

# Michael Walzer A Theory Of Revolution

Most Marxist writing about revolution, by academics as well as militants, has focused on the great question: how to get started? What are the causes of revolution? There has been less interest, surprisingly little, in outcomes. A certain agnosticism about outcomes seems to be a feature of leftist thinking, dating at least from the era of 1789. Thus, St. Just's dictum, adopted by and one would think more suitable to Napoleon: *On s'engage et puis, on voit*. Marx gave this agnosticism a historicist rationale, though only with reference to the last or proletarian revolution. The world whose laws science could discover and explain lay this side of that cataclysmic event, and what lay on the other side was largely unknowable. Or, rather, it could be understood only by negation—the withering away of the State, abolition of private property, classless society—and not in any positive or substantive way. “The dictatorship of the proletariat” remained a phrase without content, and the political, administrative, and economic character of communist society was never seriously discussed.

Lenin and Trotsky laid the foundations for a theory of outcomes but did not develop it in any detail; nor did they acknowledge its political implications. To have done so would have undercut their own activity. And yet, they must have had some idea, before they committed themselves, of the sort of regime they would be creating. In any case, such an idea is implicit in their writings, and I shall try to expound it. I do not claim that what follows is an account of “what Lenin and Trotsky really meant.” It is only one possible working out of an argument they began. I merely follow certain familiar clues, turning sometimes to historical examples that the Bolshevik leaders would never have chosen. The clues have to do, first, with the internal structure of revolution—with the sequence of events and the relations of forces within the process—and second, with two very different kinds of revolutionary endings.

The term “revolution” obviously does not cover every attack upon an established order or every seizure of power. Military coups are not revolutions; nor are most anticolonial struggles. In a world in which political turnovers are common, the term covers only a small number of cases: conscious attempts to establish a new moral and material world and to impose, or evoke, radically new patterns of day-to-day conduct. A holy commonwealth, republic of virtue, communist society—these are the goals revolutionaries seek. So I shall focus on the great revolutions—the English, French, Russian, and Chinese—in which modern radicalism reached its

fullest substantive expression and the new world came most clearly into view. The argument about structures and endings is essentially similar in these four, whatever other differences exist among them. Now that we have seen Lenin's revolution, and Mao's, agnosticism is no longer a practical or a justifiable option. Nor, unhappily, have the most recent revolutions carried us into a world of freedom, beyond the grasp of social analysis.

## Revolution As Project

Revolution, then, is a project, and it is important to say whose project it is. This is the question Lenin addressed in *What Is To Be Done?* When we study the forces that make or try to make a revolution, he suggests, we immediately discern two groups, with different sorts of political capacities and ambitions: a revolutionary class whose discontent provides the energy and whose members supply the manpower, and an intellectual vanguard that provides ideology and leadership.<sup>1</sup> The vanguard is formed only in part, perhaps in small part, by men and women drawn from the class. The extent of recruitment depends largely on the social composition of the class, the availability of education to its members, and so on. Thus, a significant number of Puritan clerics came from the lesser gentry; an insignificant number of Chinese Communist intellectuals come from the poorer peasants. By and large, while classes differ fundamentally from one revolution to another, vanguards are sociologically similar. They are recruited from middling and professional groups. The parents of the recruits are gentlemen farmers, merchants, clerics, lawyers, petty officials. Recruitment begins at school, not in the streets, or in shops and factories, or in peasant villages.

Lenin argues, though explicitly only for the proletariat and the Marxist intelligentsia, that each of these groups has its own consciousness. Class consciousness develops as the spontaneous assertion of the shared interests of the members, as these interests are perceived by men and women still living in the old order and still thinking only about its possibilities. They have little choice: They are ambitious but hemmed in, or hard-pressed simply to survive. They have to make out, or they have to earn a living today and then tomorrow. Their shared awareness of their predicament moves them to associate for protection and short-term advance. Hence the parliamentarism of the English

gentry and the trade-unionism of the modern working class. Though the life patterns of the revolutionary class may point toward a new social order, its conscious activity is shaped within the old order and aims at accommodations thought to be possible. Class consciousness rarely inspires an innovative politics. The idea of radical transformation is carried into the revolutionary class by the men and women of the vanguard.<sup>2</sup>

