

Revolution and Freedom*

Hannah Arendt
(Edited by Adriano Correia)**

My subject today is, I'm afraid, almost embarrassingly topical. Revolutions have become everyday occurrences since, with the liquidation of imperialism, one people after the other has risen "to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of Nature and of nature's God entitle them". Just as the most lasting result of imperialist expansion was the export of the European nation-state idea to the four corners of the earth, so the liquidation of imperialism under the pressure of nationalism has led to the export, as it were, of the idea of revolution all over the globe. For all the revolutions, no matter how violently anti-Western their rhetoric may be, stand under the sign and have fallen into the tradition of revolution in the West. This state of affairs was preceded by the series of revolutions after the First World War on the European continent itself. Since then, and even more markedly after the Second World War, nothing seems more certain than that a revolutionary change of the form of government, as distinguished from a mere alteration of administration, will follow defeat in war between the great powers - short, of course, of total annihilation. But it is of some importance to note that even before technological developments made wars between the great powers literally a life and death struggle, and hence self-defeating, at least for the time being, wars had become politically a matter of life and death. This was by no means a matter of course. It signifies that the protagonists of national wars had begun to act as though they were involved in civil wars. And the small wars of the last twenty years (Korea, Algeria, Vietnam) have been clearly civil wars, in which

* The original manuscript, dated to 1966-1967, may be found in *The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress*: https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?mharendt:1./temp/-ammem_eA23:. In this edition we inserted the Arendt's handwritten additions. All the many and relevant suppressions and previous formulations may be verified in the original manuscript. We chose to point out only the most relevant modifications.

**Associate Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy of Federal University of Goiás, Brazil, and scholarship holder of National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (Brazil). I would like to thank Neil Wall, Carla Milani Damiano and Thiago Dias da Silva for their invaluable assistances in editing this text.

1 Arendt quotes the introduction of the American Declaration of Independence. See Thomas Jefferson, *Political writings*, p.96-97.

the great powers got involved either because revolution threatened their rule or had created a dangerous power vacuum. In these instances it was no longer war that triggered off revolution; the initiative has shifted from war to revolution which, now, in some, though by no means all cases, is followed by military intervention - as though we were suddenly back in the 18th century when the American Revolution was followed by a war against England, and the French Revolution by a war against the allied royal powers of Europe.

And again, despite the enormously different circumstances, technological and otherwise, military interventions appear relatively helpless in face of this phenomenon. There were quite a number of revolutions over the last 200 years that went to their doom, but there were not very many whose ruin was marked by superiority in the means, and application of the means, of violence. Conversely, military interventions, even when they were successful, have often proved remarkably inefficient in restoring stability and filling the power vacuum. Even victory seems unable to substitute stability for chaos, honesty for corruption, authority and trust in government for disintegration. Restoration, the consequence of an interrupted revolution, usually provides not much more than a thin and rather obviously provisional cover under which the old processes of disintegration go on unchecked. There is, on the other hand, a great potential future stability inherent in consciously formed new political bodies, and the American republic is of course its best example; the trouble is only that successful revolutions seem to be very rare indeed. Still, in this configuration where, for better or worse, revolutions have become the most significant and the most frequent events probably for decades still, it would not only be wiser but more relevant if, instead of boasting that we are the mightiest power on earth, we would say that we have enjoyed an extraordinary stability ever since the foundation of the republic, and that this stability was the direct outgrowth of revolution. For since the contests between the great powers can no longer be decided by wars, it may well be that they will be decided in the long run by the question of which one understands better what is involved and what is at stake in a revolution.

It is, I think, a secret for nobody, at least not since the Bay of Pigs episode, that the foreign policy of this country has hardly shown itself particularly expert and knowledgeable in judging revolutionary situations and understanding the proper momentum of revolutionary movements. This episode is often blamed on faulty information and a failure of secret services; the failure actually lies much deeper. It was the failure to understand what it means when a poverty-stricken people in a backward country, where corruption has reached the point of rotteness, are suddenly released, not from their poverty, but from the obscurity and muteness - and hence incomprehensibility - of their misery, when they hear for the first time their condition being discussed in the open and find themselves invited to participate in

the discussion; what it means when they are brought to their capital, which they have never seen before and are being told: these streets and these buildings and these squares, all this is yours, your possession and hence your pride. This, or something of this sort, happened for the first time during the French Revolution, and it was an old man in Prussia - who had never left his hometown, but happened to be a philosopher and a lover of freedom - Immanuel Kant, who has not been famous for rebellious thoughts, who at once understood: “such a phenomenon in human history will never be forgotten”². Indeed, so little has it been forgotten that it has made world history. And though many revolutions ended in tyranny, it was not forgotten either that, in the words of Condorcet, “the word ‘revolutionary’ can be applied only to revolutions whose aim is freedom”³.

“Revolution”, like any other term of our political vocabulary, can be used in a generic sense without taking into account either the word’s origin or the temporal moment when the term was first applied to a definite political phenomenon. The assumption of such usage is that no matter when and why the term itself made its first appearance, the phenomenon itself has been, as it were, coeval with history as such; and the temptation to use the word revolution in this general terminological sense is particularly strong when we speak of “wars and revolutions”; for wars are indeed as old as the recorded memory of mankind. One can of course note down a history of war, of how wars were actually conducted, for what reasons and with what justifications, means and goals at different times and in different civilizations, but one will hardly ever be able to pin down something like the first war in history. According to both our classical and biblical tradition, at the very beginning of history stands a war-like act (Cain slew Abel, Romulus slew Remus) or an actual, though legendary war (the war against Troy, Aeneas’ war against Italy⁴).

This oldest legendary notion that a beginning must be intimately connected with violence - that violence, as it were, gave birth to history, that whatever brotherhood human beings may be capable of has grown out of fratricide, that whatever political organization men may have achieved has its origin in crime - has travelled through the centuries as one of the almost unexamined, almost self-evident assumptions of political thought. It has influenced the thinking and the ideologies of both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements, insofar as both agreed that only violence and crime could bring about a new beginning, so that the revolutionists put their trust into violence, be it that Jefferson held that “the

2 I. Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, p.88: “ein solches Phänomen in der Menschengeschichte vergisst sich nicht mehr”. See H. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, p.45-46, for instance.

