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The End of History?

# What Is A Revolution?

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive - The Marxist Case for Revolution Today -

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## **Description:**

Revolutions are historical facts of life. Almost all major states in today's world are born from revolutions. Whether one likes it or not, our century has seen something like three dozen revolutions-some victorious, others defeated-and there is no sign that we have come to the end of the revolutionary experience.

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Revolutions have been, and will remain, facts of life because of the structural nature of prevailing relations of production and relations of political power. Precisely because such relations are structural, because they do not just "fade away" - as well as because ruling classes resist the gradual elimination of these relations to the very end-revolutions emerge as the means whereby the overthrow of these relations is realized.

From the nature of revolutions as a sudden, radical overthrow of prevailing social and (or) political structures-leaps in the historical process-one should not draw the conclusion that an impenetrable Chinese wall separates evolution (or reforms) from revolution. Quantitative gradual social changes of course do occur in history, as do qualitative revolutionary ones. Very often the former prepare the latter especially in epochs of decay of a given mode of production. Prevailing economic and political power relations can be eroded, undermined, increasingly challenged or can even be slowly disintegrated, by new relations of production and the political strength of revolutionary classes (or major class fractions) rising in their midst. This is what generally characterizes periods of pre-revolutionary crises. But erosion and decay of a given social and/or political order remains basically different from its overthrow. Evolution is not identical with revolution. One transforms dialectics into sophism when, from the fact that there is no rigid absolute distinction between evolution and revolution, one draws the conclusion that there is no basic difference between them at all.

The sudden overthrow of ruling structures is, however, only one key characteristic of that social phenomenon. The other one is their overthrow through huge popular mobilization, through the sudden massive active intervention of large masses of ordinary people in political life and political struggle. [\[1\]](#)

One of the great mysteries of class society, based upon exploitation and oppression of the mass of direct producers by relatively small minorities, is why that mass in "normal" times by and large tolerates these conditions, be it with all kinds of periodic but limited reactions. Historical materialism tries, not without success, to explain that mystery. The explanation is many-dimensional, drawing upon a combination of economic compulsion, ideological manipulation,

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cultural socialization, political-juridical repression (including occasionally violence), psychological processes (interiorization, identification), etc.

Generally, as one revolutionary newspaper wrote at the beginning of the French revolution of 1789, oppressed people feel weak before their oppressors in spite of their numerical superiority, because they are on their knees. [2] A revolution can occur precisely when that feeling of weakness and helplessness is overcome, when the mass of the people suddenly thinks "We don't take it any longer," and acts accordingly. In his interesting book, *The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*, Barrington Moore has tried to prove that suffering and consciousness of injustice are not sufficient to induce large-scale revolts (revolutions) in broader masses. In his opinion, a decisive role is played by the conviction that suffering injustice is neither inevitable nor a "lesser evil," i.e. that a better social set-up could be realized. [3] A concomitant brake upon direct challenges to a given social and/or political order, however, is the locally or regionally fragmented nature of revolts pure and simple. Revolts generally become revolutions when they are unified nation-wide.

Such challenges can be explained, among other things, by that basic truth about class societies formulated by Abraham Lincoln, empirically confirmed throughout history, and which is at least one reason for historical optimism (belief in the possibility of human progress) when all is said and done: "You can fool all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time. But you can't fool all of the people all of the time."

When the majority of the people refuse to be fooled and intimidated any longer; when they refuse to stay on their knees; when they recognize the fundamental weakness of their oppressors, they can become transformed overnight from seemingly meek, subdued and helpless sheep into mighty lions. They strike, congregate, organize and especially demonstrate in the streets in increasing numbers, even in the face of massive, gruesome, bloody repression by the rulers, who still have a powerful armed apparatus at their disposal. They often show unheard of forms of heroism, self-sacrifice, obstinate endurance. [4] This may end in their getting the better of the repressive apparatus which starts to disintegrate. The first victory of every revolution is precisely such a disintegration. Its final victory calls for the substitution of the armed power of the revolutionary class (or of a major class fraction) to that of the former rulers. [5]

Such a descriptive definition of revolutions has to be integrated into an analytical-casual one. Social revolutions occur when prevailing relations of production cannot contain any more the development of the productive forces, when they increasingly act as fetters upon them, when they cause a cancerous growth of destructiveness accompanying that development. Political revolutions occur when prevailing relations of political power (forms of state power) have likewise become fetters upon a further development of the productive forces within the framework of the prevailing relations of production, a development which is however still historically possible. That is why they generally consolidate a given social order, instead of undermining it.

