

HANNAH ARENDT AND THE NOVUS ORDO SAECLORUM REVOLUTION

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Summary: Revolution is a modern concept, although the ancients used words to designate revolts or rebellions, generally seen as moments of turbulence that should be avoided (with the exception of Machiavelli). The modern meaning of the word has its origins in astronomy, it was used by Copernicus in his fundamental work *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (1543) and indicates the revolutions that the planets make around the sun. In its early days, the term indicated a preordained, irresistible, recurring and cyclical movement. In this sense, it meant a restoration, a return to the rule and the old (English glorious revolution). The change in meaning came with the American Revolution and, above all, the French Revolution, when the term took on a new meaning, the one that would take hold, that of a new beginning: *novus ordo saeculorum*. Revolution came to mean a radical change of paradigm, both in science, in the sense of the industrial revolution (technical-scientific) and the epistemological revolution (the radical changes of a scientific paradigm according to Kuhn's famous work); and in politics and society (cultural revolution). In this essay, we will focus on the relationship that Hannah Arendt establishes between the North American and French revolutions, with repercussions on the Russian revolution. Arendt takes a more favourable view of the American revolution as a revolution founded on freedom (*Constitutio libertatis*) than of the French and Russian revolutions as revolutions of necessity. This is a controversial thesis that we will try to debate.

Keywords: Revolution; Restoration; Reform; Freedom; Necessity.

Abstract: Revolution is a modern concept, although the ancients used words to designate revolts or rebellions generally seen as moments of turbulence that should be avoided (with the exception of Machiavelli). The modern sense of the word has its origin in astronomy: it was used by Copernicus in his fundamental work *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (1543) and indicates the turns that the planets make around the sun. In its beginnings, the term indicated a preordained, irresistible, recurring and cyclic movement. In that sense, it meant a restoration, a return to the rule and to the old (Glorious English Revolution). The change of meaning took place with the American and especially with the French Revolution, when the term took on a new meaning, which will be imposed, that of a new beginning: *novus ordo saeculorum*. Revolution has come to mean a radical change of paradigm, both in science, in the sense of industrial (technical-scientific) revolution and epistemological revolution (the radical changes of a scientific paradigm according to Kuhn's famous work); as well as in politics and society (cultural revolution). In this essay, we will deal with the relationship that Hannah Arendt establishes between the American and French revolutions, reflecting on the Russian revolution. Arendt takes a more favourable position to the American Revolution, understood like a revolution founded on freedom (*Constitutio libertatis*) that to the

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*Everything has changed in the
physical order, and everything must change in the
moral and political order. Most of the world's
revolution has already taken place;
the other half must be realised.*
Robespierre

The origin of the concept of revolution.

Hannah Arendt's book on revolutions, published in 1963, is a complex and difficult text to understand. Along with *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, it is the highest expression of the German thinker's philosophy or political theory. We will use it above all in relation to three themes: i) the origins of the concept of revolution; ii) the comparison between the American and French revolutions; iii) the comparison between the French and Soviet revolutions.

Arendt defends the thesis that the concept of revolution, like that of totalitarianism, is modern. In its early days, the term still retained some characteristics of its astronomical origin, which indicated a preordained, irresistible, recurring and cyclical movement. In this sense, it meant a restoration, a return to the rule and the old: the restoration of the liberties of the English barons against the absolutist monarchy (in England), or the restoration of the old order of things against the abuses of colonial government (in America) or against the despotism of the absolutist monarchy (in France).

Due to its astronomical origin, Arendt notes, the word indicated:

a recurrence, a cyclical movement; it is the perfect Latin translation of Polybius' ἀνακύκλωσις, a term that also originated in astronomy and was used metaphorically in the field of politics. [...] But nothing could be further removed from the original meaning of the word *revolution* than the idea that has obsessively taken hold of all revolutionaries, namely that they are agents in a process that results in the definitive end of an old order, and brings about the birth of a new world.²

This is so true that, in the polemic between Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine about the meaning of the French Revolution, Paine, in defence of the Revolution, states that it was

² ARENDT, Hannah. *On Revolution*. São Paulo: Editora Ática; Brasília: Editora UnB, 1988.

restoring an "initial period" in which men were in possession of rights and prerogatives of which they have been deprived by tyranny and conquest. And Arendt comments:

