

Social Psychology and the Paradox of Revolution¹

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Abstract

According to the gunman theory, many revolutions do not take place, in spite of the fact that the majority stands to gain if they can put an end to the oppression exercised over it, since a gunman can see to it that egoistic individuals have no incentive to take part in revolution. Champions of the idea that there is a paradox of revolution go further: Even if individuals care about the common good, they will not take action. This is wrong. If they care about the common good, revolution will take place. This is good news. The bad news is, however, that those conditions we find in social psychological literature, which are helpful to the revolutionary cause, tend to be undermined by the oppressive system when it is well-functioning.

1. Introduction

A sad fact about the human condition is that, in many places, an oppressive minority succeeds in controlling an oppressed majority. How is this possible? As Wilhelm Reich once put it, what ‘... has to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals or the fact that the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry *don't* steal and why the majority of those who are exploited *don't* strike’ (Reich 1975: 53).² This is a question addressed in the research project, *Oppression, Ideology, and Democracy*. What we are after are examples of where oppression takes place in spite of the fact that a better solution seems to be feasible. We want to focus on examples where this is hard to understand. Here two main types of explanation compete. One is the theory of ideology. The oppressed majority has been manipulated into false beliefs to the effect that their fate is only what they deserve or, at least, that there is no way of improving their situation. The other is the double coordination theory, or simply, the gunman theory. The (well-coordinated) minority succeeds – by threatening with severe sanctions anyone who dares to voice opposition to their rule – to render impossible any coordination on the part of the oppressed majority. The simple reason is that, individually, each stands to gain from not taking part in a revolutionary attempt. If the revolution succeeds, then you can reap its fruits for free. On the other hand, if it fails, you can be grateful for not having risked your neck. In any case, each had better stay back.

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² From Rosen (1988: 1).

Two crucial assumptions seem to be that everybody is egoistically motivated, and that the contribution of each to the success of the revolution is insignificant to the outcome. But surprisingly enough, champions of what they call the paradox of revolution have questioned the necessity of the first assumption.

2. The Paradox of Revolution

According to Gordon Tullock, it does not matter to our individual rationality calculations whether we are egoists or partly motivated by the common good as well when we contemplate whether we should take part in the revolution. The reason is that the common good simply 'drops out of the equations' when we want to assess the value of the outcomes of the alternatives facing us: to participate or not to participate. Unless we stand to gain individually, we will not participate, he claims. And most people do not, so in most cases, there will be no revolution. He admits that, if we do not simplify, the common good does not fall *entirely* out of the equation used to calculate whether it is reasonable to take part in a revolutionary movement, but still the common good aspect will remain *insignificant*:

If we change from our approximate equation to exact equations, it makes really very little difference. Under these circumstances, the public good remains in the equation, but has very slight weight unless the individual feels that his participation or nonparticipation will have a major influence on the outcome. Since most participants in revolution should have no such illusions, it would appear that the public good aspects of a revolution are of relatively little importance in the decision to participate. They should, therefore, be of relatively little importance in determining the outcome of the revolution. The discounted value of the rewards and punishment is the crucial factor. (Tullock 1971)

Gregory Kavka defends a similar thesis. He discusses whether it would be of any avail if everyone would have a utilitarian motivation, but concludes that this does not make much of a difference. Assume, he says, that everyone in the oppressed majority is a rational utilitarian, maximising net expected benefits of their actions for all concerned. In most cases, this does not help:

The problem is that the probability that a given individual's participation will make the difference between success and failure of a revolution is tiny, so tiny that even the huge benefit to all from a successful revolution, when discounted by this minute probability, will likely be exceeded by the substantial expected costs to the individual of participation. (Kavka 1986: 269)

This line of thought is not correct, however. Suppose I do care about the common good. I ponder the question of whether I ought to take part in a revolutionary attempt to establish justice. How should I argue?

