

What Revolutionary Action Means Today

SHELDON S. WOLIN

One of the chapters in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is entitled "Why Great Revolutions will become Rare." His thesis was that once a society becomes democratized in its political system and more egalitarian in its social institutions, it is unlikely that it will ever undergo the type of revolutionary upheavals experienced by France in 1789 and England in the 1640s. The great revolutions had resulted from gross political and social inequalities. Thanks to its system of equal political rights (i.e., for white males), and to the ready availability of land, American democracy had eliminated the causes of revolution. He claimed that the revolutionary impulse would wither because for the first time in Western history the masses of ordinary human beings had a tangible stake in defending the status quo.

Tocqueville's conclusions have been restated in many ways. Democracy, it has been said, is the form of government that has had its revolution. Others claim that for the people to rebel against democracy is for them to rebel against themselves, or that a revolution against democracy in the name of democracy is a contradiction in terms. In each of these formulations the implication is that as long as a political system is democratic, it makes no sense to think of revolutionary activity as an appropriate or obligatory form of action for the democratic citizen. But the real problem is, is it right for the democratic citizen to undertake revolutionary action when the political system retains some of the formal features of democracy but is clearly embarked on a course that is progressively anti-democratic without being crudely repressive? What are the precise ways in which a system that is formally democratic conceals its antidemocratic tendencies? Are pseudodemocratic substitutes introduced that create the illusion of democracy? Was the idea of a democratic citizen partially skewed at the outset so that its development in America was truncated? And, finally, does it make sense even to discuss the possibility of revolution under the circumstances of an advanced, complex society? In what terms would it make sense to talk of revolution today—what would revolutionary action by democratic citizens be?

Our starting point is with a significant silence. Although the United States has been repeatedly described as being in a condition of crisis, no one seems to have suggested that there is a crisis at the center of American democracy, in the idea of citizenship itself. While there are many voices, with varying degrees of good faith, ready to testify for democracy—especially when the purpose is to contrast the U.S. with the USSR—there is virtually no one who is given to reflecting about the democratic citizen, to asking what it is to be one, or why, if each of us is one and there are so many of us, the society seems to have so many antidemocratic tendencies.

In a speech last June to the British Parliament Ronald Reagan announced that the United States was about to throw its prestige and resources behind a program launched to strengthen “democracy throughout the world,” but he made no reference to the idea of democratic citizenship or any suggestion that democracy might need strengthening at home. The silence on the subject is not peculiar to conservatives or reactionaries. The democratic citizen does not appear in any substantial form in the writings of Barry Commoner, the titular leader of the Citizens’ Party, or Michael Harrington, the theoretician of Democratic Socialism of America. Most Marxists are interested in the “masses” or the workers, but they dismiss citizenship as a bourgeois conceit, formal and empty, although Marx himself was much preoccupied with the idea in his early writings.

The present silence is a symptom of a crisis that has been in the making since the beginning of the republic. Its origins are in the one-sided conception of citizenship that was reflected in the Constitution. Beginning with the movement for a bill of rights, which was mounted in the midst of the controversy over ratification of the original Constitution (1787–1789), and extending through the era of Jacksonian Democracy, the battle over slavery, and the adoption of Amendments 13, 14, 15, 17 (providing for the direct election of senators), and 19 (prohibiting the denial of suffrage on the basis of sex), a distinct pattern emerged in which each extension of rights was assumed to be an advance toward the realization of democracy. In actuality, the ideal of rights was usurping the place of civic activity. A liberal conception of citizenship was becoming predominant.

A democratic conception of citizenship, if it means anything at all, means that the citizen is supposed to exercise his rights to advance or protect the kind of polity that depends on his being involved in its common concerns. The liberal view was that citizenship is democratic in the United States because every citizen, regardless of cultural, social, economic, and biological differences, can equally claim the right to vote, speak, worship, acquire property and have it protected, and be assured of the elements of a fair trial. Unfortunately, the liberal civic culture never supplied any content to rights. A citizen was no less a citizen for espousing Klan doctrines than he was for joining the NAACP. To possess rights was to be free to do anything or say anything as long as one did not break

the law or interfere with the rights of others.