Vanguard consciousness is the work of intellectuals somehow cut loose from the constraints of the old order—or of intellectuals who cut themselves loose: These are people, usually young people, who respond to the decadence of their world by withdrawing. They give up conventional modes of existence, conventional families and jobs; they choose marginality; they endure persecution; they go into exile. They are receptive to radical and, as their opponents rightly say, to foreign ideas: Calvinism in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, English liberalism and Genevan republicanism in eighteenth-century France, Marxism in Russia and China. Revolutionary thought nowhere develops indigenously. Nor does the will to revolution—at least, it does not arise in the center but at the furthest edges of the prerevolutionary world. If the new class grows in the womb of the old society, its delivery (“Force is the midwife . . .”) comes from outside.

Class and vanguard consciousness are very different, and in characteristic ways. An analogy with the Israelite Exodus from Egypt, used frequently by Puritan radicals and occasionally still by the Jacobins, illustrates the difference. A double consciousness guides the Exodus: The people (the oppressed and revolutionary class) are moved by the vision of “a land of milk and honey”; Moses and the Levites (the vanguard) are moved by the vision of “a nation of priests and a holy people.” Both these groups and both these visions are necessary for success: Without the people there would have been no new nation; without Moses and the Levites the land would never have been conquered. As the biblical account makes clear, the people alone would probably not have left or would quickly have returned to the fleshpots of Egypt. It would be wrong to think about this as a simple conflict between popular interests and intellectual idealism. For it is possible to be very idealistic about milk and honey, and groups like the Levites quickly acquire a vested interest in holiness. Each side has interests and ideals which overlap in complex ways and make cooperation between priests and people, vanguard and class, possible. The two forms of consciousness reflect two different

experiences—that of the slaves in Egypt, that of Moses in exile in the desert—which are nevertheless the experiences of people tied to one another and capable, at some level, of understanding one another.

The two different experiences produce two different sorts of political association. Class politics is catholic and inclusive. Gentlemen, merchants, workers, and peasants in the old order share a common life—share experiences, willy-nilly, without reference to the opinions or feelings of individuals. It is a matter of collective location, not of private volition. Hence, class organizations are open, and their internal life usually takes shape, at first, as a democracy of the members, loosely governed.

Vanguard groups, by contrast, are closed and exclusive. Joining the vanguard is a matter of choice, but it requires also the acceptance of new members by the old. And the old have, through choices of their own, established certain criteria. They need to make sure of the commitments of their would-be brethren or comrades in order to guarantee the special character of their group. Here, collective location or class origin hardly matters. What does matter is opinion, ideology, zeal, readiness to accept a common discipline. Crane Brinton has said that Jacobin ideology amounts to a call for a nation of smallholders and shopkeepers, “a greengrocers’ paradise.”<sup>3</sup> That is true, up to a point, and one would expect all greengrocers to be welcome. The Jacobin intellectuals, however, had in mind a republic of virtuous greengrocers—tested and certified at meetings of the Jacobin clubs. The two notions overlap but are not the same.

The inner history of the revolution is in large part the working-out of the tension between these different notions and between the two groups of men and women who carry them. “The shift in different stages of the revolution,” Trotsky has written, “like the transition from revolution to counter-revolution, is directly determined by changing political relations between . . . the vanguard and the class.”<sup>4</sup> These relations in turn are shaped, I shall argue, by the different social compositions and the relative political strengths of the two groups. The thrust toward revolutionary dictatorship, the pursuit of holiness, virtue, or communist discipline, the use of terror, the possibility of a Thermidorean reaction, success or failure in the establishment of responsible government—all these depend upon the interaction of vanguards and classes and then on the historical factors that determine the interaction.

## Class & Vanguard

The analysis cannot begin, then, with either vanguards or classes considered alone, for what is crucial is the relation between a particular vanguard and a particular class at a particular moment in time. The balance of forces, the relative strength and competence of the two groups, shapes the revolutionary process. Ideally, the balance should be described in careful detail, but I obviously cannot do that here. I can only offer a quick historical survey of class/vanguard relationships in the great revolutions.

