

The Ethics of Revolution, Part 2

By Chris Shaw

When do people rebel and begin employing force as part of their resistance?

The answer is that violent revolutions are relatively rare and it takes quite a lot to get people angry or desperate enough to take on the forces of the State. But as we know, it does happen. Historical examples are the various wars for liberation in ancient Judea, the American War of Independence, the revolution in France in the late 1700s, the slave rising in Haiti, and the frequent (and ongoing) struggles for freedom by Indigenous populations across the Americas, including the Red River rebellion of the Metis people against Canada. More recent examples include the Sandinista rebellion in Nicaragua in the early 1980s, the rebellion against the Romanian dictator in the late 1980s, and the revolutions/civil wars throughout the Middle East in more recent times. There are various others as well.

The reasons vary, but are rarely trivial, as least as seen by the revolutionaries. Typically, attempts to reform the various societies by the conventional means of protest and petition have failed and governments have, if anything, become even more repressive. John F. Kennedy's statement that, "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible make violent revolution inevitable" is apt.

The triggers for rebellion are sometimes provided by economic turmoil resulting in hunger, or by overt State tyranny and violence.

In his book *State of Exception*, Giorgio Agamben quoted from both the Italian and German constitutions on the enshrined resistance to State oppression.

Agamben quotes from the Italian Constitution which states,

"When the public powers violate the rights and fundamental liberties guaranteed by the Constitution, resistance to oppression is a right and a duty of the citizen."

The Constitution of German Federal Republic, Article 20, also makes the right of revolution clear by noting,

". . . against anyone who attempts to abolish that order [the democratic constitution], all Germans have a right of resistance, if no other remedies are possible." (brackets mine.

The US Declaration of Independence earlier stated the same principles:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. - That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, - That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

The American Declaration of Independence is clearly the most detailed of the above, carefully laying out the reasons behind the revolt by carefully detailing to the world the grievances against Britain that had led to the war.

So the question really is less whether revolutions happen and what are the causes, but how can any revolution be conducted ethically so as to avoid the same sorts of behaviours that triggered the revolution in the first place?

If we in Canada, and elsewhere in the world, have reached that point where some form of revolution is deemed inevitable, where is the point at which peaceful revolution turns into violent revolution?

The answer lies solely in what the State does. Does the State accept the necessity of change and provide a framework in which to accomplish this change, or does it become even more violent and oppressive in a futile attempt to preserve its power? The moment lethal force is used against protesters becomes that moment of fracture, a point of departure for which there is almost no return.

If force is used against the trucker’s convoy or against its myriad supporters, Canada will have crossed a final milestone that ends only in one of two ways: A successful revolution with all the attendant chaos, or a crushed rebellion that leaves a society so divided as to be almost ungovernable except by further repression, at least in the short term.

Are we in Canada at that milestone? Not yet perhaps, but the decisions made by governments will push us all in that direction...and perhaps over the edge into the abyss whose final outcome no one can foresee.