

Modern Revolutions

Or, Is Revolution Still Possible?

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It was originally my intention to give a history lesson on the modern revolutions, with the aim of extracting what they had in common. Actually this is too big of a project, these events can not be dealt with adequately on their own in the space of 20 minutes, lump them together and you would lose everything.

What are these modern revolutions? Well in the 80's it became popular on a large part of the left to proclaim the death of the working class. Not so much from the obviously flawed position of saying nobody worked anymore, or even that modern society was no longer based around the division between wage labour and capital. No rather on the basis that the working class no longer existed as a class, ie a group of people with common interests. Its an idea that was accepted by even a large part of the revolutionary left. Core periphery theory, the underclass, all these represent the idea that working class has fragmented into many different groups. Two things were held to have caused this, on one hand the increase in consumer goods available to workers, which generated the idea that we are all middle class now, and on the other the small rump that did not benefit from this increase, the underclass of permanent unemployed, unskilled and low waged. Its an idea that became popular in general culture as well as exemplified by films like slackers and the endless generation 'X' books.

To an extent it raises a legitimate question. Were revolutions not based around semi-skilled workers living and working together in appalling conditions. An image perhaps best emphasised by the traditional mining communities of England, where workers ate, played and died together. Today with the fracture of the working class into smaller workplaces, mostly due to automation, the division of the old communities into suburbs, the advent of mass transport which meant even those in the suburbs no longer worked together, the move into white collar and skilled jobs, the advent of mass entertainment, have these things destroyed the working class as a political force. Do these things mean the revolutionary potential of those who work is dead, that their common interests have been eroded and destroyed, in short that the revolution although desirable is now utopian.

These are not new ideas, in fact they first appeared throughout academic marxism and George Woodcock in the mid sixties. The massive boom of the post war years and the real improvement in living standards brought many academics to the conclusion that revolution was dead. In his foreword to Anarchism, published in 1967 George Woodcock described it as a set of interesting

historic ideas belonging to a movement that had died in Spain at the end of the 30's. Indeed this and perhaps the upheavals in Greece, Yugoslavia and Italy that were to end the 40's were what could be called the old European revolutions.

Of course tonight we have the advantage of hindsight and can see that Woodcock was writing off revolution and anarchism on the eve a revolutionary wave that was to sweep right around the world. One that had already appeared in the United States around the struggle for Civil rights and one that in hindsight the indications could be seen going back to 66. The point being that not only Woodcock but also the left as a whole was unprepared for these events and to a large part unable to intervene. Its perhaps fitting that where we are now sitting, in the mid 90's in what appears to be the darkest part of the century for revolutionary socialism we are aware of how quickly things can change.

This is the significance of the modern revolutions, most particularly the events of 1968 in France but also the revolution of 1974-76 in Portugal, the events of the late 60's and early 70's in the US, Germany, Italy and even Ireland in 1969. Perhaps we should also add Poland of 1981 to this list and the Eastern European upheavals at the end of the 80's. In short revolutions occurring in modern countries where the working class had been transformed. Revolutions that not only demonstrated the continuing revolutionary potential of the working class but also the inability of the left to intersect and build on this potential.

This is an important point to take. The real tragedy is likely not so much that there will be no future revolutionary upheavals but rather that anarchism will be too weak to direct these upheavals away from reformism and Leninism and into a struggle for a new world. Our understanding is that for a revolution to be successful the mass of people must know not only what they are fighting against, but more importantly what they are fighting for. At the moment in Ireland we are incapable of even beginning to raise consciousness to that sort of level.

Why did the old left miss out on the upheavals of the 60's. Particularly in France the existing organisations were unable to capitalise on the crisis. The communist party became the leadership purely by default, what it was saying was crap but it had control of the unions and a reputation as being militant. The anarchists of the 22nd March movement grew but as a student body, they had no time to develop the experience they needed or to set down roots in the working class. Effectively they played the role of initiator and then were forced to tail the CP, criticising its every move but as yet unable to win away its support.

This was a pattern true everywhere in the 60's. The old organisations proved unable to adjust and failed to gain significant support, a new left grew which in fact was not all that new at all but combined a hodge podge of ideologies with aspects of youth culture. Ultimately these organisations went into decline, their leaders into academia, or into dead end armed struggle. In the end they all lacked the immediate organisation and skill to push revolution forward, and were unable to develop this after the wave had succeeded.

In Portugal the picture is even more alarming. The Portuguese revolution flowed out of a left wing military coup and saw the take-over of both land and factories. It lasted two years 1974-76 before the return to normality occurred. In this two years the far left squabbled endlessly over who was the real vanguard, there were over 20 groups claiming the title. The disruption this caused froze the revolution and thanks to US aid to the social democrats along with military threats undermined its base. There was no bloody counter revolution however, the far left simply evaporated.

In effect then the modern revolutions tell us three things

1. Revolution is possible in a consumerist society
2. To be successful the revolution will need organisations to push it forward, otherwise it may just wither or be diverted into reformism.
3. The existing left whatever its size may not be capable of turning the potential into revolution. For a variety of reasons it may fail to intersect the revolutionary movement and so become a passive spectator.

Revolutions like those in Russia and Spain matured over many years, of conflict between workers and boss. These conditions allowed the growth of revolutionary organisations, Marxist ones like the Bolsheviks and Socialist revolutionaries and anarchist ones like the Spanish CNT. At the time of revolutionary opportunity they had tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of members and because of this a massive influence in the direction the revolution took.

