

fore thought out. Read, in the chapter "La Terre à tous promise" ["The Land Promised to Everybody"], the pages on the rights of the Palestinians and the fact of Israel: all the changes of lighting that are triggered by new events or vicissitudes happen through resurgences of former lights and shades: those of long-gone Blida and Algeria.

Impossible, as one turns these pages, not to think of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's teaching and of what was for him the essential philosophical task: never to consent to being completely comfortable with one's own presuppositions. Never to let them fall peacefully asleep, but also never to believe that a new fact will suffice to overturn them; never to imagine that one can change them like arbitrary axioms, remembering that in order to give them the necessary mobility one must have a distant view, but also look at what is nearby and all around oneself. To be very mindful that everything one perceives is evident only against a familiar and little-known horizon, that every certainty is sure only through the support of a ground that is always unexplored. The most fragile instant has its roots. In that lesson, there is a whole ethic of sleepless evidence that does not rule out, far from it, a rigorous economy of the True and the False; but that is not the whole story.

## NOTES

- 1 Moses Mendelssohn, "Über die Frage: Was ist Aufklären?" *Berlinsche Monatsschrift*, 4.3 (Sept. 1784), pp. 193-200. Immanuel Kant, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" *Berlinsche Monatsschrift*, 4.6 (Dec. 1784), pp. 491-94.
- 2 This review of Jean Daniel's *Ere des ruptures* (Paris: Grasset, 1979) appeared in *Le Nouvel Observateur* in April 1979. [eds.]

## USELESS TO REVOLT?\*

**W**e are ready to die in thousands to make the shah leave," Iranians were saying last year. And the Ayatollah these days: "Let Iran bleed so the revolution will be strong."

There is a strange echo between these phrases that seem connected. Does the horror of the second condemn the intoxication of the first?

Revolts belong to history. But, in a certain way, they escape from it. The impulse by which a single individual, a group, a minority, or an entire people says, "I will no longer obey," and throws the risk of their life in the face of an authority they consider unjust seems to me to be something irreducible. Because no authority is capable of making it utterly impossible: Warsaw will always have its ghetto in revolt and its sewers crowded with rebels. And because the man who rebels is finally inexplicable; it takes a wrenching-away that interrupts the flow of history, and its long chains of reasons, for a man to be able, "really," to prefer the risk of death to the certainty of having to obey.

All the forms of established or demanded freedom, all the rights that one asserts, even in regard to the seemingly least important things, no doubt have a last anchor point there, one more solid and closer to experience than "natural rights." If societies persist and live, that is, if the powers that be are not "utterly absolute," it is because, behind all the submissions and coercions, beyond the threats, the violence, and the intimidations, there is the possibility of that moment when life can no longer be bought, when the au-

thorities can no longer do anything, and when, facing the gallows and the machine guns, people revolt.

Because they are thus "outside history" and in history, because everyone stakes his life, and his death, on their possibility, one understands why uprisings have so easily found their expression and their drama in religious forms. Promises of the afterlife, time's renewal, anticipation of the savior or the empire of the last days, a reign of pure goodness—for centuries all this constituted, where the religious form allowed, not an ideological costume but the very way of experiencing revolts.

Then came the age of "revolution." For two hundred years this idea overshadowed history, organized our perception of time, and polarized people's hopes. It constituted a gigantic effort to domesticate revolts within a rational and controllable history: it gave them a legitimacy, separated their good forms from their bad, and defined the laws of their unfolding; it set their prior conditions, objectives, and ways of being carried to completion. Even a status of the professional revolutionary was defined: By thus repatriating revolt, people have aspired to make its truth manifest and to bring it to its real end. A marvelous and formidable promise. Some will say that the revolt was colonized in Realpolitik. Others that the dimension of a rational history has been opened to it. I prefer the naive and rather feverish question that Max Horkheimer once posed: "But is this revolution really such a desirable thing?"

The enigma of revolts. For anyone who did not look for the "underlying reasons" for the movement in Iran was but attentive to the way in which it was experienced, for anyone who tried to understand what was going on in the heads of these men and women when they were risking their lives, one thing was striking. They inscribed their humiliations, their hatred for the regime, and their resolve to overthrow it at the bounds of heaven and earth, in an envisioned history that was religious just as much as it was political. They confronted the Pahlavis, in a contest where everyone's life was on the line, but where it was also a question of millennial sacrifices and promises. So that the famous demonstrations, which played such an important role, could at the same time respond in an effective way to the threat from the army (to the extent of paralyzing it), follow the rhythm of religious ceremonies, and appeal to a timeless drama in which the secular power is always accused.

