

The Unfinished People's Revolution: From Philadelphia to Havana, and Back Again

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The Western European democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century sought to establish more just societies through replacement of monarchies with republics and the elimination of hereditary class distinctions between nobles and commoners. This dynamic reflected the interests of the emerging merchant class as well as the popular classes of workers and peasants, in the context of an emerging capitalist world-economy.

The Jeffersonian-Jacksonian Revolution: An historically advanced expression

The American Republic was the expression of this phenomenon in North America. Its constitution reflected a compromise between the big merchants and landholders, on the one hand; and the farmers, artisans, and workers, on the other. The American ideology stressed individual liberty and equality of opportunity.

Material conditions favored the development of the American vision. In the first place, there was the lucrative trading relation of the New England and Mid-Atlantic farmers with the slaveholders in the West Indies. Secondly, there was territorial expansion of the nation through the conquest of the indigenous nations. And thirdly, there was the core-peripheral economic relation between emerging Northern manufacturers and Southern slaveholders, which provided raw materials and markets for Northern industry. These dynamics were the foundation of the spectacular economic ascent of the nation.

During the period 1789 to 1840, the American Republic remained politically divided between the Federalists and neo-Federalists, who successfully were creating a financial aristocracy; and the popular Jeffersonian-Jacksonian revolution, which maintained that liberty cannot truly exist for the people without a wide distribution of agricultural and manufacturing property, accompanied by popular control of the state and state control of the banking and credit system.

Social philosophy is formulated in the context of lived experiences. The Jeffersonian-Jacksonian popular revolution did not have the experiential basis for seeing the role of the unfolding European global conquest as the foundation of the nation's spectacular ascent. They were aware of the importance of the territorial expansion of the nation, but in accordance with their ethnocentric notions of civilization and barbarity, they viewed the land as freely available. They recognized the contradiction between slavery and the ideal of liberty and opportunity for all, but they understood the importance of slavery to the economy of the nation, and they could fathom no strategy for its abolition without destroying the national economy, so they deferred its abolition. They took for granted the lucrative trading relation with the West Indies; they could not see its connection to an emerging system of global domination that contradicted their professed revolutionary

values.

In spite of their limited understanding, the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian revolutionaries were a progressive force in the context of their time. Politically, they defended small farmers and workers against the pretensions of the financial aristocracy and the banks. Economically, their ideology contributed to an economic ascent that was raising the standard of living of the nation. They took concrete and practical steps toward the construction of a more just world, in the context of the world that they had inherited and of their lived experiences.

Following the age of Jackson, slavery became a central issue of public debate, as a consequence of the conflict of interests between the Northern industrial elite and the Southern slaveholding class. For many abolitionists, it was a moral debate, not well integrated into unfolding political processes. From the beginnings of the debate, the difficulties inherent in changing a structure of labor that was central to the nation's economy led some to propose the gradual and compensated abolition of slavery. As the debate intensified, many of the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian revolutionaries seized the opportunity to propose the inclusion of blacks in their vision of liberty and opportunity, on the basis of the distribution of land or wage employment in manufacturing. The proposal, however, did not have the consistent support of the Northern industrial elite, who merely feigned service to the vision of liberty and opportunity even with respect to whites. The racial reconstruction project, lacking the necessary balance of political support, collapsed; the majority of freed slaves became impoverished tenant farmers and sharecroppers, lacking the most fundamental of human rights.

By 1890, the material context that provided the foundation for the spectacular U.S. economic ascent had come to an end. In the first place, territorial expansion was no longer possible, as the nation reached its geographical frontiers. The escape valve of Western opportunities for urban workers and the unemployed disappeared.

Secondly, industry, commerce, and banking became concentrated. Concentration was to some extent a natural phenomenon, as the more efficient companies arrived to dominate the market. But it also was driven by "unfair competition," involving the use by the "Robber Barons" of illegal, unethical, and violent strategies to destroy competitors. Small entrepreneurs found opportunities limited, if not blocked.

In this context, there emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century a popular movement to break-up or regulate the trusts. But this proposal was not going to be easy to implement. The big corporations were central to the nation's economy. How does the government regulate or control them, without causing havoc to the economy? A complicated problem, even assuming the government is trying to defend the liberties of the people and not the interests of the corporations and the banks. During the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, important antitrust legislation was enacted, designed to accomplish this delicate task. However, before it could be known in practice if Wilson's project would be effective, the entire effort was cast aside by World War I.

