

Revolution: Is 1848 Repeating Itself in the Arab World?

PART I: The Dynamics of Global Capitalism

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Is history repeating itself? Have the events of 1848 in Europe repeated themselves in the Arab World? Will 2011 see the same outcomes as 1848? Only the Arab people can decide. Their fate is in their hands, but they should learn from the mistakes of 1848 and seriously address the role of the capitalist class.

PART I

The European Spring of 1848 and the Arab Spring of 2011

In 1848, revolutionary fervour broke across continental Europe. The waves of revolution were set in motion in France. It did not take long before the rest of Europe was hit with a tsunami of popular uprisings and revolts. Like a domino effect, country after country would be hit by revolt. Denmark, the German States, the Italian States, Belgium, Wallachia, and the Habsburg's Austrian Empire would all be shaken by popular revolt. The bases of the European revolts were the same as those in the modern-day Arab World.

Economic disparity, abuse of workers rights, and a lack of political equality were all causes for the wave of revolutions in 1848 Europe. Industrialization and economic and technological leaps were causing major socio-economic changes in European societies before and up to 1848. While in a very different historical context, this has also been occurring in today's Arab World.

In 19th Century Europe, fundamental economic changes, characterized by the consolidation of wealth, caused massive unemployment as well as the outbreak of famines.

This has also occurred in recent years in the Arab World, largely as a result of the brunt of neo-liberal reforms and rising food prices. Anger over lack of employment, lack of opportunities, corrupt government practices, and rising bread and food prices have actually been igniting riots and protests in the Arab World, specifically those states around the Mediterranean Sea, for several years before 2011. These past riots and protests were preludes to the highly tense situations in Egypt, Tunisia, and the Arab World.



The French Revolution of 1848: Europe's Tunisia or Iran?

1848 France was ruled by the landed property class, big industry, and the banking class. It

was the working class that brought about the rise of this triad (landed property, big industry, and the banking class) through the French Revolution of 1789. In turn, this triad or “big capital” would systematically disenfranchise the working class by eliminating universal suffrage.

A new residency criterion was imposed in France by King Louis-Philip I who served the interests of big capital and was appropriately called the “Bourgeoisie King.” French citizens had to prove that they lived in a riding for three years. To prove residency, the French working class needed letters of authentication from their employers. Thus, the working class and an overwhelming majority of the French were disenfranchised from voting and held hostage by big capital. French workers would also migrate from one place and riding to another place and riding for employment, because of the changing economic conditions, which would also make qualification for voting impossible. Unemployment would grip France and there would be a massive surplus of labour that would be readily exploited by organized capital. These unbearable conditions would lead to the French Revolution of 1848.

In the French Revolution of 1789, the working class allied itself with big capital (big industry, the banking class, and landed property), but this would change in 1848. While big capital was fighting amongst itself, the working class was becoming an ally of the petty bourgeoisie in demanding a share in governing France and directing the course of French society. The House of Orléans was overthrown and the monarchy brought to a final end with the establishment of the Second French Republic.

Yet, the working class did not secure their rights after 1848. They held briefly the seat of power. The new taxation system failed and the capitalist class retained its control, thereby neutralizing efforts for genuine socio-economic reform in France. This led up to the 1851 Paris coup that was to make Charles Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte the emperor of the Second French Empire. The other outcome, after the defeat of Emperor Bonaparte in the Franco-Prussian War, was the 1871 establishment of the short-lived French government known by historians as the “Paris Commune.” [1] Under the Paris Commune and its mixed socialist and anarchist government, France became history’s first socialist republic, more than seventy years before the establishment of the Soviet Union. Under the Prussian occupation of France, the Paris Commune was ultimately crushed by an agreement and strategic understanding reached between the Germans and French organized capital.

What lessons can be learned from 1848?

The French Revolution of 1848 illustrates how capital can manipulate the desires of the working class and mainstream society. It also illustrates that the capitalist class was predominately in control of the state, despite the changes in political leadership. Finally, the outcome of 1848 in France illustrates that policies are deliberately fluctuated by organized capital as a means to lull mainstream society. In this context, history could repeat itself in the Arab World.

1848 and the Rise of the Welfare State and Liberal Democracy

Europe was jolted from its place, because of the revolts of 1848. For almost a decade afterwards there were reverberations throughout Europe. Yet, the revolts in Europe did not equate to true revolution. Nor were the objectives of most of the European masses met. In the case of Hungary, nationalistic objectives were met and the Habsburg Empire was

reformed, in 1867, into Austro-Hungary, with the German Austrians no longer just dominating the Magyars (Hungarians). [2] 1848 also served as a catalyst for the unifications of Italy and Germany.

The European states, however, remained as kleptocracies that worked to protect, extend and entrench the wealth of the ruling classes. For the most part the mainframes of privilege and wealth are still in place in modern-day Europe. One may and should ask how this is possible?

The popular revolts in Europe caused a change in the thinking of the European ruling classes. The ruling class, which was essentially the capitalist class, would go about business as usual, but in a much more liberal and camouflaged manner. At the behest of the ruling capitalist class, the state would send government agents to infiltrate political movements and unions and direct them into so-called “peaceful channels.”

Mainstream European societies were also culturally indoctrinated with the idea and attitudes that change was “progress” and that it was a slow process that would occur in increments. Scientific theories would also reflect this cultural attitude. For example, not long after the events of 1848, Charles Darwin presented his theory about natural selection in Britain. An example of a cultural bias that was reflected in his theory was the idea that change was gradual. There is no sound evidence that evolutionary change is necessarily fixed to a gradual or slow pace. Darwin was not alone in seeing change as a slow function, other scientists and scholars in different fields were also talking about gradual development. This was due to the cultural environment that was being nurtured to protect the interests of the capitalist class.