How could a democratic conception of citizenship be said to be fulfilled—as a liberal conception would be—by having rights exercised for antidemocratic ends, as the KKK choice would be? It is not that a liberal view of rights disposes one toward the Klan, only that liberalism is fulfilled by protecting those who are so disposed. The American Civil Liberties Union, with its commitment to defending the entire range of opinion, from the most liberal to the most illiberal, was, one might say, immanent in the historical failure of liberalism to create a vision of civic commitments and of common action that could furnish both content and guidance to the exercise of rights.

This failure was inevitable, given the nature of the original liberal project, which was to protect rights by limiting governmental power. That project was written into the Constitution. The Constitution was not designed to encourage citizen action but to prevent arbitrary power, especially the form of power represented by the will of the majority. Among several of the states, the majority principle was being actively tested in the period from the outbreak of the Revolution in 1776 to the ratification of the Constitution in 1789. The Constitution was intended to shatter the majoritarian experiment at the national level by incorporating several devices that were supposed to frustrate the natural form of democratic action: separation of powers, checks and balances, federalism, the Supreme Court, indirect election of the president and Senate, and brief tenure for representatives. At the same time, the Constitution made no reference to the right to vote or hold office or to the principle of equality. Save for a somewhat enigmatic clause that was later interpreted to prevent a state from discriminating against citizens of other states, citizenship hardly figured as a basic institution. When the first ten amendments were quickly added to the Constitution, the outline of the citizen began to emerge, but it was primarily as a bearer of rights than as a participant in a collective undertaking. Several rights in the original Bill of Rights were couched in language that was less suggestive of what a citizen might actively do than what government was prohibited from doing. (“Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech. . . .” “No person shall . . . be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law. . . .”)

The present silence about democratic citizenship is a sign of the disintegration of the liberal conception of rights and, necessarily, of the idea of citizenship dependent upon it. What happened is that in the twentieth century the liberal practice of politics rapidly undermined the liberal conception of rights. The theory of rights enshrined in the Bill of Rights conceived of special forms of freedom and protection that were to be beyond the ordinary reach of legislative or executive power. Once they had been given constitutional status, rights were not only beyond the scope of positive law, they were assumed to be “above” politics. Whenever an historical controversy arose about rights, the point was made re-

peatedly that constitutional guarantees were intended to protect rights against "transient majorities" and "temporary gusts of passion."

At almost the exact moment when the liberal theory of rights was about to be given the material form of the first ten amendments to the Constitution, James Madison, who was the prime mover of that effort, also produced what came to be the classical formulation of the liberal theory of politics. In Letter 10 of the *Federalist* papers he argued that one of the sternest tests for the proposed Constitution would be whether it could control "factions," the distinctive form of politics in a society founded on freedom. A faction was a group organized to promote its interests by political means. Inevitably factions would be in continual conflict with each other, not only over property rights but over political and religious beliefs as well. Thus the liberal conception of politics, with its conception of groups as pursuing interests that would conflict with other interests protected by legal rights, carried the presumption that politics was an activity that, by nature, posed a threat to rights. The task, as Madison and later liberals saw it, was to encourage institutional devices that would control the effects of politics, not to reconstitute politics. Citizens would be engrossed in private actions, for when men and women are given freedom they use it to promote their self-interests, and it would be unjust and oppressive to limit that pursuit in the name of encouraging common action for common ends.

There were at least two further respects in which the liberal conception of politics was at odds with liberal rights. First, the protection of rights presupposed that government would be their defender, intervening to prevent interest groups from violating the rights of other groups or individuals. For this presupposition to work, government itself would have to withstand effectively the pressures generated by interest-group politics, pressures that were guaranteed to be unrelenting by the system of elections, campaign contributions, and lobbying. The presupposition collapsed because once politics was reduced to interest groups, there was no general constituency to support government in its role of impartial defender of rights. Instead of playing the role of defender of rights, government assumed a function more consistent with the politics of interest groups, that of "balancing" rights against certain overriding matters of state. Thus when wider latitude was given to the CIA and FBI to conduct surveillance, or when First Amendment rights of the press were limited by the prohibition against disclosing the names of CIA agents, the government's justification was that there had to be a balancing of national security needs with civil liberties, as though the setting were simply another instance of having to weigh the demands of conflicting groups.

