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REVOLUTION AS HISTORY

edited by S.N. Mukherjee and J.O. Ward

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Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture

The aim of our Association is to bring together concerned scholars from Australia and overseas to discuss and publish on themes which transcend the usual academic disciplines and to establish links between subject areas. We now live in a hysterical atmosphere of cold war and anti-intellectual tirade (both from the Establishment and from the Extreme Left). Our Association hopes to provide a forum for those who feel strongly about academic freedom, peace and intellectual achievement, to air alternative views on society and culture.

This is the fifth volume of our series based on a conference held in October 1987. We hope to publish our sixth volume on 'Disasters in History' (based on another conference to held in late 1989). It is most likely that our seventh volume will be 'The Epic in History'. The themes of our conferences and publications are those topics where the links between subject areas and between culture and the social world have been obscured by the conservative institutions of our cultural and social establishments.

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The original programme of the REVOLUTIONS AS HISTORY workshop (held in the STAFF CLUB, University of Sydney, 9-10 October, 1987) was (listed in order of delivery):

Christopher Hill : The Importance of the English Revolution in Modern History (read by S.N. Mukherjee)

John O. Ward: " Revolution" as an historiographical category from antiquity to the sixteenth century

Michael Wilding: Milton and the English Revolution

Alastair MacLachlan: The Myth of the French Revolution Reconsidered

S.N. Mukherjee: Marxist Historians in Search of a Revolution in India

Adrian Chan: From the Resolution on Party History by the Chinese CP to the future of revolutions as such. (Could not participate owing to ill-health)

Zdenko Zlatar: A Critical Appraisal of Teodor Shanin's *The Roots of Otherness: Russia's Turn of Century*: was the 1905 Revolution a product of Russia as a 'Developing Society'?

Maria Shevtsova: Art and Culture as Revolution

Graeme Gill: The Soviet Revolution of 1917

Tony Day and **Craig Reynolds**: Peasant Rebellion and the Concept of Hegemony: the Case of Southeast Asia in the 19th Century

A.C. Milner: Revolution in Malay Political Discourse in the 20th Century. (Could not be available, in the event)

David Marr: Revolution in Vietnam

David Christian: Trotsky's notion of Revolution

Conal Condren: 'Christopher Hill's Paper'

Ranjit Guha: On the theme of the 'workshop'

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Zdenko Zlatar teaches History at the University of Sydney. His special interests are modern Russian history, Slavonic history and the Reformation.

PREFACE

The Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture was lucky to have Christopher Hill, one of its Honorary Advisers, to address the Association's Annual General Meeting in March 1987. Hill's topic was, "The Place of the Seventeenth-Century Revolution in English History". He ended his talk with the following provocative remarks, "so my argument (for you to think about and no doubt disagree with), is that England was the country of the first political revolution; this led to England becoming the country of the first industrial revolution, and this in turn led to her becoming the first world empire. The processes are, I think, indissolubly connected". There was, of course, much discussion: some disagreed very strongly with the 'Hill Thesis' and the talk got us all thinking about the nature of the debate on revolutions among historians. In October 1987 the Association decided to hold a workshop on this subject. We had, at this workshop, scholars from all over Australia, representing various disciplines, Anthropology, History, Politics, Economics, English, French Studies, Asian Studies, Linguistics and Philosophy. The theme of the workshop was "Revolution as History" - a study of the interaction between Historians and Revolutions", how the idea of the revolution developed through ages, how historians deal with revolutions and why debates on revolutions generate such heat. The workshop was not particularly interested in the causes or effects of revolutions. We had however, many contributions from Asia, some of which could not, unfortunately, be presented in this book.

We start off the volume with John O.Ward's paper on 'Revolution' as an historiographical category for pre-industrial Europe (from antiquity to the sixteenth century). Ward examines the term "revolution" as a construction and ponders on "the mental processes and categories that determine and make possible" such constructions. After examining some "developments" in pre-modern Europe which are - somewhat confusingly - dubbed by modern scholars as "revolutions" Ward asks why they are so dubbed, and finds no systematic answer, because there is no agreement among scholars about "truly revolutionary" and "globally, universally and fundamentally" significant themes in history. His paper ends with an example of the kind of pseudo-historical writing that *does* systematically advance a theory of the "truly revolutionary".

Christopher Hill's paper deals with the differences between the pre-revolutionary England of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and the post-revolutionary England of the second-half of the seventeenth century. He shows how the English Revolution changed the course of world history: "If England had not followed a different path from that of the continental absolutist regimes, the emergence of modern science might have been very much delayed. The ideas of the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century are the ideas of the English Revolution - of the Levellers, of Hobbes, of Harrington, of Milton, of Locke, and of Newton".

