NO REVOLUTION ROUND THE CORNER

JULIUS LEWIN

VISITORS from abroad, and even my friends, often ask me "how long it can go on". By "it" they mean the present state of the Union. They are always surprised at my answer, because I tell them that I see no reason why "it" should not go on almost indefinitely and certainly for a good many years. People who think otherwise talk in terms of an impending "explosion". When you press them for a clearer idea of what that word really means, you soon find that it implies a revolution of some sort.

The belief that a revolution is due to occur in South Africa sooner or later is derived from the political circumstances that have developed since 1948. Before that date it seemed to most people that, however bad conditions in the country were for the majority of the people—the Africans—slight improvements were made from time to time, and these gave people hope for the future. When the Nationalists came to power, however, they set about closing all the doors that had kept open the possibilities of change. What is more, it was soon made plain that the Nationalists did not want progressive change, however small and slow, to occur; on the contrary, they were determined to subdue everything that might promote social change in the direction taken by the rest of Africa and the rest of the world. The previous policy of amelioration was displaced by the new policy of regimentation. Moreover, the new rulers of the Union took steps to make it impossible for any political party or, indeed, any political organization to get the present policy reversed fundamentally by ordinary constitutional means.

Once people realize that public policy cannot be altered in the traditional way, their thoughts turn to unusual methods of making their opinions heard. Hence the use of the term "extra-parliamentary methods". It is used, rather vaguely perhaps, to indicate the publicity value of strikes, popular demonstrations, processions, and similar techniques of protest. In recent times, the Torch Commando and the original Black Sash movement were respectable examples of such attempts to make protest effective by means other than putting up candidates to contest elections. Although such methods of protest were new to Europeans, Africans have long had to rely on them.

But since 1948, meetings and even processions, always hard enough to organize, have, generally speaking, become unlawful except by permission of the authorities, who prefer to prohibit them altogether.

Knowing or feeling all this, social reformers have despaired of seeing any real changes in the total situation. That is why they keep asking when the revolutionary explosion will occur.

Behind this question there is a simple idea that revolutions just happen when the time is ripe. The serious study made of the subject by Professor Crane Brinton, the Harvard historian, in *The Anatomy of Revolution* (Vintage edition, 1957) should disillusion those who hold this idea in their heads. The historical fact of the matter is that certain well-defined circumstances have to be present in combination before an attempt at revolution is likely to succeed.

Let us look at the conclusion drawn by Professor Brinton from his study of the four famous revolutions—the English one in the seventeenth century, the American and the French in the eighteenth, and the Russian in the twentieth. Different as these obviously were in time and circumstance, Brinton shows that they all had certain features in common. Let us see what they were and then ask whether comparable conditions prevail in South Africa.

First, all four countries were on the upgrade economically before the revolution came. The revolutionary movements originated in the discontents of fairly prosperous people who felt restraint, cramp, annoyance, rather than downright crushing oppression. (This description applies to Africans in the Union). Certainly, Brinton says, these four historic revolutions were not started by down-and-outers, by starving, miserable people. The revolutionaries were not worms turning, but men of hope with a philosophy of optimism behind them.

Secondly, we find in these societies, in the years before each revolution, very bitter class antagonisms of a rather complicated kind. It is not simply a case of feudal nobility against bourgeoisie in 1640, 1776, and 1789, or of bourgeoisie against working class in 1917. The strongest feelings seem to have been generated in the hearts of men—and women—who had made money, or at least who had made enough to live on, and who contemplated bitterly the barriers presented by a socially privileged aristocracy. Revolutions seem more likely when social classes are fairly close together than when they are far

apart. "Untouchables" very rarely revolt against a God-given aristocracy, and Haiti gives one of the few examples of successful slave revolutions. (This agrees with the fact that in South Africa the loudest rumblings of discontent do not come from farm labourers or peasants in the Reserves, but from the African middle class—such as it is—and the urban working class, who are better off than their rural cousins).

Thirdly, the machinery of government in all four countries was inefficient. This was due partly to neglect and partly to a failure to make changes in old institutions. New conditions, arising from economic expansion and the growth of new monied classes, new ways of transport, and new business methods, laid an intolerable strain on governmental machinery adapted to simpler, more primitive conditions. This last point best shows us where South African circumstances differ materially from those prevailing at the time of the four historic revolutions that seem to provide parallels to the situation here.

To start with, the machinery of government in South Africa is not, on the whole, inefficient. Inefficiency in this context must surely imply much more than the administrative deficiencies which are a common source of public irritation. Indeed, since the vital machinery is manned almost exclusively by Afrikaners in sympathy with the Government and its policies, it is more reliable in its operations—from the Nationalist point of view—than it would be in the hands of a different set of civil servants, whose greater technical efficiency would be offset by their political neutrality or opposition.

This point acquires special importance in relation to the control of the armed forces. Brinton finds that "no government has ever fallen before revolutionists until it has lost control over its armed forces or lost the ability to use them effectively; and, conversely, no revolutionists have ever succeeded until they have got a predominance of effective armed force on their side. This holds true from spears and arrows to machine guns and gas." Brinton is also aware that the loyalty of the armed forces could be a crucial factor in a revolutionary situation. He says "that the nowadays common view that modern weapons have for the future made street risings impossible is probably wrong. Even modern weapons have to be used by police or soldiers, who may still be subverted."

