

# **The Reaction This Time**

**Understanding Reaction In A Global, Historical Perspective**

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**A historic look a waves of reaction to periods of revolt and upheaval and how this relates to our own current situation.**

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To speak of reaction, I want first to distinguish it from counterinsurgency. Readers who are less interested in a condensed theory of counterinsurgency and want to read about the patterns of reaction leading up to the present moment should skip to the second section.

## Counterinsurgency

Counterinsurgency is a constant aspect of life under the State. It refers to the strategies and activities implemented by government and its privileged partners (capitalists without public office) to prevent effective rebellion and maintain control. This can include varying roles for military, police, courts, political parties, media and cultural production, organized religion, social reforms, institutionalization, structural adjustment, impoverishment, disease, drug epidemics, basically the whole gamut from repression to recuperation to necro-politics.

If we restrict ourselves to counterinsurgency under the modern State, we can identify three different modes. Pre-modern counterinsurgency (roughly, the 17<sup>th</sup> to sometime in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) largely overlaps with what I refer to as “cratoforming” in *Worshiping Power*: the violent reengineering of decentralized society/nature into a separated, alienated society and nature that can be administrated by a centralized, rational authority. This process happened simultaneously, albeit divergently, in Europe and the Americas through the destruction of the commons and commoning, the institution of differentiated regimes of forced labor (chattel slavery, indentured or penal servitude, wage slavery, and unwaged domestic servitude), and the imposition of an atomistic, patriarchal, punitive legal system. In many instances cratoforming parallels primitive accumulation, though the term recognizes the paramount role of state intervention in the process and understands capital accumulation as a rationalized logistics of fueling expansion, “a way of keeping score,” and a metric for facilitating the permanent alliance between government and capitalists within the broad State; in other words, capital accumulation is certainly not the foundation of the process, being dependent and subsequent to other elements, and is no more or less “material” than those other elements, 19<sup>th</sup> century European mythologies notwithstanding.

Modern counterinsurgency, arising in flashes in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and systematically in the 19<sup>th</sup>, is fully scientific, though no less mythological for its efforts. It is largely biologicist and, following Hobbes, sees alienated or statist society as a body.

Social control in this mode is a strikingly hygienic affair, with health, assumed to be the natural state of the social organism, being equated with submission to hierarchical order. And though this paradigm is based, both mythologically and materially, on alienation and the polarization of society and nature, the split pair is constantly trying to reunite, even within the thought and practice of the modernists. A nod to Enlightenment science’s Christian heritage, nature is still teleological and ethically biased. As such, the social body, in order to achieve its intended, natural, healthy state, relies on no end of prostheses and surgeries, provided for in this case by the police, urban planning, and the unfolding institutions that would organize healthcare, education, and criminality/justice in a fully patriarchal, capitalist, statist way.

Post-modern counterinsurgency, arising in the imperial campaigns to repress anti-colonial movements in the post-war period, when the new order governed by Washington had supposedly set the colonies free, is the first to recognize and name itself, particularly through the experiences of the British, and one officer, Frank Kitson, in trying to crush the independence movement in Kenya. Of course, French experiences in Algeria and Indochina, British experiences against India and the Irish, and US experiences against its African population quickly became part of the ever expanding canon of this new paradigm. And its chief innovation was to discard the idea that social peace is the natural state of affairs and is only interrupted by foreign or unnatural agents.

On the contrary, through post-modern counterinsurgency, the ruling class tacitly acknowledge that they are an unwanted burden, that rebellion is the constant state of affairs in society (society under the State, we would specify), and the purpose of counterinsurgency is to keep resistance in the lower stages, preparation or nonviolence, and not let it mature into full blown insurrection. As such, completely crushing resistance is an unrealistic goal. It is far more profitable to cultivate opportunities for unthreatening resistance, and to prioritize intelligence-gathering. States using this strategy effectively will allow a certain amount of resistance to continue so that they may gather intelligence and carry out social mapping, rather than striking the pocket of resistance and risking a loss of intelligence-gathering opportunities. After all, if people can get away with a certain level of illegality without being punished, they will assume the State is unaware of their activities and they will not improve their security practices.

Tangentially, the US government does not use this kind of strategic tolerance as much as its European counterparts, perhaps in part because its history as a settler state encouraged the ruling class to strike viciously at the first hint of a slave rebellion or Indigenous counterattacks. Additionally, the reactionary project of the Cold War installed a totalitarian imaginary in the US that seduced rulers with the dream of a totally obedient society threatened only by “outside agitators,” a trope repeatedly encouraged in the US by the history of the plantation system and the historical prevalence of working class immigration.

I wonder, though it would take a great deal of research to say so conclusively, whether the British state’s advantage in intelligence gathering amongst its lower classes, far more advanced than its continental and North American rivals for several centuries at least, can be traced back to the British elite’s long-time position as an ethnic minority ruling over peoples speaking languages from completely different families (Anglo-Saxons over Celts, Normans over Britons, English over Scot and Irish Gaelic). Such a position, which the French, Iberian, and German ruling classes did not share, certainly not over the course of centuries, would have been untenable without the British ruling class quickly developing a system of reliable informants among the locals as one of the primordial activities of state formation.

## **Reaction**

A reaction is an intensification of the methods of counterinsurgency, often with new strategies emerging that tend to include some kind of communication among global powers, in response to a global wave of uprisings with revolutionary potential. It is very much a historical feature of the world system, the interconnected structures and flows of capitalism and the State across the globe. Though specifics will differ from country to country, the reaction (as well as the revolutionary wave that triggers it) can only be properly understood in its global, systemic context.

A study of reactions over the last century or two shows that they exist in relation to the revolutionary conditions they attempt to foreclose, and that both the revolutionary wave and the reaction exist in relation to the reactionary process that preceded them. Patterns emerge, and though they are neither precise nor geometrical—they do not repeat as facsimiles, never occurring the same way twice—they do help us understand the forces at work.