Burke was correct and Paine was wrong; since "inalienable political rights, common to all men by virtue of birth, would have seemed to every age before ours the same as it seemed to Burke - a contradiction in terms".³

The change in meaning came with the deepening of the revolutionary processes, especially in France, when the term began to take on a new meaning, one that will be the one that will take hold, that of a new beginning:

The modern concept of revolution, inextricably linked to the notion that the course of history is suddenly starting in a new direction, that an entirely new history, a history never before known or narrated, is about to unfold, was unknown before the two great revolutions at the end of the 18th century [the American and the French].⁴

Arendt immediately associates this process with the idea of freedom:

It is therefore crucial for understanding the revolutions of the Modern Age that the idea of freedom and the experience of a new beginning coincide. And since the current notion in the free world is that it is freedom, not justice or greatness, that is the highest criterion for judging the constitutions of the body politic, it is not only our understanding of revolution, but our conception of freedom, clearly revolutionary in its origin, that can measure the extent to which we are prepared to accept or reject this coincidence.⁵

Here Arendt makes a distinction that will be central to her reasoning, between "freedom" and "liberation":

It may be a truism to say that liberation and freedom are not the same thing; that liberation may be the condition of freedom, but that it does not automatically lead to it; that the notion of freedom implicit in liberation can only be negative, and that therefore the intention to liberate is not identical to the desire for freedom.⁶

³ IDEM, p. 37.

⁴ IDEM, p. 23.

⁵ IDEM, *ibidem*.

⁶ IDEM, p. 24

What Arendt means here by freedom is political freedom and what she means by liberation is liberation from social needs, from poverty and misery, the solution to the social question. A historical example of this freedom is given by the Greek *polis*:

Freedom as a political phenomenon was contemporary with the Greek city states. Since Herodotus, it has been understood as a form of political organisation in which citizens lived together in conditions of non-command, without a distinction between rulers and ruled.⁷

What the Greeks meant by the term *isonomia*, equality before the law, allowed citizens to alternately govern and be governed. Modern freedom has lost this political dimension; for the revolutionaries, it meant the enjoyment of

three great primordial rights: "life, liberty and property", in relation to which all other rights were "subordinate rights", i.e. resources or means that often need to be utilised in order to obtain and fully enjoy real and substantial freedoms" (Blackstone).⁸

Rights that Arendt considers to be products of liberation, but which do not constitute the true content of freedom, which, as we shall see, means participation in public affairs, or admission to the political world.

Arendt recognises that despite this distinction, "it is often very difficult to say where the mere desire for liberation, to be free from oppression, ends and where the desire for freedom, as a political choice of life, begins".⁹ This seems to me to be one of the most problematic and paradoxical points in Arendt's analysis, which we will comment on later.

The Modern Age had emerged with the scientific revolution, but it took more than two hundred years for this revolution to enter the world of politics¹⁰. And Robespierre was aware of this need when he said: "Everything has changed in the physical order; and everything must change in the moral and political order. La moitié de la révolution du monde est déjà faite; l'autre moitié doit s'accomplir".¹¹

The absolute novelty produced by this impact was that it was possible for man,

⁷ IDEM, *ibidem*.

⁸ IDEM, p. 26.

⁹ IDEM, *ibidem*.

¹⁰ Copernicus' *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* is from 1543.

¹¹ ROBESPIERRE, Maximilien. *Rapport sur les idées religieuses et morales*, 1794. "Everything has changed in the physical order and everything must change in the moral and political order. Half of the world's revolution is already done; the other half must still be completed." (author's translation)

for "humanity" to create something absolutely new with its own strength. From during the revolutions of the 18th century:

a *novus ordo saeculorum* was no longer a blessing from the "great plan and design of Providence" and novelty was no longer the vain and simultaneously frightening possession of a few. When the innovation reached the public market, it became the beginning of a new History, unleashed - albeit unwittingly - by men of action, to be staged later and expanded and spread by their posterity¹².

But there are differences in the understanding and realisation of this novelty between the two revolutions, the American and the French, almost all of which go in favour of the former and to the detriment of the latter, in Arendt's reading.

American and French Revolutions

In comparing the two revolutions, Arendt defends the thesis that the American Revolution was not a revolution in the sense given to the concept by the French Revolution, that is, the radical and absolute foundation of a new state, a new society, a new legal order, a new man, etc.

