

Brinton, Crane. The Anatomy of Revolution. 1938. New York: Vintage, 1965.

In 1938, Professor Crane Brinton wrote his account comparing the British Revolution of 1677, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Russian Revolution of 1917. Although it has been almost sixty years since his book first appeared, it remains a classic study of revolutions. Much of what he said about revolutions holds true today. Unfortunately, some of his language is archaic and difficult to understand, so I will attempt to synthesize his main points. When it is understandable, however, I will use his original language, so you get to read excerpts of his book.

Brinton defines a revolution as a “drastic, sudden substitution of one group in charge of the running of a territorial political entity by another . . . ” (4). Revolution occurs by violence or threat of violence, while elections take place without violence and within the established system.

Brinton compares a revolution to a disease, which is accompanied by a high fever, “As new desires arise, or as old desires grow stronger in various groups, or as environmental conditions change, and as institutions fail to change, a relative disequilibrium may arise and what we call a revolution break out” (16). Just as the human body reacts to disease and attempts to restore itself to its original condition, so do societies attempt to restore themselves to a state similar to what they were before the revolution. According to Brinton, this is one of the reasons why revolutions do not accomplish many of the goals of the revolutionaries. In the case of the French Revolution, in 1815 there was even the restoration of a king.

As with disease, symptoms of a revolution are usually present before the disease is diagnosed, but with societies, these “symptoms” are often present for generations. Like a disease with a high fever, revolutions frequently start with moderation [**the Rule of the Moderates**] and work up to “a crisis . . . a delirium [with] the rule of the most violent [radical] revolutionaries, **the Reign of Terror**” (17). After this “crisis” comes a “period of convalescence,” which Brinton calls “**The Thermidorian Reaction.**” When the “fever” is over the patient returns to normal and may be “immunized at least for a while from a similar attack, but certainly not wholly made over into a new man. The parallel goes through to the end, for societies which undergo . . . revolution are perhaps in some respect stronger for it; but they by no means emerge entirely remade” (17).

Brinton says that the English, French, and Russian revolutions all followed similar paths—they begin with moderate revolutionaries, became increasingly radical and underwent a Reign of Terror, then ended in the Thermidorian Reaction with something similar to dictatorship (under Cromwell, Napoleon, and Stalin, respectively.)

In the second chapter entitled “The Old Regimes,” Brinton describes some of the symptoms present before a revolution occurs. In the four societies, which Brinton studied, **the governments all had serious financial problems** prior to their revolutions. Yet, the societies were not economically impoverished. “France in 1789 was a very striking example of a rich society with an impoverished government” (30). One of the problems was that the wealth was not evenly distributed, and those who were taxed the most heavily, were least able to pay. Also important was “the existence among a group or groups, of a feeling that prevailing conditions limit[ed] or hinder[ed] their economic activity (33).” With the American Revolution, American merchants were upset with

British policy; with the French Revolution, tax reform attempts threatened the privileged classes, but did not placate the lower classes. **There was a feeling of having been wronged by the government.**

In all four of these governments, **there was administrative confusion and inefficiency. Abortive reform attempts raised peoples' hopes, only to frustrate them further.** The **rulers** of these four governments were **weak** and **ineffective.**

Brinton states that **intellectuals** in these four societies had **transferred their allegiance** from the government. They began to deliver speeches and write against the government. Some called for radical reforms; others began “to plan and organize direct action, or at least a supplanting of the government in some dramatic way” (40). In America, the merchants' committees were a precursor of the committees of correspondence; in France, the *societies de pensee* which originally met to discuss Enlightenment ideas, eventually moved to political action; in Russia, there were organized groups of Nihilists, anarchists, socialists, liberals, westernizers and anti-westernizers, all who called for drastic change in the government. “We find that ideas are always a part of the prerevolutionary, situation . . . No ideas, no revolution. This does not mean that ideas **cause** revolutions, or that the best way to prevent revolutions is to censor ideas. It merely means that ideas form part of the mutually dependent variables we are studying” (49).

