

(<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/ocafter3.jpg>)

by Jeff Noonan

More than one year after the last encampments were dismantled, no material trace of Occupy remains in the cities where it established itself. In the corporate media—once breathless with speculation as to the

movement's origins and intentions and loud in its declamations of criticism – there is now only silence. A movement which was portrayed as having come from nothing has, seemingly, returned to nothing, having changed nothing. The very social problems it denounced– widening inequality, the tyranny of finance capital, the totalitarian power of the surveillance-security state, the subordination of democracy to money-value: remain or are getting worse. By any metric of political success Occupy seems to have been a failure, at best a juvenile political jamboree that exhausted itself because of its programmatic vacuity and hyperbolic rhetoric.

Occupy did indeed encourage hyperbolic rhetoric, and its reach far exceeded its grasp. At the same time, it did not emerge from nothing and it did not collapse back into nothing. The original occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York City in September 17th, 2011, was certainly unexpected, but it was not without precedent, and was motivated by the effects of the economic crisis which had began in 2008. The tactic of occupation was first practiced by striking teachers in Oaxaca Mexico in 2006-2007. Their strike sparked a social movement built around the occupation of public spaces and government buildings that lasted 6 months.[1] On January 25th, 2011, the Egyptian revolution intensified with the occupation of Tahrir Square by close to 50 000 anti-Mubarak activists. This occupation inspired teachers and public sector workers threatened with anti-union legislation in Wisconsin to occupy the state legislature on February 15th, 2011. The tactic of occupation was thus already well-established by the time a march on Wall Street unintentionally arrived, and then remained, in Zuccotti Park on September 17th, 2011.

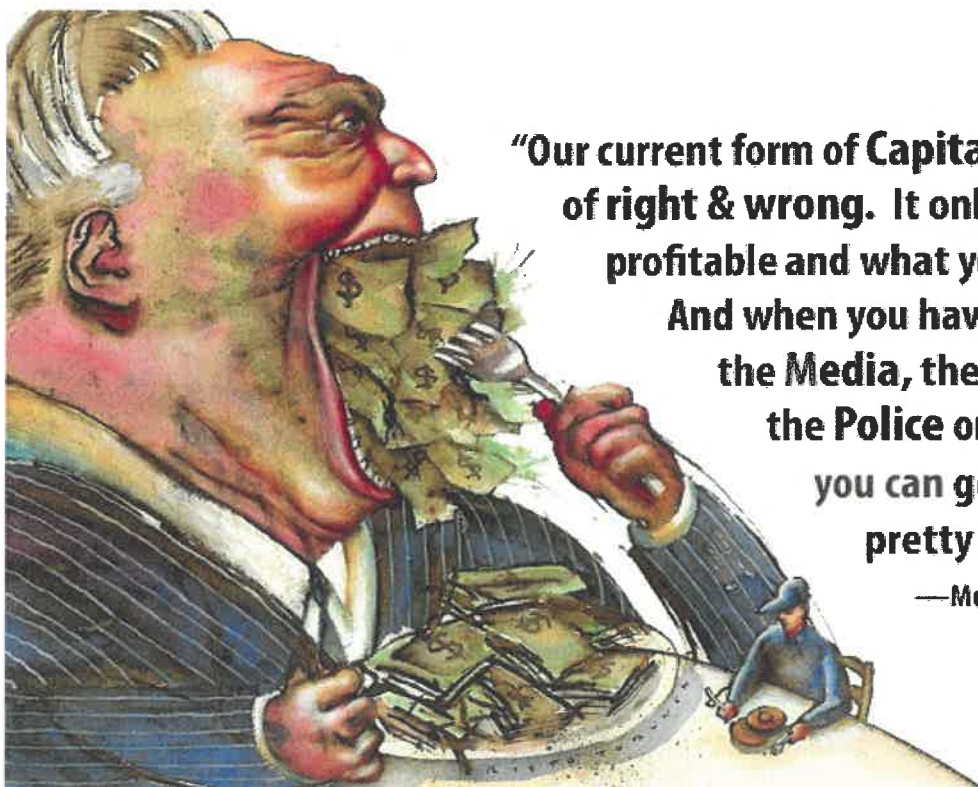


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In retrospect, two principles united these geographically disparate movements. First was the conclusion that time-limited demonstrations are ineffective vehicles of democratic social change, because they are too easily ignored by ruling powers who simply wait for the march to end and people to go home before resuming business as usual. Second was the positive inverse of this negative conclusion: in order to effect fundamental social changes democratic movements must physically reclaim public space—the

space in which the political public can democratically organize and express itself – and put it to work as a site for popular education, mobilization, resistance, and experimentation with alternative social relationships and practices. The tactic of occupation, whether in Tahrir Square or Zuccotti Park or any of the other thousands of cities in which camps sprouted aimed to be a direct and immediate embodiment of the values the demonstrators stood for: direct democracy, reciprocity and sharing, inclusion and mutual respect.

The success or failure of Occupy should not be measured by the absolute metric underlying the question: did the camps solve the social problems they decried or did they not? Rather, it should be measured by a metric of movement along a political continuum underlying the different question: did Occupy advance the open-ended and long term struggle to solve the problems it identified, or did it leave the struggle where it was before, or did it cause it to regress? The first question assumes the normalcy and necessity of capitalist temporality: that which is real and valuable is only that which can be realized in an instant. It is the temporality of capitalist consumer demand: I want X, I have the means of paying for X, so give me X right now. Social change operates according to a different temporal rhythm. Struggles unfold unevenly over open-ended time frames. If liberalism is still trying to work out the concrete implications of equal citizenship rights more than two hundred years after the Declaration of Independence, (are group rights consistent with liberalism, are positive rights consistent with liberalism, etc?) it should surprise no one that building a sustainable democratic alternative to liberal-capitalism will require many experiments whose lessons take many decades to fully understand and sustainably institutionalize. This evaluation will adopt the second approach, which is the only approach serious historico-political analysis can adopt, as the only one consistent with all available evidence about the rhythms of social change. It will focus on Occupy's achievements and limitations in three dimensions: 1) the underlying values that it affirmed and which provided its political orientation; 2) the practice of participatory or "horizontal" democracy; and 3) its material results and contribution to the future of the struggle for a democratic and life-valuable alternative to liberal-capitalism.



"Our current form of Capitalism has no concept of right & wrong. It only recognizes what is profitable and what you can get away with. And when you have the Government, the Media, the Military, and the Police on your payroll, you can get away with pretty much anything."

—Modern American Proverb

(<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/occupy8.jpg>)

I: The Underlying Life-Value of Occupy

The mainstream media reports facts, but never the causal webs that explain those facts. Thus, to the mainstream media, Occupy seemed a movement without influence and without precedent, amorphous, incoherent, and chaotic. However, as noted, Occupy had proximate influences and precedents, but it also had a narrow and wide historical context that shaped its values and its demands. The narrow historical context was the 2008 economic crisis, a crisis whose intensity had not abated by 2011. Its wider historical context was the neo-liberal re-structuring of capitalism, a longer term class project that began in the early 1970's. It was the neo-liberal re-organization of capitalism that created the political, legal-regulatory, and ideological conditions that underlay the 2008 crisis. Neo-liberal policy-makers first attacked the economic power of organized labour by globalizing production, weakening the ability of workers to maintain their standard of living through collective bargaining.

Once the power of unions to bargain wages and benefits was compromised, its political power could be targeted. Now forced to compete with much lower cost production zones, workers in North America were forced onto the defensive, focussed on keeping what they had rather than demanding more. This defensive posture backfired. Employers, in open collusion with the state, used the threat of moving production off-shore to wring ever more concessions from workers, weakening health and safety regulations, attacking benefits packages and pensions, and then proceeding to attack the right to strike and organize. So-called workers' parties, the parties of social democracy, seeing their base in the union movement weakened, soon embraced neo-liberal principles, leaving workers totally voiceless in official political institutions. The entire project was justified by values that workers, especially American workers, embrace: liberty, freedom of competition, to-the-winner-go-the-spoils principles of distribution. It undermined more traditional working class values: social support for the socially vulnerable, democracy as social solidarity and not just voting, material and not simply formal equality.

For the ruling class, neo-liberalism was a triumph. Unions are no longer fighting organizations capable of resisting the social effects of global capital flows, workers' parties have been co-opted, and a massive re-distribution of wealth from workers and the poor of the global south to the European and North American ruling class continues unabated.[2] On the other hand, for workers and the poor, the plants and animals of the planet, and the life-support systems all depend upon, neo-liberalism has been disastrous. Neo-liberalism is a more virulent form of the money-value system that drives capitalist society. The money-value system equates rationality and goodness with that which serves the growth of money-value and secures its accumulation in ruling class hands. To illustrate: if there are higher monetary returns to bankers and real estate investors to be made by building islands in the shape of the world off the coast of Dubai to be inhabited by the ultra wealthy, than there would be in building affordable housing for the poor of Detroit, then money will flow to Dubai. No real life-requirement is met by this decision—the rich already monopolise most of the world's beautiful coastlines—and the poor remain in a state of deprivation, even though the resources exist to alleviate that deprivation by using available money to invest in affordable housing. That would not produce huge profits, and so it seems “irrational” to make the latter investment.

This example illustrates the underlying structure of moral and political conflict today. The capitalist money-value system—now cancerous in its neo-liberal phase—is at war against the life-value system upon which all planetary life—that of the ruling class included—depends.[3] The fundamental principle of the money-value system is: the planet, its natural resources, its plants and animals, its people, the

social institutions that they have struggled to create to regulate shared life, their life-requirements and their life-capacities, their talents and hopes, are valuable *only to the extent that they can be exploited as instrumental inputs to the production and exclusive appropriation of money-value by the ruling class*. Any challenge to the institutionalized operation of this principle will be met with force, deadly if necessary. Still, even in the face of deadly force, life finds the courage to resist, for it has no choice when the totality of its life-support and development systems are threatened with destruction or capture by the totalitarianism of money-value rule.



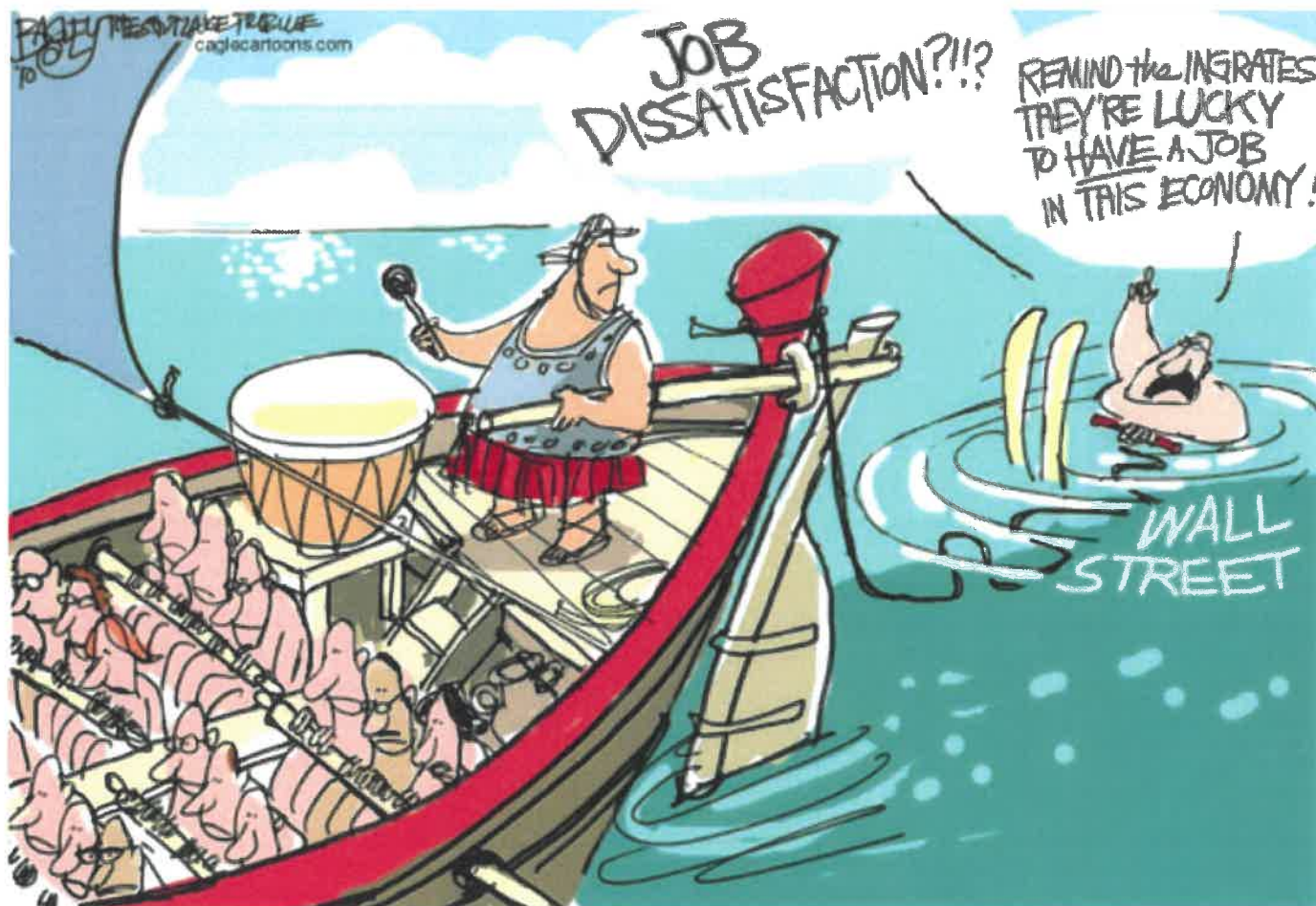
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This principle—life resists its own destruction, human life organizes resistance against its own destruction and subordination—returned to public attention in the wave of struggles that began with the Zapatista rebellion in 1994. The Zapatista's, reacting against the mortal threat to indigenous life-ways that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) posed, took up arms in defence of their local-support systems and their traditional structures of life-organization, regulation, and enjoyment.[4] They inspired nearly a decade long wave of anti-globalization/solidarity with the global south movement that harassed and harried government ministers and corporate executives across the globe, from Seattle to Quebec City to Genoa. The 9/11 attacks provided just the ideological cover the ruling

class needed to violently stamp out this wave of militant anti-capitalist resistance.

The underlying contradiction between the principle of the money-value system and the principle of the life-value system—natural and social resources are valuable *not as means of making money* but as *means of satisfying life-requirements*, through which the capacities of living things, and thus their enjoyment of life, grow—was not addressed by repressing the anti-globalization movement. Life-value movements reacted against the various fronts in the oxymoronic “War on Terror,” and remained active, although small, against tremendous ideological pressures. Then came the financial crisis of 2008, a crisis so severe that most on the North American Left were expecting that the unemployment and homelessness it caused would be the antidote to Tea Party Republican populism. This crisis, it was hoped, would get the American working class moving again. But nothing of any notable scale happened in North America—until the occupation in Wisconsin, and then after Wisconsin, the occupation of Zuccotti Park, and after Zuccotti Park an occupation of almost every city across the United States and Canada.

Just as the gross disparity in life-chances between the Global North and Global South motivated the anti-globalization movement, so the monstrous and widening inequalities within capitalist societies motivated Occupy. The financial crisis was not seized upon as an opportunity to repudiate neo-liberal wealth re-distribution, but as a pretext to intensify it. The financial speculators who caused the crisis were not stripped of their wealth and power; their institutions were bailed out at public expense and the bills paid by the working people of the world. In the aftermath of the crisis, “the focus of ruling classes shifted toward a war against public services... they announced an “age of austerity”—of huge cuts to pensions, education budgets, social welfare programs, public sector wages and jobs. In so doing, they effectively declared that working class people and the poor will pay the cost of the global bank bailout.”[5] By 2010 “an additional 64 million people” had been impoverished by the austerity agenda.[6] Occupy did not come from nowhere, it came from the anger this injustice—once it had time to set in—aroused.



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The demand for equality that motivated Occupy was not born of an obsession with arithmetic, but of a deep understanding that a society that allows its regulations and laws to become the instruments whereby a tiny financial elite enriches itself at the expense of everyone and everything else: cannot be democratic because it is not a single society bound together by shared interests, no matter how thin. Such a society devolves towards a servant economy in which the majority lives and acts only at the pleasure of the moneyed rulers. The movement that erupted on September 17th was not first and foremost about taking wealth away from the ruling class; it was, much more—about re-asserting democratic control over the economic and political conditions of free human life. The more or less spontaneous decision to remain in Zucotti Park rather than go home had immense symbolic and practical import—it announced to the financial elite a few blocks east that people were organizing to reclaim the life-space colonized by capital and returning it to public, democratic use. Since the occupiers were not going home, they could not be ignored, as is usually the case with even the largest demonstrations. The bankers and their ruling class allies would be forced, for more than two months, to hear the life-value alternative to the rule of money Occupy proposed.

That life-value underlay and unified the core demands of occupy is evident from a moment's reflection on the core principles of the original encampment, Occupy Wall Street as decided by the New York General Assembly. The core principles were: direct, participatory democracy, personal and collective responsibility, recognition of the way in which privilege affects social interactions, collective empowerment against all forms of oppression, a redefinition of the way in which labour is valued, the sanctification of personal privacy, the recognition of education as a human right, and the democratization and universalization of access to knowledge, culture, and technology.[7] Thought

through from the life-value perspective, this list forms a unified set of demands for the conditions of the development of social self-conscious agency. Social self-conscious agency is the distinguishing capacity of *human* life—the ability to creatively intervene in the environment conscious of our dependence on the natural life-support system and our interdependence with others in the social life-development system.

