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On “People Power,” Real and Imagined

Kevin Carson

May 19, 2005

In recent months, we’ve seen a lot of official and quasi-official (i.e. press) gushing about “people power” in Georgia, Lebanon, Ukraine, etc. But Jesse Walker has an interesting article at Reason on some examples of “People Power” that the neocons and the mainstream press aren’t so enthusiastic about. Latin America has been the scene of “unarmed insurrections” quite similar to their better-known counterparts in the Old World—but the official reaction has been quite different:

Latin America’s outbreak of people power hasn’t received as much stateside attention as its counterparts in Central Asia and the Middle East. This is presumably for the same reason media accounts of nonviolent Arab movements often ignore Palestinian resistance to Israel’s “security barrier”: The uprisings aren’t aligned with U.S. interests. Official Washington has not been celebrating South America’s turn to the left—three-quarters of the continent’s people now live under left-wing

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Retrieved on 4th September 2021 from mutualist.blogspot.com

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governments—and popular protest is generally regarded as a part of that shift. So it gets left out of the narrative of democratic transformation, and when it does surface, it's treated rather differently than its Asian equivalents. Instead of *Business Week's* Jason Bush describing the Ukrainian and Georgian protestors as “democratic political movements,” we have *Business Week's* Geri Smith complaining that “citizens are taking to the streets, rather than the ballot box, to register their political grievances.” (Actually, they've been taking to both.) She also quotes Moisés Naim of Foreign Policy, who calls the ferment “the politics of race, revenge, and resentment.” The solution, Smith concludes, is for the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank to subsidize “solid government institutions.”

Smith and Naim aren't alone. When *The Christian Science Monitor's* Danna Harman filed a solid report on the Latin American upheaval, published April 29, the voice of caution was Vinay Jawahar of the establishment group Inter-American Dialogue, who told Harman that it was “hard to argue that this sort of instability is good for a country.”

(But the instability in Georgia, Lebanon, Ukraine, etc., was? For sheer comic effect, this matches George Shultz's performance in a committee hearing back in the '80s, when he (the chief diplomat of a country founded by violent revolution) chided a pro-ANC congressman for “advocating the use of violence.” He was either a filthy, disingenuous liar, or stupid—and I don't think he was that stupid. If his ignorance was genuine, though, Karl von Clausewitz could have told him that Reagan, Clinton, and Bush used violence for political purposes every time the U.S. armed forces rained death on

Of course, this difference in approach probably also explains why official Washington and the mainstream press are so cool toward Latin American “people power.” As much as the necons talk about “democracy” and “civil society,” any democracy that involves genuine popular participation (and any form of civil society or “ownership society” that extends beyond the realm of consumption, and encroaches on elite control of production) will be perceived as a threat: more likely to be classified as a form of terrorism than hailed as “democracy.” So focusing primarily on social revolution, rather than politics, may very well be the best way for a movement to inoculate itself against the corrupting effects of U.S. approval.

some hapless Third World country. It’s like these clowns just *assume* their audience is so intellectually crippled by publik skool education as to be incapable of critical thought. It’s almost as if the emperor is publicly revelling in his own nakedness, the better to identify and target anyone capable of seeing it. Orwell’s Insoc Party, in similar fashion, issued the most insanely unbelievable claims possible, as a way of testing the faithful.)

According to Jesse, there has been a fundamental shift since the ‘70s from guerrilla warfare and military coups as the primary means for overthrowing governments, to “nonviolent people power.”

They fall into three general categories: methods of protest and public persuasion (e.g., a march), of organized noncooperation (e.g., a tax strike), and of “nonviolent intervention” (e.g., a land occupation). Contrary to the conventional wisdom, such methods have frequently worked under repressive dictatorships as well as under relatively benign systems; many times they’ve succeeded where guerilla tactics have failed. In 23 of those 31 rebellions, from Bolivia to Bulgaria and from Mongolia to Mali, the uprising contributed directly to regime change.

