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Eleven Theses on Socialist Revolution

Abstract

It is an open question whether socialism will ever exist on a national or international scale. But if it will, it will come about in ways different from what both Marxists and anarchists have traditionally thought. In this article I present eleven "theses" regarding how it might be possible for the world to achieve an economically democratic civilization in an era of unprecedented crisis. In the process, I try to explain what has gone wrong with attempted socialist revolutions in the past.

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How should we think about “socialist revolution” in the twenty-first century? I put the term in scare-quotes because it can be hard to believe anymore that a socialist, or economically democratic, civilization is even possible—much less inevitable, as Marx and Engels seem to have believed. Far from being on the verge of achieving something like socialism, humanity appears to be on the verge of consuming itself in the dual conflagrations of environmental collapse and, someday perhaps, nuclear war. The collective task of *survival* seems challenging enough; the task of overcoming capitalist exploitation and instituting a politico-economic regime of cooperation, community, and democracy appears completely hopeless, given the overwhelming crises and bleak horizons of the present.

Some leftists might reply that it is precisely only by achieving socialism that civilization can save itself from multidimensional collapse. This belief may be true, but if so, the prospects for a decent future have not improved, because the timeline for abolishing capitalism and the timeline by which we must “solve” global warming and ecological collapse do not remotely correspond. There is no prospect for a national, international, or global transition to socialism within the next several decades, decades that are pivotal for addressing ecological crises. In the United States, for example, it took Republican reactionaries almost a century of organizing starting in the 1940s to achieve the power they have now, and this was in a political economy in which they already had considerable power. It isn’t very likely that socialists, hardly a powerful group, will be able to overthrow capitalism on a shorter timeline. If anything, the international process of “revolution” will take much longer. Perhaps not as long as the transition from feudalism to capitalism, but certainly over a century.

It can seem, then, naïve and utopian even to consider the prospects for socialism when we’re confronted with the more urgent and immediate task of sheer survival. However guilty capitalism is of imposing on humanity its current predicament, the fact is that we can make progress in addressing the environmental crisis even in the framework of capitalism, for example by accelerating the rollout of renewable and nuclear energy, dismantling the fossil fuel industry, regulating pesticides that are contributing to the decimation of insect populations, experimenting with geoengineering, and so on. These goals—and their corollaries, such as defeating centrist and conservative candidates for political office—should be the most urgent priority of left-wing activists for the foreseeable future. If organized human life comes to an end, nothing else matters much.

Nevertheless, we shouldn’t just forget about socialism for now, because it remains a distant goal, a fundamental value, and organizing for it—e.g., “raising the consciousness” of the working class—can improve lives in the short term as well. So it is incumbent on us to think about how we might achieve the distant goal, what strategies promise to be effective, what has gone wrong in the past, and what revisions to Marxist theory are necessary to make sense of past failures. We shouldn’t remain beholden to old slogans and formulations that were the product of very different circumstances than prevail today; we should be willing to rethink revolution from the ground up, so to speak.

I have addressed these matters in a book called *Worker Cooperatives and Revolution*, and more concisely in various articles and blog posts. Here, I'll simply present an abbreviated series of "theses" (eleven of them, in honor of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*) on the subject of revolution that strike me as commonsensical, however heterodox some of them may seem. Their cumulative point is to reorient the Marxian conception of socialist revolution from that of a completely ruptural seizure and overthrow of capitalist states—whether grounded in electoral or insurrectionary measures—followed by a planned and unitary reconstruction of society (the "dictatorship of the proletariat"), to that of a very gradual process of economic and political transformation over many generations, in which the character of the economy changes together with that of the state. The long transition is not peaceful or smooth or blandly "reformist." It is necessarily riven at all points by violent, quasi-insurrectionary clashes between the working class and the ruling class, between international popular movements seeking to carve out a new society and a capitalist elite seeking to prolong the current one. Given the accumulating popular pressure on a global scale, which among other things will succeed in electing ever more socialists to office, the capitalist state will, in spite of itself, participate to some extent in the construction of new economic relations that is the foundation of constructing a new society—even as the state in other respects continues to violently repress dissenting movements.