According to Kavka, the problem is that is that '... the probability that a given individual's participation will make the difference between success and failure of a revolution is tiny.' But this is irrelevant. Whether my participation is rational or not depends not on the objective probability that I will make a change (if there is such a thing as an objective probability), but rather on my expectations. Only empirical studies can reveal whether people have a high or low estimate about the importance of their taking part in the revolutionary attempt. For all we know, it may be very high (optimistic), at least in some situations. Then participating in the revolutionary attempt is indeed rational.

Tullock is clear on this point. According to him, the problem is that people will not 'feel' that their action has a 'major influence on the outcome.'

Is this a plausible assumption? Not obviously. People may come to believe that their influence on the outcome is considerable, for the reason that the outcome affects so *many* people. Each one is perhaps affected by what I do in an almost insignificant way, but the sum of effects is great enough to warrant my participation.

This line of reasoning may be applicable at least when it comes to problems relating to the environment. The damage I do to the environment when I contribute to a system of pollution may, from my own narrow egoistic point of view, be so slim that it is insignificant. However, if I adopt a concern for all people and realise that many people are affected in a similar manner by what I do, I may find that I have good reasons to abstain from my bad behaviour.

But revolutions may be different. It is perhaps not very likely that my participation will have any effect on the outcome of the revolution. Here we face what has been called a 'threshold effect'. The fate of the revolutionary attempt is overdetermined, both when it is successful and when it fails. Does this mean that the common good drops out of the equation? It would have made no difference if I had acted differently.

This is a view held by a third champion of the idea that there exists a paradox of revolution, Allen Buchanan. He claims that a maximiser of the utility of the *group* will not view his contribution differently than an *egoistically* motivated utility maximiser. A group utility maximiser will act differently from an egoist only:

... where so-called *threshold effects* are not present. The idea is that in many of the more important public goods cases the likelihood of the individual's contribution occurring at the threshold of contribution ... is virtually nil. It seems clear that in the case of concerted revolutionary action a rational individual would regard the likelihood of his contribution occurring at a 'threshold' as negligible. (Buchanan 1979: 65, n. 11.)

Suppose participation in a revolution is in fact a matter where we should think of thresholds. The revolution either succeeds or it does not, irrespective of whether I take part. This means some simplification, as I will point out below, but even if we allow this simplification, the argument is flawed. Tullock, Kavka, and Buchanan commit a simple mistake in what Derek Parfit calls 'moral mathematics', even in the presence of threshold effects.

When we face thresholds, our contribution to the common cause is insignificant in most cases. I have never had a decisive effect on a general election, for example. But remember that we are not here discussing problems of (objectively) right or wrong actions, but rationality in action. Tullock's, Kavka's, and Buchanan's interest is in what a *rational* utilitarian or group maximiser would do. I suppose he or she would maximise the expected value. And, even if the chance that my vote (or my contribution in the revolutionary cause) would be decisive is tiny, the outcome affects a great many people, so the chance may be worth taking. The *expected* value of contributing my share is significant. The probability is low, but the value at stake is *very* high.³

Suppose several millions of people would be affected for the better, as far as my belief goes, by the victory of the revolution, then it would be perfectly rational for me to participate, even if the chance that my contribution would be decisive is only one in a million. And if we move from the election context to a revolutionary one, it is likely

³ Derek Parfit makes this point very convincingly (Parfit 1984: 74).

that I will argue in the following manner. My contribution may be crucial to the efficacy of the small group, to which I belong. This group, in turn, may be crucial to the outcome of the revolution in a certain region of my country. The outcome, eventually, may be crucial to the outcome of the revolution as such.

There is also an important difference between participation in elections and participation in a revolutionary movement. In elections, we all perform the same type of action: we do or do not cast, our vote. In a revolutionary movement, there are many different tasks to be taken care of, and in relation to the task I can best undertake, only few people may be capable of taking my place. Finally, it may well happen that the 'quality' of the revolution depends to some extent on how many participate; in that case, even if the revolution would succeed – or fail – without me, the result in either case may be *slightly* worse for all, if I do not take part. Once again, this slight difference for each may sum up to a considerable whole.

