

**Being Revolutionary**  
**Creating Positive Change in Our Era of Upheaval**  
**By**  
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“Eh, what’s up Doc,” Bugs Bunny’s most iconic phrase, was also his first sentence ever. It was memorable, in part, because of his calm, laidback delivery, even with Elmer Fudd’s loaded shotgun in his face. But does anyone recall Bugs’ second most oft repeated phrase? “Of course you know, dis means war.” Bugs Bunny was not only a wartime baby, having been born in 1940, but was also widely regarded as a war hero. As NPR reporter, JJ Sutherland put it during a 2008 report; “Perhaps this is best represented by Bugs Bunny’s emblematic adoption during WWII. The representative of the culture, the epitome of the American Character, was used in propaganda, painted on bars, and sewn on the paratroopers’ patches. Bugs’ rule-breaking was helping win the war.”<sup>1</sup>

His tremendous popularity at this tumultuous time in history may have been because the wisecracking “wascalwy wabbit,” always kept his cool, even in the face of death, but also because he was willing to stand out as an individual in an age of fascism and mass conformity. As Professor Robert Thompson, an expert on pop-culture, explains, “He defies authority. He goes against the rules. But he does it in a way that’s often lovable, and that often results in good things for the culture at large.”<sup>2</sup> And since the “authoritarian character” is, as psychologist Erich Fromm says, “the personality structure which is the human basis of Fascism,”<sup>3</sup> Bugs Bunny’s antiauthoritarian character represents it’s opposite, the bold, boisterous, nonconforming individual who defies rules and expectations. In one episode, for instance, instead of falling off a cliff he’s able to magically float in midair. “I know this defies the law of gravity,” he says, “but I never studied law.”

Ironically, those old Bugs Bunny cartoons are no longer considered appropriate for kids to watch and, in truth, they probably never were. They were far too violent and, even worse, often upheld racist and sexist cultural stereotypes. They were so bad, in fact, that a couple of them have been banned from broadcast since as early as 1968, and more recently, in 2001, the Cartoon Network ended up excluding twelve controversial episodes from a Bugs Bunny marathon that it had originally planned on showing. Extremely offensive depictions of Japanese, Blacks, and Native Americans were common at the time and Bugs Bunny cartoons were no exception. Today I can’t imagine what it must have been like for my black friends to watch the same cartoons that I enjoyed as a kid, nor to know how much they helped ingrain

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/text/s.php?sId=17874931&m=1>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, Avon Books, The Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1966, p. 186.

and reinforce these terrible stereotypes in me and my own feelings of privilege growing up white.

It is this sort of dichotomy, between being a true liberator who defies authority in a way that is “lovable, and that often results in good thing for the culture at large,” as JJ Sutherland put it, and being one who, instead, helps uphold a system of conformity and discrimination that results only in what is good for the elite. In other words, I want to consider how we know whether we are genuinely working to transform an unjust system or unwittingly working to uphold it. Are we, like Bugs Bunny, willing to violate some of the norms within our own dominant group, but not enough to truly threaten our place of privilege and power? Or are our actions meant to utterly shatter the system of domination in the name of genuine freedom and justice for everyone?

In his book about how we become fascist, *Escape From Freedom*, Erich Fromm distinguishes between what he calls the *rebel* and the *revolutionary*. In essence, the *rebel* is someone who feels powerless and is fighting to become powerful, whereas the true *revolutionary* is fighting to change society for the good of all. The *rebel* is selfish; the *revolutionary* is altruistic. The *rebel* is an authoritarian character; the *revolutionary* is a genuine liberator. These distinctions are important because *rebels* and *revolutionaries* are often fighting side-by-side in the same cause. The only way to tell them apart is by their actions. In war the revolutionary will treat the opposition humanly, taking prisoners and treating them according to the rules of the Geneva Convention, for example, whereas the rebel, being an authoritarian character, may torture, humiliate, rape, and even kill them with utter disregard. In a civil demonstration or protest, the revolutionary will march peacefully but boldly to confront systems of injustice, even if placing oneself in harm's way, while the volatile rebel may quickly turn violent, storming the castle, so to speak, destroying and stealing property, and even beating and fighting with their opposition.

As an authoritarian character, the rebel behaves much like those in the positions power she or he is struggling to overthrow, not really to make the world a more just and better place for all, but to obtain a position of power and authority for oneself. The rebel, if you will, is an authoritarian character who feels powerless, is envious of those with power, and is obsessed with taking power. Once they get into positions of power, however, they behave very much like every other authoritarian.

Hugo Chavez, for example, the late Venezuelan President, was born into a poor, working-class family and grew up to become a Labor Party leader and founder of the *Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement*, which made two coup attempts to overthrow the Venezuelan government. Eventually he was elected President and was widely heralded as a hero of the poor and working classes. Yet, before long, he instituted radical changes in government, including creating a Constitutional Assembly made up of 95 percent of his own supporters. The Assembly then created a new constitution that gave Chavez almost exclusive power by eliminating two houses of Congress, gave the military the right to oversee the economy and to

maintain order on the streets, and extended term limits so he could, effectively, stay in power forever. Once in power, it seems, Chavez didn't want to give it up and eventually became the kind of authoritarian dictator he once opposed.

