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A reform or a revolution?



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A Practical Utopian’s Guide to the Coming Collapse

By David Graeber

What is a revolution? We used to think we knew. Revolutions were seizures of power by popular forces aiming to transform the very nature of the political, social, and economic system in the country in which the revolution took place, usually according to some visionary dream of a just society. Nowadays, we live in an age when, if rebel armies do come sweeping into a city, or mass uprisings overthrow a dictator, it's unlikely to have any such implications; when profound social transformation does occur—as with, say, the rise of feminism—it's likely to take an entirely different form. It's not that revolutionary dreams aren't out there. But contemporary revolutionaries rarely think they can bring them into being by some modern-day equivalent of storming the Bastille.

At moments like this, it generally pays to go back to the history one already knows and ask: Were revolutions ever really what we thought them to be? For me, the person who has asked this most effectively is the great world historian Immanuel Wallerstein. He argues that for the last quarter millennium or so, revolutions have consisted above all of planetwide transformations of political common sense.

Already by the time of the French Revolution, Wallerstein notes, there was a single world market, and increasingly a single world political system as well, dominated by the huge colonial empires. As a result, the storming of the Bastille in Paris could well end up having effects on Denmark, or even Egypt, just as profound as on France itself—in some cases, even more so. Hence he speaks of the “world revolution of 1789,” followed by the “world revolution of 1848,” which saw revolutions break out almost simultaneously in fifty countries, from Wallachia to Brazil. In no case did the revolutionaries succeed in taking power, but afterward, institutions inspired by the French Revolution—notably, universal systems of primary education—were put in place pretty much everywhere. Similarly, the Russian Revolution of 1917 was a world revolution ultimately responsible for the New Deal and European welfare states as much as for Soviet communism. The last in the series was the world revolution of 1968—which, much like 1848, broke out almost everywhere, from China to Mexico, seized power nowhere, but nonetheless changed everything. This was a revolution against state bureaucracies, and for the inseparability of personal and political liberation, whose most lasting legacy will likely be the birth of modern feminism.

Revolutions are thus planetary phenomena. But there is more. What they really do is transform basic assumptions about what politics is ulti-

dominant ideology at its very strongest points. The morality of debt and the morality of work are the most powerful ideological weapons in the hands of those running the current system. That's why they cling to them even as they are effectively destroying everything else. It's also why debt cancellation would make the perfect revolutionary demand.

All this might still seem very distant. At the moment, the planet might seem poised more for a series of unprecedented catastrophes than for the kind of broad moral and political transformation that would open the way to such a world. But if we are going to have any chance of heading off those catastrophes, we're going to have to change our accustomed ways of thinking. And as the events of 2011 reveal, the age of revolutions is by no means over. The human imagination stubbornly refuses to die. And the moment any significant number of people simultaneously shake off the shackles that have been placed on that collective imagination, even our most deeply inculcated assumptions about what is and is not politically possible have been known to crumble overnight.

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What would happen if we stopped acting as if the primordial form of work is laboring at a production line, or wheat field, or iron foundry, or even in an office cubicle, and instead started from a mother, a teacher, or a caregiver? We might be forced to conclude that the real business of human life is not contributing toward something called “the economy” (a concept that didn’t even exist three hundred years ago), but the fact that we are all, and have always been, projects of mutual creation.

At the moment, probably the most pressing need is simply to slow down the engines of productivity. This might seem a strange thing to say—our knee-jerk reaction to every crisis is to assume the solution is for everyone to work even more, though of course, this kind of reaction is really precisely the problem—but if you consider the overall state of the world, the conclusion becomes obvious. We seem to be facing two insoluble problems. On the one hand, we have witnessed an endless series of global debt crises, which have grown only more and more severe since the seventies, to the point where the overall burden of debt—sovereign, municipal, corporate, personal—is obviously unsustainable. On the other, we have an ecological crisis, a galloping process of climate change that is threatening to throw the entire planet into drought, floods, chaos, starvation, and war. The two might seem unrelated. But ultimately they are the same. What is debt, after all, but the promise of future productivity? Saying that global debt levels keep rising is simply another way of saying that, as a collectivity, human beings are promising each other to produce an even greater volume of goods and services in the future than they are creating now. But even current levels are clearly unsustainable. They are precisely what’s destroying the planet, at an ever-increasing pace.