This was due to three main factors: i) the lack in America of mass poverty and, therefore, of a social issue as there was in France¹³; ii) the existence of a people who had already experimented with self-government unlike France; iii) a conflict against a constitutional monarchy like the English one and not an absolute one like the French one.

With regard to the **social question**, Arendt states that it is simply the existence of poverty:

Poverty is more than deprivation, it is a state of constant want and acute misery, the ignominy of which consists in its dehumanising force; poverty is abject because it subjects men to the absolute empire of their bodies, that is, to the absolute empire of need [...]. It was under the dictates of necessity that the multitude heeded the call of the French Revolution, inspired it, pushed it forward and ultimately led it to destruction, for this was the multitude of the poor¹⁴.

¹² ARENDT, *On the Revolution...*, p. 38.

¹³ Arendt returned to the theme of poverty and slavery in greater depth in the essays collected in the book: ARENDT, H. **Crisis of the Republic**. San Diego, New York, London: Harvest Book, 1972.

¹⁴ ARENDT. *On the Revolution...*, p. 48.

In America, on the other hand, the state of poverty and therefore the "social question" was absent, obviously among free white men who had the right to citizenship, to the exclusion of black slaves. But, and this is the paradoxical aspect of the matter; for Arendt, slavery and black labour were totally "obscure", invisible and did not inspire compassion:

We can only conclude that the institution of slavery contains an even darker obscurity than the obscurity of poverty; the slave, and not the poor person, was "totally despised". [...] Slavery, for both Europeans and Americans, was not part of the social question, so that whether it was genuinely absent, or merely hidden in obscurity, it was, for all practical purposes, as if it didn't exist, which also made non-existent the most powerful and perhaps most devastating of the passions that grip revolutionaries, the passion of compassion¹⁵.

This thesis is paradoxical, because this "removal" of the slavery issue did not mean its suppression: it continued to undermine the foundations of American democracy, demonstrating the impossibility of "freedom without liberation" and constituted a huge social issue, which led to a bloody civil war that is still far from being resolved today.

It seems that Arendt "settles" the question in this way, in order to maintain the distinction between freedom and liberation in favour of the American revolution and to the detriment of the French revolution. "In France, the transformation of the rights of man into the rights of the *sans-culottes* was the turning point"¹⁶: we went from a revolution based on liberty (*Constitutio Libertatis*) to a revolution based on liberation from necessity.

Another important difference is that the Americans had **experienced self-government** during the centuries of colonisation. The American colonists were indeed subjects of His Majesty the King of England, but they had much greater freedom of action than subjects of absolutist power such as in France.

The third element of difference is that the French, in addition to having no experience of self-government, lived under the aegis of an **absolutist monarchy**. And here Arendt draws an analogy between the absolute and divine power of the monarch and the absolute power of the general will of the people:

Theoretically, the deification of the people in the French Revolution was the

¹⁵ IDEM, p. 57.

¹⁶ IDEM, p. 48.

inevitable consequence of the attempt to derive law and power from the same source. The absolute monarchy's claim to be founded on "divine rights" had given rise to a conception of a secular domain in the image of a God whose will *is* the law. Historically, there is no more significant difference in principle between the American and French Revolutions than the fact that the latter unanimously affirmed that "the law is the expression of the general will" (as laid down in Article VI of the 1789 *Déclaration des Droits de l'homme et du citoyen*), a formula that can be searched for in vain in both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States¹⁷.

It is unique that Arendt uses political theology here in a way that is very close to that of Carl Schmitt, who states:

The sovereign who, in the deist view of the world, even if outside of it, remained the assembler of the great machine, is radically repelled. The machine now works automatically. The metaphysical principle that God of himself manifests only general and not particular declarations of will dominates the metaphysics of Leibniz and Malebranche. In Rousseau, "volonté générale" becomes identical to the will of the sovereign; but at the same time, the concept of the general aspect also receives a quantitative determination in its subject, i.e. the people become sovereign.¹⁸

The analogies are evident despite the differences: Schmitt laments that in this secularisation "the decisionist and personalist element of the concept of sovereignty, which had been in force until then, is lost. The will of the people is always good, *le peuple est toujours vertueux*"; Arendt, on the other hand, laments the absolute character that revolution takes on, leading to liberticidal excesses.

