

A Vocabulary Justifying Revolutions

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To my knowledge, the concept “vocabulary of motives” was first used in social science by the young C. Wright Mills (1940). In my recent book, *The Many-Splendored Society: Fueled by Symbols* (Zetterberg, 2010, pp. 415-416), I suggest that vocabularies of motives are of two different kinds. We use ‘vocabularies of justifications’ to motivate our own actions. ‘Compelling vocabularies’ are what others use to motivate us, and what we might use to motivate others. The leverage of these small sets of words fascinates and mystifies. Our language brains use them in human encounters to shape and motivate individuals, and thereby also maintain and change social reality.

In concluding my book, I found no place for a section with an example of a vocabulary justifying revolutions. I present it here instead, and thank the Editor of *Sociologisk forskning* for the opportunity. (I do not rule out that the piece might find a place also in some later volume of my writing project *The Many-Splendored Society*.)

A revolution, a full and rapid change of political, economic, and other realms within a society, requires extraordinary justifications. Usually verbal attacks do not suffice as justification and the revolutionaries need to justify spontaneous and organized violence as well.

The American Revolution contributed concrete *compelling* vocabularies such as the legislative principle “No taxation without representation,” meaning that a legislature elected by the people shall decide taxes paid by that people. It also created *justifying* vocabularies, such as the Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776 by Thomas Jefferson. The latter states that the Creator has given all men “certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”.

This phrasing has some well-known antecedents. John Locke had, at the time of the English revolutions, put forth three rights: “life, liberty, and property,” or, “life, liberty, and estate.” George Mason, Jefferson’s fellow-statesman, had written in the Virginia Declaration of Rights about “the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.” Jefferson dropped all references to property. He wrote “pursuit of happiness” and added “among these” to the text, implying that there were others. He apparently took liberties in editing the rights he thought given by God. He respected Benjamin Franklin, who believed that God helps those who help themselves.

In Jefferson’s own life, there is little doubt that the pursuit of happiness was an umbrella covering his pursuits of money, power, knowledge, and artistic beauty, preferably centered on his stately family home, Monticello. His fortune included approximately 100 slaves who served his household, his farm, and a nail factory.

Jefferson is particularly known for the statement that “the government governs best which governs least,” leaving ample room for all non-political pursuits. He clearly wanted to live in a society without hegemony of the body politic. (On this score he apparently would prefer what we call a many-splendored society.) Lincoln modified this into wiser words: the government should do for the people whatever the people cannot do for themselves.

Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence of thirteen of the British colonies in North America constitutes the world’s most famous vocabulary of justification of a revolution. His vocabulary, however, is not the one that we usually associate with uprisings. There is a slogan of “equality” as in the French revolution, but in America it apparently means equality at birth, i.e. “born equal.” There is no explicit “call to arms.” The word “rebellion” is not found in the text. The purpose of the Declaration is to cut ties to a kingdom and establish a republic. There is no talk of a “democracy.” Such a word belongs in another generation. However, Jefferson avoids also the word “republic” in the text. The central theme is the right to pursue happiness and the right to disobey any authority, such as the British King and Parliament, when they stand in the way of this pursuit.

Twenty-seven Arguments Justifying a Revolution

The Declaration is a short document, and its longest section is a list of oppressions imposed by an increasingly despotic colonial power. The list of twenty-seven grievances against King George III is best understood if we sort them in a different order than the original one, and if we give them headings.

The fighting had already begun when the Declaration was written. The following five items deal with the ongoing war; the last one deals with the situation in Canada. The latter is included in the Declaration as a hint of the King’s strategic goal for the war, as least as it was seen by the thirteen other North American British colonial territories.

Waging war against us (5 items)

- He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.
- He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.
- He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.
- He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation, and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & Perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

- For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies.

The largest number of grievances about the King and the British Parliament deals not with the war of insurrection but with the run-up to that war.

Failures to respect the rule of law (5 items):

- For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments.
- For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.
- He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation.
- For depriving us in many cases, of the benefit of Trial by Jury:
- For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences:

Ruling without consent of the governed and of elected representatives (5 items):

- For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent.
- He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.
- He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.
- He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected, whereby the Legislative Powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.
- He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their Public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

Failure to sign legislation enacted in the colonies (2 items):

- He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.
- He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

Failure to respect an independent judiciary (2 items)

- He has obstructed the Administration of Justice by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary Powers.
- He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

Failure to respect civilian rule over the military (5 items):

- He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.
- He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil Power.
- For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us.
- For protecting them, by a mock Trial from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States.
- He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

Obstructing our pursuit of happiness (3 items):

- He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people and eat out their substance.
- He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.
- For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

Refusal to allow and/or listen to appeals (2 items):

- In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.
- Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity.

