

A PHILOSOPHICAL RE-EXAMINATION OF 'REVOLUTIONS' AND THE QUEST FOR POLITICAL STABILITY IN NIGERIA: REVISITING THE SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY OF THOMAS HOBBS

Jenifer Emejulu & Timothy D. Adidi

Abstract

The world has recorded and gazetted revolutions in history as one of the options for changing the socio-economic narratives of a nation that is politically unstable and economically depressed due to failure in leadership. As such, many have argued that revolutions are not necessary for political stability; while other scholars are of the opinion that it is very necessary for changing the narratives in governance so as to achieve a more peaceful environment in responding to the existential realities that are antithetical to good governance. This paper upholds that a revolution is indeed necessary; but does not translate into good governance or political stability. Therefore, considering the various interpretation of what a revolution is, this paper uses a qualitative and expository research methodology to argue that the revolution of the mind is a safer landing for the process of political stability; and in so doing, this paper has revisited the social contract theory of Thomas Hobbes as the bedrock in resisting the temptation of a revolution devoid of ethical standard. Hobbes does not approve of revolutions because of their association with violence. He is known to abhor violence and war and the major purpose of the creation of the state was for peace. Following Hobbes, this paper holds that a violent revolution is not the solution to the political problems in Nigeria.

Keywords: *political stability, good governance, revolution, violence, ethical standards.*

Introduction

Political Philosophers have been searching for answers to the question of how best man should organize the state to ensure a just society. Plato, Aristotle and their contemporaries have all grappled with issues which arise from the nature, purpose and organization of the state. The state has duties which it owes its citizens and vice versa. When these two do not play their roles as they should, there is crisis in the state. The relationship between leadership and the citizens in the state goes beyond then day to day running of the state. The leadership of the state has a huge responsibility to ensure the equitable distribution of political goods to the citizens. Nigeria like many states around the world is witnessing crises in the relationship between her leadership and its citizen and this is because of the failure of its leadership in

its delivery of political goods. The clamour for a change in Nigeria has led to many ideas as how this change can be achieved. Some schools of thought have suggested restructuring, others want the country split into regions and lately the call for revolution in the country. Nigeria is a county plagued by a lot of problems: political, economic, social and the majority of the masses are impoverished and disillusioned. The social contract theorists maintain that the creation of the state was to man s advantage; to secure his life and property and in turn, men were to give up their individual will for the general will. The state was to secure man s life and property and to deliver the political goods which is its primary function and when it fails in its duties, crisis looms in the state. Thomas Hobbes in his social contract theory gave a lot of power to the Leviathan (government) which he referred to as a mortal god. This was to show the extent of the power which he bestowed upon the leadership of the state. Hobbes Leviathan had unlimited powers and was to be obeyed without question, he was not subject to the contract and was not bound by it. The citizen in such as state had no right to resist the Leviathan. The right to resist or revolt against the leadership of the state has been contested by many scholars. Revolution brings about change in the state; it could be political, social, economic, cultural, etc. This paper considers the Nigerian situation and examines the call for a revolution, taking a cue from Thomas Hobbes it examines the social contract theory and the place of revolution in the Nigerian state.

Conceptual Clarification Revolution

A revolution is a major, sudden and hence typically violent alteration in government and in related associations and structures. The term is used by analogy in such expressions as the industrial revolutions, where it refers to a radical and profound change in economic relationships and technological conditions.¹ Revolutions generally arise from the feeling of discontentment of the people from oppression or the incompetence of their government, and a desire to change it. Revolution is commonly understood to have two components: rejection of the existing government's authority and an attempt to replace it with another government, where both involve the use of extra-constitutional means.² There are different types of revolutions: political, socio-economic, violent and nonviolent revolutions, etc.

