

Crisis and Revolt

The crises we face and the kind of struggle we need to face them.

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When I discuss politics with liberal friends and relatives, they usually argue that people with decent values must support the Democrats. (I do not try to persuade them not to spend 15 minutes a year voting for Democrats. Rather, I am arguing against their continuing support for the Democratic Party. I am also arguing against the strategy of big progressive forces, such as unions and communities of color, which provide major resources to the Democrats.) They say that, whatever the failings of the Democratic Party and its politicians (and liberals admit many), surely they are much better than the Republicans, who are cruel and ignorant.

I answer that we are using different criteria to judge political groupings. These liberals are asking which of the groups of politicians are better than the other. I agree that the Democrats are generally the “better” party, in the sense that they are, at least, the “lesser evil.” For example, the Democrats at least admit that there is a problem with the global climate, even if they do not do anything about it.

But my criterion is different: given the objective problems we face politically, economically, ecologically (in the climate, energy, and pollution), militarily (wars and the continuing threat of a nuclear war so long as these atomic “weapons” exist), and in a number of other ways—who can prevent our social destruction? Who has a solution to the crises? What program can save us and who fights for that program? By this objective yardstick, Democrats as well as Republicans—liberals, moderates, conservatives, and crazed reactionaries—the full spectrum of US politics—all fall short. It is like choosing between two doctors, one a total quack and the other who is incompetent (whether he or she means well), when you are facing a severe illness.

Predictions of Disaster

Consider some book reviews which recently appeared in the New York Times (I live in New York City). There was a review of Martin Wolf’s “The Shifts and the Shocks” by Felix Salmon (2014). The author, Martin Wolf, is the chief economics commentator for “The Financial Times”—perhaps the world’s leading business journal. He “is extremely influential” among “finance ministers and central bank governors” (p. 1). As the reviewer summarizes, Wolf claims that, following the Great Recession of 2007-9, the inadequate “global policy response...all but ensures that we will have an even worse crisis down the road, and that unless we start implementing extreme measures today, we will be running headlong into catastrophe....As Wolf puts it, ‘No industry should have the capacity to inflict economic costs that may even surpass those of a world war’....This book is...a wonkish eschatology of how the global economy, and Europe’s in particular, is doomed. If Wolf’s prescriptions aren’t followed, he says, ‘further crises seem certain,’ erupting again and again, ‘until governments are no longer able to prevent some kind of fiscal or monetary collapse....Our open world economy could end in the fire’ ” (p. 27).

I will not go into his proposed solutions, as given in the review. They seem too radical to be carried out by existing governments and central banks, while simultaneously too mild to be effective, since he continues to support the capitalist world financial system.

Several books on climate change were reviewed by Nathaniel Rich (2014). One, by historians of science, Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, has the grisly title, “The Collapse of Western Civilization; A View from the Future.” The reviewer summarizes, “It is possible that by the end of the century, the populations of Africa and Australia will be wiped out, New York and most other coastal cities will be accessible only to scuba divers, 70 percent of all species will go extinct, a

second Black Death will kill off half of Europe, 1.5 billion people will be displaced, and, as soon as 2050, the United States government will declare martial law to prevent food riots” (p. D5).

The predictions by the economist Wolf and the historians Oreskes and Conway may seem to be alarmist (Oreskes and Conway say their book is “fiction,” after all, “a view from the future”). No one can make absolute predictions of an inevitable future. But it is clear that these are real threats which reasonable people should take seriously.

Of course, it is not news that there are also many bourgeois economists and historical writers who say that everything will be okay, with a little effort and luck. But it is (or should be) news when a prominent economist (who had previously supported the financial-liberalization and austerity measures of Thatcher and Reagan) admits to having been wrong and makes dire predictions. Nor is he the only one; there are many leading economists who have made similar statements, although the media and politicians do not emphasize them.

As for the catastrophism of the science historians, the reviewer Rich also looks at Diane Ackerman’s “The Human Age.” Ackerman, he writes, points out environmental dangers but believes that the intelligent use of technology could keep them under control. “I’m enormously hopeful,” she writes. The book, writes Rich, “is rarely grim and the overwhelming spirit is one of relentless optimism.”

However it is not enough to invent technology which can help with climate change. Social institutions must also be invented which will properly use this technology. Rich asks, “Why has our civilization been unable to take the most basic steps to prevent a future that could include mass starvation, [population] displacement and pestilence?”

Naomi Klein’s “This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate” is also reviewed by Rich. Apparently, she believes that climate catastrophe is avoidable, but only if people takes steps toward socialism. The review summarizes, “Change must come quickly. By 2013, she writes, we will be lucky to restrict the ultimate rise in global temperature to an average of four degrees Celsius or seven Fahrenheit. Four degrees warming, as it turns out, is the premise for the nightmarish future described by Dr. Oreskes and Dr. Conway.” In his opinion, this makes their book, of the three he reviews, actually “the one furthest from fiction.”

