

## **The End of Revolution, and its Means**

Processual and Programmatic Approaches to Revolution in the Epoch of Revolution Debate

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**Abstract:** In *Contention* volume 5, issue 2, Benjamin Abrams interviewed the political theorist John Dunn on the topic of Modern Revolutions. In the interview, Dunn advanced the view that the ‘Epoch of Revolution’ had ended by 1989, and that what many scholars called revolutions today were simply instances of regime collapse. The interview received a lot of attention from scholars and practitioners including Hugo Slim. Slim challenged Dunn’s concept of revolution in this issue, and Dunn responded defending his ideas. This article attempts to tease out the differences underlying the two scholars’ disagreement as to whether the ‘Epoch of Revolution’ has truly passed. The article proposes that while processual approaches (such as Slim’s) conceive of revolution primarily as a political means, Dunn’s ‘programmatic’ approach to revolution conceives of it as not only a means, but a political end. The article also considers the implications of Dunn’s theory of revolution, and the representative challenges of academic interviewing.

**Keywords:** regime collapse, revolution, The Epoch of Revolution, John Dunn, empirically-led political theory

When I first approached John Dunn about conducting an interview in *Contention*, my impetus was one of serious scholarly interest. Alongside his personal impact on our shared field, Dunn’s thought has also informed some of the most prominent approaches to revolution today, including the work of Theda Skocpol (1979:xvi 290), and Eric Selbin (2010). What rapidly became apparent to me during the interview process was a sense of why scholars like Skocpol

and Selbin would find Dunn to be a compelling intellectual correspondent, despite their vast conceptual and disciplinary differences. It was clear from our interview that Dunn approaches his work with a remarkable level of modesty, and considers his objects of inquiry (chiefly, Revolution and Democracy) with a passionate curiosity. While Dunn readily offers his theories to other scholars, he declines every opportunity to impose them on the unwilling.

One of the interesting outcomes of the interview project was the subsequent debate between Dunn and Dr Hugo Slim, Head of Policy for the International Committee of the Red Cross. Slim was suspicious of Dunn's claim that revolution was a thing of the past: limited to an approximately 200-year epoch running from 1789-1989. The subsequent exchange between Slim and Dunn exposed a subject which I found particularly interesting: the underlying premises which lead Dunn's theory of revolution to exclude a great many of the seemingly quite profound struggles happening today.

Reflecting on my interview with Dunn, his broader corpus of work, as well as Slim and Dunn's responses in this issue, this article considers Dunn's broader conception of revolution, noting how his approach to the phenomenon of revolution fundamentally differs from the model which today's practitioners and scholars (including myself) are most familiar. At the core of this distinction is the question of whether we regard revolution merely as a political means, or whether it is also a political end. It seems that for Dunn, revolution is emphatically the latter: a longer-term project which is merely initiated by an instance of regime overthrow. Dunn is in good revolutionary company here: The Jacobins, Bolsheviks and Chinese communists seldom envisaged their revolutions as being typified by the mere act of regime overthrow (Furet, 1999). Instead, for them, their revolution was to be continued long after the reconstruction of a new order, with a much grander (if unattainable) aim of one day ushering in a new era of human history and total social emancipation.

## **The Means and Ends of Revolution**

In our interview as well as in his wider work, Dunn distinguishes between ‘Revolution’ on the one hand, and phenomena like ‘rebellion’ and ‘regime collapse’ on the other (Abrams and Dunn, 2017); Dunn, 1989). He argues that revolutions are more than just radical movements aimed at seizing the state (rebellion) or fixed events during which an old regime is replaced by a new (regime collapse). For Dunn, revolution is more than just a political process or political means. Instead, Dunn’s work conveys that revolution was, for a period, also a clearly articulated end in itself: a political horizon with unique theoretical and ideological contents.

If this seems odd to us, it may be because we have adopted a much more processual view of revolution than many others in the past. Indeed, within the realm of what is sometimes called ‘contentious politics’, we are encouraged to think (as the late, great Charles Tilly often did) of political processes, and to investigate the causal mechanisms contained within them (Tilly, 1986;1993;1995;2004). These kinds of queries are the familiar domain of the political scientist or the sociologist, but are less intuitively appealing to a political theorist such as Dunn, or to the revolutionaries he studies. For the revolutionary protagonists in whose thought Dunn grounds his theorising, revolution was a distinct political programme with a radical teleological rationale. Thinking about revolution in a ‘Dunnian’ fashion, as “an actor's concept, not a purely external, naturalistic identification” (Dunn, 1989: 226), we might ask why one would advocate for Revolution rather than Liberal Democracy or Fascist Autocracy, and what sets Revolution apart from either of these two political options.