### **1919–1937**

One of the longest and best known periods of reaction began in 1919 and led to some of the most extreme and divergent outcomes, compared with other reactionary periods. In a world systems theory analysis, this was a period of “systemic chaos” when the global system of capitalism and mutually recognizing states did not have a consensual arbiter or a shared set of rules. Great Britain was the undisputed world leader, even more so after WWI: a quarter of the world’s population and land area was within its empire; long-time rivals France and Russia had now been stabilized as subordinate allies; and newer rivals Germany, Italy, and Turkey had recently been defeated and stripped of their colonies. However, Great Britain no longer had the military means to defend its swollen empire, its monopolistic form of imperialism did not give the bourgeoisie of other countries any opportunities for growth short of direct conflict, and its methods of economic organization were not the best suited to capital accumulation in the changing circumstances.

As usual, the prior reaction conditioned the subsequent revolutionary movements, influencing how this reaction would unfold. In this case, the prior reaction can be found in the vicious suppression of a series of revolutionary movements, culminating in the annihilation of the Paris Commune and the slaughter of tens of thousands of its participants. Elsewhere, Bismarck united Germany under a centralized, nationalist government that brooked no dissent; in Spain the First Republic repressed the anarchist-inspired Cantonal rebellion and then a military coup restored the monarchy and put an end to the Carlist revolt and with it self-government and the peasant commons; in Russia Alexander III instituted a reactionary reign and crushed the Narodnik movement; in the United States, the potentially revolutionary moment of emancipation was shut down through the bloody imposition of capitalist discipline via racial terrorism, as seen in the Memphis riots, the New Orleans massacre, and the rise of the KKK, while simultaneously the state concluded genocidal wars against those nations that had successfully resisted settler encroachments, like the Apache and Oceti Sakowin, and finally a nascent workers’ movement was met with growing brutality. More than a century of uninterrupted terrorism against its lower classes and Ireland meant that the United Kingdom was relatively untouched by the revolutionary wave: if anything, they had anticipated the reaction and made it systematic long in advance.

All of these reactions tended towards a totalitarian use of state power, pushing the envelope for what was possible at the time, and all of them were extremely effective at terrorizing and silencing their populations. One consequence was that the ruling classes developed an inflated sense of their own power and an unrealistic belief in the ability of brute force to manufacture social peace (remember, this was a time when the modern view of counterinsurgency still prevailed). This meant that they were not prepared for the next wave of revolutionary movements, and that brute force would be their go-to response.

The reaction of the 1870s to 1880s (a period of economic depression followed by financial expansion and extreme corruption) also dehumanized the ruling class in the eyes of their subjects. For centuries (since the bloody repression of the revolutionary movements of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>

centuries), peasant movements had sought to preserve a balance rather than annihilate their opponents, the landlords. Similarly, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the workers' movement focused on relatively peaceful campaigns like sabotage, "combinations", and the mutualist schemes of Proudhon (keep in mind that while the sans-culottes may have been happy spectators to the Terror during the French Revolution, the killings themselves were organized by the bourgeoisie).

But after the vicious massacres that ended the Paris commune, the chief methods used by the lower classes for two decades focused on assassinations and bombings, importing the techniques used by the Russian nihilists in the brutal context of serfdom. Subsequently, as labor organizing shifted back from a primarily clandestine to a primarily visible terrain, the emphasis was placed on taking over industry and completely getting rid of the bosses and rulers. They were no longer interested in negotiating with those in power.

World War I was a perfect expression of the greed, blood-thirst, and vanity of the ruling classes. At its end, the next wave of revolutionary insurrections broke out across Russia, Germany, Italy, the Balkans, Hungary, and Austria, with major revolutionary surges in France, Spain, the UK, the US, India, Argentina, and Chile, and of course there had already been a successful revolution in Mexico, though it was eventually taken over by the bourgeoisie and professional military. The reaction began in 1919 when the Freikorps, a predecessor of the Nazis, suppressed the insurrections in Germany, and even earlier when the Bolsheviks became systematic in the way they annihilated the workers' and peasants' movements, to "become our own Thermidor" or become the reaction to their own revolution in order to hold onto power, in the words of Lenin.

The revolutionary movements caught the authorities off guard. The ruling class suddenly discovered that the wolf was at the gate and the gate was open, so they responded with extreme, often panicked measures that usually resulted in a great deal of bloodshed. They also suddenly came face to face with a workers' movement that was better organized than it had been in a long time. Methods for recuperating and institutionalizing the workers' movement had been at the forefront of their counterinsurgency methods during the prior decades, so in many countries, the reaction looked like a more aggressive recuperation, allowing more changes to the balance of power than the capitalists and the traditional ruling class might have preferred in less urgent circumstances. This is one of the main paradoxes of fascism: it defeats the workers' movement while also giving the citizen workers more stability and protection than they enjoyed under the prior regime of liberal capitalism. It does this primarily through extreme violence and expropriation of non-citizens and through renewed access to colonies, while also convincing the owning class of the need to make some concessions in order to avoid a revolution.

In Italy, the reaction was a straight up coöptation of the workers' movement. Italian fascism convinced one half the workers' movement to attack the other half to commit their obedience to a nationalist, centralized state. The capitalists gave their vital support to this movement, even though it meant removing much of the traditional ruling class, after the Bienni Rossi convinced them that a revolution was just around the corner.

In Germany, the "National Socialist German Workers' Party," or Nazis, also grew out of an initiative by German industrialists and military intelligence to co-opt the workers' movement, which had launched the failed insurrections of 1919.