3 “Sur le sens du mot révolutionnaire”, (Published originally in 01/06/1793, *Journal d’Instruction sociale*), in *Oeuvres*, vol. XVII (1847), p.615: “le mot *révolutionnaire* ne s’applique qu’aux révolutions qui ont la liberte pour objet”. Quoted in H. Arendt, *On revolution*, p.29.

4 See *On revolution*, p.209.

tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure”⁵, or that Marx thought of violence as the ultimate driving force of history⁶, while counter-revolutionists denounced every revolution, since it meant a new beginning, as a crime.

Yet, while it seems difficult indeed to use the term war in any other but a generic sense, because its first appearance cannot be dated in time or localized in space, no such excuse for indiscriminate usage has ever existed for the term revolution. Prior to the two great revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century, the very word was absent from the vocabulary of political thought or practice, at least in the sense in which from then on it was used. For the seventeenth century, in which the term first appeared in political usage still clung strictly to its original astronomical meaning, signifying the eternal, irresistible, ever-recurring motion of the heavenly bodies; it now was used metaphorically to describe a movement of revolving back to some pre-established point, and hence, politically, to indicate a motion of swinging back into some pre-ordained order. Thus the word was first used not when what we call a revolution broke out in England and Cromwell rose to a kind of revolutionary dictatorship, but on the contrary, in 1660, after the overthrow of the Rump Parliament and on the occasion of the reestablishment of the monarchy. And even the Glorious Revolution, the event through which, rather paradoxically, the term found its definite place in political and historical language, was not thought of as a revolution at all, but as the restoration of monarchical power to its former righteousness and glory. But what revolution actually meant, prior to the 18th century revolutions, is perhaps most clearly indicated in the inscription on the great seal of 1651 which said that the first transformation of monarchy into a republic meant that “*Freedom, by God’s blessing, [was] restored*”⁷.

The fact that the word “revolution” meant, originally, restoration is more than a mere oddity of semantics. Even the eighteenth century revolutions cannot be understood unless it is realized that the first revolutions broke out when restoration had been aimed at, and that the content of the “restoration” was freedom. In the words of John Adams, the men of the revolution had been “called without expectation

5 Arendt remarks in *On revolution* (p.322, n. 28), that “the much-quoted words occur in a letter from Paris to Colonel William Stephens Smith, 13 November 1787”. William Stephen Smith was John Adams’ son-in-law. Jefferson was referring to Shays’ Rebellion against the government of Massachusetts in 1786-1787.

6 “‘Violence is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one’ [K. Marx, *Capital*, New York: Modern Library, p.824], hence: violence is the midwife of history”, H. Arendt, “Tradition and the modern age”, p.21. Arendt replaces “force”, in mentioned edition, with “violence” - *Gewalt*, in German (K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, p.680). Cf. H. Arendt, “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought”, p.287-290.

7 Arendt refers to “The Great Seal of England, 1648”, whose complete inscription was: “In the first year of Freedom, by God’s blessing restored, 1648”. See *On revolution*, p.43.

and compelled without previous inclination”⁸, and the same is true for France, where, in Tocqueville’s words, “one might have believed the aim of the coming revolution was not the overthrow of the old regime, but its restoration”⁹.

And when in the course of both revolutions the actors became aware of the fact that they were embarked upon an entirely new enterprise, and hardly revolving back to any event preceding them, and when the word, consequently, had acquired its new “revolutionary” meaning, it was Thomas Paine of all people who could, still true to the spirit of a bygone age, propose in all earnestness to call the American and French Revolutions by the name of “counter-revolution”, in order to save the new, extraordinary events from suspicion that an entirely new beginning had been made and to save them from the odium of violence which, inevitably, was connected with such an enterprise. This almost instinctive horror before the entirely new, which is quite manifest in the mentality of these first revolutionaries, we are liable to overlook partly because we are so well acquainted with the general eagerness of the Modern Age since its beginning in science and philosophy for “things never seen before and thoughts never thought before”¹⁰, and partly, this is easily overlooked because nothing indeed in the course of these revolutions is more conspicuous and more striking than the emphatic stress on novelty, repeated over and over again by actors and spectators alike - their insistence that nothing comparable in significance and grandeur had ever happened before, that an entirely new era was about to unfold. Yet his entirely new story was initiated by men who were firmly convinced that they were about to do no more than restore an old and “natural” order of things which had been disturbed and violated by existing powers. Nothing would have been more alien to their mind prior to the actual experiences of the revolution than eagerness for new things, an eagerness which was even then quite current in non-political doing and thinking, though, of course, our present-day convictions that novelty as such could be desirable were still quite random. The enormous pathos of a new era, of the *novus ordo saeculorum*, which is still inscribed on our dollar bills, came to the fore only after the actors, much against their will, had come to a point of no return.

Hence, what actually happened at the end of the eighteenth century was that

8 “A defense of the constitutions of government of the United States of America”, in *The works of John Adams*, Vol. 4, p.293.

9 “On eût pu croire que le but de la révolution qui se préparait était, non la destruction du régime ancien, mais sa restauration”. *L’Ancien Régime et la Révolution - fragments et notes inédites sur la révolution*, p.72. See *On revolution*, p.45.

10 See *On revolution*, p.46-47 and 172. “Galileo Galilei and Martin Luther and the great seafarers, explorers, and adventurers in the age of discovery, still belong to a premodern world. Moreover, the strange pathos of novelty, the almost violent insistence of nearly all the great authors, scientists, and philosophers since the seventeenth century that they saw things never seen before, thought thoughts never thought before, can be found in none of them, not even in Galileo”. H. Arendt, *The human condition*, p.248-249.

an attempt at restoration and recovery of old rights and privileges resulted in the exact opposite, namely the opening up of a future and a progressing development which defied all further attempts at acting or thinking in terms of revolving, circular motions. And while the term “revolution” was radically transformed in the revolutionary process, something similar, but infinitely more complicated, happened to the word “freedom”. So long as nothing more was meant than freedom by God’s blessing *restored*, it was a question of those rights and liberties which we today associate with constitutional government and which are properly called civil rights. What was not included in them was the political right to participate in public affairs. But none of the other rights, not even the right to be represented for purposes of taxation, were in theory or practice the result of revolution. Not “life, liberty, and property”, but the claim that they were inalienable rights of all human creatures, no matter where they lived and what kind of government they enjoyed, was a revolutionary claim. And even in this new revolutionary extension to all mankind, liberty meant no more than freedom from unjustified restraint, that is, something essentially negative.

