

The Great Ideas Today 1970



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Revolution is a perennial idea. Yet there is no doubt that it has had greater currency at one time than another. We seem now to be living at a time in which the idea of revolution is again experiencing an upswing in popularity. It is therefore appropriate that we consider what we think about revolution and what we should think about it.

The West has a long tradition of thinking about the idea of revolution, which is well represented in Great Books of the Western World. One need only cite the authors who discuss revolution: Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Shakespeare, Locke, Montesquieu, the authors of

The Federalist, Hegel, Marx, and Engels. In organizing our symposium, we asked our contributors to continue this conversation.

Our contributors represent different approaches to the idea of revolution. None of them is as such an advocate of immediate violent political revolution. To represent that position, we reprint in Part Four Lenin's State and Revolution, which was written immediately before the violent overthrow of the Russian state in 1917.

Although not advocates of violent revolution, two of our authors find the idea of revolution more attractive than do the other two. Both Illich and Goodman, at least by implication, view sympathetically some of the revolutionary aspirations present in the world today, though both contend that these aspirations need redirecting. Toynbee and Buckley take a more skeptical attitude toward revolution.

The greatest difference among our four authors lies in the focus of their interest in revolution. Dr. Toynbee, as a historian, takes an admittedly long view of the subject and considers how revolutions have arisen in the history of civilization. Dr. Illich speaks as a representative of the Third World, an expression that he dislikes and criticizes, though he would not deny that the part of the world that it is used to designate is often held to be the closest to revolution, even of a violent sort. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the current concern about revolution is the emergence of anarchism as an ideal that is considered attractive and feasible, and this is the subject on which Paul Goodman writes. The ideal of a society that can function without the use of coercion is one of the few anarchist ideals shared by Lenin; in fact, it is the essence of what he, after Engels, describes as "the withering away of the state." The impracticability, if not impossibility, of governing without the sanction, if

not the actual use, of force is one of the main contentions of William Buckley s analysis of what he calls counterrevolutionary doctrine.

The last part of our symposium consists of an attempt to delineate at least the main contours of the discussion of revolution as it is found in Great Books of the Western World.

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