This is reflected, according to Arendt, in the different forms of constitutionalism and the different role played by the constitution in the two revolutionary processes. In the case of the independence of the American colonies, the constitution makes a distinction between "law" and "power":

For, in America, the armed uprising of the colonies and the Declaration of Independence were followed by the spontaneous appearance of draft constitutions in all thirteen colonies [...], so that there was no interruption, no hiatus, and almost no breathing space between the war of liberation, the struggle for independence, which was the condition of freedom, and the constitution of the new states.¹⁹

For the creators of the American constitutions, power originated with "the people",

¹⁷ IDEM, p. 147.

¹⁸ SCHMITT. *Political Theology*..., p. 44-45.

¹⁹ ARENDT. *On the revolution*..., p. 113.

but the main source of the law had to come from a constitution, something objective and permanent that could be amended, but which could not be subject to sudden changes in the will of the people, as an expression of Rousseau's *volonté général*. Unlike what happened in France:

The great and fatal misfortune of the French Revolution was that none of the constituent assemblies was able to muster sufficient authority to formulate the law of the land. [...] Theoretically, the grave and fatal error of the French Revolution was its almost automatic and naïve conviction that law and power emanate from one and the same source. Conversely, the great fortune of the American Revolution was that the inhabitants of the colonies, before their conflict with England, were already organised in a system of self-government.²⁰

And here Arendt draws attention to a phenomenon that will also have repercussions in the Russian Revolution: the existence in the colonies of local self-governments, districts, *counties* and municipalities, which were preserved by the Revolution and on which, through the federative principle, the Constitution of the United States was founded.

Arendt summarises the three fundamental differences between the two revolutions as follows

form:

The singular good fortune of the American Revolution is undeniable. It took place in a country that was completely unaware of the plight of popular misery [sic], and among a people who had ample experience of self-government; and certainly, one of its greatest graces was that the revolution was the consequence of a conflict with a "limited monarchy". In the rule of king and parliament, the framers of the American constitutions [...] were never tempted to attribute the same origin to law and power.²¹

Commenting on the American Declaration's concept of the "pursuit of happiness" understood as public happiness, i.e. the participation of citizens in the public sphere, Arendt cites Thomas Jefferson's thesis:

Jefferson himself - in a document for the Virginia convention of 1774, which in many respects anticipated the Declaration of Independence - had declared that "our ancestors", when they left the "English dominions in Europe" exercised "the right which Nature conferred on all men [...] to establish new societies, according to such laws and regulations as seemed to them most proper for promoting the public happiness".²²

²⁰ IDEM, p. 132

²¹ IDEM, p. 125.

²² IDEM, p. 101.

Although she recognises that in the final wording of the Declaration the term "public" disappears, Arendt affirms that "pursuit of happiness" retains a double meaning for the American revolutionaries: personal well-being and participation in public affairs"²³

But the French and Russian revolutions were not limited to these aspects; they were much more ambitious and far-reaching in their aims.

French Revolution and Russian Revolution

The Russian revolution followed the French one in its "ill-fated trajectory"²⁴ because in Tsarist Russia there were not the three conditions found in the American Revolution, on the contrary: there was a widespread condition of misery and poverty, which raised a huge social issue; there was no experience of self-government, since the peasants had only recently been freed from the serfdom of the glebe and in a merely formal way; and finally because the Tsarist monarchy possessed all the characteristics of the absolutist monarchy of a *legibus solutus* power.

For this reason, the confrontation must be made between the French revolution and the Russian revolution, and the Russian revolutionaries were well aware of this and considered themselves to be, in a way, the communist heirs of the bourgeois Jacobins. The main points of contact were the social question and the question of the absolute foundation of a new power.

Following her distinction between (political) freedom and (economic) liberation or between freedom and necessity, the philosopher states that the idea of necessity, dominant in the Russian revolution, did not lead to a new science of politics, but to a philosophy of history (Hegel) and that necessity and not freedom became the main category of revolutionary political power.

No revolution has ever solved the "social question" by freeing men from the state of need, but all revolutions, with the exception of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, have followed the example of the French Revolution and used and misused the powerful forces of misery and hardship in their struggle against tyranny and oppression. And all the records of past revolutions show beyond any doubt that all attempts to resolve the social question by political means have led to terror, and that it is terror that condemns revolutions to perdition.²⁵

²³ IDEM, p. 105-106.

²⁴ IDEM, p. 89.