Perhaps more important, though, are the examples of successful “people power” that didn’t lead to regime change—those that treated the central government either as irrelevant, or largely a hindrance, regardless of its political ideology.

More substantial changes can occur without the government formally changing hands. Of the recent turbulence in Latin America, the most interesting event may be the revolt of the Bolivian Indians. They were the backbone of the protests that

drove President Sanchez de Lozada out of power in 2003, and of the more recent turmoil as well, but that's not what I'm referring to here. I'm referring to the fact that about a fifth of the country's population now lives in villages that run their own affairs, outside of the capital's control. This power was not ceded to them. They simply took it.

That's a rural phenomenon, but it has urban echoes: The state has had a hard time governing El Alto, the overwhelmingly Indian city at the heart of the 2003 rebellion. Similar semi-autonomous zones exist in other South American countries. The Nasa Indians of Colombia, for example, gradually took back their traditional lands from the 1960s to the 1990s, and do what they can today to fend off incursions by government officials, right-wing paramilitaries, and Marxist guerillas.

Then there's a social movement that's rarely regarded as a movement at all: the squatters who occupy unused, usually government-owned land in and around most major third world cities. There they've built vast, self-governing neighborhoods that, despite some serious social problems, are usually more pleasant places to live than the legally sanctioned slums. Some, indeed, have evolved into middle-class neighborhoods.

Hmmm. That's not exactly the kind of "people power" I'd expect the Soros Foundation or the National Endowment for Democracy to get all excited about—at least not in a good way.

The relative weight given to regime change and to the building of social counter-institutions, respectively, might have something to do with the levels of official sympathy in Washington.

to demand, "Why are you using government coercion to stop us from controlling our own schools, community, etc.?" (This can be especially effective in pointing out the hypocrisy of the Republicans' bogus "populism," with their appeals to decentralism and local control). The objective is to keep the state constantly off-balance, and force it to defend its every move in the court of public opinion.

One example I used was the squatters' movement:

So long as the state is bound in legal principle to enforce property rights of landlords, any victory won by squatters will be only short-term and local, without permanent results of any significance. But the other side of the coin is that squatters are indigent and homeless people with very little to lose—after all, some people reportedly commit some minor crime around first frost every year just to get three hots and a cot until spring. If every vacant or abandoned housing unit in a city is occupied by the homeless, they will at least have shelter in the short term until they are forcibly evacuated. And the political constraints against large-scale brutality (if the squatters restrict themselves to non-violent tactics and know how to use the press to advantage) are likely to be insurmountable. In the meantime, the squatters' movement performs a major educative and propaganda service, develops political consciousness among urban residents, draws public attention and sympathy against the predatory character of landlordism, and—most importantly—keeps the state and landlords perpetually on the defensive.

That leaves a lot of room for reformism, particularly when the reforms in question simply make room for the voluntary and autonomous provision of services once monopolized by the state or its privileged partners. It also leaves a lot of room for radicalism, especially when you remember that the institutions already on the ground include full-fledged contractual local “governments.” You’ll see how far society is able to go when you see how far it’s willing to go. As Lenin once said in another context, you should be as radical as reality.

That’s quite close to the kind of two-track coordination between social and political movements I called for in “A ‘Political’ Program for Anarchists”:

Whenever it is strategically appropriate, we should coordinate the political program with the non-political program of alternative institution-building. The social movement can be used to mobilize support for the political agenda and to put pressure on the state to retreat strategically. The political movement can provide political cover for the social movement and make mass repression less feasible.

