

HISTORIA I SPOŁECZEŃSTWO

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(R)EVOLUTION – THE CONCEPT OF POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN ANCIENT GREECE

Introduction

Considering the topic of revolution, it is impossible not to notice that it appears on various levels and in different contexts. In this paper, I would like to draw attention to the concept of revolution and revolt in antiquity, but not in terms of a direct historical analysis and dry description of rather frequent political changes, but as a factor taken into account in the political theories of ancient philosophers. Due to the extremely broad range of this issue, the analysis in this paper is limited to our closest cultural field, i.e. Greek philosophy.

First of all, what we consider as a basic difference between revolution and revolt today (though these words are often used as synonyms too) did not have such importance in antiquity. Most of the modern philosophers (e.g. Samuel Huntington, Charles Tilly) distinguish the difference between revolt and revolution by their outcomes¹. Revolutions bring fundamental changes in the society and in its political structure while the scope and consequences of revolts are smaller. Due to the size of Greek

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven and London 1968, p. 264. Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Michigan 1977, pp. 7–5, 7–8.

poleis, most of the coups were also not big (in modern terms) and, generally, did not last long, which brings them closer to today's concept of revolt. However, they usually brought a major reorganization of the state, which, as stated before, is usually considered to be the main characteristic of revolution. Therefore, due to the characteristic features of the Greek city-state, our current distinction between "revolution" and "revolt" did not play such an important role and most of the uprisings could be fitted in both of these categories. Secondly, the term "revolution" is derived from Latin, so its linguistic origins cannot be followed back to the ancient Greece. It does not indicate that words carrying the meaning similar to our "revolution" unknown at the time. They are, however, more difficult to trace. In English translations, the word appears in dual sense – in relation to political changes, or circular movement. The latter one can be seen, for example, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where it is stated, concerning those called immortals, that when they have taken their stand, the revolution carries them round (*περιφορά*) and they behold the things outside of the heaven². In *Statesman*, the Greek word is *τροπή* and means the "turn" or the process of "turning"³. Finally, in *Laws*, as well as in Aristotle's *Poetics*, the word translated as "revolution" is *periodos* (*περίοδος*)⁴ that intuitively connects with a "period of time", which is rather similar to the first meaning of "revolution", and the way it was used, for instance, by Copernicus: the revolutions of the spheres simply mean their circular movement (as in previous examples), although, practically, that movement was also used for establishing periods of time.

However, in different sections, the words translated as "revolution" are far more meaningful from the political point of view. In Plato's letter to Dion, the word *metabole* ("changes") is used⁵ and it concerns a political upheaval. Similarly, Polybius describes the process of change

² στάσας δὲ ἀντὶ τὰς περιάγει ἢ περιφορά, αἱ δὲ θεωροῦσι τὰ ἔξω τοῦ οὐρανοῦ. Plato, *Φαῖδρος*, [in:] *Platonis Opera*, ed. J. Burnet, Oxford 1903, 247c.

³ Plato, *Πολιτικός*, [in:] *Platonis Opera...*, 270d.

⁴ Plato, *Νόμοι*, [in:] *Platonis Opera...*, VI.771b; Aristotle, *Ars Poetica*, ed. R. Kassel, Oxford 1966, 1449b.

⁵ Plato, *Epistles*, [in:] *Platonis Opera...*, VII.324c.

in the political system with the word *μετέστησαν*⁶. Thucydides and Aristotle use a more significant term, *σισσιάζω*⁷, related directly to *stasis*, which meant not only a fraction or a political party, but it was also associated with distress and troublesome changes that took place in the *polis*. In Herodotus, the words concerning young Darius are also not translated as “my son is planning to attack you” (*χρᾶσθαι*), but it is rather stressed that “he is planning revolution”⁸. Nowadays, we strongly associate the term “revolution” with a “forceful change in politics” and that, in my opinion, also allows us to discover its elements in ancient texts – despite the lack of a directly connected word, readers are able to establish a connection between some political changes, described then as “conflict, attack, change or civil unrest” with the modern term of revolution⁹. I, therefore, intend to consider the concept of revolution as the main stimulus conditioning the occurrence of political changes in the theories of the philosophers who, while dealing with the analysis of the contemporary governments, devoted their attention not only to the search for the best political system, but also to the changes in each of the forms. Such a comprehensive approach will allow to observe the whole process of the evolution of political systems, starting with the causes rooted in the previous regimes, through their course, to the establishment of a new constitution. It is worth noting at the very beginning that these changes could have happened in different ways.

The second expression used in the title of this paper is also modern, however the idea of “evolution” was known to ancient Greeks not only in the biological sense, but as the concept of constant changes that were fundamental for the theories concerning the cyclical nature of time and history. Therefore, I use the phrase “evolution” to describe the change that is, in its nature, the opposite of “revolution”: the process

⁶ Polybius, *Histories*, transl. E.S. Shuckburgh, London–New York 1889, II, 41.

