

Thoughts on Revolution

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Introduction

The following thoughts on anarchism and revolution are in response to a statement by Ron Tabor, ‘Thoughts on the Current Conjuncture’ (posted 02/07/2023). I was associated with him and his co-thinkers for many years, as he played a leading role in several far-left organizations. We met in the International Socialists (forerunner of the I.S.O. and of Solidarity) and associated in the split-off, Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL), followed by the Love and Rage Anarchist Federation, and finally by *The Utopian; A Journal of Anarchism and Libertarian Socialism* (now a virtual journal; many of those still around it regard themselves as the ‘Utopian Tendency’).

In the beginning, Ron saw himself as a revolutionary Marxist. Unlike most revolutionary Marxists of the sixties, he and his tendency interpreted Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky in the most libertarian, radically democratic, and humanistic possible fashion. We focused on Marx’s writings on the Paris Commune, Lenin’s *State and Revolution*, and Trotsky’s *Transitional Program*. By the end of the period, as mass movements died down, Ron and others of the RSL turned toward revolutionary anarchism. (Unusually, I had been an anarchist-pacifist before I became an unorthodox Trotskyist.)

Many radicals became demoralized by the political quiescence which followed the sixties and seventies. In his paper, Ron writes, “Today, the notion of transcending our current society—overthrowing it and replacing it with a more democratic and more just one—appears to have completely dropped out of political discourse. Even socialists and communists no longer talk about, let alone publicly advocate, revolution.”

A great many former leftists turned in a right-ward direction, many became liberals and others became neoconservatives. Former New Leftists came to admire the history of the Communist Party in the thirties and forties, when it was mostly reformist in practice. Others turned from the left altogether out of disgust with its totalitarian history and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Ron also turned toward the right, in his own eccentric way. Considering himself as a revolutionary and an anarchist, he came to reject “socialism” and ‘the left,’ claiming to be opposed to both the left and the right. (How this new general orientation changed his opinions on specific topics will not be covered here.) He disagreed with the classical anarchists, such as Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Malatesta. They had regarded themselves as ‘libertarian socialists’—or ‘anarchist-communists’—as opposed to the ‘state socialists’ or ‘authoritarian socialists.’ They saw themselves as the ‘left of the left.’

Ron came to reject all aspects of Marxism, even the most libertarian or humanistic aspects. (See Tabor 2013; also my review of that work, Price 2013.) While rejecting Marxism’s statist politics, many anarchists had valued parts of Marxism, such as its political economy—Bakunin has been called ‘the first of the anarcho-Marxists.’ (My own anarchism is still influenced by what I have learned from libertarian— ‘ultra-left’—Marxism and unorthodox-dissident Trotskyism. See Price 2022.)

In fact, a great many anarchists came to somewhat similar conclusions as Ron. For example, this is easily seen in the Comments sections of anarchistnews.org. They reject ‘socialism;’ they denounce the left;’ they reject learning anything from Marxism (no matter how unorthodox). They generally are individualist-anarchists, Stirnerites, ‘post-leftists’ and ‘post-anarchists,’ nihilists, anti-civilizationists, and neo-primitivists. They are explicitly anti-working class and against the idea of revolution. Ron does not identify with these trends, but he has much in common with them.

Ron's *Thoughts on the Current Conjecture* covers a wide range of topics, such as free will and the existence of God. I agree with some of what it says, including rejecting a rigid determinism, opposition to the Democratic Party as well as the Republicans, and especially Ron's support for the Ukrainian people's war against Russian state aggression. Rather than go through all these subjects, I will only focus on Ron's important discussion about revolution. In my opinion, it is a final abandonment of working-class revolutionary politics.

What Causes a Revolution?

"Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly, all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government...."

Thomas Jefferson, *The U.S. Declaration of Independence*

As Jefferson implied, revolutions are rare, but revolutions have happened. Sometimes they lost but sometimes they won—such as the U.S. Revolution. Some have expanded human freedom for a time, even if none has (yet) led to a fully "cooperative, egalitarian, and democratic – that is, a truly free, just, and self-managed – society on a global scale; no rich, no poor, no state, just people trying to live together democratically, fairly, and cooperatively," in Ron's words.

What makes a people or a class willing to stop suffering from "the forms to which they are accustomed," in Jefferson's phrase? The central factor is a change in their experience. Objective changes in society (caused ultimately by developments in the productive forces) shake up people, so that what they expect of the world and what they normally believe no longer seems tenable. They become open to new thoughts and experiences, new activities and directions—which interact with the objective changes. Minorities become 'radicalized,' looking for new ways of thinking—on the left or the right or some mishmash of the two. In turn they influence ever broader sections of society.

Ron Tabor has his own interpretation—or re-interpretation—of 'revolution.' Objective changes and new experiences have little to do with it. Yet he starts with a classical description. The good society "can be created only through a revolution, the destruction of the current socio-economic system and the creation of a new, totally different, one.... such a transformation cannot be achieved by working through the existing political structures, a strategy that leaves our current social and economic arrangements intact." So far, so good, from the standpoint of revolutionary anti-authoritarian socialism.