There is a connection between the threat of ecological/climate catastrophes and the threat of economic meltdown. After World War II, the world did not return to the conditions of the Great Depression (as most economists, pro-capitalist as well as Marxist, expected). There were several causes for the surprising post-war prosperity, which lasted from the late forties to about 1970. These include the enormous expansion of military spending in the USA. Another cause was the looting of the environment. A whole industrial society was built on petroleum oil, for production, transportation, agriculture (artificial fertilizers and pesticides), and everything we use plastics for. Petroleum was treated as a “cheap” resource, instead of including in its price the need for putting money by—for cleaning up the global ecology, creating new sources of renewable energy, and developing the poor nations in nonpolluting ways. Rationally, wealth from the production and use of petroleum and other carbon-based fuels should have gone for these purposes. Instead, these needs were ignored and most of oil wealth was counted as profit. Some was used to artificially and temporarily raise the standard of living of a part of the working class. Sooner or later the bills were bound to come due.

Now the capitalist class complains that it cannot afford to rebuild the world economy on a sustainable and balanced basis! This would indicate the need for a different way to organize the

world economy—and a different class managing society (the international working class, with its allies among the oppressed) until a classless society can be completed.

I could also discuss other threats to the survival of “Western civilization,” such as it is. Wars continue around the world. Talk by the Democrats that they would move toward world nuclear disarmament has remained just talk; in fact the U.S. state currently plans to spend a trillion dollars to upgrade its nuclear armaments. Meanwhile other national states still have their own genocide-threatening, world-ecology-destroying, nuclear bombs. And there are many other problems, such as immigration, racial oppression, attacks on rights for women, etc., which do not rise to the level of threatening the existence of civilization or life on earth. Yet they are bad enough and are not being addressed by governments or politicians.

Popular Struggle against both the Lesser and the Greater Evils

In brief, the Democrats may be the “lesser evil,” but that still makes them an evil. Just as do the Republicans, the Democrats support capitalism and the national state, which are the causes of the nightmarish threats. The “greater evil” cannot be defeated by using the “lesser evil.” In practice, progressive forces (such as labor unions, the African-American community, organized feminism, environmentalists, and so on) have supported Democrats over Republicans for decades now, since, say, the end of World War II. What has been the empirical result? Have not both parties moved more and more to the right? The Democrats are now where the Republicans used to be and the Republicans are entirely far-right, including even semi-fascists.

Electoral politics are no answer. The reviewer Rich notes Naomi Klein’s program for a “Great Transition” to a better, safer, world. She raises proposals for expanding the public sector, taxing the extremely rich, investing in infrastructure, and so on (proposals which would also, I might add, decrease the danger or impact of a new Depression). Rich does not criticize the program, but comments that this “reads like a campaign book for a candidate who would have exactly zero chance of winning the American presidency” (p. D5). However, the goal is not to elect a president but to prevent world-wide disaster and immense human suffering. If the US political system cannot accommodate that, then to hell with the US political system. As Rosa Luxemburg wrote during World War I, the only real alternatives are “socialism or barbarism”—or, as Murray Bookchin updated the phrase, “anarchism or annihilation.”

Most great advances in US society came about through non-electoral means, outside of the ballot box. In the thirties, the rights of unions were won through massive strikes, including occupations of factories in key industries. In the sixties, African-Americans won the end of legal segregation through large-scale civil disobedience. Anti-discrimination laws were won through urban rebellions (so-called riots). The Vietnamese war was limited by big demonstrations, civil disobedience, campus strikes, and the breakdown of the US army. Such rebellions and expressions of discontent will be needed to change society from the rule of the capitalist exploiters and their agents in the two mainstream political parties. (Some radicals advocate creating a new party. This would be still working within the framework of the capitalist class and its governmental set-up.)

Right now most US people more-or-less accept this social system. In the recent past, many (white) people have been relatively comfortable. Now the system is facing serious difficulties. These are beginning to shake up lots of people. There is a great deal of dissatisfaction bubbling under the surface, breaking out now and again in mass demonstrations on various issues, and in

other signs of popular unrest. There is no guarantee, but enough people may become dissatisfied to really threaten the rule of the corporate rich and their national state. Whether this will happen soon enough cannot be known, but the possibility is real—and growing.

Paul Goodman was the most well-known anarchist of the sixties. In an article criticizing electoralism as a strategy, he referred to deTocqueville and lessons from the French Revolution:

“It will be said that there is no time. Yes, probably. But let me cite a remark of Tocqueville. In his last work, ‘L’Ancien Regime,’ he notes ‘with terror,’ as he says, how throughout the eighteenth century writer after writer and expert after expert pointed out that this and that detail of the Old Regime was unviable and could not possibly survive; added up, they proved that the entire Old Regime was doomed and must soon collapse; and yet there was not a single [person] who foretold that there would be a mighty revolution” (in Stoehr 2011; p. 75).

References

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