¹ J. E. Luebering "Revolution" *Encyclopedia Britannica*. February 24, 2020.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/revolution-politics>

² "Revolution" *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
<https://plato.Stanford.edu/entries/revolution>

Nonviolence

Nonviolence rejects the use of physical violence in order to achieve social or political change, often described as the politics of the ordinary people; this form of social struggle has been adopted by mass populations all over the world in campaigns for social justice.³ M. K. Gandhi and L. King Jnr are popular proponents of nonviolence and adopted its principles to achieve decolonization in India and segregation in the United States of America respectively.

Social contract

The social contract refers to a voluntary agreement among people defining the relationship of individuals with one another and with government and by this process forming a state. It is a view that persons' moral and /or political obligations are dependent upon a contract or agreement among them to form the society in which they live.⁴ The most popular among the social contract theorists include: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and J.J. Rousseau.

Types of Revolutions

Mark Katz identified six forms of revolution;

1. Rural revolution
2. Urban revolution
3. Coup d'état, e.g. Egypt, 1952
4. Revolution from above, e.g. Mao's Great leap forward of 1958
5. Revolution from without, e.g. the allied invasions of Italy, 1944 and Germany, 1945.
6. Revolution by osmosis, e.g. the gradual Islamization of several countries.⁵

The term *revolution* has also been used to denote great change. Such revolutions are usually recognized as having transformed in society, culture, philosophy, and technology much more than political systems they are often known as social revolutions. Some can be global, while others are limited to single countries, some can also be slow or occur in faster paced stages. One of the classic examples of the usage of the word *revolution* in such context is the Industrial Revolution or the Commercial Revolution. These usages of the word

³ "Say no to Violence" United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/observances/non-violence-day>

⁴ "Social Contract Theory" *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
<https://iep.utm.edu/soc-cont/>

⁵ Mark N Katz, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Waves*. (St Martin's Press 1997) 4

revolution are diverse and range from such terms as the digital revolution, the agrarian revolution; these all show slow moving change in societies but these revolutions are broadly classified into two: political and social revolutions.

According to Allan Todd there are basically two types of revolutions: Social and Political revolutions. To him, social revolutions are much more fundamental and deep-going upheavals than political revolutions in that they are attempts, above all, to transfer economic assets and power, and social and political status and privileges, from one social group to another. Consequently, social revolutions tend to be much more violent than political revolutions – especially as the dominant economic and social elites have so much more at stake.⁶ The Paris Commune of 1871 and the Russian Revolution of 1917 can both be seen as examples of social revolutions. On the other hand, political revolutions occur mainly when new economic and social developments have already begun to transform society, but where existing political rulers and institutions are tending to hold back further changes. He further states that the belief behind such political revolutions is that once changes in political personnel and structures have been achieved, the economic and social transformations can continue at a quicker pace, and even be assisted to their final conclusion.⁷

There are also violent and nonviolent revolutions. Revolutions may be violent or nonviolent and may begin nonviolently and become violent. This distinction, though obviously important, is not so crisp as one might think, because what counts as violence may be disputed. For example, attempts to overthrow a government by disruptive techniques (for example conducting general strikes, disabling power grids, or blocking main transportation routes) are obviously not violent in the same way as discharging firearms or detonating explosives⁸. Violence is understood here as occurring on a large scale and not small pockets of violence.

There is a difference between a revolution and other forms of uprising like a coup, revolts or rebellion. A Revolution is distinguished from a coup d'etat, which is a sudden seizure of state power by a small group, a coup does not necessarily cause profound, far-reaching change in the social system. There is also a difference between a revolution and revolt or a rebellion, which may be either a failed attempt at revolution, a violent expression of grievances

⁶ Allan Todd, *Revolutions: 1789-1917*. (U.K : Cambridge University Press 2003) 44

⁷ Buchanan, Allen, "Revolution", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). 2007.
<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/revolution/>>.

