Introduction

When Marx wrote that people make their own history but not under circumstances of their own choosing, by 'make their own history' he was referring to actions in the world of affairs. But the sentiment could apply no less well in another sense; to the circumstances in which people 'make history' by conceptualizing the past. There have been distinguished attempts to trace the rise of true historical scholarship out of the history-as-myth and history-as-legitimation which once held sway. But – viewed from a particular angle – these interpretations themselves all too easily look like refurbished, higher-order myths, ones perhaps serving the interests of the historical profession. Indeed, once we remember that the breakthrough into true historical scholarship is supposed not to have been made till the nineteenth century, and admit that the age of romanticism was a peculiarly fertile age for breeding myths of origins and antiquity, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the more we pride ourselves upon the acuteness of our historical vision, the more we also need therefore to humble ourselves by seeing this as a product of the particular times in which we live.

And who can deny that these are confused? Today when the future of mankind under nuclear threat looks less assured than formerly, it is hardly surprising that the clear lines of the past as well disappear before the eyes. Can historians see any historical pattern? The liberal West has hardly produced a secular philosophy of destiny since positivism, evolutionism, and their surrounding aura of progress theory collapsed amid their own ambiguities in the century of Total War. For its part, Marxism continues to guide fields of historical interpretation. But there are many Marxisms. And, moreover, the capacity of Stalinist regimes to 'forget' or 'rewrite' inconvenient pasts has hardly boosted the credit of Marxism as a vision of the dynamic linking of past and present, thought and action.

Then, for its part, yesterday's Structuralism told us to forget (for the present at least) about dichronicity in favor of synchronicity, study slices

of time not changes And now today's Deconstructionism goes further, and writes off everyday notions of a 'real' history back there in the past by insisting that there is no reality outside the texts. And so, with the clear contours of the past dissolving before their eyes, it is small wonder then that today's professional historians are a cautious bunch, alert to complexity, singing the praises of pluralism, and sensitive to the snares lurking in the very words and concepts they use, waiting to trap the unwary user.

At the thick of these problems – indeed one of their most notable casualties – lies the idea of revolution. On the one hand, the concept has increasingly been overworked, debased and almost done to death. By a process of the inflation of historians' vocabulary, what formerly might have been termed a 'shift', or a 'change', becomes a 'revolution' in the mind of the historian needing to win a place in the sun for his own specialized wedge of research. On the other hand, so many of the great revolutions of the traditional historical canon – the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and Russian Revolution will serve as illustrations – have been subjected to withering factual, conceptual and terminological scrutiny.

In some quarters, this onslaught on 'revolution' has been ideological, an attempt to discredit Marxism as a theory of society by showing that the revolutions which form its historical props are no such thing. In part, however, it has followed from more genuinely penetrating and critical scrutiny of our concepts and their adequacy for depicting the thick texture of historical processes. What sort of criteria should we use if we are to make precise and helpful distinctions between (say) a revolution, a transformation, a revolt, a rebellion, or mere change?

It is the importance of questions like this, and the urgency of not simply settling into a cosy Anglo-Saxon semantic scepticism ('it all depends on what you mean by revolution') that has led to the launching of this book, and encouraged its contributors to engage with the key questions in the fields in which they are acknowledged experts. They have taken it as central to their brief critically to survey the existing scholarship, both empirical and conceptual, in their respective specialities, and to show the strengths and weaknesses of of historians' concepts of revolution in fields as diverse as economic history, the development of the visual arts, and power politics.

One volume cannot be expected to cover all the various aspects of such a wide-ranging theme. The next best thing to that, however, is to have an essay such as the one here by Eric Hobsbawm which 'does not set out to establish a general theory of revolution, but to sketch out, as it were, the landscape within which historical study of revolutions ought to be set'.

The other contributors have explored the particular ways in which

historical thinking in revolutionary terms is (or is not) applicable to special fields of history. Moses Finley's and Joseph Needham's contributions, for instance, suggest a negative finding, the apparent absence of revolutions in traditional Marxist terms in antiquity and China before 1911 respectively. Yet this in itself is extremely positively revealing as to the real configuration of societies at that time.