Choosing a Mix of Three Types of Grievances

The arguments used to justify the American Revolution were, in part, ordinary grievances that normally are dealt with in courts of law, or at a Court of Royalty, or in a Parliament. Here we recognize two types:

- First, violations of practices and norms established both in England and in the American colonies, for example, suspending trials by jury, refusing to consider and sign laws enacted by colonial legislators, and unwarranted closing of legislatures.
- Second, violation of practices and norms established in England, but without firm tradition in the colonies, for example, imposing taxes without consent of a local legislature, and quartering armies on the territory without consent of colonists. Such abuses came almost naturally to a colonial power.

Several grievances used to justify the Revolution were of a third type and were formulated with the aid of an image of an ideal society. In this type we have justifications derived from utopias:

- Third, violations of practices and norms of an ideal society, not firmly established, neither in England, nor in the colonies. It is well to remember that the freedom and justice preached by John Locke were far from fully realized in England at that time. But in a new United States of Americas they should apply.

John Locke's ideas were much more celebrated in America than in England: human equality, inalienable rights, the pursuit of happiness, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly. The full development by Montesquieu of Locke's ideas of separation of legislative and executive power to include also judiciary power were also alive among the American Federalists, but belonged at that time still in a utopian category of thinking in Europe, not put into practice anywhere on the continent. Was it even seriously contemplated by leading European politicians of those days as something to be put into practice?

The steam of the American Revolution can be attributed to many factors; I regard the perhaps most important one to be its successful mixture of justifications based on established practices at home and/or abroad and of justifications based on untried, but promising, ideal practices.

The last two grievances about the refusal of the British King and Parliament to listen to appeals are interesting to us in our effort to study societies ruled by words rather than through violence and new revolutions. First of all, these grievances are instructive when we seek to understand the American Constitution that emerged after the successful revolutionary war. The new country was given many opportunities for citizens to be heard by the government, and it provided several easy ways for citizens to seek redress. Thus, the Americans were given not only a right to vote for their go-

vernment in general elections, and to sue their government in a court of law, if need be, they also obtained a regulated process to amend their constitution, and an independent Supreme Court to guard and interpret the constitution. All these provisions have contributed to give the Constitution of the United States a long life and to give The Supreme Court higher prestige among the American public than the Presidency and the Congress. Eventually, the United States allowed also the ultimate non-violent practice in this process of making a government pay attention to grievances from the citizens: *civil disobedience*.

Civil Disobedience

Civil disobedience is an active, polite, and non-violent response to disliked laws. It provides practical actions for persons whose dignity has been offended by laws or authorities and who therefore perceive a right of disobedience in regards to the offending law. In short, it is one way to implement the thesis of the Austrian jurist of modern natural law Alfred Verdrass (1958) that persons whose dignity has been offended by laws or authorities need not obey the offensive laws or directives. This is not explicitly written into the Constitution of the United States, but Henry David Thoreau inspired this process of canceling obnoxious governmental practices. In his essay *Civil Disobedience* (Thoreau, ~~Civil Disobedience (Original title: Resistance to Civil Government)~~, 1849/1993) he presents his reasons for having refused to pay taxes as an act of protest against slavery and against the Mexican-American War.

If the civilly disobedient, “the resisters,” are caught by the police, they refuse to move. They may try to make the violence used by the police during their capture visible to the media. If drawn into court, they get new opportunities for verbal protests and for publicity for their cause. The process has been used by movements for independence (India), against laws of racial segregation (American South and South Africa), and against drafts into wars considered unjust (Vietnam).

Civil disobedience is an organized activity that requires knowledge and preparation by the resisters. This is an accepted means of changing norms in a modern society, but only if the resisters, if and when caught, are prepared to assume the complete, prescribed consequences of the existing laws which they want to have abrogated. They must be psychologically prepared, not only for criminal charges, but for the negative opinions that the law-abiding always ascribe to deviants. However, these individuals may become heroes if their activity ends with the invalidation of the unwanted law.

An outstanding example of this kind of hero is “the mother of the civil rights movement” in the United States, Mrs. Rosa Parks, an African-American seamstress, who had been a secretary to the President of NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. On the 1st of December 1955 she was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama for not standing and letting a white bus rider take her seat. Protests lasting eleven months were organized by Dr. Martin Luther King, pastor of a local Baptist Church. On November 13, 1956 the US Supreme Court declared that

Alabama's state and local laws requiring segregation on buses were illegal, a landmark decision that changed the country.

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Biographical note

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