In Spain, a regular military dictatorship in the '20s failed to achieve stability, and then the largely left-wing Republic that began in 1931 failed to recuperate the anti-capitalist movement, which was majority anarchist, so the military launched a much more brutal dictatorship modeled on fascist lines in 1936. 1937, the year I have chosen to mark the culmination of the reaction

and thus the end of the revolutionary moment, was when Soviet-aligned interests crushed the revolutionary currents—and pressured the CNT to stand by and do nothing—during the “May Days” in Barcelona.

The USSR was a vital player in the reaction precisely because they found themselves on the other side of the barricades from the Right and could therefore destroy revolutionary movements from the inside. They decided in the early '20s to use the International to destroy any revolutionary movement they could not control, after they had already destroyed the workers' and peasant movements within the Tsarist empire they had inherited. By the end of the '20s, they had explicitly decided that “revolutionary” simply meant advancing Russia's geopolitical interests, whatever the cost, which is why the Communists frequently acted in complicity with the Nazis, in Germany in the early '30s or during the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact that gave Germany a green light to invade Poland (dividing it, incidentally, with the USSR) and start WWII. For these reasons, Voline described the USSR as “red fascism.”

In Argentina, the military cracked down on the anarchist movement with a series of brutal massacres, and heavy repression similarly occurred in Chile, India, Indonesia, and elsewhere, as the British, Dutch, and others maintained their colonial regimes.

Incidentally, the main countries that turned to fascism during this period, Italy, Germany, and Japan, were the world powers that had been locked out of a colonial expansion by the successes of major players like the UK and France. Germany, Italy, and Japan had everything they needed to be major powers except for access to important colonial markets, which was a key ingredient in the recipe for prosperity effectively cooked up by the UK and France over more than a century. The capitalists and the ruling classes in Germany, Italy, and Japan knew that their only hope for being serious players was to conquer territory that they did not currently possess, which meant that they had to start a war and win it. The recent lesson of WWI showed how dangerous the mutinies of soldiers could be, how people forced to fight wars they did not believe in quickly became revolutionaries. As such, the ruling classes in these countries knew they would need an ideology that could motivate their populations and justify warfare. Fascism provided some unique advantages in this respect. (Compare this to France, the UK, and the US, where war mobilization only became effective after the home territories had already suffered serious attacks.)

This is an important point: though fascism is the best known outcome of the 1919–1937 reaction, it was not the only one, and in fact it was not the most successful one. Nearly all the countries that went fascist crashed and burned.

The reason we care more about fascism today is because the other major reactionary current from that period, the current that actually won, achieved a huge public relations victory by claiming to be the moral opposite of the fascists, and claiming that fascism was the greatest evil the world had ever known.

These were the centrist and progressive democrats. They included the ruling classes of the United States, who had gained their power through the genocide of hundreds of Indigenous nations and would shortly murder hundreds of thousands of civilians through fire bombing and dropping atomic bombs, and who would prove they were by no means the moral opposite of the Nazis through Operations Paperclip and Gladio. They included constitutional monarchies like Belgium, the Netherlands, and the UK, that held free elections amongst citizens, but killed literally tens of millions of people in Africa and Asia. In the '30s and '40s, numerous leaders of the Indian independence movement tried to make alliances with Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan.

It's not because they were evil, it's because they had experienced the violence of the British first hand and did not see a major ethical difference between fascists and constitutionalists.

Even today, when you try to point out that mass murder and political repression are not necessarily signs of fascism because these tactics have been practiced for far longer and far more effectively by democracies, people will scream out that you are excusing the violence. The much greater violence of colonialism has been normalized, and democracy has won a great propaganda victory.

The states that became the most effective oppressors and mass murderers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century went in a different direction during this reactionary period. France brought in the Republican Socialist Party, which carried out a number of progressive reforms. The US initially reacted with the knee jerk repression of the Palmer Raids, the Red Scare, and renewed violence against Black people (such as the 1917 murder of Black soldiers in Texas, the Tulsa massacre, and other events). In 1929, however, the government changed course and introduced a sweeping series of progressive social reforms that provided economic security and increased democratic participation. The major, institutionalized labor unions played an important role in carrying out this recuperation, though it is important to note that independent labor unions like the IWW and the UMWA were subjected to bloody repression during the earlier period. The UK, for its part, extended voting rights to a much larger portion of the population and conceded independence to Ireland and greater sovereignty to the "Dominions" as part of a recuperative movement towards greater democracy and decentralization.

As we have seen, all major states enter into a period of reaction at roughly the same time and there is a high level of communication between them, with the same tendency being able to sweep multiple countries, but their differing circumstances might also cause them to go in opposite directions.

### **1944–1948**

The reactionary period from 1944–1948 presents a stark contrast with the earlier reactionary period, in a way that is nonetheless fully conditioned by it. Whereas the revolutionary wave beginning in 1917 took ruling classes largely by surprise, this time around, they remembered and preempted the revolutionary wave that was sure to break out at the end of World War II.

Their fears were not ungrounded. Anarchist and communist partisans were well armed and well organized, and they had played a major role in defeating the fascists in France, Italy, Poland, and the Balkans. They expected to be able to sweep Franco out of Spain and usher in new, more just realities in country after country. However, they were also more cautious. The extreme brutality they had experienced under fascism made them afraid to take the plunge and commit to revolution the way they had thirty years earlier. It also made them more likely to accept alliances of convenience with the democratic powers. Especially in France and Italy, these alliances were their downfall, but we can understand why revolutionaries made this mistake. After all, such alliances had helped them survive fascist occupation, and anyone who might access the category of citizenship, as opposed to someone in the colonies, was clearly safer under a democracy than under a fascist government, even if both practiced some form of capitalism.