Even those running the system are reluctantly beginning to conclude that some kind of mass debt cancellation—some kind of jubilee—is inevitable. The real political struggle is going to be over the form that it takes. Well, isn’t the obvious thing to address both problems simultaneously? Why not a planetary debt cancellation, as broad as practically possible, followed by a mass reduction in working hours: a four-hour day, perhaps, or a guaranteed five-month vacation? This might not only save the planet but also (since it’s not like everyone would just be sitting around in their newfound hours of freedom) begin to change our basic conceptions of what value-creating labor might actually be.

Occupy was surely right not to make demands, but if I were to have to formulate one, that would be it. After all, this would be an attack on the



mately about. In the wake of a revolution, ideas that had been considered veritably lunatic fringe quickly become the accepted currency of debate. Before the French Revolution, the ideas that change is good, that government policy is the proper way to manage it, and that governments derive their authority from an entity called “the people” were considered the sorts of things one might hear from crackpots and demagogues, or at best a handful of freethinking intellectuals who spend their time debating in cafés. A generation later, even the stuffiest magistrates, priests, and headmasters had to at least pay lip service to these ideas. Before long, we had reached the situation we are in today: that it’s necessary to lay out the terms for anyone to even notice they are there. They’ve become common sense, the very grounds of political discussion.

Until 1968, most world revolutions really just introduced practical refinements: an expanded franchise, universal primary education, the welfare state. The world revolution of 1968, in contrast—whether it took the form it did in China, of a revolt by students and young cadres supporting Mao’s call for a Cultural Revolution; or in Berkeley and New York, where it marked an alliance of students, dropouts, and cultural rebels; or even in Paris, where it was an alliance of students and workers—was a rebellion against bureaucracy, conformity, or anything that fettered the human imagination, a project for the revolutionizing of not just political or economic life, but every aspect of human existence. As a result, in most cases, the rebels didn’t even try to take over the apparatus of state; they saw that apparatus as itself the problem.

It's fashionable nowadays to view the social movements of the late sixties as an embarrassing failure. A case can be made for that view. It's certainly true that in the political sphere, the immediate beneficiary of any widespread change in political common sense—a prioritizing of ideals of individual liberty, imagination, and desire; a hatred of bureaucracy; and suspicions about the role of government—was the political Right. Above all, the movements of the sixties allowed for the mass revival of free market doctrines that had largely been abandoned since the nineteenth century. It's no coincidence that the same generation who, as teenagers, made the Cultural Revolution in China was the one who, as forty-year-olds, presided over the introduction of capitalism. Since the eighties, “freedom” has come to mean “the market,” and “the market” has come to be seen as identical with capitalism—even, ironically, in places like China, which had known sophisticated markets for thousands of years, but rarely anything that could be described as capitalism.

The ironies are endless. While the new free market ideology has framed itself above all as a rejection of bureaucracy, it has, in fact, been responsible for the first administrative system that has operated on a planetary scale, with its endless layering of public and private bureaucracies: the IMF, World Bank, WTO, trade organizations, financial institutions, transnational corporations, NGOs. This is precisely the system that has imposed free market orthodoxy, and opened the world to financial pillage, under the watchful aegis of American arms. It only made sense that the first attempt to recreate a global revolutionary movement, the Global Justice Movement that peaked between 1998 and 2003, was effectively a rebellion against the rule of that very planetary bureaucracy.

Future Stop

In retrospect, though, I think that later historians will conclude that the legacy of the sixties revolution was deeper than we now imagine, and that the triumph of capitalist markets and their various planetary administrators and enforcers—which seemed so epochal and permanent in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991—was, in fact, far shallower.

I'll take an obvious example. One often hears that antiwar protests in the late sixties and early seventies were ultimately failures, since they did not appreciably speed up the U.S. withdrawal from Indochina. But afterward, those controlling U.S. foreign policy were so anxious about being met with similar popular unrest—and even more, with unrest within

the problems that will arise when we start trying to build a free society. What now seem likely to be the thorniest problems might not be problems at all; others that never even occurred to us might prove devilishly difficult. There are innumerable X-factors.

The most obvious is technology. This is the reason it's so absurd to imagine activists in Renaissance Italy coming up with a model for a stock exchange and factories—what happened was based on all sorts of technologies that they couldn't have anticipated, but which in part only emerged because society began to move in the direction that it did. This might explain, for instance, why so many of the more compelling visions of an anarchist society have been produced by science fiction writers (Ursula K. Le Guin, Starhawk, Kim Stanley Robinson). In fiction, you are at least admitting the technological aspect is guesswork.