Interest politics discourages as well the development of a civic culture favorable to the defense of rights and to the acceptance of integrative action as the activity definitive of citizenship. Interest politics dissolves the idea of the citizen as one for whom it is natural to join together with other citizens to act for pur-

poses related to a general community and substitutes the idea of individuals who are grouped according to conflicting interests. The individual is not first and foremost a civic creature bound by preexisting ties to those who share the same history, the same general association, and the same fate. He or she is instead a business executive, a teamster, a feminist, office worker, farmer, or homosexual whose immediate identity naturally divides him or her from others. As a member of an interest group, the individual is given an essentially anticivic education. He is taught that the first duty is to support the self-interest of the group because politics is nothing but a struggle for advantage. In contrast, the citizen has to decide what to do, not in a setting where each has the same interest as the other, but in one where there are differences that have to be taken into account and, ideally, incorporated into the decision. The citizen, unlike the groupie, has to acquire a perspective of commonality, to think integrally and comprehensively rather than exclusively. The groupie never gets beyond "politics," the stage of unreflective self-interest.

The inability of liberals to develop either a tradition of the state as the consistent defender of rights—save, of course, property rights—or a civic culture that nourished political action rather than politics eventually led to the radical alteration in the status of rights. The underlying philosophy of the Bill of Rights, which drew heavily from the tradition of natural-rights thinking, was that the status of rights could be "settled" on a more or less permanent basis, that once a right was included in the Constitution it was "fixed" or, in the language of the eighteenth-century natural-law writers, "unalterable." But rights proved no less tractable to interest-group politics than did other lofty subjects, such as foreign policy or national defense. Throughout the nineteenth century and down to the New Deal, property rights, rather than civil or political rights, dominated American politics—even the issue of slavery was formulated as a matter of rights of ownership. But in the twentieth century, especially after World War II, it has been the civil rights of citizens that have been contested, not only in the courts and before administrative tribunals, but in the arena of interest-group politics. Some of the most powerful groups are organized for the express purpose of using political and legal means to deprive other citizens of their rights or to restrict the exercise or scope of them. Rights to abortion, sexual freedom, freedom from censorship, public education free of religious influences, rights of privacy against sophisticated surveillance, affirmative action quotas—these and a multitude of other issues are an indication of how profoundly politicized rights have become, how unassured their status is. This is not, as the Founding Fathers or latter-day conservatives would have it, because of the tyranny of the majority. Many of the limitations imposed on rights through legislation or administrative rulings have been inspired by minorities obsessed with single issues. Society is now accustomed

to the dangerous notion that rights, like crop subsidies or taxes, are part of the normal give-and-take of politics.

The transvaluation of rights from a quasiabsolute to a contingent status, from being constitutive of politics to being very nearly derivative or reflexive, is vividly illustrated by the recent fate of the system of "economic rights" that liberals had vigorously promoted and touted as the answer to socialism. Beginning with the New Deal, liberals argued that political rights were formal and ineffective if citizens did not have jobs, social security, unemployment compensation, the right to organize unions and bargain collectively, access to higher education, and, in general, a decent standard of living. The claim was frequently made that because material needs were primary, economic rights were more "fundamental" than political rights. This primacy should be given recognition by legislating an "economic Bill of Rights" that would supply a "real" foundation for the exercise of what would otherwise be formal or "legal" rights. Although this proposal was not explicitly adopted, it accurately foreshadowed the extraordinary growth of social benefits and services that evolved into the program of the welfare state. It proved to be a latter-day version of Esau's bargain, a selling of a political birth-right for a mess of pottage. Economic rights, or, as they more recently have been called, "entitlements," do empower people. There is a gain in dignity, autonomy, and well-being, and no democrat should believe otherwise. But this must not blind one to the antipolitical consequences resulting from the preoccupation with economic rights. Unlike the situation with political rights, where, for example, my possession of a right to form a voluntary association does not diminish your right to free speech, economic rights are contingent upon finite resources: your right to medical care will necessarily utilize resources that cannot be allocated to satisfy my right to job training. In the context of an expanding economy such as existed from roughly 1945-1970 the political consequences of economic rights were temporarily suppressed, but with the onset of economic recession, stagflation, and unemployment the diverse effects of basing the value of citizenship upon economic benefits became apparent. Given a capitalist economy and an increasingly harsh conception of it by the dominant groups, all of the solutions to the deepening crisis involved cutting back social benefits and thereby creating or exacerbating cleavages among the citizenry: racial, religious, class, ethnic, and regional prejudices moved closer to the surface as groups competed for survival in a declining economy. Interest-group politics became intensified, while concern for shared values and a common fate seemed either incomprehensible or utopian and naïve.