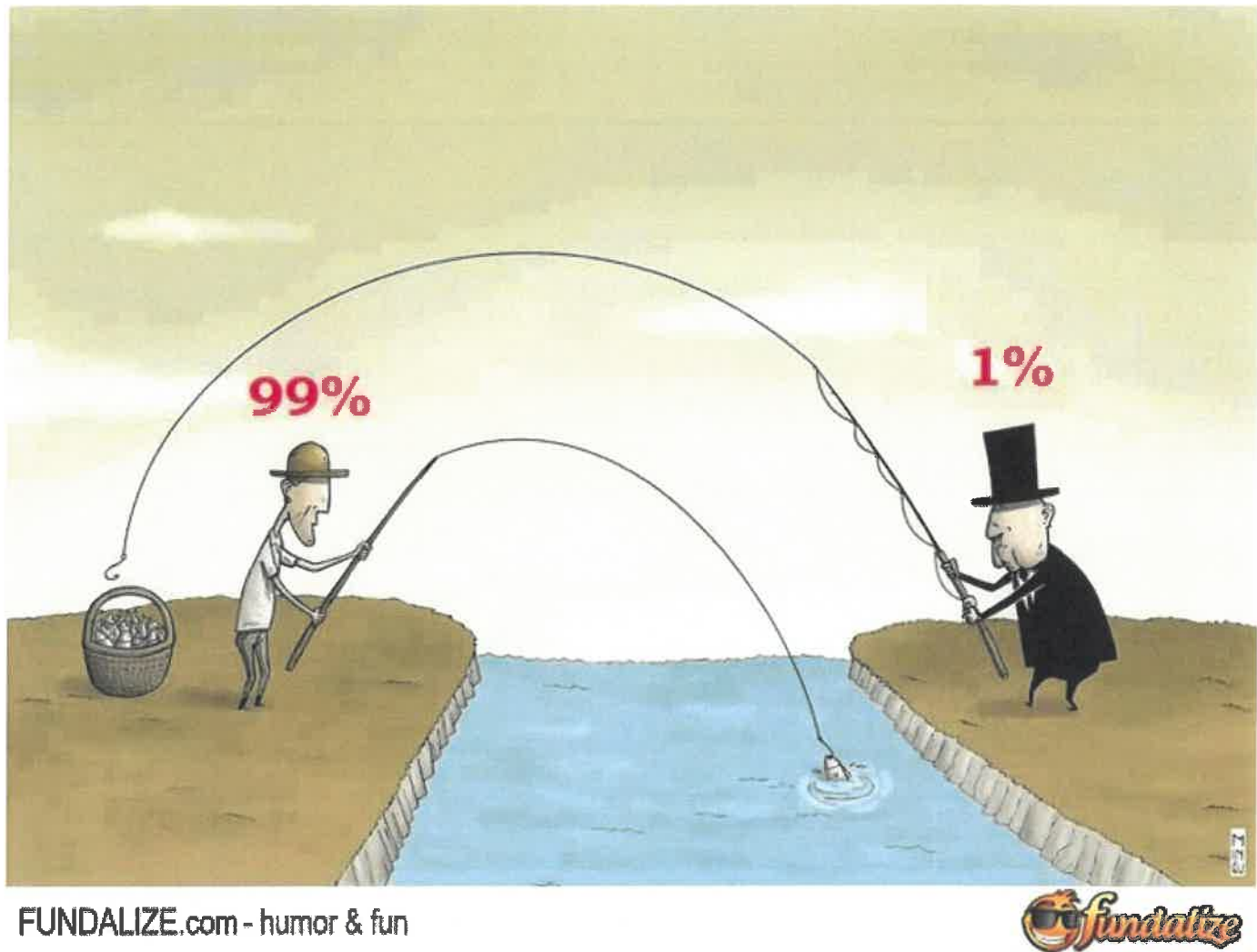


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Direct democracy ensures that everyone can actively contribute to the rules and principles that will govern collective life; personal and collective responsibility ensures that everyone will participate and accept the implications of collective decisions; recognition of privilege checks the advantages a sexist and racist society confers on some identities and thus contributes to equality of voice; collective

empowerment against all forms of oppression entails struggle against the manifold of ways in which the shared life-interest in all-round life-requirement satisfaction is undermined by the operation of the ruling money-value system; redefining the value of labour leads to the recognition of the contributions that it makes to the creation of life-valuable goods and services, while education and the democratization of access to knowledge, culture, and technology ensures the multidimensional cultivation of the intellect, imagination, and emotions for everyone. The realization of these principles is obviously incompatible with a society in which human beings are reduced to tools of money-value growth. Instead, they imply that the true value of material and social resources is the satisfaction of those natural and social life-requirements the full development of social self-conscious agency demands. The slogan of Occupy Washington, “Human need before corporate greed,” makes my point as clearly as one could hope.[8]

The act of occupying soon shifted from a symbolic reclamation of public space to an experiment in realizing the values affirmed by the New York General Assembly. In place of the Machiavellian system-management, surveillance, and repression that is the truth of the politics called ‘democratic’ today, occupiers across North America devised new practices of participatory deliberation, interaction, and decision making. The egalitarianism affirmed by their slogan, “We are the 99%” became a lived reality of shared labour to find and distribute resources the encampments required for their survival. As one of the central figures of Occupy Windsor, Paul Chislett, said to me in an interview, the greatest sense of accomplishment came from the way in which people had to devote themselves as individuals to the collective project of figuring out how the camp could be maintained and governed.[9] Individuals began to experience the value of their own labour differently—it was not a commodity to be bought (or, in Windsor, with the highest unemployment rate in Canada, more likely not bought) but a specific way in which an individual could contribute to a collective project, and feel valuable as a specific individual as a result.



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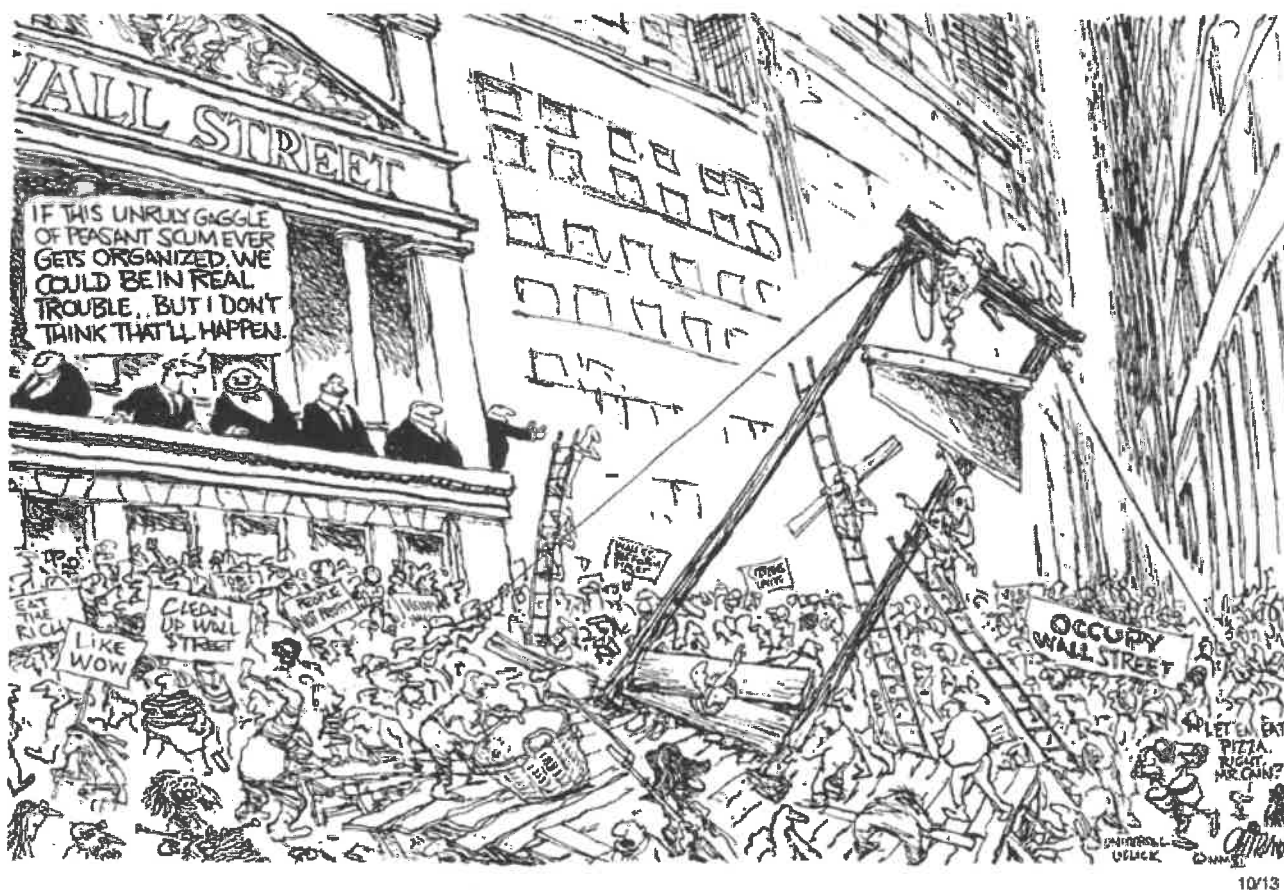


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Occupy thus put into practice, as far as it could, the democratic egalitarianism its claim to be the 99% demanded. The slogan—if somewhat vacuous as a sociologically astute analysis of class structure—nevertheless vividly exposed the consequences of neo-liberal redistribution: the concentration of wealth in the hands of a tiny financial elite who, despite producing nothing of life-value, enjoys commanding power over life and death, of individuals, and whole societies. Where the people who control bond markets can decide the fate of whole economies, as in Spain and Greece, democratic equality is impossible. The financial elite has this power only because of the unequal share of resources they command, and because they have command over an unequal share of necessary life-resources, they, and not the people, decide the conditions of the people's lives. But there is no rational justification for this concentration of wealth in the hands of parasitic financial speculators. It cannot plausibly be defended on grounds that it improves the life-conditions of people. On the contrary, it demonstrably undermines all the values on which liberal-capitalist society is supposed to stand—liberty (people are slaves to bond markets), equality (there are gross disparities in the distribution of wealth) and fraternity (people cannot feel themselves part of a common project when the ruling class lives in sealed off compounds apart from the misery they create).

Unfortunately, the effort to live the democratic egalitarianism they believed in, *without organized effort to reclaim productive resources from the ruling class*, ultimately demanded more energy than small groups of people could reasonably be expected to expend. The longer the camps endured, the more effort their physical and political maintenance required, the more the problem of how to keep the camps running as

open, tolerant, diverse, democratic spaces came to the fore. More and more of the deliberations concerned matters of internal self-governance and survival. The movement turned inward, away from positive strategies to change the world towards strategies that would ensure the survival of the camps as liberated zones. Cinzia Arruza explains this problem as it affected the original Occupy Wall Street site: “in the spasmodic search for the alchemical combination between the most possible democratic organization and the efficiency necessary to catalyse the movement... politics was lost... in a self-referential spiral.”[10] The rapidity with which the movement spread proved that a politics that focused on the undemocratic implications of capitalist class structure was viable in the North American context, when it had seemed since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, that class could not be a mobilising idea. Yet, this first experiment in popular self-governance burned itself out, in part because of the “horizontal” practices that were central to its version of democratic egalitarianism.



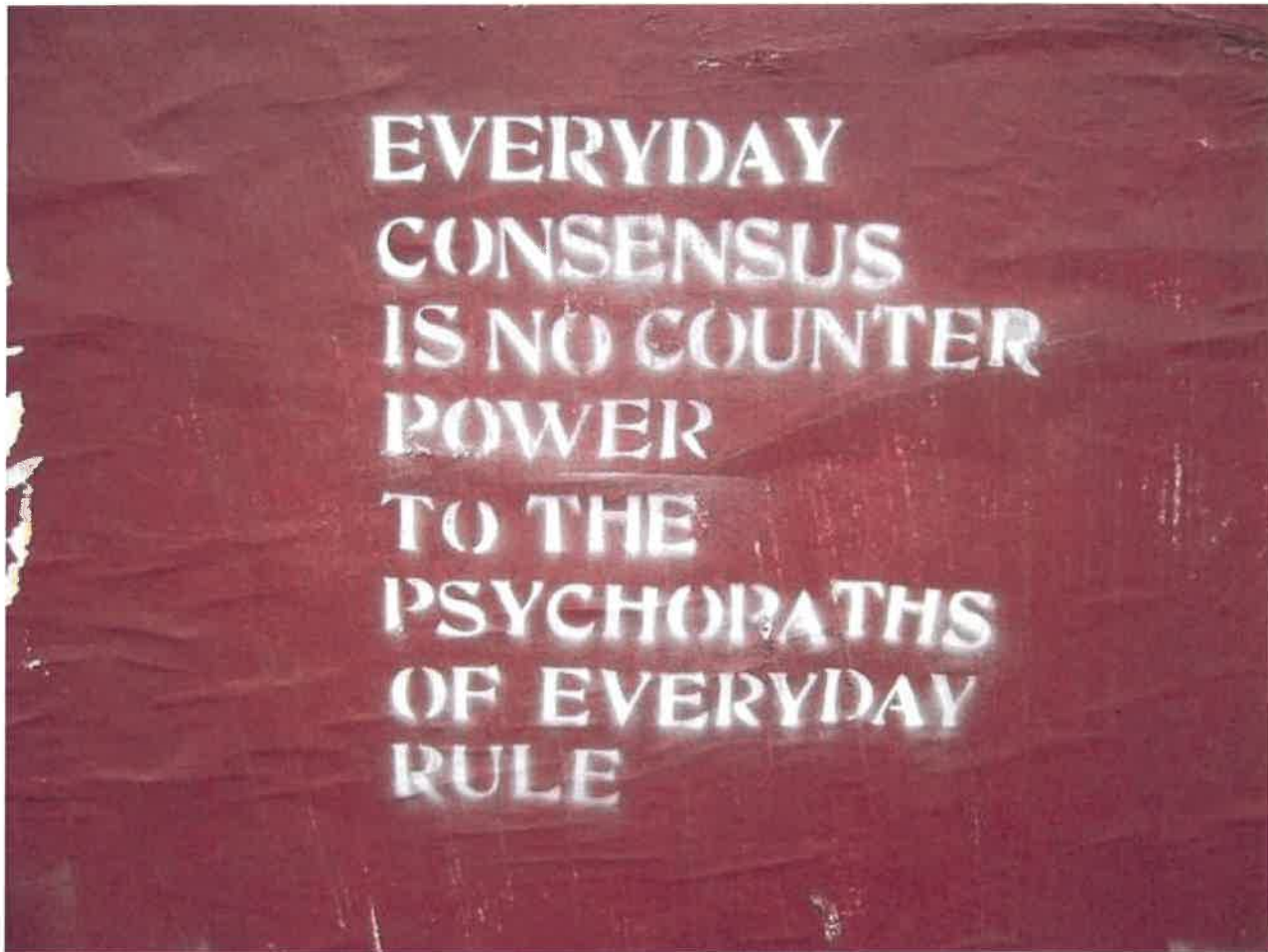
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II: Horizontalism

“Horizontalism” as a political practice has a long history—it seems to be the form spontaneously taken by popular movements whenever and wherever they emerge. As a technical term, however, it was first applied to the practice of neighbourhood and worker self-organization in Argentina in the wake of its economic collapse in 2001. A political practice is “horizontal” when instead of making demands on the state, it sets as its main task the re-organization of everyday life in non-hierarchical relations. Horizontalist political practice rejects leaders, party discipline, and reformist concessions. Instead, it actively lives the transformed social relationships it values. Marina Sitrin, a radical sociologist who worked within many Argentinian horizontalist movements and was also active in Occupy New York defines its main features as “the rejection of political parties, from the Left and the Right... the rejection of aspects of representative democracy... the rejection of homogeneity, of imposed ideas, and

decisions.”[11]

In contrast to staid leftist dogmas and ready-made prescriptions, horizontalism is exuberantly experimental, open to novelty, imaginative, and decisively concrete. It is about working together to find immediate solutions to immediate problems, rather than acquiescing to capitalist reality or awaiting the revolution that promises to solve all problems, but only on the day after. The essence of horizontalism as a positive practice is “active participation... the struggle to maintain autonomous forms of decision making as a conscious process.”[12] Horizontalism stresses the need to live the change the movement demands; all horizontal movements are thus attempts, in the words of John Holloway, to change the world without taking power. Official political power is vertical, power over, and is always corrupting, according to proponents of horizontalism, of the values of democratic egalitarianism.[13]



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Anyone who played any part in Occupy could not help but be energized—initially—by the vibrancy of its horizontalist practice. Life-long activists are born of the excitement they first feel in being *listened to* for the first time. The general assemblies and working groups that defined the political life of Occupy allowed new voices to be heard, new ideas to be expressed, new political relationships and solidarities to be born. Joe Friesen, on Occupy Wall Street, explains the difference between horizontal practices which engage him and the vertical practices of official politics which repel him: “I have no interest in participating in the political process. It’s bureaucratic, it’s vertical, it’s exclusive... The principles I’m pushing and many people here are pushing are in direct opposition to the existing structure... The principles here are horizontal in terms of decision-making, transparency, openness, inclusiveness, and

accessibility.”[14] The radicality of the practice lies in its unwavering commitment to respectful deliberation—rather than force, violence, or doctrinaire program—as the source of solutions to even the most complex social problems.

To live democracy in this way transformed the self-understanding of the people involved. They overcame the possessive egoism engendered by capitalist consumerism. They came to identify their individual good with their membership in and contribution to the encampments. Sitrin once again provides insightful analysis: “the ‘rule’ of the movements is affect... and networks of solidarity and friendship. This new value is apparent at the subjective level in people seeing themselves as new, and changed, and in their liking this new found agency and protagonism which is then reflected in their relationships to one another. This new value is also very concrete in that people are finding new ways to survive, to stay housed, and are helping others to survive on the basis of these relationships.”[15] The objective and subjective coincide in each person’s socially self-conscious commitment to new forms of collective practice aimed at constructing a life-space in which life-requirements are satisfied through sharing and cooperative labour, rather than purchases of commodities. The struggle to live differently, and not just symbolically manifest opposition, marked Occupy as a higher plateau of the amorphous anti-capitalist movement. It was also its downfall.



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While it was quite real—whether threatened state repression ended the encampments—the movement was open to attack because it had weakened from within. Horizontalist practice enabled people to live the democratic egalitarianism they posed as a social alternative to capitalism, it enabled them to see through the socially constructed forms of market dependence that keeps people wed to capitalism, but they also discovered that this social construction is anchored in a very real material control over fundamental life-

requirements. The encampments tried to function as substitute sources of life-requirement satisfiers. They could succeed in this substitution so long as voluntary labour and donations supplied the necessities of life. But volunteerism and donations presuppose productive labour—people can donate food only if they have already purchased it in its commodified form, and they can purchase it only if they have money and jobs to do so. Hence, rather than a material challenge to the structure of private and exclusive control over universally required life-resources, the new relationships that Sitrin describes tried to side-step that structure, leaving it untouched. The camps never generated an economy that could be self-sustaining because an economy that could be self-sustaining requires democratising control over the resources that are presently the private property of the ruling class.