Arnošt Klíma's and Tibor Hajdu's contributions are essentially studies of defeats of revolutions in the same geographical area, separated in time by about seventy years. The revolutionary movements in Central Europe of 1848–9 and 1917–21 were, of course, about different issues: establishment of bourgeois democracy and, later, socialist democracy. And their effects were also different. As Klíma points out, the military and political defeat of the revolution of 1848–9 did not prevent the post-revolutionary society of Central Europe from becoming essentially bourgeois. Nothing like socialist society is, however, discernible in Central Europe after 1917–21.

From Klíma's and Hajdu's accounts, nationalism emerges as one of the powerful forces that affected the bourgeois and socialist Central European revolutionary movements of 1848–9 and 1917–21 respectively. It goes without saying that nationalism imbued the revolutionary struggles against colonial rule which are tracked down in Victor Kiernan's essay. Reminding the reader that 'national consciousness always takes a jumble of forms ... it could be either westernizing and modernizing, or ... reactionary', Kiernan's contribution ranges over several overlapping social, economic, political and religious levels.

Many of these essays pose the question of wherein precisely lies the revolutionariness of certain dramatic transformations. For example, Paulinyi's contribution focusses attention on technology. Is it with the great inventions (the steam engine and the like) that we see the true revolutionary break? Or do we find that other, more subtle transformations, involving social relations as well as machines, are the ones that truly deserve the term revolutionary? Or (and this is what Peter Burke's and Alan Macfarlane's essays discuss) might there be certain levels of history in which the vocabulary of revolution is almost certainly bound to prove misleading, except perhaps with very special connotations, as in the idea of a 'long revolution'?

And through these inquiries some general clarifications begin to emerge. It is thus the argument of many of the essays in this collection that events build up their own evolutionary momentum; hence the historian's true yardstick for interpreting the nature and quality of past change is often the revolutionary break which constitutes the outcome rather than the origin of transformation. Thus it would be misguided and myopic,

suggests Porter's essay, to abandon the idea of the scientific revolution of early modern times merely because it appears to have fed on the past even at the same time as it rejected it, and to have begun by a gradual process rather than cataclysmically.

Lastly, in putting forward positive suggestions for the role of the concept of revolution and the interpretation of revolution as a historical force, the contributors consider the dynamic interconnections of phenomena which acquire the character of a revolution, occurring in different spheres. For those concerned with comparing revolutionary accomplishments in agriculture and industry, William N. Parker's essay has particular interest. He finds that 'change' in one generally seems to have facilitated, and sometimes to have been a consequence of, change in the other. The revolution which was the coming of the printed book (argues Elizabeth Eisenstein) culminated, to some degree, in that transformation of the political world we call the French Revolution and the bourgeois state. Eighteenth-century music and aesthetics, as Ernst Wangermann's essay shows, had powerful affinities with contemporary political impulses towards radical change. And the French Revolution called up in turn, argues Ronald Paulson, a revolution in art, though one which – acknowledging the complexity of history – we must see in purely art-historical terms as reactionary. Germane to these issues is M. Teich's discussion of the modern scientific-technological revolution in the context of the unparalleled 'socializing' impact of science and technology in the twentieth century.

We live in confused times, but times in which change has more and more revolutionary consequences for us. Only if we can appreciate the diverse, subtle, yet essential nature of revolution in the course of our history, will we have the insight and courage to confront and contribute to the transformations of our own times.

1

*Revolution**

E. J HOBSBAWM

I

To judge by the subject catalogue of the Library of Congress, the literature on 'revolution', stable in the 1950s, grew at an extraordinary rate between 1960 and the mid-1970s. Surveying 'a lively and disorderly' field, Zagorin (1973, pp. 28–9) observes that there are three possible ways of attacking the problem of revolution. Practically all we know about them comes by the investigation of particular revolutions. Those who practise comparative study, or seek to establish a general explanatory theory of revolution, have been almost entirely parasitic on the first group of students. No attempt can be made here to survey the enormous bulk of their productions, but three observations can be made about the relation of the historiography of actual revolutions to comparative and general study.