For Dunn, what distinguishes Revolution from other political options is its distinct teleological dimension. Revolution might begin with regime breakdown, but this is merely the entrance-point into a political programme which promises the periodic progression towards utopia. When leaders such as Robespierre, Lenin and Mao talked of ‘the revolution’ it was envisaged

with precisely this continuity. We might therefore call Dunn's approach a particularly 'revolutionary' view of revolution, in that he adopts the same perspective on the revolutionary process as his 'modern revolutionaries' did themselves: that regime breakdown is one small, delimited fragment of a much broader teleological endeavour. If we take this point of view, delimiting 'revolution' as a word which simply refers to a political process associated with the brief, initial stage of these larger projects seems bizarre.

For Slim, an active humanitarian actively engaged in intervening in precisely these kinds of phenomena, a processual view is much more appealing than Dunn's vision of revolution as a political programme. In order to be an effective humanitarian it is imperative that one should primarily treat revolution as a causal process: identifying its critical junctures and internal dynamics. Taking this view renders the whole process permeable to appropriate forms of intervention, thereby preventing the kinds of violence, brutality and mass slaughter with which we have unfortunately come to associate revolutionary processes. Slim, despite his progressive credentials and vitally important work, is occasionally called upon to play the part of the 'counter-revolutionary' – attempting to prevent these fragile political processes from spilling over into potentially grotesque humanitarian outcomes. From this point of view, Slim's defence of revolution as an enduring political category is particularly well made: the kind of political process which we have long identified as 'revolution' indeed continues today, and those who carry it through are still possessed of a sufficiently ideological character to try and accomplish it.

Where Slim and Dunn ultimately differ is on the question of *ends* and *means*. When we view revolution processually, as a means to a variable spectrum of potential ends, Slim's line of contention seems to be the most promising. For Slim (and many of us), revolutionaries can be anyone with a conceivable post-revolutionary order and the strong desire to accomplish it. If, however, we take Dunn's view (that revolution is not only a means of transformation but also

a transformative political programme in itself,) then our definition of a revolutionary is necessarily narrowed. The revolutionary – like the democrat- becomes someone dedicated to a distinct political programme which must be upheld. For such figures the Revolution, above all else, must be sustained, and any divergent outcome is unacceptable. War, starvation, slaughter and chaos are all permissible so long as the revolution continues.

### **The Implications of Dunn's Theory of Revolution**

Dunn's methodological approach sets him apart from many other political theorists, and makes his work particularly interesting to a broader audience. Drawing on an enormous amount of historical evidence and first-hand experience, Dunn is what we might call an 'empirically-led political theorist'. He generates his theoretical claims in the prudent style of Locke, Rousseau, Burke and de Tocqueville: poring over evidence, critically reflecting, and generating rigid theoretical proposals which stand up to careful empirical scrutiny (Dunn, 1985:189). This empiricist element in Dunn's thought is what makes his theories so valuable for those of us in the social and political sciences. Dunn's theoretical interventions are all manifestly empirically accessible: we can readily relate them to clearly identifiable discrete phenomena, and they do not seem as abstract or alien as many other political ideas.

However, the tension between the empirically-led character of Dunn's theoretical arguments and the conceptual nature of his principal subject matter can make it easy for us to mistake the exact nature of his claims. Because Dunn adopts a style which seems to us much more empirical in nature than a great deal of other political theory, we are intuitively tempted to try and derive naturalistic pronouncements from his work. We presume that when Dunn says that the 'Epoch of Revolution' has passed, he is stating that there will be no more historical phenomena which bear naturalistic resemblance to revolution. This would be a misreading of Dunn's point. Instead, Dunn's argument is that we have reached the end of a period typified by processes of

rebellion and regime overthrow which were *conceptually* recognisable as part of a broader revolutionary programme: possessed of a similar core motivating ideas, theory, teleology and imagined protagonists.

For those of us in the business of comparing revolutions, however, there is still something quite anxiety-provoking about the revelation that everything after 1989 is manifestly a different kind of thing than everything prior. We might fear that accepting Dunn's claim would be tantamount to admitting that any comparisons crossing his approximate date-line are between apples and oranges. There are several ways to respond to this kind of concern – not least that the 'apples to oranges' critique of comparison is seldom particularly instructive: because historical processes belong to multiple categories there is always a way to show that they are, from one view or another, categorically different. Some of the most interesting social and political questions assess precisely how far certain rules, logics, theories, or forms stretch *across* these categorical distinctions. As Dunn stresses in his reply to Slim, his dividing line between revolution and regime breakdown is certainly not so strict as to suggest that comparison between them is impossible. Rather, inherent in Dunn's distinction between the two is exactly such an act of comparison.