Importantly, this led to a divergence in the collective reality of the Global North and the Global South that has largely survived to this day (the divergence was initially created by colonialism and whiteness, but it had waxed and waned over the centuries and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> was



at a historic low). In the Global North, people chose survival and ultimately comfort instead of revolution, whereas in the Global South, people had no such choice. In fact, World War II presented them with an opportunity, giving many of them military experience as they were called up to fight for Britain or France, and showing them that their colonial masters were weakened and could be defeated. Over the next decades, nearly all revolutionary struggles would take place in the Global South, with little support from people in the Global North.

The reactionary measures unleashed by the leading states began before World War II even ended. In 1943 and 1944, the Allies carried out heavy bombing campaigns against working-class, communist strongholds like the San Lorenzo neighborhood of Rome. They encouraged the *Vercors maquis*, a large partisan network in southeastern France, to rise up prematurely in June 1944 and then failed to give them promised aid as they were slaughtered by the Nazis. The Soviet Union halted its inexorable advance through Poland just on the other side of the river from Warsaw, giving the Nazis time to massacre nearly all the participants of the Warsaw Uprising. They also ordered the hugely successful Greek partisans to disarm, and looked the other way when the British shot down the ones who refused. In this way, the Allies made sure that the revolutionaries would take heavy losses and would start the post-war period on their back foot.

Then, they began preparing the Cold War, a new world order in which the entire planet would be ruled by one of two authoritarian factions each practicing a different model of capitalism. There could be no room for independent movements. What would become the NATO bloc prepared a tacit alliance with Franco, as he was their best bet to preventing the reemergence of revolutionary movements in Spain. Throughout Europe, they recruited ex-fascists for Operation Gladio. Initially to organize “stay behind” actions should the USSR invade Western Europe, the Operation quickly morphed into carrying out terrorist attacks against revolutionary movements. From this point, we can talk about fascism having been subordinated to democracy and turned into a tool in the democratic toolbox, rather than a paradigm or governmental mode with a serious chance of defining an entire world system.

For its part, the USSR invaded and occupied Poland, East Germany, all of Central Europe shy of Austria, and most of the Balkans, as well as preserving the limits of the Tsarist empire throughout Asia, making sure there would not be any autonomous space where free, revolutionary movements could develop.

In East and West, this period of reaction did not confine itself to repressive measures. In fact, its major thrust was the cooptation of anti-capitalist demands relating to quality of life. Before a revolutionary movement could manifest, the ruling classes implemented a sweeping array of social welfare measures. Whereas in 1916, they thought they were at the height of their power, in 1944 they remembered history and realized they would face a real danger if they did not implement reforms. So, in 1944, Britain created an advanced welfare state under a Labour government. Between 1944 and 1946, the Provisional Government of France under De Gaulle, with the Communists and Socialists as the major players, passed protective labor laws, established occupational health care, and gave women the right to vote. Italy was a little more moderate but also passed similar laws in this period. For its part, the Soviet Union embarked on a major campaign of constructing cheap public housing.

As for the United States, FDR had already taken huge steps towards a welfare state before the war. And unlike most other countries, the US was not devastated by the war, it was thriving. To pad the bubble of comfort it was promising the working class, the US government expanded a system of loans for university education and specific support to veterans through the G.I. Bill, which

included support for mortgages. Cheap loans for university education and home mortgages became the guarantor of the burgeoning US middle class and a basis for US financial expansion. And to prevent a global economic recession and the kind of revanchism that set the stage for World War II, they started the Marshall Plan, opening up new territory for the investment of surplus US capital and providing the funds for Western Europe to quickly rebuild. The model provided by the Marshall Plan and the Bretton Woods institutions of 1944 led to the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community, the precursor to the European Union.

The reactionary period of 1944 to 1948 was the polar opposite of the previous period. It was short, it was highly effective from the state's point of view, and it shows that states are capable of being intelligent, that they can learn from their mistakes and think of innovative tools for killing revolutions besides just bludgeoning them with brute force. It resulted in the creation of a world system that still exists today, that is, in fact, only now falling apart, and it effectively prevented serious revolutionary movements in the Global North up until the present moment, ushering in an unprecedented period of social peace and enrichment for global capitalists.

The main exception appears to be in the decades of warfare that followed in the Global South; however, independence movements found their place within the world order created between 1944 and 1948. World leaders recognized that old-style colonialism was unsustainable, so the United States announced national sovereignty, independence, and the abolition of colonialism as founding principles of the United Nations from the very beginning. However, in specific cases, the US, the UK, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Belgium would intervene in independence movements, slowing them down, favoring certain factions, and guiding the outcomes to the sort of neo-colonialism we have today. Interventions by the USSR and China ensured that independence movements were never fully revolutionary, and instead corresponded to the mercenary, geopolitical interests of the major states. As such, the constant wars in the Global South were minimized as a source of instability for the new world system, which had recognized from the beginning that colonized countries should eventually be set free. Instead of instability, such warfare provided a growth opportunity for the armaments industry and ensured access to extractive industries. Continuing warfare and the military coups that went along with it also destroyed the revolutionary potential of the Non-Aligned Movement.

### **1966–1976**

Several things happened in 1968 that marked the opening of a new reactionary period: the defeat of the autonomous student and workers' movement in France; the assassination of MLK and the end of the pretext of reform in the US; the Tlatelolco massacre against the student movement in Mexico; and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia to put down a series of reforms.

In fact, the reaction had kicked off earlier in the socialist world, with Mao beginning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China in 1966 to strengthen his grip over the country, leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths. In the same year, Brezhnev consolidated his power over the USSR and held the first public trials (of two writers) since Stalin.

In the post-colonial world of the Global South, 1966 was also a key year: the socialist independence leader of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, was deposed by a government that worked closely with Western financial institutions to privatize the industries and services Nkrumah's government had nationalized. And the left-leaning independence leader of Indonesia, Sukarno, was deposed in a

coup between 1965 and 1967, initiated by British secret services and the CIA, and resulting in the deaths of one million suspected communists and sympathizers.

