

“Revolution and the Advancement of Mankind in the Second and Third Millennia”

The conservative bias of the patriotic organization Daughters of the American Revolution has been satirized with the jingle: “We are the daughters of the American Revolution, and we will never be the mothers of another.” Any sensible person knows that revolutions are perilous because of their uncertain outcomes. To blithely preach revolution, as the Communists did, verges on nihilism. Think of the peasant wars associated with the Protestant Revolution, the turmoil in England at the time of Cromwell resulting in the first beheading of a king, the Terror during the French Revolution, and the party purges and the extirpation of the kulak in the Soviet Union under Stalin. Even the *comparatively* benign American Revolution had huge unremembered costs in mortality and suffering.

Writing in 1938 when Communism was rife in the United States and Europe, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy warned in his classic work, *Out of Revolution: Autobiography of Western Man*, “It is always astonishing to find bankers, scholars, parsons enthusiastically awaiting a new revolution without divining the satanic character of all revolutions, whether it comes from the left or from the right. God certainly does not grant to a revolution what he gives to thirty or forty years of loyal collaboration in peace and law.” (16)

The DAR has a point because a *world* revolution—as opposed let’s say to a bread riot, a coup d’etat, the deposition of a dictator, or some other violent transfer of power lacking in universal ideals— is always, in Rosenstock-Huessy’s definition, “once for all”. There will, in fact, never be another American Revolution. The Christian Church, England, France, Russia were permanently and irreversibly changed by singular revolutions not to be repeated.

Because of the largely beneficial results, revolutions may be too easily glorified as worth the cost, since it is indisputable that such radical change cannot be achieved by peaceful protest or negotiation. It is necessary to walk through the valley of death to reach the desired end. Yet any reader of Edmund Burke knows how much of value is irretrievably lost by revolutionary transformations. Nonetheless, these entirely unpredictable volcanic eruptions are sources of creative power that must be judged affirmatively in the scales of history, ultimately bringing improved wellbeing to all of mankind, indeed

liberating human powers that were hitherto unrealized, and in each case giving birth to a new type of man.

Events mimicking a true revolution can be manufactured. Quasi-revolutions are commonplace, and indeed the word “revolution” is now attached to the most trivial happenings and commercial products. Even in the case of indisputably major events, evidencing courage and nobility—for example, the unseating of a dictator in Egypt early in 2011— it is a question whether the action is properly called a “revolution,” when there is no evidence of a bequest that is a necessary step forward for all mankind.

Political upheavals with the goal of catching up to the West—or let us say, the best of the West, leaving out what is undesirable— i . e., of gaining the rights and liberties and practices of liberal democracies, such as the individual choice of vocations, parliamentary procedure, the entrepreneurial spirit, and the organization of labor, not to speak of what is enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Rights of 1948— such upheavals are not themselves “revolutions,” if the word is to retain the precise meaning that Rosenstock-Huessy gave to it. But the terminology is not important if the substance is understood. “Revolution” is a convenient word. What must be understood is that the rights and liberties we refer to are all the result of a connected series of bloody, world revolutions in Europe in the past one thousand years.

When considering the five great European world revolutions beginning in the eleventh century, exclusive of the American Revolution—the Papal or Gregorian, the Protestant, the English, the French, and the Russian— it helps to consider that it is nonsense to declare oneself “for” or “against” revolution. One might just as well be for or against ocean waves. We have no choice in the matter. The great European revolutions were not predictable or controllable events. Utter surprise was one of their characteristics; each emerged with the force of a tidal wave, and the timing of each is fundamentally inexplicable. Historians will forever be debating the “cause” or the “causes” of the French Revolution, which is symptomatic of the profound mystery of its emergence, and so for all of the others. The great revolutions deserve continuing study, and the professoriate has illuminated much about the motivations behind them and the underlying issues, but we will never be able to divine the point at which men become willing to spill blood for an idea. And make no mistake, as Rosenstock-Huessy points out, there can be no revolution without those willing to die for the cause.

In the absence of “scientific” explanation, we fall back, retrogressively it might seem, on teleology. Science, of course, has expunged teleology, which is as it should be in dealing with the material world, the world after the fact. But men are purposeful. They have missions and goals that take centuries, even millennia, to be fulfilled. The dreams and ambitions of the human spirit leap over space and time, and men and women can be inspired (inspired) by commands issued far away and long ago. Speech is the embodiment of the human spirit, in Rosenstock-Huessy’s conception, and great inspiring utterances echo through the ages, transformed and translated as necessary to serve an immediate purpose. At what point there will be a coalescence of the spirit such as to produce martyrs for the sake of a new and better future can never be systematically known or anticipated.

The only meaningful context for such moments is the story of humankind as a whole—not so-called “world history,” which is to a large degree the child of political correctness—but a coherent narrative of where mankind has been and where we are going, within which a pattern of human ideals unfolds. This is sometimes called Universal History, and the great European revolutions fit into this narrative with a design that is evident in retrospect, with each revolution in dialogue with the preceding one, and each listening to the implicit command: “there is work still to be done to fulfill human destiny.” Such is the picture that Rosenstock-Huessy draws in *Out of Revolution*. The book is important not because of the individual interpretations of six revolutions, brilliant though those interpretations are, but because of the pattern as a whole in relation to what has been called our journey through time.