Liberties in the sense of civil rights are the results of liberation, but they are by no means the actual content of freedom, whose essence is participation in public affairs and admission to the public realm. Had the revolutions aimed only at the guarantee of civil rights, the liberation from certain regimes which had overstepped their powers and infringed upon old and well-established rights would have been enough. It is true, the revolutions began with claims for such old rights, for “freedom *restored*”, but they overstepped the limits which such claims implied almost from the beginning of the revolutionary process. The difficulty here is that revolution has always been concerned with both, liberation and freedom, and since liberation is indeed a condition of freedom, though freedom is by no means the necessary result of liberation, it is very difficult to say where the mere desire for liberation, to be free from oppression, ended and the desire for freedom as the political way of life began.

The point of the matter is that the former, the desire to be free from oppression, could very well have been fulfilled under monarchical, though not under tyrannical, rule, whereas the latter necessitated the formation of a new, or rather rediscovered form of government; it demanded the constitution of a republic. For nothing, indeed, is more clearly borne out by the facts than Jefferson’s claim “that the contests of that day were contests of principle, between the advocates of republican and those of kingly government”¹¹. And this equation of republican government with freedom, the conviction that monarchy is a crime or a government fit for slaves, though it

¹¹ *The Anas* (4 February 1818), in *The complete Jefferson*, p.1206ff. See *On Revolution*, p.33 and 310, n. 64.

became commonplace almost as soon as the revolutions had started, had also been quite absent from the minds of the men of the revolutions. This was the new freedom they now were aiming at, and yet, one can hardly maintain that they had no notion of it prior to the revolutions. On the contrary, it was a passion for this new political freedom, though not yet equated with the republican form of government, which inspired and prepared those who didn't yet know what a revolution was, for the role they were to play in them. For every understanding of the phenomenon of revolution it is elementary to realize that¹² no revolution, no matter how wide it may have opened the gates to the masses of the poor and the downtrodden - *les malheureux, les misérables, les damnés de la terre*¹³ as we know them from the grand rhetoric that came out of the French Revolution - was ever started by them, just as no revolution was ever the result of conspiracy, secret societies, or open revolutionary parties.

Generally speaking, we may say that no revolution is even possible where the authority of the body politic is truly intact, which means, under modern conditions, where the armed forces can be trusted to obey the civil authorities. Revolutions are the answer - not the necessary but the possible answer - to disintegration; they are the consequences, but never the causes of the downfall of political authority. Wherever these disintegration processes, usually for a rather long time, have been permitted to develop unchecked, revolutions *may* occur, namely under the condition that there exists a sufficient number of men who are prepared for its collapse and willing to assume power. Revolutions always appear to succeed with amazing ease in their initial stage, and the reason is that the men who supposedly "make" them don't "seize power", but pick up the power which lies in the street.

If the men of the American and French Revolutions had anything in common prior to the events which were to determine their lives, to shape their convictions and eventually to draw them apart, it was a passionate concern for public freedom, for participation in public affair and a no less passionate hatred for the hypocrisy and foolishness of "good society", to which was added a more or less outspoken contempt and discontent with the pettiness of merely private affairs. In this sense of the formation of a very special mentality, John Adams was entirely right when he said that "the revolution was effected before the war commenced"¹⁴, but not because

12 Removed: "To the question 'What is Freedom', there are probably as many answers as there are centuries in the history of human thought, and if we want to find out the interconnectedness of freedom and revolution we must raise the question: what kind of freedom is here at stake? In an attempt to answer this, we first turn our attention to the notion of political freedom which preceded the revolutions and inspired and prepared those who didn't yet know what a revolution was, for the role they were to play in them".

13 See *On revolution*, p.112-114.

14 Letter to Niles (14 January 1818), in *The works of John Adams*, vol. 10, p.282 (quoted in *On revolution*, p.118).

of any specifically revolutionary, rebellious spirit but because the inhabitants of the colonies were “formed by law into corporations, or bodies politic” with the “right to assemble... in their own town halls, there to deliberate upon public affairs”; for it was indeed “in these assemblies of towns or districts that the sentiments of the people were formed in the first place”¹⁵. To be sure, nothing comparable to the political institutions in the colonies existed in France, but the spirit was still the same; what was in France a “passion” and a “taste”, in Tocqueville’s words¹⁶, clearly was an experience in America which, from the earliest times of colonization, actually since the Mayflower compact had been a veritable school of the public spirit and of public freedom.

Prior to the revolutions, these men on both sides of the Atlantic were called *hommes de lettres*, and it is indeed very characteristic of them that they spent their time in “ransacking the archives of antiquity”¹⁷, that is, in turning towards Roman history, but not because they were romantically enamored with the past as such but with the specific purpose of recovering certain political lessons, spiritual as well as institutional, which obviously had been lost or half-forgotten during the centuries of a strictly Christian tradition. This passion for freedom, taught in the school of antiquity when man’s highest ambition found its fulfillment in the public realm, was nourished as it were by an astounding drive toward distinction and significance, toward greatness and even glory, and it was accompanied by a conscious emulation of ancient virtue. “The world has been empty since the Romans and is filled only with their memory, which is now our only prophecy of freedom”¹⁸, exclaimed Saint-Just, just as Thomas Paine before him had predicted: “what Athens was in miniature, America will be in magnitude”¹⁹.

In order to understand this role of antiquity in the history of revolution²⁰, we must recall with what enthusiasm for “ancient prudence” Cromwell’s dictatorship had been greeted already by Harrington and Milton, and how this enthusiasm had been revived in the eighteenth century by Montesquieu’s *Considerations on the grandeur and the decadence of the Romans*²¹. Without the classical example of what

15 Letter to Abbé Mably (excerpts), (1782), in *The works of John Adams*, vol. 5, p.495 (quoted in *On revolution*, p.118).

