

How revolutions happen Another lesson from the monastic lockdown

Jean Grondin

Professor of philosophy at the Université de Montréal

For intellectuals and academics, at least those blessed with relatively good health, the lockdown is not necessarily a major inconvenience, nor all that unusual. Descartes conducted his meditations isolated, or alone with God, by his fireplace. Our own secular age is now rediscovering the virtues of monasticism. For the professors of today, the forced confinement means an interruption from the distraction of conferences and gatherings which are often unproductive. Most can now concentrate on their essential work, of thinking, contemplating ideas, reading, writing and supervising graduate students. Most of us will have easy access to books, articles and documentary sources, but also to the best literature, poetry and music of the world at our fingertips.

For society at large and the real world, it has been an immense tragedy, especially for all those who were directly affected, the ill and their relatives, the elderly, the healthcare workers, the many who lost their employment and livelihoods. On a more philosophical level, it has taught us or reminded us of many things:

It first reminded us of the forgotten fragility of human life and customs. Life was following its quiet, normal course, until it was hit head-on by a largely unforeseen pandemic. Feeling secure in our health systems and sleepy routines, we all believed that plagues belonged to the history books. We were proven wrong, and this is always a significant hermeneutic experience since it challenges our assumptions. In the middle of all this, one cannot but think that, in spite of the vast suffering, it could have been a whole lot worse. What if the virus had proven far more deadly, say, if 50% of those infected died? Such a pandemic has now become thinkable. What if the most common mosquitoes could transmit such a deadly virus? What if we had to suffer under massive food and water shortages in our cities? That there weren't many is almost a miracle. There are a lot of "what ifs" in this crisis, that were hitherto unthinkable and that will now be part of our outlook on life.

The fragility of human customs is also on display. So many things that we took for granted were taken from us, like the simple act of shaking hands, going to work or to school, meeting friends and relatives. On a positive note, this rediscovered fragility brought out, in many cases, the best of human initiative. I am thinking here of the admirable heroism of front-line workers and the newfound solidarity that emerged in our communities, which many had thought implausible in this age of rabid individualism. I am also thinking about

the intense Promethean effort invested in the search for a cure, besides Hydroxychloroquine and ingestible bleach, or a vaccine. All this is most uplifting, especially in a climate in which most news were rather depressing.

The fact that this transformation happened so suddenly also reminds us of how revolutions really happen. Intellectuals and dreamers are found of thinking how we should revolutionize society and our way of doing things. As is well documented, they are seldom successful. Some find solace by developing theories about why their dreamed of revolutions did not happen. Yet, revolutions *do* happen, mostly because they are forced upon us. In my life, I think I experienced two sweeping revolutions in the way people live. The first is the metamorphosis of the place of women in society. When I was young, it was quite obvious—and viewed as an almost biological necessity—that their roles as mothers and homebodies who took care of the house, was preordained. Needless to say, all this has been transformed and with it our behavior with one another. I don't have to dwell on the wide-ranging changes this entailed, since they are obvious to all (unless, as some do, one lives in a separate universe). It is also not my subject. My point is just that it did turn out to be a watershed in human civilization that nobody could have predicted, say, in the quiet 1950s or even the turbulent 1960s. To be sure, there was then an eloquent Women Lib movement, but the transformations that occurred went way beyond what was thought imaginable. The other major revolution I experienced in my lifetime was the computer and digital revolution, which started to spread at the end of the 1980s, transforming everything in its path. Books and printed papers used to be the way to transmit knowledge and to get information. Search engines did not exist, so we had to use our minds and legs to look up things in dusty encyclopedias. Our fingers would nibble at cigarettes, not smartphones (both are as addictive as they are hazardous). Who would have thought that all this would change in just a few years? Of course, as is also the case with the current pandemic, the digital revolution was predicted by a prescient few—as was, no doubt, the case with the Women revolution—but the average Joe did not see it coming.

Other substantial revolutions unfolded over the last decades. The ecological crisis is certainly one of them. My only observation here is that they happen without much involvement from future-planners or politicians, who often don't think beyond the next elections. It is as if real and ground-breaking revolutions would happen elsewhere. All of sudden, they are there and engulf us. It can be said that those who were involved in the American or the French Revolution, to say nothing of the Industrial Revolution, did not really see what was coming either. Momentous upheavals in recent time also largely happened overnight: the Fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11.

It is too early to foresee what lasting changes will ensue from the current epidemic. Who knows? The fact remains that we are all witnessing an unprecedented, hopefully more reflective period in our relationship with the world and with one another. It is as if, for the first time in 200 years, the industrial society had come to a halt. It is amazing how swiftly and widely such a revolutionary change took place in our behavior and outlook on life. Everything that we took for granted was suddenly called into question, and we all adapted. This is how revolutions happen.