⁸ Buchanan Allen."Revolution" 2007

with limited purpose, or merely a change in allegiance. The term *revolution* is more broadly applied to any significant historical transformation.⁹

The world has witnessed a lot of revolutions but most prominent and remarkable among them are:

- The American revolution of 1775 -1783 which established the independence of 13 American colonies from Great Britain creating the republic of the United States.
- The French revolution 1789-1799 which is regarded as one of the most influential of all modern socio-political revolutions and is associated with the rise of the bourgeoisie and the downfall of the aristocracy.
- The Russian revolution of 1917
- The Chinese revolution in the 1940s
- The Cuban revolution of 1959
- The 1989 revolutions across several countries like china (the crackdown in Tiananmen Square protests), the fall of the Berlin was prompted by the demonstrations in East Germany and the anticommunist protests in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary
- The Arab Spring 2010-2012 comprising of:
 - i. The Tunisian revolution 2010-2011
 - ii. The 2011 Egyptian revolution
 - iii. The 2011 and post 2011 Libyan civil war
 - iv. The Syrian civil war
 - v. The uprising in Bahrain in 2011
 - vi. The 2011 Yemeni revolution

The Morality of Revolutions

There are moral issues posed by revolutions. There are also interesting conceptual questions as to how to distinguish revolution from resistance, rebellion, and secession, all of which also involve opposition to existing political authority. There is also the question of the means through which this revolution is carried out. although prominent figures in the history of Philosophy have held views on revolution, they have primarily concentrated on the issue of just cause (and in some cases on rightful authority to wage revolutionary war), without addressing a number of other moral problems that revolutions raise, such as the question of whether revolutionaries can rightly use forms of violence that the armed forces of states are morally prohibited

⁹ Buchanan Allen. "Revolution" 2007

from using and whether they may conscript fighters, punish defectors and traitors, and expropriate property needed for the struggle.¹⁰

It is very important to state categorically that not all revolutions can guarantee political stability or translates into political stability. As such, it is expected that there should be rules of engagement that governs and guides a revolution. This is simply because despite occasional injustice, it is wrong to stir up and wage civil war against a rightful ruler, that is, one who retains the right to rule. The right referred to here is not so much legal right as moral right; and this readily translates into the ethics of a revolution that guarantees safety of lives and properties. Hence, one of the greatest challenges of any revolution is the temptation of carrying arms and weapons with the loss of lives and destruction of properties. No revolution in the world has ever succeeded without the loss of lives and properties. A single live lost during any revolution does not worth the act of a revolution. This is the very reason there is a much clarion call towards non-violent revolutions which comes through active resistance without physical force, by petitions, speeches, protests, books, pamphlets, editorials, and propaganda of all sorts, is always morally allowed against unjust laws and tyrannical rulers. Due to the serious devastating effects of revolutions, revolutions do not always work, but though exciting and enticing; and they have no ability to forge lasting change.

The use of violence in revolutions raises the question if the means is really justified by the end achieved. This is because the use of violence can escalate to civil war and wanton destruction lives and property. The question of whether nonviolent revolutions can produce positive result is also raised.

The Problems in the Political Landscape of Nigeria

The nation is plagued by a myriad of problems. Social, political and economic problems have kept the country in a pitiable state. corruption and mismanagement of the country's resources have left the country underdeveloped despite her rich natural resources. Nigeria has been scarred by political instability which has affected her institutions and there seems to be no end to her woes.

The Nigeria political landscape no doubt is in dire need of socio-economic and political redemption because of the high level political instability that is characterized by bad governance from insecurity to economic depression and periodic recession despite been functionally operating a democratic form a presidential system of government. It is this retrogressive

¹⁰ Buchanan, Allen, "Revolution", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). 2007.