Myself, I am less interested in deciding what sort of economic system we should have in a free society than in creating the means by which people can make such decisions for themselves. What might a revolution in common sense actually look like? I don't know, but I can think of any number of pieces of conventional wisdom that surely need challenging if we are to create any sort of viable free society. I've already explored one—the nature of money and debt—in some detail in a recent book. I even suggested a debt jubilee, a general cancellation, in part just to bring home that money is really just a human product, a set of promises, that by its nature can always be renegotiated.

Labor, similarly, should be renegotiated. Submitting oneself to labor discipline—supervision, control, even the self-control of the ambitious self-employed—does not make one a better person. In most really important ways, it probably makes one worse. To undergo it is a misfortune that at best is sometimes necessary. Yet it's only when we reject the idea that such labor is virtuous in itself that we can start to ask what is virtuous about labor. To which the answer is obvious. Labor is virtuous if it helps others. A renegotiated definition of productivity should make it easier to reimagine the very nature of what work is, since, among other things, it will mean that technological development will be redirected less toward creating ever more consumer products and ever more disciplined labor, and more toward eliminating those forms of labor entirely.

What would remain is the kind of work only human beings will ever be able to do: those forms of caring and helping labor that are at the very center of the crisis that brought about Occupy Wall Street to begin with.

It does often seem that, whenever there is a choice between one option that makes capitalism seem the only possible economic system, and another that would actually make capitalism a more viable economic system, neoliberalism means always choosing the former. The combined result is a relentless campaign against the human imagination. Or, to be more precise: imagination, desire, individual creativity, all those things that were to be liberated in the last great world revolution, were to be contained strictly in the domain of consumerism, or perhaps in the virtual realities of the Internet. In all other realms they were to be strictly banished. We are talking about the murdering of dreams, the imposition of an apparatus of hopelessness, designed to squelch any sense of an alternative future. Yet as a result of putting virtually all their efforts in one political basket, we are left in the bizarre situation of watching the capitalist system crumbling before our very eyes, at just the moment everyone had finally concluded no other system would be possible.

Work It Out, Slow It Down

Normally, when you challenge the conventional wisdom—that the current economic and political system is the only possible one—the first reaction you are likely to get is a demand for a detailed architectural blueprint of how an alternative system would work, down to the nature of its financial instruments, energy supplies, and policies of sewer maintenance. Next, you are likely to be asked for a detailed program of how this system will be brought into existence. Historically, this is ridiculous. When has social change ever happened according to someone's blueprint? It's not as if a small circle of visionaries in Renaissance Florence conceived of something they called "capitalism," figured out the details of how the stock exchange and factories would someday work, and then put in place a program to bring their visions into reality. In fact, the idea is so absurd we might well ask ourselves how it ever occurred to us to imagine this is how change happens to begin.

This is not to say there's anything wrong with utopian visions. Or even blueprints. They just need to be kept in their place. The theorist Michael Albert has worked out a detailed plan for how a modern economy could run without money on a democratic, participatory basis. I think this is an important achievement—not because I think that exact model could ever be instituted, in exactly the form in which he describes it, but because it makes it impossible to say that such a thing is inconceivable. Still, such models can be only thought experiments. We cannot really conceive of

the military itself, which was genuinely falling apart by the early seventies—that they refused to commit U.S. forces to any major ground conflict for almost thirty years. It took 9/11, an attack that led to thousands of civilian deaths on U.S. soil, to fully overcome the notorious "Vietnam syndrome"—and even then, the war planners made an almost obsessive effort to ensure the wars were effectively protest-proof. Propaganda was incessant, the media was brought on board, experts provided exact calculations on body bag counts (how many U.S. casualties it would take to stir mass opposition), and the rules of engagement were carefully written to keep the count below that.

The problem was that since those rules of engagement ensured that thousands of women, children, and old people would end up "collateral damage" in order to minimize deaths and injuries to U.S. soldiers, this meant that in Iraq and Afghanistan, intense hatred for the occupying forces would pretty much guarantee that the United States couldn't obtain its military objectives. And remarkably, the war planners seemed to be aware of this. It didn't matter. They considered it far more important to prevent effective opposition at home than to actually win the war. It's as if American forces in Iraq were ultimately defeated by the ghost of Abbie Hoffman.