16 See *On revolution*, p.118-119, 222, 245.

17 See *On revolution*, p.219.

18 “Le monde est vide depuis les Romains; et leur mémoire le remplit, et prophétise encore la liberté”. “Rapport sur la conjuration ourdie pour obtenir un changement de dynastie; et contre Fabre D’Eglantine, Danton, Philippeaux, Lacroix et Camille Desmoulins”, in *Oeuvres complètes de Saint-Just*, T. II, p.331 (quoted in *On revolution*, p.196, without naming the source).

19 “The rights of man”, in *The complete writings*, Vol. I, p.371-372 (quoted in *On revolution*, p.196, without naming the source).

20 From this point until the end of the paragraph Arendt reviews, with some slight changes, *On revolution*, p.196-197.

21 *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*, p.275: “Les

politics could be and participation in public affairs could mean for the happiness of man, none of the men of the revolutions would have possessed the courage for what then turned out to be unprecedented action. Historically speaking, it was as though the Renaissance's revival of antiquity should suddenly be granted another lease on life, as though the republican fervor of the short-lived Italian city-states, foredoomed by the advent of the nation-state, had only lain dormant to give the nations of Europe the time to grow up, as it were, under the tutelage of absolute princes and enlightened despots.

The first elements of a political philosophy which would correspond to this notion of public freedom are spelt out in John Adams' writings. His point of departure was the observation that "wherever men, women, or children, are to be found, whether they be old or young, rich or poor, high or low..., ignorant or learned, every individual is seen to be strongly actuated by a desire to be seen, heard, talked of, approved and respected by the people about him, and within his knowledge". The virtue of this "desire" he saw in "the desire to excel another" and its vice he called "ambition" which "aims at power as a means of distinction"²². And these two are indeed among the chief virtues and vices of political man, for the will to power as such - regardless of any passion for distinction, where power is not a means, but an end - is characteristic of the tyrant and is no longer even a political vice, but rather that quality that tends to destroy all political life, its vices no less than its virtues. It is precisely because the tyrant has no desire to excel and lacks all passion for distinction that he finds it so pleasant to dominate, and thereby to exclude himself from the company of others; conversely, it is the desire to excel which makes men love the company of their peers and drives them into public business.

This public freedom is *not* an inner realm where my will or my thought may remain free, regardless of exterior circumstances; it is rather a tangible worldly reality, created by men to be enjoyed by them together in public - to be seen, to be heard, to be known, and to be remembered by others. And this kind of freedom demands equality, it is possible only among one's peers; that is, institutionally speaking, it is possible only in a republic which knows no subjects and, strictly speaking, no rulers. This is the reason why the discussion of the form of government, in contrast to later revolutionary ideologies, played such an enormous role in the writing and thinking of these first revolutionists. It was not hatred for bad kings and tyrants - who after all had often been replaced by better ones without any change of form of government

Romains parvinrent à commander à tous les peuples, non-seulement par l'art de la guerre, mais aussi par leur prudence, leur sagesse, leur constance, leur amour pour la gloire et pour la patrie". See also p.239.

22 "Discourses on Davila", *The works of John Adams*, vol. 6, p.232-233. From this point until the end of the paragraph Arendt use extracts from her work *On Revolution* (p.119-120), with some slight alterations.

(and hence without any revolution) - that made them republicans; it was rather the conviction that “kingship itself” is a crime, as the French Revolution said, or that monarchies were a form of government fit for slaves, as we hear it from the American Revolution.

No doubt, it is obvious and of great consequence that this passion for freedom for its own sake awoke in and was nourished by men of leisure, by the *hommes de lettres* who had no master and were not busy with making a living. In other words, they enjoyed the privileges of ancient citizens without having any part in the affairs of state which kept the ancient free-men so enormously busy. Needless to add, that where men are in truly miserable conditions, this passion for freedom is entirely unknown. And if we needed additional proof for the absence of such conditions in the colonies - for the “lovely equality” in the country where “the most conspicuously wretched individual”²³ (Jefferson) was ever so much better off than nineteen of twenty millions of inhabitants in France; namely, “had a vote in public affairs, lived in a tidy warm House, had plenty of good Food and Fewel”²⁴ (Franklin) -, we need only remember that John Adams ascribed this love of freedom to “poor and rich, high and low, ignorant and learned”. It is the chief, perhaps the only reason, why the principles that inspired the men of the first revolutions became so triumphantly victorious in America and failed so tragically in France. Seen with American eyes, a republican government in France was “as unnatural, irrational and impracticable as it would be over elephants, lions, tigers, panthers, wolves, and bears in the royal menagerie at Versailles”²⁵ (John Adams). The reason why the attempt was made nevertheless is that those who made it, the *hommes de lettres*, were not much different from their American colleagues and that they learned only in the course of the French Revolution that they were acting under radically different circumstances.

The circumstances differed in political as well as in social respect. The rule of King and Parliament in England was indeed “mild government”²⁶ compared with French absolutism. The country had developed under its auspices an intricate and well-functioning regime of self-government which in many respects needed only the explicit foundation of the Republic to become solidified and be confirmed in existence. The country was not only economically ever so much better off, the people had been schooled in the participation of public affairs as no other nation in the world.

Still, these political differences, I think, though important enough, were

23 Letter from Paris to Mrs. Trist (18 August 1785), in *The writings of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. I, p.394-395. See *On revolution*, p.67.

24 Letter to Dr. Joshua Babcock, 13 Jan. 1772, in *The writings of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol. V (1767-1772), p.362.

25 John Adams in a letter to Jefferson (13 July 1813), in *The Adams-Jefferson letters*, p.355. See *On revolution*, p.67-68.

26 J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, (Letter III: What is an American, 1781), p.49. See *On revolution*, p.147, mainly, but also p.24 and 217.

negligible compared to the formidable obstacle to the constitution of freedom inherent in the social conditions of Europe. The men of the first revolutions, though they knew well enough that liberation had to precede freedom, were still unaware of the fact that such liberation means more than political liberation from absolute and despotic power, and that to be free for freedom meant first of all to be free not only from fear but from want. And this condition of desperate poverty of the masses of the people, who for the first time burst into the open when they streamed into the streets of Paris, could not be overcome with political means, and the mighty power of this constraint, under which they labored, did not crumble before the onslaught of the revolution as did the royal power of the king. The American Revolution was fortunate indeed that it did not have to face this obstacle to freedom, it owed a good measure of its success to the sheer absence of desperate poverty among the freemen and the complete invisibility of the slaves in the colonies of the New World.