“**Class divisions and antagonisms**” exist in all four societies. Class barriers are seen as against the natural order. The **ruling class** is **inept** and **divided.** “Both the French and Russian middle classes hated, and envied, and felt morally superior to their aristocracies. . . .” (58). Until the middle of the 18th century, members of the middle class

wanted to join the aristocracy; but shortly before 1789, the ideas of the Enlightenment and the reaction of the nobility, made some middle class Frenchmen realize that this was no longer possible. While many French bourgeois (middle class) had become wealthy, they could no longer join the nobility and thereby obtain social and political status. “Where wealth cannot buy everything [i.e. political and social status] by the third or fourth generation, you have a fairly reliable preliminary sign of revolution” (64).

In Brinton’s third chapter, “First Stages of Revolution,” he discusses the growth of revolutionary agitation in the four revolutions studied. In all four cases, the governments were attempting to collect taxes from people who refused to pay. A preliminary stage of the French Revolution was the calling of the Assembly of Notables in 1787. The notables refused to ratify new taxes for the king and urged him to call an Estates General for the spring of 1789 to approve the taxes. The first violence of the French Revolution was on July 14, 1789, when the Bastille prison fell to the revolutionaries. Many date the beginning of the Revolution with this violence. Brinton notes that **revolutions become revolutions** “only after the revolutionaries had beaten or won over the armed forces of the government” (89).

In the next chapter, Brinton discusses the “Types of Revolutionists.” Moderates are dominant in the beginning of the revolution. These moderates usually come from the middle class and the liberal nobility. Extremists dominate in the crisis stage of the revolution. Many moderate and extremist leaders are intellectuals. Most classes must join to make a revolution successful.

In the fifth chapter, Brinton describes “The Rule of the Moderates.” He shows that the “honeymoon period,” just after the old regime falls, is short-lived, since it soon

becomes clear that there are numerous factions among the revolutionaries. The moderates are represented by “the richer, better known, and higher placed of the old opposition to the government, and it is only to be expected that they should take over from that government” (22). (These are people like Lafayette and Mirabeau in the French Revolution and Kerensky in the Russian Revolution.) **Once in power, the moderates are faced with all the problems of the old regime government, but with little power.** They are often confronted by foreign/civil war, and they are divided on how to handle these challenges. In addition, most moderates believe in civil rights such as freedom of speech, press and assembly, and are reluctant to suppress their enemies. “They [find] against them an increasingly strong and intransigent group of radicals and extremists who [insist] that the moderates [are] trying to stop the revolution, that they had betrayed it . . .” (122). By the later part of the rule of the moderates, a “dual sovereignty” exists between the institutions of the moderate government and the organizations established by the extremists (i.e. the Jacobin Club of the French Revolution and the Soviets of the Russian Revolution). The extremists, who are better organized and disciplined than the moderates, begin to control some events. The moderates become more and more associated with the old regime and are discredited. “The necessity for a strong centralized government to run the war is one of the reasons why the moderates failed” (144).

In the next chapter, Brinton describes “The Accession of the Extremists:” He describes that the extremists “are not only few, they are frantically devoted to their cause. . . . The discipline of the Jacobins [and Bolsheviks . . . was very rigorous, and . . . resembled the kind of discipline which a militant religious body imposes on its members (155-156).

The Jacobins, Bolsheviks, and Sons of Liberty were adept at “propaganda, electioneering, lobbying, parading, street fighting, guerilla warfare . . . sporadic terrorism”(156). The extremists “follow their leaders with a devotion and unanimity not found among the moderates” (157). These leaders were “men of action” like Robespierre and Lenin, and are very authoritarian once in power.