The revolutionary movement that triggered the reaction is closely related to the question of decolonization, a pressure valve that constituted the most ungoverned space of the world order created by the 1944–1948 reaction. The world order created by the United States in the aftermath of World War II was nominally committed to decolonization. What this meant to Washington was the eventual dismantling of the British, French, and other empires, opening up the entire Global South to investment by all capitalist entities. Just as the United States had profited immensely from the Bolivarian revolutions that freed Latin America from Spanish colonialism, they expected to profit from decolonization throughout the rest of the world. They had no need to impose the kind of monopolies associated with British-style colonialism, as both free trade regimes and clientelism with nationalist dictatorships would favor what were the most effective vehicles for large scale, transnational economic exploitation at the time: the private corporations that were concentrated in the US and its ally states like the UK, France, the Netherlands, and Germany. They viewed it as a positive sum game: all capitalists would win more if none of them tried to hoard the honey pot, and the home countries of those capitalists would grow military the more productive their corporations became. After all, World War II was the high point of the industrialization of warfare, completing Napoleon’s realization of capitalist logistics, “an army marches on its stomach.” At the time, it was therefore easy to think that military victory would always fall to the country that could best increase its productive output and rationalize its death delivery systems.

Simultaneously, the US ruling class understood that they had no chance of dominating the entire world through direct military means. As such, they created mechanisms for political cooperation, like the UN, and gained legitimacy by inviting their main adversary, the USSR, to participate as a full member. Washington recognized the inevitability of a bipolar world in which they would not have absolute power, so they designed a bipolar world with structures that favored corporate capitalism and they prepared a clever endgame. They were banking on the belief that they and their allies, which were the countries with more advanced mechanisms for transnational capitalist exploitation, would be able to profit much more from the “opening up” of the Global South than the USSR could, meaning that after a few decades’ time, they could redraw the balance of powers.

For this game to work, decolonization had to go a certain way: it had to lead to Western-style, nationalist governments that were either democracies or military dictatorships seeking development along a Western path and dependent on Western military hardware, loans, and technical expertise. Decades or centuries of colonial tutorship, which reinforced the myth of European superiority, succeeded insofar as every major independence movement in the Global South accepted the legitimacy, or at least the neutrality, of Western-style institutions from governments to mass media to banks.

However, people tend to be much more independently minded than most rulers believe. Both conspiracy theory thinking and the version of anti-imperialism that sees everyone as a puppet of one of two camps share the belief that the only people with any agency are those in power.

Decolonization did not go entirely as planned. In 1956, Egypt, under the socialist-leaning, pan-Arabist Nasser, nationalized the Suez Canal—one of the most important waterways in the world—and successfully defended it against Britain, France, and Israel. And in 1958, Castro’s party won

the Cuban revolution and soon demonstrated they would not be obedient pawns to US interests, even if they failed to change Cuba's position in the world economy as a producer of sugar cane.

Things completely blew open in 1961, when the Chinese Communist Party denounced the USSR as "revisionist traitors". China, which had not been previously considered a major player by NATO or the USSR, had already demonstrated its power in the '50s when it effectively defeated the US in the Korean War. Now, it had put an end to the bipolar world system that US strategic planners had prepared for. Subsequently, it would no longer be a simple matter to divide the Global South into the clients of one or another superpower. There would be greater possibilities for entirely independent positions.

And in fact the same year, 1961, saw the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement, bringing together Ghana, Egypt, Indonesia, India, Yugoslavia, and dozens of other countries. Though newly independent countries were still beholden to world powers, now their revolutions could take on subversive meanings.

General prosperity in the Global North limited the possibilities for revolutionary movements there. When they did come about, their principal claims were to justice and freedom. They claimed solidarity with the independence movements that had already been going on for years, allying with Vietnam or Algeria against their own governments, and excoriating those governments for the hypocrisy of their ostensible support for political freedoms. In socialist countries, they called for more openness and freedoms, sometimes conflating this with economic liberalism and sometimes pointing out a more libertarian path to socialism. In the US, the racist oppressions at the heart of the settler state were the core cause of the revolutionary groundswell, though rebellion against the strict cultural controls of the Cold War era also played a major role, as it did throughout Western Europe. In Germany, for example, the movement coalesced in part around the admission of an unspoken post-war truth, that the government was comprised largely of rehabilitated Nazis who had been absorbed into the democratic system. In a way, all of these movements were claiming that the social contract, supposedly renovated in 1945, was phony.

The peak of revolutionary activity, 1968, actually occurred after the reaction had already begun in the Global South and the socialist countries. Though there were major movements in Germany, Mexico, Italy, the Netherlands, the US, and elsewhere, the most famous epicenter was France, when hundreds of thousands of students and workers took control of much of the country and caused President De Gaulle to flee to Germany, believing a revolution had already begun.

An aspect of the revolutionary movement was its extreme vulnerability to authoritarianism, a direct consequence of the 1944–1948 reaction. The welfare state in the West, and socialism/state capitalism in the East, destroyed people's ability for self-organized, collective action. As such, revolutionary action in the West was dominated by small groups claiming to be vanguards and battling for supremacy, even as the much more numerous phenomenon of decentralized, anonymous action failed to generate a collective consciousness of its own power and nature. In the Warsaw Pact, decades of living under states that claimed to be the revolution and crushed any disagreement had created even greater levels of passivity. In Czechoslovakia, citizens dutifully waited to see what reforms their rulers would pass, and they only went so far as to mount a mostly pacifist defense of those rulers when Soviet tanks were sent in, such a difference from the decentralized initiative and gusto of the Hungarian Revolution twelve years earlier. In China, the lower classes mobilized largely on the basis of Mao's exhortations. As such, they could be mobilized to support revolutionary measures just as easily as reactionary ones.