The horizontalism of Occupy was an experiment in alternative social relationships. These experiments in alternative social relationships cannot stabilise into actual alternative institutions unless they gain control over a resource base. They cannot gain control over a resource base if they refuse on principle to struggle for state power. That does not mean that they must leave state power and the forms of vertical relationships currently typical of its exercise just as they find it. Horizontalism could change the way in which vertical institutions function. But it must address the foundations of those vertical institutions: control over life by means of control over that which life-requires. Ultimately, you can change your world, for a moment, by not taking power, but you cannot change *the* world without doing so. Unless horizontal movements contest the structure of control over natural resources and social institutions, they remain vulnerable to state repression.

Rather than address this key problem, Occupy tended to make a virtue of their political weakness and focus on the enlivening effects their horizontal processes had on the participants. While those effects were real and valuable, they were also elements of the inwardization which ultimately proved to be a disintegrative force. In his discussion with me Chislett concluded that the biggest failure of Occupy, after the initial excitement wore off, was that the campers ceased to think of how to build the camp into the seed of a genuinely revolutionary movement, i.e., a movement that could actually reclaim for universal life-development the resources that are currently mere instruments for the production and private appropriation of money-value.



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It would be unhistorical to have expected that a movement that expanded as rapidly and unexpectedly as Occupy would be able to develop into the sort of cohesive political organization required to contest the material and political foundations of capitalist power. However, it is not unhistorical to criticise turning a means of organization—horizontalism—into an end in itself, because the political problems caused by turning means into ends—inwardization, factionalization, moralization of organizational purity—have long been understood. The first systematic critique of organizational substitutionalism—mistaking the form of a movement for an alternative society—was perhaps that of Jo Freeman, who applied it to the valorization of “structurelessness” in the radical feminist movement.[16] Once the priority of the movement becomes its own internal life, it ceases to engage concretely with the world problems people initially came together to solve. In order to survive, a movement must grow, but in order to grow, it has to convince the initially skeptical or passive that it is capable of changing society. It cannot change society if its priority is to preserve its inclusiveness and consensual purity.

A political movement that is going to change the world needs open-ended debate, mutual respect, a willingness to experiment, and a capacity to keep itself free of dogmatism. It also needs discipline—the internal group discipline to make collectively binding decisions and the internal individual discipline to help carry them out even if one disagreed with the context of the decision. This internal discipline did not develop. Instead, Occupy groups began to fragment into more and more sub-groups with less and less coherent strategy to take the movement forward. Jodi Dean describes the way in which this disintegration affected Occupy Wall Street. The original Occupy “turned in on itself, obsessively reflecting on its failures to adequately include—people with full time jobs could not attend all the meetings, undocumented people and immigrants could not risk arrest in ways that others could, hierarchies of gender and race and class reproduced themselves within the movement—thereby letting

questions of process take the place of discussions of action.”[17] To point out problems of horizonatlist practice as an end in itself is not to condemn the participants or the practices. The point, rather, is to learn from the mistakes so as to avoid them in the next manifestation of struggle.

Democratic politics is neither horizontal nor vertical but a synthesis of both. Democratic politics is horizontal in so far as it depends upon maintaining a space in which everyone with an interest can be heard and respectful relationships so that everyone feels confident enough to speak. Yet, there must also be a vertical dimension. A movement powerful enough to change society must speak with one voice—decisions must be taken by majority vote when consensus proves impossible and everyone has to subordinate his or her own private feelings to the job of carrying out the decision. If the decision proves to be wrong, then the group learns from the mistake and integrates what it has learned into the next round of deliberation. Mistakes prove fatal only when they provoke splits; when they feed a learning process they can be politically productive, but that learning process presupposes that the group is cohesive enough to hang together through failure. Throughout, reflection on process must be subordinate to the main goal: overcoming the institutionalized barriers to universal life-requirement satisfaction and life-capacity realization. Occupy did not achieve this goal, and given the low level of political confidence amongst anti-capitalist activists, it would not have been reasonable to expect that it could. Nevertheless, its contribution to the present and the future of that struggle are more than symbolic. I will conclude with a brief discussion of its material successes.



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III: Achievements

It would be easy to declare Occupy a failure. It fell ludicrously short of mobilising the 99% in whose name it claimed to speak. The income inequality it decried grows worse. The democracy it prizes continues to erode into the totalitarian surveillance and security state. Evermore life-space, life-time, and life-resources fall under the control of commodity markets, while ever tighter labour markets undermine the bargaining power of workers. All of these claims are true, and none should be ignored. Yet, it is also true that the world is not the same after Occupy as it was before. It is still a world ruled by money-value, but it is also a world in which a new generation of activists has been energised by their experience of the life-ground of value in political action in the encampments. That which is of ultimate importance is not Occupy, but the contribution that Occupy makes to the long-term struggle to create a world governed by a life-valuable social morality. If it has taken over two hundred years to understand and institutionalise the formal rights of liberal citizenship, it should surprise no one that creating a society in which those rights are made concretely real as universal and comprehensively accessible to the natural and social conditions of free life-development and enjoyment is a long term and open ended project.

Occupy, though short lived, made four important contributions to that long term project.

1. It proved to people that they had the power to mobilise and act; that there is a life-value alternative to corporate money-rule;
2. By mobilising and acting the occupiers helped to rebuild the “infrastructure of dissent” which any sustainable social movement requires;
3. People learned that what ultimately sustains life is not money and commodities but nature and collective labour; and
4. Occupy has inspired new movements in its wake that continue its work in new directions and in relation to distinct but related problems.



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In my discussions with Paul Chislett the theme that he kept returning to was the way in which the experience of direct democracy transformed the people in the camp. In Windsor—a small industrial city whose camp was also quite small—the homeless people that proved to be a problem in larger centres became some of the most important activists. Their being welcomed and involved in the political life of

the camp transformed them, helping them to overcome long-standing addictions and providing the context they needed to rediscover their subjectivity after years of being objects of social service bureaucracy and police violence. These are only the most dramatic examples of the most important achievement of Occupy—everyone who camped out, who participated in general assemblies, who performed solidarity work felt the power of collective agency. They discovered how good it feels to discover like-minded people and to discuss with them how a new world might be built. Once one has had this experience it is difficult (but not impossible) to rest content with the pre-packaged diversions of commodified enjoyment. The feeling of unity without ego-dissolution stays with people, it is what makes life-long activists out of weekend demonstrators, and it is life-long activists who are the trans-generational bond that transformational social movements require for their success.

Once people have freed their desires and their joys from commodity markets the system is ultimately doomed, because you can repress dissent for a time, but you cannot repress *lack* of desire for the commodities the market requires people to purchase for its social reproduction. Once people have become affectively disengaged from the market and engaged with each other in making unified demands for a life-valuable world, there is nothing, ultimately, that the ruling class can do to save itself. I believe that Occupy, by creating a space in which people could live and act out a dress rehearsal—messy and amateurish and full of mistakes—of the alternative society people know we need, has contributed more than any other movement since the mass mobilization of the 1960's to the creation of a new generation of activists.

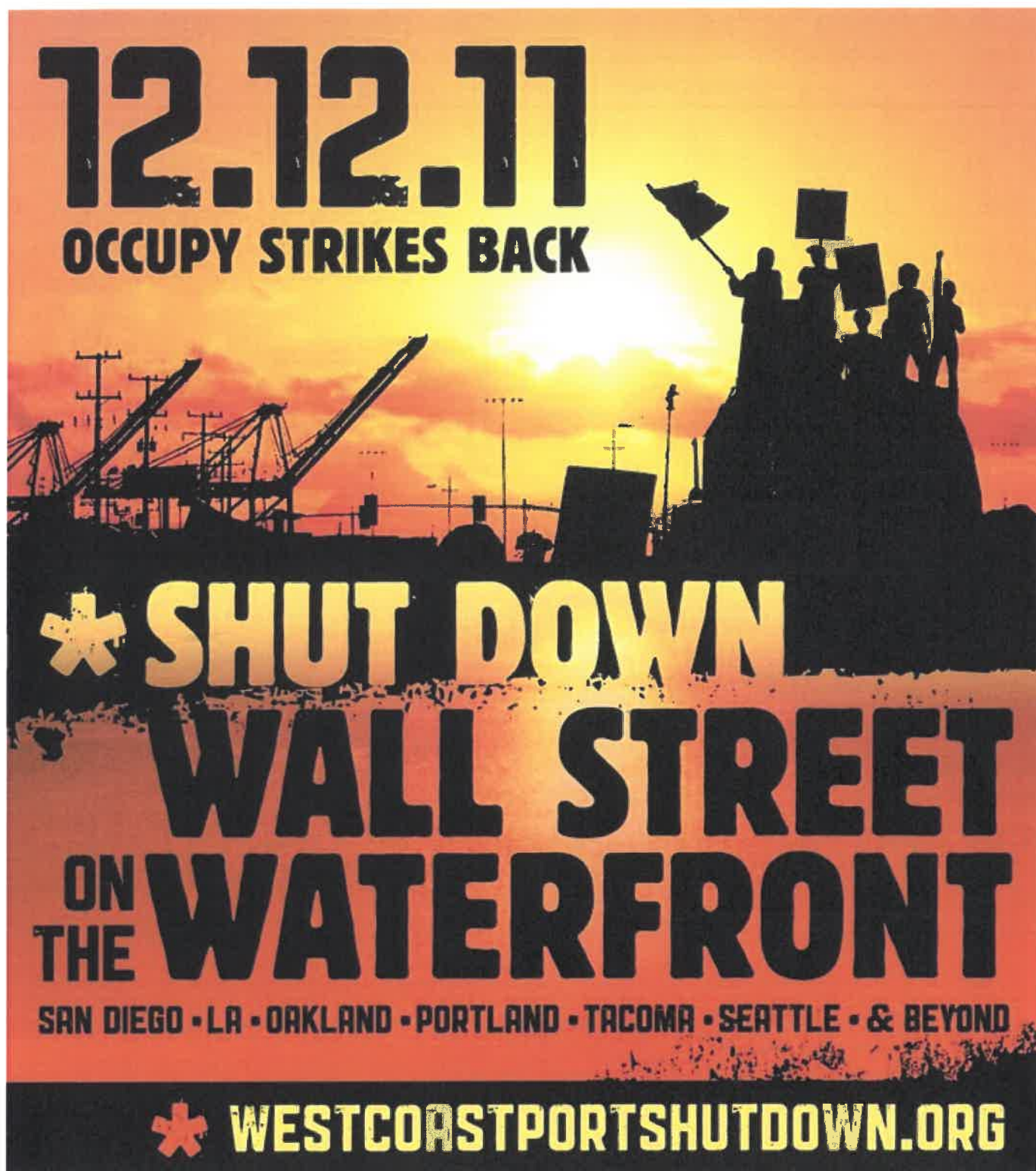


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Those activists have not disappeared. Although the camps are gone, the people and the ideas and the memories of the democratic egalitarianism of the camps remain. Those memories and those ideas live on in thousands of new websites, Twitter feeds, Facebook posts, and national and international contacts between participants. Together these sites and posts and networks have re-invigorated what Alan Sears has called the “infrastructure of dissent.” The infrastructure of dissent is “the range of formal and

informal organizations through which we develop our abilities to analyse (mapping the system) communicate (through official and alternative media), and take strategic action in real solidarity.”[18] The longevity of social movements depends upon the preservation and dissemination of political knowledge, and this preservation and dissemination is the function of the infrastructure of dissent. Occupy proved enormously creative in getting its message out—the virulent pace at which it spread owed largely to the digitized infrastructure of dissent that it created. Of course, one can make too much of the revolutionary implications of new social media—technologies do not act, people do. But people in action need support and to find and build support means disseminating their message. Sustaining the fight requires sharing ideas, tactics, and strategies. The resourcefulness and ingenuity of Occupy in finding new ways to share information and new ways to build solidarity networks is now preserved in a revitalised infrastructure of dissent that will enable the next global wave of activism to begin from a higher plateau of understanding and political sophistication.

The third major achievement of Occupy, directly tied to its tactic of remaining in public space for an unlimited amount of time, was that it provided objective evidence that life is sustained and developed by natural resources and collective labour, not commodity markets. For the time that they were encamped, the occupiers lived outside of the labour and commodity markets that drive capitalism. As noted above, this dependence is a system-requirement of capitalist society, not a genuine universal life-requirement. The struggle to keep the camps going made people cognizant of what is universally required for life: nature and other people; the material inputs that biological life requires and the social relationships the humanization of mammalian biology demands. Breaking the *appearance* of universal necessity which attaches to commodity markets is an essential step to freeing people from the belief that they have no choice but to comply with system-demands. Breaking people from this belief, in turn, is an essential step in the mobilization of social forces necessary to eliminating commodity and labour markets as the prime determinants of human life-chances. It is true that Occupy did not go far enough, did not challenge the structure of control over universally required resources that allows commodity and labour markets to play this role. It did, however, create a space in which people could see through capitalist appearances to life-reality, teaching them the distinction between actual life-needs and capitalist system-requirements. People discovered that labour could be allocated by the demands of social (i.e., camp) reproduction, not capitalist demand, that even the most mundane tasks could be fulfilling if they were performed willingly and not because the boss or economic necessity demanded, and that conflicts over alternative uses of resources could be resolved through democratic debate and not by which alternative would generate the highest monetary returns.



(<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/ocafter10.jpg>)

This experience, finally, reinvigorated old social movements, like organized labour, and inspired new movements in the wake of the disappearance of the Occupy camps. Perhaps the political high point of Occupy was the “general strike” organized by Occupy Oakland. As many as 20 000 people took part in this day of action, organized in response to police attacks on the main encampment.[19] While Occupy has not yet led to a dramatic upsurge in strike activity or labour militancy, it has at least taught the lesson that novel forms of open-ended militant action, not more concession bargaining, are required if the labour movement is to regain any political relevance.

That lesson has been learned by new movements that have arisen in the wake of Occupy, most notably the Quebec student movement and the Idle No More movement of the First Nations of Canada. In the winter of 2012 tens of thousands of Quebecois(es) students struck against the provincial government's plan to raise tuition fees. Many of the leading militants of the student strike were also Occupy activists. Unlike Occupy, however, the student strike won. In no small part due to the social movement their tenacity inspired, the government was defeated and the tuition hike cancelled.

Idle No More erupted in the wake of an on-going housing crisis on a First Nation's reserve in Atawapiskat, in Northern Ontario. Hundreds of people in one of the world's richest countries live in ramshackle housing in a climate of dangerous extremes. In response, the Chief, Teresa Spence, began a hunger strike in December 2012. This hunger strike quickly developed into a national movement which, inspired by Occupy tactics, blocked rail lines, highways, and access points to border crossings to the United States. The set of problems faced by First Nation's people emerge from the distinctive colonial history they have suffered, but the essential material problems they face—lack of control over the conditions of their lives—though generally more extreme, are shared with working class and oppressed people everywhere. Occupy lives on in their on-going struggles to reclaim their life-space, life-time, and the life-resources their freedom and dignity requires.

Occupy has not disappeared with the closure of the camps. It endures in the consciousness of the activists who created it and the new movements it continues to inspire. True, its achievements did not match the exuberant rhetoric that its more excitable protagonists trumpeted in its early days, but it did not leave everything as it is. Most importantly, it was a living example of non-alienated, democratic social relationships. It did not generate the disciplined, permanent organizational form that a movement capable of wresting control over life-resources will require, but it helped to create the people who might one day work out what the organizational form must look like in the specific socio-historical context in which the fight for the material conditions of freedom plays out today.



(<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/ocafter4.jpg>)

End notes

[1] This movement is chronicled in Nancy Davies, *The People Decide*, (Boston: Narco News Books), 2008.

[2] For a more detailed and nuanced discussion of neo-liberalism see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neo-liberalism*, (New York: oxford University Press), 2007. For its particular effects on organized labour see Greg Albo, Sam Gindin, and Leo Panitch, *In and Out of Crisis: The Global Financial Meltdown and Left Alternatives*, (Oakland, CA: PM Press), 2010.

[3] See John McMurtry, *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism*, (London: Pluto Press), 1999.

[4] For a more detailed history of the Zapatista rebellion and the political principles underlying it see *Zapatista! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution*, (New York: Autonomedia), 1994.

[5] David McNally, *Global Slump*, (Oakland, CA: PM Press), 2010, p. 4.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] These principles are spelled out on the website of Occupy Wall Street, <http://www.nycga.net/resources/principles-of-solidarity/> (<http://www.nycga.net/resources/principles-of-solidarity/>) (accessed, January 11th, 2013).

[8] Quoted in Chris Hedges and Joe Sacco, *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, (Toronto: Knopf Canada), 2012, p. 236.

[9] Paul is a tireless community organizer in Windsor, the director of the Windsor Worker's Action Centre, and gave an immense amount of time and energy to Occupy. He was gracious enough to speak to me about his experiences in Occupy. I was not a central figure in Occupy Windsor. I participated in some general assemblies and did solidarity work, but did not stay in the encampment.

[10] Cinzia Arruza, "Occupy America," *International Viewpoint: On Line Socialist Magazine*, March 18th, 2012, p. 4. (<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2536> (<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2536>)) (accessed, January 17th, 2013).

[11] Marina Sitrin, *Everyday Revolutions*, (New York: Zed Books), 2012, p. 65.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] See the discussion of "power over" versus "power to" in John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power*, (London: Pluto Press), 2002, pp. 28-30.

[14] Quoted in Hedges and Sacco, *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, p. 150.

[15] Sitrin, "Occupy: making Democracy A Question," *What We Are Fighting For: A Radical Collective Manifesto*, Federico Campagna and Emanuele Campiglio, eds., (London: Pluto Press), 2012, pp. 88-9.

[16] Jo Freeman, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 17, 1972-73, pp. 151-164.

[17] Jodi Dean, "Occupy Wall Street: After the Anarchist Moment," *Socialist Register 2013: The Question of Strategy*, Leo Panitch, Greg Albo, and Vivek Chibber, eds., (London: Merlin Press), 2013, p.54.

[18] Alan Sears, "The Left and the End of Harper." (<http://www.rabble.ca/news/2011/07/left-and-end-harper>) (<http://www.rabble.ca/news/2011/07/left-and-end-harper>) (accessed, December 9th, 2012).

[19] Barbara Epstein, "Occupy Oakland and the Question of Violence," *Socialist Register 2013: The Question of Strategy*, pp. 63-83.



