

*The Anatomy  
of Revolution*

*Crane Brinton*

Revised  
and Expanded  
Edition



A Vintage Book

*Paul Rand*

**THE ANATOMY  
OF  
REVOLUTION**

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CRANE BRINTON

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*Revised and Expanded Edition*

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VINTAGE BOOKS

A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE

*New York*

*To Alden and Helen Hoag  
who listened to it all*

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## **P R E F A C E**

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I have gone carefully over the original text of this book, making many changes throughout, and bringing the bibliographical suggestions up to date. Naturally the Russian Revolution has given me my greatest difficulties. I have tried to take account of the recrudescence of Terror in 1936-39 as well as the continued abnormal isolation of Russia in a new section of Chapter Eight, section V, "Russia: Permanent Revolution?" I still incline to the belief that the great Russian Revolution is over—as far as such great social movements can ever be said to be over. Chapter One I have also in part rewritten, attempting to make as clear as possible what I mean by the "clinical" character of the social sciences. No doubt in the last fifteen years what must be called "anti-scientism" has increased, at least on the surface of our Western thought. But I suspect that only the very exalted new man of feeling—or the very careless reader—will hold that I am defending old-fashioned views of science as a form, as indeed the form, of absolute truth. Science no doubt has its own metaphysics—but like decent underclothing, its metaphysics is not normally visible. I have in my brief expository attempt in Chapter One carefully observed the decencies.

In addition to those whom I have thanked for aid in my preface to the first edition, I should like to thank especially Mrs. Bernard Barber, Mr. Franklin Ford, and Mr. Henry Vyverberg, three of my students, whose researches have enriched my knowledge of eighteenth-century France and the "prodromal symptoms" of the great Revolution; and Miss Elizabeth F. Hoxie, whose discerning care is responsible for the many corrections in the original text this revised edition has made possible.

CRANE BRINTON

# **PREFACE TO THE VINTAGE EDITION**

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A book of this sort must constantly tempt its author to afterthoughts. Five years after my revision of 1952 I should like now to make three brief comments. First, though I still hold that the "desertion [or alienation] of the intellectuals" is a real uniformity in the societies herein studied, I am more than ever convinced that a certain alienation among intellectuals is normal in the modern West—normal in the sociological sense developed by Durkheim and his school. The whole subject of the role of the intellectual classes in human societies is worth all the attention it can get. Colin Wilson's recent *The Outsider* (Boston, 1956) is pertinent here.

Second, events in Russia since the death of Stalin surely reinforce the commonplace that the great Russian Revolution is quite over, finished. What is going on now is a working out of what went on from 1917 to 1924, the years of what may be called the Russian Revolution proper. That working out must be very different from the working out of the "principles of 1776 and 1789."

Third, although I am convinced that the Russian Revolution belongs, as a "popular" revolution, a revolution of the Left, along with the English, American, and French revolutions, I do not think its relation to these earlier revolutions is by any means a simple one of affiliation, let alone repetition. Indeed, I have perhaps not sufficiently under-

lined in this book some of the major differences that set the Russian off from those revolutions with which it is here compared. I should like to call the reader's attention to a suggestive essay by T. H. von Laue of the University of California at Riverside, "*Die Revolution von aussen als erste Phase der russischen Revolution 1917*," in *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Vol. IV, no. 2 (Munich, 1956). Von Laue puts the Russian Revolution in a "new category of modern revolutions," the "revolution of backward countries" (*Revolution der rückständigen Länder*); and he further emphasizes the extent to which the guiding ideas and impulses of the Revolution of 1917 came from outside Russia, from a West more advanced economically, socially, politically. Obviously in contrast, England in the early seventeenth century, with its background of Elizabethan greatness, France in 1789, still "*la grande nation*," were quite the opposite of "backward"; and, although they both drew, as did the Americans of 1776, on a reservoir of Western culture by no means limited to any one nation, theirs were nonetheless in no sense revolutions imported from the outside by a native minority.