Yet this is not quite a complete description of our political condition because it omits one of the most striking and seemingly puzzling facts. Despite the deepening unemployment, the irrational level of defense expenditures, the utter

hopelessness for millions of blacks and many Hispanics, and the brazenly business-oriented bias of the Reagan administration, there is an astonishing passivity among those who have been hurt most by the current economic policies. All of the elements for radical political protest appear to be present. And yet there has been no general mobilization of outrage, only a few parades.

There are, of course, many reasons for the political passivity of the unemployed and the permanently poor, but one of the most important is the depoliticization to which they have been subjected. For more than three decades the thinking behind as well as the substance of public policies dealing with the poor, the unemployed, and racial minorities, have treated them as having a pariah status quite unlike other interests. The tacit assumption of interest-group politics has always been that there was one common element among farmers, workers, employers, and teachers, etc.: they were all productive in one way or another. They might receive subsidies, benefits, or protections from the government, but, after all, it was they who in the last analysis were contributing to what they were receiving. This is why farmers and businessmen have always been outraged whenever the federal government has attempted to use government aid as a justification for government regulation and intervention. Farmers and businessmen have never conceived of themselves as receiving handouts and therefore as being dependents. As a result, they have been able to retain a strong sense of dignity and have been able to act with others who share their interests.

Those who are poor, unemployed, and members of racial minorities can be treated differently, in ways that are divisive, that render them incapable of sustained political action. They are "targeted" by specialized programs that, in effect, fragment their lives. One agency handles medical assistance, another job training, a third food stamps, and so on *ad infinitum*. If a person's life is first flensed by bureaucrats whose questionnaires probe every detail of it, and that life is reorganized into categories corresponding to public programs that are the means of one's existence, the person becomes totally disabled as a political being, unable to grasp the meaning of common concerns of even so small a totality as a neighborhood. This is because he or she has been deprived of the most elemental totality of all, the self.

Depoliticization is more extreme among the poor and racial minorities because they are the most helpless of all groups in the political economy, the new social form that is replacing the older form of the political order. The political economy has taken the liberal idea of the citizen one apolitical step farther. The conception of the citizen as a bearer of rights, who in principle could exercise his capacities to speak, petition, write, and associate, gave way to a conception of a wholly new kind of being whose existence consisted of indices which told him what his condition was objectively: an index for prices, another for wages, inflation, unemployment, consumer spending, and, most grandly, "a misery index."

However useful indices may be for those who have the power to make decisions, they are simultaneously a symbol of powerlessness and a persuasive force toward further depoliticization for those who cannot. An index, such as one representing inflation rates, does not tell the individual what he is *doing*, but rather what is *happening to him*. It registers forces that are beyond his ability to influence or control.

Perhaps there is no more striking indication of the extent of depoliticization than the level of popular awareness concerning how the political system really works. Most people understand that our system makes it relatively easy for wealth and economic power to be translated into political power and influence, which are then retranslated into legislative enactments, Treasury rulings, defense contracts, FCC policies, export licenses, and the like. They also know that money, especially corporate money, buys candidates, finances campaigns, hires lobbyists, and keeps a legion of experts, especially academic ones, on long retainers and short leashes. What is so striking is not that people know these things, but that the dominant groups in the political economy are now so confident of their control that they encourage rather than suppress public knowledge of their enormous power. It becomes the interest of corporate power, not simply that ordinary citizens should perceive how money buys politicians and legislation, but that they should perceive how *much* money it takes. That knowledge provides an invaluable lesson in powerlessness. Lurid accounts of political scandals are doubly useful in this regard, especially when large sums are involved; they teach how much money it takes to purchase favors and how purchaseable public officials are, and how utterly cynical it has all become when government corrupts its own members. One Abscam is worth a thousand Mobil ads.