First, the revolutions about which we possess abundant and serious literature are those recognized by contemporaries as prodigious and influential upheavals. They are the 'great revolutions', e.g. the French, Russian and Chinese (cf. Skocpol 1976, 1979a, 1979b) and those classified as such by analogy with them at the time retrospectively and prospectively. Thus we know more about anti-Bourbon insurrections in nineteenth-century Italy than about Carlist wars in Spain, though the latter were considerably larger than the former. *Second*, since the 'great revolutions' have *de facto* provided the criteria for the rest, their influence on historiography has been profound. It has operated prospectively on revolutionaries, counter-revolutionaries and social scientists, and retrospectively on both practitioners and historians of revolution. In short, they have provided analytical models. From 1799 onwards revolutions have been searched for analogies to Jacobinism, Thermidor and Bonaparte (Brinton 1938; Bahne 1967, pp. 74–6; Cordova 1975, p. 92), and

*This paper is based on a report given to the XIV International Congress of Historical Sciences, San Francisco, 1975.

since 1917 for seizures of power as in Russia, for disciplined parties of the Bolshevik type, for Stalinist tendencies. The Chinese and some colonial revolutions drew attention to peasants and protracted guerrilla approaches to power, which had played little part in the analyses before the Second World War. Thus Brinton (1965 ed., pp. 59–60) had devoted only a single page to peasants.

Moreover, analytical models were derived from the arbitrary selection of revolutions which happened to form part of the analysts' intellectual universe. The Chinese tradition of revolutionary change played no part in Western analysis, though Mao was clearly influenced by it (Schram 1967, pp. 127–8; Schram 1969; Mao Tse Tung III, 1954, pp. 73–6). The Mexican Revolution passed the world by. There appears to be no reference to it in Debray's influential pamphlet (Debray 1967). Theory and practice were – temporarily – overshadowed by the much smaller but internationally more 'visible' Cuban events of 1956–9. Critical observers have since used Mexico, now recognized as the first 'great' revolution of this century, to question received models (Aya 1979, p. 44; Goldfrank 1979).

Third, the actual historiography of revolutions is of very uneven quality and quantity, so that the basis for comparison and generalization is skewed. The ideal of a revolution satisfactorily and accessibly documented, with a long and mature tradition of study, and sufficiently emancipated from contemporary passions of government and public opinion to be safe from the pressures of both, is still rarely realized. Hence the French Revolution, though by no means recollected in political tranquility, continues to stand out as the model to which, speaking historiographically, all the others aspire. Time may remove the three major obstacles in the way of historians: a public opinion committed to myths about the formative events in national life; government authority and policy committed to particular (and not always unchanging) interpretations of the historical past; and the inevitable, and sometimes lengthy, time-lag between the occurrence of a revolution and the possibility of dispassionate, if not uncommitted, historical analysis. The historiography of Ireland since 1960 is proof of what chronological distance can achieve. However, since so many of the revolutions which form the basis for generalization and comparative analysis are rather recent, the problem is serious.

In short, extensive comparative study, though indispensable, as Skocpol rightly argues (1979a), is rarely based on comparable knowledge or satisfactory criteria of comparability.

The present paper is not a survey of work in the field of comparative revolutionary studies, still less a bibliographical guide to it.[1] While critical of most of the earlier social science literature on the subject, which has

been often and of necessity repetitively surveyed,[2] it does not set out to establish a general theory of revolution, but to sketch out, as it were, the landscape within which historical study of revolutions ought to be set. It will be evident that I find some work of the 1970s congenial, illuminating or useful, notably the line of inquiry which leads from Moore 1966 to Skocpol and the explorations of Tilly and his followers. I share with them the belief that such questions as 'why men rebel' (Gurr 1970) or 'when men rebel and why' (Davies 1971) are an inadequate approach to revolution; the belief that the question of 'violence', a term which is usually left ambiguous and ill-defined (see Hobsbawm 1973, ch. 21; Hobsbawm 1974, pp. 378–9; G. P. Meyer 1976, p. 129) may be inseparable from revolution but is peripheral to it;[3] and the belief that, in spite of the proven inadequacies of much Marxist writing on revolution, 'the marxist theory of society, frequently upgraded into a theory of revolution, remains one of the most stimulating models for the analysis of revolutionary processes of transformation' (G. P. Meyer 1976, p. 167). However, it will also be clear that I pay rather less attention to the much-studied causes (long-term or short-term) of revolutions than they do, believing that they are far from exhausting the interest of the subject. Conversely, the present paper stresses the neglected problem of how and when revolutions finish.