I should like to add two other suggestive recent works in German: Karl Griewank, *Der neuzeitliche Revolutionsbegriff* (Weimar, 1955), and Willy Andreas, *Das Zeitalter Napoleons und die Erhebung der Völker* (Heidelberg, 1955).

CRANE BRINTON

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F. Beck and W. Godin, *Russian Purge and the Extraction of Confession*. The Viking Press, New York, 1951.

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*Chapter*

**I**

**INTRODUCTION**

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*1. The Field of Study*

Revolution is one of the looser words. The great French Revolution, the American Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, a revolution in Haiti, a social revolution, the American Negro revolution, a revolution in our thinking, or in the ladies' garment trade, or in the automotive industry—the list could be almost endless. Indeed, at one end of its spectrum of meanings revolution has come in common usage to be hardly more than an emphatic synonym for “change,” perhaps with a suggestion of sudden or striking change. Even such emphasis is not always implied. The editors of *Fortune* in their *U.S.A.: The Permanent Revolution*, though they have borrowed their title from Leon Trotsky, obviously mean no more than “permanent change of a good kind,” or “progress,” or “development.” They do not even mean what Jefferson meant when he said in his letter to Samuel Kercheval in 1816 that a “revision” every nineteen years or so would be desirable. Jefferson was clearly thinking of a wholesale change in the governing personnel of a nation, in the political and to some extent the social, economic, cultural complex of habits and institutions a people lived under. He may have been thinking of the great French Revolution, or of noth-

ing more violent than his own succession to power in the election of 1800.

For though we use the noun "revolution," and still more perhaps its adjective "revolutionary," to indicate a most varied set of changes, we keep in the corners of our mind a much more definite meaning, a kind of central tough core not eroded out into looser strata of meaning. We think of the great overturns in previously stable political societies in the past—the English Revolution of the 1640's and its sequel in 1688, the American Revolution, the French Revolution and its nineteenth-century sequels, the Russian Revolution of 1917 and its twentieth-century sequels; or we think of nationalist revolutions like the twentieth-century revolutions in Ireland and Algeria. We may also think of violence and terror, purges and guillotines. But our focus is on drastic, sudden substitution of one group in charge of the running of a territorial political entity by another group hitherto not running that government. There is one further implication: the revolutionary substitution of one group for another, if not made by actual violent uprising, is made by *coup d'état*, *Putsch*, or some other kind of skullduggery. If the change is made without violence in a free election, as in the British election of 1945 which gave socialism power (to most of us Americans a revolutionary thing), then the strongest expression the commentators can allow themselves is the "British revolution by consent." But is a revolution by consent really a revolution?

The term "revolution" troubles the semanticist not only because of its wide range in popular usage, but also because it is one of those words charged with emotional content. Indeed, any complete sociology of revolution in our Western world would have to take into account the way different groups in different times and places were moved by the complex associations of "revolution" and "revolutionary." The Daughters of the American Revolution find joy and elevation in the thought of what went on here in 1776, but not in what has gone on in Russia since November, 1917, or in China. The old French upper classes have never quite recovered from the shock of the Reign of Terror; nothing—not its association with the

Right, or integral nationalism, or even with *Nous, Philippe Pétain*—can make a French aristocrat feel comfortable about a revolution. In Russia the word is still enshrined as a holy word. In China and Cuba revolution seems rather more than a word.

At any rate, revolution in its stricter as in its looser sense is once more in this mid-twentieth century fully topical. The nineteenth century, which thought it was about to abolish foreign wars, thought also that it was about to abolish the kind of internal or civil war we associate with revolution, and indeed would make revolution unnecessary. Change was still to be the characteristic of our culture, but it was to be orderly, peaceful, gradual change. Our grandfathers' catch phrase, "evolution, not revolution," now has a faraway sound. We live in the midst of the alarums of war and revolution, of what can be not unfairly called world-wide revolution. We live, indeed, in a world where in actual fact the government, the constitution, the whole moral, juridical, political structure of the United States is just about the oldest, the most continuously functioning, of the great states of our world. The paradox is unavoidable: this new country is in some senses one of the oldest—older than socialist Britain, older than the Fifth French Republic, older than any soviet republic, older, incredibly, than the governments of those immemorial lands of the East, India and China.

