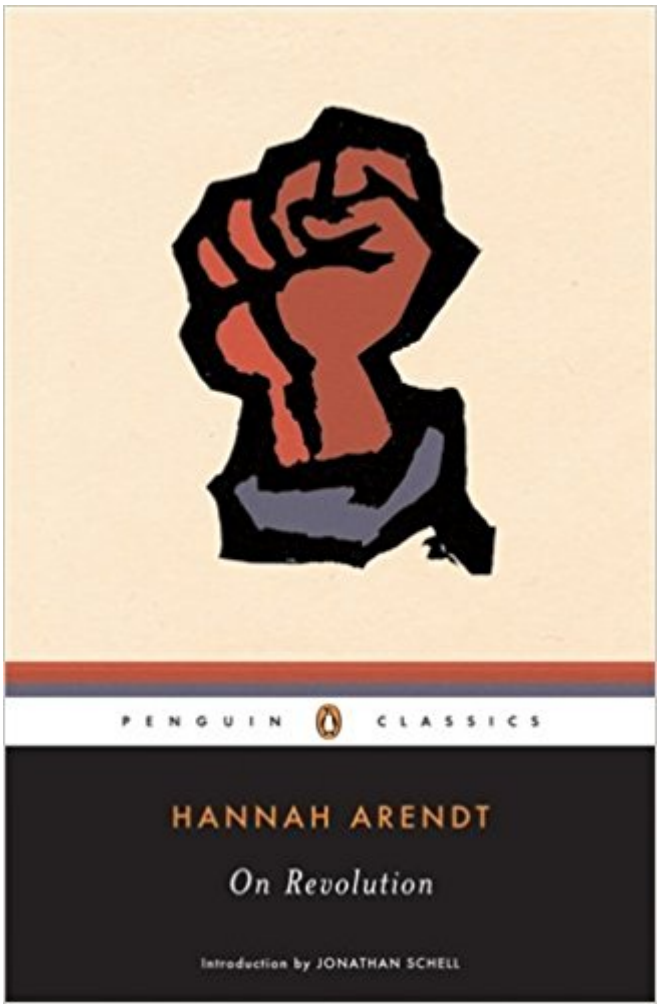
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On Revolution (Penguin Classics)



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Synopsis

A unique and fascinating look at violent political change by one of the most profound thinkers of the twentieth century and the author of Eichmann in Jerusalem and The Origins of Totalitarianism Ã Â Hannah ArendtÃ¢â ¬â„¢s penetrating observations on the modern world, based on a profound knowledge of the past, have been fundamental to our understanding of our political landscape. On Revolution is her classic exploration of a phenomenon that has reshaped the globe. From the eighteenth-century rebellions in America and France to the explosive changes of the twentieth century, Arendt traces the changing face of revolution and its relationship to war while underscoring the crucial role such events will play in the future. Illuminating and prescient, this timeless work will fascinate anyone who seeks to decipher the forces that shape our tumultuous age.

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Customer Reviews

Ã¢â ¬Å“ArendtÃ¢â ¬â„¢s admirers will welcome her excursion into the relatively neglected field of comparative revolution. She is never dull, enormously erudite, always imaginative, original and full of insights.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •The Sunday Times (London)

Hannah ArendtÃ Â (1906Ã¢â ¬â œ1975) was University Professor of political philosophy in the graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research, a visiting professor at several universities including California, Princeton, Columbia, and Chicago, a research director of the Conference on

Jewish Relations, the chief editor of Schocken Books, and the executive director of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction in New York City. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1952, and an Arts and Letters Grant of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1954. She is also the author ofÃ Â Between Past and Future andÃ Â Eichmann in Jerusalem, which are available from Penguin Classics along with The Portable Hannah Arendt. Jonathan SchellÃ Â (1943Ã Â- Ã¢â ¬â œ2014) was the Lannan Fellow at the Nation Institute. He is the author of The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People and The Fate of the Earth, among other books.

Arendt asks why the US Revolution was so successful compared to the French Revolution and many subsequent revolutions. To answer this question she examines both the contrasting historical experiences of the two countries and how their leaders drew on different aspects of Enlightenment philosophy to formulate and justify their actions.In the American case the people were more or less equal and free by virtue of landholdings. In addition they had extensive experience in self government from township councils on up to the colonial legislatures. This all began with the most primordial of social contracts, the Mayflower Compact, the ultimate forerunner of the US Constitution. The most influential philosopher for the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Founding FathersÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• was Montesquieu, who emphasized checks and balances to create a stable and enduring government, one that could not be taken over and ruined by one faction or another.In contrast the French experience was entirely top-down, with the vast majority of people living in poverty and misery as part of the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“third estateÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• -- subject to control and exploitation by the aristocratic elites of the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“first estateÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•. The ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“peopleÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• or ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“massesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• were desperate for liberation from their misery, a situation that Arendt calls the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“social questionÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• or a matter of ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“historical necessityÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•. Yet they did not know how to govern themselves or better their economic condition in the short run. In todayÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s terminology, ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“the system was totally rigged against themÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•. They could break out of their prison-like condition after the storming of the Bastille, but then what?The self-appointed leaders of the French Revolution, like Robespierre, were equally at a loss when it came to practical actions. They sought to identify and embody the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“will of the peopleÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• and then to create a top-down rule of their own in order to implement this will. But they quickly discovered that just writing a constitution and proclaiming the hegemony of their new regime didnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t actually make anything happen ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ they themselves lacked legitimacy and in any case did not have access

to the real levers of power, except terror. Strangely, Arendt never discusses the issue of the ownership of land. Instead she identifies their philosopher as Rousseau, who idolized people in the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“state of natureÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•, uncorrupted by high society. But the reality was that these demogogues were far better equipped to take revenge, as in the Jacobin Terror, than to create a just social and economic order.The one principle of ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“republicanÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• government that Robespierre, and later Lenin, refused to recognize or accept was the spontaneous formation of self-governing ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“councilsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• that begins automatically after an old regime collapses. Instead they were brutally suppressed in order to gain dictatorial control. Later in the US, Thomas Jefferson saw a need to revive the old revolutionary spirit, advocating a division of the country into local districts, or wards, where people could debate and decide face to face on issues from local to national, as in New England town meetings.Other post-revolutionary issues discussed by Arendt include corruption, political parties, representative government, and federalism. For example, she characterizes the operation of political parties in representative government as ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“government of the people by an elite sprung from the peopleÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (p. 269). But she pays scant attention to the underlying economic issues, nor to the eventual success of the French Revolution in leading the way toward a new political order, via a long trial and error process of "creative destruction".My favorite quote is ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Freedom in a positive sense is possible only among equalsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (p. 267), which leads to the conundrum ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“how to reconcile equality with authorityÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (p. 270).

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