

LAW 45

PREACH THE NEED FOR CHANGE, BUT NEVER REFORM
TOO MUCH AT ONCE

JUDGMENT

Everyone understands the need for change in the abstract, but on the day-to-day level people are creatures of habit. Too much innovation is traumatic, and will lead to revolt. If you are new to a position of power, or an outsider trying to build a power base, make a show of respecting the old way of doing things. If change is necessary, make it feel like a gentle improvement on the past.

TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW

Sometime in the early 1520s, King Henry VIII of England decided to divorce his wife, Catherine of Aragon, because she had failed to bear him a son, and because he had fallen in love with the young and comely Anne Boleyn. The pope, Clement VII, opposed the divorce, and threatened the king with excommunication. The king's most powerful minister, Cardinal Wolsey, also saw no need for divorce—and his halfhearted support of the king cost him his position and soon his life.

One man in Henry's cabinet, Thomas Cromwell, not only supported him in his desire for a divorce but had an idea for realizing it: a complete break with the past. He convinced the king that by severing ties with Rome and making himself the head of a newly formed English church, he could divorce Catherine and marry Anne. By 1531 Henry saw this as the only solution. To reward Cromwell for his simple but brilliant idea, he elevated this son of a blacksmith to the post of royal councillor.

By 1534 Cromwell had been named the king's secretary, and as the power behind the throne he had become the most powerful man in England. But for him the break with Rome went beyond the satisfaction of the king's carnal desires: He envisioned a new Protestant order in England, with the power of the Catholic Church smashed and its vast wealth in the hands of the king and the government. In that same year he initiated a complete survey of the churches and monasteries of England. And as it turned out, the treasures and moneys that the churches had accumulated over the centuries were far more than he had imagined; his spies and agents came back with astonishing figures.

To justify his schemes, Cromwell circulated stories about the corruption in the English monasteries, their abuse of power, their exploitation of the people they supposedly served. Having won Parliament's support for breaking up the monasteries, he began to seize their holdings and to put them out of existence one by one. At the same time, he began to impose Protestantism, introducing reforms in religious ritual and punishing those who stuck to Catholicism, and who now were called heretics. Virtually overnight, England was converted to a new official religion.

A terror fell on the country. Some people had suffered under the Catholic Church, which before the reforms had been immensely powerful, but most Britons had strong ties to Catholicism and to its comforting rituals. They watched in horror as churches were demolished, images of the Madonna and saints were broken in pieces, stained-glass windows were smashed, and the churches' treasures were confiscated. With monasteries that had succored the poor suddenly gone, the poor now flooded the streets. The growing ranks of the beggar class were further swelled by former monks. On top of all this, Cromwell levied high taxes to pay for his ecclesiastical reforms.

WHERE CHRISTMAS CAME FROM

Celebrating the turn of the year is an ancient custom. The Romans celebrated the Saturnalia, the festival of Saturn, god of the harvest, between December 17 and 23. It was the most cheerful festival of the year. All work and commerce stopped, and the streets were filled with crowds and a carnival atmosphere. Slaves were temporarily freed, and the houses were decorated with laurel branches. People visited one another, bringing gifts of wax candles and little clay figurines.

Long before the birth of Christ, the Jews celebrated an eight-day Festival of Lights [at the same season], and it is believed that the Germanic peoples held a great festival not only at midsummer but also at the winter solstice, when they celebrated the rebirth of the sun and honored the great fertility gods Wotan and Freyja, Donar (Thor) and Freyr. Even after the Emperor Constantine (A.D. 306-337) declared Christianity to be Rome's official imperial religion, the evocation of light and fertility as an important component of pre-Christian midwinter celebrations could not be entirely suppressed. In the year 274 the Roman Emperor Aurelian (A.D. 214-275) had established an official cult of the sun-god Mithras, declaring his birthday, December 25, a national holiday. The cult of Mithras, the Aryan god of light, had spread from Persia through Asia Minor to Greece, Rome, and as far as the Germanic lands and Britain. Numerous ruins of his shrines still testify to the high regard in which this god was held, especially by the Roman legions, as a bringer of fertility, peace, and victory. So it was a clever move when, in the year A.D. 354, the Christian church under Pope

Liberius (352-366) co-opted the birthday of Mithras and declared December 25 to be the birthday of Jesus Christ.

NEUE ZÜRCHER ZEITUNG, ANNE-SUSANNE RISCHKE,
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In 1535 powerful revolts in the North of England threatened to topple Henry from his throne. By the following year he had suppressed the rebellions, but he had also begun to see the costs of Cromwell's reforms. The king himself had never wanted to go this far—he had only wanted a divorce. It was now Cromwell's turn to watch uneasily as the king began slowly to undo his reforms, reinstating Catholic sacraments and other rituals that Cromwell had outlawed.