But the process of building a new economy will not be exclusively statist (despite the statism of mainstream Marxism going back to Marx himself). Transitions between modes of production take place on more than one plane and are not only "top-down." In particular, as civilization descends deeper into crisis and government proves inadequate to the task of maintaining social order, the "solidarity economy," supported by the state, will grow in prominence and functionality. A world of multiform catastrophe will see alternative economic arrangements spring up at all levels, and the strategies of "statist Marxism" will complement, or be complemented by, the "mutual aid" (cooperative, frequently small-scale, semi-interstitial) strategies of anarchism. These two broad traditions of the left, so often at each other's throats, will finally, in effect, come together to build up a new society in the midst of a collapsing *ancien régime*. Crisis will, as always, provide opportunity.

1

Successful socialist revolution, meaning the creation of a society that eliminates differential ownership and control of economic resources and instead permits democratic popular control of the economy, has happened nowhere on a large scale or a "permanent" ("post-capitalist") basis. Whether in Russia, China, Cuba, or elsewhere, the dream of socialism—still less of communism—has never been realized. According to Marxism, indeed, the very fact that these were isolated islands under siege by a capitalist world indicates that they signified something other than socialism, which is, naturally enough, supposed to *follow* capitalism and exist first and foremost in the "advanced" countries. The fact that these "socialist" experiments ultimately succumbed to capitalism is enough to show that, whatever progress they entailed for their respective populations, they were in some sense, in the long term, revolutionary abortions.

2

Marx was right that there is a kind of "logic" to historical development. Notwithstanding the postmodernist and empiricist shibboleths of contemporary historiography, history isn't all contingency, particularity, individual agency, and alternative paths that were tragically not taken

(because of poor leadership or whatever). Rather, institutional contexts determine that some things are possible or probable and others impossible. Revolutionary voluntarism, the elevation of political will above the painfully protracted, largely “unconscious” dialectical processes of resolution of structural contradictions and subsequent appearance of new, unforeseen conditions that are themselves “resolved” through the ordinary actions of millions of people, is a false (and un-Marxist) theory of social change. If the world didn’t go socialist in the twentieth century, it’s because it couldn’t have: structurally, in the heyday of corporate capitalism (monopoly capitalism, state capitalism, imperialism, whatever one calls it), socialism was impossible.

In short, on the broadest of historical scales, the “hidden meaning” of the past—to use a phrase beloved by Marx—is revealed by the present and future, as probabilities with which the past was pregnant become realities.

3

Marx therefore got the timeline of revolution radically wrong. He did not (and could not) foresee the power of nationalism, the welfare state, Keynesian stimulation of demand, the state’s stabilizing management of the crisis-prone economy, and the like. In fact, we might say that, falling victim to the characteristic over-optimism of Enlightenment thinkers, he mistook the birth pangs of industrial capitalism for its death throes. Only in the neoliberal era has the capitalist mode of production even finished its conquest of the world—which the “dialectical” logic of historical materialism suggests is a necessary precondition for socialism—displacing remaining peasantries from the land and privatizing “state-socialist” economies and state-owned resources. Given the distribution of power during and after the 1970s between the working class and the business class, together with the increasing mobility of capital (a function of the advancing productive forces, thus predictable from historical materialism), neoliberal assaults on postwar working-class gains were, in retrospect, entirely predictable.

4

Despite, or because of, its horrifying destructiveness, neoliberalism potentially can play the role of opening up long-term revolutionary possibilities (even as it presents fascist possibilities as well). Its function of exacerbating class polarization, immiserating the working class, eroding social democracy, ripping up the social fabric, degrading the natural environment, destabilizing the global economy, relatively homogenizing conditions between countries, hollowing out the corporatist nation-state and compromising the integrity of the very (anti-revolutionary) idea of “nationality,” facilitating a *global* consciousness through electronic media—a consciousness, in the end, of suffering and oppression—and attenuating the middle class (historically a pretty reliable bastion of conservatism): all this in the aggregate serves to stimulate mass protest on a scale that, eventually, the state will find unmanageable.

Fascist repression, it’s true, is very useful, but fascist regimes can hardly remain in power indefinitely in every country. Even just in the U.S., the governmental structure is too vast and federated, and civil society too thick and resilient, for genuine fascism ever to be fully consolidated everywhere, much less made permanent. Repression alone is not a viable solution for the ruling class.

