain affinities between social science and revolutionary ideology. Characteristically, social scientists describe theories as one would describe objects; they are "constructs," things to be "made," and hence the activity of theorizing is typically called "theory-construction." Today's revolutionary ideologist will often assert that revolutions are "made" and that it is his task to supply the correct knowledge for "making" them. Both the ideologist and the social

¹⁰ Johnson, p. xiv.

scientist display a zeal for “models”; the latter’s preference is for systems models, while the former makes models of actual revolutions, e.g., the Chinese or the Cuban model. There are also some interesting linguistic parallels between the way in which each describes his activity. The social scientist emphasizes “methods” of inquiry and “strategies for research,” while the ideologist accents methods and strategies for seizing power. Each places great weight upon “organization”: the social scientist organizes research and research teams, while the ideologist is busy organizing revolutionary groups, cadres, and parties. The social scientist and the revolutionary ideologist are alike in being children of the age of organization, bureaucracy, and technique. It was appropriate that Weber, in one of his few comments about revolution, should have echoed what Lenin had discovered earlier: “Previous to this situation [i.e., the short-lived German revolution of 1918] every revolution which has been attempted under modern conditions has failed completely because of the indispensability of trained officials and of the lack of its own organized staff. The conditions under which previous revolutions have succeeded have been altogether different.”¹¹ It is not only revolutionary movements that have chosen bureaucratic forms from the belief that they were a necessary condition of success; it is also the revolutionary actor who defines himself in bureaucratic terms. Usually there is very little that is comic about revolutions, but surely one such comic moment is to be found in one of the revelations contained in Lenin’s famous secret testament. Lenin, who more than any single revolutionary did so much to rivet bureaucratic modes of thought and action upon revolutionary movements, complains in his testament that Leon Trotsky, who popularly symbolized the theoretical man-turned-actor, had “a disposition to be too much attracted by the purely administrative side of affairs.”¹²

The bureaucratization of revolutionary action signalled a profound alteration in the Marxian conception of *praxis*, but an alteration ultimately rooted in a drastically revised understanding of theory. Broadly speaking, Marx’s philosophical conception of theory, which always reflected the humanistic preoccupations of the *Paris Manuscripts*, was replaced by the theoretical orientation preoccupied with the mobilization of revolutionary power. Revolutionary theory was transformed into a body of revolutionary thought so that it became essentially a body of strategic and tactical doctrines, a quasi-military way of thinking about action. Like military action, revolutionary action was conceived in terms that stressed organization, planning, secrecy, and discipline. The classical formulation was

¹¹ Henderson and Parsons, p. 385.

¹² Edward H. Carr, *A History of Soviet Russia: The Interregnum, 1923–1924* (New York and London, 1954), pp. 258–59, 263.

supplied by Lenin, but variations on the same themes can be found in Mao, Che Guevara, and Debray. It was summarized succinctly by Josef Stalin when he asserted, "The working class without a revolutionary party is an army without a General Staff. The Party is the General Staff of the proletariat."¹³

Today the military mode of thinking has all but supplanted the political mode in revolutionary circles. Wherever one turns, whether to Communist writers, professed Marxists, student revolutionaries, or black militants, one finds sophisticated discussions of tactics, firepower, guerilla warfare, and combat techniques, but very little in the way of searching political analysis, let alone theory. Debray has summed it up by saying, "In Latin America today a political line which, in terms of its consequences, is not susceptible to expression as a precise and consistent military line, cannot be considered revolutionary."¹⁴ This remark has its perfect complement in a sentence from Stalin: "After the correct political line has been laid down, organizational work decides everything, including the fate of the political line itself. . . ." ¹⁵ Small wonder that one of the first casualties of this new mode of thinking should be theory, for the needs of practice become of paramount importance. As a Soviet philosopher has conveniently put it, "In relation to theory, practice is pre-eminent . . . [for it supplies] the foundation for the development of theory, [and] is also the criterion for its truth."¹⁶ Small wonder, too, that a second casualty should be the theoretical type of person; for, as Debray warns, "He will be less able than others to invent, improvise, make do with available resources, decide instantly on bold moves when he is in a tight spot."¹⁷

The militarization of action on the part of revolutionary thinkers and actors is symptomatic of a deeper movement in thought and action which has been gathering force for nearly a century. The addiction to military thinking is merely the latest installment in the move to reduce action to techniques and to assign to theory the task of specifying the proper techniques. In these respects revolutionary thought is closely related to nonrevolutionary thought. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the so-called "revisionist socialists" and the English Fabians had defined socialism's problems mainly in terms of parliamentary, electoral,

¹³ J. Stalin, *Problems of Leninism* (Moscow, 1947), p. 82.

¹⁴ Régis Debray, "Revolution in the Revolution?" *Monthly Review*, XIX (July-August 1967), 24.

¹⁵ Stalin, p. 509.

¹⁶ Cited in Gustav Wetter, *Dialectical Materialism* (New York, 1958), p. 259. The passage has been slightly altered for grammatical reasons.

¹⁷ Debray, p. 21.

and administrative techniques. Today the tactical-manipulative approach defines the politics of those who would sell presidents as well as of those who would “make” revolutions. What unites these apparent opposite tendencies is an exploitative attitude toward the things, relationships, and persons that make up the political world. The revolutionary and the mainstream politician are alike in viewing the political world as composed of manipulatable objects. Political knowledge signifies the techniques of manipulation that will bring power to the manipulator. Knowledge is power—the power to exploit the vulnerabilities of the political world.