(<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/zap1-1.png>)

[Thank you indeed Jeff for this much needed essay]

The writer is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Windsor, in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. His most recent book is *Materialist Ethics and Life-Value*, (2012). More of his work can be found at his website: <http://www.jeffnoonan.org> (<http://www.jeffnoonan.org>)

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MARCH 14, 2013MARCH 14, 2013 SANJAY PERERA# ACTIVISM, # CAPITALIST LIFE CRISIS, # CONSENSUS, # DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES, # DIRECT DEMOCRACY, # JEFF NOONAN, # LIFE-COHERENT, # LIFE-VALUE, # MONEY VALUE, # NEW PARADIGMS, # OCCUPATIONS, # OCCUPY, # OCCUPY MOVEMENT, # OCCUPY WALL STREET, # POST-OCCUPY WORLD, # RADICALISM, # SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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Philosophers for Change

What does Revolution mean today?

Save



(<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/rev0.jpg>)

by Jeff Noonan

On May 31st what began months before as opposition to the cutting down of trees in Taksim Square in Istanbul exploded into country-wide opposition to the increasingly authoritarian rule of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. As was the case with the Arab Spring and Occupy, the Turkish youth and workers' movement caught global commentators unawares. Turkey had been held up as a model of "moderation" amongst "Muslim" countries: tolerant, democratic, capitalist, a NATO member, and a trusted American ally. Suddenly, the social fissures that had opened up the space for revolution in Tunisia and Egypt, for Occupy in North America, and for movements for real democracy and an end to

austerity in Greece and Spain had cracked open Turkey too: a disconnect between the values and goals of youth and workers and the economic and political priorities of the government. In an essay written to explain the unanticipated uprising, Sungur Savran called the movement, “*une revolte, pas ... une revolution*.” [1] His point was that those occupying Taksim Square had immediate and specific demands which, if met, could defuse the crisis. A revolution, by contrast, makes demands that cannot be met by changed policies or even changed governments, but require fundamental social changes. The question is, therefore, what is the nature of the changes demanded that makes them “fundamental,” or revolutionary?

A revolt seeks to oust a government which has lost legitimacy or reverse a hated policy, but does not call into question the legitimacy of the entire social system, its institutions, its class structure, and its ruling value system. The basic difference between revolt and revolution is one of scale and scope — revolts are particular, revolutions are comprehensive, revolts have demands that can be satisfied without change of ruling class and value system, revolutions aim to change the structure of power, the organization of major institutions, and the ruling value system. There is, thus, continuity across the history of revolutionary struggle: wherever there are fundamental institutional and value changes, there is revolution.

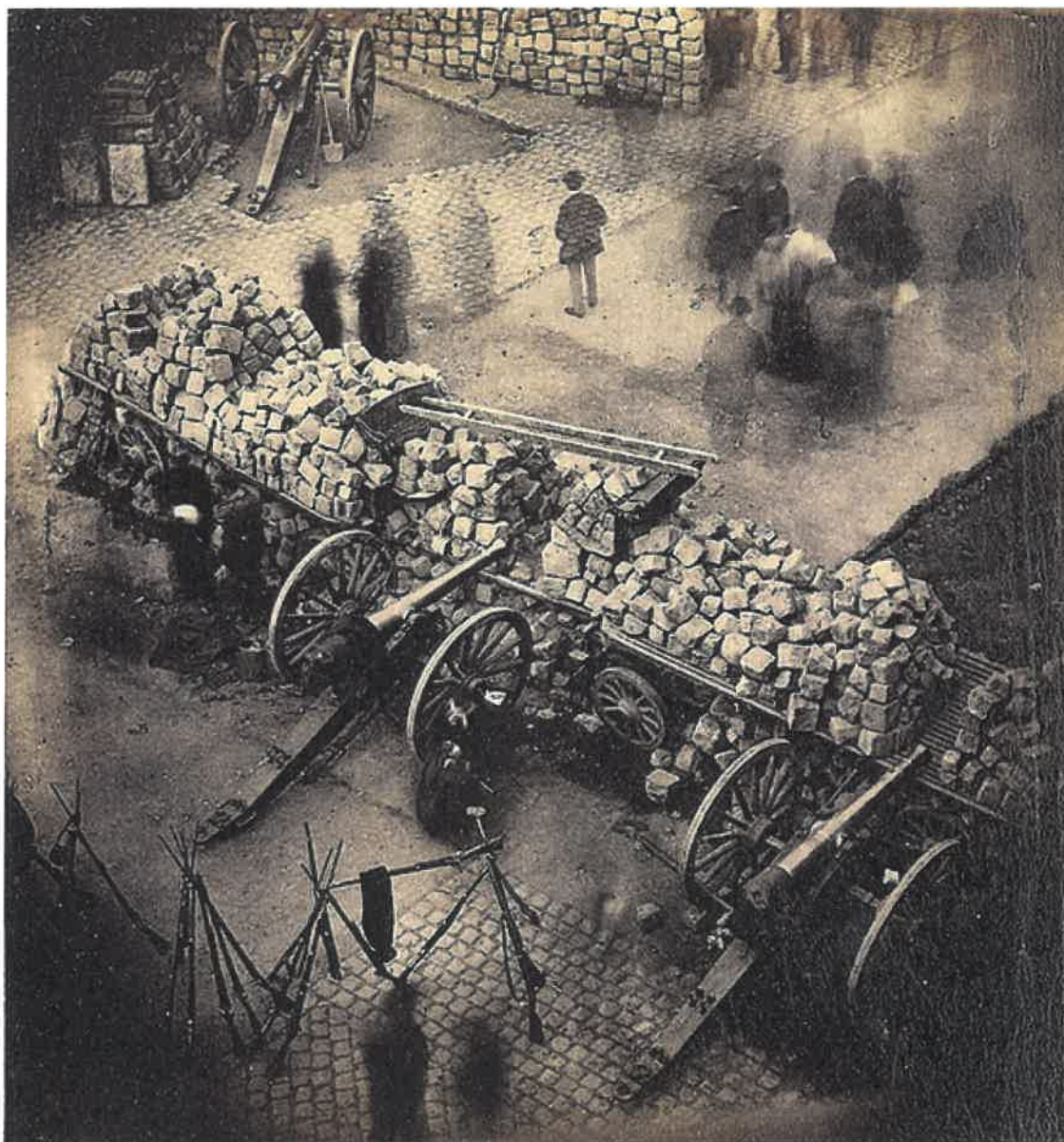


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Within this broad and abstract continuity there are also differences, and it is most important today to understand those differences. While revolutions have always involved fundamental changes in value system, social institutions, and ruling class, the content of those fundamental changes — the substance of the new value system, the character of the institutions, and the identity of the incipient ruling class —

alters over history. These changes of content have had implications for revolutionary form — its justifications, its methods, and its leaders. Understanding these changes at this conjuncture in history is particularly important, because intensifying political instability across the globe indicates that we may be entering a revolutionary period (one in which the subaltern classes refuse to be ruled in the old way and rulers cannot rule in the old way) at a time when revolutionary politics, at least in the Global North, is still associated with the catastrophe that was Stalinism. The important question is thus not “what does revolution mean in the abstract,” but rather “what does revolution mean today?” Can there be a revolutionary politics that learns from the failures of twentieth century revolutions how to avoid degeneration into the violent rule of an undemocratic and unrepresentative “vanguard” claiming to speak in the interests of those it brutally oppresses?

In order to answer this question we need to proceed historically, first examining the difference between the ancient world’s understanding of revolution and the modern world’s, and then examining the emergence of the Marxist understanding of revolution from the modern. Central to both the modern and Marxist understanding of revolution is the idea that it involves the political overturning of conditions that block the institutionalization of universal human interests. The difference between them comes down to a difference in understanding the content of those universal interests. Revolution today retains the connection between politics and the removal of structural barriers to the institutionalization of universal human interests, but the failures of twentieth century forms of revolutionary practice entail refinements in the understanding of the content of those interests and a rejection of vanguardism as a viable political means by which their more comprehensive institutionalization may be sought. The twentieth century has made clear that militarization of revolutionary political struggle and the more comprehensive satisfaction of universal human interests are antithetical. Revolutionary politics in the Global North today means using the spaces for democratic organization that previous revolutions have pried open for mass, militant, but resolutely non-violent organizing and action against intransigent ruling classes whose legitimacy is compromised because they reduce democratic institutions to tools for their own private interests.



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I: What has Revolution meant?

In the ancient world political revolution was understood in essentially geometrical terms. Societies were assumed to move in cycles of degeneration and development in which power passed to different groups of people. Thus “revolution” did refer to instances of structural social change, but these changes were plotted along a natural continuum of decline and restoration not itself subject to change by organized political means. For example, in Plato’s typology of states in Book Eight of *The Republic*, democracy develops out of a revolution of the poor against oligarchy, but in turn necessarily degenerates into tyranny, both the nadir of social organization and the first moment of the regenerative movement.[2] There are two key differences between the ancient and modern conceptions of revolution. The first is that the ancient conception does not recognise the possibility of permanent breaks between an unjust past and a just future, and the second is that it does not regard human beings as capable of full self-determination. Societies cannot fully escape their past and human beings cannot fully determine their social and political lives because human societies are embedded in natural cycles and forces beyond the reach of human politics. The modern idea of revolution is born with the Enlightenment’s rejection of these core principles of ancient thought.

Enlightenment ideas about revolution were not created *ex nihilo*, but drew on a body of theory and political practice that had been developing throughout the seventeenth century. Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes, and Locke challenged scientific and philosophical orthodoxy and exposed its limitations. Politically, the English Revolution of the 1640's overthrew the monarchy and opened the door to the political power of an emerging capitalist landowning class, demonstrating as convincingly as one could imagine that social orders are impermanent and subject to deliberate change. When combined, the critique of scientific and philosophical orthodoxy, the new discoveries that critique made possible, and the success of the English Revolution formed a matrix within which a new idea of progress emerged. The modern idea of revolution incorporated this new idea of progress. Revolution came to mean a consciously organized social process whereby the shackles of the past (superstition, aristocratic rule) were cast off *once and for all*. Rather than orbit around an eternal cycle, revolution came to signify permanent break with the past that enabled permanent improvement in science, in technique, in political and social organization.

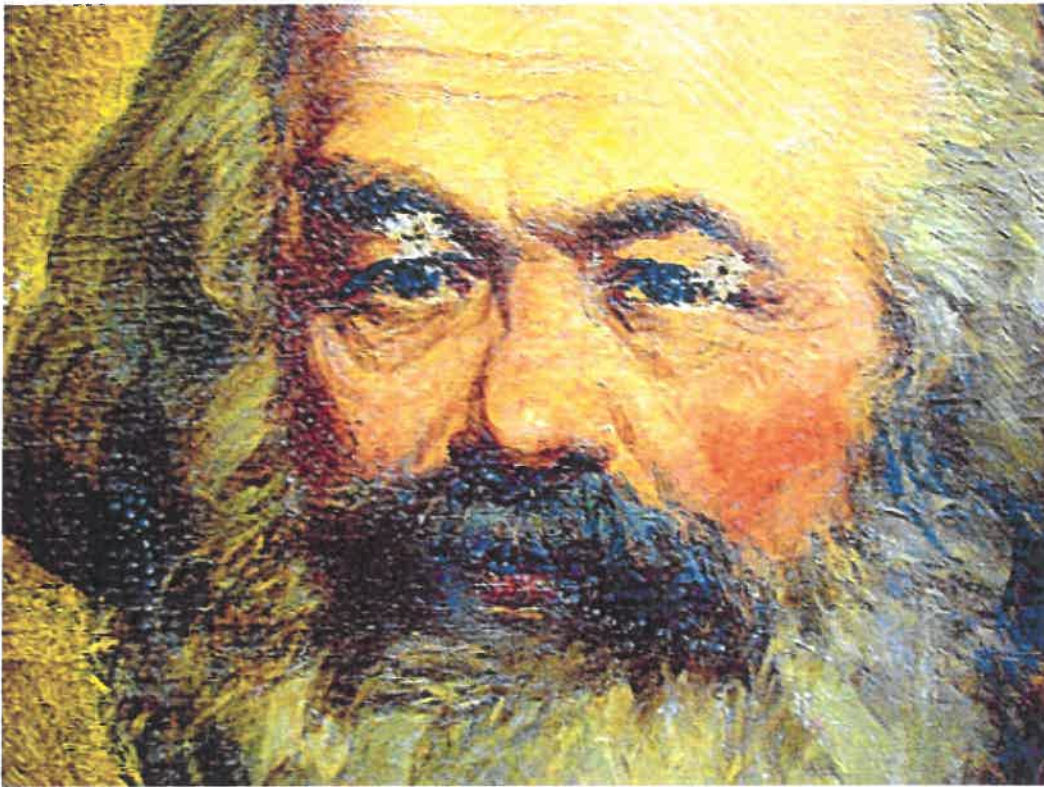


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The philosophical, scientific, and political achievements of the seventeenth century gave rise to a self-ramifying series of increasingly radical changes in the eighteenth century. These increasingly radical

changes — the anti-colonial revolution of America against the British helped inspire the French Revolution which asserted the *universal* rights of human beings which inspired the slave rebellion in San Domingo (Haiti) against French rule and the slave trade — were all predicated on the new legitimacy of the general practice of revolution. The basic idea of conservatism — that there is wisdom in the past — was discredited. Conservatives now took on a historically new guise as *reactionaries*, social groups who resisted the progressive change for which revolutionaries were struggling. Prior to the eighteenth century, radical breaks from tradition would have been regarded as unnatural, monstrous denials of human nature; at the end of the eighteenth century revolution was regarded as necessary for the full development of human nature. Condorcet provides a canonical formulation of this new idea of revolution. Generalizing from his examination of European history he concludes: “*Nous avons vu la raison humaine se former lentement par la progres naturels de la civilization; la superstition s'emparer d'elle pour la corrompre, et le despotisme degrader et engourdir les esprits sous les poids de crainte et du malheur.*” [3]

Change, rather than stasis, progressive development, is natural, opposed only by superstition and the despots it serves. Stasis is thus an unnatural check to social development which, since it is grounded in irrationality, will not cede to the force of the better argument, but only to force. Revolution is thus necessary to overcome unnatural blockages to human historical development. *Revolutions* might be political singularities, but the principles upon which they rest are universal: “*les philosophes des diverses nations embrassent, dans leur meditations, les interets de l'humanite entiere sans distinction de pays, de race ou de secte, formaient ... un phalange fortement unie contre ... tous les genres de tyrannie.*” [4]. This modern conception of revolution, as a political necessity forced on humanity by tyrannical power, is the template from which the Marxist conception of revolution was developed.

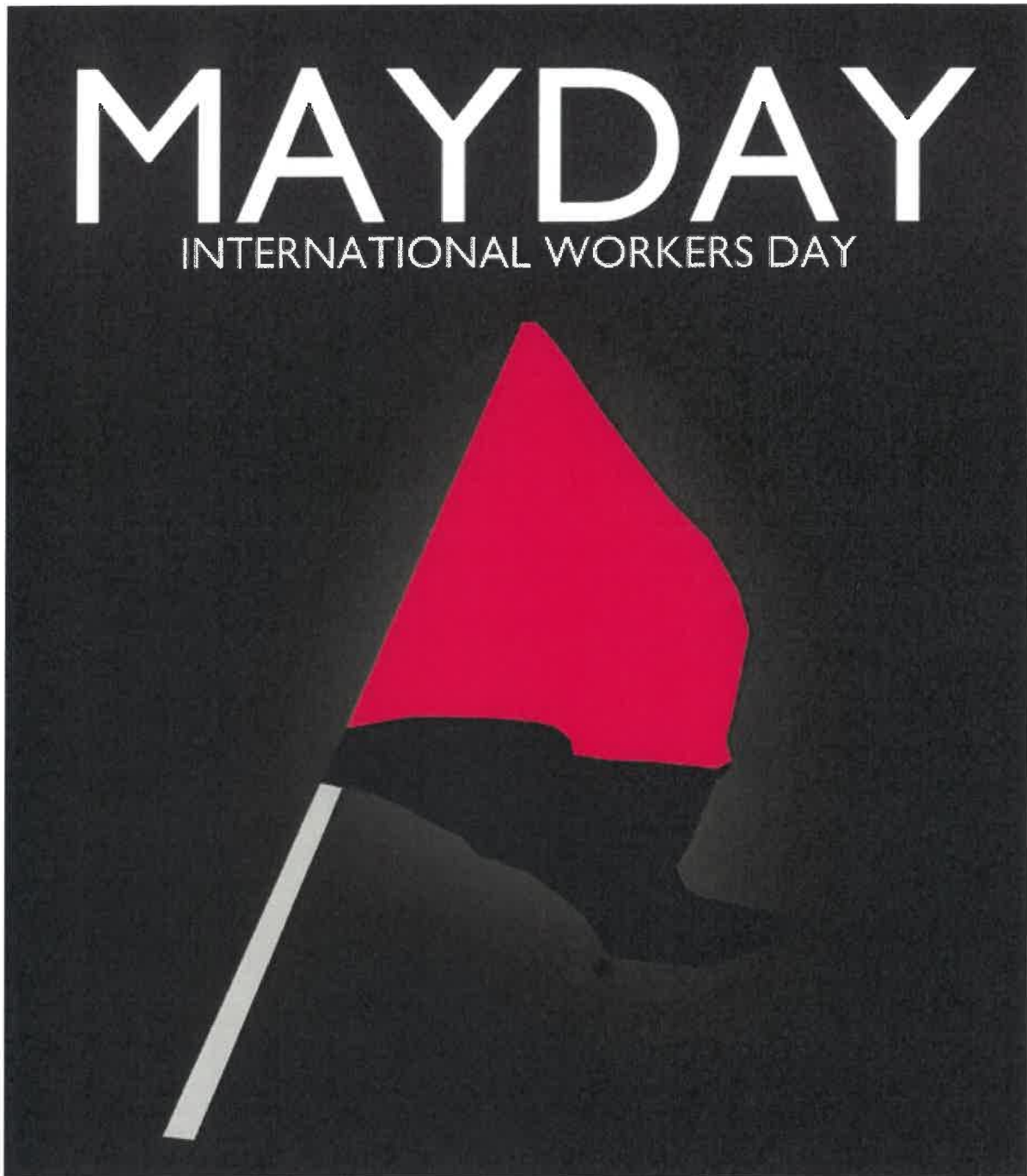


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Marx and Engels and the communist tradition they engendered altered the goal and the composition of revolutionary forces, substituting overcoming capitalist class structure for “tyranny” and the proletariat for the bourgeoisie, but maintaining the underlying justification for revolution first formulated in the

Enlightenment. The changes that Marx and Engels introduced expressed the failure of the eighteenth century liberal-capitalist revolutions to satisfy the universal human interests in whose name they claimed to speak. At the same time, Marx and Engels did not reject the objective reality of those interests, but instead attempted to give them more comprehensive expression. The impossibility of liberal-capitalism satisfying those universal interests is still cited as the reason why revolution is both necessary and legitimate. "For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim...to present its interests as the common interest...it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and present them as the only rational, universally valid ones." [5] Whether these interests are fully universal or not is a question decided by practice, not philosophy. Thus, in abstract expression the class interests of the bourgeoisie in political freedom from absolute monarchy were universal, but once institutionalized proved to be concretely opposed to the class interests of workers. Hence, just as the bourgeoisie before it, the workers face a structural impediment to their freedom, an impediment which they can overcome only through a revolution of their own.