Now, if this line of argument is correct, and if the corresponding view defended by Tullock, Kavka, and Buchanan is wrong, i.e. if there is no paradox of revolution, since the common good remains in the equations, while there seems to be some truth in the gunman theory of oppression,⁴ then we must investigate *when* people are prepared to take an interest in the common good. Only when they do not, the gunman can stop them from revolting. Here we cannot remain satisfied with mere speculations; we must consider the evidence brought forward by those social psychologists who have thoroughly investigated the matter.

3. When Do People Care About The Common Good?

We need to distinguish between two cases. On the one hand, people may individually hold an interest in their common fate, and be prepared to act on this interest, once this seems to be a rational thing to do (and not too costly). People act like Kavka's rational utilitarian. On the other hand, people may be prepared to act together in favour of the common good in order to solve a common social dilemma. Here the typical line of thought is: let us settle the matter together by taking collective action!

I discuss these two possibilities in order.

This is the first possibility in detail. We are interested in the common good. We ponder whether we have an obligation to take part in the revolutionary cause and, when we discuss whether we have a reason to participate, we see ourselves as no more (and no less) important than anyone else. When will we come to the conclusion that we have reason to participate?

Clearly, if we are rational, the crucial thing is that we do not perceive the revolutionary attempt as hopeless. We feel that there is some possibility of success. At the same time, we believe that the costs for us, were we to participate, would be worthwhile. I do not sacrifice my life easily, of course, but I may be prepared to do so, if the expected gain by all is high enough. This means we do not rule out that our participation may be decisive.

When are people prepared to react to such situations with a readiness to take part in collective action? When do they have the required motivation?

If we review the relevant literature – and, being a philosopher and not a social psychologist, I rely mainly on an overview of the field by Tom R. Tyler and Heather J. Smith (Tyler & Smith 1998), on the literature to which they refer, and to quoted literature – it surfaces that two main theoretical approaches appear relevant. On the one

⁴ I defend the gunman theory of oppression in Tännsjö (2006).

hand, we have social identity theory (see Tajfel & Turner 1979; 1986) and, on the other hand, we have relative deprivation theories (see Crosby 1976; 1982). In the former, the emphasis is on a negative social identity that triggers attempts to improve one's status position. In the latter, there is an emphasis on situations where people feel that there is a discrepancy between their value expectations and value capabilities, i.e. a discrepancy between what they want and what they feel they deserve.

I will not go into the relative merits of these theoretical approaches. In many ways, they seem to be complementary rather than rival approaches. They certainly share many assumptions as to when people are prepared to take up collective action in order to improve their common situation. Particularly, they share a relative view on how people tend to compare their fate with others. The most conspicuous conditions that must be fulfilled, if people are to take collective action, in order to better their collective position, seem to be the following.

First of all, they must not believe that the oppression will go away. If people feel that the situation will soon change for the better, then they will accept their current situation, because they know it is temporary (Folger 1987).

Secondly, people must believe that, collectively, they can change their situation. An important condition for collective action is a belief in *collective efficacy* (Azzi 1994; Dion 1986). If people feel that their situation is hopeless, then collective action is unlikely (Kelly 1993). Success of a revolutionary attempt, the mobilisation of revolutionary resources, is something that renders participation more likely, irrespective of the degree of resentment (Martin 1986).

Thirdly, they must believe that the odds that they can move individually from the oppressed and into the oppressive group, are slim. If they believe that the boundaries between the groups are permeable, they may try to assimilate into the oppressive group individually (Wright Taylor & Moggaddam 1990). Most people seem to prefer individual to collective strategies of action, even if they believe that the collective situation is unjust (Wright, Taylor & Moggaddam 1990).