Sensing his fall from grace, in 1540 Cromwell decided to regain Henry's favor with one throw of the dice: He would find the king a new wife. Henry's third wife, Jane Seymour, had died a few years before, and he had been pining for a new young queen. It was Cromwell who found him one: Anne of Cleves, a German princess and, most important to Cromwell, a Protestant. On Cromwell's commission, the painter Holbein produced a flattering portrait of Anne; when Henry saw it, he fell in love, and agreed to marry her. Cromwell seemed back in favor.

Unfortunately, however, Holbein's painting was highly idealized, and when the king finally met the princess she did not please him in the least. His anger against Cromwell—first for the ill-conceived reforms, now for saddling him with an unattractive and Protestant wife—could no longer be contained. In June of that year, Cromwell was arrested, charged as a Protestant extremist and a heretic, and sent to the Tower. Six weeks later, before a large and enthusiastic crowd, the public executioner cut off his head.

Interpretation

Thomas Cromwell had a simple idea: He would break up the power and wealth of the Church and lay the foundation for Protestantism in England. And he would do this in a mercilessly short time. He knew his speedy reforms would cause pain and resentment, but he thought these feelings would fade in a few years. More important, by identifying himself with change, he would become the leader of the new order, making the king dependent on him. But there was a problem in his strategy: Like a billiard ball hit too hard against the cushion, his reforms had reactions and caroms he did not envision and could not control.

The man who initiates strong reforms often becomes the scapegoat for any kind of dissatisfaction. And eventually the reaction to his reforms may consume him, for change is upsetting to the human animal, even when it is for the good. Because the world is and always has been full of insecurity and threat, we latch on to familiar faces and create habits and rituals to make the world more comfortable. Change can be pleasant and even sometimes desirable in the abstract, but too much of it creates an anxiety that will stir and boil beneath the surface and then eventually erupt.

Never underestimate the hidden conservatism of those around you. It is powerful and entrenched. Never let the seductive charm of an idea cloud your reason: Just as you cannot make people see the world your way, you cannot wrench them into the future with painful changes. They will rebel. If reform is necessary, anticipate the reaction against it and find ways to disguise the change and sweeten the poison.

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

As a young Communist in the 1920s, Mao Tse-tung understood better than any of his colleagues the incredible odds against a Communist victory in China. With their small numbers, limited funds, lack of military experience, and small arsenal of weapons, the Party had no hope of success unless it won over China's immense peasant population. But who in the world was more conservative, more rooted in tradition, than the Chinese peasantry? The oldest civilization on the planet had a history that would never loosen its power, no matter how violent the revolution. The ideas of Confucius remained as alive in the 1920s as they had been in the sixth century B.C., when the philosopher was alive. Despite the oppressions of the current system, would the peasantry ever give up the deep-rooted values of the past for the great unknown of Communism?

The solution, as Mao saw it, involved a simple deception: Cloak the revolution in the clothing of the past, making it comforting and legitimate in people's eyes. One of Mao's favorite books was the very popular medieval Chinese novel *The Water Margin*, which recounts the exploits of a Chinese Robin Hood and his robber band as they struggle against a corrupt and evil monarch. In China in Mao's time, family ties dominated over any other kind, for the Confucian hierarchy of father and oldest son remained firmly in place; but *The Water Margin* preached a superior value—the fraternal ties of the band of robbers, the nobility of the cause that unites people beyond blood. The novel had great emotional resonance for Chinese people, who love to root for the underdog. Time and again, then, Mao would present his revolutionary army as an extension of the robber band in *The Water Margin*, likening his struggle to the timeless conflict between the oppressed peasantry and an evil emperor. He made the past seem to envelop and legitimize the Communist cause; the peasantry could feel comfortable with and even support a group with such roots in the past.

Even once the Party came to power, Mao continued to associate it with the past. He presented himself to the masses not as a Chinese Lenin but as a modern Chuko Liang, the real-life third-century strategist who figures prominently in the popular historical novel *The Romance of the Three*

Kingdoms. Liang was more than a great general—he was a poet, a philosopher, and a figure of stern moral rectitude. So Mao represented himself as a poet-warrior like Liang, a man who mixed strategy with philosophy and preached a new ethics. He made himself appear like a hero from the great Chinese tradition of warrior statesmen.