The difference between the class interest of workers and that of all previous classes is, according to Marx and Engels, that the universal interests of human beings and the particular class interests of workers coincide. If, therefore, the workers can successfully overthrow the capitalist class structure they would at the same time overthrow the social conditions — private and exclusive ownership of universally required life-resources and their exploitation for money-value — which require political tyranny. In other words, the proletarian revolution would be the final revolution because its outcome — collective ownership and control of universally required life-resources — abolishes the conditions which make any form of oppression necessary. Since there would be no private and exclusive social power having to protect its particular interests from the majority, there is no longer any need for a repressive apparatus of any kind.



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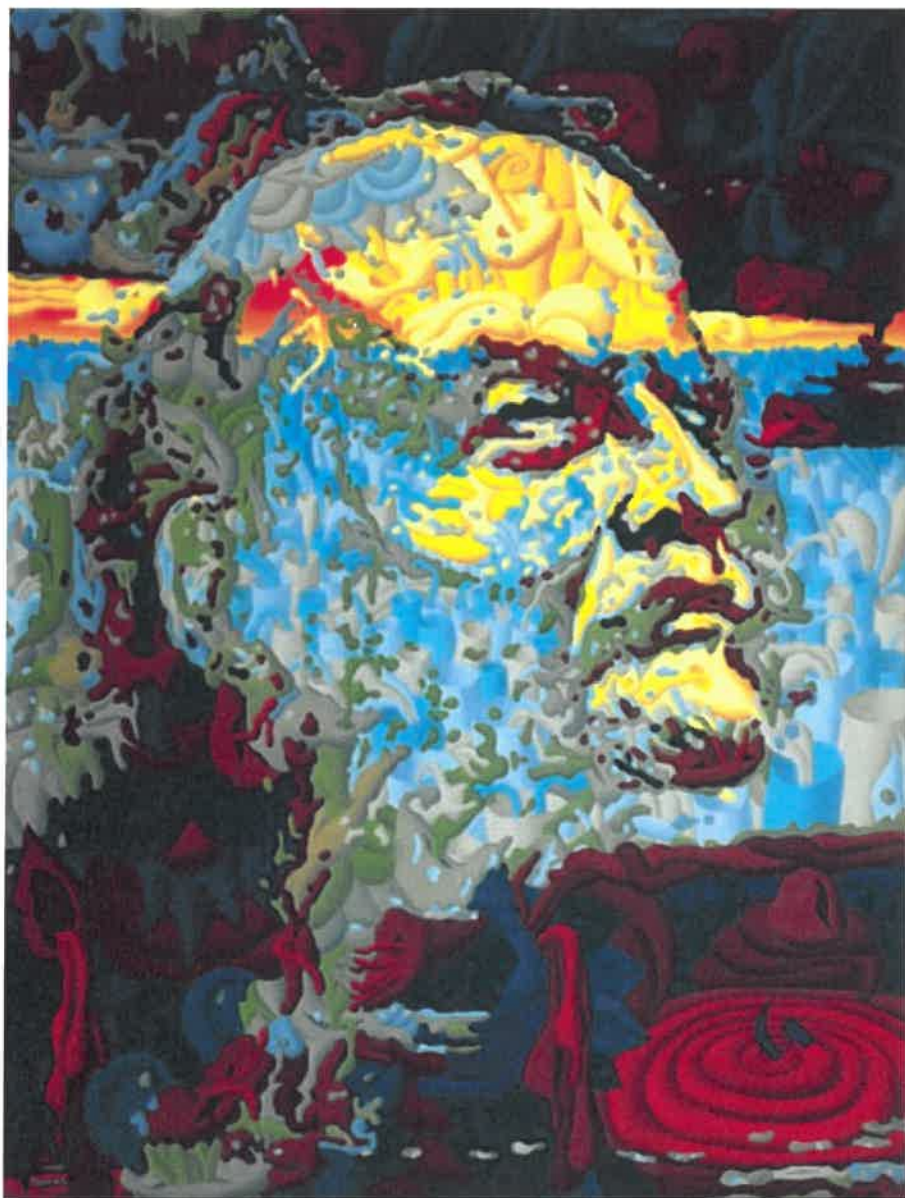
The proletarian revolution thus triumphs over the conflicts that made all previous revolutions necessary:

Political power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another. If the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie...makes itself the ruling class, and , as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for class antagonisms and classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class. In place of the old bourgeois society...we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the conditions of the free development of all.[6]

The proletarian revolution is thus regarded by Marx and Engels as a regrettable necessity, part of the struggle for political power which ruling class intransigence forces upon the proletariat (as monarchical

intransigence forced revolution on the bourgeois before).

Revolution is thus a break with the class structure of bourgeois society, but it is also continuous with those aspects of liberal capitalism that were of universal value, in particular, democracy. Marx and Engels understood revolution as part of the “battle for democracy,” the elimination of the structural barriers capitalist society places in the way of substantive self-government. Given the vehemence with which these structural barriers will be defended by the ruling class (because from their subjective perspective these structural barriers are personal privileges) *battle* is necessary. Hence, revolutions must remove the old ruling class by force and employ coercive tactics against reactionaries. As Engels explains, “a revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is: it is an act whereby part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets, and cannon, all of which are highly authoritarian means. And the victorious party must maintain its rule by means of terror which its arms inspire in the reactionaries.[7] Engels is not glorifying revolutionary violence, but drawing on the historical experience available to argue against those who oppose authoritarianism in the abstract that the democratic values they cherish can often not be advanced save by undemocratic means, because the old ruling class will protect its private interests at all costs.



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This realist current in Marx and Engels is a through-line connecting their work to the great revolutionaries of the twentieth century, Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, and Che Guevara. All believed, as Marx and Engels believed, that organized armed resistance was an instrumental necessity and not an intrinsic value. If the exclusive control of the ruling class over universally required life-resources could be achieved through argument, then persuasion would be preferable. Unfortunately, ruling classes are only interested in argument as a means of dividing opposition and attenuating the process of change. The emergence of genuine democratic society thus requires armed struggle. Those who reject revolutionary violence on principle are not serious about the democratic values they claim to champion, because democracy is a way of life not an idea, such that anyone who values democracy wants to live in a democracy, and anyone who wants to live in a democracy must take up the challenges of building one in the actual historical conditions one faces. “The petty bourgeois democrats, those sham socialists who replaced the class struggle by dreams of class harmony, even pictured the socialist transformation as a dreary fantasy — not as the overthrow of the rule of the exploiting class, but as the peaceful submission of the minority to the majority which has become aware of its aims.”[8] Lenin’s historical experience contained no instance of peaceful institutionalization of universal human interests, but only the imprisonment, exile, and execution of those who defended them in practice. Like Engels, he does not glorify revolutionary violence as a virtue; he laments it as a social necessity, but is willing to use it, because he is committed to realizing the values he champions in theory in living practice.

The crucial point to take away from this brief survey of the development of the modern conception of revolution is that Condorcet, Marx, Engels, and Lenin are drawing their conclusions from concrete historical analysis of the political struggles of which they were a part or which formed the historical background to the struggles of which they were a part. The differences in their arguments derive from differences of historical context; the continuities from historical continuities. The most important continuity is the claim that revolutions advance the universal interests of humanity, in this service to social progress lies both their necessity and their moral and political justification. The most important difference is in the understanding of the social conditions required for the realization of those universal interests — overcoming the class structure of liberal-capitalism supported by Condorcet as the highest achievement of human struggle. The same problem that confronted Marx and Engels in relation to the bourgeois revolutions in whose shadow they lived confront socialists living today in the shadow of the twentieth century socialist revolutions: what is continuous with and what is different from the social conditions of the twentieth century and what implications do these continuities and differences have for the meaning of revolution today?

The continuities between twentieth and twenty-first century capitalism are clear. Capitalism remains exploitative, alienating, inequalitarian, intolerant of genuine democratic self-governance in all major social institutions, regularly generative of violent domestic and international conflict, conducive to the over-development of the worst dispositions of the human personality (selfishness, greed, ego-centrism, self-importance, indifference to the sufferings of the others, and victim-blaming) and environmentally unsustainable. The realization of the universal life-interests of human beings — the satisfaction of their life-requirements in a sustainable economy that provides real opportunities for the expression and enjoyment of valuable life-capacities, democratic self-governance in all spheres of collective life, and peaceful international and domestic social relations conducive to the formation of creative, difference-embracing, mutualistic relationships and cultural expressions — still depends upon overcoming the class structure of capitalism. The universal life-interests of human beings cannot be comprehensively satisfied when the natural resources and the social institutions required for their satisfaction remain under the more or less exclusive control of a minority class driven by the goal of maximal accumulation of money-value for itself. But there are also at least three crucial differences between the social

conditions of twenty-first century capitalism and early twentieth century capitalism that necessitate important changes in the meaning of revolution today. I will discuss each of these differences and then explain their implications for the contemporary conception of revolution in the next section.



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The most important difference between the political and social context in which opponents of capitalism were working in the twentieth century and the social and political context in which they work in the twenty-first is the failure of the former's revolutionary experiments. The political centre-piece of those experiments — the vanguard party — proved capable of seizing power, but not of democratizing power once the period of initial instability had passed. Indeed, that instability was overcome only through the "authoritarian means" Engels described. The problem that Engels did not anticipate was that the practitioners of those authoritarian means continued to seek out and find new internal "enemies" long after the old ruling classes had ceased their opposition. The legacy of revolutionary vanguardism — purges, show trials, mass detentions and executions — is a legacy only a fool or a psychopathic killer would want to risk repeating. New forms of political organization are thus required, forms which somehow reconcile the goal of the complete transformation of capitalism into a democratic socialist life-economy and society with the political pluralism that everyone concerned in a credible way with advancing the project of sustainable human freedom accepts today.

The second crucial difference between the political contexts of the nineteenth and early twentieth century and our own time concerns the relative balance of armed force between states and democratic

opponents. Engels' belief that reactionaries can be "terrified" into compliance by revolutionary arms is made nonsense by the reactionaries having at their disposal the complement of weapons available to modern states. Street fighting, barricades, and even small arms are no match for tanks, drones, and stealth bombers. No irregular popular militia is any military match for the states of the Global North; if any of those states ever chose to unleash the full killing-power of their military on oppositional movements, those opposition movements would be overwhelmed in a matter of hours.

Afghanistan is not a counter-example — although US and NATO forces have not defeated the Taliban, they have not unleashed the full means of violence available to them. That which constrains them from unleashing every device they have is not any response the Taliban could mount, but the political and moral cost, especially at home, the use of nuclear or biological weapons would have. That ruling classes can still be constrained by political and moral costs tells us something of profound positive importance. Today, revolutionary politics must be resolutely non-violent — the goal of movements for fundamental social change can no longer be to overthrow the state by force, but to overwhelm the state's legitimacy through organizing a gigantic, unified movement that rests on goals so obviously in the shared life-interest that the army and police forces refuse to protect the ruling powers, which must then concede as a consequence. In this choice lies the difference between Egypt — a successful revolution that was captured by reactionary forces but in which the opposition lives to continue the struggle, and Syria, a brutal civil war that is hardening sectarian divisions and in which the fractured opposition is being slaughtered.



(<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/rev7.jpg>)

The need to reject armed violence and political vanguardism brings us to the third and most important

difference between nineteenth and twentieth century conceptions of revolution and today's. The difference is that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the battle of (political) democracy had not been won. The space for democratic opposition in Russia, Germany, and China was constrained by vestiges of monarchical authoritarianism; in the Global South, revolutionaries confronted violent, racist, colonial administrations. Armed struggle was not a choice, it was, as Lenin argued, a necessity where there were no mature, functioning democratic alternatives. For the reasons cited in points 1 and 2, armed vanguardism is no longer an option: it has been discredited by the failure of twentieth century revolutions to produce stable democratic socialist alternatives to capitalism, and struggles conducted on military terms will always prove favourable to states which enjoy an overwhelming military advantage against internal opposition. However, there is also no need to fight on the terms of the twentieth century, because the principle, if not the practice, of democracy has been fully accepted and incorporated into the institutional structure of the major capitalist societies. Democratic societies can change themselves if a stable majority of citizens is committed to changing them. The major explosions in the last five years — from the Arab Spring to Occupy to Turkey — have all been fuelled by demands that ruling classes *respect* ordinary people by *respecting* democracy. Revolutionary vanguardism has been discredited in the popular imagination, mass democratic action has not.

In any society in which the democratic principle — all affected by a decision should be able to participate in its formulation and execution — has been institutionalised, there is no legitimate way for ruling classes to prevent its more extensive and intensive application.[9] Revolutionary politics today thus means building mass movements against the illegitimate attempts of ruling powers to prevent the legitimate extension and deepening of democratic governance of all major social institutions in the shared life-interest. This conception of revolution — fundamental social change led by a clear understanding of common life-interests achieved by means of peaceful democratic struggles of movements capable of winning by force of argument and not force of arms — is what oppositional movements require, not only to avoid the mistakes of the past, but to actually solve the structural problems of the present. In the next section I will unpack this understanding of what revolution means today.



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II: What Revolution means today

As noted, the legitimacy of revolution since the Enlightenment has been grounded in the universality of interests purportedly represented by revolutionary classes and served by their political organizations. The failure of those organizations to create stable democratic socialist societies raises questions about the universality of the interests they serve. For Marx, the history of revolution was the history of the progressively more inclusive scope of revolutionary movements: bourgeois parties served bourgeois interests, which were more universal than aristocratic interests, but still exclusionary. The proletarian movement served proletarian interest, but these interests were universal, because the proletariat, the class whose labour is responsible for social reproduction and development, has no need to exploit the labour of any other class. "Only the proletarians of the present day," Marx wrote,

who are completely shut off from all self-activity, are in a position to achieve a complete and no longer restricted self-activity, which consists in the appropriation of the totality of the productive forces and in the thus postulated development of a totality of capacities. All earlier revolutionary appropriations were restricted... In all appropriations up to now, a mass of individuals remained subservient to a single instrument of production; in the appropriation by the proletarians, a mass of instruments of production must be made subject to each individual and property to all.[10]

Yet, in each case of twentieth century socialist revolution, the workers found themselves subordinated

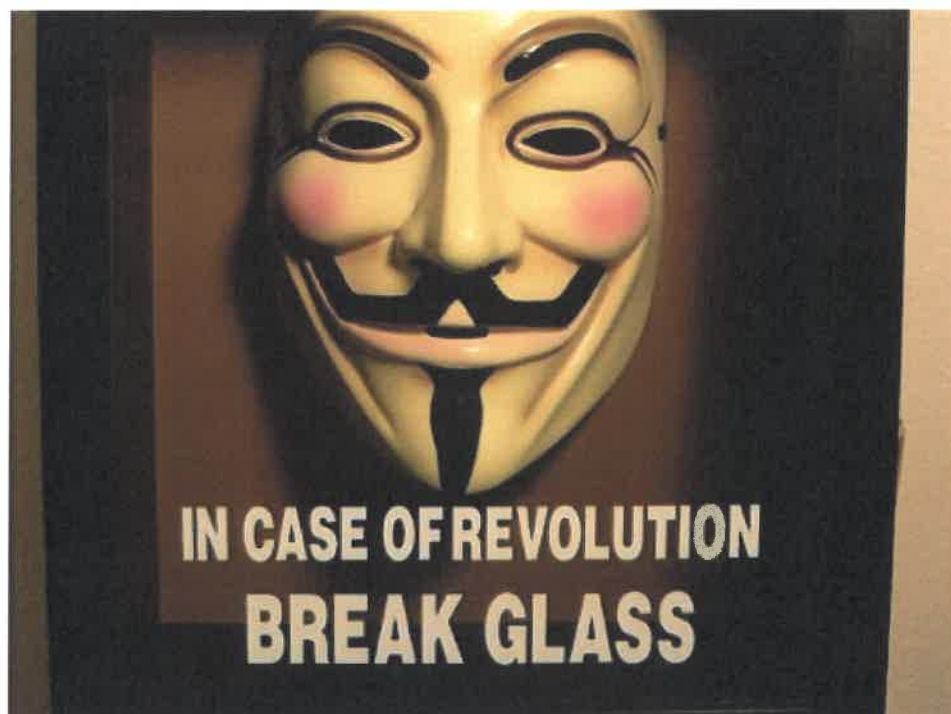
anew, not to a ruling class, but to the vanguard party which began its life claiming to be the self-conscious expression of the universality of working class interests. The reconstitution of the vanguard party as a permanent ruling power alienated from the lives and goals of working people raised questions, both about whether working class interests were really universal, and, more fundamentally, whether there were any universal human interests at all.



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It is clear that there are universal human interests, but, as human, they do not fully coincide with the social interests of any particular class. The universal interests of human beings are grounded in the need to satisfy certain fundamental natural and social requirements of biological life and social and cultural development. Working people *share these interests* with every other human being. The unique problem that working people face is that they cannot access those goods and services their own labour produces without the money to pay for them, but labour markets do not necessarily provide labour and a living wage to all who need it. This structural dependence of working people on labour markets for the money they require in order to purchase the natural and social necessities of life and human development gives them a cross-class *social* interest in overcoming this structural dependence on labour and commodity markets. The *universal* interests, however, are deeper — they are the life-interests in need-based access to the full range of life-requirements which must be satisfied if the full range of human capacities is to be developed, expressed, and enjoyed in each human life. The political conflict is between classes, the moral fault line the political conflict reveals is between a ruling value system that prioritises money-value appropriation by the ruling class over the satisfaction of the universal life-interests. If we agree with Marx that each successive revolution is construed on a more universal basis than the last, then a socialist revolution is not grounded in the social class interests of the proletariat, but the universal life-interests threatened by capitalist social dynamics and ruling-value system.