Fourthly, they must be capable of *identifying* with the oppressed group, and with the oppressed group in its *entirety*. Their sense of justice may be helpful. If they feel that the position of their entire group is *illegitimate*, then this feeling promotes increased identification with the group, making it more likely that people experience the feelings of a cohesive group rather than individual relative deprivation (Ellemers, Wilke, & Van Knippenberg 1993).

If all these conditions are met, then we, ordinary human beings, tend to develop a concern for the fate of our group, and we are prepared to take part in revolutions. Even if our individual costs are considerable, and even if the revolution means no direct gain for us individually, it is not irrational of us, in those circumstances, to take part in it. This may very much be at stake for the group as such. If the revolution is successful, a great many people will have their lot improved; this may be true not only of the present generation, but of future generations as well. If the situation is such that I am prepared to care for all, then I can be expected to take part, even if there is *no* expected personal gain for me.

But in most cases, my participation will mean some expected gain for me, as well as for most other people who take part in the revolutionary attempt. If the revolution is successful, we will all have our situation improved. This leads us to the second possibility pointed out by social psychologists. People are prepared, in some situations, to forgo their individual interests in a collective attempt to avoid all ending up in a

suboptimal outcome in a social dilemma. People are sometimes prepared to take collective action in order to realise an optimal pattern of behaviour, even if this means that, individually, they have to forgo some possibilities of individual gain. Here, of course, we are speaking of situations where individual rationality will lead to a suboptimal outcome.

Let us look at this other possibility in more detail. Again, being a philosopher and not a social scientist, I must rely on expertise. In my review, I depend upon an overview written by Dean G. Pruitt (1998).

As pointed out by the advocates of the gunman theory of oppression, what we seem to face when we look upon our participation in the revolutionary attempt from an egoistic point of view, is a problem comparable to a prisoner's dilemma, or, if we view the fruits of the revolution as a public good, a similar social choice dilemma. When each is successful in favouring an own private interest, all end up in a sub-optimal outcome. It is true that, if we are rational and egoistically motivated, there is no way for us to escape from a sub-optimal equilibrium. We all have an incentive to defect. If we do not defect, irrespective of the behaviour of the rest, this means that we lose some welfare. But there is much empirical evidence to the effect that people do not always end up in sub-optimal outcomes. People are capable of adopting strategies leading to the optimal outcome. They simply restrain their rationality, egoism, or both. This again is something that happens under certain well-defined conditions. Let us review these conditions.

The most obvious variable is the size of our gain if we reach the optimal outcome, as compared to our loss if we end up in the sub-optimal equilibrium. If the difference is considerable, then people tend to cooperate rather than defect. As a matter of fact, if we view the revolutionary enterprise as a prisoner's dilemma, where the value to each in the optimal outcome is given by W , and the value to each in the sub-optimal equilibrium is Z , while the value of defection when the other cooperates is Y , and where the value of cooperating when the other party defects is X , then there is a formula (see Komorita, Sweeney, & Gravitz 1980; Rutte & Wilke 1992) where the constant K predicts how willing people are to cooperate:

$$K = \frac{W - Z}{Y - X}$$

This index is generalised to the n -person prisoner's dilemma as well (Komorita & Parks 1994).

Now a revolutionary enterprise is normally more like a tragedy of the commons than a prisoner's dilemma situation, since typically, by defecting from the revolutionary cause, I do not punish other players. It is just that I need not risk my own neck in vain (either the revolution succeeds or it does not, and this is not decided by what I do). However, the rulers, if they have read the relevant literature, may be tempted to *make* it more like a prisoner's dilemma, by offering rewards to people who do not take part in the revolutionary enterprise, and by threatening to sanction those who do. If it is likely that my not taking part in the revolution not only renders success less likely, but also tends to produce rewards for me and sanctions against those who dare to participate, we face a genuine n -person prisoner's dilemma. But if the difference between the existing situation, and the situation after a successful revolution is perceived as large enough, this need not make people less inclined to take part. Moreover, the fact that I

feel that by not participating I may cause problems for others, may create a *positive* incentive for me to participate!