We Americans, then, seem in many ways to be a stable society in the midst of societies undergoing revolutionary change. We are a little afraid of revolutions—the wrong kind of revolutions, the Communist or the Fascist kind. Indeed, some of our critics hold that we are essentially reactionary, essentially out of touch with the kind of hopes and aspirations in other peoples which in ourselves a century and more ago spurred us on to revolution. Arnold Toynbee keeps telling us we have deserted our own revolution, that we fail to realize that the echoes of that shot fired at Concord are still heard round the world. These critics are no doubt unfair. But we *are* a stable society, as Western societies go, and cling in spite of all that has happened since to the hopeful nineteenth-century "evolution, not revolution." Perhaps we cannot do much as yet to

control the processes of social change. Perhaps what goes on in human group relations must be for a long time to us as uncontrollable as the weather. Revolutions may be as "inevitable" as thunderstorms—and often as useful as a storm in a parched countryside.

But we understand thunderstorms—or so we must believe unless we give up two thousand years of Western scientific study—better than did the earlier peoples who saw in them Thor or Jupiter at work; we can take certain steps to protect ourselves against them. We can at least try to understand a revolution, whether we want one or not. Yet we shall not go far toward understanding one unless we can maintain toward it, if not indifference, at least detachment.

This last word, one may hope, is not just a favorable way of saying what "indifference" says unfavorably. A physician may feel far from indifferent toward his patient, but he will not be a good physician unless he is detached in his observation and treatment of his patient's malady. We may dodge here a whole lurking set of philosophical difficulties, and say simply that what we commonly call modern science has as one of its basic elements the detachment of the scientist. The scientist, *as a private person*, may love and hate, hope and fear; *as a scientist*, he must try to leave all this behind when he enters his laboratory, his clinic, or his study.

To attempt to maintain in the analysis of human affairs the detachment of the physicist or the chemist is very difficult, and to a great many upright and intelligent people seems unprofitable, even treasonous. You should, they feel, hate Mao or Castro all the time, before, while, and after you start explaining him; otherwise your explanation may edge into extenuation.

But to understand all is by no means to pardon all. At any rate, the scientific understanding of the place of the mosquito in yellow fever has not led us to tolerance of that particular type of mosquito. Quite the contrary. We cannot, of course, expect such immediate and apparently spectacular results as were obtained with yellow fever from the study of man in society, from what are a bit optimistically called the social sciences—anthropology,

economics, political science, history, sociology, and the like. But we may well consider the possibility of approaching the study of revolutions in something of the spirit the natural scientist carries to his work.

Our aim in the following study is the modest one of attempting to establish, as the scientist might, certain first approximations of uniformities to be noted in the course of four successful revolutions in modern states: the English Revolution of the 1640's, the American Revolution, the great French Revolution, and the recent—or present—revolution in Russia. Were we attempting to find an ideal type for revolution, were we seeking a kind of Platonic idea of revolution, we might be fairly reproached with picking four nice neat revolutions which made almost too good a case, too perfect a pattern. But we are making no such attempt. It should be very clear that not all revolutions, past, present, and future, will conform to the pattern here drawn. Our four revolutions are not necessarily even "typical" in the sense the word "typical" has for literary critics or moralists. They are simply four important revolutions with which we have chosen to begin a work of systematization still in its infancy.