The revolution that is needed today is not a revolution of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie — even using those nineteenth century terms sounds anachronistic — but a revolution of the common life-interest against the life-blind dynamics of globalized capitalism, dynamics which are compromising the life-support capacity of the biosphere and which turn all life, bacterial, plant, animal and human into exploitable tools of their reproduction and expansion. To be sure, working people, those whose lives are dominated in almost every dimension by the need to compete for scarce work in order to merely live, must be at the forefront of new organizations of political opposition. Their position in production still gives them tremendous potential social and political power, should this power be organized nationally and internationally. But it is not workers as workers that embody the universal life-interest; the universal life-interest is basic, each human being is an embodiment of it, the content of the universal life-interest is constitutive of what it is to be a human being. Hence, consciousness of the universal life-interest is not identical to class consciousness. Therefore, it cannot be represented by a vanguard party of the early twentieth century form. We need to understand precisely why it cannot be.



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First, although the working class is composed of people of different sexes and sexualities, different races and ethnicities, different ranges of ability and interest, the ways in which these differences become grounds for oppression in a capitalist society cannot be understood through the lens of class exploitation. However, they *can* all be understood through the lens of common life interests, which proves that class exploitation and the common life-interest are not identical. While every form of oppression has its own complex history, each is a form of systematic deprivation of some set of life-requirements. The experience of oppression is the experience of structurally imposed barriers to free self-expression and development. The ideological justification of oppression is also structurally identical across particular cases. Wherever one finds oppression, one finds ideologies of invidious hierarchy, according to which the oppressed group is not denied anything it actually needs, because it is not 'civilised' or 'rational' enough to properly use that which the laws and mores of the society prevent it from accessing. If class exploitation is not the common fount of all forms of oppression, then class consciousness cannot be the basis of political unity between working people and other oppressed

groups, whether members of the working class or not. Consciousness of the shared life-interest *could* be that basis, but its becoming so is not the automatic outcome of a reified dialectic of political development, but deliberate political argument and construction.

Second, that which is required by each and all as universal condition of the development of the totality of human capacities goes beyond Marx's "totality of the instruments of production." Working people have a *social* interest in owning and controlling the means of production, and a society grounded in life value presupposes a democratic economy in which universally required life-resources and productive institutions are commonly owned. But it also requires respect for life as an intrinsic value, recognition of the material priority of the biosphere as a life-support system, and consequent limits to productivity and economic 'growth'; it requires the capacity to slow down, to leave possibilities unrealized, to relate to each other mutualistically, to value receptivity and passivity and sensuousness.

It is true references to all of these requirements of a life-valuable society can be found in Marx and the Marxist tradition, but they are not central to its understanding of revolutionary goals, much less revolutionary practices. When it comes to revolutionary practice, Marx, Engels and the Marxist tradition tend towards ruthless political realism, focussing on revolution as an instrument by which one class power is replaced by another. Taking and then maintaining power begin their lives as instruments of revolutionary values, but, historically, they have then become ends in themselves. At the point where they become ends in themselves the rifles and cannons that Engels said were to frighten the reactionaries get turned against anyone who questions any decision of the leading party faction. From the life-value perspective, taking and maintaining power are only ever instrumental values and can never be allowed to become ends in themselves. Successful life-value revolution is thus resolutely opposed to "by any means necessary" thinking. Revolutionaries who are willing to do anything have always proven ready to do anything to *anybody*, including people supposedly on their side.



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Third, and more practically, slogans of workers' power do not move a majority of people today, even in those sites of intense capitalist crisis. In Greece and Spain, the radical left has been revived by the crisis, but it does not speak the language of workers' power, but of "real democracy." [11] That which matters to people today is not that workers attain power as a class, but that the institutions of political democracy — themselves the inheritance of a longer revolutionary heritage — actually function democratically, and not as the exclusive instruments of (especially finance) capital. The old class divide is still present, the structural subordination of people's life-requirements and life-horizons to money-value is still the fundamental material and normative problem, but no one believes that a vanguard worker's party is the political form that a workable solution requires. There is a growing awareness that genuine progress towards the more comprehensive institutionalization of life values requires an end to the exclusive power of a single class, but that overcoming this rule is not going to be accomplished through a once and for all blow that knocks them from their perch. Instead, the idea of revolutionary change as an on-going process of learning and experimentation (Occupy, for example) is emerging.

While vanguardism has no purchase on the political imagination at present, it does not follow that nothing of use can be learned from its history. In particular, Trotsky's theory of the permanent revolution remains relevant, although not perhaps in the way he would have expected. The theory maintained that in order to succeed the bourgeois democratic revolution in Russia would have to become socialist, because the bourgeois democratic parties would consolidate their own rule as soon as they attained power, subordinating the workers and peasants to their class interests. [12] The significance of his argument is not restricted to the unique circumstances of Russia, but is of general importance, for it is rooted in the idea that revolutions are not events but processes: "It is not a question of a single 'blow,' or of a single day or month, but of a whole historical epoch. It would be absurd to try to fix its duration in advance." [13] If it is true that revolutions take place over entire historical epochs, and that it is *impossible* to fix the duration of a revolution in advance, then it is *possible* to look differently at the epoch stretching from the Enlightenment to the present. This entire epoch can be understood as a period of permanent revolution in which the material implications of democracy are being worked out. Marxism and socialism are, in this view, not the antithesis of liberal-capitalism, but extensions and developments of the democratic principle first introduced during the revolutions of the eighteenth century. As we have seen, Marx and Engels saw the socialist revolution as part of the "battle for democracy," and socialism is, in its most basic sense, democratization of economic relationships and institutions.

It is possible to read this epoch in this way because the idea of democracy is the real revolutionary rupture with the hierarchical and aristocratic civilizations of the Middle Ages and antiquity. [14] Democracy is the political form of the rule of the universal life-interest because it is the only political form that allows everyone to speak. The universal life-interest is not an abstraction that exists apart from the individuals whose nature embodies it. Nor is it the free-floating product of abstract political deliberations and argument. It is the real basis of the existence of everyone as real living individuals. It is the substance from which democratic deliberation proceeds, not the invention of those deliberations. However, in hierarchical societies in which only those with the proper bloodlines or sex or colour are allowed a voice, the life-interests of the subaltern are defined for them, and never in ways that recognise the full scope of those life-interests. Democracy is revolutionary both because it allows those who have been historically oppressed to say: "We have the same scope of life-requirements as you, and we will take what we need because it is our due as individuals," and it allows the response: "You are right, but you do not have to take that which is your due by force, because your being human beings and your being members of a democracy entitles you that which you require, so all of us together will re-structure our institutions such that you receive that which you require."



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George Herbert Mead lacked the concept of universal life-interests and nowhere showed any understanding of the need to extend the principle of democracy into the economy, but he did understand its revolutionary significance. "Democracy," he argued "incorporated the principle of revolution into its institutions. That is, when you set up a constitution, and one of the articles in it is that the constitution can be changed, then you have, in a certain sense, incorporated the very process of revolution into the order of society. Only now it is to be an ordered, a constitutional revolution, by such and such steps." [15] What Mead and twentieth century followers like Habermas either ignored or downplayed is the way in which class power can constitute a structural impediment to the rule of the shared life-interests in a formally democratic society. Where class interests function to systematically block the rule of the shared life-interests, organized struggle against them is required. But in a state that has already crossed the bridge between aristocracy and democracy this struggle, though organized and extra-parliamentary, in the workplace and streets and neighbourhoods, need not be violent, because it is already legitimate by the constitutional norms that everyone claims to accept. If those constitutional norms are not a sufficient principled basis to ensure the rule of the common life-interests, then the constitution can be amended, as Mead notes, or even, as in Venezuela, completely rewritten. The point is: the victory of democracy is the victory of political struggle over the conditions that necessitated armed violence and vanguardism.

Marx and Engels themselves were not blind to the possibilities that democracy — largely a result of working class and women's struggles — afforded working people. [16] As Hal Draper argued, "Marx was the first socialist thinker and leader who came to socialism *through* the struggle for liberal democracy." [17] Marx himself argued to the International Working Men's Association that "You know

that the institutions, mores, and traditions of various countries must be taken into consideration, and we do not deny that there are countries — such as America, England... where the workers can seize power by peaceful means.”[18] The traditions, mores, and institutions of every country in the Global North — the site from which global capitalist exploitation of all the peoples of the globe is launched and to which the vast majority of the wealth generated flows — rule out the possibility that groups who preach “arm the workers,” “for the dictatorship of the proletariat” will have any political relevance.[19] Overcoming the undemocratic power of the ruling class and money value will not be accomplished by nineteenth century means. Nor, it should go without saying, will it be accomplished by voting for any existing political party. It will be overcome through a combination of local struggles to protect existing life-value standards and nation-wide and global struggles, led by political movements yet to be created, to claim back control over the universally required life-resources currently exploited by the money-appropriating class and the (formally) democratic institutions through which their rule is legitimated and protected.

What exactly that political movement — or, more likely, movements — will look like is an open question. Occupy, The Movement for Real Democracy (Spain), Syriza (Greece), the Venezuelan socialist party are all experiments in finding that form. That which they all share in common is the principle of democratic non-violence as the political foundation of opposition and demands for change. Its significance is brilliantly captured in this reflection on the Egyptian revolution: “This significance of Egypt...is threefold. First is the moral force of non-violence... Second, non-violence of the multitude makes possible a new politics of inclusion. And finally, it makes possible a radically different sense of the worth of the self. Unlike violence, non-violence does not just resist and exclude. It also embraces and includes, thereby opening up new possibilities.”[20]

The full flowering of those possibilities takes longer than individual political agents would hope. People understandably want to see solutions to the problems they have spent their lives fighting against come to fruition in their life time. But such cannot always be the case, and trying to rush and force history often leads to far worse results than patience. The Egyptian revolution has not yet achieved its social and economic aims; but would you rather be alive in Egypt to continue to fight, or dead in a civil war like Syria?



(<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/revpeace4.jpg>)

End notes:

- [1] Sungur Savran, "C'est une Revolte, Pas (Encore) Une Revolution," *The Bullet* No. 834, June 5th, 2013. (<http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/834.php> (<http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/834.php>))
- [2] Plato, *The Republic*, G.M.A. Grube, trans, as revised by C.D.C. Reeve, (Indianapolis: Hackett), 1992, p. 227, 557a.
- [3] Condorcet, *Esquisse d'une Tableau Historique des Proges de l'esprit Humaine*, (Paris: Flammarion), 1988, p. 213. "We have seen human reason slowly develop through the natural progress of civilization; superstition has tried to prevent this progress, in order to corrupt it and despotism has degraded and numbed it under the weight of fear and evil." (My translation).
- [4] *Ibid.*, p. 230. "The Philosophers of diverse nations, by embracing in their reflections the interests of humanity as a whole, without distinction of country, race, or sect, formed...a powerful phalanx strongly united against all manner of tyranny." (My translation)
- [5] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers), 1975, p. 68.
- [6] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers), 1986, p. 54.
- [7] Engels, quoted in Vladimir Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers), 1975, p. 60.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[9] David Beetham, *Democracy and Human Rights*, (Cambridge: Polity Press), 2004, p. 5.

[10] Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 97.

[11] See for example the manifesto of Spain's Real Democracy movement. Jerome Roos, "Manifesto — Spain's Real Democracy Now!" <http://roarmag.org/2011/05/m-15-manifesto-real-democracy-now-spanish-revolution-protests/> (<http://roarmag.org/2011/05/m-15-manifesto-real-democracy-now-spanish-revolution-protests/>) (accessed, June 7th, 2012).

[12] Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects*, (New York: Pathfinder Press), 1969, pp. 276-281.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 210.

[14] Even though the practice of Athenian democracy was far more democratic than the practice of contemporary liberal democracy, it was at constant war with aristocratic and patriarchal values (represented paradigmatically in classical Greek philosophy) which never ceased to be parts of the background culture.

[15] George Herbert Mead, *On Social Psychology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1997, p.20.

[16] On the role of working class and other major social struggles to the origin of contemporary democracy, see Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyn Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1992. On Marx and Engels signal contribution to democratic development see August Nimtz Jr., *Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough*, (Albany: State University of New York Press), 2000.

[17] Hal Draper, *Two Souls of Socialism*, Chapter 3, p.2. (<http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/contemp/pamsetc/twosouls/twosouls.htm>) (<http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/contemp/pamsetc/twosouls/twosouls.htm>) (Accessed June 19th, 2013).

[18] Karl Marx, "The Possibility of Non-Violent Revolution," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Robert . Tucker, ed., (New York: Norton), 1978, p. 523.

[19] Academic arguments about the democratic meaning of "dictatorship of the proletariat" will also not make any difference — the slogan is irredeemably compromised by its association with failed Stalinist societies, and ignores, contrary to the practice of historical materialism, the actual course of historical change over the past 150 years. For an example of such a problematic academic exercise see Peter Halliward, "People and Power: Four Notes on Democracy and Dictatorship," *What We Are Fighting For*, Federico Campagna and Emanuele Campiglio, eds., (London: Pluto Press), 2012, pp. 61-73.

[20] Mahmood Mamdani, "An African Reflection on Tahrir Square," *African Awakenings*, Firoze Manji and Sokari Ekine, eds., (Cape Town: Pambazuka Press), 2012, p. 209.



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[/revpeace1-1.jpg](#))

[Thank you Jeff for this important piece]

The writer is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Windsor, in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. His most recent book is *Materialist Ethics and Life-Value*, (2012). More of his work can be found at his website: <http://www.jeffnoonan.org> (<http://www.jeffnoonan.org>)

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JULY 23, 2013 JULY 24, 2013 SANJAY PERERA # ARAB REVOLUTION, # CAPITALISM, # DEMOCRACY, # DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES, # ENGELS, # JEFF NOONAN, # LENIN, # LIFE-VALUE, # MARX, # NATURAL LIFE-SUPPORT SYSTEMS, # NON-VIOLENCE, # OCCUPY, # PARADIGM SHIFT, # REVOLUTION, # REVOLUTIONARY IDEAS, # REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT, # SOCIAL REVOLUTION, # TROTSKY

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The difference Democracy does (and does not)
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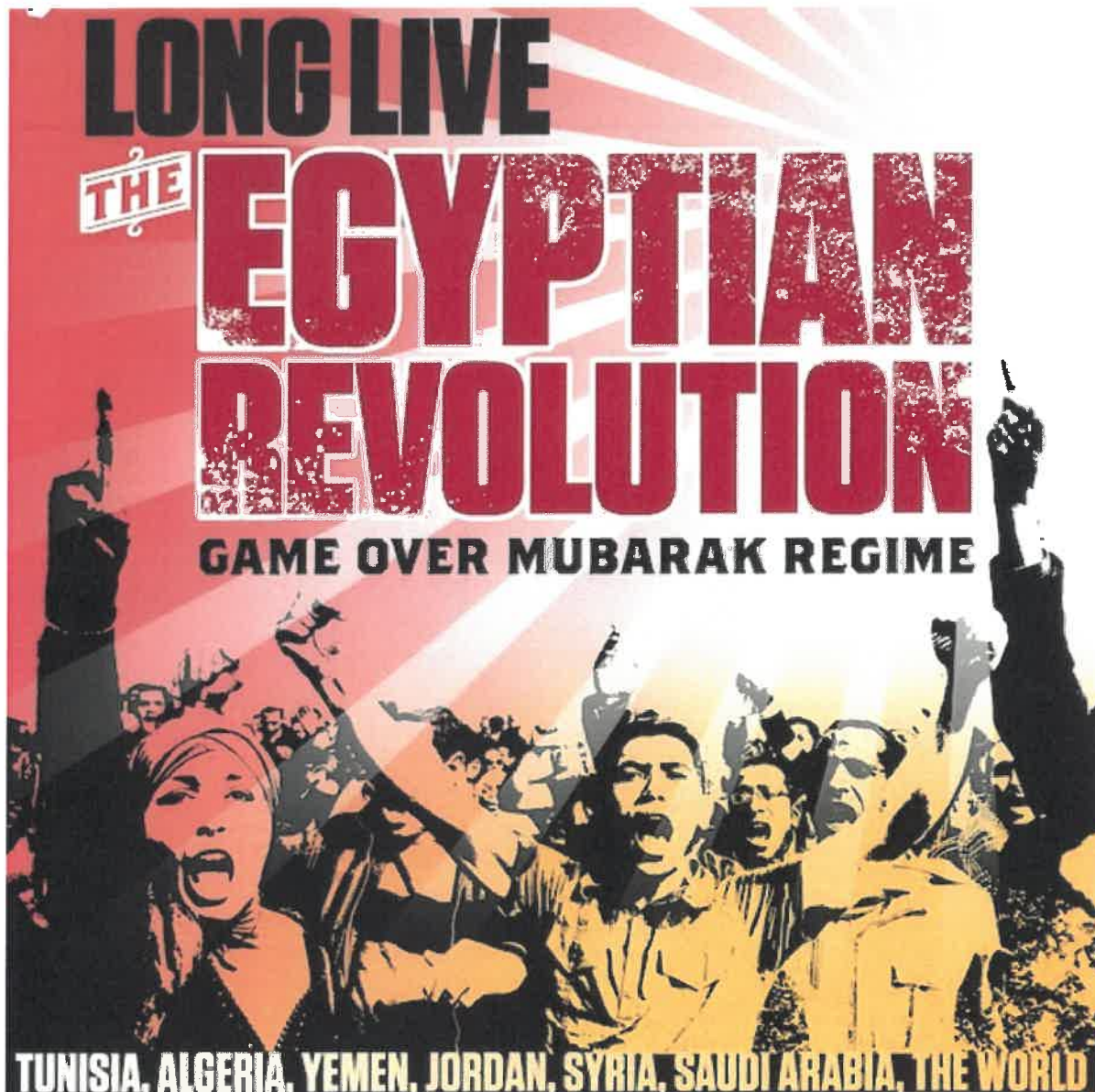
by Jeff Noonan

With unnoticed irony, Roger Cohen, writing in *The New York Times* on Bastille Day, July 14th, 2013, lamented the weeks of protest in Egypt that culminated in the army's removal of the government of Mohammed Morsi. Cohen argued that since the street protests overturned the results of a free election, they were undemocratic, even though massively popular. "When is a coup not a coup? It seems when tens of millions of Egyptians support it and choose to portray it as part of a continuing revolution that was betrayed by the ousted President, Mohammed Morsi, of the Muslim Brotherhood." [1] Subsequent developments may in fact have borne out Cohen's argument that the army did stage a coup, but what interests me here is the implicit contrast he establishes between democracy as a stable institutional form

(constitutionally limited governments changing places through free election), and popular power expressed through extra-parliamentary means (street demonstrations, workers' and citizens assemblies and councils, occupations, and so on). Clearly, to the millions of Egyptians who felt that the Brotherhood had hijacked the revolution and was using its power as the government of the day to constitutionally entrench Islamic rule, the institutionalized form of democracy typical of the West and the only democracy Cohen can understand as legitimate did not make the sort of difference in their lives they hoped that the revolution would make.