⁷ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, ed. J.M. Dent, London 1910, III, 69; Aristotle, *Politics*, [in:] *Aristotle in 23 Volumes. Vol. 21*, transl. H. Rackham, Cambridge 1944, II, 1262b.

⁸ Herodotus, *Histories*, translated by A.D. Godley, Cambridge 1920, I, 210.

⁹ I believe my view is confirmed by Robin Osborne, who has written: *If Greek had known revolutions there is a good case for thinking that (...) might have reckoned Athenian political history to have been full of them*. Therefore the lack of a term does not indicate the absence of the general idea, one that received its name afterwards. Simon Goldhill, Robin Osborne, *Rethinking Revolutions Through Ancient Greece*, Cambridge 2006, p. 10.

that is not sudden, or violent, but it progresses over longer periods of time. The most appropriate example of this understanding would be Polybius' description of the fall of "good" types of government, discussed below, as they require two or three generations to deteriorate¹⁰. I hope that this paper will provide a new, different perspective to the issue of revolution and changes themselves, as well as present certain trends in its understanding, developing since ancient times.

Political transformations in philosophical theories

The fate of ancient Greece was marked by a high degree of instability. The only exception in this field, Sparta, had an exceptional, unique political system, and, even so, it finally succumbed to the test of time. It is no wonder that the main idea of all philosophers dealing with the theory of the state was to provide stability and, hence, the idea of the ideal state arose. However, it should be noted that, from the perspective of the undertaken study, the issue of the ideal state is much less important. What is crucial, is the fact that all philosophers assume that their ideal system, whether it would be *politea*, *callipolis* or Roman Republic, must fall. Such a state is more stable than all the others, but "since for everything that has come into being destruction is appointed, not even such a fabric as this will abide for all time, but it shall surely be dissolved, and this is the manner of its dissolution"¹¹. The state is a subject to a natural cycle, and, therefore, to the development, growth and decline. From the point of view of the changes taking place and their progress, it is the further development that is most interesting. The ultimate cause of changes in all the theories is the disturbance of the internal balance in the community.

¹⁰ For more detailed definitions of the terms of both evolution and revolution in political doctrines, see: Krystyna Chojnicka, *Ewolucjonizm*, [in:] *Słownik Historii Doktryń Politycznych*, Vol. 2, ed. M. Jaskólski, Warszawa 1999, pp. 150–151; Barbara Stoczevska, *Rewolucja*, [in:] *Słownik Historii Doktryń Politycznych*, Vol. 5, ed. K. Chojnicka, M. Jaskólski, Warszawa 2012, pp. 109–113.

¹¹ Plato, *Republic*, [in:] *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vols. 5 & 6, transl. P. Shorey, Cambridge 1969, VIII, E546.

There are four great philosophers who discussed the issues of political changes in *polis*: Plato, Aristotle, Polybius and Cicero¹². In some ways, especially in the description of the order of those changes, their ideas differ. However, in many aspects, they are extremely similar. Generally, Greek philosophers distinguished two types of constitutions – the good and the bad ones. Names of those may differ, but in each category three types of government can be named: rule of one, few and many. That distinction is vital for observing the difference between revolutionary changes and more peaceful ones. For the first time, the basic version of that typology appears straightforwardly in the *Histories* of Herodotus, during the famous debate concerning the political systems described in Book III¹³. However, what is even more interesting from the perspective of the undertaken study, that debate is carried out immediately after the revolt. According to Herodotus, after the death of Cambyses, the son of Cyrus the Great, the rule was not taken by his brother, but a Median Magi, impersonating him. When it came to the light, seven eminent Persians stormed the palace and killed the usurper. And, the people “when they learned what had been done by the seven and how the Magi had tricked them, resolved to follow the example set, and drew their daggers and killed all the Magi they could find”¹⁴. Therefore, without that uprising, there would be no basis for a discussion concerning the government of Persia, nor for introducing Herodotus’ famous distinction between constitutions. The situation described is also coincidentally closest to modern definition of “revolt” itself, since it did not change the fundamental rules of governance, as Persia still remained a monarchy, but it provided an opportunity to consider the possibility of a regime change and led to the election of a new king.

Returning, nonetheless, to the philosophers mentioned before, I have chosen to analyze the theories of Plato, Aristotle and Polybius. They are

¹² Of course, they are not the only ones, as the matter was discussed also, to a lesser or greater extent, by poets (Solon, Hesiod) dramatists, Ionian philosophers (Thales, Heraclitus) and many others, since politics has always played an important role in Greek culture. Since it is impossible to discuss all of these conceptions in just one paper, the scope of the analysis has been confined to the most popular and profound theories.

¹³ Donald Kagan, *The Great Dialogue. History of Greek political thought from Homer to Polybius*, New York 1965, p. 69.

¹⁴ Herodotus, op. cit., III, 79.