At this point it may be objected that since the social sciences have been aping the natural sciences for several centuries, and got no further forward, that they ought therefore to try and stand on their own feet, that they ought to work out their own methods without bothering about what has been done in the natural sciences. There is a kernel of truth in this objection. Certainly writers like Fourier or Herbert Spencer, who have proclaimed themselves literally the Newtons or the Darwins of social science, appear to have gone wrong from the start. A prophetic soul drawing upon philosophy and the arts—a Spengler, a Toynbee, for instance—will probably make at least as much sense out of the study of men in society as will the social scientist who tries to take over *unaltered* the methods and materials of physics or biology. Yet one hesitates to turn the study of men in society wholly over to the Spenglers or even to the Toynbees; and one hesitates equally to accept the radical separation Dilthey and his followers make between *Naturwissenschaften* (the natural



sciences) and *Geisteswissenschaften* (the historical or social sciences). The long tradition of what may be called scientific rationalism has in our society made conquests not to be lightly abandoned even in this postwar world. That tradition makes it imperative for us to attempt to continue, and extend, the kind of work we call scientific.

There has, indeed, been a great deal of nonsense written under the protecting name of science. It is easy to sympathize with Mr. Max Lerner's outburst:

I am frankly skeptical when people working on the study of societies begin arming themselves with scalpels, slide-rules and test-tubes. For they are promising more than they can possibly fulfill. The protestations of complete objectivity that we have been hearing from students of society in the past quarter century take on a religious note: it is as if they were washing themselves in the blood of the scientific lamb.

Some of Mr Lerner's objections to the appeal to science and to scientific detachment are probably those of the liberal reformer, but some are those of the skeptic and critic. These last objections can be shown to rest in good part on a misunderstanding of scientific method not by any means limited to Mr. Lerner. So common is the misunderstanding that we must attempt here to put the matter as clearly as possible in a very few words.

## II. *The Bare Elements of Scientific Methods*

First, not even the "exact" sciences like astronomy or physics are exact in the sense of "absolute" or "infallible." Their firmest laws or uniformities are to be regarded as tentative. They may be upset at any time by further work. But at any given moment they are not to be tampered with unless they prove unreliable *in relation to observed facts*. In the contemporary revolution in physics, Newton's laws have not been "disproved"; nor has the principle of indeterminacy been so firmly established as to make all men equal before the game of poker. What has happened in modern physics, as far as a layman can judge, is that the physicist has been sharply reminded that even

his neatest uniformities are not absolutes, but are subject to correction, that he is safer in regarding these uniformities as based on observations rather than on the will of God, or the nature of things, or on reality. Or more radically, he should regard these uniformities as his *invention* rather than his *discovery*.

This brings us easily to the second point. Science makes no attempt to study or describe reality—certainly not ultimate reality. Science is not even concerned with truth, in the sense that word has for theologians, for most philosophers, for a good many other people, and perhaps for common sense. The desire to find a final cause, an unmoved mover, a *Ding an sich*, seems to be so common in men that we have no grounds for believing that this search is not, in one form or another, a fairly constant and in fact essential element in human society. Only, scientists *as scientists* can have no part in such a search. Eddington, Jeans, even Whitehead, ceased to practice science while they were pursuing theology. Science is based, not on faith, but on skepticism, on a skepticism that will not even worry itself over its status in the universe. And so the scientist works on serenely, undisturbed by the philosopher's final thrust: that to be constantly skeptical is to believe in doubt, which is after all a form of faith.

Third, the scientist by no means confines himself to "the facts and nothing but the facts." Dangerous epistemological depths yawn at this point, but we shall have to try and go ahead in spite of them. The popularization of Baconian ideas on induction is probably the chief source of the erroneous notion that the scientist does nothing to the facts he laboriously and virtuously digs up, except to let them fall neatly into a place they make for themselves. Facts themselves are not just "out there" and we should be willing to accept L. J. Henderson's definition of "fact" as an empirically verifiable *statement* (italics mine) about phenomena in terms of a conceptual scheme. Actually the scientist cannot work without a conceptual scheme; and though the relation between facts and conceptual schemes is not by any means clear, it is at least clear that a conceptual scheme involves something besides facts, involves, indeed, a working mind.