5

Sooner or later, it will be found necessary to make substantive concessions to the masses (while never abandoning repression). Some writers argue that what these will amount to is a revitalization and expansion of social democracy, such a sustained expansion (under the pressure of popular movements) that eventually society will pass from social democracy straight into socialism. This argument, however, runs contrary to the spirit of Marxism, according to which society does not return to previous social formations after they have departed the stage of history. Fully fledged social democracy was appropriate to a time of industrial unionism and limited mobility of capital; it is hard to imagine that an era of unprecedented crisis and decaying nation-states will see humanity resuscitate, globally, a rather “stable” and nationalistic social form, even expanding it relative to its capacity when unions were incomparably stronger than today. While social democratic policies will surely persist and continue to be legislated, the intensifying dysfunction of the nation-state (a social form that is just as transient as others) will necessitate the granting of different kinds of concessions than centralized and expansive social democratic ones.

6

Here, we have to shift for a moment to considering the Marxist theory of revolution. Then we’ll see the significance of the concessions that states will likely be compelled to grant. There is a glaring flaw in Marx’s conceptualization (expressed, for example, in the famous Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy) according to which “an era of social revolution” begins when the dominant mode of production starts to fetter the use and development of the productive forces. The flaw is simply that the notion of “fettering” is semi-meaningless. Philosophers such as G. A. Cohen have grappled with this concept of fettering, but we don’t have to delve into the niceties of analytic philosophy in order to understand that the capitalist mode of production has always both fettered and developed the productive forces—fettered them in the context, for instance, of devastating depressions, disincentives to invest in public goods, artificial obstacles (like intellectual copyright laws) to the diffusion of knowledge, and, in general, a socially irrational distribution of resources; even as in other respects it still *develops* the productive forces, as with advances in information technology, biotechnology, renewable energy, and so on. In order to be truly meaningful, therefore, this concept of fettering needs revision.

7

The necessary revision is simple: we have to adopt a *relative* notion of fettering. Rather than an absolute conflict, or a contradiction, between productive forces and production relations, there is a conflict between *two sets of production relations, one of which uses productive forces in a more socially rational and “un-fettering” way than the other*. This revision makes the idea of fettering meaningful, even concretely observable. Capitalism, for example, was, in the final analysis, able to triumph over feudalism because it was infinitely better at developing productive forces, such that its agents could accumulate far greater resources (economic, scientific, technological, intellectual, cultural) than the agents of feudalism. The epoch of social revolution, properly speaking, lasted half a millennium, though it was punctuated by dramatic moments of condensed social and political revolution such as the French Revolution.

If the idea of fettering is to apply to a transition between capitalism and socialism, it can be made sense of only through a similar “relative” understanding, according to which a cooperative and democratic mode of production emerges over a prolonged period of time (hopefully not half a millennium) both interstitially and more visibly in the mainstream. As the old anarchic economy succumbs to crisis and stagnation, the emergent “democratic” economy—which does not yet exist today—does a better job of rationally and equitably distributing resources, thereby attracting ever more people to its practices and ideologies. It accumulates greater resources as the old economy continues to demonstrate its appalling injustice and dysfunction.

8

This theoretical framework permits an answer to the old question that has bedeviled so many radicals: why have all attempts at socialist revolution failed? The answer is that they happened in conditions that guaranteed their eventual failure. There was a radical difference between, for example, October 1917 and the French Revolution: in the latter case, capitalist relations and ideologies had already spread over Western Europe and acquired enormous power and legitimacy. The French revolutionaries were beneficiaries of centuries of capitalist evolution—not, indeed, industrial capitalist, but mercantile, agrarian, financial, and petty-bourgeois. This long economic, social, cultural, and political evolution prepared the ground for the victories of 1789–1793. In 1917, on the other hand, there was no socialist economy whatsoever on which to erect a political superstructure (a superstructure that, in turn, would facilitate the further and more unobstructed development of the socialist economy).

Even industrial capitalism was barely implanted in Russia, much less socialism. The meaning of 1917 was merely that a group of opportunistic political adventurers led by two near-geniuses (Lenin and Trotsky) took advantage of a desperate wartime situation and the desperation of the populace—much of which, as a result, supported these “adventurers”—to seize power and almost immediately suppress whatever limited democracy existed. The authoritarian, bureaucratic, and brutal regime that, partly in the context of civil war, resulted—and that ultimately led to Stalinism—was about as far from socialism as one can imagine.