Corporate politics has perverted the forms of politics that meant to connect the institutions of government with the citizens. These changes have been recognized but not frontally challenged because—at the most obvious level—the political economy developed over the past century has been a spectacular success. The very functioning of a successful economy seems to transform political categories and expectations into economic ones, and thereby creates an illusion of “economic democracy.” If we do not participate as citizens we do participate as consumers, exercising our freedom to choose our satisfactions whenever we wish—and as if by magic when new products suddenly materialize on the store shelves, we feel that the economy is responding to our every impulse and desire—which is more than we can say about our elected representatives and nonelected public administrators.

About seventy-five years ago, Elihu Root, a representative public figure of the age, remarked after surveying the state of American politics that “in the whole field of popular government I am convinced that one of the plainest

duties of citizenship is hopefulness, and that pessimism is criminal weakness."¹ In a land where optimism is virtually a patriotic duty, pessimism is still taken as a symptom of resignation and despair. But pessimism is, I think, something else: the sign of suppressed revolutionary impulses. Pessimism is the mood inspired by a reasoned conviction that only a revolutionary change can ward off the consequences that are implicit in the tendencies in contemporary American society, but that such a revolution, while politically and morally justified by democratic standards for legitimate authority, is neither possible nor prudent—if by revolution we mean launching a campaign of violent insurrection or civil war. Revolutions of that nature are plainly pathological under contemporary conditions of interdependency.

Democrats need a new conception of revolution. Its text should be John Locke, not Karl Marx, because the problem is not to show that a social class should seize power—no social class in an advanced society can pretend to the universality of right which Marx presupposed in the workers of his day—but to reinvent the forms and practices that will express a democratic conception of collective life.

Locke is best remembered for the argument that when those who rule seem bent on acquiring "Absolute Power over the Lives, Liberties, and Estates of the People," their power, which they hold on trust from the people, reverts, and the people are free to fashion new institutions. The right to revolution is not solely a right to overturn and destroy institutions but to fashion new ones because those who rule have perverted the old ones. The right to revolution is the right to create new forms.

Locke insisted that if that right was to be meaningful, people were not required to wait submissively until absolute power had been established:

... the State of Mankind is not so miserable that they are not capable of using this Remedy till it be too late to look for any. . . . Men can never be secure from Tyranny if there be no means to escape it, till they are perfectly under it . . . they have not only a right to get out of it, but to prevent it.²

When the right to revolution is conceived as justifying political creativity rather than violence, it is easy to understand why Locke was so insistent that people should and would not revolt over "every little mismanagement in publick affairs." Establishing new institutions was justified only after the rulers had engaged in "a long train of Abuses, Prevarications, and Artifices, all tending the same way."

¹ Elihu Root, *Addresses on Government and Citizenship* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1916), p. 59.

² John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, II.220.

Elsewhere he alluded to a “general course and tendency of things” and to “a settled Design.” Given the complex judgment required, Locke’s discussion was remarkable for its democratic implications. At various times he referred to the right to revolt as an option that belonged to the “people,” to “the majority,” and even to individuals; but he never implied that it was so weighty a matter that only a high-minded elite could be entrusted with it. This last point is crucial, for if the right to revolt is about devising new institutions, citizenship is more than a matter of being able to claim rights. It is about a capacity to generate power, for that is the only way that things get established in the world. And it is about a capacity to share in power, to cooperate in it, for that is how institutions and practices are sustained.