²⁵ IDEM, p. 89

In another section of the book, Arendt re-emphasises the same question with reference to Marx:

The transformation of the Rights of Man into the rights of the *sans-coulottes* was the turning point, not just of the French Revolution, but of all the revolutions that were to follow. This is largely due to the fact that Marx, the greatest theorist the revolutions ever had, was much more interested in history than politics.²⁶

And he comments: "Be that as it may, there is no doubt that the young Marx became convinced that the reason why the French Revolution had failed to establish freedom was because it had failed to resolve the social question. That's why he concluded that freedom and poverty were incompatible."²⁷

Marx's great contribution, according to the philosopher, would not be in his doctrine of exploitation, but in his theory of revolution, as a philosophy of history that points to the need to overcome not "the oppression of one's fellow human beings, nor much less to institute freedom, but to free the vital process of society from "the shackles of scarcity and make it surge forward in a torrent of abundance"²⁸.

From this perspective, the conversion of revolutionary violence into historical necessity "simplifies the problem to such an extent that a real distinction between violence and necessity becomes superfluous". And here Arendt makes a comparison between Marx, Robespierre and Lenin:

Politically, this evolution led Marx to a real capitulation of freedom to necessity. He did what his master of revolutions, Robespierre, had done before him, and what his greatest disciple, Lenin, would later do in the most important revolution his teachings ever inspired.²⁹

Regarding Lenin and the paths of the Russian Revolution, Arendt comments that initially, during the so-called *New Economic Policy* (NEP), Lenin had launched the slogan that the revolution would consist of "electrification plus soviets", which indicated a "more rational and less ideological" path for the economy; but he himself abandoned it:

²⁶ IDEM, p. 48. Arendt's assessment of Marx coincides with that of Karl Löwith, who interprets Marx's work as that of a philosopher of history à la Hegel: "The main characteristic of the last two works cited [*The Manifesto* and *Capital*] is not the dogmatic emphasis on the class struggle and the relationship between labour and capital, but the absorption of all these categories into an exhaustive historical scheme. Like Hegel in philosophy, Darwin in biology and Ferdinand Christian Baur in theology, Marx transforms the problem of his special science into a historical problem". LÖWITH, Karl. *The Meaning of History*. Lisbon: Edições 70, 1991, p. 43.

²⁷ IDEM, p. 49.

²⁸ IDEM, p. 51

²⁹ IDEM, p. 52

the potential of the new institutions in favour of freedom, by deciding that only the Bolshevik Party could be the driving force, both for electrification and for the soviets; he himself therefore set the precedent for the later situation in which the party and the party apparatus became literally omnipotent.³⁰

Arendt's other observation is that the Russian Revolution, like the Paris Commune, had spontaneously produced forms of popular self-government such as the councils (*soviets*), which initiated the revolutionary process. But the Bolsheviks initially appropriated their revolutionary charge in order to later control and subordinate the soviets through the party.

Arendt concludes her thoughts on Lenin:

Lenin was the last heir to the French revolution; he didn't formulate any theoretical concept of freedom, but when confronted with it in concrete reality, he realised what was at stake, and when he sacrificed the new institutions of freedom, the soviets, in favour of the party he thought would liberate the poor, his motivation and reasoning were still in line with the tragic failures of the French revolutionary tradition.³¹

Arendt attaches great importance to the Councils, both in the Paris Commune in 1871 and in the Russian Revolution in 1905 and 1917, as organs of self-government and "spaces of freedom". As such, they systematically refused to consider themselves temporary organs of the revolution, and instead made every effort to establish themselves as permanent organs of (self-) government.³²

The reference that comes spontaneously to mind is the tragic episode of the sailors of the Kronstad Soviet, who were slaughtered in combat and then shot after their defeat by the Bolshevik forces, leaving thousands dead on the ground; just as the forces of the French army slaughtered the Communards of Paris: the two experiences of "freedom" for Arendt repressed in blood³³. And the philosopher concludes:

It was nothing more and nothing less than this hope for a transformation of the state, for a new form of government that would allow every member of modern egalitarian society to become a "participant" in public affairs, that was buried in the disastrous revolutions of the 20th century³⁴.

³⁰ IDEM, p. 52.

³¹ IDEM, p. 53.

³² IDEM, p. 211.

³³ The third experience cited by Arendt, the Hungarian revolution of 1956, didn't fare any better.