A clerical vanguard, like that of the Puritan ministers, holds a strong position over and against any lay group. It stakes a claim to special knowledge, though no longer to magical powers, and it possesses a considerable capacity for collective discipline. This capacity was evident when young and radical clerics established the first underground organizations in modern European history. Protestant ministers, however, are vulnerable to the appearance of lay saints, who may either join and reshape the vanguard or organize to resist its initiatives. The appearance of born-again Christians among gentlemen and merchants quickly undercuts the more extreme forms of clerical pretension. Lay vanguards, led most often by lawyers and journalists, hold a weaker position relative to gentry-merchant groups, for their knowledge is not so special and is shared almost from the beginning by the men and women with whom they interact. It is among these middling social groups that intellectuals are most likely to fulfill the task that Lenin first assigned to them—which he and the Bolsheviks were never able to fulfill: “The task of the intelligentsia is to make special leaders from among the intelligentsia unnecessary.”<sup>5</sup> Hence, the weakness of radical intellectuals as a distinct and disciplined group during the French Revolution and the virtual nonexistence of vanguard politics in 1830 and 1848.

Organization requires more than competence, however; it also requires practice. The hundred years of Protestant experimentation with conferences and congregations—roughly the period of gentry self-assertion in Parliament—goes a long way toward explaining the precise form of the interactions of the 1640s and the 1650s. In the years immediately following 1789, by contrast, the radicals were compelled to innovate on the spot. Eighteenth-century French society had only the most rudimentary sorts of lay

political or intellectual organization (the salons, literary and scientific societies, Masonic lodges). The Jacobin clubs, split and purged several times, represented a first approximation to the party cells that facilitated later vanguard activity. But they lacked trained and disciplined cadres and members sufficiently differentiated by experience or conviction from their immediate social surroundings. The short life of the Jacobin republic, and its failure to leave any significant institutional residues, has to be connected with the short history of Jacobinism before the republic was founded.

In more recent revolutionary upsurges the independence of the vanguard has been enhanced by its contact with poorly educated and unorganized social classes. Vanguards have a much stronger position relative to new industrial workers and traditional peasants than to gentlemen and merchants, and a stronger position relative to peasants than to workers. Selig Perlman has argued, also using a Leninist sociology, that the power of a radical intelligentsia within or over the working class declines in close connection with the rise of unionism.<sup>6</sup> The more organized the class, the less powerful the vanguard. If that is so, then it follows that the proletariat of a developed industrial society will resist vanguard initiative more strongly than other social groups, and for what may properly be called Marxist reasons: Everyday life tends to produce among workers very high levels of solidarity and political sophistication and relatively tight defensive organizations. Perhaps that is why there has never yet been a revolution in which a mature working class provided the mass base.

The conditions under which social classes yield to vanguard direction resemble those that make for other sorts of elite dominance. First, class balance: that moment in history when an older ruling class can no longer maintain its political position, while the coming class cannot yet assert its own authority. Engels refers to this balance of forces in explaining early modern absolutism.<sup>7</sup> He might have added that it helps explain the role of radical intellectuals in the struggle against absolutism. Once that struggle has begun, however, the balance is likely to shift rapidly towards the rising class, and if that class is sufficiently cohesive and well organized, the vanguard upsurge will be brief. It can be prolonged only if no social class can assert its own right to rule. Second, then, class underdevelopment: the essential prerequisite of sustained vanguard dictatorship. A wide variety of factors come into play here. Class size, resources, education, organizational structures, and

traditions of struggle determine the specific revolutionary capacity of burghers and proletarians. Mass illiteracy, geographic dispersion, a purely local solidarity determine the general incapacity of a traditional peasantry.

Modern radicalism has tended to reach out for a peasant base—to bring into political life a social class far less capable of organization and independent activity, more in need of and more at the mercy of vanguard leadership than any other. Not that the vanguard is ever entirely free of class control: I only want to suggest a comparative judgment. A Puritan minister was locked into a tight connection with, in part a dependence on, the English gentleman. Every move he made had to be negotiated. He had very limited powers of experimentation. Even when he succeeded in getting Puritan morality enacted into law, he could not get it enforced. The seventeenth-century gentry provide a classic example of a group resistant to vanguard initiative: Already in control of the Commons, politically sophisticated, well-educated, economically powerful, it and its merchant allies were the agents of the first and perhaps the most successful Thermidorean reaction. Even this class, however, needed the clerical vanguard, at least for a time. For the ministers provided the decisive innovations in revolutionary politics and the zeal without which the monarchy could never have been overthrown.

