

Socialism or Barbarism; Anarchism or Annihilation

The Relationship Between Crisis and Consciousness

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March 28, 2010

Contents

Is Socialism Inevitable?	3
Can Objective Tendencies be Ignored?	4
Socialism or Barbarism!	5
References	7

At a March conference of the U.S.—Northeastern Federation of Anarchist-Communists (US-NEFAC), we discussed a document some of us had written. It covered the current economic crisis and the likely prospects for the coming period. No one claimed to know for sure what the immediate future would bring—would the Great Recession be over soon or would recovery collapse into a new crisis? When will there be a new working class upsurge? But we expect that the overall economic direction will be downhill, despite short-term ups and downs; that there would be no return to the relative prosperity of the 50s or even the 90s; that there is a likelihood of a second Great Depression, worse than the 30s; that ecological and environmental decay will deepen; and that wars will continue and may even get worse. In response, we expect an eventual new wave of popular radicalization, combining elements of the 30s and the 60s.

This led to a discussion, on and off the conference floor, about the nature of the developing crisis and its relation to a hoped-for workers' revolution, particularly the relation between objective trends and subjective popular struggles. I will continue this discussion here. Since anarchism does not have much of a developed analysis of capitalism and crisis, it will be necessary to mostly use Marxist concepts (although I am not now a Marxist—I call myself a Marxist-informed anarchist). Roughly speaking, there are three ways of conceptualizing the relationship between objective crisis and subjective mass struggle.

Is Socialism Inevitable?

One view is that capitalism works in an automatic way, producing a trend toward eventual catastrophe as well as producing the modern working class. This class will become aware of the danger and will automatically make a revolution and establish socialism. This has been a common interpretation of the lines in Marx and Engels' Communist Manifesto, "What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable" (in Draper, 1998; p. 135; more grammatically: "are alike inevitable").

This implies that history is an automatic mechanism, something which happens to people rather than something which people do. The most the working class can do is to speed up the automatic processes, but not to make them occur in the first place. This was the main interpretation of Marxism among the Social Democratic Parties and among Stalinists.

The Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta complained that his teacher Peter Kropotkin had this orientation: unrealistically optimistic, mechanistic, and fatalist, not unlike the worst of the Marxists. "Since, according to his philosophy, that which occurs, must necessarily occur, so also the communist-anarchism he desired must inevitably triumph as if by a law of nature.... The bourgeois world was destined to crumble; it was already breaking up and revolutionary action only served to hasten the process" (Malatesta, 1984; p. 265).

The inevitablist interpretation can have unfortunate political consequences. It can justify limiting struggle to reformism, since any struggle will (supposedly) inevitably lead to revolution. It can justify a lack of struggle (Malatesta cites various anarchists who retired to private life, confident that the world would reach communist-anarchism without needing them to make any effort). It can lead to the repression and mass murder of the Leninists, since it will come out all right in the end, in socialist freedom, or so they believe they know. It led to Trotsky arguing that the collectivist bureaucracy of Stalin's Soviet Union could not be a new ruling class, because if it were, this would violate the transition from the bourgeoisie being the ruling class to the workers

overthrowing them and becoming the next rulers (Matgamna, 1998). If the bureaucracy were a new ruling class, he claimed, that would discredit the entire revolutionary perspective! Following this logic, orthodox Trotskyism capitulated to the Stalinism it was formed to fight against.

Of course, there is also the sense in which people may psych themselves up, crying, “The revolution will win!” or “The strike will win!” or “The Red Sox will win!” This is not a matter of cold-blooded prediction but a statement of desire, of intention, and of commitment. It says that we are committed to our side’s victory and that we intend to do all that we can to see that it happens—which is pretty limited for sports fans but in the case of a revolution is a pledge of “our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

Can Objective Tendencies be Ignored?

Secondly, in reaction to inevitablism, some have turned in a liberal direction. I am thinking of the criticisms of Marxism made by the influential liberal philosopher John Dewey. In effect, he denied that the social system was governed by determining laws at all. It was dogmatic, he wrote, to claim that the class struggle was necessary to change society in a freer direction; the struggle of the middle class might do as well as that of the working class. Contrary to Marx (and Bakunin), electoral activity might yet bring the state and economy into socialism—peacefully, gradually, and “democratically,” without an overthrow or replacement. In short, revolution is not needed.

Some Marxists and anarchists react against mechanistic inevitablism by also adopting an open-ended analysis, which has similarities to that of liberalism. In effect they reject the idea that capitalism is a system which has laws. (In my opinion, social laws mean patterns of mass behavior which are regularly repeated). Instead they focus on the self-activity of the working class, which interacts with the self-activity of the capitalist class, each responding to the other—and little else. (This view is elaborated by Cleaver, 1979/2000.)

