

Could a Revolution Happen in the US?

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Fall 2014

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Throughout the USA there is discontent. Under the apparently placid political surface there is bubbling dissatisfaction. Yet there has been only limited rebellion, all kept within the limits of Democratic-Republican politics as usual. Certainly, to most people, the possibility of a revolution — an uprising against capitalism and its state — seems distant, if not absurd. I want to argue that a revolution is quite possible (but not inevitable). And I want to clarify what revolution means.

Most political theorists ask why there are occasional rebellions and revolutions. I think it is more fruitful to ask why there are not more rebellions — popular struggles leading up to revolutions. Consider the unfairness of a tiny minority — the “one percent” — ruling over and getting rich from the big majority. Consider the dangers of ecological catastrophe, economic collapse, and nuclear war, not to mention many other issues of oppression and unfairness. Why do people put up with this? Why isn’t there at least a large movement to get rid of this system?

Revolutions happen because people have not been sufficiently flexible to adapt social institutions to changing conditions. Conditions may change gradually (feudalism is being replaced by capitalism; global climate change develops over the decades, etc.). But popular consciousness lags behind the change, and those who benefit from existing conditions (such as the feudal lords or the owners of oil industries) resist gradual changes. At some point there develops extreme tension between the existing consciousness and institutions and the need for change. Then there is either an explosive revolution or social disaster. The question is, why does it take so long, even when the need for change has become drastic, for there to be a major movement for the necessary transformation: for revolution?

Essentially there are three reasons. First, there is widespread ignorance and miseducation deliberately spread by the dominant institutions. From our schools, churches, newspapers, television news, and other forms of mass media, US people learn a heavily distorted view of the world. They have little knowledge of the power of the capitalist minority and the inequality of wealth in the country. They know almost nothing of the record of the US empire in other countries, especially the poorer nations. The white majority knows almost nothing about the oppression of People of Color. Economic theory is a closed book to most US people. US people are mainly in the dark about the dangers of climate change and the possible alternatives. To most, “socialism”, “communism”, “Marxism”, “anarchism” and “radicalism” are words spoken by the devil. The range of debate, between “conservatives” and “liberals”, Republicans and Democrats, is incredibly narrow and uneducating; it is almost unheard of for a significant issue to be seriously debated.

The US is a bourgeois democracy, which is to say, it is not a fascist or totalitarian state which simply suppresses dissent through police measures. Police measures are indeed used, but in an inconsistent manner. It is possible to learn the truth about these matters, if individuals are willing to look. There has always been a minority which is interested in looking at alternate sources of information (the writings of Noam Chomsky, socialist journals, radical blogs, etc.). But mostly this has been a tiny minority. The question is why don’t more people look at the alternate media and books which are available? (This is exactly what people do in periods of radicalization.)

Growing Dissatisfaction

The second reason for popular quiescence is a certain level of comfort, or at least, of being not too uncomfortable. This leads to people not looking for information outside the conventional wisdom. The political psychology of this was expressed by Thomas Jefferson in the US Declaration

of Independence: “...All experience hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed”.

Accepting that existing “evils are sufferable” was most obvious during the prosperity which followed World War II and lasted about 30 years (until the early '70s). Most workers felt that they were doing better than they had been, and better than their parents. They expected that their children would do better yet. From the many better-off workers to the expanded “middle class”, most (white) families had a house and at least one car, with only one parent having to hold a waged job. Under these conditions, the radicalism of the thirties died down.

Other reasons for the post-WWII decline of the Left, included the anticommunist repression which drove the Communists and other leftists out of the unions, the universities, and public and private employment. Another was the ugly reality of the totalitarian Soviet Union, which was falsely labelled as “socialist” and “communist” by both its supporters and opponents. But the prosperity was the main factor, which permitted the repression to succeed with so little resistance.

It is just this factor which has changed. The economy has continued to decline. A “jobless recovery” followed the Great Recession of 2008 and further decline (even a new Great Depression) is likely within the next five to ten years. The ecological/energy crisis is increasingly coming to affect ordinary people in observable ways, as climate change comes closer to total catastrophe. And other issues continue to affect the people (such as attacks on women’s reproductive rights or on African-American voting rights — things which were supposed to have been settled). Meanwhile the Federal government appears to be deadlocked and incompetent, unable to deal with the growing problems.

“Polling by Gallup shows that since June 2009...public confidence in virtually every major institution of American life has fallen, including organized religion, the military, the Supreme Court, public schools, newspapers, Congress, television news, the police, the presidency, the medical system, the criminal justice system and small business....Banks, organized labor, big business and health maintenance organizations...had the confidence of just roughly a quarter of the population or less.” (NY Times 10/22/14; p. A3)

So there is plenty of political unhappiness and social discomfort out there. One way it has shown itself in the growth of the extreme right. The “conservative” (really reactionary) Republicans shade into virtual fascists (those who want to overthrow bourgeois democracy, as expressed in threats to rely on “second amendment remedies” if they don’t get their way through the electoral process).