It is easy to imagine how much more such men are “needed” when they interact with a discontented class radically deprived of resources, education, and leadership. Peasants can mount Thermidorean pressures, such as those that forced the introduction of the New Economic Policy in Russia. But it is critically important that NEP was a Bolshevik policy aimed at appeasing the peasants, not a peasant policy aimed at overthrowing Bolshevism: “The concessions to the Thermidorean mood and tendency of the petty-bourgeoisie,” Trotsky wrote in 1921, “. . . were made by the Communist party without effecting a break in the system and without quitting the helm.”<sup>8</sup> There was no Russian (as there is no Chinese) equivalent of the gentry or of the French bourgeoisie, no indigenous class capable of generalizing its own way of life, asserting its ideological and organizational supremacy, and replacing the vanguard regime.

Thermidor decisively tests the class/vanguard relationship, and I should say a word about its general character. It is not to be identified too literally with the political intrigue of the summer of 1794. What made that intrigue possible was the disaffection of revolutionary forces with the Jacobin

dictatorship and the widespread sense of alternatives short of a restoration of the *ancien régime*. Thermidor is not a counterrevolution, though it may open up possibilities for counterrevolutionary politics; it is rather the self-assertion of the revolutionary class against the politics of the vanguard.<sup>9</sup> If, in the Russian case, the proletariat is the revolutionary class, then Kronstadt and the Workers' Opposition represent failed Thermidorean tendencies. If we prefer the peasants, then NEP is as close as Thermidor ever came. The politics of the vanguard shapes the period of revolutionary history called—the name is a triumph of antivanguard feeling—the Terror. This term too should not be identified in any simple sense with the proscriptions and judicial murders of the Jacobin regime.<sup>10</sup> The Terror is the dictatorial imposition of vanguard ideology. So Thermidor marks the end of dictatorship, and its success or failure is determined by the “changing political relations” of the vanguard and the class. If Thermidor fails, the Terror becomes permanent.

## The Vanguard Program

Vanguard ideology, and therefore the political character of the Terror, has a similar form in each of the great revolutions. Its specific content reflects shifting intellectual traditions—Reformation theology, neoclassical republicanism, Leninist political theory. But the basic structure and the general themes of vanguard argument persist, even when radical intellectuals address different social classes. For the placement of the intellectuals with reference to the different classes, and to the old order as a whole, remains fundamentally the same. The presentation of the argument changes, of course, and it is probably worth noting a general decline in the intellectual quality, and a restriction in the referential range, of revolutionary literature from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. (I refer here only to the propaganda of the vanguard, not to its more reflective and theoretical work.) The rigorously argued and heavily annotated sermons of the Puritan ministers have no analogues in the popular writings of contemporary Chinese Communists. The debased aphoristic style—as it appears in English—of the *Little Red Book* is not imaginable in either the English or the French Revolutions. Calvinism found popular expression at a fairly high level



because the social classes for which it was popularized already possessed a substantial literary culture. Marxism has found popular expression at a low level because its vanguards have written for classes without a literary culture of their own.

But all such differences are less important than the deeper similarities in vanguard ideology. It is the similarities that make revolution the sort of event it has consistently been. The first is simple enough. Calvinism and Marxism, and republicanism too, though to a far lesser degree, impose upon their adherents a genuine intellectual regimen. Each of these creeds has behind it a tradition of learning; it requires study; and when studied it imposes order upon a wide range of historical, cultural, and political phenomena. Life in the vanguard is an educational experience. Its members come to possess a doctrine which they apply and manipulate with great skill, and this possession is crucial to their bid for power. Members of the revolutionary class remain doctrineless until they go to school with the vanguard. They share socially widespread interests and aspirations and hold common opinions; they do not need a doctrine. But the vanguard intellectuals, socially disinterested and often disdainful of common opinion, are likely to be, perhaps need to be, doctrinaire. Their zeal is first of all intellectual in character.