To be sure, there existed poverty and misery in America that was quite comparable to the conditions of the “laboring poor” in Europe; if, in William Penn’s words, America was “a good poor Man’s country”²⁷ and constituted the dream of a promised land for Europe’s poor up to the beginning of this century, it is also true that this goodness depended to a considerable degree upon black misery. In the middle of the 18th century, roughly 400,000 Negroes along with approximately 1,850,000 white men lived in America, and despite the absence of reliable statistical data, nevertheless there is no doubt that the percentage of complete destitution was higher in the countries of the Old World at the time, though it became considerably higher during the 19th century. The difference, then, was that the American Revolution, because of the peculiar institution of slavery and because the slave belonged to a different race, could overlook the existence of the miserable and with it the formidable task of liberating those who were not so much constrained by political oppression as by the sheer necessities of life.

The *malheureux*, the wretched ones, who play such an enormous part in the course and the rhetoric of the French Revolution which identified them with “le people”, either did not exist or remained in complete obscurity during the American Revolution, whereas it was one of the main consequences of the Revolution in France to bring them out into the street, to make them visible for the first time in history. (By the same token, however, the American Revolution has remained without much consequence for the history of revolution, while the French Revolution that ended in resounding failure has determined and is still determining what by now we can call the revolutionary tradition. What then had happened in Paris in 1789?).²⁸ The French

²⁷ John Oldmixon, *The British empire in America*, p.408. See *On revolution*, p.71.

²⁸ The excerpt between parentheses was written on the back of the page. It was added at this point without any precise indication from Arendt concerning the exact place where the excerpt should be inserted.

Revolution had opened the doors to those who had never before been admitted to the public realm, whom antiquity had held in slavery, whom we find in a state of serfdom throughout the Middle Ages, and to whom the first centuries of the modern age had granted no more than the very precarious status of the “laboring poor”. When this happened, it turned out that not just freedom, but freedom to be free, had always been the privilege of the few and this not only in the positive sense - that only a few were admitted to the public realm and that under the rule of the absolute prince “the world of public affairs was not only hardly known to [the classes of leisure] but was invisible”²⁹ -, but in the negative sense as well. *Only very few were free to be free.*

Freedom from fear is a privilege that even the few have enjoyed in relatively short periods of history, but freedom from want has indeed been the great privilege by which a very small percentage of men has been distinguished throughout the centuries. And what we call the recorded history of mankind is actually the history of these privileged few. Only those who know freedom from want are in a position to appreciate fully what it means to be also free from fear, and only those who are free from both want and fear are in a position to conceive of that passion for public freedom or to develop in themselves that “*goût*”, the taste for liberty, and the peculiar love of equality which liberty carries with itself.

Schematically speaking, one may say that each revolution goes first through the stage of liberation before it can attain freedom, i. e., the second and decisive stage of the foundation of a new form of government, a new body politic. In the course of the American Revolution, the stage of liberation meant liberation from political constraint, from tyranny or monarchy or whatever the word may have been. The first stage was characterized by violence, but the second stage was a matter of deliberation, discussion and persuasion, of applying their “political science”, as the founding fathers understood it. In France, however, something altogether different happened. The first stage was much rather characterized by disintegration than by liberation or violence. And when the second stage of the revolution was reached and the National Convention had declared France to be a republic, the power had already shifted to the streets, and the men who had originally assembled in Paris to represent the “nation” rather than the people and whose chief concern - whether their name was Mirabeau or Robespierre, Danton or Saint-Just - had been government, the reformation of monarchy or later the foundation of a republic, saw themselves

29 Arendt mentions this excerpt in a note in *On revolution*, p.294, n. 11: “Tocqueville, op. cit. [*L’Ancien Régime et la Révolution*], p.195, speaking about *la condition des écrivains* and their *éloignement presque infini... de la pratique*, insists: ‘L’absence complète de toute liberté politique faisait que le monde des affaires ne leur était pas seulement mal connu, mais invisible’. And after describing how this lack of experience made their theories more radical, he stresses explicitly: ‘La même ignorance leur livrait l’oreille et le creur de la foule’”. See *On revolution*, p.124.

all of a sudden confronted with another task of liberation, of liberating the people at large from wretchedness in order to make them free to *be* free.

This was not what both Marx and Tocqueville saw as the entirely new feature of the revolution of 1848, the shift from changing the form of government to the attempt at altering the order of society by means of class-struggle; and Marx noted that only then, after February 1848, after the “first great battle... between the two classes that split society”, revolution meant “overthrow of bourgeois society whereas before it had meant overthrow of the form of state”³⁰. But it was the prelude, and though it ended in dismal failure, it remained decisive for all further revolutions. It showed what the new formula, that all men are created³¹ equal, meant in practice. And it was this equality which Robespierre had in mind when he said the revolution had pitted “the grandeur of man against the pettiness of the great”³², or Hamilton when he spoke of the revolution having vindicated “the honor of the human race”³³, or Kant, taught by Rousseau and the French Revolution, conceived of as the new dignity of man. And whatever the French Revolution did and did not achieve, although it did not make people equal, it liberated the poor³⁴ from obscurity, from non-visibility. What has seemed irrevocable ever since was that those who were devoted to freedom could never remain reconciled to a state of affairs where freedom from want, the freedom to be free, was a privilege of the few.

As to the original constellation of the men of revolution and the masses of the poor they happened to bring into the open, let me quote from Lord Acton’s interpretative description of the famous women’s march to Versailles, one of the turning-points in the French Revolution. The marchers, he said, “played the genuine part of mothers whose children were starving in squalid homes, and they thereby afforded to motives which they neither shared nor understood [i. e., the concern with government] the aid of a diamond point that nothing could withstand”³⁵. What the “*peuple*”, as the French understood it, brought to the revolution, and what was altogether absent from the course of American events, was the irresistibility of a

30 Karl Marx, *Die Klassenkämpfe in Frankreich 1848 bis 1850*, p.31 and 35: “Es blieb den Arbeitern keine Wahl, sie mußten verhungern oder losschlagen. Sie antworteten am 22. Juni mit der ungeheuren Insurrektion, worin die erste große Schlacht geliefert wurde zwischen den beiden Klassen, welche die modern Gesellschaft spalten. Es war ein Kampf um die Erhaltung oder Vernichtung der bürgerlichen Ordnung. Der Schleier, der die Republik verhüllte, zerriß. [...] Der 25. Februar 1848 hatte Frankreich die Republik oktroyiert, der 25. Juni drang ihm die Revolution auf. Und Revolution bedeutete nach dem Juni: Umwälzung der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft, während es vor dem Februar bedeutet hatte: Umwälzung der Staatsform”.