³⁴ IDEM, *ibidem*. This affirmation of political participation in the public space is reminiscent of Arendt's position on "the

Arendt takes over from Edmund Burke's criticism of the revolutionaries' pretence of carrying out a radical transformation of the whole of society and thus not limiting themselves to a revolution of freedom, i.e. a political process, but a much more ambitious and wide-ranging process of liberation, political, economic, social and cultural.

Referring to the objectives of the councils (of the Paris Commune), Arendt states that they did not want "paradise on earth, nor a classless society, nor the dream of a socialist or communist fraternity, but the establishment of the 'true republic' was the expected 'reward' at the end of the struggle".³⁵

This is one of the key points of Arendt's proposal: the Greek *polis* and the American revolution were revolutions of freedom even if the price to be paid was the exclusion of slaves or the invisibility of the oppression of the excluded; in the French revolution the moment it introduced the *sans coulottes* and the social question and even more so in the Russian revolution, they failed because instead of guaranteeing freedom they became necessarily authoritarian regimes when not totalitarian as in the Soviet Union.

According to Arendt, the moment of the new foundation that the revolution promises to realise is positive if it is understood as the foundation of political freedom, as the ancients thought and practised it, in other words, as political participation; if this horizon is lost, the revolution fails and there is a drift towards tyranny. For Arendt, the culminating and paradigmatic moment from which she interprets the French Revolution is the Rousseau/Robespierre moment, which will also serve as inspiration for the Bolshevik revolution: Marx/Lenin.

Newton Bignotto, in commenting on the book, acknowledges the criticism levelled by some historians³⁶ at Arendt's theses on the French Revolution, because it is a reading based above all on texts, speeches and doctrines, and centred on the period of the Terror and the figure of Robespierre:

Arendt focuses almost all her attention on the figure of Robespierre, who appears as an emblematic figure of the entire Revolution and its failure.

action" as a fundamental human dimension for social coexistence, which she developed in *The Life of the Spirit*. São Paulo: Relume Dumará, 1993.

³⁵ IDEM, p. 211.

³⁶ BIGNOTTO, Newton. Hannah Arendt and the French Revolution. *What makes us think*, n°29, May 2011, p. 43: "After several decades since its publication, it is possible to say that the historical observations contained in the book on both the American and French revolutions have been surpassed by the studies published since the appearance of the pioneering works by Gordon Wood and Bailyn on 18th century American history and by Furet on France."

Robespierre perfectly embodies, in Arendt's eyes, the moment when revolution was converted into a permanent process of seeking to satisfy material demands. By exchanging the pursuit of freedom for the pursuit of what he called the "right of the *sans-culottes*", the Jacobin opened the gap through which several of the modern revolutions would pass and determined the sacrifice of 18th century ideals on the altar of necessity. This process was carried out in the language of his time and only because of this could it be understood and become effective. Robespierre was always mobilising recourse to the "will of the people", which for him coincided with the *general will*.³⁷

And she says that Arendt's central aim was to raise the question of the foundation of political power:

Thus, although Arendt was mistaken in her interpretation of some moments of the French Revolution and exaggerated in attributing a social dimension to the struggles of the *miserable* to obtain satisfaction for their needs from the nascent republic, she offered a valuable tool for thinking about the emergence of new political forms in the modern world.³⁸

And he concludes with a "republican" reading of his thought:

Situating herself very close to the republican tradition, Arendt ended up bringing to the centre of her work an awareness of the importance of the initial moments in the foundation of new regimes. [...] With this, Arendt renewed republican thinking. She made it heir to the libertarian aspirations of the eighteenth-century revolutions, but at the same time, she was able to see in the drift of the Terror one of the possibilities inscribed in movements that lose the capacity to be guided by freedom when conducting the social transformations that are often an essential part of revolutionary processes.³⁹

It is precisely the claim to a new absolute foundation that will bring the French revolution (in the transitory moment of terror) and the Russian revolution (in the institutionalisation of terror) closer together in Arendt's view.

Final considerations

Arendt's central thesis about a clear separation between the process of freedom (positive pole) and liberation (negative pole) is not only paradoxical, but also difficult to sustain historically.

³⁷ BIGNOTTO, Newton. *Hannah Arendt and the French Revolution* 2011, p. 47.

³⁸ IDEM, p. 56.

³⁹ IDEM, p. 57.

The absence or presence of the social question was not the decisive factor that marked the profound differences between the two revolutions. In the case of the American Revolution, Arendt's *scam* of denying that slavery was a social issue because of its obscurity or invisibility doesn't hold up: it took a bloody civil war of "liberation" to tackle this apparently obscure and invisible problem.