That zeal takes three different though related forms:

1. It is a puritanical zeal. Vanguard ideologies place an enormous emphasis on self-control, collective discipline, and mutual surveillance (what the Puritans call "holy watching"). They aim to produce high standards of methodical work and to curb or limit all forms of the dissipation of energy through play. The vanguard's ideas about the range of revolutionary activity are likely to be fixed by their ideas about the number of people capable of sustained discipline of this kind. The range widens, at least in theory, as workers and peasants enter the revolutionary coalition. Thus, Lenin's *State and Revolution* suggests that everyone can internalize self-control and make it habitual, and that everyone can watch everyone else, so that policemen, like vanguard intellectuals, will one day become superfluous. But Lenin is not willing to wait for that wonderful day: "No, we want the socialist revolution with human nature as it is now, with human nature that cannot do without subordination [and] control . . ." <sup>11</sup> The vanguard will have to do the controlling—there is no one else. In preparing its members for this task, Lenin often sounds like the prophet of a Weberian Protestantism, preaching vehemently against "this slovenliness, this carelessness, untidiness,

unpunctuality, nervous haste, the inclination to substitute discussion for action, talk for work, the inclination to undertake everything under the sun without finishing anything . . .”<sup>12</sup> For Lenin, the true sign of a “proletarian” was not his class background or his specific relation to productive forces, but his self-control.

Exactly how well self-control works, we do not know. It has not made policemen superfluous, but clearly there have been periods in the history of every vanguard when holiness, virtue, or Communist discipline has been maintained at a high level. And clearly too, the class with which the vanguard interacts always resists this difficult morality. Not, by any means, unanimously: The vanguard does make converts, especially during moments of crisis and heroism; modified versions of virtue do fit the experience needs of particular classes or sections of classes; and the enforcement of morality can be turned into an expression of existing class conflicts. So vanguard intellectuals find gentry, merchant, worker, and peasant collaborators. Nevertheless, the history of every revolution is in part the history of popular resistance to virtue. Once again the Exodus story is illustrative. According to a folk legend, on the day that the Israelites left Mt. Sinai, they marched at double speed in order to get as far away as possible as quickly as possible: They wanted no more laws.

2. Vanguard ideology expresses a zeal for political activism and participation, for self-government, often understood as a consequence of or a parallel to self-control. It is almost as if a dialogue were going on between the autocrats of the old order and the vanguard of the new. The autocrat, like a good Hobbist, says, “Absolute power is necessary to social order; therefore I will repress you.” The vanguard intellectuals reply, “Holiness or virtue or Communist discipline is necessary to social order; therefore we will repress ourselves.” Self-government, understood as collective self-repression, must be the work of men and women who have already learned the discipline of the self, or who are locked into groups that enforce such discipline. Hence, the role assigned in vanguard political practice to the congregation, the club, and the party. By contrast, members of the class generally seek a more immediate form of self-government in parliaments, assemblies, and soviets. Hannah Arendt is right when she claims that freedom is the very essence of revolution. But two different kinds of freedom are at stake in the revolutionary process. For the class, freedom is a natural or a human right already possessed; all that is necessary is to create conditions under which it can be exercised—to open

up arenas for democratic politics. For the vanguard, freedom has to be earned: Men and women become free over a long period of internal (religious or psychological) and external struggle.

Vanguard intellectuals, therefore, willingly repeat the arguments of older elites: that the people are not ready for self-government, free elections, a free press. Everpresent Thermidorean pressures, called counterrevolutionary by the vanguard, prove the unreadiness. The classic response to these pressures is the purge, which clears the political arena of men and women who, it is alleged, would vote if they could to return to Egypt. But the purge is ostensibly a temporary measure—permanent only for those who are killed in its course: Ultimately, and in principle, the band of brethren, citizens, comrades ought to include everyone.

3. The vanguard has deep egalitarian tendencies. Its activity calls into question all conventional social distinctions. Its members make war upon traditional hierarchies of birth and blood and denounce all claims to rule based on wealth rather than virtue. A hatred of personal dependency, a strong sense of the value of individual effort—these constitute the central features of every vanguard ideology. They are connected with the voluntarist character of the revolutionary struggle, and they are given symbolic expression in the new titles assigned to all participants, whatever their social background. Revolutionary classes, though they share for a time the excitement of the struggle, aspire to something simpler and less demanding. Consider, for example, two titles from the era of bourgeois radicalism: mister and citizen. The first reflects class consciousness and is nothing more than a demand for equal respect. The second reflects vanguard consciousness and, far more heavily loaded, implies a shared concern and a shared activity. And it is not clear, in the second case, how much respect there can be if shared concern and activity do not in fact exist.

