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# AFTER LIBERALISM

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IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN



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## REVOLUTION AS STRATEGY AND TACTICS OF TRANSFORMATION

Did the French Revolution fail? Did the Russian Revolution fail? These are two questions that at one time might have seemed absurd. They no longer seem absurd. But how does one answer such questions?

Revolution is a strange word. Originally it was used in its etymological sense to mean a circular movement that returns to the point of origin. It can still be used to mean this. But it soon became extended to mean simply a turning and then an overturning. The OED records its usage as early as 1600 in the sense of the overthrow of a government by persons subject to it. But of course the overthrow of a government is not necessarily inconsistent with the concept of a return to a point of origin. Many a political event called a "revolution" by its protagonists has been asserted by them to be the restoration of rights infringed, and hence a return to an earlier, better system.

In the Marxist tradition, however, revolution has been firmly ensconced within a linear theory of progress. Victor Kiernan captures it best, I believe, when he asserts that it means a "cataclysmic leap" from one mode of production to another.<sup>59</sup> Still, like most concepts, merely defining it is insufficient; it must be placed in opposition to some alternative. And, as we know, again in the Marxist tradition (but not only), the alternative to "revolution" is "reform."

Reform versus revolution came to mean, in the debates of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, slow aggregative change versus swift change, small-scale changes versus large-scale change, reversible change versus irreversible change, improving change (which is therefore prosystemic) versus transforming change (which is therefore antisystemic), and inefficacious change versus efficacious change. Of course, in each of these antinomies

I have loaded the dice, giving each the characterization that revolutionary discourse utilized.

There is, in addition, an ambiguity within the Marxist tradition itself. Marxists often made a distinction between a political revolution (which could be a surface phenomenon) and a social revolution (the real thing). In addition, Marx and Engels themselves were not averse to using the word *revolution* for such concepts as *industrial revolution*, and even to suggest that the "industrial revolution" was more important or more fundamental than the "French Revolution." This suggestion was of course quite consonant with the basic philosophical bias of historical materialism, but it was not necessarily a great succor to voluntarist political action. Hence it was that revolution came to symbolize more and more in the tradition of the Marxism of the parties, and especially in the Bolshevik tradition, the violent overthrow of a bourgeois government by the proletariat, or at the very least the violent overthrow of a reactionary government by popular, progressive forces.

We are not at an end of the ambiguities. The concept of "violent overthrow" is not self-evident. Does a so-called spontaneous uprising, or a disintegration of the existing power structure, constitute a revolution, or is it only one if such an uprising is then canalized by a revolutionary party? When did the French Revolution occur—with the attack on the Bastille, or with the effective coming to power of the Jacobins? The Russian (October) Revolution was traditionally thought to have begun with the storming of the Winter Palace. Later, however, "revolutions" were thought to start before the actual seizure of state power. That is, it was thought essential to lead up to such a seizure with long guerilla campaigns, the whole being characterized by Mao Zedong as "protracted struggle." The protracted struggle was thereupon put forward as the essential element of the revolutionary process, and not only before the seizure of the state organs but also afterwards (the "cultural revolution").

And one last ambiguity remains to be noted. After the Baku Congress, anti-imperialist struggle was given the label of "revolutionary" activity, but the theoretical relationship of such anti-imperialist revolution to socialist revolution has never been entirely

clear. This is because there has been no consensus whatsoever. Was the Algerian revolution in a category with, or quite different from, the Vietnamese revolution? There have been many actual trajectories. In Cuba, the "revolution" was not Marxist or even socialist before the seizure of power, but Marxist and socialist afterwards. In Zimbabwe, the rhetorical road traveled was the inverse.

In any case, as we now see clearly, the results have been extraordinarily mixed. The Mexican Revolution does not seem today to have had very revolutionary results. And the Chinese? The Russian revolutionaries are now an historical memory, and, at the moment, not one very honored in Russia. The first question that it seems reasonable to ask, therefore, is whether the so-called revolutionary trajectory has indeed been more or less efficacious than the reform trajectory has been. Of course, we can do the same skeptical review of the accomplishments of social-democratic reform. How fundamentally was the Labour Party able to transform Great Britain? Or even the Swedish Social-Democratic Party? In the 1990s when almost everyone from China to Sweden to Mexico is talking the language of the "market," one may wonder legitimately whether 150 to 200 years of revolutionary tradition have paid off.