Rosenstock-Huessy was never tempted by Marxism and despised German National Socialism from the start. He is not classifiable politically and seems to transcend the usual polarities. It is ironic that because he wrote a book about the singular creativity of the European revolutions in the second millennium, he was superficially assumed to be pro-revolution! In fact, much of his thinking was moored in Christianity, and he saw in the events of the second millennium another stage in the working out of the Christian revelation, not unlike the Joachimite or Johannine prophecies of three great ages. The third millennium of our era, in which we are now living, figured in Rosenstock-Huessy’s thinking as much as the first two. His Universal History begins with the tribes of 10,000 years ago, and the advent of Christianity is the neck of the hour glass that links

the ancient world to the modern, including the tribes, the Egyptian and other star-gazing empires, ancient Israel, and the Greeks.

From this perspective, the European world revolutions were a vital, if calamitous, stage in the universal history of mankind, and are not recurrent. The third millennium in its progress to a planetary society will certainly have its share of wars and travail, but it is hard to imagine the eruption of revolutions comparable to those of the second millennium in Europe, or to the American Revolution, all of which were associated with the development of nation-states and made huge social, political, and economic leaps with influence in time far beyond the borders of the West. The spirit will speak to us in the third millennium in different forms and unexpected ways, as usual, and transformations there will be, but not in accordance with the old patterns.

The closest Rosenstock-Huessy came to prophesying a true revolution in the third millennium of what he called "our era" (formerly referred to as A.D., and now more usually C.E.), is in his various discussions of the first stage of man's emergence into the life of the spirit, namely the era of the tribes. Each of the great European revolutions drew inspiration and authority from reaching back to a specific earlier time, as for example the Protestants adopted the first century of Christianity as their standard. For Rosenstock, such reclamation from the past is not arbitrary or accidental, but essential to progress. In the third millennium, the era of tribalism will provide that guidance. The tribes, he said, invented speech, using that word in the refined meaning Rosenstock gave to it; and they invented marriage and the family. These both require resuscitation the coming centuries. The tribes also lived necessarily in deference to nature, over which they had little control.

"Following the paths of the wild animals, was the first political power that enabled these groups to become a little larger than the small group of husband, wife, and children. The relation of the tribesman to the animals is one of spiritual gratitude for their directing powers, for the work done for them, because the elephant, the lion, and the fox, etc. were superior to men."

The most imaginable world revolution in the third millennium will produce a new order of mankind in relation to the natural world. It is obvious that with ten billion people living on Earth, which is the anticipated number by 2100, and all of us struggling to improve the conditions of life, we will need to be

much more mindful of our impact on the natural environment if we are not to exhaust or destroy the bounty around us on which we remain dependent.

Our mentors in the third millennium will be the indigenous peoples in the era of pre-history. To gain the authority to save planetary society from ourselves, we will need to think back to the beginning. Perhaps, then, it is a harbinger of this inspiration that Bolivia, according to John Vidal writing for the *Guardian* in the U. K., "is set to pass the world's first laws *granting all nature equal rights to humans*. The Law of Mother Earth, now agreed by politicians and grassroots social groups, redefines the country's rich mineral deposits as 'blessings' and is expected to lead to radical new conservation and social measures to reduce pollution and control industry." Constitutional rights will include the right to continue vital cycles and processes free from human alteration; the right to pure water and clean air; the right to balance; the right not to be polluted; and the right to not have cellular structure modified or genetically altered. (April 10, 2011).

If Bolivia manages to implement even a fraction of its radical program, which springs from the spiritual as well as practical concerns of the country's present-day native American population, one can imagine the titanic struggle with capitalism that is bound to follow, in every country, and it will be violent.

The problem with capitalism, Rosenstock-Huessy argued in *Out of Revolution*, is not, as the Marxists claimed, that it exploited wage-earners; the benefits it has ultimately brought to the standard of living of workers are obvious. Capitalism's persistent failure is that it neglects to reproduce or replace what it exploits and exhausts, whether it is the soil, the fish stocks, or stable families and communities that are the nursery of reliable and capable workers. The capitalist was "freed from all responsibility for the political, moral and educational order of his country. . . . Lumber, electricity, a man's talents, can be commercialized; or they can acquire a past and a future, enter the real life of the soul, as soon as we feel responsible for their reproduction. "

"Suppose all the kinds of raw material we use in our business begin to grow scarce: rubber, wood-pulp, children, poets; forest fires begin to destroy our timber, and drought our fields. . . . At that moment the employer becomes deeply interested in the process of 'Reproduction'; a new world opens before his eyes: a world of change. The circular process of raising rubber, replanting forests, educating foresters, resettling the country, begins to present itself to

the minds of the business men who up to that time had thought of nothing but the logs they bought from the farmer who needed cash." (73-90)

"The World Revolutions," Rosenstock-Huessy wrote, "all start without reference to [*geographical*] space, with an absolute programme for the whole of mankind, and a vision of a new earth. They all believe themselves to be the vessel of eternal, revealed, definite truth. Only reluctantly do they come back to the old earth. Every revolution makes the painful discovery that it is geographically conditioned. . . . All great revolutions presuppose a colossal effort of human liberty and free will. They all arrive at their limits because they underestimate the freedom of their neighbours. The Great Revolutions never take into account the fact that mankind cannot act all at once. They overestimate the capacity of humanity for simultaneous change." (457-458)

One can only hope that whatever the practical limits of Bolivia's aspirations, the result will be a legacy for all mankind.

Norman Fiering, May 19, 2011