This materialist explanation of revolutions offered by Marxism seems indispensable for answering the question: "why, and why just at the moment?" Revolutions have occurred in all types of class societies but not in a uniform way. It appears clearly illogical to attribute them either to permanently operating psychological factors (humanity's allegedly inborn aggression, "destructiveness," "envy," "greed" or "stupidity") or to accidental quirks of the political power structure: particularly inept, stupid, blind rulers, meeting increasingly self-confident and active opponents. According to the particular school of history concerned, one can see that blind ineptitude either in the excessive recourse to repression, or in the excessive amplitude of suddenly introduced reforms, or in a peculiar explosive combination of both. [6]

There are of course kernels of partial truth in such psychological and political analyses. But they cannot explain in a satisfying way the regular and discontinuous occurrence of revolutions, their cyclical nature so to speak. Why do "inept" rulers at regular intervals succeed "adequate" ones, so many times in so many countries? This can surely not

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be caused by some mysterious genetical mutation cycle. The big advantage of the materialist interpretation of history is to explain that occurrence by deeper socio-economic causes. It is not the ineptness of the rulers which produces the pre-revolutionary crisis. It is the paralysis engendered by an underlying social-structural crisis which makes rulers increasingly inept. In that sense Trotsky was absolutely right when he stressed that "revolutions are nothing but the final blow and coup de grâce given to a paralytic."

Lenin summarized the underlying analysis in a classical way by stating that revolutions occur when those below do not accept any longer as before. The inability of a ruling class or major fractions to continue to rule has basically objective causes. These reflect themselves in increasingly paralyzing internal divisions among the rulers, especially around the question about how to get out of the mess visible to the naked eye. It intertwines with growing self-doubt, a loss of faith in its own future, an irrational search for peculiar culprits ("conspiracy theories") substituting for a realistic objective analysis of social contradictions. It is this combination which precisely produces political ineptitude and counterproductive actions and reactions, if not sheer passivity. The basic cause always remains the rotting away of the system, not the peculiar psychology of a group of rulers.

One has obviously to distinguish the basic historical causes of revolutions from the factors (events) triggering them off. The first ones are structural, the second ones conjunctural. [7] But it is important to emphasize that even as regards the structural causes, the Marxist explication of revolutions is by no means monocausally "economistic." The conflict between the productive forces and the prevailing relations of production and/or political power relations isn't all purely economic. It is basically socio-economic. It involves all main spheres of social relations. It even eventually finds its concentrated expression in the political and not in the economic sphere. The refusal of soldiers to shoot at demonstrators is a political-moral and not an economic act. It is only by digging farther below the surface of that refusal that one discovers its material roots. These roots don't transform the political-moral decision into a pure "appearance," or a manifestation of mere shadow boxing. It has a clear reality of its own. But that substantial reality in its turn doesn't make the digging for the deeper material roots irrelevant, an exercise in "dogmatism" or an "abstract" analysis of only secondary interest. [8]

In any case, the inability of the rulers to continue to rule is not only a socio-political fact, with its inevitable concomitant of an ideological moral-crisis (a crisis of the prevailing "social values system"). It has also a precise technical-material aspect. To rule also means to control a material network of communications and a centralized repressive apparatus. When that network breaks down, the rule collapses in the immediate sense of the word. [9] We must never, therefore, underestimate the technical aspect of successful revolutions. But the Marxist theory of revolution also supersedes a peculiar variant of the conspiracy theory of history, which tends to substitute for an explanation of victorious revolutions an exclusive reference to the technical mechanism of successful insurrections or coups d'état. [10] Instead, it is the material interests of key social forces and their self-perception which provide the basic explanation of turning points of history.