On the other hand, the communards of Paris and the sailors of the soviets did want political participation, but to tackle the social question and much more than that: they shared with the revolutionary leaders the idea of "paradise on earth", a "classless society", the dream of a "socialist or communist fraternity" and not just the establishment of the "true republic".

In the end, to be politically free to do what? Just debate in the public arena? The (false?) dilemma between liberalism and socialism reappears here: the former affirming the priority of political freedom, and the latter of liberation from economic oppression as a *conditio sine qua non* to be able to exercise political freedom itself.

It seems very difficult, as the philosopher herself recognises, "to say where the mere desire for liberation, to be free from oppression, ends and where the desire for freedom, as a political choice of life, begins".⁴⁰

All the revolutions, both bourgeois and socialist, each had to confront the two processes of freedom and liberation from their own historical conditions: the English revolutionaries in the *glorious revolution* demanded not only the old "liberties" that the barons had wrested from John the Landless, but also the new freedoms of a parliamentary monarchy, in order to address the social question, to give more political, economic and social power to the "people", to the *commons*, in other words, to the bourgeois. The same can be said of the American colonists who, on freeing themselves from English domination, demanded more economic and social power for themselves.

But the "lesson" that Arendt's complex and complicated reflections on revolution leave us with is something else: the problem of the absolute foundation of a new social order.

The fundamental difference between the English and American revolutions, on the one hand, and the French and Russian revolutions, on the other, was that the former considered themselves to be "restorations" rather than revolutions, and their goals of freedom and liberation were limited to the English and the American colonists; unlike the French and Russian revolutions, which sought to wipe the *slate clean* of the past and initiate a new social order not only for the French and the Russians, but also for the American colonists.

⁴⁰ IDEM, *ibidem*.

Russians but for "humanity".

This was the novelty introduced by modernity. For the ancients, "revolutions" were the cyclical transformations of forms of government, from monarchy to tyranny, from tyranny to oligarchy, from oligarchy to democracy, from democracy to monarchy and from monarchy to tyranny, and so the cycle resumed its course. The solution could be found, according to Polybius in Antiquity and Machiavelli among the moderns, when commenting on the stability of the Roman Republic, in the "mixed form" of government, which allowed the monarchical principle to coexist with the aristocratic and popular, thus giving guarantees of more stability, which was the ultimate goal of political coexistence.⁴¹

But neither the ancients nor Machiavelli imagined revolution as an "absolute" foundational moment, a change not only of political form, but of the social, economic, cultural and religious system.

This is the "metaphysical" novelty that Burke criticises in the French Revolution. From the criticism of the abstract and metaphysical character of human rights comes the criticism of the revolution's pretension to build on these "metaphysical rights" a totally *new* man and society, which leads to the justification of revolutionary violence.

These professors, having no way of applying their extreme principles to cases that lack only qualified opposition, or one could say, civil and legal opposition, don't oppose it at all. With them, it's either a war or a revolution, or nothing at all! [...] The worst thing about these revolutionary speeches is that they harden and insensitise hearts, so as to prepare them for the desperate blows that are only used on extreme occasions. [...] For some people, plots, massacres and assassinations become a small price to pay to achieve a revolution.⁴²

The revolutionary doctrine of the radical transformation of society in order to create a completely new social order (*novus ordo saeculorum*) and a new man has an extremely powerful religious and utopian charge, according to Löwith.⁴³ It was this pretence, this *hybris* that led the revolutions to fail: the pretence of a new absolute foundation for coexistence

⁴¹ Machiavelli's novelty was that the mixed form served not to repress conflict, but to allow it to express itself and for the "moods" of the crowd to have their turn before the "moods" of the *optimates* and thus make the Republic great.

⁴² BURKE, E. *Reflexões sobre a revolução na França*. Brasília: Editora UnB, 1997, p. 92. On Burke's criticism of the French Revolution see: TOSI, G. - FRAGOSO, Williard. *Right-wing and left-wing criticisms of human rights. Problemata*: v. 8. n. 1 (2017), p. 122-162.

⁴³ LÖWITH, K. *The Meaning of History* 1991. On Löwith's critique of the Marxian concept of revolution see: TOSI, G. De Revolutionibus orbis terrestris, In: TOSI, G. - ALIAGA, L. - FREIRE, R. (eds). *Centenary of the Russian Revolution: balances and reflections*. João Pessoa: UFPB Publishing House, 2019.