But there have also been popular struggles that point in a different direction. The movement of Latinos and immigrants (first massively apparent in the 2006 May Day marches) is one. Since the Great Recession, there was the virtual occupation of the Wisconsin government by workers. There was the Occupy Wall Street movement, which spread over the country. There have been national movements for a higher minimum wage and for decent pay for fast food workers. Following events in Ferguson, MO, and elsewhere, there has been a movement against police brutality and racial oppression. 400 thousand people marched in New York City against climate change. I am not covering everything. (I leave out the impact of rebellions in other countries — the Arab Spring, the occupations and general strikes in Europe against austerity, the democracy movement in Hong Kong, etc.)

Yet all of these struggles in the US have (so far) remained limited. They have died down or been defeated or kept marginal. The Wisconsin struggles, for example, did not go on to make a general strike against the governor's anti-labor policies. Instead the union leadership pulled the movement into electoral activities — which were defeated. The Occupy movement made an impact which is still being felt; but its encampments were eventually dispersed by the police. The immigrant struggle has been channeled into Democratic Party politics — and gotten little or nothing for it. The Democratic Party continues to play the role it has since the Populist era, of drawing movements of opposition away from mass direct action into the dead end of electoral politics. This is how it weakened the Civil Rights and antiwar movements of the 60s and it will do the same to present struggles if we let it. The union bureaucrats know no other strategy — and the same goes for other liberal leaderships (of the Black community or of most ecological organizations).

The Power of the Working People

Which brings up the third main reason for a low level of rebellion. This is the sense that nothing can be done, that there is no alternative. The establishment, the ruling class and its institutions, seem all-powerful. What is the use of struggling? You might as well worry about whether there will be an earthquake.

What people do not realize is the vulnerability of the ruling class. It has money and it has armed force (police and military). But we, the working class and the rest of the population, have our own potential power. We have numbers, being the big majority. As workers, we have our hands on the means of production, transportation, and communication — which we can shut down if we decide to, and can start up again in a different way, if we decide to. We have an appeal at least to the ranks of the military, daughters and sons of the working class and middle class.

Everything would change with one big strike in a major city, one general strike which shuts down a city while workers occupy their workplaces and youth really occupy the downtown district (Wall Street or whatever). Our whole politics would change. The ruling class fears this like the fires of hell. Liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, union officialdom, will do all in their power to prevent this from happening, because it would show the people the power that we really have. They would rather push all opposition into the Democrats or even into independent electoral action (third parties), away from mass action. But it could happen, especially if radicals put efforts into advocating and educating working people about such a strategy.

What is a Revolution?

The first factor — the miseducation of the people — includes teaching people to fear and dislike the very idea of a “revolution”. This is peculiar for a country which prides itself on its founding revolution of 1776. The Declaration of Independence asserted, “*Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government....Under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government*”.

But look at this statement by Naomi Klein, in her popular book *This Changes Everything*, about the need to stop the capitalist development of climate catastrophe. She strongly advocates the need for a popular movement to fight climate change and all forms of oppression. But instead of asserting the “Right of the People” to revolution, she writes, “...Let’s take for granted that we want to do these radical things democratically and without a bloodbath, so violent, vanguardist revolutions don’t have much to offer in the way of road maps”. (Klein 2014, p. 452).

Since this is her only reference to “revolution”, it implies that revolutions are undemocratic, vanguardist (elitist) and violent, certain to end in bloodbaths.

A popular revolution of the working class and all those oppressed by capitalism would be the most democratic transformation possible. Revolution is not defined by being “violent” or “bloody”. “Revolution” means “to turn over” (revolve). It means one class overturning another class. Under capitalism, it means the working class and its allies of all the oppressed overturning the capitalist class and its state and other institutions, and replacing them with new institutions. This is intended to develop a classless, nonoppressive, freely cooperative society.

Such an overturn might be fairly nonviolent. This would be so IF the big majority of the population is united behind it and determined to carry it through — IF the workers boldly seize industry and transportation and manage it themselves — IF the ranks of the military (who mainly come from the working class) come over to the side of the majority — and IF the ruling class is demoralized (especially if revolutions have been successful in most other countries). All this is possible, but....iffy.

For example, the October Russian revolution which brought the Soviets to power had minimal bloodshed. It was only later, when foreign imperialists pumped up counterrevolutionary forces into fighting a civil war, that the revolution became bloody (and the worst traits of the Bolsheviks were encouraged). It is likely that the US ruling class will try to resist losing its power and wealth, as violently as “necessary”.

The problem of violence, of a “bloodbath”, depends on the extent of resistance by the capitalist class and on little else. This is the most arrogant, self-conscious, ruling class in the world, used to throwing its weight around as it chases. The best way to limit its violence is to be prepared: to organize the workers and oppressed as solidly and strongly as possible. This too shows the need for mass action and popular resistance.

Conclusion

Will there be a revolution? In time? Before ecological and economic or other catastrophes crash down on society? This is impossible to predict. What is lacking is organization, a layer of self-organized radicals, militants who are prepared to advocate revolution and to link this goal up to the daily struggles of the people. The formation of such self-organization is not a matter of prediction but of commitment.

Citations

Declaration of Independence (1776). http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html

Klein, Naomi (2014). *This Changes Everything; Capitalism vs. the Climate*. NY: Simon & Schuster. NY Times (10/22/14). “A Steady Loss of Confidence.” Pp. A1, A3.

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Retrieved on November 16th, 2014 from <http://anarkismo.net/article/27548>

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