<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/revolution/>>.

condition in Nigeria that made Odumegwu Ojukwu feared the coming of a revolution when he regrettably opined that “we have to realise that if in Nigeria, reform from the top becomes impossible, then we must gird our loins to face the revolution from the bottom”¹¹ Hence, following the opinion of Odumegwu Ojukwu and the socio-economic and political quagmire the Nigerian landscape is facing, there is a problem of unethical leadership which is the chief reason according to Odumayak Okpo for the continuous underdevelopment of Nigeria¹². The renowned novelist, Chinua Achebe, attributes the root cause of the country’s problem to bad leadership. In his book entitled *The Problem with Nigeria*, he said:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership¹³

Unfortunately, scholars have always established that the political landscape of Nigeria on the leaders; and this is without looking towards to another dimension of the failure to in the followership. There is an inclusive dimension to followership as a contributing factor to the Nigeria’s political landscape. This is why it is really difficult for the call of a revolution from the bottom to be realized as conjectured by Odumegwu Ojukwu. There is an integrated collaboration of corruption from the public and private sector which flows down to the ordinary people in the society; in some cases, and if not all cases; and this has brought about a politicized level of ethnicism and religion to the detriment of a common ideological framework that will install a revolution in Nigeria.

This therefore, will pose the question as to what is the basis for common grounds amongst the ordinary people to begin a revolution in Nigeria? No doubt, the Nigeria people sometimes again are beneficiaries of the present socio-economic condition despite the abnormally characterized by ineffective policies that has promoted the divide of ethnicism and religious differences. Then, how do we hope to galvanize ourselves as an independent people against the loyalty we have to our tribal and religious affiliations we have as representatives in government? There are beneficiaries who are stakeholders in various government levels and who get contracts to which

¹¹ Odimegwu O., *Because I am Involved*. (Spectrum Publications 1989)

¹² Okpo O., *Rethinking Leadership for Nigeria’s Development: An Ibibio Ethics as Paradigm to Ethical Leadership*. (Hope Publications 2018) 28

¹³ Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria*. (Heinemann 1983) 1

others survive from, and who despite these abnormalities and disorientation about politics will refuse to be part of a revolution to change the status quo. For example, if the Minister of Petroleum is a Gbagyi man, and there is a call for a revolution, it is not expected that eighty-five percent of the Gbagyi people will join any call for a revolution because of what they stand to lose despite the fact that the government in power have lost the competence of some majority. At the end, this will bring a clash of interest rather than patriotic citizenship which is for the common good and common interest? This is exactly what has affected the increase in political participation in the Nigerian polity. It is even very easy for people to be paid off with monetary gratifications and the lack of resilience due to personal gains. Are Nigerians resilient enough to sustain the momentum that comes with a revolution? Patriotic citizenship has enough reasons for the possibility of a guaranteed revolution in Nigeria; and this is where Odumegwu Ojukwu agrees that revolution can come from the people; but if and only the people are patriotic enough to leave above their ethnic and religious sentiments to be governed by reason and apply politics with morality as the basis for socio-economic common good; because politics, rightly understood, is the intelligent ordering of the affairs of the city-the polis-for the sake of the common good.¹⁴ There is a universal and ontological basis right from the Athenian schools of thought that reconciles politics and morality as an inseparable project. These schools of thought from Plato to Aristotle and from Aristotle to the great medieval thinkers, all agree all agree that the political project is an ethical project, and the ethical project is the political project¹⁵

Revisiting the Social Contract Theory of Thomas Hobbes and Its Implication for a Non-Violent Revolution in Nigeria

Hobbes' Leviathan was the force holding the state together to prevent the anarchy prevalent in the state of nature "the sovereign is the soul of the common wealth, which once departed from the body, the members do no more receive their motion from it. The end of this obedience is protection which where so ever a man seeth it, and his endeavor to maintain it"¹⁶ The Leviathan was the soul driving the state and was to be obeyed without complaint. "Hobbes explicitly denied that revolution could ever be justified holding

¹⁴ Akinwale.,A., Religion and Societal Conscience Formation. (ed) Jamahh U.V, In a Keynote Address in the Proceedings of the Second Theology Week of the Good Shepherd Major Seminary, Kaduna. (Good Shepherd Major Seminary Publication 2019) 3