These last remarks contain a clue, perhaps, to the proper study of revolutions. The assertion that knowledge signifies power recalls the dream of Francis Bacon for a scientific revolution which, when translated into technological inventions, would usher in a new era of endless progress. When Bacon wrote, the scientific revolution was already well under way; and it is still continuing. Less than two hundred years later, the age of political revolutions was launched, and it, too, is still going on. The beginnings of the political revolutionary movement, in 1776 and 1789, coincided almost exactly with the beginnings of the Industrial-Technological Revolution, which most historians tend to fix about 1780. The latter, too, still continues.

The confluence of these three revolutions—political, scientific, and technological—has given rise to a common mode of thinking that characterizes not only those who live in the more “advanced” societies but those who hope to live in more advanced societies as well. That mode of thinking is one in which knowledge is power when knowledge is readily translatable into practice. This belief is held to be true, regardless of whether the knowledge in question is scientific, political, or administrative.

At this point, however, we discover something curious about the revolutions that are said to have taken place in science, technology, and industry. Although philosophers, scientists, and historians insist upon describing some of the great changes in these domains as “revolutionary,” and they will even identify particular theories, inventions, and the like as revolutionary, they will also warn against the error of assuming that any of these revolutions was really discontinuous with the past. Typically, they will invoke the concept of “process” in order to demonstrate that what seemed like radical change was instead part of a sequence whose beginnings are difficult to fix and whose culmination is impossible as yet to foresee. This, we are told, is the true genius of science and technology, a genius which is dynamic, progressive, cumulative, ceaseless, without beginning or end.

In pointing to this widely held view of scientific and technological revolutions, I am not suggesting that it is false or misleading, but only that it represents a peculiar and, for that reason, a significant notion of revolution. Or, rather, it is significant and only seems peculiar because we have been led to believe through our political notions that a revolution marks a sharp break. Given the repeated and endless revolutions that the world has experienced since the eighteenth century, is it possible that political revolutions, like scientific and technological ones, are both novel *and* processive? As early as the middle of the nineteenth century, it occurred to Tocqueville that the Revolution of 1789 was continuing to reverberate throughout Europe. He had glimpsed what we now know, that we are not so much the victims of particular revolutions as of a revolutionary process. Perhaps it is not only consciousness that has its stream of events; science, technology, and politics manifest the same structure. The abortive French Revolution of 1968 may be an intimation of the sort of McLuhanesque revolutions in store for advanced societies: brief, vivid spectacles, revolutionary phantasmagoria flashing across the screen, over before it has scarcely begun, yet memorialized by a flood of posters, books, articles, and television—memorialized but not really experienced, pop revolution for the spectators, instant revolution for the producers, and an art form for the main actors.

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the forces—scientific, industrial, technological, political, and revolutionary—which have imposed a process-like character on the world will continue unabated like some endless Heraclitean flux. As we have come to realize during the last decade, science, technology, and industry are exploitative processes: they objectify the world, then process it, either by experiment or by the “process of production,” and then the results are consumed. They not only exploit, they deplete the world. This same exploitative mentality is exhibited in revolutionary doctrines and actors: they cultivate scientifically the knowledge of destructive violence; they view their actions as “experiments” whose “errors” are subject to correction; and they deplete the world of its traditional institutions just as they deplete political relationships of all trust.

Modern social science, in its way, displays the same syndrome of attitudes and activities as that found among revolutionaries and technocrats: it objectifies the world, then converts it into data, processes the data, and describes the results as “findings.” It, too, depletes the world by depriving it of history, value, and common experience. If these comparisons between revolutionary doctrine and action on the one hand, and the social scientific study of revolution, on the other, seem strained, one

might well ponder the meaning of "Project Camelot." This began in 1964. Its general purpose was to forecast and measure the causes of revolutions and insurgency in underdeveloped areas. It happened also to be organized by the United States Army. In the pursuance of this project, extensive efforts were made to enlist the services of American social scientists. The letters of invitation contained language such as this: the aims of the project were to "make it possible to predict and influence politically significant aspects of social change in the developing nations"; to devise procedures for "assessing the potential for internal war within national societies"; and to "identify with increased degrees of confidence those actions which a government might take to relieve conditions which are assessed as giving rise to a potential for internal war." Specific countries were listed: some from Latin America, a few from the Middle East and the Far East, and some "others," namely, France and Greece. A minor international crisis was provoked when the Chilean legislature issued a public report denouncing the project as an unjustified interference in the internal affairs of another country. Other voices were raised to protest that the terms of the project indicated a pronounced bias against revolutionary change, even when directed against a dictatorship. The director defended the name as well as the objective of the project, saying "it connotes the right sort of things—development of a stable society with peace and justice for all." This was perfectly in keeping with the spirit of "Camelot": after all, it was a mythical realm. For its part, the Army insisted that the aim was not to devise counterinsurgency tactics but to promote something called "insurgency prophylaxis."

In the light of our previous discussion of the parallels between social science thinking and the new military-style revolutionary thinking, I cannot resist quoting from a social scientist who has carefully analyzed the affair: "The scholars engaged in the Camelot Project used two distinct vocabularies. The various Camelot documents reveal a military vocabulary provided with an array of military justifications, often followed [within the same document] by a social science vocabulary offering social science justifications and rationalizations. . . . The dilemma of the Camelot literature . . . [is] an incomplete amalgamation of the military and sociological vocabularies."¹⁸

A glance at some of the recent literature of the political and social sciences suggests that the gap between "the military and sociological categories" is being bridged. Studies such as those on internal war,

¹⁸ Irving Louis Horowitz, "Life and Death of Project Camelot," *Trans-Action*, III (September 1965), 3 ff.

counterinsurgency, and urban disorder, as well as much of the literature about violence, testify to the penetration of military thinking into the outlook and language of social science. If this development takes hold, it will mean that social science can confront contemporary revolutionary movements on the common ground of military techniques. Von Clausewitz, rather than Comte, may turn out to be the true founder of social science. The dim figure standing in the distance, waiting, is General Giap.