In the battle between the people and the corporations, war functions to the advantage of the corporations. Inasmuch as the rapid production of arms and military equipment is needed for the war mobilization, the delicate balance between promoting the economic growth of the nation and protecting liberties of the people is upset. The corporations are given free hand.

As a result of this law of corporate rule through war, World War I and World War II not only drove further the spectacular economic ascent of the nation; they also facilitated the consolidation of the corporate dominance. By the 1950s, a “power elite” and a “military-industrial complex” had emerged, and the nation arrived to operate on the basis of a permanent war economy, with the political process controlled by the corporations. The standard of living rose, but the political power of the people diminished.

The incapacity of the people to stop the national turn to war during the course of the twentieth century is rooted in the ideological limitations of the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian revolution, particularly its incapacity to understand the factors driving U.S. ascent and to discern that these factors would soon reach their limit and the end of their time. The revolutionaries possessed a social philosophy that had been advanced for its time, heralding a new world of individual liberty and opportunity and reinforcing new productive capacities and a spectacular economic ascent. But they could not discern that the nation was on the road to empire, undermining the republic and its proclaimed democratic values. They therefore were unprepared to see the coming twentieth century un-proclaimed U.S. imperialism and to delegitimize its pretexts for wars; they were unprepared to stop imperialist wars, in order to defend themselves.

And so, the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian revolution came to an end, unable to reframe the meaning of individual liberty in a world of large corporations; and unable to see that the imperialist domination of other lands was the foundation of the powerlessness of the people of the United States. Its important legacy, in spite of its limitations, is all but erased from the memory of the people.

The Cuban Revolution: The people’s revolution reaches a more advanced stage

The American Revolution, however, would attain a more advanced expression, appropriate for twentieth century reality, in a nearby island nation, that of Cuba, where the experience of the people was of a different order. The Cuban Revolution was born in the nineteenth century in the context of Spanish colonialism, and as such, it has been an anti-colonial revolution, which learned early the political necessity of uniting the popular sectors of workers, peasants, and blacks in a struggle against colonial interests and their native allies, the Cuban landed estate bourgeoisie. Beginning with the U.S. intervention of 1898, Cuba passed to be a neocolonial Republic under U.S. tutelage. Defined by this neocolonial situation, the Revolution arrived to be an anti-imperialist revolution, uniting popular sectors of workers, students, peasants, blacks, and women; standing against U.S. control and against the Cuban figurehead bourgeoisie and political class that were totally subordinate U.S. interests. Unlike the American Revolution in the North, the Cuban Revolution not only discerned the role of imperialism in the shaping economic development and underdevelopment, but it also conceived itself as fundamentally an anti-imperialist revolution.

When the Cuban Revolution took political control in 1959, with the overwhelming support of the various popular sectors, it confronted the same problem that the U.S. popular revolution and antitrust movement had confronted in the progressive era in the United States, namely, the problem of how to change the structures of the economy in defense of popular liberties without undermining the productive capacity of the economy. The Cuban Revolution attacked the problem step-by-step, without a previous ideology beyond that of the right of the nation to sovereignty and the right of the people to social justice. First, it took possession of large agricultural estates, distributing the land to peasants in the form of

cooperatives, state managed farms, and small-scale private property. Secondly, it nationalized U.S. companies in Cuba, with the intention of cooperating with the United States in the payment of compensation. Specifically, the Cuban Revolution proposed to establish a fund that would be fed by the USA-Cuba sugar trade in excess of the established sugar quota. In response to the absence of U.S. cooperation, Cuba proceeded to the nationalization of all foreign companies. Thirdly, the Revolution nationalized Cuban big industry, placing the companies under state management. Its initial hope was that Cuban industrialists would cooperate with the Revolution in the economic development of the nation, but the Cuban figurehead bourgeoisie not have sufficient economic and ideological independence from U.S. capital to participate in an autonomous nationalist project of economic development. The Cuban national bourgeoisie abandoned the country to participate in the U.S. directed Cuban counterrevolution.

The Cuban Revolution, therefore, proceeded on a model in which the state formulates a development plan, seeking to sever its peripheral role in the world-economy and its dependency on the U.S. economy; and taking ownership of private companies, foreign and domestic, not in response to a previously formulated plan, but in accordance with the practical demands of the situation. The Revolution accepted small-scale private ownership of economic enterprises, insofar as it was practical and necessary for supplying the needs of the people. With respect to the economy, Cuban socialism has been pragmatic.