¹⁵ Akinwale.,A., Religion and Societal Conscience Formation. p. 6

¹⁶ Thomans Hobbes. *Leviathan* Edwin Curley (ed) (Hackett Publishing Company, 1994) 144

instead that a subject could only resist government authority as a matter of self defense and then only when the perpetration of lethal harm against her was imminent”¹⁷

In the study of social and political philosophy, there is an emphasis on the human person as the purpose of which the state exists, so that the human person can fully realize his/her potentials through the state. As such, despite the fact that the state serves the purpose of the human being (person), the state is not a perfect entity as against Hegel’s postulations. It is this human dimension of the state as ruled by fallible human beings that result to small abuses of power occurring constantly and serious ones occasionally in every state, because rulers are only humans and fallible. Such causes cannot justify a revolution.¹⁸ Anthony Akinwale asserts this fact thus:

Nigerians are neither the worst people nor the most corrupt in the world. Ours, like every human society, is inhabited by human beings, and every human being is infected by the virus of self-centeredness. The difference between us and others is that while, in other climes, measures have been put in place to manage their self-centeredness, here in Nigeria, we operate a system that mismanages our self-centeredness. Our operative notion of politics makes it possible to get away with acts that are inimical to the common good.¹⁹

It is this self-centeredness that gave way for the social contractarians on how they state came into existence. In fact, the state is a human creation and human beings are not perfect. Therefore, in revisiting the social contract theories, it is important to understand the purpose and reason behind the existence of the state. One of the aim and purpose of the state is to create a civil society and from Thomas Hobbes postulations of the state of nature in which everyone surrenders to the *Leviathan* because of this self-centeredness; there was a need to surrender by consent as the basis of legitimate regulation of human affairs, as a yardstick for independence and choice in society²⁰ Despite the consent from the people to surrender to the Leviathan, Hobbes understood political obligation as essentially based on a theory of duty within natural law tradition;

¹⁷ Buchanan, Allen, "Revolution", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). 2007.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/revolution/>

¹⁸ Milton Gonsalves, Fagothey’s Right and Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice. p. 404.

¹⁹ Akinwale A., Religion and Societal Conscience Formation 2019 p.7

²⁰ Mukherjee & Ramaswamy, *A History of Political Thought: Plato to Marx* (2nd Edition) New Delhi: PHI Learning. 2011. Pg 198.

and political obligation was essentially moral.²¹ This political obligation comes with the people to resist should the Leviathan not create room for resistance²² It is this resistance that comes in the form of a political revolution.

Scholars have long considered Hobbes concept of political revolution to be the conservative notion of the conclusion to a cycle of political turmoil²³ Despite the various interpretations of political revolution as presented by Thomas Hobbes, it will be appropriate to critically look at his work in *Behemoth* (written around 1668) he appropriated the vocabulary of revolution to describe a pattern of usurpation which in *Leviathan* 1651 he characterized in terms of synthesis and analysis.²⁴ In so doing, he rejected three ideas prevalent among contemporaries who invoked the notion of revolution: (i) that corruption inevitably afflicted all forms of government, (ii) that fortune shaped earthly events, and (iii) that God will mysteriously and directly intervene in history²⁵ Thus, Hobbes transformed the concept of political revolution; because it is Hobbes belief that revolution leads to a state of war, and as such the common wealth was established and erected to prevent such state, and thus the sovereign is granted the power to punish those who resisted his power²⁶

In a review, Martinich in *Hobbes on Resistance: Defying the Leviathan* advances the argument of Susanne Sreedhar in favor of Thomas Hobbes concept of a revolution as non-violent will not literally interpret his position on revolution, thus Martinich explicitly argued:

Hobbes subjects have the right to rebel; that is; they collectively have the right to resist their sovereign when in their judgment he is a threat to their survival. This is, or at least appears to be, much stronger than the thesis that a subject has a right to defend herself against immediate threats to her life whatever the source, including her sovereign or the sovereign's agents. I think that Hobbes would agree with the latter thesis, but I am highly doubtful that he would accept the former. In *Leviathan*, the explicit terms of the social contract are that people give up their right to make the kind of decisions that would be necessary for