31 Arendt replaces “born” with “created”.

32 “Séance du 5 février 1794”, in *Oeuvres*, vol. III, p.542 (instead of p.543, as indicated in *On revolution*, p.288, n. 34): “Nous voulons substituer dans notre pays... la grandeur de l’homme à la petitesse des grands”.

33 *The Federalist*, n° 11, p.72.

34 Arendt replaces “people” with “poor”.

35 Lord Acton, *Lectures on the French Revolution*, p.129 (interpolation by Arendt).

movement which human power could no longer control. This elementary experience of the irresistibility of the revolution - as irresistible as the revolving motion of the stars - brought forth an entirely new imagery which we even today almost automatically associate when we think of revolutionary events.

When Saint-Just exclaimed, under the impact of what he had before his eyes, “*Les malheureux sont la puissance de la terre*”³⁶, he meant the great “revolutionary torrent” on whose rushing waves the actors were borne and carried away until its undertow sucked them from the surface and they perished together with their foes, the agents of counter-revolution (Desmoulins³⁷); or Robespierre’s tempest and mighty current which, nourished by the crimes of tyranny on one side, by the progress of liberty on the other, increased constantly in rapidity and violence³⁸; or what the spectators reported: a “majestic lava stream which spares nothing and which nobody can arrest”³⁹, a spectacle that had fallen under the sign of Saturn, “the revolution devouring its own children”⁴⁰.

The words I am quoting here were all spoken by men deeply involved in the French revolution, and they testify to things witnessed by them, not to things they had done or set out to do on purpose. This is what happened, and it taught men a lesson which, in hope or fear, has never been forgotten since. The lesson was as simple as it was new and unexpected. It said, in the words of Saint-Just: “If you wish to found a republic, you first must pull the people out of a condition of misery which corrupts them. There are no political virtues without pride, and no one can have pride who is wretched”⁴¹.

This new notion of freedom resting upon the liberation from poverty changed

36 “Rapport sur les personnes incarcérées”, in *Oeuvres complètes de Saint-Just*, T. II, p.238.

37 Camille Desmoulins, “Le vieux Cordelier”, I, V, VI, in *Oeuvres*, T. I, p.6, 127 and 141. See *On revolution*, p.48-49 and 209. See p.113-114 on the torrent of the poor set on the march, and their fury, “a torrent rushing forward with elemental force and engulfing a whole world”.

38 “Séance du 17 novembre 1793”, in *Oeuvres*, vol. III, p.446: “Les crimes de la tyrannie accélèrent les progrès de la liberté, et les progrès de la liberté multiplient les crimes de la tyrannie et redoublant ses alarmes et ses fureurs, il y a eu entre le peuple et ses ennemis une réaction continue dont la violence progressive”.

39 Words of Georg Forster quoted in Karl Griewank, *Der neuzeitliche Revolutionsbegriff*, p.243. See *On revolution*, p.49.

40 In *On revolution*, p.49, Arendt quotes this sentence of Pierre Vergniaud, “the great orator of the Gironde”. The source is Vergniaud’s speech of 13 march 1793: “Alors, s’écriait-il douloureusement, il a été permis de craindre que la Révolution, comme Saturne, ne dévorât successivement tous ses enfants” (Luis Blanc, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, Vol. 8, p.152). This image appears in the same year in M. Mallet du Pan, *Considérations sur la nature de la révolution de France*, p.80: “A l’exemple de Saturne, la révolution dévore ses enfans. Cet ensemble formidable qui en lioit toutes les parties, et en dirigeoit les mouvemens, est maintenant dissous: la Convention et ses clubs travaillent à le concentrer dans leur sein; mais avant d’y parvenir, il faut réduire les départemens et les villes soulevées, il faut réduire les royalistes vainqueurs à l’ouest, il faut prévenir des coalitions systématiques, il faut étouffer l’exemple dangereux de résistances efficaces”.

41 “Discurs sur les subsistances”, in *Oeuvres complètes de Saint-Just*, T. I, p.374-375.

the course and the goal of the revolution. Liberty⁴² now had to mean first of all “dress and food and the reproduction of the species”⁴³ as the Sans-culottes distinguished quite consciously their own rights from the lofty and, to them, meaningless language of the proclamation of the “rights of man and of the citizen”. Liberation now meant provision with life’s necessities, the abolition of what then was called “unhappiness”, the creation of “*bonheur*”, happiness - and this word, it was duly noted, was a new word in Europe. It meant the solution of the social question. Compared to the urgency of these demands, all deliberations about the best form of government suddenly appeared irrelevant and futile. “*La République? La Monarchie? Je ne connais que la question sociale*”⁴⁴, said Robespierre. And Saint-Just who had started out with the greatest possible enthusiasm for “republican institutions” was to add⁴⁵: “the freedom of the people is in its private life [...]. Let government be only the force to protect this state of simplicity against force itself”⁴⁶. He might not have known it, but that was precisely the credo of enlightened despotism which held with Charles I, in his speech from the scaffold, that the people’s “liberty and freedom consisted in having the government of those laws by which their life and their goods may be most their own: ‘tis not for having share in government, that is nothing pertaining to them”⁴⁷. If it was true - as all participants, moved by the misery of the people, suddenly agreed -, that the goal of revolution was the happiness of the people (*Le but de la Révolution est le Bonheur du Peuple*⁴⁸) then it was indeed much rather a

42 “Liberty” replaces “liberation”.