The present paper thus proposes to pick certain strands out of the web of historical debate. It is concerned particularly with revolutions as incidents in macro-historical change, i.e. as 'breaking-points' in systems under growing tension, and with the consequences of such ruptures. It will not be particularly concerned with revolt and insurrection and still less with revolutionary organisation as putative makers of revolution. The author's approach should emerge from the text, but for the sake of clarity three points should be made at the outset: (1) the historical study of revolutions cannot usefully be separated from that of the specific historical periods in which they occur; (2) it can never be separated from the history of the period in which the scholar studies it, including that scholar's personal bias; (3) I wish specifically to disclaim as unhistorical any version of the view that 'revolution is always avoidable if the creative potential of political organization can be realized' (Chalmers Johnson, cited in Stone 1972, p. 14), as well as the opposite proposition.

II

There is little point in discussing at length the numerous definitions of revolution proposed by social scientists, though an analysis of their underlying assumptions might be profitable. How much is the analysis of

revolutions distorted by the view that they are deviations from a social equilibrium which is taken to be the norm (Johnson 1964: 1968), or by the organicist view of society which underlies the familiar metaphor of revolution as a 'fever'? (Sorokin 1925, 3, p. 403; Brinton 1938, crit. by Dahrendorf 1961; Eckstein 1965; Wertheim 1974, pp. 176–7). Social science definitions are both unrealistic and tend to assume the existence of a universal class of revolutions (or a single ideal type of revolution), criteria for whose membership are to be established. Definition may be so broad as to tell us nothing of interest about actual revolutions. At best it establishes that historical change implies discontinuity as well as continuity, at worst the word becomes a synonym for any sufficiently noticeable change which takes place at an observably faster rate than others.[4] On the other hand, arbitrary selections from the total complex of phenomena most of us think of as 'revolution' are of little use to historians, though they may provide the illusion that revolutionary phenomena can be quantified, compared and correlated non-trivially on a 'scientific basis'. Selection may define it simultaneously as 'change which is characterized by violence as a means and a specifiable range of goals as ends' (Zagorin 1973a, p. 27) and as 'a fundamental change in social structure which is accomplished in a short period of time' (Galtung in Jänicke 1973, p. 121), two formulae which have nothing in common except the word 'change'. Without entering into their merits, their omissions are obvious. Zagorin does not enable us to distinguish the Mexican Revolution from the Chilean coup of 1973, while Galtung does not enable us to distinguish between the Russian Revolution and the social changes which occurred in Jamaica as the result of the abolition of slavery. All such definitions, broader and narrower, assume chronologically and geographically almost universal applicability of the concept.

But historians (Geiss and Tamchina 1974; Moore 1967) are doubtful about such universal applicability. They are much more likely to confine the phenomenon to the period of the transition to global industrialization, i.e. the period covered by the historiography of the 'neuzeitliche Revolutionsbegriff' (Griewank 1973; Koselleck 1969). Whether even the Netherlands revolt should be included (as by Smit in Forster and Greene 1970; see also Zagorin 1976, 1982) has been doubted. Even narrower chronological definitions have been suggested, as by Bauman 1971. A less extreme view would at least divide the phenomenon of 'revolution' into two phases: the period of 'modern revolution' in the full sense which belongs to the era of Polanyi's 'great transformation' (Polanyi 1945) – whether or not we regard this as completed – and a less far-reaching mode of socio-political change, which also occurs in earlier periods.

Nonetheless it seems clear that the attempt to extend the 'system-

changing' revolutions too far into the past breaks down. The thesis that the transition from classical antiquity to feudalism was due to a 'slave-revolution' (for which, incidentally, there is no warrant in the texts of Marx or Lenin) was abandoned in Soviet Marxism.[5] If the term retains any value when applied to such periods, as has been maintained (Heuss 1973), it must be used with considerable care.