Here other factors are of importance besides the values in the equation above. Here the results are also applicable to dilemmas of the tragedy. One obvious variable is the kind of personality you exhibit. If you have a pro-social orientation, then you are more likely to cooperate than if you are of an individualistic bent, and you are more likely to cooperate if you are an individualist than if you are competitive (Deutsch 1973; Kuhlman & Marshello 1975; Liebrand 1984; Van Lange & Kuhlman 1994). This is hardly surprising.

It is also true, with respect to social dilemmas, just as it is with our readiness to fight for the sake of our peers against what we conceive of as injustice, that a common sense of *identity* is helpful. We are more likely to cooperate and abstain from defection when we care about the well-being of the rest of the members of our group. It is interesting to note, however, that identification with the group as a whole is important. Tight sub-groups constitute a *threat* to cooperation (Brewer & Kramer 1986; Kerr 1992; Kerr & Kaufman-Gilliland 1994).

It is often stressed in textbooks on game theory that, in a prisoner's dilemma, it is of no avail to allow prisoners to communicate. If they cannot affect each other's actions, communication cannot lead to any binding agreements. So if they are rational and egoistic, even if they are allowed to talk to one another, they will be stuck in the sub-optimal equilibrium. However, this argument is put forward under the assumption that the prisoners are both egoistically motivated and rational. In reality, it has been observed that people are prepared to forgo their egoism and rationality, provided they are allowed to communicate with one another. If they can communicate they make promises, and the fact that they make promises tends to make them cooperate rather than defecting. By communicating, they strengthen both their group identity and a sense of trust. The fact that communication greatly increases the likelihood of cooperation has been confirmed both for prisoner's dilemmas (Deutsch 1973; Voissem & Sistrunk 1971) and for dilemmas of the tragedy of the commons type (Jorgenson & Papciak 1981).

5. The Art of Upholding Oppression

The above helps explain why revolutions take place, when they take place, and why they do not take place, when they do not. To the extent that the oppressive minority is clever and has a knack for upholding its rule, one can expect that it will create and maintain conditions unfavourable to the revolutionary enterprise. Some of these conditions can be easily manipulated, while others are more recalcitrant.

Among the conditions that are relatively easy to manipulate, we find the permeability of the border between the oppressed majority and the oppressive minority. If the ruling minority can create possibilities for individuals in the oppressed majority, individually, to move to the oppressive majority, this will render collective action on the part of the majority less likely. We often find examples of such possibilities in stable oppressive systems. However, if the border between the oppressive minority and the oppressed majority is defined in racial terms, as was the case with the apartheid rule in South Africa, and in Israel (in particular if we include in our discussion the occupied Palestinian territories), or in terms of caste, as among Hindus, then this solution is not available. However, one can then predict that the ruling elite will at least try to implement a *complicated* system of races and castes in order to have many competing

sub-groups, rendering collective identification and action on the part of the oppressed majority unlikely in its *entirety*.

If the ruling minority is strong, it is finally possible to undermine any sense of collective efficacy on the part of the oppressed majority by severely punishing any attempt at organised resistance. This is not only important to avert real threats, but also to psychologically instil a feeling of helplessness among the oppressed.

We have seen that communication is therefore a means, not just to organise resistance among the oppressed majority, but also, indirectly, to create trust, a sense of identity, and a readiness to act collectively in order to solve a social dilemma. A strong oppressive government has the upper hand in most situations in this respect. Its secret police can render communication among the members of the oppressed group difficult and dangerous. However, when the ruling minority loses its grip on the situation, a spread of promises, incitements, and proclamation of common goals may prepare the road to collective action against the oppressive minority.

