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Book Review

Political Change and Revolution: Political Philosophy Lessons [Mutamento politico e rivoluzione: lezioni di filosofia politica].
Norberto Bobbio, 2021.
Rome, Donzelli. xxiii + 558 pp, €35.00 (hb)

This volume, which contains the transcript of the last course taught by leading Italian political philosopher Norberto Bobbio on 'Political Change and Revolution', provides both a history and a conceptualisation of the notion of revolution. The course, given at the University of Turin during the 1978–1979 academic year, has two parts: a historical examination of authors from Plato and Aristotle to Herbert Marcuse and Karl Popper and a theoretical outline of a general theory of revolution. In these lessons, the views of Michelangelo Bovero, a lecturer assisting with the course and Bobbio's successor at the University of Turin, are reflected on many occasions.

As Bovero notes in his Preface to the volume, the lessons traverse the entire history of Western culture, reconstructing the models through which the various forms of political change have been conceptualised, compared, and judged. Recurring themes of political thought are analysed, including political change, its objective causes and subjective reasons; the divergent claims of justice; the formation of opposing factions; civil strife; and the advent of charismatic leaders and demagogues. Continuities and discontinuities are identified, along with a key turning point: the emergence of revolution as a new form of political change in the modern age. Bobbio then analyses the attempts to understand the new phenomenon and the transformations it induced in the way in which history is conceived. Finally, he builds a theory of revolution using the analytic method: the art of making conceptual distinctions and creating dichotomies, culminating in the definition of the decisive dichotomy – that between revolution and reform – the other great modern political category, according to Bobbio.

While political change was the main concept in Plato, Aristotle, Polybius, and other classics, revolution is the concept that best characterises the modern age. The term 'revolution' in the modern sense of relevant, sudden change in the political and social order seemingly appears for the first time in the *Funeral Oration for Henriette-Marie of France* (1699) by Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, Bovero says (p. 242). However, by speaking of 'the fatal revolutions of monarchies', Bossuet refers narrowly to struggles for succession to the throne. It is Rousseau who defines the revolution as a radical political change. Addressing his critics in book III of *Émile*, he says: 'You count on the present order of society without considering that this order is itself subject to inevitable revolutions, and that it is impossible to foresee or prevent the one which may affect your children. The great become small, the rich become poor, the king becomes a commoner' (p. 243).

The first great analysis of the idea of political change is made by Aristotle in Book V of *Politics*. The analysis will be immensely influential, and its effects will still be felt in Montesquieu. But the ancient world privileged stability, Bobbio believes, and political change

was often associated with disintegration and corruption. Only with England's 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 (which was no revolution at all, Bobbio says) and the French Revolution did the concept begin to have a positive connotation.

Bobbio provides the 'categories', the mental resources, distilled from the scope of Western culture to conceptualise the problem of revolution, devoting the last part of the course to a real 'theory of revolution'.

As Bovero remarks in his Preface, the salient feature of Bobbio's method is his 'theoretical use' of the history of thought: he clarifies in an analytical manner the concepts devised by political writers; reconstructs systems of concepts through theoretical models; identifies the rise of fundamental issues that are destined to become recurring themes; distinguishes the ways in which such themes are formulated; and measures their validity, endurance, and capacity to recur in other forms, other times, and other circumstances. To understand this conceptual world, he says, it is essential to learn the 'lesson of the classics'.

The course is a lesson in reasoning: the examination, in Aristotelian fashion, of the current definitions of the concept of revolution, formulated by scholars of different orientations, and their comparison; the identification of the essential elements of a concept – the identifying aspects – always present together yet to be kept analytically separate; the dimensions of the revolution as a movement and as a change; the reconnaissance of the field of related, different, and opposite concepts, explored and reconstructed with 'the art of distinction', of which Bobbio is a recognised master; the search for contradictions and opposites and the construction of dichotomies; the focus on the ultimate and decisive dichotomy – that between revolution and reform; the return to the world of phenomena, with the typology and anatomy of revolutionary and reformist processes; and finally the assignment of a value judgement on reform versus revolution, which was a recurring concern of Bobbio, as a militant philosopher and a politically engaged writer.

The last great thinker on revolution is Karl Marx, Bobbio says. 'After Marx, the theory of revolution … has not made much progress … . In the discussions that have taken place in the context of Marxism … the underlying theme was not so much the *theory* of revolution as much as the *strategy* of revolution … . After reading the works of the great revolutionary leaders, from Lenin to Trotsky, Stalin, Mao etc., my impression is that, more than a development of the theory of revolution, the underlying theme is that of the revolutionary strategy' (p. 440).

Theories of revolution are still underdeveloped, Bobbio believes, because there are too few examples of revolution from which to extrapolate and discover general laws. It wasn't until the French Revolution – which remains the paradigmatic revolution – that thinkers looked back and considered two past events, the English Civil War of 1642–1651 (the 'Great Rebellion') that led to Oliver Cromwell's rule and the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688. The Russian (1917) and Chinese (1949) revolutions were further cases, and some thinkers such as Giuseppe Ferrari and Crane Brinton sought, unconvincingly, to find general and recurrent patterns in those events.

A theory of revolution, Bobbio says, requires the analysis of seven main themes: method and approach (How should revolution be studied – from a historical, sociological, economic, or juridical viewpoint?); concept (definition, characteristics); comparison of similar, different, and opposite concepts (coup d'état, civil war); typology (national revolution, class revolution, active and passive revolution); aetiology (What are the causes of revolution? Can the causes be addressed?); anatomy (Do all revolutions pass through

certain phases?); and axiology or value judgement (Are revolutions good or bad? Are they necessary and beneficial or unnecessary and harmful?). Regarding value judgements, Bobbio writes, 'there are two fundamental criteria: you can judge on the basis of principles or on the basis of consequences. Any action can be judged on principles that exist before the action itself: "thou shalt not kill" provides a principle and you can judge the action according to whether it corresponds or not; or you can judge the action based on the results, that is to say: an action is good or bad, regardless of any principle, if it obtains certain results that you consider good. These are two completely different judgements that almost always do not coincide. This is the drama and the contradiction of our moral and political life' (pp. 453–54).

According to Bobbio, the two different meanings of revolution must be kept separate: the revolution as a cause, as a movement that produces certain effects, and the revolution as an effect, that is, as a change produced by that movement. Such distinction is crucial because there may very well be a revolution as a cause that does not give rise to a revolution as an effect. For example, the revolution of 1848 involved revolutionary movements that did not produce significant effects, while the Industrial Revolution was a major transformation that did not have a revolution as a cause. 'A good definition of revolution should take both aspects into account', Bobbio writes. 'The revolution as a cause belongs to the genus "movement," the revolution as an effect belongs to the genus "change" .... Hence, one could say that the revolution is a violent movement (as a cause) which results in a radical change' (p. 481).

One of the strong features of the lectures is the constant effort to narrow down the scope of the concept of revolution, clearly distinguishing it from such phenomena as rebellions and uprisings. Likewise, the book warns against using the term in a loose sense, such as in 'industrial revolution', 'scientific revolution', 'artistic revolution', 'fashion revolution', and 'revolution in taste'. The book concludes with Bobbio providing his reasoned opinion on the crucial alternative between reform and revolution; however, we do not want to spoil the ending.

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