The same thing happened with the original Labor Party in the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Communism, especially, is a particular brand of socialism that doesn't believe it possible for a centralized government to justly distribute power and resources. Each community, rather, must be free to govern itself. Yet when the Bolshevik Revolution happened in Russia, and the Maoist Communist Revolution occurred in China, the leaders of both movements felt it necessary to violate their greatest principle, just long enough to establish order, before promising to turn their new governments over to the people they were liberating. Within just a few years, however, millions of people starved to death in both countries, and both established what have ended up being two of the longest lasting, most centralized, authoritarian governments in the world.

History calls them revolutions and revolutionaries, but, judging by the outcomes, they were rebellions and rebels. Those promising a new order merely longed to be in power, just as their constituents longed for leaders that would give them social power and status, the same kind of power and status they envied in those they sought to overthrow. Upon obtaining it, however, it soon became apparent their revolutions weren't about obtaining justice, but about seizing power for themselves, like Fidel Castro, another revolutionary leader who ended up being Cuba's dictator for 50 years.

Let's contrast this with the story of Thomas Paine, a true *revolutionary character*. He may be best remembered for his 1776 pamphlet, *Common Sense*, in which he so successfully argued in favor of American Independence, that historians say the Declaration of Independence would not have been supported without it. As John Adams once said, "Without the pen of Paine, the sword of Washington would have been wielded in vain."<sup>4</sup>

In another pamphlet, *The American Crisis*, Paine famously wrote, "These are times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like Hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph." General George Washington was so moved by these words that he ordered the entire pamphlet read aloud to every soldier in the Continental Army, which inspired them to continue on under the harshest of circumstances.

After the American Revolution was over, Paine went to France to help fight in its revolution, even though the United States sided with England. Once the French revolutionaries gained control, however, he protested their intention to execute

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<sup>4</sup> <http://libertyonline.hypermall.com/Paine/Default.htm>

members of the ousted monarchy. So he was arrested and thrown in prison where he wrote, *The Age of Reason*, becoming the founder of *Deism*, arguing against institutionalized religion and Christian dogma. Meanwhile, his name had become anathema in the United States, largely because of his anti-religious views, and his powerful friends, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, allowed him to languish in prison for political reasons.

It wasn't until he had become deathly sick that John Adams, then ambassador to France, used his position to obtain Paine's release and quietly moved him back the U.S. where he was ostracized and abused, and soon died impoverished. Only six people attended his funeral in New Rochelle, NY, where his body was buried. Years later his friend, William Cobbett, troubled that his grave was being vandalized and desecrated, exhumed his remains and secretly and illegally returned them to England where they remain in some unknown, unmarked location. His remarkable contributions were all but buried and forgotten with him until 20<sup>th</sup> century historians rediscovered his incredible significance.

So, on the one hand there's Paine, who lived in poverty his entire life, worked tirelessly to improve the welfare of others, traveled to a foreign land to help strangers fight for freedom, went to prison because he had compassion for his enemies, and was demonized and maligned because he even sought intellectual and religious freedom. On the other hand we have figures like Hugo Chavez, Chairman Mao, Vladimir Lenin, and Fidel Castro, all of whom became so obsessed with retaining power once they finally got it, that they came to behave very much like those they once fought to depose. Paine, additionally went to France because he was a true liberator, unlike other American Revolutionaries who quickly made friends with England and ignored France's requests to help fight the same enemy. "A rebel" Fromm says, "is one who wants to overthrow authority because of his resentment and, as a result, to make himself the authority in place of the one he has overthrown. And very often, at the very moment when he reaches his aim, he makes friends with the very authority he was fighting so bitterly before."<sup>5</sup>

[It should be noted that France, which thanked Paine by throwing him in prison, followed the same pattern as Russia and China and Venezuela and Cuba. Their intention to overthrow the cruel Monarchy ended with their leader, Napoleon becoming a power hungry dictator.]

So it's important for those seeking to end authoritarian regimes to begin by understanding their own motivations; to determine if they are truly seeking the kind of social transformation that establishes greater justice for all, or if they are merely seeking authoritarian power for themselves. Are they true revolutionaries, like Thomas Paine, and social reformers like Dr. King who understood the Black community "must not," in his words, "lead us to a distrust of all white people," because he understood, none of us can have genuine freedom if all of us don't, "that,"

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<sup>5</sup> Fromm, *ibid.*, p. 140.

as he said, “their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom;” or Gandhi, who regularly called the British he sought to liberate India from, “our friends;” or Nelson Mandela who, upon becoming President of South Africa after ending Apartheid, immediately began a process of Truth and Reconciliation between black and white South Africans? Or are they rebels, like those who overthrow one rigid authoritarian system only to replace it with their own rigid authoritarian system?