While often insightful, this is one-sided.. For example, how explain the Great Recession? The working class had not become more aggressive recently against the capitalists (quite the contrary) and the capitalists had not wanted the crisis. Indeed, the capitalists generally do not understand their system and the workers lack socialist consciousness (however militant their struggles, very few see the need for socialism). Therefore the two basic classes act more-or-less blindly, as if they were part of an automatic mechanism, which causes society to be an automatic mechanism, in effect. For the workers, this can only change if they become aware of what they are doing and what they might do differently.

This open-ended, solely-subjective, analysis often ends up with liberal/reformist conclusions. The working class may be rejected—either because almost everyone is defined as part of the “proletariat,” even peasants, or because people can (supposedly) deliberately quit being exploited workers, or because they are better seen as a multiclass “multitude”. Revolution becomes unnecessary because people can peacefully and gradually build a new society inside capitalism—without a need to overthrow capital and the state. So Cleaver writes, “As opposed to the traditional Leninist view that building a new society could only occur after revolution-as-overthrow-of-capital [which is also the anti-Leninist Marxist and anarchist view!—WP], these new movements...were undertaking the building of ‘the future’ in the present.... Those who are doing the elaboration...move beyond being ‘workers’” (1979/2000; pp. 17–18). An even worse example is

Hardt & Negri's Empire (2000). I find it depressing that the autonomist Marxist trend should end in this rejection of the working class and revolution.

Socialism or Barbarism!

The third possible view was expressed near the beginning of the Communist Manifesto: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles....a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes" (in Draper, 1998; p. 105–107). Draper explains this as "either a revolution that remakes society or the collapse of the old order to a lower level" (1998; p. 200).

Engels restated this several times, for example, throughout his *Anti-Duhring*. He writes that the modern working class must make the socialist revolution or else face "...sinking to the level of a Chinese coolie," while the bourgeoisie is "a class under whose leadership society is racing to ruin like a locomotive [with a] jammed safety-valve..." (1954; pp. 217–218). For the capitalist class, "...its own productive forces have grown beyond its control, and...are driving the whole of bourgeois society toward ruin, or revolution" (p. 228). When the capitalist system turns most people into proletarians, "...it creates the power which, under penalty of its own destruction, is forced to accomplish this revolution" (p. 388). Socialist revolution is not inevitable. But if it is not made, society faces ruin and destruction, with the working class reduced to the level of the starving, super-exploited, Chinese workers of that time. Therefore the working class and its allies should consciously and deliberately decide to make the revolution (and we, the revolutionary minority, hope that it will).

Where Engels said the alternatives were "ruin or revolution," the great, revolutionary-democratic, Marxist, Rosa Luxemburg, said the alternatives were "socialism or barbarism." What she meant by that is discussed in an intriguing study by Norman Geras (1976). She emphasized the tendency of capitalism toward catastrophe. She wrote that this contradicted the program of the reformist "revisionists" such as Bernstein, who thought that capitalism could peacefully evolve closer and closer to socialism. It also refuted the beliefs of the "orthodox" Marxist centrists, such as Kautsky, who thought they should limit the workers' struggles to reforms without raising the need to educate the workers for the struggle for power.

To Luxemburg, capitalism, in its final epoch, was propping itself up by imperialism, which would lead to ever greater crises and "a period of world wars" (quoted on p. 32). Left to its own tendencies, it would produce barbarism, by which she meant, "...the destruction of all culture, depopulation, desolation, degeneration, a vast cemetery" (quoted on p. 33). Geras makes the strange-sounding statement that, for Luxemburg, "it is not socialism but barbarism that is inevitable" (p. 31). What he means is that if capitalism is left to itself, continuing to operate blindly by its own laws, it will eventually collapse into barbarism. To prevent capitalist collapse and barbarism requires that the proletariat make a conscious decision to overthrow it and create a new society. Geras writes, "The idea of inevitable capitalist collapse and the idea of socialism-or-barbarism...are one and the same idea" (same). Luxemburg wrote, "In relation to capitalism as a whole, that society's objective development merely gives us the preconditions of a higher order of development, but that without our conscious interference, without the political struggle of the working class for a socialist transformation... [socialism will never] come about" (quoted on p. 19).