But he rejects the goal of a different kind of society, one that is democratically cooperative, without a market or law of value. "The revolutionary conception I advocate does not mandate specific economic, social, or political institutions.... A community of small business people and other individual property-owners...might be either competitive or cooperative... It all depends on the attitude, the feelings, of the people involved."

Similarly, Ron wants "to include small and medium-sized property owners—entrepreneurs, factory owners, shopkeepers, restaurant owners, farmers, artisans, and artists—in our vision." He is asserting that class-struggle anarchists or Marxists have (mistakenly) excluded non-working class

sectors from their revolutionary strategy. While true of some wooden workerists, it is not true in general. They have generally tried to reach out to non-proletarian people (especially—but not only—peasants/small farmers, white-collar workers, and oppressed people such as African-Americans, immigrants, women, LGBTQ people, and oppressed nations). But they have seen modern wage workers as central agents of a possible revolution—due to the workers’ strategic role in capitalist production and the political economy.

This is what is central to Ron’s current view of ‘revolution.’ While aware that objective factors (poverty, inequality, exploitation, unemployment, insecurity, racism and discrimination, ecological catastrophes, wars, etc.) have effects, he puts the most important influence on moral and conscious factors—“*a spiritual revolution on a global scale.*” He states, “*Universal concern, universal care, sadly, is rare. But it is what we need.... This would require the evolution of the human species to a higher moral and ethical level than it has attained so far.*”

There is nothing new in these views. The basic moral standards raised by the great spiritual teachers of humanity, down through the ages, have been for cooperation, mercy, love, forgiveness, concern for others: Do as you would be done by (the Golden Rule). “What does the Lord require of thee but to do justice and love mercy.” Why haven’t these values—which dominate the ideologies of all societies—led to the social transformation we desire? Apparently moral values are not enough.

Ron asserts, “...The revolution I envision cannot be a violent one, certainly not like the majority of the revolutions that have occurred throughout history...” Yet the issue is not ‘violence’ but force (coercion). Society is polarized—divided by two essential classes. One of which—the minority—exploits the other, squeezing extra labor out of the majority. This is what a revolution (turnover) challenges, where the bottom part of society overturns the upper, taking away its wealth and power and reorganizing the system. Inevitably, the elite does not want its wealth and power to be taken away! No matter how peaceful and democratic the revolution, the rich will regard it as unfair domination. They will resist it as best as they can. They will organize their hangers-on and put up a fight. They must be coerced to give up their rule and riches.

Must a revolution be violent and bloody? Or rather, how much violence and bloodshed must be part of any particular revolution? It depends. Ron refers to several upheavals in Eastern Europe which were mostly nonviolent. Even the Russian Revolution was minimally violent at the beginning (until foreign forces invaded and subsidized counterrevolutionary armies).

An anarchist-socialist U.S. revolution might be fairly nonviolent (I won’t say ‘peaceful’) if the ruling class is demoralized (perhaps similar revolutions have already succeeded in other countries), and if the working class is united and resolute. On the other hand, if the reactionary forces in the U.S. have won a broad base, if the workers and oppressed are divided, and if the ruling class is ready to live up to its bloody history, then the revolution might be desperate and violent. Right now, we are too far from such an event (if a revolution ever does happen) that it is impossible to predict. But an abstract desire for a revolution to be as nonviolent as possible is not much help.

In brief, Ron now has redefined ‘revolution’ to mean a nonviolent classless spiritual awakening. He no longer sees it as provoked by objective material crises in industrial capitalist society. What he would like to see is a spontaneous moral mass movement, generated by the positive aspects of human nature with no particular basis in the contradictions of industrial capitalism.

Having abandoned revolution (in any meaningful sense) and the central role of the working class, as well as socialism and the left, Ron’s perspective is a despairing one. He would like freedom-loving consciousness to continue and even grow but has little confidence that it will.

“There is no guarantee that revolutionary libertarian conceptions will live on past ourselves.” I agree that there is ‘no guarantee.’ Among the people, there is a great deal of authoritarianism, competitiveness, racism, nativism, misogyny, ignorance, and general hatred and self-hatred. What can give hope of a potential revival of “*revolutionary libertarian conceptions?*” What might lead to a ‘spiritual’ awakening? It is the actual experience of struggle, the effort to defend ourselves, our class, our oppressed group, and humanity itself—appearing as the values and ideas of a revolutionary minority but then spreading as people experience standing up for themselves.

“Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men [sic] on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a **revolution**; the revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the **ruling class** cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class **overthrowing** it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.” (Marx & Engels; p. 60)

Will this happen? Will the struggles of the working class and the oppressed around the world free themselves from “*the muck of ages?*” I have no crystal ball. I make no absolute predictions based on ‘science.’ We are living in a time of upheaval and contradiction. There is a frightening rise of the far-right, even if there is an increase in socialists and anarchists on the left. How this plays out will depend on many factors including a commitment to freedom and cooperation.

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