Not long after the extremists take control, there is often a “Reign of Terror and Virtue.” “The Reigns of Terror in France and in Russia are in part explicable as the concentration of power in government of national defense made necessary by the fact of war” (144). The radicals are not politically naïve, since they have been controlling parts of the government when the moderates were technically in charge. **During the Reign of Terror, constitutional rights are put aside.** The government becomes extremely centralized, a form of dictatorship by committee. In France, the Committee of Public Safety was the all-powerful executive; in Russia, it was the All Russian Central Executive Committee. Extraordinary courts, revolutionary tribunals, revolutionary surveillance committees, and secret police spy on the populace.

“Religious enthusiasm, organization, ritual, and ideas appear inextricably bound up with economic and political aims, with a program to change things, institutions, laws, not just to convert people” (186). There is a sense of trying to create a heaven on earth, that this is dawning of a new age. There is no room for lukewarm acceptance of the revolution, nor is their room for traditional vices such as prostitution, gambling, alcoholism. Now, you can be executed for such things. Leaders like Robespierre and Lenin set an example of asceticism and devotion to the cause. Names of streets, people, and places are changed to reflect the enthusiasm for the new era. In the French

Revolution, a Republican calendar was even adopted. Year I was the first year of the French Republic.

“The ardent revolutionists overshoot the mark and make life unbearable for their neighbors” (190). Thousands of people are imprisoned/guillotined/shot for not sharing their “vision.” Those who were leaders in the first stages of the revolution often go into exile or are executed. “In addition, our revolutionists all sought to spread the gospel of their revolution [to other countries]. What we now call ‘nationalism’ is certainly present as an element in all these revolutionary gospels” (192).

“These four revolutions show a progressively increasing hostility to Christianity” (196). Religious symbols and holidays are replaced by revolutionary ones. “What separates these revolutionaries from traditional Christianity is most obviously their insistence on having their heaven here, now, on earth, their impatient intent to conquer evil once and for all” (197).

Brinton states that **the pressures of foreign and civil war** helped to “explain the rapid centralization of the government of the Terror, the hostility to dissenters within the group...” (199). He finds that in France and Russia, “There is rough correlation between the military situation of the revolutionary armies and the violence of the Terror; as the danger of defeat grows, so does the number of the victims of the revolutionary tribunals. There is, however, a certain lag, and the Terror continues after the worst of the military danger is over” (199).

The Terror is also a time of “acute economic crisis” and “class struggles.” Brinton states that, “Human beings can go only so far and so long under the stimulus of an ideal. Social systems composed of human beings can endure but for a limited time the

concerted attempt to bring heaven to earth which we call the Reign of Terror and Virtue” (203).

In the ninth chapter, Brinton describes the “**Thermidorian Reaction,**” which he says “comes as naturally to societies in revolution as an ebbing tide, as calm after a storm, as convalescence after fever, as the snapping-back of a stretched band” (203). In the French Revolution the guillotining of Robespierre on July 28, 1794, marked the beginning of the “Thermidorian Reaction” (10 Thermidor). There is usually an amnesty of former moderates and the persecution of the most ardent revolutionaries. Eventually, out of the anarchy of the revolution, a strong man, (like Napoleon) often takes control. The revolution moves back to a more moderate position. In some cases, as with the French Revolution, there is even a restoration of a constitutional monarch in 1815 after the fall of Napoleon.

In the final chapter, **Brinton discusses the accomplishments of revolutions.** He says that some of the abuses of the old regime and some institutions have changed, but other are changed “slightly, if at all” (237). “Politically, the revolution end the worst abuses, the worst inefficiencies of the old regime...The machinery of government works more smoothly after than immediately before the revolution” (239). **Governments become more efficient and more centralized.** These revolutions also saw “much transfer of property by confiscation or forced sale. They saw the fall of one ruling class and its succession by another ruling class recruited in part...from individuals who were before the revolution outside the ruling class” (241). These revolutions also “left behind a tradition of successful revolt” which has since been followed in many parts of the world (249).

As you will see, Brinton's ideas have formed a basis for discussion on revolutions for the last sixty years. Some of his ideas have been rejected by subsequent historians, while many of his insights have been embraced and have been researched further.