That is, there is an interaction between objective factors and subjectivity. As a system, capitalism creates the possibility of socialism. This includes a high level of productivity, higher than ever before in the history of humanity; the proletariat, a collective working class, trained in cooperation and joint action by the system itself, living in the centers of capital production, and international in scope. In many ways capitalism pushes the workers to move toward a new, cooperative, world order. It also has mechanisms for holding back the struggle, for dividing the workers into a million distinct groupings. The better-off workers may feel satisfied and conservative. The worse-off workers may become demoralized. But capitalism finally threatens the workers, and all who live under its sway, with catastrophe, mass destruction, and barbarism, and this also pushes the workers to overthrow it, to end it, and to build a better society. This will not happen inevitably. It is a matter of struggle, of consciousness, and of making a collective decision—of breaking with fatalism and mechanism. It requires the efforts of the revolutionary minority to win over the big majority of workers and oppressed.

It may still seem to be rather fatalistic to say that there will inevitably be one of only two outcomes. But this is not as rigid as it may sound. There are, unfortunately, many possible forms of catastrophe in which capitalism may end, and there are many different ways in which a revolution may happen as well as different types of a free society which may come out of one. There are many possible concrete ways in which “socialism or barbarism” may become realized. So history is not as limited as the formula may appear.

But, yes, I am making a claim to a sort of inevitability. I am saying that, as best as we can determine, as much as we can understand the world, this status quo will not last, however stable it appears when we look out the window. Just like all previous social systems, capitalism too will come to an end someday (and sooner than we may think). That is inevitable. But how this will work itself out, and, especially, how conscious and self-active the working people will be—that is something which we cannot know at this time.

(Whether Luxemburg had the best analysis of the mechanisms by which capitalism tends toward catastrophe is another question. I am discussing the politics involved. She focused on the difficulty capitalism has in selling its commodities and which, she thought, required imperialist domination of non-capitalist countries. In my opinion, Luxemburg made some serious analytic errors, which I will not discuss further—but for a neo-Luxemburgist analysis, I highly recommend the insightful work of Loren Goldner, [website]. An understanding of the tendency of capitalism toward catastrophe and the means by which the system holds it off as long as it can, until there is, hopefully, a revolution, is better provided by Henryk Grossman [Kuhn, 2007]. He sees crises as being caused by the long-term tendency of the falling rate of profit and the growth of semi-monopoly firms—I cannot go further into his analysis here. Like Luxemburg, he denied that there will be an inevitable, automatic, change from crisis-ridden capitalism to socialism. His views on capitalist crisis were highly valued by the council communist/libertarian Marxist, Paul Mattick [1934].)

The anarchist Murray Bookchin noted that the hierarchical structures of modern capitalism threaten human survival through nuclear war or ecological catastrophe (he wrote before global warming became so obvious). “No longer are we faced with Marx’s famous choice of socialism or barbarism; we are confronted with the more drastic alternatives of anarchism or annihilation. The problems of necessity and survival have become congruent with the problems of freedom and life” (1986; p.62). In the event of a nuclear war, we would be lucky to have barbarism!

This analysis does not change the basic argument: in a social system which both creates the possibility of a free and productive society (what Bookchin calls “post-scarcity anarchism”) and which has drives which threaten catastrophe, socialist-anarchism is not inevitable. But it is needed (by the most modest of moral standards, such as, it is good for the human species to survive). Therefore the workers and all oppressed people need to become aware of the danger and to decide to make a revolution and build a new society. (Unfortunately, Bookchin did not quite draw this conclusion, since he had come to reject the centrality of the working class and the need for a revolution, rather similarly to Cleaver the Marxist.)

Ruin or revolution! Socialism or barbarism! Anarchism or annihilation! These slogans (of Engels, Luxemburg, and Bookchin) are central to understand the alternative we face. (The libertarian socialist and ex-Trotskyist Cornelius Castoriadis, in the 1950s, called his French grouping “Socialisme ou Barbarie”; Cleaver, 1967/2000.) One of these choices (ruin/barbarism/annihilation) will be the outcome if capitalism is given its head; if the bourgeoisie is allowed to blindly run it into the ground; if the system is permitted to follow its innate tendencies (objective laws) to their bitter end. The other (revolutionary socialist-anarchism) requires that the working class become aware of the danger, conscious of the possible alternative to disaster, and decides to take the choice of freedom, cooperation, radical democracy, ecological balance, and internationalism.

I discuss three possible approaches above (inevitability of revolution, subjectivity, the interrelation of the objective crisis and the subjective choice). Which is the “correct” interpretation of the Marxism of Marx and Engels, I do not know, or much care. Probably they are all based in some aspect of what Marx actually wrote and thought. But whatever Marx and Engels (and Kropotkin) thought, there is no inevitable outcome between socialism and annihilation. The issue will be decided in struggle.

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Considering the economic and social crisis we are facing, what are the relationships between the objective tendency of capitalism toward catastrophe and the subjective consciousness involved in class struggle? Is it “inevitable” that capitalism will crash and produce the socialist-anarchist revolution? Can we ignore or deny objective social laws in favor of focusing on the self-activity of the working class?

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