These culturally-based assumptions were tailored for mainstream European societies, because it was in the interest of the capitalist class to present the changes to European societies as “progress” and for improvement as something that was “gradual.” Organized capital was merely socializing mainstream society to accept a culture of endurance in the hope that change would gradually come. This is similar to the “transition periods” being called for by the White House, by the E.U., and by the Arab regimes themselves in the Arab World.

The capitalist class also made small concessions to pacify mainstream society in what evolved into what was later called the “welfare state.” The state wasted no time in preventing the emergence of full-out working class revolutions. To pre-empt the emergence of communism in Western Europe, which Auguste Comte foretold if social differences were not resolved, the Western European governments wasted no time in giving their respective societies political face-lifts too.

After 1848, Britain and the Netherlands instituted governmental change through constitutionalism and progressively became liberal democracies and so-called constitutional monarchies. By the end of the Second World War, most Western European countries were liberal democracies and “liberal welfare states.”

It must also be pointed out that there were two phases to the welfare state. The first phase was its emergence after 1848 to oppose the increasingly radical nature of the working class. The second phase, the liberal welfare phase, was after the Second World War to prevent communist movements from taking over in Western Europe and Japan.

The Decline of the Welfare State and its Direct Relationship to the decline of the “Communist Threat”

Currently, the vitality of the liberal welfare state has been the focus of many discussions. A liberal welfare state is a state that essentially is one that has programs to reduce inequalities amongst its citizens. These programs include state focus on the poorer strata or members of a society and a much broader focus on social programs to reduce inequalities amongst the citizenry.

After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the liberal welfare state has been in decline. This was attributed to so-called fiscal crises, which instituted containment policies that would later evolve into government liquidation of social programs. There is, however, a very good case to argue the opposite.

The liberal welfare state arose at a time when there was a serious communist option in Europe and globally. After the Second World War in Europe and Asia, there were strong communist movements and a great deal of support for communism. Workers were radicalizing since 1900. The creation of the liberal welfare state neutralized any drive towards communism in Western Europe and Japan by satisfying the demands of vast segments of mainstream society. It was in effect a lulling of working class demands.

After the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union, the ruling capitalist classes in the Western Bloc no longer needed the liberal welfare state to placate mainstream society from imposing communism. After the start of the current economic crisis, cutbacks to social programs and even broader austerity measures have been applied further against the liberal welfare state. From the perspective of a Marxist historical analysis, the liberal welfare states served the capitalist class in eroding the demands of the working class and mainstream society.

Democracy versus Kleptocracy: More than Meets the Eye

It must be asked, how “democratic” were these so-called democracies of the world? To answer this, we must consider democracy as the “rule of the people.” Direct democracy, which is the direct involvement and participation of every citizen, is democracy in its truest form. Direct democracy can arguably be considered to be in line with anarchism or to be one and the same.

Representative democracy or indirect democracy is a means in which specific numbers of citizens or constituents are represented by an official or officials. Firstly, electing a representative does not mean that they will represent the democratic will of their constituents. Exceedingly, this has clearly been the case in most the so-called democracies. Why is this?

Democracy has never been practiced in its true form. Athens is credited through the Eurocentric perspective as the home of democracy as a political system. Even in Athens true democracy was not practiced. Ignoring the industrial slavery in Athens, the vast majority of the Athenian population was not involved in the voting process and even those who did vote were influenced or coerced at times. There was also an elite that manipulated the course of decision-making in the Athenian city-state.

The key word here is “managed.” Like Athens, the modern-day so-called liberal democracies

are also “managed” by a ruling class. This is done through the control of various institutions, entertainment, political parties, information, and the means of the general population’s livelihoods. The people are stirred and directed in how they vote. Genuine informed consent is missing in many cases. In the United States, Barack H. Obama was presented as an option outside of the status quo, but in reality he was merely a new face for the same ruling establishment controlling the American way of living.

Modern-day democracies are kleptocracies in one way or another. Empirically there is such a vast amount of data that shows this. There can be no real democracy until men and women are free in thought, in body, and in livelihood. As long as they are controlled, either socially or economically, by such things as organized capital there will be a spoiling effect on true liberty. If it does not control the state, the capitalist class wields a tremendous amount of influence over the state. In turn, the state serves the capitalist class and exerts control over mainstream society for the capitalist class, as do the media and the structures of economic life.

As constitutionalists correctly argue, democracies can be managed and manipulated. Since 1848, the capitalist class has managed to hinder genuine democracy in all its forms, while promoting kleptocracy. Big capital has always managed to carve a place for itself at the helms of the state and has managed to maintain itself through the mercy of liberalism.



Part II of this article will focus on the “Struggle for Self-Determination” in the Arab World

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NOTES

[1] After the establishment of the Second French Republic, Charles Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, the nephew of Napoléon Bonaparte who would become the new French president, would eventually also jump camps from big capital’s camp to the working class and the petty bourgeoisie camp. After failing to have the French constitution amended to allow him to run for a second four-year term, in a populist move, President Bonaparte would promise the reintroduction of universal suffrage to the working class. In 1851, Charles Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte would seize power and declare himself emperor of the Second French Empire. To gain working class support for his regime in 1864 Emperor Bonaparte would remove France’s legal bans on strikes and in 1866 he would also de-criminalize unions.

[2] The Austrian Empire would turn into a monarchic union under the Habsburgs. Hungary would be carved within the Austrian Empire as a separate kingdom, which would have its own government.

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