The modern revolutions took a different form, they appeared rapidly, instantly at the time, even with hindsight developing over months. They arose after periods of low class struggle, and collaboration between the opposition and government. This collaboration took many different forms but a modern equivalent is the PCW, accepted yesterday by ICTU. This lack of struggle in the run up meant that the left was very much smaller and that it had got used to talking to itself and not identifying the issues in the class.

The left expected these upheavals to follow pre-set patterns and put 'the left' into the leadership because of its long experience. Life of course does not work like that, the ideas of the existing left were judged outmoded and rejected, it for the most part failed to recognise the importance of specific events

How possible is revolution today. Well in the English speaking world, which is where we draw the vast bulk of our news from it looks very distant. Its a long time since we've seen a significant victory anywhere. In Europe however its clear that we are entering a new phase of struggle, the riots in France of the last few days and the general strikes in several countries over the past couple of years suggest times are not so dim.

To a large part the current gloom is a side effect of two good things, one the collapse of labourism, the idea of social partnership as something with mass support among left activists. We may have the PCW here but its not because the left feels this will bring about socialism, its because those who support it see no other choice. The second is the collapse of the USSR and the overthrow of the CP's throughout Eastern Europe. Both these things were good, they removed dead ends from appearing as alternatives.

However because right up to the collapse of both Labourism in the mid 80's and the USSR at the end of the 80's the bulk of activists had looked to one or other (or even both) of these systems as being what socialism is about their collapse had a massive demoralising effect. This saw large numbers slowly drop out of oppositional politics. This smaller pool in turn has had no effect on those who like ourselves never looked to either of these systems. We find ourselves exposed and abandoned, too weak as yet to make an impact. So although there are opportunities as never before there are also problems.

The late 80's and early 90's have also seen an incredible international crisis of capitalism. In many countries this has taken an economic form, with prolonged recession. In all countries it has taken a political form with government scandals, what's called incompetent government and most sinisterly the growth of the far right. Where as the 80's were a period of triumph for

capitalism, a triumph that became rooted in popular culture as evidenced by Loadsamoney the 90's are a period where that triumph has collapsed. Thatcherism had an exciting dynamism for the right, Major is presented as an incompetent bore. In effect though he is no different, it is the times that have changed.

This is the reason the SWP has decided Britain is on the brink of a revolution, the crisis of capitalism. And by brink they do mean brink, last year after the miners marches Tony Cliff said in International Socialism that if the SWP had twice its membership they could have marched on parliament and forced the government out of power. Leninism at its most rampant, there are two needs for the revolution, the objective crisis of capitalism and the subjective revolutionary party. In Britain and by default here they are saying the first exists and the second is almost there, their rally on Friday will no doubt repeat this message.

As I've already said however the lesson to draw from the modern revolutions is that it is the subjective experience of the working class that matters. The test of the organisation is its ability to intersect that experience, most of you here will have some idea of how badly the SWM does that here today and what's more they are driving out their middle membership. Marketing was always one of their strongest features so maybe they'll yet get it together.

So are we on the brink of a revolution. In Britain and Ireland the answer would seem to be definitely no. Although people have no confidence in the government and the political system there is no alternative to it seen. The acceptance of the PCW yesterday is an example of this in action. Sure people think the current system is crap but for an upheaval they also need to have an idea of an alternative system and a idea of how to get there. There is no evidence that this exists and it is this that will make revolution.

The other lesson I'm trying to draw out however is that we need to be careful about this conclusion. The speed at which ideas now flow, exemplified perhaps by the speed of the reaction to the Chiapas rebellion in Mexico make change very likely to be quick. In the 60's event in the US and France played a part in inspiring event in Ireland. A couple of truly significant victories internationally could change the mood here almost overnight. In this sense there is enormous opportunity ahead.

Having said this we are in a weak position to take advantage of it. Unless anarchist ideas are dominant it is likely a revolution will be turned down the dead ends of reformism or re-vamped Leninism. In Ireland it could well be republicanism. But we do not have the numbers to assert that dominance. That is why we need to take growth very seriously anarchists cannot afford to remain as tiny propaganda groups we must grow to organisations of thousands and tens of thousands. We must make much firmer links internationally and start a real debate within the movement.

But in doing so we must retain our politics and our methods. One of the strengths WSM has is that it has succeed in obtaining a relevance with a specific audience around the Dublin based activists. Our experience as a group demonstrates that it is possible for an organisation to retain relevance to a section of the class that is involved in struggle. Preserving this while growing is indeed a difficult task.

It is however what we must do. Our new perspectives reflect that of a group which has realised what it takes to make a revolution and that this requires going far beyond the tradition of the left in Ireland. We may well face such an opportunity within a decade and it is likely that we will do so without being completely prepared, particularly in being far weaker on the ground than we need to be.

This means we and every left activists needs to be aware that every step forward, every action we take on a day to day basis now has the potential to make far reaching consequences. The work we put in and the seriousness with which we take it could well determine the success or failure of a revolution that is looming in the near future. It is a huge burden, one that the left has tended to shy away from but it is also the burden that gives the hours and pounds we put into political activity a purpose. We must fasten our sights on that purpose and get down to work. Right now it may seem an insupportable burden but the prize is the greatest that could be wished for, the fulfilment of not only our dreams but also all those who have fought this system over the last century. We have a world to win. I'd recommend Dermots article on Paris '68 we published recently as an introduction to some of the ideas I'm talking about here and also Phil Mailers book, "Portugal: The impossable revolution?" which the bookservice sells.

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