

Robert Nisbet's Ten Conditions of Revolution

One of the twentieth century's most astute observers of society, sociologist, historian, and man of letters, Professor Robert Nisbet (1913-1996), offered ten conditions of revolution. By this, he meant not what we want to label revolution (which is cheap and easy to do), but what really constitutes revolution. He wrote these after years of observing, experiencing, and digesting the student rebellions of 1964-1970, which he pronounced not a revolution but a middle-class temper tantrum. The students who revolted, he understood, were too soft to be true revolutionaries. Black Americans had legitimate grievances in the 1960s, and they might very well be on the verge of legitimate revolution, but not the white middle-class kids who played revolutionary in the 1960s. Whatever damage they might have caused society in the short and long runs, they did so as spoiled children, not as revolutionaries.

So, according to Nisbet, what are the conditions of real and true revolution? He laid them out in his typical, succinct fashion. And, at times rather blatantly, he relied upon the language and the ideas of the great Anglo-Irish statesman, Edmund Burke (1729-1797).

First, a real revolution must follow a dramatic change in the economic or societal order. Something drastic has to have happened, though it might very well have happened so gradually in the social frame that it went unrecognized as an "event" that can be defined and understood in isolation.

Second, authority – or the understanding of authority – must collapse, leading to "if not a breakdown, at least a confusion of authority." By authority, Nisbet meant not power (which is presumed and assumed), but a mutual and consensual

understanding of respect both given and earned. An example would be a professor who earned the respect of his students and thus has established his authority by teaching well, knowing his subject, and treating the students with dignity. Opposed to this, as an example of power, would be the professor who wields grades over his students as a weapon.

Third, society must have become, relatively recently, wealthy or wealthier than it had been. One of the most tragic mistakes observers – historians, sociologists, political theorists, and social commentators – have made was claiming that revolution occurs when a people are in poverty. Revolutions occur when the people have recently left a condition of poverty and have seen what affluence is possible. “There must be enough feel of possessions,” Nisbet argued, “enough sense of affluence, to make the sense of what hasn’t been achieved a galling one.”

Fourth, and deeply related to the third point, society must have recently liberalized, thus allowing those recently freed to see what is still possible to be gained. “It is the liberalization of the old regime that makes possible, at one and the same time, the feeling of relative deprivation of freedom and the means of doing something about it,” Nisbet explained.

Fifth, society must have become intensely politicized, witnessing the political sphere swamp and dominate all other spheres of existence. As such, issues have become nearly Manichean in their division of good and evil, just and unjust.

Sixth, the intellectual elites, having accepted the politicization of society – and perhaps even having precipitated it – must see the opportunities a politicized and centralized power structure presents to them, and they must eagerly seize it.

Seventh, some catalyst must take place which throws intellectuals, politicians, and a substantial number of

revolutionaries to passionate extremes. "There must be some precipitating incident or event," Nisbet claimed, "one that, while in no way necessarily related to internal conditions, succeeds in bringing passions to ever greater boil and, with this, potential mobilization of numbers."

Eighth, while revolutions will never attract the mass of people, they must be able to mobilize, morally, a small cadre of crusaders to mock the norms of a society. "The atmosphere of idealism, however bogus it may be in terms of underlying realities, must form, giving blanket to the inevitable harshnesses, the inescapable violence, the occasional atrocity of revolutionary behavior."

Ninth, armed with morality – again, however false and hypocritical – the revolutionaries must paint an idyllic picture of their future, a progressivism that leads to some sort of utopian-like qualities. The more the revolutionaries can show the corruption of the present state of existence, the brighter their own outlook can be. After all, Nisbet understood, "it is always difficult, nay, impossible, to deny the existence of corruption and hypocrisy in some degree at least around one; such is the human condition."

Finally, tenth, there must already exist a certain amount of guilt within and among members of the ruling class. This must be something that is at least tangentially obvious and exploitable by those who will be revolting.

Given the events of the moment in this era of confusion in American history, one cannot help but wonder if 2020 counts as a revolution. Only time will tell, of course, and it's still too early in the crisis to know its resolution, but there's no doubt that those deeply involved in the protests of 2020 (for and against them) have seen the shadow of revolution. Many, on both sides, have even longed for it. Again, though, there are degrees of expression and reaction. Sometimes, the imagery and symbolism in 2020 – such as a guillotine in front of Jeff

Bezos's house – is simply over the top. At other times, though, the movement in 2020, whether revolutionary or not, has been incredibly subtle and nuanced. Only time will tell.

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