When the vanguard reaches out to radically oppressed social classes, its moral egalitarianism generates also a commitment to material equality. Puritans and Jacobins never seriously challenged the property system, though the political prerogatives of private ownership would surely have been eroded in a holy commonwealth or a republic of virtue. Communist vanguards obviously go much further, though they in turn stop short of acknowledging the prerogatives of collective ownership. They do not yield power to the workers and peasants whom they recognize as equal owners of the means of production. Indeed, worker and peasant attempts to give their new equality a

political form are likely to be treated as counterrevolutionary, especially after Communist vanguards take over the task of economic development.

In the earlier revolutions development was not a political issue, for the expansion of the economy resulted from the freely chosen activities of individual members of the revolutionary class. They required the support of the political authorities, but not their positive direction, the coercion of others, not of themselves. The case is very different in both Russia and China, where the liberation of class energy and the assertion of class interest could not readily have produced anything more than an equality of the impoverished (in vanguard ideology—Maoism may be an example—an equality of the virtuous poor).<sup>14</sup> Hence, the vanguard is driven to take on the role played, under radically different circumstances, by the Western bourgeoisie. It generates hierarchical structures of roughly the sort that exist in advanced bourgeois society, though with different ideological justifications and disguises. Liberty and equality disappear from its creed. What is left is a commitment to the forms of self-control and labor discipline necessary for industrialization.

Thus, Lenin in 1918: "The task which the Soviet government must set the people in all its scope is—learn to work."<sup>15</sup> Here, government and people have replaced vanguard and class, but the relation of the first two is fixed by the relation of the second two. The government determines the tasks of the people, not the other way around. Once again, this pattern is possible only in the absence of an economically independent and politically advanced social class. The commitment to industrialization is also rooted in the vanguard's desire to maintain its new political position and to strengthen and develop the country it has come to rule. Vanguard intellectuals now seek to serve the long-term interests of their subjects. At the same time, they must ignore or repress the immediate demands of those same subjects. They are at war with "backwardness."

In the course of this war the members of the vanguard become more and more like the members of other ruling groups (modernizing elites?), increasingly accustomed to the prerogatives of government, increasingly isolated from their own people. Hence, the process that follows upon the seizure of power might be called—the term is obviously not Lenin's or Trotsky's—the routinization of vanguard consciousness. But routinization in this case can be a harrowing business, for the militants of the vanguard carry over into their new bureaucratic roles a deep conviction of their own superior

understanding (correct ideological position), a contempt for their enemies, and a disciplined readiness for combat. And they are, in the short run at least, steeled against the temptations of sentimentality and corruption.

## The Case For Thermidor

The argument thus far has assumed a single, readily identifiable vanguard and a single revolutionary class. Actual experience has been far more complex. The group of vanguard intellectuals shades off on the one side into the more responsible leadership, the directly controlled agents of the class (e.g., trade-union officials), and on the other into the exotic world of "new notionists," isolated sects and eccentric geniuses, without any social base at all.<sup>16</sup> The revolutionary class is itself a plurality of groups, perhaps a plurality of classes, including rising and falling, modern and traditionalist elements, not gentry, merchants, workers only, but artisans and peasants too. These different elements form an unstable coalition and come into conflict with the vanguard on different schedules; they also come into conflict with one another.

The revolutionary world, then, is more pluralist than I have suggested. And yet, it also yields regularly to an act of personal unification—to a dictatorship different from that of the vanguard, the dictatorship of a leader who seizes upon the disruption and disorder of the moment. The leader imposes on the revolution something of his own character, but he also reflects the dominant tendencies of his society. Sometimes, he accommodates himself to the rising class and presides over the Thermidorean reaction, as Cromwell did in his last years. Sometimes, he intensifies and personalizes the Terror, as Stalin did before and after World War II. As with vanguards, so with dictators: Their power is greatest where the mass base of the revolution is least organized and cohesive. The cult of personality grows where class political culture is underdeveloped. But why, in these circumstances, vanguard power cannot be sustained on a collective basis remains unclear. It is as if the radical intellectuals, for all their zeal and discipline, share in the political underdevelopment of their society—and if they do share that underdevelopment, they are likely, as in the Soviet Union, to suffer its consequences.