Soon, everything in Mao's speeches and writings had a reference to an earlier period in Chinese history. He recalled, for example, the great Emperor Ch'in, who had unified the country in the third century B.C. Ch'in had burned the works of Confucius, consolidated and completed the building of the Great Wall, and given his name to China. Like Ch'in, Mao also had brought the country together, and had sought bold reforms against an oppressive past. Ch'in had traditionally been seen as a violent dictator whose reign was short; the brilliance of Mao's strategy was to turn this around, simultaneously reinterpreting Ch'in, justifying his rule in the eyes of present-day Chinese, and using him to justify the violence of the new order that Mao himself was creating.

After the failed Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s, a power struggle emerged in the Communist Party in which Mao's main foe was Lin Piao, once a close friend of his. To make clear to the masses the difference between his philosophy and Lin's, Mao once again exploited the past: He cast his opponent as representing Confucius, a philosopher Lin in fact would constantly quote. And Confucius signified the conservatism of the past. Mao associated himself, on the other hand, with the ancient philosophical movement known as Legalism, exemplified by the writings of Han-fei-tzu. The Legalists disdained Confucian ethics; they believed in the need for violence to create a new order. They worshiped power. To give himself weight in the struggle, Mao unleashed a nationwide propaganda campaign against Confucius, using the issues of Confucianism versus Legalism to whip the young into a kind of frenzied revolt against the older generation. This grand context enveloped a rather banal power struggle, and Mao once again won over the masses and triumphed over his enemies.

Interpretation

No people had a more profound attachment to the past than the Chinese. In the face of this enormous obstacle to reform, Mao's strategy was simple: Instead of struggling against the past, he turned it to his advantage, associating his radical Communists with the romantic figures of Chinese history. Weaving the story of the War of the Three Kingdoms into the struggle between the United States, the Soviet Union, and China, he cast himself as Chuko Liang. As the emperors had, he welcomed the cultlike adoration of the masses, understanding that the Chinese could not function without some kind of father figure to admire. And after he made a terrible blunder with the Great Leap Forward, trying to force modernization on the country and failing miserably, he never repeated his mistake: From then on, radical change had to be cloaked in the comfortable clothes of the past.

The lesson is simple: The past is powerful. What has happened before seems greater; habit and history give any act weight. Use this to your advantage. When you destroy the familiar you create a void or vacuum; people fear the chaos that will flood in to fill it. You must avoid stirring up such fears at all cost. Borrow the weight and legitimacy from the past, however remote, to create a comforting and familiar presence. This will give your actions romantic associations, add to your presence, and cloak the nature of the changes you are attempting.

*It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out,
nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle,
than to initiate a new order of things.*

Niccolò Machiavelli, 1469-1527

KEYS TO POWER

Human psychology contains many dualities, one of them being that even while people understand the need for change, knowing how important it is for institutions and individuals to be occasionally renewed, they are also irritated and upset by changes that affect them personally. They know that change is necessary, and that novelty provides relief from boredom, but deep inside they cling to the past. Change in the abstract, or superficial change, they desire, but a change that upsets core habits and routines is deeply disturbing to them.

No revolution has gone without a powerful later reaction against it, for in the long run the void it creates proves too unsettling to the human animal, who unconsciously associates such voids with death and chaos. The opportunity for change and renewal seduces people to the side of the revolution, but once their enthusiasm fades, which it will, they are left with a certain emptiness. Yearning for the past, they create an opening for it to creep back in.

For Machiavelli, the prophet who preaches and brings change can only survive by taking up arms: When the masses inevitably yearn for the past, he must be ready to use force. But the armed prophet cannot last long unless he quickly creates a new set of values and rituals to replace the old ones, and to soothe the anxieties of those who dread change. It is far easier, and less bloody, to play a kind of con game. Preach change as much as you like, and even enact your reforms, but give them the comforting appearance of older events and traditions.

Reigning from A.D. 8 to A.D. 23, the Chinese emperor Wang Mang emerged from a period of great historical turbulence in which the people yearned for order, an order represented for them by Confucius. Some two hundred years earlier, however, Emperor Ch'in had ordered the writings of Confucius burned. A few years later, word had spread that certain texts had miraculously survived, hidden under the scholar's house. These texts may not have been genuine, but they gave Wang his opportunity: He first confiscated them, then had his scribes insert passages into them that seemed to support the changes he had been imposing on the country. When he

released the texts, it seemed that Confucius sanctioned Wang's reforms, and the people felt comforted and accepted them more easily.

Understand: The fact that the past is dead and buried gives you the freedom to reinterpret it. To support your cause, tinker with the facts. The past is a text in which you can safely insert your own lines.