Under contemporary conditions, the Lockean question is: are there signs of rebellion, symptoms of disaffection but also examples of political creativity? For some years now social scientists have uncovered widespread civic apathy and pollsters have reported on the low esteem in which politicians and major political institutions are held. Now in a society where the official rhetoric and the rituals of political socialization are still heavily democratic, *incivisme* of the kind documented by voting studies is a serious matter. It is not alienation but disaffection and rejection. I want to suggest that “rejectionism” pervades our society and that its presence and intensity represents a form of rebellion, a gesture of defiance in the face of a system that is immovable and so interconnected as to be unreformable as a totality. We see rejectionism in the vast underground economy of illicit transactions; in the chronic insubordination that plagues the armed forces; and even, I would hazard, in the patriotic zeal of the Moral Majority: for if one looks at their rhetoric and actions, one finds a profound loathing for the current condition of the body politic. We see it among professional groups where the obsession with money and status seems inspired less by greed than by the inability to find any moral point to serving a society so wholly dominated by the corporate ethos. And it is present in its most exaggerated form among high school achievers and undergraduates who are convinced that if they can transform themselves into technical functions—law, medicine, public administration, and business management—they will be hermetically sealed off from the cynicism and corruption of society.

The origins of rejectionism lie in the 1960s. The turmoil of those years was not solely about the Vietnam war: it was about racism, imperialism, professionalism, affluence, moral codes, orthodox notions of sexuality and gender, and much more, from junk food to slick culture. It was revolutionary not because it was violent—the violence was exaggerated by the media—but because it was uncivil and yet civil: uncivil in withdrawing from and condemning the bour-

geois forms of civility, but civil in inventing new ones, many of them bearing the marks of an obsession with participation and equality as well as an intoxication with the first experience of power, the experience of cooperation, common sacrifice, and common concern. "Sharing" threatened suddenly to lose its sentimental overtones and become a political word.

The truth of rejectionism is that it recognizes that it is naive to expect the initiative for reform of the state to issue from the political process that serves the interests of political capitalism. This structure can only be reduced if citizens withdraw and direct their energies and civic commitment to finding new life forms. Toward these ends, our whole mode of thinking must be turned upside-down. Instead of imitating most other political theories and adopting the state as the primary structure and then adapting the activity of the citizen to the state, democratic thinking should renounce the state paradigm and, along with it, the liberal-legal corruption of the citizen. The old citizenship must be replaced by a fuller and wider notion of being whose politicalness will be expressed not in one or two modes of activity—voting or protesting—but in many.

A political being is not to be defined as the citizen has been, as an abstract, disconnected bearer of rights, privileges, and immunities, but as a person whose existence is located in a particular place and draws its sustenance from circumscribed relationships: family, friends, church, neighborhood, workplace, community, town, city. These relationships are the sources from which political beings draw power—symbolic, material, and psychological—and that enable them to act together. For true political power involves not only acting so as to effect decisive changes; it also means the capacity to receive power, to be acted upon, to change, and be changed. From a democratic perspective, power is not simply force that is generated; it is experience, sensibility, wisdom, even melancholy distilled from the diverse relations and circles we move within. Democratic power, accordingly, bears the marks of its diverse origins—family, school, church, workplace, etc.—and, as a result, everything turns on an ability to establish practices whose form will not distort the manifold origins of power.

The practical task is to nurture existing movements that can provide constructive forms for rejectionism and make it genuinely political. The most important of these are the grassroots movements that have become epidemic throughout the country. Their range and variety are astonishing. They include rent control, utility rates and service, environmental concerns, health care, education, nuclear power, legal aid, workers' ownership of plants, and much more. Their single most important feature is that they have grown up outside the state-corporate structure and have flourished despite repeated efforts to discredit them.

While it is of the utmost importance that democrats support and encourage political activity at the grassroots level, it is equally necessary that the political limitations of such activity be recognized. It is politically incomplete. This is be-

cause the localism that is the strength of grassroots organizations is also their limitation. There are major problems in our society that are general in nature and necessitate modes of vision and action that are comprehensive rather than parochial. And there are historical legacies of wrong and unfairness that will never be confronted and may even be exacerbated by exclusive concern with backyard politics.

During the last year hopeful signs of discontent have emerged at this more general level in the antinuclear movement, the opposition to an imperialistic foreign policy, and the defense of human rights. These developments are suggestive because they represent the first steps ever toward systematic popular intervention in the sacrosanct domain of state secrets and national security. This is new terrain for democratic politics and it is genuinely political, for the problems of war, rights, and imperialism concern us all, not only because our survival is at stake but also because our bodies, our labor, and our legitimating name are frequently used for purposes that implicate us in shameful actions.