This conflict between democracy as constitutionally limited government by parties elected through universal suffrage, and democracy as popular rule expressed through directly democratic assemblies of citizens and workers, is much older than the Arab Spring and the Egyptian revolution. Indeed, every revolution since 1789 has continually wrenched open the conflict between stability and popular power, between political rule and control over fundamental social and natural resources, and thus between democracy as a form of government, and democracy as a form of social life.[2] Between the poles of Schumpeter's understanding of democracy as competition between parties for election to power on the basis of more or less the same platforms — stability, economic growth, jobs, higher 'standards of living' — and the directly democratic popular assemblies and workers' councils typical of revolutionary situations, lies a continuum of mediating positions — democratic egalitarianism, deliberative democracy, (itself spread out along a continuum of liberal and social democratic forms), cosmopolitan democracy, agonistic democracy, and republican or 'strong' democracy often linked to the thought of Hannah Arendt.[3]

While these attempts to explain exactly what the meaning and value of democracy are the creatures of political philosophy, the problems theory addresses are all practical. Each of the alternatives listed above has been tried, more or less systematically, for greater or lesser periods of time. I want to add: and with greater or lesser success. But here I hesitate, at the most crucial question, because before one can answer it, one would have to know what exactly democracy is supposed to succeed at doing. Ensure comprehensive representation of social interests for the sake of fairness, or social stability, or legitimacy of law, or all three? Ensure the self-government of the 'people' as a good in itself? Ensure that collectively required resources are collectively controlled? On an answer to those questions depends the answer to the question of what democracy means, what its social conditions are, and what institutional form it must take depend. Is constitutionally limited parliamentary government sufficient? Do the people retain the right of revolution, as the American Constitution guarantees? Must parliamentary institutions be supplemented by regular town hall style consultative and deliberative meetings, perhaps nationally or even globally extended by the Internet? Does it require overthrowing the ruling class and re-appropriating the universally required life-goods they currently control? Does it require some complex balanced whole composed of partial expressions of all of these elements?



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These questions are complex. Singularly and together they define the central problems of political philosophy and social practice since at least the French Revolution, and I will not try to answer them in this essay. I instead want to ask a more basic question: what difference does democracy make to the lives of human beings such that they continue to fight and die for it? Answering this question in a way that sheds concrete light on what the objectives of democratic movements ought to be is best pursued by starting with the opposite question: what differences have actually existing democracies (those forms that have been socially instituted to greater or lesser extents) *not* made to the lives of the people who either fought for them directly or inherited the struggles of others as the given form of the society into which they were born? As will become clear, given the manifold of ways in which all forms of democracy have failed to satisfy the hopes placed in them, it is remarkable that the idea of democracy retains any power at all, much less the extraordinary motivating force that it does.

Still today people in Egypt and Syria are fighting for something they call democracy, activists in Spain call their anti-austerity movement the Movement for Real Democracy, dissidents across China continue to demand liberal-democratization of the state, while Americans demonstrate against the totalitarian powers of the security state spawned by the Cold War and run amok since 9/11. When we compare the

concrete failures with the still potent animating force of the abstract idea, we will spy a thread that analysis can follow, partially historically and partially counter-factually, down to the core difference democracy *could* make to people's lives, were it understood as the self-conscious, instituted means of ensuring the universal and comprehensive satisfaction of human life-requirements in ways that are sustainable over the open-ended future of the life of the planet and species.



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I. A colloquial history of democratic disappointments

Consider the movements noted in the preceding paragraph, add any more that come to mind, and then ask: if democracy made the difference that those currently struggling for it think it will, why has that difference not yet been made? To put that point more concretely: what fundamental social problem has democracy, liberal, deliberative, social, or socialist solved? The distribution of wealth is unequal, globally and within liberal democratic nation states, and getting worse.[4] The various peoples' and soviet republics which legitimated themselves by appeal to the value of substantive equality never achieved it in practice, and, as they matured beyond the moment of revolutionary tumult, deprived workers of even those limited forms of defence they came to enjoy in mature liberal democracies — trade unions and the right to organise labour parties.[5] Democracies have been and still are sexist in their distribution of power and prestige, hetero-normative in their official sexual mores, and racist in their historical development, a history which not even the election of a black President in the United States has overcome.

Democracies have elected fascists, engaged in slave trading, wars of aggression, resource theft on a grand scale, and colonial genocide (what Michael Mann appropriately calls the 'dark side of democracy').[6] Liberal democracy is based upon a formal separation of economic from political power, which allows all adult citizens the vote, but allows the economic forces that determine our ability to live and flourish to be controlled by more or less ungoverned competitive struggles between private capitals

each seeking to grow, at the expense of each other, the workers' who depend upon paid employment for a living, and the entire natural life-support system upon which all living creatures depend.[7] The most historically significant attempts to abolish that distinction, in the Soviet and Chinese peoples' republics, ended in a nightmare of state capitalist exploitation and bureaucratic totalitarianism on an epic scale.[8] If democracy has not solved any of those problems, but has in fact proven, if not the cause, then at least compatible with each, why do people continue to struggle for it? Perhaps better said, why do they continue to believe that *any* form of democracy is going to *now* prove capable of solving their problems, when no historical instantiation of the idea has yet come close?



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Is it simply that 'where there is life there is hope,' and 'hope springs eternal?' Or, if this answer is too naive, is the truth the opposite — that the masses, as Plato argued more than two millennia ago, are endlessly open to seduction by demagogues of various sorts who know that there is no quicker route to tyrannical power than a convincing-sounding promise to empower the masses against a perceived enemy?[9] Or is it that philosophical insight has not yet penetrated deeply enough into the conceptual complexities of the idea and emerged with a thoroughly consistent and realizable theory of democracy? Or could it be, as commentators on the Arab Spring like Roger Cohen argue, that people have not yet become sufficiently enlightened and disciplined to act in the responsible and self-restrained manner that democracy requires? Or could it be that there are simply too many competing and contradictory interests in any society bigger than a small town which make the sort of social solidarity socialist and republican theories of democracy presuppose impossible? While affirmative answers to all of these questions have been proposed as explanations of democracy's failure (and all have some truth, relative to the version of democracy to which they are addressed) it is this last question that I want to reflect more deeply upon, as I believe that it offers us the best pathway towards understanding the difference that democracy does and does not make.

Such is the power — or ambiguity, or vacuity — of the idea of democracy that it welcomes widely divergent social movements under its umbrella of legitimacy. While resonant, perhaps, as a slogan, there is no universal interest expressed by movements calling themselves democratic, but at the best distinct and at worst directly contradictory social interests all seek legitimacy as democratic. Thus, civil libertarians argue that the security state is anti-democratic, while the bureaucrats staffing the security state's agencies argue that they are protecting democracy. Capitalists argue that the free market is essential to democracy, while socialists respond that it generates coercive powers over individual life-conditions and social choices totally at odds with democracy. Feminists argue that democracy is incompatible with patriarchy and that overcoming patriarchy requires that the personal become political, while classical liberals argue that democracy requires a private sphere as that which the public exercise of political power protects. Given that such glaringly contradictory social forces all claim to be the authentic voice of democracy, how is anyone to begin to sort true from false democrats in a way that can avoid charges of tendentious political favouritism?



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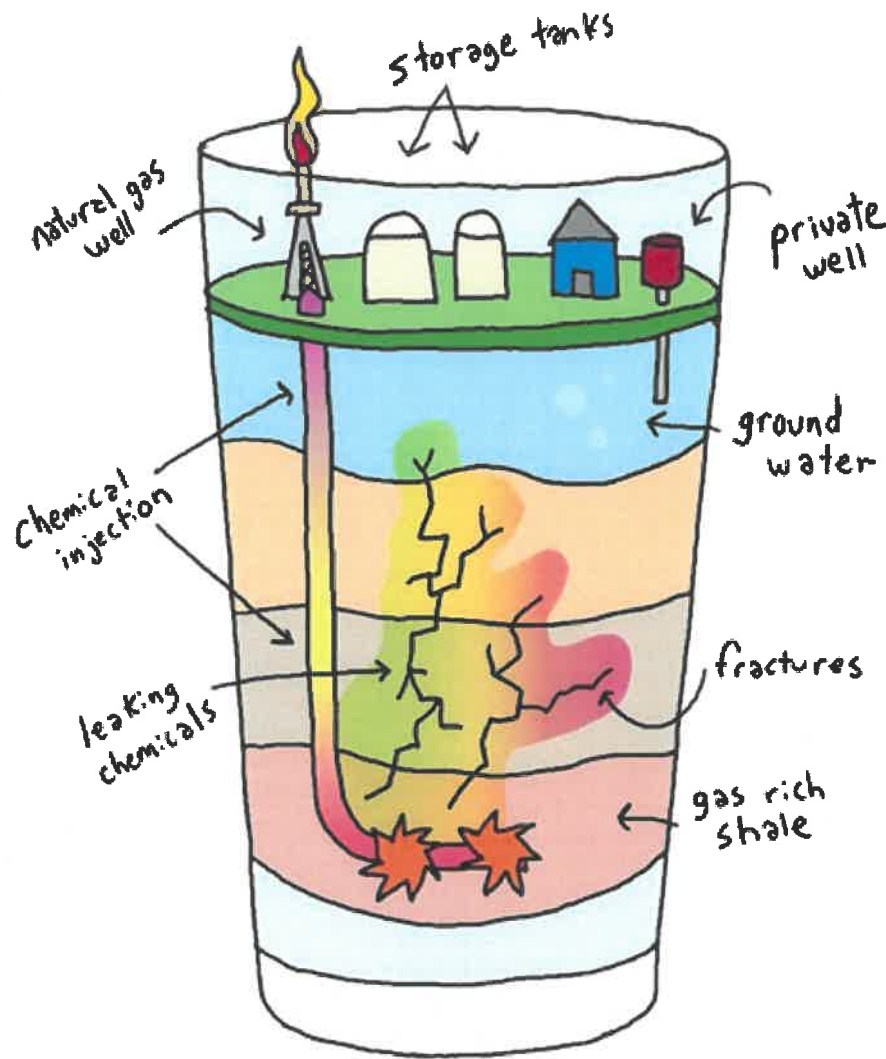
II. The paradox of political democracy

The first step in such a sorting process must be to decide upon a formal definition of democracy to which all competing democratic factions could agree. One arrives at this formal definition by abstracting from different possible institutional embodiments the political core that distinguishes democracy from other political systems. That core idea is that in a democracy all affected interests are represented in the institutions that are empowered to make the decisions that affect those interests. David Beetham defines a system of collective decision-making as democratic "to the extent that it is subject to the control by all members of the relevant association, or all those under its authority, considered as equals." [10] This principle of democracy does not determine what the range of affected interests is, how they should be represented, or how decisions ought to be made and ratified. Thus, it

cannot be accused of tendentious favouritism, but it does distinguish democratic from non-democratic systems. Whatever merits they may or may not have, non-democratic systems *systematically and permanently exclude from legislative and executive power* some group(s) of people because of some purported or real incapacity(ies) on the group(s)' part to make or meaningfully contribute to responsible decisions affecting the life of the whole.

Hence, we can conclude that whatever else they are, 'true' democrats are in favour of forms of institutional power that are maximally inclusive of affected interests. It does not follow from this claim that *all* forms of exclusion are antithetical to democracy, only that where some groups whose interests are affected are excluded from exercising power in the institutions that affect them, the exclusion is grounded in non-arbitrary reasons. Thus, infants are affected by the policies of the hospitals in which they are most often born in liberal-democratic societies, and by government child-welfare laws, but their being excluded from exercising power in these institutions seems non-arbitrary, since they lack the one most basic capacity required of participants in democratic deliberation — the capacity to be articulately aware of and able somehow to communicate the content of one's interest.

Thus, we have arrived at a formal principle that allows us to sort true from false democrats. Any true democrat will be in favour of institutional structures which are maximally inclusive of affected interests; false democrats will employ the language of inclusive consideration and representation of interests but in reality will favour policies, principles, and social forces which marginalise, exclude, and subordinate some social groups to a central ruling minority. A supporter of patriarchy may speak the language of democracy, but, by actively supporting practices and policies that exclude women from participating in public life, he proves his politics to be in contradiction to the principle of democracy. Thus, the formal understanding of democracy can do some work in distinguishing true from false democrats. But can it explain what difference even true democracy makes to the value of peoples' lives? In order to answer this question, let us construct an example, drawn from real life but abstracted from the real play of unequal political power. This purifying abstraction is necessary to uncover the limits of true democracy if true democracy is understood only as a means of inclusive representation and participation.



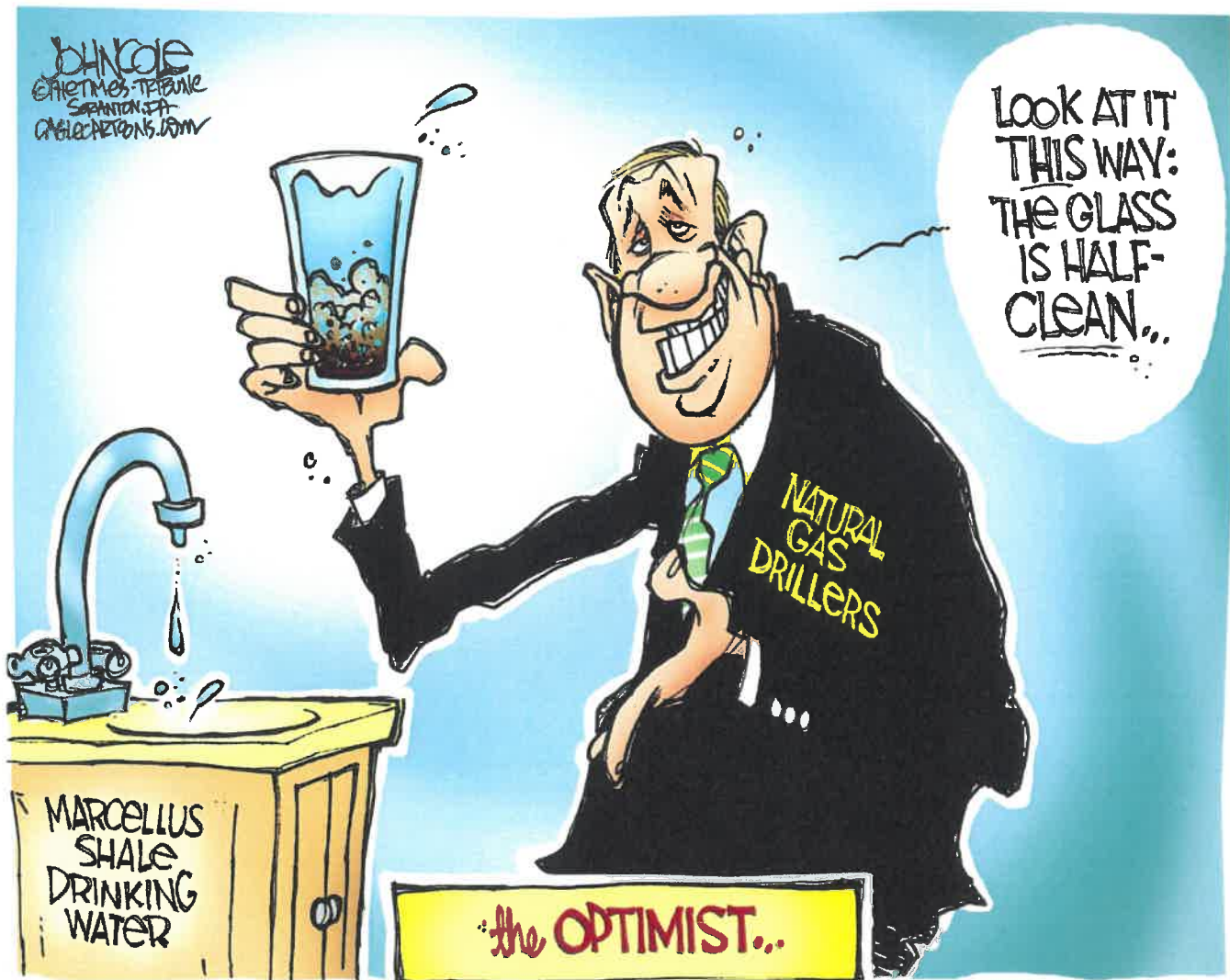
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Across North America, natural gas companies have been pushing local communities to allow the extraction of shale gas by a process of hydraulically fracturing ("fracking") the rock and allowing the gas to flow to the surface. The practice has proven to be a significant threat to ground water supplies (some communities' tap-water near well-sites is flammable), but also attractive to residents of relatively poor areas with few job opportunities and declining or stagnant populations.[11] Wherever fracking is proposed, it ignites intense political controversy between residents who want the work and residents who want to preserve their water supplies, between business interests hoping to derive money-value from the expanded consumer markets that new workers and residents would bring, and environmentalists concerned with preserving habitats and ecosystems, and between gas companies and regulatory agencies.

Let us now imagine the following scenario: a gas company proposes a new fracking operation in a very poor area, but does not use its economic power to force a decision in its favour. The regional government devises a series of open-ended deliberative sessions in which a panoply of unbiased experts present the cases pro and con. A second series of deliberative sessions is organized in which non-expert resident opponents meet to make their case to the other side. A third series then follows in which all concerned citizens meet together in open ended plenum to debate the issues anew, incorporating what

they now know from the expert testimony and all the positions opposed to their own. The session goes on as long as it takes to hear everyone, as many times as they feel they need to be heard to make their case clear to all the others. Everyone argues in terms that are in principles acceptable to others (the basic principle of Habermas' discourse ethics), no one employs misleading rhetoric, red herrings, or intimidates opponents in any way.[12] At the end of these three rounds of deliberation, a binding referendum is held. Advertising is allowed, but all groups who want to advertise have the same budget. The referendum is held, and the decision — whose legitimacy no one on the losing side disputes — is to allow fracking. Is this decision democratic? And if it is democratic, is it the right decision? And if it is not the right decision in spite of being democratic, does that fact call into question the value of democracy, or only the formality of the democratic process at work?

