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Another circumstance proper to be mentioned is the inevitable duration of the revolutionary spirit. This may be illustrated from the change of government in England in 1688. If we look at the revolution strictly so called, we are apt to congratulate ourselves that the advantages it procured, to whatever they may amount, were purchased by a cheap and bloodless victory. But, if we would make a solid estimate, we must recollect it as the procuring cause of two general wars, of nine years under king William, and twelve under queen Anne; and two intestine rebellions (events worthy of execration, if we call to mind the gallant spirit and generous fidelity of the Jacobites, and their miserable end) in 1715 and 1745. Yet this was, upon the whole, a mild and auspicious revolution. Revolutions are a struggle between two parties, each persuaded of the justice of its cause, a struggle not decided by compromise or patient expostulation, but by force only. Such a decision can scarcely be expected to put an end to the mutual animosity and variance.

Perhaps no important revolution was ever bloodless. It may be useful in this place to recollect in what the mischief of shedding blood consists. The abuses which at present exist in political society are so enormous, the oppressions which are exercised so intolerable, the ignorance and vice they entail so dreadful, that possibly a dispassionate enquirer might decide that, if their annihilation could be purchased by an instant sweeping of every human being now arrived at years of maturity from the face of the earth, the purchase would not be too dear. It is not because human life is of so considerable value that we ought to recoil from the shedding of blood. Alas! the men that now exist are for the most part poor and scanty in their portion of enjoyment, and their dignity is no more than a name. Death is in itself among the slightest of human evils. An earthquake, which should swallow up a hundred thousand individuals at once, would chiefly be to be regretted for the anguish it entailed upon survivors; in a fair estimate of those it destroyed, it would often be comparatively a trivial event. The laws of nature which produce it are a fit subject of investigation; but their effects, contrasted with many other events, are scarcely a topic of regret. The case is altogether different when man falls by the hand of his neighbour. Here a thousand ill passions are generated. The perpetrators, and the witnesses of murders, become obdurate, unrelenting and inhuman. Those who sustain the loss of relations or friends by a catastrophe of this sort are filled with indignation and revenge. Distrust is propagated from man to man, and the dearest ties of human society are dissolved. It is impossible to devise a temper more inauspicious to the cultivation of justice and the diffusion of benevolence.

To the remark that revolutions can scarcely be unaccompanied with the shedding of blood, it may be added that they are necessarily crude and premature. Politics is a science. The general features of the nature of man are capable of being understood, and a mode may be delineated which, in itself considered, is best adapted to the condition of man in society. If this mode ought not, everywhere, and instantly, to be fought to be reduced into practice, the modifications that are to be given it in conformity to the variation of circumstances, and the degrees in which it is to be realized, are also a topic of scientific disquisition. Now it is clearly the nature of science to be progressive in its advances. How various were the stages of astronomy before it received the degree of perfection which was given it by Newton? How imperfect were the lisplings of intellectual science before it attained the precision of the present century? Political knowledge is, no doubt, in its infancy; and, as it is an affair of life and action, will, in proportion as it gathers vigour, manifest a more uniform and less precarious influence upon the concerns of human society. It is the history of all science to be known first to a few, before it descends through the various descriptions and classes of the community. Thus, for twenty years, and *Principia* of Newton had scarcely any readers, and his system continued unknown; the next twenty perhaps sufficed to make the outlines of that system familiar to almost every person in the slightest degree tinctured with science.

The only method according to which social improvements can be carried on, with sufficient

prospect of an auspicious event, is when the improvement of our institutions advances in a just proportion to the illumination of the public understanding. There is a condition of political society best adapted to every different stage of individual improvement. The more nearly this condition is successively realized, the more advantageously will the general interest be consulted. There is a sort of provision in the nature of the human mind for this species of progress. Imperfect institutions, as has already been shown, cannot long support themselves when they are generally disapproved of, and their effects truly understood. There is a period at which they may be expected to decline and expire, almost without an effort. Reform, under this meaning of the term, can scarcely be considered as of the nature of action. Men feel their situation; and the restraints that shackled them before vanish like a deception. When such a crisis has arrived, not a sword will need to be drawn, not a finger to be lifted up in purposes of violence. The adversaries will be too few and too feeble to be able to entertain a serious thought of resistance against the universal sense of mankind.

Under this view of the subject then it appears that revolutions, instead of being truly beneficial to mankind, answer no other purpose than that of marring the salutary and uninterrupted progress which might be expected to attend upon political truth and social improvement. They disturb the harmony of intellectual nature. They propose to give us something for which we are not prepared, and which we cannot effectually use. They suspend the wholesome advancement of science, and confound the process of nature and reason.

We have hitherto argued upon the supposition that the attempt which shall be made to effect a revolution shall be crowned with success. But this supposition must by no means be suffered to pass without notice. Every attempt of this sort, even if menaced only, and not carried into act, tends to excite a resistance which otherwise would never be consolidated. The enemies of innovation become alarmed by the intemperance of its friends. The storm gradually thickens, and each party arms itself in silence with the weapons of violence and stratagem. Let us observe the consequence of this. So long as the contest is merely between truth and sophistry, we may look with tolerable assurance to the progress and result. But, when we lay aside arguments, and have recourse to the sword, the case is altered. Amidst the barbarous rage of war, and the clamorous din of civil contention, who shall tell whether the event will be prosperous or adverse? The consequence may be the riveting on us anew the chains of despotism, and ensuring, through a considerable period, the triumph of oppression, even if it should fail to carry us back to a state of torpor, and obliterate the memory of all our improvements.

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William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, Book IV, Of the Operation of Opinion in Societies and Individuals, Chapter II, Of Revolutions, London 1798 [1793]

<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/g/godwin/william/enquiry/complete.html>