It is one of the ironies of the twentieth century that the Bolsheviks both forgot and illustrate a central Marxian dictum: *never trust the self-interpretations of historical actors*. There is always an objective context and an objective, hidden historical meaning behind the actions of people like Robespierre, Napoleon, or Lenin, a meaning they have no access to because they are caught up in the whirl of events (and, to quote Hegel, the owl of Minerva flies only at dusk, *after* the events). The fact that Lenin and his comrades were convinced they were establishing socialism is of no more than psychological interest. It is unfortunate that many Marxists today continue to credulously believe them.

9

Said differently, the twentieth-century strategy of “Marxist” revolutionaries to seize the state (whether electorally or in an insurrection) and *then* carry out a social revolution—by means of a sweeping, “totalizing” political will—is highly un-Marxist. It is idealistic, voluntaristic, and unrealistic: history moves forward slowly, dialectically, “behind the backs” of historical actors, not straightforwardly or transparently through the all-conquering will of a few leaders or a single political party. The basic problem is that if you try to reconstruct society entirely from the top

down, you have to contend with all the institutional legacies of capitalism. Relations of coercion and domination condition everything you do, and there is no way to break free of them by means of political or bureaucratic will. While the right state policies can be of enormous help in constructing an economically democratic society, in order for it to be genuinely democratic it cannot come into existence *solely through the state*. Marxism itself suggests that the state—largely a function of existing economic relations—cannot be socially creative in such a radical way. Instead, there has to be a ferment of creative energy at the grassroots (as there was during the long transition from feudalism to modern capitalism) that builds and builds over generations, laboriously inventing new kinds of institutions in a process that is both, or alternately, obstructed and facilitated by state policies (depending on whether reactionaries or liberals are in power, or, eventually, leftists).

Nearly all attempts at socialist revolution so far have been directed at a *statist rupture* with the past, and have therefore failed.ⁱ There is no such thing as a genuine “rupture” in history: if you attempt it, you’ll find that you’re merely reproducing the old authoritarianism, the old hierarchies, the old bureaucratic inefficiencies and injustices, though in new forms.ⁱⁱ Rather, the final, culminating stage of the conquest of the state has to take place *after* a long period of economic gestation, so to speak (again, gestation that has been facilitated by incremental changes in state policies, as during the feudalism-to-capitalism transition), a gestation that serves as the material foundation for the final casting off of capitalist residues in the (by then) already-partially-transformed state.

10

This brings us back to the question of how capitalist elites will deal with the popular discontent that is certain to accumulate globally in the coming decades. Since the political economy that produced social democracy is passing from the scene, other sorts of concessions (in addition to repression) will be necessary. In our time of political reaction it is, admittedly, not very easy to imagine what these might be. But we can guess that, as national governments prove increasingly unable to cope with environmental and social crises, they will permit or even encourage the creation of new institutional forms at local, regional, and eventually national levels. Many of these institutions, such as cooperatives of every type (producer, consumer, housing, banking, etc.), will fall under the category of the solidarity economy, which is committed to the kind of mutual aid that has already been rather prominent in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Capitalism’s loss of legitimacy will foster the conditions in which people seek more power in their workplaces, in many cases likely taking them over, aided by changes in state policies (such as the active promotion of a cooperative sector to provide employment in a stagnant economy) due in part to the presence of more socialists in government. Other innovations may include a proliferation of public banks, municipal enterprises (again, in part, to provide jobs at a time of raging structural and cyclical unemployment), and even universal basic income.

The subject of what types of “non-reformist reforms”—i.e., reforms that have the potential to serve as stepping-stones to a new economy—governments will be compelled, on pain of complete social collapse, to grant is much too complex to be explored in a brief article. Two points suffice here. First, the usual Marxist critiques of (worker) cooperatives and other ostensibly apolitical, interstitial “anti-capitalist” institutions—such as “mutual aid”—can be answered simply by countering that these are only *one part* of a very long and multidimensional

project that takes place on explicitly political planes too. It is puzzling that so many radicals seem unaware that the transition to a new civilization is an incredibly complex, drawn-out process: for instance, over many generations, emergent institutions like cooperatives network with each other, support each other, accumulate and share resources in an attempt to become ever freer of the competitive, sociopathic logic of the capitalist economy. At the same time, all this grassroots or semi-grassroots activity contributes to building up a counter-hegemony, an anti-capitalist ethos in much of the population. And the resources that are accumulated through cooperative economic activity can be used to help fund political movements whose goal is to further transform the capitalist state and democratize the economy.