But that view is not wrong when applied to South Africa. Not only have non-Europeans no access to modern weapons and

training in their use, but the loyalty of the men who do handle such weapons is of a different quality from that found outside Africa. The attitude of soldiers and policemen towards non-Europeans is notorious. No realist believes that the loyalty of the men in the armed forces is open to subversion, least of all in a racial crisis. It follows that the race riots that occur periodically are inevitably localized and therefore subdued without much difficulty. Least of all in so large a country with such poor communications as South Africa can rioting spread and grow into a revolution.

In any case, it is important to distinguish revolution from disorder. As Brinton himself admits, "disorder in some sense appears to be endemic in all societies and certainly in our Western society. The historian turned diagnostician can find evidence of disorders and discontents in almost any society he chooses to study. If a stable or healthy society is defined as one in which there are no expressions of discontent with the government or with existing institutions, in which no laws are ever broken, then there are no stable or healthy societies. A normal or healthy society will not be one in which there are no criticisms of the government or the ruling class, no gloomy sermons on the moral decay of the times, no Utopian dreams of a better world around the corner, no strikes, no lock-outs, no unemployment, no crime waves, no attacks on civil liberties. All we can expect of what we may call a healthy society is that there should be no striking excess of such tensions; and perhaps also that most people should behave as if they felt that, with all its faults, the society were a going concern. Then we may look about for the kind of signs just described—discontents expressed in words or deeds—and try to estimate their seriousness."

It is my contention that the signs of discontent in South Africa, when all added up, do not amount to a serious situation in the sense of a prelude to revolution. For one thing, the continued economic prosperity, which is shared to a significant extent by Africans, and the rising standards of living generally tend to compensate people for the sense of personal frustration induced by colour bars. In South Africa to-day most people do still behave as if they felt that, with all its weaknesses, the country were a going concern. Only a small minority think otherwise, and even their actions commonly belie their fears.

When I have persuaded my visitor from overseas that there will be no revolution to-morrow, he turns to another possibility.

Surely, he argues, the non-Europeans have already learnt how to use the moral force of passive resistance. The campaign of 1952 and the stay-at-home strike on the Rand on 26 June, 1957 (and in previous years) indicate the future trend. If this trend continues—so it is argued—the Africans, assisted by Indians and even by Coloured people, will sooner or later be able to paralyse the country and so force concessions from the Government.

There are two points to be answered here: one concerns the effectiveness of a general campaign of passive resistance and the other the effect of strikes by workers in particular industries.

The experience of 1952 offered only limited encouragement to those who put their faith in passive resistance. The campaign lasted from June 26 until it reached its climax on December 8, when a small band of Europeans led by Patrick Duncan "defied an unjust law" by entering the Germiston location without permits. In all, more than 8,000 non-Europeans were sent to jail for short terms. It is commonly believed that the campaign was killed by the ferocious new Acts of Parliament passed in February, 1953. The fact of the matter, however, is that the campaign had showed signs of waning late in November, 1952, and the Congresses really made a virtue of necessity by calling it off some weeks later, after the climax had been reached. I have no desire to belittle the courage displayed or the hardships endured by those who courted punishment in those fateful months. But facts are stubborn things, and the fact is that at no time did the campaign shake—though it did anger—the Government; nor does anyone who was wide awake in that period honestly think that it ever looked like producing anything remotely resembling a truly revolutionary situation. Since that time the severe new laws, passed as a direct result of the campaign, have sufficed to suppress any inclination to organize another campaign on similar lines. It is one thing to go to prison for two weeks and another to go for two years and to be flogged into the bargain.

There remains the other question, whether strikes in particular industries can become general enough and last long enough to wring major concessions from any South African government. Only those who have never been close to trade unions imagine that it is an easy matter either to organize aggressive trade unions or to lead them into strikes for a political purpose. The idea of trade unionism is fully thirty years old among Africans in the Union. It goes back to Kadalie's day, the mid-

nineteen-twenties. This is not the place to discuss why Africans are so slow and so ineffective in organizing trade unions. But when every allowance is made for illiteracy and other obstacles, such as hostile laws, the fact remains that Africans have made comparatively little headway in the last generation in this field of endeavour.

Moreover, even if trade unions were much stronger and more wisely led, it is difficult to see what vital industries or essential services could be brought to a standstill. If and when urban Africans did strike in large numbers, their place would be taken and their work carried on somehow by White workers or by other Africans brought, if necessary, from neighbouring territories where Africans are more backward and much less politically conscious than they are in the Union. Add to this the fact that African workers predominate in hardly any service or industry where stoppage or slowing down would at once create a national crisis impossible to resolve. The gold mining industry is not such an industry. Even if it were, the experience of August, 1946 showed how a strike could be dealt with and terminated within a week or two.

The events of March and April, 1958, confirm this conclusion. The various reasons for the failure of the proposed three-day stoppage are not relevant here. What is significant, however, is that official arrangements were made on a high level to prevent the break-down of essential services. These arrangements were planned by an inter-departmental committee, headed by the Secretary of Labour and representing the Union Defence Forces, the police, the prisons, and the Department of Native Affairs. Nothing is gained by forming opinions on the basis of illusions; and it is an illusion to suppose that South Africa, so obviously rotten with injustice, must be ripe for revolution. Yet the last word need not strike an entirely hopeless note. The view that change will not come in the foreseeable future by reason of an "explosion" of a revolutionary character does not imply that no changes at all are possible in the status and condition of Africans. It does mean that such changes are likely to depend more on the slow and difficult emergence of effective trade unions than on any other single factor. The increasing employment of Africans in industry offers the best hope that in due time collective action will produce social change. But in Thomas Hardy's words, "if way to the better there is, it exacts a full look at the worst".