Even when it is imprudent for the social movement to resort to large-scale illegality, it can act as a “shadow government” to publicly challenge every action taken by the state (much like the shadow system of soviets and workers’ committees before the October Revolution). Even though such “shadow institutions” may be unable to implement their policies in the face of official opposition, that fact in itself is an opportunity

I’ve tended to dismiss –perhaps mistakenly–most of the officially favored examples of “people power” as counterfeit revolutions. Jesse argued recently that some of them (especially the Ukrainian “Orange Revolution”) have had genuinely populist credentials. Much of the grass-roots action to bring down Yanukovich was just as authentic as the left-wing movements in Latin America.

Nevertheless, the outcome in most of the officially approved “revolutions,” once the smoke cleared, was what the Bushies and their fellow travelers call “rule of law”: a professionalized government of neoliberal elites, largely insulated from any form of genuine popular control, that do the bidding of the World Bank and IMF. Four decades ago, in *Like a Conquered Province*, Paul Goodman observed that real democracy had to be qualified as “participatory” to distinguish it from what he called “double talk democracy.” When the Bush administration and the court intellectuals at *U.S. News* get all maudlin about the spread of “democracy,” you can be sure they’re talking about the latter kind.

So what accounts for the difference in outcome?

One explanation might be the very fact of official U.S. approval. William F. Buckley once stated, as “Buckley’s law,” that any institution not avowedly conservative in principle would fall victim to creeping liberalism. We might say, similarly, that any Third World movement not avowedly anti-American and anti-neoliberal will be coopted into the global corporate agenda. When the U.S. government is involved in any way in encouraging or strengthening a popular insurrection, the elements sponsored by Soros or NED money will inevitably win out over the genuinely populist elements.

A bigger reason, though, may be that the Latin American movements treat political action as secondary to direct action aimed at building alternative institutions. The main focus of the action is what the Wobs call “building the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.” As one of Marge

Piercy's characters said in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, "The powerful don't make revolutions." In discussing who actually laid the groundwork for the future decentralist utopia, in the period leading up to the insurrection, Sojourner said:

It's the people who worked out the labor-and-land intensive farming we do. It's all the people who changed how people bought food, raised children, went to school!... Who made new unions, withheld rent, refused to go to wars, wrote and educated and made speeches.

Political action is concerned mainly with running interference: protecting the new, self-built society from state interference, and hindering the state's ability to roll back the social revolution.

Recently Jesse argued in a post to the LeftLibertarian yahoo group that

There are conditions under which I think you can do some good by engaging with electoral politics. Libertarian activism is a matter of defending and extending the zones of free action, and sometimes the act of defense might involve, say, targeting an especially obnoxious politician for defeat.

But that's a secondary activity. The idea that one achieves liberty by electing a bunch of libertarians is ass-backwards. You achieve liberty by building alternative institutions, and by rendering any law against those institutions a dead letter.

He made a similar point, at greater length, on his blog a year or so ago:

In the 1970s, libertarians debated the "gradualist" and "abolitionist" approaches to liberty. Advocates of the second course declared that, if they

could push a magic button, they would eliminate the state (or 99% of it) overnight. Advocates of the first preferred to dismantle the government piecemeal. Neither approach made sense unless you imagined the speaker was somehow put into a position of power, so he could either push that button or pull all those levers in succession. It wasn't clear which was less realistic: the idea that the abolitionist could find his magic button, or the idea that a series of moderate reforms could someday add up to radical change.

I prefer a different approach. Albert Jay Nock distinguished social power, rooted in the voluntary institutions of society, from state power, rooted in coercion. Both coexist in our culture, each one waxing as the other wanes; the libertarian's goal is to maximize the former at the expense of the latter. Washington is not always the best place to do this. The most promising transformations in America over the last few decades have taken place not when state officials voluntarily relinquished some of their authority, but when social institutions either seized new ground or (more often) crept onto it while no one was watching. Examples range from the homeschooling revolution, which achieved tremendous victories while school choice legislation was at best sputtering forward, to the various DIY alternatives eating away at licensed professions from building to broadcasting. Useful libertarian activism is a matter of defending the zones of free action that exist and assisting the people who are trying to push them further.