Conal Condren disagrees. In his cleverly written paper Condren scores a number of points against Hill. This is not an unfamiliar phenomenon: if one has a narrow, empirical view of history one cannot see the global significance of revolutions. One either sides with Edmund Burke or with Tom Paine; Condren is clearly on the side of Burke. In this age of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, it seems that Condren's paper belongs to the cold war of the fifties.

Michael Wilding in his short but incisive essay examines the revolutionary ideology of Milton, and explains how his early revolutionary beliefs continued in all of Milton's writings: "from the pre-revolutionary 1630s, through his employment by the council of state to write official propaganda for the new republic, or into the dark years of the restoration, reaction and repression, Milton remained firmly committed to a revolutionary position, never ceasing to give expression to egalitarian, anti-authoritarian, communistic progressive beliefs".

Alastair MacLachlan has given us an excellent account of the linguistic explosion of the French Revolution: he treats the Revolutionary discourse of 1789, as a sign not as a screen. The Revolutionary discourse cannot be dismissed as mere rhetoric, for it is very likely that the language and symbols of the Revolution are the most lasting legacy of 1789. MacLachlan also deals with the myth of the Revolution. He shows that we need the "myth". "In many ways it remains vital to any attempt to restore the contingency of the Revolution, and to rescue its participants not just from theoretical models of class or from subservience to the imperatives of the state ... but from ... the redundancy and the trivialization imposed on their language, their emotions, their experiences, their politics, by a modern critical history which operates solely under the rubric of de-mystification".

Zdenko Zlatar's essay is an exercise in historiography. He critically reviews Shanin's work on the Russian Revolution of 1905. He takes Shanin to task: "His thesis that the 1905 revolution in the Russian countryside was the product of Russia as a 'developing society' is a classic example of what Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch have called a badly put question, "*une question mal posée*".

Maria Shevtsova deals with "art and culture as revolution". Taking her definition of culture from Lenin's "On Co-operation", Shevtsova in a very provocative essay brings to life the Proletkult/Narkompros debate on art, culture and education during the early years of the revolution. She uses Mayakovsky's play *Mystery-Bouffe* to make her point. The debate seems very relevant to us in Australia living in a 'dark age' presided over by Dawkins and Metherell.

David Christian examines Trotsky's views on revolution. Trotsky was both a historian and a revolutionary. The experiences of the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 and of the post-revolutionary regime in the Soviet Union shaped Trotsky's views on revolution. Christian sees Trotsky's broadening of the category of revolution as the 'inflationary' approach. He shows that Trotsky was right to discard the narrow concept of revolution (as an isolated and national event). Revolutions are/were part of a wider and longer destabilizing process; historians "should explore the fault lines rather than the earthquake".

Soumyen Mukherjee's paper deals with the marxist historian's problem in India: how to deal with such earthshaking events as 1857 and 1942? One was 'feudal' while the other was a 'hindrance' to the cause of anti-fascist people's war. "The importance of these revolts is recognised by historians of all schools but the revolts are still vast areas of wasteland in marxist historiography". Mukherjee suggests some reasons for this.

Tony Day and Craig Reynold's paper deals with the concept of 'peasant revolts' in Southeast Asia. They build their theory around two case studies, the Samin Movement in Java and the revolts in the lower Mekong, Thailand. Their case studies, they insist, suggest "that peasant insurgency in Southeast Asia should be studied, not as an antithesis to, but in the context of 'states' and 'revolutions', failed, achieved or potential". This is an important thesis, but whether the authors have produced a strong enough hook to hang it on, is for the reader to decide.

These ten papers do not pose all the questions that are related to "revolutions and historians", nor do they individually or collectively answer all the questions that they have posed. But they have raised enough dust to provoke scholars to rethink about revolutions. For this reason alone the workshop was a worthwhile exercise and so, we hope, is this volume.

In editing the papers submitted by the contributors for publication in the present form, we have taken only minimal trouble to eliminate idiosyncrasies of footnoting style and other inconsistencies. The submissions were, after all, and remain, "working papers" and we feel that there will be little inconvenience to our readers as a consequence of the inconsistencies that remain. For much the same reasons we have made only minimal alteration to the language and terminology used by each author: by and large they are responsible for all curios here.

The labours of editing have been somewhat lopsided. Ward was prevented by illness from attending all but his own session of the workshop, but he later laboured hard, undertaking the numerous close readings and re-readings of the text of the volume that were necessary to minimize the errors and infelicities which the workshop format seems to generate, and seeing the volume from initial type-up through to publication.

Many helped us to organise the workshop and the preparation of this volume: we wish to take this opportunity to thank them all and more particularly Ms. Elizabeth Bonner and Mrs. Jayshree Thuraisingam (who typed much of the volume) and Ms Joan Hitchen who undertook the final layout and laserprinting.