43 Arendt mentions in *On revolution*, p.289, n. 2, that “a ‘Declaration of the Rights of Sans-Culottes’ was proposed by Boisset [François Boissel, 1728-1807], a friend of Robespierre” (J. M. Thompson, *Robespierre*, p.365). “Robespierre vous a lu hier la déclaration des droits de l’homme, et moi je vais lire la déclaration des droits des sans-culottes. ‘Les sans-culottes de la République française reconnaissent que tous leurs droits dérivent de la nature, et que toutes les lois qui la contrarient ne sont point obligatoires; les droits naturels des sans-culottes consistent dans la faculté de se reproduire...’ (Bruit et éclats de rire). L’orateur continue. ‘De s’habiller et de se nourrir. 1° Leurs droits naturels consistent dans la jouissance et l’usufruit des biens de la terre, notre mère commune; 2° dans la résistance à l’oppression; 3° dans la résolution immuable de ne reconnaître de dépendance que celle de la nature ou de l’Être-Suprême’...” (P.-J.-B. Buchez and P.-C. Roux [eds.], *Histoire parlementaire de la Révolution Française*, v. 26 [avril 1793], p.107).

44 “Republic? Monarchy? I know only the social question”. Arendt probably quotes from Albert Ollivier, *Saint-Just et la force des choses*, p.165, where there is no indication of the source of the statement. In the complete works of Robespierre the most related sentence appears as follows: “Est ce dans le mots de république ou de monarchie que reside la solution du grand problem social?”. “Le défenseur de la constitution” (17 mai 1792), in *Oeuvres*, vol. I, p.319).

45 Removed: “in the purest tradition of absolutism”.

46 “Fragments sur les institutions republicaines”, in *Oeuvres complètes de Saint-Just*, T. II, p.507.

47 “King Charles’ speech made upon the scaffold at Whitehall-gate”, in Jim Daems and Holly F. Nelson (eds.), *Eikon basilike - the portrait of his sacred majesty in his solitudes and sufferings*, p.322. Partially quoted in H. Arendt, “What is freedom?”, *Between past and future*, p.150.

48 In *On revolution*, p.289, n. 3: “*Le but de la Révolution est le bonheur du peuple*, as the manifest of Sans-Culottism proclaimed it in November 1793. See n° 52 in *Die Sanskulotten von Paris. Dokumente zur Geschichte der Volksbewegung 1793-1794*. In the first paragraph of this document (*De l’esprit révolutionnaire*) we find also the follow statement: “La revolution est faite pour le

sufficiently enlightened despotic government that could provide it than a republic with freedom for all.

The French Revolution ended in disaster and made world history, the American Revolution was a triumphant success and remained a local affair - partly, of course, because social conditions in the world at large were by far more similar to the conditions surrounding the revolution in France, and partly because the so much praised Anglo-Saxon pragmatic tradition prevented the postrevolutionary generations in the United States from *thinking* about the revolution and adequately conceptualizing its experiences. It is therefore not surprising that the despotism, actually the return to the age of enlightened absolutism, which announces itself so clearly in the course of the French Revolution, became the rule for nearly all following revolutions which did not end in restoration, and even became dominant in revolutionary theory.

I don't need to follow this development into details, it is sufficiently well known especially from the history of the Bolshevist party and the Russian Revolution. What is more, it could be predicted: it was in late summer of 1918, that is, after the promulgation of the Soviet Constitution but prior to the first wave of terror which was triggered off by the attempt to assassinate Lenin, that Rosa Luxemburg in a private letter, which later was published and became famous, wrote as follows:

with the repression of political life in the land as a whole (...) life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element. Public life gradually falls asleep. The few dozen party leaders of inexhaustible energy and boundless experience direct and rule. Among them only a dozen outstanding heads do the leading and an elite of the working class is invited from time to time to meetings where they are to applaud the speeches of the leaders, and to approve proposed resolutions unanimously (...). A dictatorship, to be sure; not the dictatorship of the proletariat, however, but of a handful of politicians⁴⁹.

Well, that this is how it turned out to be no one is likely to deny - except, of course, for Stalin's totalitarian rule, for which, however, it would be difficult to hold Lenin or the revolutionary tradition responsible. But what is perhaps less obvious is that one would have to change only a few words to obtain a perfect description of the ills of absolutism prior to the revolutions⁵⁰.

A comparison of the two first revolutions, whose beginnings were so similar

people; c'est le bonheur du peuple qui est le but; c'est l'amour du peuple qui est la pierre de touché de l'esprit révolutionnaire", *Archives historiques, statistiques et littéraires du département du Rhône*, vol. 13, p.174.

49 *The Russian revolution and Leninism or Marxism*, p.78-79.

50 Removed: "I have dwelt at some length on the French Revolution because the same facts and experiences have appeared in nearly every revolution ever since. It was the French Revolution that set the world on fire, and it was consequently from its course, and not from the course of events in this country, that our present use of the word 'revolution' has received its connotations and overtones everywhere, this country not excluded".

and whose ends so disastrously different, demonstrates clearly, I think, that the conquest of poverty is a prerequisite for the foundation of freedom, *and* that the liberation from poverty cannot be dealt with in the same way as the liberation from political oppression. For if violence pitted against violence leads to war, foreign or civil, violence pitted against social conditions has always led to terror. Terror rather than mere violence, terror let loose after the old regime has been defeated and the new regime established, is what either sends revolutions to their doom or deforms them so decisively that they fall back into tyranny and despotism.

I said before that the revolution's original goal was freedom in the sense of abolition of personal rule and the admission of all people to the public realm, their participation in the administration of public affairs. But rulership itself had its most legitimate source not in any drive to power, but in man's wish to emancipate himself from life's necessity, and this was achieved by means of violence, by forcing the many to bear the burden of the few so that at least a few could be free. This, and not the accumulation of wealth, was the core of slavery at least in antiquity; and it is only the rise of modern technology, and not the rise of any modern political notions, included revolutionary ideas, which has changed this human condition, at least in some parts of the world. What America had achieved by great good luck, many, though probably not all, may acquire today by virtue of calculated, organized effort and development. This fact, I think, is the measure of our hope. It permits us to take lessons of the deformed revolutions into account and still hold fast not only to the undeniable grandeur of such events, but to their innermost promise.

Let me, in conclusion, just indicate one more aspect of freedom which came to the fore during the revolutions and for which the men of the revolutions were least prepared, and that is that the idea of freedom and the actual experience of making a new beginning in the historical continuum should coincide. Let me remind you once more of the *novus ordo saeculorum*. The surprising phrase is taken from Virgil who in the fourth Eclogue speaks of a *magnus ordo saeculorum*, "the great cycle of periods [that] is born anew"⁵¹ in the reign of Augustus (*Magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo*). But he speaks of a "great", and not of a "new" order, and it is this change in the line, much quoted throughout the centuries, that is characteristic for the actual experiences of the modern age.