And in the Global South, the movements tended to be entirely dependent on charismatic, intelligent leaders from the independence struggles. The death or retirement of those leaders nearly always resulted in a shift towards nationalism or liberalism and an end to the revolutionary experiment. The way decolonization was set up in 1945 gave the superpowers a great deal of influence over how independence could be achieved, and an absolute limit was placed on an acceptance of authoritarian politics within a Western nation-state framework. Both Soviet and NATO influence meant that political parties, with all the dynamics they entailed, would be the vehicles for independence.

As we have seen, the reaction beginning in 1919 had underestimated the revolutionary movement and then overcompensated, whereas the reaction of 1944 took its measure exactly. If anything, the reaction beginning in 1966 overestimated the revolutionary potential of the moment, as symbolized by De Gaulle's flight.

Governments around the world used a combination of repression and recuperation to weaken revolutionary movements; then they increased their repressive powers; and then, perceiving themselves to be in a position of great strength, they set about dismantling barriers to the accumulation of capital. Incidentally, in nearly every country, the level of repression was less openly murderous than in earlier periods of reaction.

The USSR did not engage in mass killings when it invaded Czechoslovakia, and though Brezhnev increased political repression and expanded the police apparatus, the purges he carried out did not result in mass executions, as under Lenin and Stalin.

In the US, police and soldiers killed hundreds of mostly Black people during urban riots in the revolutionary period, which is consistent to how the government responded to unrest in earlier moments, such as Reconstruction. But as the country shifted to a reactionary mode in 1968, the government tried to hide the majority of its repressive violence, using the FBI to covertly infiltrate groups and organize secret assassinations or get rival revolutionary groups to attack one another. And the greatest violence was inflicted by the drugs that flooded into racialized and lower class communities at this time, either with police support or negligence. Drug addiction became an epidemic in the '70s, leading to countless deaths from overdose, disease, and criminal gangs, and making solidarity and self-organization within oppressed communities all but impossible. From the state's perspective, the best part of this kind of repression was that it could claim not only to be innocent of all the killings, but even that it was trying to help the afflicted communities. While pretending to be blameless, the government unleashed a massive amount of violence, first by permitting the drug epidemic and then by intervening with police and social services against the lower classes.

Western Europe experienced a similar wave of addictive drugs that weakened revolutionary movements and obstructed lower class solidarity, and police operations also tried to hide the extent of their violence. The German state murdered revolutionaries under the guise of suicides, and in Italy the police used fascists to attack the movement, generally blaming their bombings on anarchists.

All of these tactics reveal a specifically democratic mode of reaction, using fascist street gangs or covert police operations to murder social rebels and weaken movements, often turning factions against one another. All the while, the government maintains its mythology of human rights and neutrality, so that the majority of the population does not realize what is happening, and believes the narrative claiming that all the social violence is the product of unreasonable extremists on the Right and Left fighting each other. This is the "Strategy of Tension" used ef-

fectively in Italy throughout the '60s and '70s. Notably, a strategy of tension relies on fascists or other far Right actors, but it does not lead to a fascist takeover. On the contrary, the result is to neutralize revolutionary movements and then allow a renewal of faith in centrist democracy.

Another advantage of the democratic mode of reaction is its ability to use necropolitics. State capitalism has to be able to at least claim that it improves quality of life for the whole population, whereas liberal capitalism champions the *laissez faire* idea that if you starve to death, it's your own fault. That's why the democratic countries were able to destroy entire movements with drugs and then the AIDS epidemic, even though it meant hundreds of thousands of people died, without ever having to take responsibility for those deaths. But in the end, having the police look the other way (or run the shipment) as kilos and kilos of heroin and cocaine went into the ghettos proved much more effective than opening fire on crowds of demonstrators.

The final major advantage of the democratic mode of reaction is the political pressure valve of elections. In nearly every case, political power changed hands right after the peak of revolutionary potential. In the US, largely because of white supremacy, the revolutionaries never got a majority on their side, and starting in 1968, the government went to the Right for 20 of the next 24 years. In France, the Left was weak since the Communists had played such a major role in stopping the revolution, so again, the right-wing came to power. But in Germany, where the Right was already in power, things shifted the other way and the Socialists got into government, institutionalizing some of the movement's demands. In Italy, they had a harder time, as the government had long been dominated by a centrist party, and neither the Right nor the Left had the power to sweep the elections, which is part of the reason why things were much more conflictive and unstable in Italy throughout the '70s.

Spain is a useful case study because it was governed by the longest lasting fascist dictatorship and also formed a part of the wave of revolutionary movements associated with May '68. In the late '60s, an autonomous workers' movement was spreading throughout the country. Workers' councils started popping up in factories, mines, the ports, and other workplaces. They quickly started organizing wildcat strikes, and also federating, linking up across the country. The Communist Party tried to take over the Workers' Commissions, as they were called, but they didn't succeed until the early '70s. In the meantime, many different anticapitalist currents were active in the councils, and some of them also started forming armed groups to support the striking workers (it was understood that the Communists were not anticapitalists, as their stated goal was to advance capitalism in the Spanish state). By the early '70s, hundreds of thousands of people were participating in wildcat strikes. The police and military shot down dozens of protesters, but people were also improving their ability to defend themselves and strike back. Around this time, the entirety of the fascist regime realized that it would best serve their interests to transition to democracy. They negotiated with the Communist Party and eventually settled on a constitutional monarchy. The left-wing parties were very careful to build unity around antifascism and not around anticapitalism, and they ended up preventing a revolution by transitioning to democracy.