Second, the question naturally arises as to why the ruling class will tolerate, or at times even encourage, all this grassroots and statist “experimentation” with non-capitalist institutions. On one level, the answer is just that the history will unfold rather slowly (as history always does—a lesson too often forgotten by revolutionaries), such that at any given time it won’t appear as if some little policy here or there poses an existential threat to capitalism. It will seem that all that is being done is to try to stabilize society and defuse mass discontent by piecemeal reforms (often merely local or regional). Meanwhile, the severity of the worldwide crises—including, inevitably, economic depression, which destroys colossal amounts of wealth and thins the ranks of the obstinate elite—will weaken some of the resistance of the business class to even the more far-reaching policy changes. By the time it becomes clear that capitalism is really on the ropes, it will be too late: too many changes will already have occurred, across the world. Historical time cannot be rewound. The momentum of the global social revolution will, by that point, be unstoppable, not least because only non-capitalist (anti-privatizing, etc.) policies will have any success at addressing ecological and social disaster.

11

The argument that has been sketched here has a couple of implications and a single major presupposition. The presupposition is that civilization will not destroy itself before the historical logic of this long social revolution has had time to unfold. There is no question that the world is in for an extraordinary era of climatic chaos, but—if for a moment we can indulge in optimism—it might transpire that the ecological changes serve to accelerate the necessary reforms by stimulating protest on an absolutely overwhelming scale. Maybe, then, humanity would save itself in the very nick of time. If not, well, we’ll have a grim answer to the old question “Socialism or barbarism?”

One implication of the argument is that there is a kernel of truth in most ideological tendencies on the left, and radicals should therefore temper their squabbling. The old debates between, say, Marxists and anarchists are seen to be narrow, short-sighted, crabbed, doctrinaire, and premised on a false understanding of the timescales in question. If one expects revolution to happen over a couple of decades, then yes, the old sectarian disputes might acquire urgency and make some sense. But if one chooses to be a Marxist rather than a voluntarist, a realist rather than an idealist, one sees that global revolution will take a century or two, and there is temporal room for statist and non-statist strategies of all kinds.

A second implication, less practically important but of interest anyway, is that Marxists going back to the founder himself have misunderstood the prescriptions of historical materialism.

There may well be something like a “dictatorship of the proletariat” someday, but, since idealism and voluntarism are false, it will (like the earlier “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie”) happen near the end of the revolutionary epoch, not at the beginning. It is impossible to predict what form the state will take by then, or how the final removal of bourgeois remnants from government will further transform it. What can be known is only that in order to politically oust the ruling class, the working class needs not just numbers but *resources*, which hitherto it has lacked on the necessary scale. With the gradual—but, of course, contested and violent—spread of a semi-socialist economy alongside (and interacting with) the decadent capitalist one, workers will be able to accumulate the requisite resources to effectually compete against the shrinking business class, electing left-wing representatives and progressively changing the character of the capitalist state.

Meanwhile, in the streets, people will be figuratively manning the barricades, decade after decade, across a world tortured by the greed of the wealthy and the suffering of the masses. All their struggles, surely, will not be in vain.

ⁱ Other reasons for their failure have been operative as well, notably imperialist interference with the revolutionary process. But the effectiveness of such interference has itself shown the inadequacy of an exclusively “ruptural” strategy—the attempt to create socialism by political fiat in a still-overwhelmingly-capitalist world—because core capitalist nations usually find it easy to squash the political revolution when it hasn’t been preceded by generations of socialist institution-building across the globe, including in the heart of the most advanced countries.

ⁱⁱ To repeat, this is the lesson of Marxism itself. We are embedded in the past even when trying to idealistically leap out of it and leave it behind. Insofar as Marx sometimes wrote as if a proletarian dictatorship could virtually “start anew,” enacting whatever policies it wanted and planning a new society as though from a blueprint, he forgot the gist of his own thought.