Other conditions are more or less 'objective' and difficult to manipulate, either by the oppressive minority or the oppressed majority. I think here of whether the oppressive system is perceived as stable or unstable, and of whether the oppression is conceived of as something that will remain in place unless action is taken against it, or as something that will eventually disappear. How the situation is perceived in these respects is probably often a matter of historical contingencies that will work either in favour of or against revolution.

6. How To Make Revolution

Are there any conditions that easily lend themselves to manipulation from the point of view of a prospective revolutionary? If an oppressive system is stable, then there is little possibility for representatives of the oppressed majority to manipulate crucial conditions of collective action. They experience difficulty in communication, appear weak, face a division among the members of the majority in terms of subgroups, and so forth. But once the oppressive system is unstable, possibilities arise.

We have seen that perceived group efficacy is important to collective action. A way of creating an impression, then, is to make some isolated but successful attempt to shake the system. Examples that come to mind are of course the attack on the Bastille, on the Winter Palace, or the Moncada episode in the Cuban revolution. Such events reinforce perceived group efficacy and hence collective action.

We also know that social support is important (Klandermans 1997). Once successful action is taken, social support is likely. Again group efficacy is strengthened. Now it becomes possible to punish those who yield to the temptation to focus on subgroups rather than the relevant oppressed group. It becomes less tempting to escape from oppression individually. In fact, it might now be perceived as dangerous to attempt to do so, once the oppressive system is perceived as vulnerable. The 'right' kind of social identification may ensue, and render easier collective action.

This explains why revolutions sometimes take place.

7. Is The Ideology Theory Back In Play?

We have seen that one crucial condition for revolution is identification of the individual with the oppressed group in its *entirety*. And we have seen that, typically, an oppressive government rules by division. The majority is divided into subgroups, with subgroup identities and rivalry; hence no identification within the oppressed group in

its entirety comes about. Does this stress on identification mean that *ideology* is crucial to oppression, after all?

I think not. Identification with a group is a complex psychological phenomenon, where one part is emotional, and another cognitive. To have emotions is not *per se* to be in the grip of an ideology. The crucial thing is whether the emotions are founded on a correct or incorrect understanding of the situation. If we see division where no division exists, then we are in the grip of an ideology. However, if the ruling elite is clever, then it creates identification with subgroups, not by making the members of the majority believe there are subgroups where there are none, but by creating the subgroups themselves. The more restricted identification is based on a correct understanding of the world and, hence, not ideological.

It is true that identification of the kind that renders collective action possible, typically leads to stereotypical thinking. We exaggerate what we have in common, and have a rather simplistic understanding of the group with which we feel we are in competition or struggle.

Social identity is constructed and has its effects through a process of self-categorization that accentuates attitudinal, emotional, and behavioral similarity to the group prototype ... Self-categorization *depersonalizes* perception and conduct such that members, including oneself, are not processed as complex, multidimensional whole persons but rather as embodiments of the contextually salient perceived group prototype (Hogg & Hains 1996).

However, we should not label such stereotypes ideological, unless they go to extremes. I do not deny that there exist for example racist ideologies. But not all oppression, or all collective action directed at an oppressive system, goes to such extremes. When it does not, there is no need to make any reference to 'ideology', at least not in the sense of any system of *false* beliefs, either when we explain why the oppressive system remains in place or when we explain why, eventually, it disappears.

8. Conclusion

I have shown that, even if the gunman theory of oppression is correct, there is no 'paradox' of revolution. The paradoxes disappear once we correct the moral mathematics. The crucial factor is motivation. If people are egoistically motivated, they will not take part in the revolution. However, if they are motivated by a concern for the common good, they may take part. When are they motivated by a concern for the common good? We learn about the crucial conditions from social psychology. It has turned out that, in a well-established and stable oppressive system, these conditions are typically manipulated in favour of oppression.

However, some of the conditions are present or absent, and they cannot be easily manipulated either by the oppressive government or the oppressed majority. When such conditions disappear, a possibility arises for the oppressed majority to bend other conditions in their favour and revolution becomes possible.

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