Humanity breeds monsters, "daydreams" turn into nightmares.

Löwith shows how this claim is a secularisation of the theology of history, an immanent theology that must take place here and now and not in an indefinite afterlife. This powerful religious charge is also a factor that leads to the justification of violent means.⁴⁴

The Russian revolution was more radical and more ambitious than the French revolution, but it did not break with Russian historical tradition, establishing a despotic and autocratic government, not very different from the Tsarist one, from the point of view of the political regime. Unlike France, where terror was defeated, the revolutionary terror of the Bolsheviks became institutionalised in the Soviet Union during the Stalinist period, creating one of the most radical forms of totalitarianism, according to Arendt (1989).

The revolution could have been more successful if Lenin and the Bolsheviks had kept to the three slogans that brought them to power: an end to the war, all power to the *soviets* and land to the peasants. However, only the first promise was kept and the end of the war gave the Bolsheviks enormous popularity and power over the army, but the workers', peasants', soldiers' and sailors' *soviets* were quickly controlled by the party, which began to identify with the state, and lost their autonomy as a grassroots power.

Those who opposed it, such as the Kronstad sailors or the Ukrainian anarchists, were brutally crushed, and the peasants' land, after the initial distribution during the New Economic Policy (NEP), was nationalised and nationalised at the cost of the deaths of millions of people. Thus, a revolution that began as a popular and mass moment, continued with a coup with the closure of the Constituent Assembly and the seizure of absolute power by the Bolshevik party.⁴⁵

The two processes of freedom and liberation could have taken place together and the revolution itself had "spontaneously" created the instruments for this: Stalinist totalitarianism was not the inevitable success of the revolution if the autonomy of the soviets had been maintained,

⁴⁴ LÖWITH, K. *The Meaning of History...* 1991, p. 53: "Marx was a Jew the size of the Old Testament, despite being an emancipated nineteenth-century Jew who felt deeply anti-religious and even anti-Semitic. It is the ancient Jewish messianism and prophetism [...] and the Jewish insistence on absolute righteousness that explain the idealist basis of Marx's materialism. It is therefore no accident that the 'ultimate' antagonism between the two hostile camps of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat corresponds to the Judeo-Christian belief in a final struggle between Christ and the Antichrist in the last epoch of history, that the task of the proletariat corresponds to the universal-historical mission of the chosen people."

⁴⁵ REIS FILHO, A. D. *A Revolução Russa 1917-1921* 1999. IDEM. *The Russian Revolutions and Soviet Socialism*.

São Paulo: UNESP, 2017 In this latest book by Daniel Aarão Reis Filho, he talks about not one, but four revolutions, from the 1905 uprising (Bloody Sunday), through the February 1917 revolution, the October 1917 revolution and the 1921 NEP, and says that there was a democratic and popular revolution, but there was also a coup.

the distribution of land to peasants, the market economy provided by NEP.

But not only the terrible objective conditions with which the revolution had to contend came into play, but also a strong ideological factor: fidelity to the Marxist theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which Marx saw as a necessary but transitory phase. However, it was practically impossible for a revolution in an economically backward country like Russia, with no democratic tradition and no organised civil society, to succeed in anything other than a dictatorship. And two great Marxist intellectuals, Karl Kautsky⁴⁶ and Rosa Luxemburg⁴⁷, from different perspectives, had already warned of the dangers that the revolution was running.

This great historical experience made the contradiction of the Marxian theory of revolution as a process of proletarian dictatorship even clearer, with the aim of destroying the bourgeois state and then destroying itself. Nothing could be less "scientific" or more utopian than this perspective. The result was neither a dictatorship of the proletariat nor a socialist society, but a totalitarian regime and a dictatorship over the proletariat.

This seems to me to be Arendt's most original contribution; not so much the distinction between freedom and liberation because the desire for freedom and liberation are two inextricably related processes; but the ideological "surplus" that justifies the analogy between Rousseau/Robespierre and Marx/Lenin in their obsession with being faithful executors of an absolute historical necessity, which would create the new man and a new paradise on earth, whatever the cost.

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⁴⁶ KAUTSKY, K. *The dictatorship of the proletariat...* 1979

⁴⁷ LUXEMBOURG, R. *The Russian Revolution...* 1991.

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