For Virgil - to speak in the language of the 17th century - it was a question of founding "Rome anew", but not of founding a "new Rome", so that he could escape in typically Roman fashion the fearful risks of violence, inherent in actually setting a new beginning. Now, we could of course argue that the new beginning, which the first revolutions thought they were witnessing, was only the rebirth of something quite old - the rebirth of a secular political realm which finally arose again - out

51 Works - *The Aeneid, Eclogues, Georgics*, p.274.

of Christianity, out of feudalism, out of absolutism. But no matter whether it is a question of birth or rebirth, decisive is that the line I quoted was taken from a nativity hymn, not of course prophesying the birth of a divine child as the Middle Ages believed, but praising *birth as such*, the arrival of a new generation as the great saving event, the “miracle” which will redeem mankind time and again. In other words, it is the affirmation of the divinity of birth, and the belief that the world’s potential salvation lies in the very fact that the human species regenerates itself constantly and forever.

What made the men of the revolution go back to this particular poem of antiquity, quite apart from their erudition, was, I would suggest, that not only the pre-revolutionary *idea* of freedom but the experience of being free coincided, or rather was intimately interwoven with beginning something new, with, metaphorically speaking, the birth of a new era. To be free and to start something new was felt to be the same, and obviously this mysterious gift of man, that he can start something new, has something to do with the fact that every one of us came into the world as a newcomer, through birth. In other words, we can begin something because we *are* beginnings and hence beginners. Insofar as the capacity for acting and speaking (and speaking is but another mode of acting), makes man a political being, and since acting has always meant to set something into motion that was not there before, birth, human natality which corresponds to human mortality, is the ontological condition *sine qua non* of all politics. This was known in both Greek and Roman antiquity albeit in an inexplicit manner. It came to the fore in the experience of revolution, and it has influenced, though again in a rather inexplicit manner, what one may call the revolutionary spirit.

At any rate the chain of revolutions which have become, for better and worse, the hallmark of the world we live in discloses to us time and again the eruption of new beginnings within the temporal and historical continuum. For us who owe it to a revolution and the resulting foundation of an entirely new body politic that we can walk in dignity and act in freedom, it would be wise to remember what a revolution means in the life of nations. Whether it ends in success, with the constitution of a public space of freedom, or in disaster, for those who have risked it, or have become involved in it against inclination and expectation, it means the actualization of one of the greatest and most elementary human potentialities; it means an unequalled experience of *being* free, in making a new beginning, from which comes the pride of having opened the world to a *novus ordo saeculorum*.

Let me sum up: Machiavelli who most passionately desired a new order of things for Italy and whom one may well call the “father of revolution”⁵² could not

⁵² Machiavelli “certainly was not the father of political science or political theory, but it is difficult to deny that one may well see in him the spiritual father of revolution”. *On revolution*, p.37.

yet speak with any great amount of experience about these matters. Thus, he still believed that the “innovators”, i.e. the revolutionists, would encounter their greatest difficulties in the beginning when they seize power and find it easy to retain it. We know from practically all revolutions that the opposite is true - it is relatively easy to seize power and infinitely more difficult to retain it - as Lenin, no bad witness in such matters, once remarked expressly⁵³. Still, Machiavelli knew enough to say the following: “There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things”⁵⁴. With this sentence, I suppose, no one who understands anything at all of the story of our own century will quarrel. And the danger he expected to arise has proved to be quite real up to our own day, although he was still unaware of the greatest danger in modern revolutions: the danger arising out of poverty. He mentions what since the French Revolution has been called the counter-revolutionary forces, represented by those “who profit by the old order”, and the “lukewarmness” of those who might profit by the new order because of “the incredulity of mankind, who do not truly believe in anything new until they have had actual experience of it”⁵⁵.

However, the point of the matter is that Machiavelli saw the danger only in defeat of the attempt at a new order of things, and that is in the sheer weakening of the country in which the attempt was made. This too has proved quite true, the weakness may then attract conquerors; it is the power vacuum of which I spoke before. Not that this power vacuum did not exist before, but it can long remain hidden until some decisive event happens, when authority breaks down and a revolution brings it out dramatically into the open, to be seen and known by all. In addition to these dangers, we have witnessed the supreme danger, namely, that out of the abortive attempt to found the institutions of freedom may grow the most thoroughgoing abolition of freedom and all liberties. Precisely because revolutions put the question of political freedom in its truest and most radical form - freedom to participate in public affairs, freedom of action - all other freedoms, political as well as civil liberties, are in jeopardy when they fail.

Deformed revolutions, such as the October Revolution in Russia under Lenin, or abortive revolutions, such as the various upheavals among the Central Powers in Europe after the First World War, may have, as we now know, consequences which in sheer horror are well-nigh unprecedented. The point of the matter is that revolutions rarely are reversible, that once they have happened, they won't be forgotten - as Kant remarked about the French Revolution at a time when terror ruled in France. This can't possibly mean that therefore it is best to prevent revolutions, for

53 Lenin, *Collected Works*, v. 26 (September 1917-February 1918), p.90ff.

54 N. Machiavelli, *The prince*, p.21.

55 Idem, *ibidem*.

if revolutions are the consequences of a regime in full disintegration and not the product of revolutionaries - be they organized in conspiratory sects or in parties - to prevent a revolution means to change the form of government, i.e., to effect a revolution with all the dangers and hazards involved.

The collapse of authority and power, which as a rule comes with surprising suddenness not only to the newspaper-reader but to all the experts and secret services watching such things, becomes a revolution in the full sense of the word only when there are people around willing and capable of picking up the power, of moving, as it were, into the power vacuum. What then happens depends upon many circumstances, not least upon the degree of insight into such processes and their irreversibility from the side of foreign powers. But success or failure depend most of all upon the very subjective qualities and the moral-political rank of those who are willing to assume responsibility. We have little reason to hope that at some time in the not too distant future such men will match in practical and theoretical wisdom the men of the American Revolution who became the Founding Fathers of this country. But this little hope we *do* have is, I am afraid, only the one that freedom in a political sense will not vanish again from the earth for God knows how many centuries.

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