One may wonder even more how great has been the distinction between revolutionary and reformist activity. Particular parties, particular social movements, and particular complexes of social activity perceived as a long and large "revolutionary" event can all be described (probably without exception) as the locus of shifting tactics, such that they looked revolutionary (or insurrectionary, or radical, or transformatory) at some points in time and distinctly less so at others.

Real-existing revolutionary leaders have always tried to steer a middle course, often in zigzag form, between "selling out" at one end and "adventurism" on the other. Of course, one person's "adventurism" has been another's "true revolutionary commitment." One person's "sellout" has been another's "one step backward, two steps forward."

It is perhaps time to stop throwing stones at one another and take a sober look at the objective constraints on left political activity

over the past two centuries throughout the world, and the degree of strength of the underground pressure for transformation. Let us start with the givens. We live in a capitalist world-system that is deeply inegalitarian and oppressive. It has also been successful in expanding world production, which has therefore placed considerable economic strength in the hands of those who are the chief beneficiaries of the world-system. We may assume that those who benefit wish to maintain the system more or less as it is, and will invest considerable political energy in maintaining the status quo. Can we assume that those who do not benefit wish with equal fervor to transform it? No we cannot, for several reasons: ignorance, fear, and apathy. Furthermore, individual upward mobility provides an outlet for a clever minority of the oppressed. In addition, the nonbeneficiaries are weaker—economically and militarily—than the beneficiaries.

This asymmetry of political strength and sociopsychological stance is the basic dilemma that has faced the world Left since it began to organize itself consciously in the nineteenth century. It was the debate about what we should do about this asymmetry that the reform versus revolution debate was about. It is remarkable in retrospect to see how similar to each other were the answers each side gave. Collective self-education will overcome ignorance; collective self-organization will overcome fear and apathy. An organized class culture will restrain potential deserters who are tempted by individual social mobility by offering them leadership roles in the present movements and future governments. And the imbalance of social strength between the beneficiaries and the nonbeneficiaries can be overcome by taking away from the beneficiaries the control of the state machineries.

This is what major movements have been doing for 150-odd years now. The strategy and the tactics of the Chinese Communist Party, the African National Congress of South Africa, and the Austrian Social-Democratic Party—to take three well-known examples—have been remarkably similar, given how different their historical circumstances have been. One can label all three movements either magnificent successes or miserable failures. What I find difficult to accept is any analysis that gives a different success

rating to each of the three. They have been magnificent successes in their ability at mass mobilization, in achieving some significant reforms in their respective countries such that the situation today is radically different from the situation in, say, 1900 and, for some persons and in some respects, radically better. They have been miserable failures in that we are still living in a capitalist world-economy that is, if anything, more inegalitarian than it was in 1900. There are still multiple forms of oppression in each of these countries, and these movements have in various ways constrained, rather than facilitated, current protests against some of these forms of oppression.

Cup half full or cup half empty? Perhaps we are asking the wrong question. The question is whether, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were historical alternative strategies for each of these movements that in retrospect seem plausible and could have achieved more. I doubt it. It is in many ways a silly exercise to rewrite history on the basis of a simulation. But it does seem to me that the alternative movements that actually presented themselves in each of these cases lost out because they were obviously less efficacious from the point of view of the nonbeneficiaries of the system, and that the sum of the reforms achieved by the dominant movements have been worth something, even if there is no post-capitalist utopia in any of the three countries. Quite the contrary.

Having said this, the sum total is very disappointing, given the incredible social energy that was put into revolutionary activity in the twentieth (and nineteenth) centuries. I share the sense of the revolutionaries of 1968 that the Old Left in all its versions had become by that point in time "part of the problem." Since then, however, the world Left has moved on. The worldwide revolution of 1968 has had an immense impact on forces everywhere that think of themselves as antisystemic. Our mode of analysis reveals six major consequences, each of which I wish to state in a restrained way.