A simple gesture like using an old title, or keeping the same number for a group, will tie you to the past and support you with the authority of history. As Machiavelli himself observed, the Romans used this device when they transformed their monarchy into a republic. They may have installed two consuls in place of the king, but since the king had been served by twelve lictors, they retained the same number to serve under the consuls. The king had personally performed an annual sacrifice, in a great spectacle that stirred the public; the republic retained this practice, only transferring it to a special "chief of the ceremony, whom they called the King of the sacrifice." These and similar gestures satisfied the people and kept them from clamoring for the monarchy's return.

Another strategy to disguise change is to make a loud and public display of support for the values of the past. Seem to be a zealot for tradition and few will notice how unconventional you really are. Renaissance Florence had a centuries-old republic, and was suspicious of anyone who flouted its traditions. Cosimo de' Medici made a show of enthusiastic support for the republic, while in reality he worked to bring the city under the control of his wealthy family. In form, the Medicis retained the appearance of a republic; in substance, they rendered it powerless. They quietly enacted a radical change, while appearing to safeguard tradition.

Science claims a search for truth that would seem to protect it from conservatism and the irrationality of habit: It is a culture of innovation. Yet when Charles Darwin published his ideas of evolution, he faced fiercer opposition from his fellow scientists than from religious authorities. His theories challenged too many fixed ideas. Jonas Salk ran into the same wall with his radical innovations in immunology, as did Max Planck with his revolutionizing of physics. Planck later wrote of the scientific opposition he faced, "A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it."

The answer to this innate conservatism is to play the courtier's game. Galileo did this at the beginning of his scientific career; he later became

more confrontational, and paid for it. So pay lip service to tradition. Identify the elements in your revolution that can be made to seem to build on the past. Say the right things, make a show of conformity, and meanwhile let your theories do their radical work. Play with appearances and respect past protocol. This is true in every arena—science being no exception.

Finally, powerful people pay attention to the zeitgeist. If their reform is too far ahead of its time, few will understand it, and it will stir up anxiety and be hopelessly misinterpreted. The changes you make must seem less innovative than they are. England did eventually become a Protestant nation, as Cromwell wished, but it took over a century of gradual evolution.

Watch the zeitgeist. If you work in a tumultuous time, there is power to be gained by preaching a return to the past, to comfort, tradition, and ritual. During a period of stagnation, on the other hand, play the card of reform and revolution—but beware of what you stir up. Those who finish a revolution are rarely those who start it. You will not succeed at this dangerous game unless you are willing to forestall the inevitable reaction against it by playing with appearances and building on the past.

Authority: He who desires or attempts to reform the government of a state, and wishes to have it accepted, must at least retain the semblance of the old forms; so that it may seem to the people that there has been no change in the institutions, even though in fact they are entirely different from the old ones. For the great majority of mankind are satisfied with appearances, as though they were realities. (Niccolò Machiavelli, 1469-1527)

Image: The Cat.

Creature of habit, it loves the
warmth of the familiar. Upset its
routines, disrupt its space, and it will
grow unmanageable and psychotic.
Placate it by supporting its rituals. If
change is necessary, deceive the cat by
keeping the smell of the past alive;

place objects familiar to it in
strategic locations.

REVERSAL

The past is a corpse to be used as you see fit. If what happened in the recent past was painful and harsh, it is self-destructive to associate yourself with it. When Napoleon came to power, the French Revolution was fresh in everyone's minds. If the court that he established had borne any resemblance to the lavish court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, his courtiers would have spent all their time worrying about their own necks. Instead, Napoleon established a court remarkable for its sobriety and lack of ostentation. It was the court of a man who valued work and military virtues. This new form seemed appropriate and reassuring.

In other words, pay attention to the times. But understand: If you make a bold change from the past, you must avoid at all costs the appearance of a void or vacuum, or you will create terror. Even an ugly recent history will seem preferable to an empty space. Fill that space immediately with *new* rituals and forms. Soothing and growing familiar, these will secure your position among the masses.

Finally, the arts, fashion, and technology would seem to be areas in which power would come from creating a radical rupture with the past and appearing cutting edge. Indeed, such a strategy can bring great power, but it has many dangers. It is inevitable that your innovations will be outdone by someone else. You have little control—someone younger and fresher moves in a sudden new direction, making your bold innovation of yesterday seem tiresome and tame today. You are forever playing catch-up; your power is tenuous and short-lived. You want a power built on something more solid. Using the past, tinkering with tradition, playing with convention to subvert it will give your creations something more than a momentary appeal. Periods of dizzying change disguise the fact that a yearning for the past will inevitably creep back in. In the end, using the past for your own purposes will bring you more power than trying to cut it out completely—a futile and self-destructive endeavor.