The Cuban Revolution dealt with the universal problem of elite control of the political process by abolishing electoral parties and eliminating electoral campaigns. Candidates for delegates to municipal assemblies are nominated in neighborhood assemblies, and they are elected in small voting districts on the basis of publicly displayed one-page biographies, without the necessity of conducting electoral campaigns. The elected delegates of the municipal assemblies in turn elect the deputies of the national assembly, on the basis of suggestions submitted by the mass organizations. Thus constituted, the National Assembly of People's Power is the highest authority in the nation, which elects the executive and judicial branches of government to five-year terms, and to which the executive and judicial branches must render accounts.

In the first decades of the American Republic, Federalists and conservatives sought to prevent control of the government by the majority, for fear that the interests of the large merchants and landholders and the financial aristocracy would be swept aside. In contrast, the Cuban Revolution developed a political structure designed to ensure that the interests of the people would be the highest priority of the government.

In the United States, the Federalists and neo-Federalists had feared democracy, which they considered to be systemic mob rule, shaped by unenlightened prejudices disseminated by demagogic politicians. Accordingly, they favored the establishment of a relatively permanent senate and/or judiciary, constituted by members of the hereditary aristocracy, which would have the authority to check the actions of the mob. The Cuban Revolution did not naively fail to recognize the possibilities for control of the political process by an unruly mass. But they dealt with the threat in a different way. Cuba's systemic check on the people has been in the form of a vanguard political party, the Communist Party of Cuba. Unlike the Federalists' senates and judiciaries, the Cuban vanguard party was not initially formed from a hereditary minority, but from a minority of revolutionaries, who had distinguished themselves as leaders in revolutionary struggle. Once established, this moral minority that has been self-perpetuating, itself selecting its new members. Such a minority, based on revolutionary merit rather than status at birth, speaks to the people with moral

authority. Moreover, unlike the Federalists' senates and judiciaries, the vanguard revolutionary party does not have political or legal authority or veto power. Its role is to educate the people, guiding them in the formation of revolutionary consciousness and in providing the foundation for seeing through the factual and ideological distortions of the global elite. The vanguard party leads but does not decide; the people decide, through its delegates and deputies.

The Cuban revolution was forged as an integrated project of students, peasants, workers, professionals, blacks, and women, just as the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian revolution of 1789 to 1840 was an integrated project of the middle class, farmers, and workers. In the United States, the marginality of issues of race, and the even greater marginality of gender, were a reflection of the political conditions and assumptions of the time. In contrast, the Cuban Revolution accomplished the integration of race and gender in the people's struggle in a natural form. The integration of blacks in the struggle was defined by the 1890s, reflecting the political necessities of the anti-colonial revolution. During the neocolonial Republic, women assumed revolutionary tasks, and they were accepted because of the utility of their contributions. In the period of 1959 to 1962, the triumphant revolution consistently made explicit the full participation of blacks and women in the revolutionary project and in Cuban society.

Cuban revolutionary ideology has been shaped by the lived experiences of the Cuban people, responding to the neocolonial situation of rule by an imperialist power and its large corporations. As a result, it has been able to break new ground, to arrive to a more advanced understanding than that of the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian revolutionaries of the period 1763 to 1840. It has arrived to new insights and human experiences in regard to the control and regulation of the economy in defense of the interests of the people; and it has arrived to new structures for putting political power in the hands of the people and for popular political education, enabling the people to overcome confusion and division.

The absolute necessity of returning to Philadelphia

The people's revolution now has to return to the United States. The Cuban Revolution has reached its limit, in that it has attained the maximum of what it can attain in the context of the capitalist world-economy. The capitalist world-economy itself has to be transformed, setting aside neocolonialism and imperialism, respecting the true sovereignty of nations, and facilitating cooperation among nations in mutually beneficial trade and in addressing the common problems that humanity confronts. Such a transformation can only occur through the coming to political power of the popular sectors in key nations, especially the United States, still the largest economy in the world, and the still world's reigning imperialist power.

What is presently occurring in the United States is not revolution but rebellion. The current U.S. rebellions lacks an adequate intellectual base; it has a limited and distorted understanding of the popular revolution of the United States, and it is characterized by a profound ignorance of the Cuban Revolution and other anti-neocolonial revolutions and movements of the Third World. In the context of a capitalist world-economy that has reached and overextended its territorial limits, such ignorance has to be overcome. Intellectuals have to play an important role in this regard, appropriating insights that emerge from the experiences of popular struggles in other lands, adapting them to conditions in their particular nations. They should follow the examples of the American revolutionary leaders and intellectuals of the period 1763 to 1840, who wrote pamphlets

that were designed to explain to the people. Their example shows that slogans, placards, and tweets alone will not get it done; sustained popular political education is the key, and the organization of the people developing its consciousness.

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