Clearly, an antiwar movement in the sixties that is still tying the hands of U.S. military planners in 2012 can hardly be considered a failure. But it raises an intriguing question: What happens when the creation of that sense of failure, of the complete ineffectiveness of political action against the system, becomes the chief objective of those in power?

The thought first occurred to me when participating in the IMF actions in Washington, D.C., in 2002. Coming on the heels of 9/11, we were relatively few and ineffective, the number of police overwhelming. There was no sense that we could succeed in shutting down the meetings. Most of us left feeling vaguely depressed. It was only a few days later, when I talked to someone who had friends attending the meetings, that I learned we had in fact shut them down: the police had introduced such stringent security measures, canceling half the events, that most of the actual meetings had been carried out online. In other words, the government had decided it was more important for protesters to walk away feeling like failures than for the IMF meetings to take place. If you think about it, they afforded protesters extraordinary importance.

Is it possible that this preemptive attitude toward social movements,



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The police in Seattle using tear gas to try to disperse protests against one aspect or another of free trade sought by the World Trade Organization.

the designing of wars and trade summits in such a way that preventing effective opposition is considered more of a priority than the success of the war or summit itself, really reflects a more general principle? What if those currently running the system, most of whom witnessed the unrest of the sixties firsthand as impressionable youngsters, are—consciously or unconsciously (and I suspect it's more conscious than not)—obsessed by the prospect of revolutionary social movements once again challenging prevailing common sense?

It would explain a lot. In most of the world, the last thirty years has come to be known as the age of neoliberalism—one dominated by a revival of the long-since-abandoned nineteenth-century creed that held that free markets and human freedom in general were ultimately the same thing. Neoliberalism has always been wracked by a central paradox. It declares that economic imperatives are to take priority over all others. Politics itself is just a matter of creating the conditions for growing the economy by allowing the magic of the marketplace to do its work. All other hopes and dreams—of equality, of security—are to be sacrificed for the primary goal of economic productivity. But global economic performance over the last thirty years has been decidedly mediocre. With one or two spectacular exceptions (notably China, which significantly ignored most neoliberal prescriptions), growth rates have been far below what they were in the days of the old-fashioned, state-directed, welfare-state-oriented capitalism of the fifties, sixties, and even seventies. By its

own standards, then, the project was already a colossal failure even before the 2008 collapse.

If, on the other hand, we stop taking world leaders at their word and instead think of neoliberalism as a political project, it suddenly looks spectacularly effective. The politicians, CEOs, trade bureaucrats, and so forth who regularly meet at summits like Davos or the G20 may have done a miserable job in creating a world capitalist economy that meets the needs of a majority of the world's inhabitants (let alone produces hope, happiness, security, or meaning), but they have succeeded magnificently in convincing the world that capitalism—and not just capitalism, but exactly the financialized, semifeudal capitalism we happen to have right now—is the only viable economic system. If you think about it, this is a remarkable accomplishment.

How did they pull it off? The preemptive attitude toward social movements is clearly a part of it; under no conditions can alternatives, or anyone proposing alternatives, be seen to experience success. This helps explain the almost unimaginable investment in “security systems” of one sort or another: the fact that the United States, which lacks any major rival, spends more on its military and intelligence than it did during the Cold War, along with the almost dazzling accumulation of private security agencies, intelligence agencies, militarized police, guards, and mercenaries. Then there are the propaganda organs, including a massive media industry that did not even exist before the sixties, celebrating police. Mostly these systems do not so much attack dissidents directly as contribute to a pervasive climate of fear, jingoistic conformity, life insecurity, and simple despair that makes any thought of changing the world seem an idle fantasy. Yet these security systems are also extremely expensive. Some economists estimate that a quarter of the American population is now engaged in “guard labor” of one sort or another—defending property, supervising work, or otherwise keeping their fellow Americans in line. Economically, most of this disciplinary apparatus is pure deadweight.

In fact, most of the economic innovations of the last thirty years make more sense politically than economically. Eliminating guaranteed life employment for precarious contracts doesn't really create a more effective workforce, but it is extraordinarily effective in destroying unions and otherwise depoliticizing labor. The same can be said of endlessly increasing working hours. No one has much time for political activity if they're working sixty-hour weeks.