Once the revolutionary potential had been defeated, governments across the board focused on increasing their repressive powers. In Spain, they just left the fascist police intact. In the USSR, Brezhnev increased KGB infiltration of all dissident groups, and they put thousands of dissidents in mental hospitals. Britain reduced the power of the labor unions, defeated several miners' strikes, and effectively invaded Northern Ireland, carrying out a number of massacres and widespread repression. These were unpopular moves, so the Labour Party briefly got back in

power in the mid-70s, an example of the democratic pressure valve, but this was the point when they backed away from their position of increasing public ownership.

In the US, these are the years when the War on Crime and the War on Drugs began. These policies constituted a smart form of repression, because they clearly targeted the lower classes, but were also completely depoliticized. It was easy for the government to claim that they were neutral policies simply responding to crime and had nothing at all to do with repression. In 1968, President Johnson, a Democrat, passed the major bill in his newly announced “war on crime” that began federal assistance to local law enforcement and expanded the FBI, particularly with an eye to urban riots. And then a few years later, Nixon declared the War on Drugs, which gave rise to the prison industrial complex.

Parallel to this was the beginning of the Culture Wars. These began in the '70s as a campaign by evangelicals, Heritage Foundation types, and disgruntled white Marxists who had moved to the right in reaction to the anti-racist movements of the previous years. They saw how the cultural conservatism assiduously implanted in the population by the Cold War had been shattered by all the struggles of the 1960s, and they sought to bring this conservatism back, using flashpoint issues like abortion and gay rights, as well as lots of racially coded language around crime, drug use, and unemployment. They were a fundamental part of the rightward turn that led to the '80s and '90s being deeply conservative decades.

Similarly, in Italy, Berlusconi laid the foundations for the stabilization of capitalist society with a shift to the right by creating a media empire based on tabloids, soap operas, and Fox News-style programming.

This follow-up to the first phase of the reaction was similar to the Cold War politics of the late '40s and '50s: after defeating the revolution, the State makes sure it ends up stronger and more able to prevent the next one. The result was to leave governments in a position of such uncontested dominance, that they could dismantle most of the reforms and protections that had been won by previous revolutions (or the reactionary concessions used to preempt such revolutions), and usher in the age of unbridled, mercenary capitalism most of us have grown up in.

In 1972, Mao met with Nixon and began the liberalization of the economy, beginning a shift to a profit-oriented economy that would be completed under Deng Xiaoping in the '80s. In 1965, the USSR had already instituted an economic reform that made profitability and sales two of the primary metrics to be used by economic planners, while granting more independence to individual enterprises to manage their business. The reform was never fully implemented, but in the '80s Gorbachev introduced more far-reaching changes to liberalize the economy.

In 1979, Thatcher came to power in the UK and quickly became the queen of neoliberal austerity. Reagan followed her a year later in the US, and at that point, all major parties in democracies around the world adopted practically identical programs of austerity, slashing spending on social services, selling public infrastructure and resources, and dedicating funds to military spending, paying off debts, and subsidizing key industries.

Another important aspect in this growth of unbridled capitalism was a détente between East and West and the gradual end of Cold War politics. From 1929 to 1973, the USSR experienced economic growth (measured in capitalist terms) faster than the US, and China would soon begin to take off as well. A centrally planned economy was more effective than liberalism in enabling the growth of capitalism in those two countries, that had previously been devastated by feudalism and by old-school imperialism, respectively. But now they had largely caught up. Continued economic growth in the USSR (and in China, by the '90s), if it happened along the lines pursued

during the era of mostly central planning, would lead to an increase in the quality of life of the lower classes beyond what was in the interests of the ruling classes. After all, if the lower classes aren't sunk in poverty, dependent on aid, what do they need rulers for?

To be clear, liberal capitalism and centrally planned economies exist on a continuum. Free markets do not exist—corporations, after all, are monopolistic bureaucracies—and the US economy, like any other, is dependent on government planning. The question is how much government planning, and how much competition between private corporations? The USSR and China began to increase the proportion of investment by private corporations and decrease the proportion of central planning as the best way to allow for further economic growth. In China, that growth transformed the country into a dynamic, international capitalist player (as Xi Jinping says, the Chinese Communist Party took the organizational principles of the capitalist corporation and applied it to the entire country). In the former USSR, “growth” looked more like plutocratic vultures stripping the entirety of the welfare state and social infrastructure, but both of these are legitimate forms of capital accumulation.

Because the USSR and China no longer had to protect their domestic economies from the neo-colonial intrusions of Western corporations, but were ready to come to the banquet hall of global liberal capitalism, the Cold War had to give way to a period of economic “cooperation” among plutocrats, exemplified by the WTO. The War would not return until the updated balance of power (with Russia losing rank and China gaining it) led to geopolitical conflicts in former Soviet satellites and in Southeast Asia, the former due to NATO expansionism and the latter due to Chinese expansionism (which, to be honest, was simply China butting heads with the post-1945 US expansionism).

## **The Reaction Beginning Now**

What can we say about the current period of reaction, which is still crystallizing around us? Much of it depends on the revolutionary wave it responds to. That wave, in turn, is conditioned by the reactionary period that preceded it. We can recall that a major weakness of the earlier revolutionary wave was its authoritarianism, that prevented effective solidarity and self-organization, and facilitated recuperation.

It should be no surprise, then, that the current revolutionary wave, beginning with the Zapatista uprising in 1994, passing through the Second Intifada in Palestine, the piqueteros in Argentina, the Water and Gas Wars in Bolivia, and the Black Blocs of the Global North, and metamorphosing into a wave of sudden insurrections starting with the banlieue revolts of 2005 and maturing with the Mike Brown and George Floyd revolts in the US, is thoroughly decentralized, anti-political, and frequently, consciously anti-authoritarian. Hardly a single one has centered around a political party or union, though such organizations have ridden the coattails of a few of the uprisings, killing them off in the process.