Still, personal rule is probably a temporary condition, and when we try to appraise the long-term outcomes of revolutionary activity, the class/vanguard scheme resumes its central importance. We can now distinguish two different sorts of outcomes. First, the vanguard wins and holds power, making its dictatorship permanent, dominating and controlling weak social classes. It attempts for a while to act out its radical ideology but undergoes a gradual routinization. Leaving aside the precise history and character of the routinization, it is fair to say that this was the foreseeable outcome of the Bolshevik revolution. The dictatorial rule of the vanguard was determined by the radical inability of any social class to sustain a Thermidorean politics. Thermidor, then, represents the second possibility: The revolutionary class resists and replaces the vanguard and slowly, through the routines of its everyday life, creates a new society in its own image. It reabsorbs the vanguard intellectuals into the social roles occupied by their parents, that is, into professional and official roles without any special political significance.<sup>17</sup>

The second of these seems to me the preferred outcome. For popular resistance to vanguard ideology, even when it is unsuccessful, has been sufficiently emphatic and so often reiterated as to demand serious attention. One of the central features of the revolutionary process, it determines what we can think of as a revolutionary law: *No vanguard victory is possible without radical coercion*. Given that law, it is best to insist, if one can, and as early as one can, upon the superfluity of the vanguard. The best revolutions are made by social groups capable of articulating their own collective consciousness and defending themselves against the initiatives of radical intellectuals. Thermidor is the work of such groups—an optimal outcome since it generates a *limited and socially responsible government, more or less democratic* depending upon the size and confidence of the newly dominant class. Thermidor represents the fulfillment of Marx's vision of revolutionary politics—the moment when power is “wrested from an authority usurping pre-eminence over society itself, and restored to the responsible agents of society.”<sup>18</sup>

Short of Thermidor, only two other possibilities might raise similar hopes. We might imagine an absconding vanguard, which withdraws from political power even in the absence of overwhelming class resistance. Like Machiavelli's ideal prince, it founds the republic, the new moral world,

through its own heroic efforts, but then it “confides the republic to the charge of the many, for thus it will be sustained by the many.”<sup>19</sup> Or, we might imagine a vanguardless revolution, carried out by a social class free from any lingering attachment to the old order, with a fully developed sense of its own future, capable of producing leaders of its own, loyal to itself—Marx’s (but not Lenin’s) industrial proletariat. But we have, as yet, no experience of such a vanguard or of such a class.

## Notes

1. *What Is To Be Done?* (Peking, 1975), esp. Part I; Lenin draws freely here upon arguments first developed by Kautsky.
2. I have tried to illustrate this thesis with regard to the English case in *The Revolution of the Saints* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), ch. 4.
3. *A Decade of Revolution: 1789-1799* (New York, 1934), 136.
4. “Hue and Cry Over Kronstadt,” *New Internationalist*, IV (1938), 103.
5. *What the ‘Friends of the People’ Are* (Moscow, 1951), 286.
6. *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (New York, 1928).
7. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Moscow, 1952), 281.
8. Quoted in Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast* (London, 1963), 317.
9. See Georges Lefebvre’s summary statement in *The Thermidoreans* (New York, 1966), ch. 11.
10. But Deutscher was surely right to argue, against Trotsky, that the Stalinist purges were a feature of the Russian Terror and not of the Russian Thermidor: *Prophet Outcast*, 316.
11. *State and Revolution* (New York, 1932), 42-43.
12. *How to Organize Competition* (Moscow, 1951), 62.
13. *On Revolution* (New York, 1963), 21 ff.
14. See Benjamin I. Schwartz, “The Reign of Virtue: Thoughts on China’s Cultural Revolution,” *Dissent*, XVI (1969), 239-251.
15. *The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government*, in *Selected Works* (New York, 1935-1937), VII, 331.
16. The phrase is quoted in Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (New York, 1978), 108.
17. See Crane Brinton, *The Jacobins* (New York, 1950), 230 ff. for an account of the later activities of Jacobin militants.
18. *The Civil War in France*, in Marx-Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1951), I, 472.
19. *The Discourses*, I, ix.