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[1] Precisely because the Marxist conception of revolution encompasses the necessary dimension of mass action, the concept of "revolution from above" is not strictly accurate, although it was used by Engels and has, of course, a well circumscribed significance. Joseph II's reforms in Austria; Tsar Alexander II's abolition of serfdom; Bismarck's unification of Germany; the Meiji "revolution" in Japan, were historical attempts to pre-empt revolutions from below through radical reforms from above. To what extent they were successful or failed in that historical purpose must be analyzed in each specific case. The same applied mutatis mutandis to Gorbachev's reform course in the Soviet Union today.

[2] This was the epigram of the weekly *Révolutions de Paris*, which started to appear from the end of August 1789 in Paris.

[3] See Barrington Moore Jr., *The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*, M.E. Sharpe, White Plains, N.Y. 1978.

[4] This was the case during the days preceding the downfall of the Shah in the streets of Teheran, a spectacle largely forgotten because of the

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subsequent developments in that country.

[5] This does not automatically flow from the disintegration and disarmament of the former army. The ruling class can make an attempt to substitute a new bourgeois army to the old one, as it did in Cuba after the downfall of Batista and in Nicaragua after the fall of Somoza, but without success.

[6] This is the currently prevailing explanation of the reasons for the Shah's downfall: the combination of the "white revolution" destabilizing traditional Iranian society and the savagery of SAVAK.

[7] In Russia, the cause of the February-March 1917 revolution was the rottenness of tsarism and the tremendous parasitical weight of the peasants' exploitation upon the overall economic development of the country. The triggering factors of that revolution were hunger riots of the Petrograd women workers which the Cossacks refused to repress. This expressed the emergence of a de facto alliance between the working class and the peasantry, contrary to what had occurred in the repression of the 1905 revolution. There is, however, also a deeper dialectical mediation between structure and conjuncture. The specific social-political order in Tsarist Russia determined both its participation in the first world war, and its increasing incapacity to cope with the material and political prerequisites of successful warfare. This incapacity in turn deepened the social crisis in a dramatic way-leading to chronic food shortages, to hunger riots and hence to the decisive days of outbreak of the February-March 1917 revolution. A similarly multi-layered analysis is needed to understand contemporary revolutionary moments-including unsuccessful ones, such as May 1968 in France. What went on in France during the climax of the mass upsurge and the general strike deserves to be seen as a revolution, although it was defeated. And the triggering factor of the student revolt in Paris must itself be seen in the context of a deeper structural crisis of social and political relations. Useful here is the remarkable study by the Soviet sociologist, Alex D. Khlopin, *New Social Movements in the West: Their causes and prospects of developments*, which complements Western Marxist analyses.

[8] In Russia, the material interests of the Cossacks as sons of peasants, the connections of these interests to political awareness on the one hand, and to the explosive crisis of the relations of production in the countryside on the other hand, all converge to explain the Cossacks' peculiar shift in behavior, at a given moment, in a given place.

[9] It is, of course, possible that this breakdown is only temporary and only lasts some weeks or months. But this doesn't make the collapse less real. In Germany-not only, but of course especially in Berlin-this is what occurred in November-December 1918. In France, this is what occurred at the climax of May 1968. Indeed, it was recently confirmed that, at that moment, General de Gaulle couldn't phone General Massu, the commander of the French army in Germany: he had lost control of the whole telecommunication system in Paris as a result of an effective general strike. An anonymous woman telephone operator whom he finally succeeded in speaking to personally, refused to obey his order. The decision of the strike committee prevailed. These are the unknown heroines and heroes of revolution. This is the stuff proletarian revolutions are made of.

[10] See Edward Luttwack, *Technique of the Coup D'État* (1968); cf. interview with *Stampa-Sera*, August 8, 1988.