1. The two-step strategy—first take state power, then transform society—has moved from the status of self-evident truth (for most persons) to the status of doubtful proposition.

2. The organizational assumption that political activity in each

state would be most efficacious if channeled through a single cohesive party is no longer widely accepted.

3. The concept that the only conflict within capitalism that is fundamental is the conflict between capital and labor—and that other conflicts based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. are all secondary, derived, or atavistic—no longer has wide credence.

4. The idea that democracy is a bourgeois concept that blocks revolutionary activity has been giving way to an idea that democracy may be a profoundly anticapitalist and revolutionary idea.

5. The idea that an increase in productivity is the essential prerequisite of socialist construction has been replaced by a concern with the consequences of productivism in terms of ecology, the quality of life, and the consequent commodification of everything.

6. The faith in science as the foundation stone of the construction of utopia has given way to a skepticism about classical science and popular scientism, in favor of a willingness to think in terms of a more complex relationship between determinism and free will, order and chaos. Progress is no longer self-evident.

None of these six revisions of our premises is totally new. But the revolution of 1968, by shaking the legitimacy of the Old Left, has transformed the doubts held by a small handful of persons into a far more widespread revisionism, a veritable "cultural revolution." Each of these six revisions of premises is complex and could be elaborated at length. I cannot do that here. I can only address the implications of these revisions for antisystemic political activity, particularly for the strategy and tactics of "revolution."

The first and most fundamental implication is that "revolution"—as the word was used in Marxist-Leninist movements—is no longer a viable concept. It has no meaning, at least no meaning now. "Revolution" was supposed to describe an activity by a party, its struggle to achieve state power, its role as the standard-bearer of labor in the capital-labor struggle, its scorn for democracy as mere "bourgeois rights," its dedication to increased productivity, its self-description as scientific. Do parties meeting this description and attracting significant support still exist? I don't see very many, if any.

What we see in their place are two things. The first are Old Left parties, often with changed names, struggling to survive electorally on the basis of eclectic centrist programs about which they don't seem to feel very strongly, heirs of a vague sentiment for social justice (in the manner in which the Radical Socialists in the France of the Third Republic incarnated the tradition of laicity). The second is the ever-evolving panoply of parties and movements who are the diluted heirs of the revolution of 1968: Green parties, feminist movements, movements of oppressed ethnic and racial so-called minorities, gay and lesbian movements, and what might be called base community movements.

In the United States, in the 1980s, there was talk of creating a Rainbow Coalition of such movements. But in the end nothing much came of this idea. Indeed, as we come into the 1990s, we observe two enormous political dilemmas for the world's antisystemic movements.

First, the new antisystemic movements that emerged out of the revolution of 1968 were quite successful in their attack on the premises that undergirded the Old Left, but they have floundered ever since in their quest for an alternative strategy. Is state power still relevant, or not? What could be the basis of any lasting alliance between movements? As time goes on, the answers seem increasingly similar to those of the now highly eclectic Old Left movements.

Secondly, the 1990s are seeing the spread of movements, launched in the 1980s, which are racist and populist. But quite often they use themes and assume tonalities that overlap partially with what the new antisystemic movements do. There is enormous risk of political confusion of multiple types.

So here we are: tired and eclectic shells of Old Left parties; no viable concept of "a revolution;" new antisystemic movements that are vigorous but with no clear strategic vision; and new racist-populist movements of growing strength. Amidst all this, the besieged defenders of the existing capitalist world-system are by no means disarmed and are pursuing a policy of the flexible postponement of contradictions, waiting as they are for the moment when they can pursue a radical transformation of their own, away

from a capitalist mode of production to some new but equally inegalitarian, undemocratic world-system.

It is time long past when we need to define with some clarity an alternative strategy to the defunct one of "revolution." I think that such redefinition is a collective worldwide task. I can only suggest here a few lines of action that might be elements of such a strategy, but which do not add up to a total strategy.