²¹Thomans Hobbes. *Leviathan* p. 202

²² Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan* p. 198

²³ Hartman "Hobbes Concept of Political Revolution". *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol.47 No.3 (July – September), University of Pennsylvania Press. 1986, p. 487

²⁴ Hartman "Hobbes Concept of Political Revolution". p. 487

²⁵ Hartman "Hobbes Concept of Political Revolution". p 487

²⁶ O'Toole J. *The Right of Revolution: An Analysis of John Locke and Thomas Hobbes' Social Contract Theories*. A Senior Honors Thesis Submitted to the College of Arts and Sciences Honors Program and the Department of Philosophy. 2011 Published Online p. 45

them to rebel; they give up such a right to govern themselves. If the proposition that subjects have a right to rebel had been put to Hobbes, he would have denied it²⁷

What if the revolution is provoked by abuse of power on the part of the ruler? Does abuse of power take the right of power from the ruler? According to Milton Gonsalves, rebellion is open, organized, and armed resistance to constituted authority; and revolution is a fundamental change in political organization or in a government or constitution; the overthrow or renunciation of one government or a ruler and the substitution of another by the governed²⁸ Hence, Milton Gonsalves differentiates between rebellion and a revolution and considers them inappropriate in any political sphere as seen in Thomas Hobbes interpretation of a revolution.

Nonetheless, according to Milton Gonsalves, there are extreme conditions in which a revolution is justifiable and they are as follows:

1. The government has become habitually tyrannical and works for its own selfish aims to the harm of the people, with no prospect of change for the better within a reasonable time.
2. All legal and peaceful means available to the citizens have been exhausted to recall the ruler to a sense of duty.
3. There is a reasonable probability that resistance will be successful, or at least that it will secure a betterment proportional to the effort and suffering involved in a civil war.
4. The judgment that the government is tyrannical should be truly representative of the people as a whole. It should not be a movement of a single faction or party, of one geographical district, or of one social class or economic interest²⁹.

Revolutions most often turn violent although there are records of successful nonviolent revolutions. A violent revolution in Nigeria poses a lot of risks to the unity and stability of the country, violence is always counterproductive. Nigeria has been victim of the assault of many violent attacks by militants and terrorists and a revolution in Nigeria could be hijacked. This is because there are a lot of arms in the country and in the hands of militant agents which are a threat to the Nigerian state. There might be a scramble for control of the nation's resources by interested parties and their allies. The revolutionaries

²⁷ Martinich A., In a Book Review on Hobbes on Resistance: Defying the Leviathan. Cambridge University Press. 2010. <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/hobbes-on-resistance-defying-the-leviathan/> retrieved online 10th October, 2019.

²⁸ Milton Gonsalves, *Fagothey's Right and Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice*. (Meril Publishing Company 1989) 404

²⁹ Milton Gonsalves, *Fagothey's Right and Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice*.

because of the very nature of a revolution may not have a fail proof plan to replace the government they are revolting against. This might lead to a total state of war and deterioration of the state. This will create a condition worse than that which led to the clamour for revolution. A nonviolent revolution should be the right way to go instead of a violent one. Genuine reformatory revolution should not be rushed, it can be gradual over a long period of time. It is not enough to ask for a revolution without realizing the huge moral responsibility it must entail to ensure that the state does not fall into complete anarchy

Conclusion

Revolutions are inevitable but not the only way to resolve political issues since there are so many options of settling the issues resulting from unstable government and failure of government to meet to its responsibilities. A nonviolent revolution is always the better alternative to restore political stability. It is very central to Thomas Hobbes theory of resistance in his social contract theory not to destabilize government through a means that threatens the existence of government. Violent revolutions can destroy the already fragile peace in a state such as Nigeria. This work advocates other persuasive approaches like civil disobedience, strikes, non-violent resistance and others to force the hand of government to change its policies to ensure the much desired change in the society.