This anti-authoritarianism conditions the reaction in several ways. The ruling class will have a perpetually difficult time understanding the current revolutionary wave. They will not be able to take its measure like they did in 1944. Due to its subterranean, rhizomatic, spontaneous nature, it will not be easy for them to stabilize it through traditional means of recuperation, like institutionalizing the movement with a union or political party. In fact, we have already seen that the benefits of institutional recuperation, such as the Pink Wave in Latin America, or the string of far



Left and municipalist governments across the northern Mediterranean, succeeded in dampening insurrectionary fervor for only a few short years.

This brings us to a second point. The ruling class does not feel particularly threatened by the current revolutionary wave. They recognize that the lack of “consumer confidence” is a problem for the economy, but when they discuss the future of capitalism in Davos and other settings, what they fear are populist regimes of economic protectionism that take advantage of massive discontent with growing inequality, information warfare, and a total collapse of capitalism brought about by climate change. Revolution doesn’t make the list. The most “the people” can do to threaten them, in their mind, is support counterproductive populist governments that bank on inequality.

It makes sense that the ruling class does not fear revolution. They are coming off of one of the longest periods of social stability in modern history. Their power has grown immensely. And they are also protected by one of the greatest weaknesses of the current revolutionary wave: unlike in previous moments, revolutionaries today do not believe in revolution, and they cannot even imagine what a revolution would look like. Though our capacities for short-term self-organization have been astounding, time after time, once everything has been set on fire, we just go home. Seen in historical perspective, this is little better than voting. (Don’t get me wrong: there can be no revolution without the fires and barricades, whereas the same cannot be said for the ballot.)

However, the fact that the ruling class does not fear the current revolutionary wave does not mean they will not take it seriously or will not react quickly enough as in 1917. We have already seen proof of this. Because repressive technologies have advanced the totalitarian project and the ruling class has enjoyed social peace for so long, they are much less likely to feel a need to tolerate explosions of anger and discontent. Rather, they will increasingly try to punish illegality, even if it means shutting off the social pressure valve.

And, as we have seen from the Pink Wave in Latin America and the governments of SYRIZA and Barcelona en Comú, the ruling class is not feeling particularly generous. They do not see the need to carry out major reforms that renew the social contract or improve the quality of life for those on bottom. They think, erroneously, that the kind of empty, symbolic bandages that worked all throughout the ’90s and ’00s will suffice, or that they can regain the social peace by switching the political party in charge, as happened at the end of the ’60s in many countries. But that trick has also lost its edge.

Encouraging nationalism has been a rote response for the ruling classes, as in most previous reactions. Again, this is another trick that seems to be losing its edge. Few countries have been able to develop the stable, nationalist majority that was a plank of fascism, socialism, and Cold War democracy. Rather, the growth of nationalism has actually made governments more unstable as populations are divided with no clear winner. Part of the problem, for the ruling classes, is that the new Cold War does not have a convincing ideological underpinning. It’s not humanistic socialism against barbarous capitalism or freedom against autocracy. It’s just Machiavellian geopolitics, a cast of bullies each trying to come out on top. As such, the center Left in the US has led the charge to try to infuse this new Cold War with an ideological alibi: once again, freedom against autocracy. But they’re going to have a hard sell as long as they keep encouraging police murders and opposing universal healthcare.

Furthermore, the ruling classes have their work cut out for them: though the revolution has little chance of success, so too does the reaction. We are once again in a period of systemic

chaos, in the twilight of US dominance. There is no clear leader, no agreed set of rules anymore. Therefore, the reaction does not only need to foreclose the possibility of revolution, it needs to reassemble a tenable world system, and as long as it fails to do so, the possibilities of revolution will reappear.

For all these reasons, one of two things might happen. The first is that the current revolutionary moment continues to mature, with the elaboration of positive projects (decolonization, autonomy, mutual aid) and greater international solidarity. This would force the ruling class to expand their repressive technologies in a way that does not inhibit economic growth, which is a difficult balance to strike. Dead workers are unproductive, and closed borders block many of the flows of capital. Alternatively or additionally, they would need to break with neoliberalism and consider real, deep-seated reforms capable of renewing the social contract and also open up a new sector of economic growth, probably the transition away from fossil fuels. Because of the weakness of current revolutionary movements, such reforms would easily be enough to pacify the lower classes; however it would also require capitalists to slow down their aggressive, mercenary binge of speculation and accumulation, which is most apparent in the parasitic extremes of private equity firms plundering everything that is left of the social wealth. And this is a hard sell, because capitalists have not had to temper their piratical urges since the end of World War II. In other words, no capitalist who is alive today knows what it is like to make some sacrifice for the “collective good,” which for them means the good of all capitalists and the capitalist system as a whole. On the contrary, they have all spent decades devouring the goose that lays golden eggs and at this point have come to believe it is immortal.

The second possibility is that the current revolutionary wave gets exhausted by the forms of repression currently being employed against it, maybe taking advantage of some electoral changes to call it quits. If that happens, the reaction will probably come to a quick end as the ruling class tries to get back to the illusion of normality it so fervently believes in. If that is the case, there will be a historically short gap between this wave of revolutionary potential and the next one. And the next one will be stronger indeed, as a growing portion of the lower classes will be forced to elaborate more effective forms of mutual aid and coordination to survive our growing poverty.

A study of reactions throughout history does not make it clear what will happen next, but it does show us how the ruling classes operate in these circumstances, the range of weapons they use, and the ways they tend to think. History never repeats exactly, but it does move in patterns, and by becoming aware of these patterns, we can stay ahead of the curve, and maybe even alter our course.

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The Reaction This Time  
Understanding Reaction In A Global, Historical Perspective  
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