The most useful definitions have been descriptive or synthetic. That is to say they have started by describing what the term 'revolution' has actually come to mean, as in Griewank (1973, pp. 21–2):

> Hitherto revolutions has come to be used quite unambiguously only for certain total historical phenomena which combine three features. *First*, a process which is both violent and in the nature of a sudden shock – a breaking through or overturning, especially as regards changes in the institutions of state and law. *Second*, a social content, which appears in the movement of groups and masses, and generally also in actions of open resistance by these. *Finally*, the intellectual form of a programmatic idea or ideology, which sets up positive objectives aiming at renovation, further development or the progress of humanity.

We may note the presence of the element of mass mobilization, without which few historians would identify a revolution as such. The value of this type of definition is diagnostic. It treats revolution as a syndrome, to be recognized by a *combination* of 'symptoms' rather than by the separate occurrence of one or more of them. It also helps to separate the revolutions about whose character there is likely to be substantial consensus from those (such as the Nazi era in Germany) which are not universally accepted as such. On the other hand its analytical value is small, nor is it sufficient to describe the specifically 'modern' revolutions which take place during the transition to an industrial world, still less more specific phases of these.

Limited as the synthetic type of definition is, it allows for the crucial duality of the revolution as studied by historians. This consists of two interlocked but rather different types of phenomena. They are a series of events, generally associated with 'revolt' and capable of transferring power from an 'old regime' to a 'new regime', though not all revolutions achieve such a transfer.[6] Normally they consist of a nest of Chinese boxes of such episodes, ranging in length from those measured in days ('les trois glorieuses', 'ten days that shook the world') to those measured in months ('February', 'October'), years (1789–99) or decades (e.g. in China 1911–49). Where the revolutionary process is interrupted by 'restorations' or other peripeties, the time-scale may be even longer, as indeed it may be if we take as terminal dates not the actual collapse of the old regime and the transfer of power to the permanent victors, but some suitable point in the 'crisis of the old regime' which precedes its fall, and

the point at which the convulsions of the transitional era give way to history within a new and fairly permanent framework, i.e. when 'revolution' turns into a new 'evolution'. (Cf. the title of Cline 1962.) This generally occurs some time after the transfer of power.

Lengthy though these 'revolutionary eras' may be, they are to be distinguished from the historic macro-phenomena in which they are embedded, such as the change from pre-capitalist to capitalist societies. The revolutions which interest historians lie at the intersection of these two types of phenomena. We are unlikely to class them as revolutions if they do not involve potential transfers of power in the characteristic manner. On the other hand, if most of us did not regard the context of historical transformation as essential to the phenomenon, the comparative history of revolutions would not tacitly have dropped out of sight most members of the largest class of events known by that name, the 115 successful revolutions of nineteenth-century Latin America (Lieuwen 1961, p. 21; there are other estimates). Many political systems periodically generate crises, at all events among the ruling elite, e.g. because of the absence of a foolproof mechanism for transferring office, which make the succession of any woman or minor in some hereditary monarchies or that of any Ecuadorian president for long periods an almost automatic occasion for conflict. Historians of revolution neglect them when they lead to no more than dramatic episodes in the national history of events, as in sixteenth-century England. Not so when they act as triggers to more far-reaching changes, as in sixteenth-century Scotland.

If we omit the context of historic transformation we may be left with analyses based on static dichotomies such as 'internal peace/internal war' (Eckstein 1965), violence/non-violence (Zagorin 1973), or more generally 'social dysfunction'. These neither explain why the attitude of old regimes to revolution changed after 1789 (Sorel 1908, pp. 53f, 543f), nor the difference between the 1917 revolutions and the assassination of Tsar Paul I in 1801. We may therefore find ourselves analysing not revolution, but some more restricted phenomenon, though one normally associated with it, such as, say, 'rebellion'.

On the other hand, however we define the macro-phenomenon of historical transformation it is neither identical with nor, except in a very general sense, does it imply the micro-phenomenon of actual revolution. Following Marx, who provided the most powerful guide to it, we may call the macro-phenomenon 'an epoch of social revolution' (Marx 1859). Marx's analysis of such a period, 'when the productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production', may apply to a wide range of areas, though the maximum region involved in a productive system (i.e. under capitalism the capitalist 'world economy') is