We need to know because millions of people in our nation today are revolting against the establishment. It may not be a stretch to say we are already in the midst of another revolution, both on the national and global level. Obviously there are movements like ISIS and Boko Haram that are as brutal and authoritarian as those they are seeking to usurp. More subtly, however, are people all over the world who want the same kind of freedoms they see others enjoy. In our own nation, Bernie Sanders has gained the support of millions on the promise of what he calls a “revolution.” The corporate owned news media doesn’t seem to cover it much, but the signs of revolution are everywhere. Sander’s supporters, and their demands for income equality, overturning Citizens United, taxing the rich, regulating Wall Street, a green economy, universal healthcare, and publically funded higher education aren’t going to simply go away just because, in all likelihood, he loses the election.

Just last month, furthermore, the Grant Township in Pennsylvania passed the first ever law legalizing civil disobedience so its citizens can legally interfere with fracking Companies constructing wastewater injection wells. And, though the national media hardly mentioned it, just two months ago more than twelve hundred protestors were arrested in our nation’s Capital, the largest number since the Vietnam era, demanding an end to big money in politics in a movement called Democracy Spring.

While I agree with all these calls for reform, I wonder how, as a society, we will go about getting them, through genuine revolution or misguided rebellion? And how are we to know the difference?

In *Escape from Freedom*, Erich Fromm outlines several distinctions between the rebel and the revolutionary. The rebel, he explains, as an authoritarian character, “worships the past... What has been, will eternally be.”<sup>6</sup> So the rebel doesn’t really want social progress, but merely to return to the imaginary “good ol’ days,” which may explain why so many seeking social change are infatuated with Donald Trump’s promise to “make America great again.”

The rebel also remains committed to hierarchy and privilege more so than to liberty and justice. Thus, they tend to see arbitrary differences, like “sex or race,” Fromm says, as “signs of superiority or inferiority.” A difference that doesn’t, “have this connotation,” he says, “is unthinkable.”<sup>7</sup> It is unthinkable because, by definition,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 193.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 196.

authoritarianism is hierarchical and, therefore, must find reasons to justify how it discriminates.

Finally, rebels admire authority and revere authoritarian figures who tell them what to do and how to think. In short, they are fascist, all too ready to unthinkingly accept the majority position on things, even though they believe they are doing so in the name of freedom and of their own accord. The Rebel, Fromm says, “borrows [one’s] thoughts from them, [one’s] feelings, [one’s] goals, [one’s] values—although [one] lives under the illusion that it is [oneself] who thinks, feels, and makes [these] choices.”<sup>8</sup>

The revolutionary character, by contrast, is almost the complete opposite, having, what Fromm calls a, “critical mood,” meaning the revolutionary thinks for oneself. Thus, the revolutionary is fully capable of saying *no* to those in authority, and is one for whom, Fromm says, “disobedience is a virtue.”<sup>9</sup> (Like the Township in Pennsylvania that just made it legal.)

But the most important characteristic of the revolutionary character, he tells us, is “a deep reverence for life,’ to use Albert Schweitzer’s term, a deep affinity with, and love for life.”<sup>10</sup> “The miracle of creation,” however, “and life is always a miracle,” Fromm continues, “is outside [the authoritarian’s] range of emotional experience.”<sup>11</sup> Thus the revolutionary loves life and all lives, compared to the rebel who too easily disregards the lives of others.

45 years ago, Professor Rupert Wilkinson wrote a book on the authoritarian personality that he actually entitled, *The Broken Rebel*. In it he says, “Authoritarians exhibit a deep wish to yield to strong authority, especially the authority of an ‘in-group,’ be it family or nation, church or fraternity. Some authoritarians submit to human leaders; others, finding mortal man too fallible or personal subservience unacceptable in their milieu, defer mainly to doctrines and magical institutions. Above all, the authoritarian craves moral commandments that proceed very visibly and directly from an external source.”<sup>12</sup> (To an external authority, that is.)

Today, when I see protestors against Donald Trump turn violent, saying he is not welcome in their communities because he says others aren’t welcome in his community, I wonder what the difference between them is, and fear the revolution we’re in may quickly degrade into mere rebellion, in which the powerless seek only power for themselves and their group, rather than true justice and liberation for all. As genuine revolutionaries, we cannot succumb to the temptation for personnel power, but must remain devoted to the causes of equality, and justice for all,

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<sup>8</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Dogma of Christ and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology, and Culture*, Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, Connecticut, 1955, 1973, p. 144f.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 149.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 147.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Wilkinson, Rupert, *The Broken Rebel*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, NY, 1972, p. 21.

including caring for the welfare of the powerful, like Paine, and King, and Gandhi, and Mandela did. Nor can we cease thinking for ourselves so we aren't swept away by the mood of the masses who too easily succumb to feelings of rage and self-righteousness (like some of the Sanders supporters have done when by hurling insults and chairs at their opponents). And we must, above all, maintain our love of life and respect for all beings, including those we are fighting for as well as those we are fighting against. Revolution is never about us, it's about the freedom and justice and equality we seek for everyone.