Let no one be frightened of the term "conceptual scheme." The meaning is really very simple: thunder and lightning impinge on our senses of hearing and sight—probably the mere differentiating of this sound and this flash from other sounds and flashes means that we are employing a conceptual scheme. Certainly when we think of Jupiter with his bolts, Thor with his hammer, or the electrical discharge of modern physics, we have clearly arranged our sense-perceptions in accordance with definite conceptual schemes. We possess, indeed, the basic elements of three different theories of thunder and lightning, three differently stated uniformities in these phenomena. But the crucial reason why we should prefer our electrical discharge to Jupiter or Thor *as a conceptual scheme* is that it is more useful, and that we can by using it get on better also with other conceptual schemes we use for similar purposes. But in the sense which the word *true* has for the theologian, and most moralists and philosophers, our electrical discharge is not a bit *truer* than the old notions about Jupiter and Thor.

We may even use two contradictory conceptual schemes, choosing one or the other of convenience, or from habit. We are all of us educated out of the old Ptolemaic conceptual scheme, which saw the sun moving about a stationary earth, into the Copernican conceptual scheme, which sees the earth moving about a stationary sun. Einstein, of course, used a conceptual scheme somewhat different from both of these, but most of us are not yet up to Einstein; in daily life we all, however, contentedly say "the sun rises," and should be very pedantic indeed if we insisted on saying in Copernican terms "the earth has revolved into sight of the sun."

The scientist, then, goes to work roughly in some such fashion as this. He starts with a conceptual scheme of some sort, and with questions, or even hypotheses, which he frames in terms of that scheme. He then hunts for a suitable supply of facts. These facts he seeks to arrange in uniformities or theories which will answer his questions, and perhaps suggest other questions. He then immerses himself again in the hunt for facts, and emerges with new or modified uniformities. The scientist is not interested in

where his conceptual scheme came from, or whether it preceded or followed on facts, or whether it is "subjective" and the facts "objective." These questions he leaves to the philosophers, who have not settled them yet after two thousand years of debate. But the scientist does, by his recognition that a conceptual scheme is as essential to his activity as are observed facts, emancipate himself completely from self-styled "scientific" materialists, positivists, empiricists, who naïvely assert that our sense-perceptions filtered through a "mind" are somehow in themselves an orderly and sole reality, or a "reflection" of such a reality. For, note particularly, the facts with which the scientist deals are not phenomena, sense-perceptions, the "external world," those dear absolutes of innocent positivists, but merely *statements about* phenomena. A properly verifiable statement about Cromwell or Lenin is then as much a fact as the reading of a thermometer in a laboratory. We cannot here go into the thorny problem of what satisfactory verification is; the practicing scientist, the practicing historian, the practicing judge (and, one hopes, jury) have their own well-tried craft-methods of verification.

Fourth, though the scientist is very careful indeed about matters of definition, and is as disdainful of sloppiness as any historian and of bad thinking as any logician, he distrusts rigidity and attempts at perfection. He is interested less in beauty and neatness of definition than in having his definitions fit not his sentiments and aspirations, but the facts. Above all, he does not dispute over words. He is less interested in the accurate theoretical distinction between a mountain and a hill than he is in making sure that he is dealing with concrete elevations on this earth. He does not expect class terms to be perfect, mutually exclusive; when he distinguishes between a plant and an animal, he is not at all offended if you call his attention to a living thing that seems to belong to both his classifications at once. He sets to work studying the living thing and will, if necessary, modify his class terms. But he is quite willing also, if it proves more convenient, to set up a new class term of borderline plant-animals. This simple willingness to be guided by convenience is of course one of the amazing things about the scientist and one of the most difficult for