If those of us who are more processual in our thinking are still at all anxious about Dunn's typology, we could instead portray the implications of his argument in other terms. We could say, for example, that there was an epoch of 'Intrinsic Revolutions' in which their ideological ends and political means were in agreement (the immediate aim of a Dunnian revolution is yet more revolution). Conversely, we might argue that we are now witnessing merely 'Instrumental Revolutions,' in which the ideological ends of the revolutionary process are something other than revolution: normally the creation of a new, reformed regime, or alternate configuration of the state to resemble something like a liberal democracy, religious autocracy, or other such political forms. This distinction – absent the terminological differences – amounts to a similar

pronouncement as Dunn's, and when we temporarily put our terminological discomfort to one side, Dunn's argument quite clearly rings true. Few of us would really contend that Egypt's 2011 Revolution was possessed of the same revolutionary radicalism of the kinds of historical events Dunn is thinking about. By contrast, when scholars say that the French Revolution lasted from 1789 until such dates as 1795 or 1799, they do not mean that an uninterrupted process of regime overthrow was taking place during this period. Instead, they predominantly refer to a period during which French 'Revolutionaries' advanced a self-consciously revolutionary programme across a variety of political contexts (Baker, 1990. Hanson, 2009.)

While Dunn does much to defend his idea of the 'Epoch of Revolution' in this issue, there remain avenues through which one can challenge his belief that it has ended. We could, for example, ask why Dunn is convinced that our current 30-year dearth of revolutions is enough to mark the end of a 200-year epoch. There was, after all, a 40-year period between 1855 and 1895 during which Dunn's brand of revolution was also notably absent<sup>1</sup>. Many of those living in the 1880s – thirty years into this period - would have likely associated the word 'Revolution' not with politics, but with industry. And yet with the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a renewed upsurge of revolution spread across the globe.

In light of the fluctuations of revolutionary activity seen during Dunn's epoch, one might plausibly argue that - far from ending - its pattern is in fact due to repeat. For his own part, while Dunn remains confident that today's revolutionaries are unlikely "to have any significant consequences," he does not discount the possibility that new revolutionaries might arise in the future. As he put it at the end of our interview: "It doesn't make any sense to think that you could predict *that* in a controlled way, so why pretend to be able to at all?" (Abrams and Dunn, 2017: 127, 130). With the emergence of a new cast-list of revolutionaries uncertain, we may

still consign Dunn's revolutions to a period of dormancy. Whether this period will end in extinction or eruption remains unresolved.

### **Postscript: The Interview as a Scholarly Format**

It is something of an open secret that the 'academic interview' is much more than a verbatim transcription of an intellectual's own words. The interviewer may spend hours with his or her subject, and cover a great deal of material, only a portion of which will make it into the final transcript. There will be all manner of asides, casual remarks, and stumbles over phrasing on either side of the process. There may be entire conversations which are considered too personal to publish, or simply irrelevant to the principal endeavour. All of these peculiar 'crumples' of the interview process are ironed flat by the enterprise of publication.

This transformation from interview to publication generally proceeds through the following steps.

1. The interviewer produces a transcript of what took place, ignoring stutters, coughs, laughter and other such elements of human discourse.
2. With the transcript finished, the material is then polished into a kind of 'intelligent verbatim' account: an easily legible version of the conversation that took place.
3. This account is then edited by the interviewer – an overarching set of themes is decided upon, and the elements of the interview which address with these themes are organized accordingly.
4. This thematised version of the interview is further spruced-up by the interviewer, who assures that sentences, paragraphs and topics flow in an intuitive, literary fashion.
5. At this late stage, the interviewee is finally presented with a preview of what it is they are reported to have said, and they then conduct subsequent edits to ensure that:

- a. What they are reported to have said is close enough to what they had actually said.
  - b. What they had said was close enough to what they actually think about the matter at hand.
6. The interviewer then edits the whole piece once again, this time for style. They write a brief precis, framing the entire endeavour in view of the agreed upon content, and ensure that both the interviewer and interviewee appear as coherent as possible.
  7. Both parties approve the final content, and the piece enters the publication process.

The upshot of this entire process is that the interviewer will introduce all manner of seemingly insignificant turns of phrase, sequences of argumentation, and stylistic flourishes to the finished interview which neither they, nor the interviewee will notice until a great deal later on. While I am confident that Dunn and I produced as faithful a finished product as anyone could hope to, I must concede that we elevated ‘The Epoch of Revolution’ quite far above the scholarly parapet of Dunn’s broader corpus. I hope, however, that in doing so we generated healthy debate and engagement around a subject which remains in desperate need of scholarly energy: the prospects of revolution today.

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## Notes

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1 A possible exception is the Paris Commune of 1871, which was later fêted by Lenin as the inspiration for the Soviet state. However, as Harison (2007:7) notes, prior to Lenin's revival of the Commune it was largely regarded as a "last spasm of a now obsolete revolutionary tradition." Its protagonists, meanwhile, were "the brave but ultimately misguided martyrs of an unplanned and doomed enterprise" (Harison, 2007: 28).