1. The first is a return to a traditional tactic. Everywhere, in every workplace, we should push for more, that is—that more of the surplus value be retained by the working class. This once seemed so obvious, but it came to be neglected for a variety of reasons: the parties' fear of trade unionism and economism; protectionist tactics of workers in high-wage areas; movement-dominated state structures acting with the logic of employers. Simultaneously, we must press for the full internalization of costs by every enterprise. Local-level constant pressure for such internalization and for more—more in Detroit, more in Gdańsk, more in São Paulo, more in Fiji—can deeply shake the patterns of accumulation of capital.

2. Second, everywhere in every political structure at every level, more democracy, that is, more popular participation and more open decision making. Again, once thought obvious, this has been restrained by Left movements' deep distrust of mass psychology, the origin of their vanguardism. Perhaps this was legitimate in the nineteenth century, but a transformation to a better world-system will not be possible without genuine, deeply motivated popular support, which has to be created and developed through more democracy now.

3. Third, the world Left has to come to terms with its dilemma concerning universalism versus particularism. The Napoleonic imperial universalism affected by the Old Left has no merit. But an endless glorification of smaller and smaller particularisms has none either. We need to search for a way of constructing a new universalism that is based on a foundation of countless groups and not on the mythical atomic individual. But this requires a kind of global social liberalism that we are reluctant to accept. We need thus to give operational meaning (and not mere puffery) to

Senghor's "rendez-vous de donner et de recevoir." It should be tried at countless local levels.

4. Fourth, we need to think of state power as a tactic, utilizing it whenever we can and for whatever immediate needs, without investing in it or strengthening it. Above all, we must shun managing the system, at any level. We must cease to be terrified of the political breakdown of the system.

Will this transform the system? I do not know. I see it as a strategy of "overloading" the system by taking the ideological slogans of liberalism seriously, something never intended by the liberals. What could overload the system more than the free movement of people, for example? And, along with overloading the system, it is a strategy of "preserving our options," of moving toward better things immediately, of leaving the total responsibility of managing the existing world-system to its beneficiaries, of concentrating on creating a new sociality at the local and world levels.

We must, in short, become practical, consequential, constant workers in the vineyard, discussing our utopias, and pushing forward. As the present world-system crashes down upon us in the next fifty years, we must have a substantive alternative to offer that is a collective creation. Only then will we have a chance of obtaining a Gramscian hegemony in world civil society, and thereby a chance of winning the struggle against those who are seeking to change everything in order that nothing change.

## MARXISM AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE COMMUNISMS

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MARXISM . . . IS INEVITABLY BOUND TO PERISH, SOONER OR  
LATER, AND THIS APPLIES, TOO, TO ITS FORM AS *THEORY*. . . .  
IN RETROSPECT (AND ONLY IN RETROSPECT),  
IT WILL BE POSSIBLE TO SAY,  
FROM THE MANNER OF ITS PERISHING,  
WHAT KIND OF STUFF MARXISM WAS MADE OF.  
*Balibar, 1991, 154*

Marx has been pronounced dead regularly and he has been resuscitated just as often. As with any thinker of his stature, he is worth rereading primarily in the light of current realities. Today it is not only Marx who is once more dying but also a whole series of states that have labeled themselves Marxist-Leninist and that are, by and large, collapsing. Some are happy about this, some sad, but few are trying to draw up a careful and judicious balance sheet of the experience.

Let us remember at the outset that Marxism is not the summa of the ideas and writings of Marx but rather a set of theories, analyses, and recipes for political action, no doubt inspired by Marx's reasoning, that were made into a sort of dogma. This version of Marxism, the dominant one, was the product of two historical parties that constructed it, in tandem and successively, jointly but not in collaboration with each other: the German Social-Democratic Party (especially before 1914) and the Bolshevik Party, later to become the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Although this dominant version of "Marxism" was never the only one, other versions have had a very limited audience, at least until rather recently. The true origins of the "explosion" of Marxism, of which Lefebvre (1980) wrote, is to be found in the world revolution of 1968. This event coincides more or less