This startling superimposition produced, in the middle of the twentieth century, a movement strong enough to overthrow an apparently well-armed regime while being close to old dreams that the West had known in times past, when people attempted to inscribe the figures of spirituality on political ground.

Years of censorship and persecution, a political class kept under tutelage, parties outlawed, revolutionary groups decimated: where else but in religion could support be found for the disarray, then the rebellion, of a population traumatized by "development," "reform," "urbanization," and all the other failures of the regime? True. But should one have expected the religious element to quickly move aside in favor of forces that were more real and ideologies that were less "archaic"? Undoubtedly not, and for several reasons.

First there was the rapid success of the movement, reconfirming it in the form it had just taken. There was the institutional solidity of a clergy whose sway over the population was strong, and whose political ambitions were vigorous. There was the whole context of the Islamic movement: with the strategic positions it occupies, the economic keys which Muslim countries hold, and its own expansionary force over two continents, it constitutes an intense and complex reality all around Iran. With the result that the imaginary contents of the revolt did not dissipate in the broad daylight of the revolution. They were immediately transposed to a political scene that seemed fully prepared to receive them but was actually of a completely different nature. This scene contained a blend of the most important and the most atrocious elements: the formidable hope of making Islam into a great civilization once again, and forms of virulent xenophobia; global stakes and regional rivalries. Along with the problem of imperialisms and the subjugation of women, and so on.

The Iranian movement did not come under that "law" of revolutions which brings to visibility, so it would seem, the tyranny lurking within them, beneath the blind enthusiasm. What constituted the most internal and the most intensely experienced part of the uprising bore directly on an overloaded political chessboard. But this contact was not an identity. The spirituality which had meaning for those who went to their deaths has no common measure with the bloody government of an integrist clergy. The Iranian clerics

want to authenticate their regime by using the significations that the uprising had. People here reason no differently when they discredit the fact of the uprising because today there is a government of mullahs. In both cases, there is "fear." Fear of what happened in Iran last autumn, something the world had not produced an example of for a long time.

Hence, precisely, the need to grasp what is irreducible in such a movement—and deeply threatening for any despotism, whether that of yesterday or that of today.

To be sure, there is no shame in changing one's opinion; but there is no reason to say one has changed it when today one is against severed hands, having yesterday been against the tortures of the Savak.

No one has the right to say, "Revolt for me; the final liberation of all men depends on it." But I am not in agreement with anyone who would say, "It is useless for you to revolt; it is always going to be the same thing." One does not dictate to those who risk their lives facing a power. Is one right to revolt, or not? Let us leave the question open. People do revolt; that is a fact. And that is how subjectivity (not that of great men, but that of anyone) is brought into history, breathing life into it. A convict risks his life to protest unjust punishments; a madman can no longer bear being confined and humiliated; a people refuses the regime that oppresses it. That doesn't make the first innocent, doesn't cure the second, and doesn't ensure for the third the tomorrow it was promised. Moreover, no one is obliged to support them. No one is obliged to find that these confused voices sing better than the others and speak the truth itself. It is enough that they exist and that they have against them everything that is dead set on shutting them up for there to be a sense in listening to them and in seeing what they mean to say. A question of ethics? Perhaps. A question of reality, without a doubt. All the disenchantments of history won't alter the fact of the matter: it is because there are such voices that the time of human beings does not have the form of evolution but that of "history," precisely.

This is inseparable from another principle: the power that one man exerts over another is always perilous. I am not saying that power, by nature, is evil; I am saying that power, with its mechanisms, is infinite (which does not mean that it is omnipotent, quite

the contrary). The rules that exist to limit it can never be stringent enough; the universal principles for dispossessing it of all the occasions it seizes are never sufficiently rigorous. Against power one must always set inviolable laws and unrestricted rights.

These days, intellectuals don't have a very good "press." I believe I can employ that word in a rather precise sense. This is not the moment to say that one is not an intellectual; besides, I would just provoke a smile. I am an intellectual. If I were asked for my conception of what I do, the strategist being the man who says, "What difference does a particular death, a particular cry, a particular revolt make compared to the great general necessity, and, on the other hand, what difference does a general principle make in the particular situation where we are?", well, I would have to say that it is immaterial to me whether the strategist is a politician, a historian, a revolutionary, a follower of the shah or of the ayatollah; my theoretical ethic is opposite to theirs. It is "antistrategic": to be respectful when a singularity revolts, intransigent as soon as power violates the universal. A simple choice, a difficult job: for one must at the same time look closely, a bit beneath history, at what cleaves it and stirs it, and keep watch, a bit behind politics, over what must unconditionally limit it. After all, that is my work; I am not the first or the only one to do it. But that is what I chose.

## NOTES

- \* This statement appeared in *Le Monde* in May 1979. [eds.]