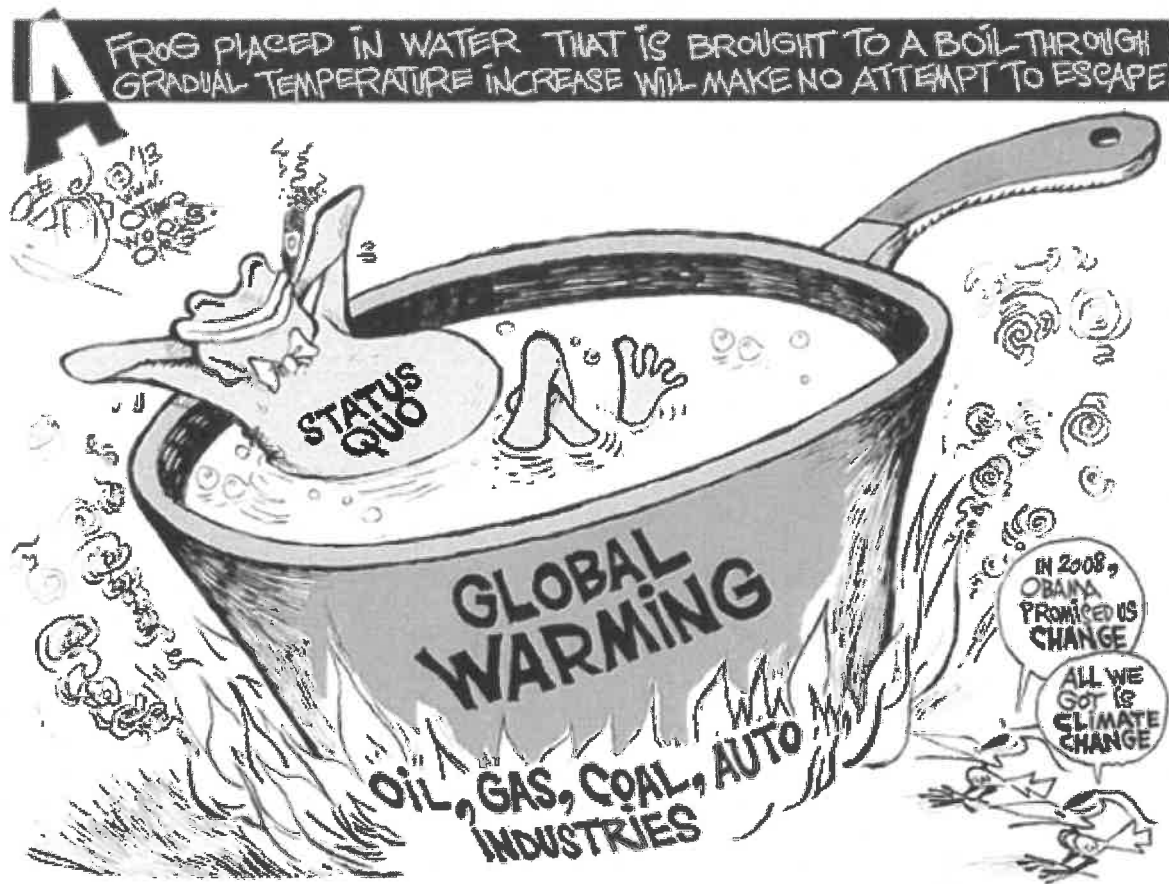
In answer to the first question, the answer must be "yes." The example is contrived to remove all the undemocratic forces at work in actually existing liberal-democratic societies. Corporate power, access to unequal resources, misleading rhetoric, none are allowed to sway the vote. Everyone with an interest is allowed to participate fully and freely, all groups are as well informed as they can be, and there are no artificial deadline constraints placed on the debates. Voting is free and fair. The situation meets as thoroughly as any could the principle of democracy discussed above. Thus, the decision is democratic.



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Does the fact that the decision is democratic entail that it is the right decision? This question is more difficult, and requires first of all that the meaning of "right" be clarified. I mean by "right" in this context "in the objective life-interests of the residents of the community as integrally bio-social beings, dependent upon the natural world for their means of life-support and each other and the institutions that structure their lives as means of life-development." Allow me here to add another element to the story. Assume for the sake of argument that all of the worst environmental effects of fracking are real, and that the citizens knew about them and believed that they were real before they voted, but felt that the short term jobs were more important than the long term damage to their means of life-support. To say that the decision is right (in their shared life-interests) seems to be flatly contradicted by the long-term destruction of their water supply, without which they cannot live. Yet, to say that it is wrong even though completely democratic seems paternalistic. I would argue that the decision is the wrong decision, because democracy presupposes life, which in turn presupposes access to the natural resources which are means of life. However, I do not believe that this argument is paternalistic, but rather revelatory of a fundamental problem that arises when democracy is identified with the *political form of decision-making* in abstraction from the *material implications of the decisions made*. This problem has two dimensions.

First, if democracy pays attention only to the form of decision making, it can overlook the role that socially real but impersonal economic forces can play in surreptitiously predetermining decisions in favour of ruling class interests, even if the ruling class does not exploit its unequal financial power to sway the vote. This limitation has long been understood by Marxists, who have demonstrated the way in which the formal separation of political from economic power in capitalist society attenuates the power of citizens to determine the conditions of their collective life. Since capitalist society depends upon the separation of the majority of people from their universal means of life-maintenance, they become dependent upon wage labour for their survival. Other things being equal, people will choose policies which ensure their short-term survival, which means that, where systematic alternatives to capitalism are viewed as utopian, people will tend to favour those policies which enable them to find work. However, this fact also means that people will tend to vote for policies which favour ruling class interests' in exploiting wage labour for its own profit, and thus policies which are adopted only under the compulsion of dependence upon wage labour for survival. Although democratic at a political level, decisions such as the one adopted in the example above are still taken under the *coercive force* of social necessity rooted in private control over universally required life-resources, and thus not *fully democratic*, if "democratic" refers not only to the form of decision-making, but the material implications of the decision taken.



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By “the material implications of the decision taken” I mean the real effects that politically democratic decisions have upon the lives and life-horizons of the people who take them. It can be the case, as in the example above, that majorities vote for decisions that secure their short-term interests in employment but undermine the long-term interests in sustainable natural life-support systems. This fact points us to a second problem with political democracy, which is that it cannot avoid the paradox that temporary political majorities can make decisions which threaten the long term life-support capacities of nature, and thus the ability of the people who compose those majorities, as well as future human beings, to survive, develop, and flourish. Even Marxist critics of the political form of democracy in capitalist society fall victim to this paradox. For example, David Schweickart, in his otherwise excellent *After Capitalism*, accepts this paradox as an unsolvable problem for any democratic society, no matter how extensively and intensively the principle of democracy is realized. He notes that while it would be irrational for citizens of a fully democratic society to choose policies which are ecologically unsustainable, such an outcome cannot be ruled out, because “Economic Democracy is, after all, a democracy — and hence the quality of its ‘general will’ is dependent upon the particular wills of the individual citizens.”[13]

In other words, even if the separation of the majority from the universal means of life-support were overcome and workers controlled production, there is nothing anti-democratic, according to the formal conception of democracy as collective decision-making *procedure*, about their choosing economic policies which favour unsustainable levels of energy use, material consumption, and waste production. Presumably, then, the alternative — some sort of limitation on the choices it is materially rational to make, would be *undemocratic* and paternalistic. I do not believe that all such alternatives are undemocratic, but rather that the belief that they must be expresses a conception of democracy that has become alienated from the life-ground of value (the enabling conditions of biological life and social

choice) which any political system presupposes.[14]

The problem with political democracy and any socialist critique of political democracy which simply accepts the foregoing paradox as unresolvable is that *both* are alienated from the life-ground of value. The socialist critique of the capitalist form of political democracy recognises the way in which competitive market forces can predetermine policies behind the backs of and against the *class interests of workers*, but so long as it does not ground its alternative explicitly in the *universal interests of living things in sustainable life-support systems*, it has no solution to the paradox, and accepts it as a risk society must run if it is to remain democratic.



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[/2013/12/dem3.jpg](#))

III. Democracy, life-value, and the resolution of the paradox of political democracy

Before proposing a solution to this paradox, let us pause and re-ask the question from which this investigation began: what is so apparently all-good about democracy that even socialist critics of the

damage that capitalism does to life and life-conditions affirm it as more important even than safeguarding the most basic conditions of life? Is it not the very height of material irrationality for *anyone*, regardless of the politics they espouse, to argue that some political-social form of decision-making procedure is more valuable than sustainable life-support systems, such that one cannot question the legitimacy of democratic decisions, even when the material implications of those decisions threaten the future of the particular community or even the whole of the species?

Part of the answer to this question is historical. In most of the world in 2013, no political movement, whether aligned with ruling class interests or in opposition to them, can appear legitimate if it is openly and avowedly undemocratic. Take Egypt for example. The Egyptian Army, the Muslim Brotherhood, Egyptian liberals, and Egyptian socialists all claim not only to *be* democratic, but to be the *authentic or real* voice of democracy. In the ferment of revolution, when all long suppressed movements gained some political room to breathe and express themselves, though each spoke for different (if overlapping) constituencies and interests, all nevertheless felt themselves to be the genuine representative of “the interests of the people.” If anyone of them were to have said explicitly: we are for the reconstitution of the Egyptian state on a narrow sectarian basis and the subordination of all competing interests to this new exclusive ruling principle, they would have immediately discredited themselves. So on one level all movements use the language of democracy because at this point in history to not do so would be fatal to the political sustainability of the movement.

If that were all that were at issue then there would be little problem in arguing that where democracy and long term life-interests are at odds, democracy must be rejected in favour of securing the long term life-interests of the members of the community or the species as a whole. The problem with resolving the paradox in this top-down way is that human life-interests extend beyond the mere preservation of natural life and include certain fundamental requirements of life as socially self-conscious agents, in the absence of which many rational human beings would argue life ceases to be worth living. Of all of these conditions of social self-conscious agency, none is more important than democracy itself. Life as the mere object of authoritarian power is intolerable for the most part to human beings because it violates their most valuable general life-capacity — to decide for themselves the goals they will pursue. Whenever there is the tiniest crack in the edifice of authoritarian power, whether wielded by medieval aristocracies, party apparatchiks, dictators, or bosses, people mobilise one way or the other to overthrow it for the sake of creating the social space they need to articulate their long-suppressed interests and goals. Hence, to limit democracy from the outside and above for the sake of ensuring the long term conditions of life-maintenance is not only unlikely to mobilise support (for the historical reasons given above), it itself could be argued to be contrary to the life-interests of the *human* beings in whose universal life-interests it would justify itself.



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Hence the attempt to solve the first paradox returns us to the second noted above: if democracy can prove as self-destructive as non-democratic social systems, it may be necessary to regulate it by externally-imposed, and therefore, undemocratic limitations, not on the form of decision-making but on the content of the decisions made. Thus, in the case of the fracking example above, if it were decided (by whatever supra-popular regulatory body with the power to do so) that this decision, though democratic, had long-term life-destructive implications, it would be overridden. Whether or not some such external regulatory body to save society from formally democratic but life-destructive and materially irrational decisions could be legitimated on grounds analogous to liberal constitutions, it is not clear to me, as I alluded above, that such external regulation is the only option. It may be possible to resolve the second paradox by re-interpreting the meaning of democracy in a way that builds in materially rational decision-making into its principle. I will sketch the beginnings of such a reinterpretation by way of conclusion.

Beetham's formal principle of democracy treats it as a decision-making procedure. Wherever collectively binding decisions must be made, they should be made by all those whose *lives* will be affected by the outcome. In practice, however, in contexts where lives seem to depend *immediately* upon access to labour and consumer markets and only *mediately* upon access to natural life-support systems (in reversal of what is the case biologically) people tend, as explained in Section Two, to vote in favour of policies that promote capitalist money-value growth, in the hopes of creating employment opportunities. That is, they tend to think of "life" as "performance in market competition" and not as a set of bio-social activities which require access to the very life-goods threatened by untrammelled market forces. However, if one thinks of life not as market performance but integral bio-social activity, one will become aware (as the environmental and eco-socialist and eco-feminist movements have

become aware) of the total set of conditions that *enable choice*. Once this total set of conditions has come into focus, it will become clear to anyone who subscribes to Beetham's democratic principle (and I have already demonstrated that all true democrats must subscribe to it), that democracy must not only include all affected parties, it must include, in the democratic self-consciousness of those parties, *understanding of and commitment to the preservation of the total set of conditions, natural and social, enabling free choice*. "Free choice" here is not synonymous with whatever outcome people deliberating happen to make, but rather, the choices people make when they include the total set of natural and social conditions enabling choice as the *life-ground necessary to deliberation as such*.



(<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/environ3.jpg>)

To argue that democracy must preserve and develop rather than degrade and destroy the set of the total conditions of choice *is* to argue that decisions such as the example constructed in Section Two to frack for natural gas are undemocratic, even if popular, because, as materially irrational and life-incoherent, at odds with that which is required to "ensure consistency with life and life-capital requirements." [15] Life-capital is the real foundation of all economies as that which sustains biological existence and enables the development of the human capacities that make life good. [16] The growth of life-capital; not money-capital, by life-coherent means, *is* the essential foundation of a materially rational, that is, actual and sustainable, democratic society. To argue that democratic politics must recognize and preserve the natural and life-capital bases of social and individual choice is not to impose external constraints on democracy, as charges of paternalism imply. The life-ground of value is not an external constraint that undemocratically limits democracy, it is *an internal constitutive condition of any form of persistent social life whatsoever*. To ignore the difference between undemocratic external constraints (class rule and money-value underlying but also *undermining* the life-value of universal suffrage) and internal constitutive conditions of democracy is to ignore the fundamental material fact that political life presupposes life.

That difference is ignored not by true democrats, but by servants of money-value growth as the sole and exclusive good of social life. For anyone who understands society as it fundamentally is — an organized system of life-protection and life-development — the life-value foundation of democratic deliberation is neither an undemocratic limit upon democracy, nor simply instrumentally essential for its long-term survival, but a necessary basis *and* the primary value a real democratic society serves.

The human form of the life-ground of value requires real democracy. Ruling class enemies of equality, self-realization, and democracy generally today speak the language of “free choice.” However, rather than allowing free choice, they typically employ every manner of persuasion, threat, diversion, and coercion to ensure that people choose policies which return ever more money-value to their private and exclusive control while cumulatively undermining the natural life-support system upon which everyone depends. Materially rational free choice, by contrast, is not unconstrained by internal constitutive limitations. Materially rational free choice is free from manipulation by class power, but as rational, respects the general natural and social conditions outside of which life, (and therefore, by extension, choice), is impossible. Materially rational choices enable further choice by ensuring that the material conditions of life are preserved.



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The realization of the goods that life-valuable choices make possible presupposes the satisfaction of life-requirements. The comprehensive and universal satisfaction of life-requirements depends upon access to the natural resources that maintain life and the social institutions that enable the development of life-capacities in human forms.[17] Undemocratic forms of social life not only deprive oppressed groups of

the resources that they require in order to live healthy lives, they deprive them of access to the social institutions they require access to in order to protest, resist, and overcome this oppression. The struggle for democracy therefore, has not only been a struggle for the inclusion of voice, but the struggle for the inclusion of voice so that the *harms of deprivation* oppressed groups suffer can be articulated *and overcome*.

As a substantive life-value, democracy ensures that life-requirements are comprehensively and universally satisfied for the sake of enabling life-valuable forms of free capacity realization in the lives of each and all. Since the production and distribution of life-resources affects the interests of everyone, to deprive some demonized group of access to life-resources is incompatible with democratic inclusivity. At the same time, to choose policies which run down those resources at unsustainable pace is also incompatible with democratic inclusivity, since it will undermine the *future* of that society.

The human future is not a reified abstraction occupying some space-time ontologically distinct from the present. On the contrary, it is constantly engendered by the actions existing people take. If a society actively reproduces itself, it engenders its future in the children born into it, who have, as now-living beings, the same life-interests in policies that will maintain and enable their lives as the adults in whose hands decision making authority is vested. Full democratic inclusivity of life-interests demands that all affected interests be represented in the deliberations through which law and public policy are decided. Since existing adults continue to have children, and thus commit themselves to the existence of a future for the species, and the economic decisions they make determine the rate at which resources will be consumed, these decisions affect not only everyone alive now, but everyone who will be brought into being in the unfolding future of the community. Just as it is contrary to the principle of democracy to assert the equality of people and act so as to deprive subaltern groups of the life-goods they require, so too is it contrary to the principle of democracy to seamlessly bring new life into being and at the same time use resources at unsustainable rates.

Only life-grounded and life-coherent decisions that ensure the universal and comprehensive satisfaction of life-interests in the present at rates which are sustainable over the open-ended future of the species are fully democratic. To draw that conclusion is not to impose external, paternalistic, undemocratic limits on democracy, but only to remind all true democrats of their real responsibilities as self-governing agents. The willing assumption of these responsibilities is the most fundamental internal constitutive condition of democracy, deniable in theory and practice only by those false democrats who see in the term nothing but ideological cover for their venality and misanthropy.



(<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/demegyp1-1.jpg>)

End notes:

[1] Roger Cohen, "A Big Step Backwards for Democracy," "New York Times International Weekly," *The Toronto Star*, Sunday, July 14th, 2013, p. 14.

[2] I examine this historical conflict in more detail than I can enter into here in Jeff Noonan, *Democratic Society and Human Needs*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press), 2006.

[3] See Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, (New York: Harper and Row), 1975, pp. 269-284. Paradigm expressions of the different interpretations of democracy are: Vladimir Lenin, *To the Population, Democracy and Dictatorship, and What is Soviet Power?* (Moscow: Progress Publishers), 1967; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Revised Edition, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press), 1999, pp.65-73; Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press), 1996; James Bohman and William Rehg, eds., *Deliberative Democracy*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 1999; Jurgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press), 1995; David Held, *Global Covenant*, (London: Polity Press), 2004; Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, (London: Verso), 2000; Hannah Arendt, "What is Freedom?" *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, (New York: Penguin Books), 1993, pp. 143-71; Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, 20th Anniversary edition, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2004.

[4] Isable Ortiz, "Global Inequality: Beyond the Bottom Billion — A Rapid Review of Income Distribution in 141 Countries," (New York: UNICEF), 2011. (http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/files/Global_Inequality.pdf) (http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/files/Global_Inequality.pdf) (accessed November 12th, 2013).

[5] Ian H. Birchall, *Workers Against the Monolith*, (London: Pluto), 1974.

[6] Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2004.

[7] This essential characteristic was first disclosed by Marx. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels *Collected Works: Volume 3*, (New York: International Publishers), 1975, pp. 146-174. In the contemporary period it has been systematically elaborated by Ellen Meiksins Wood. Ellen Meiksins Wood, "The Separation of the 'Economic' and the 'Political' in Capitalism," *Democracy Against Capitalism*, (New York: Cambridge University Press), 1995, pp. 19-48.

[8] Tony Cliff, *State Capitalism in Russia*, (London: Pluto Press), 1974

[9] Plato, "Republic," *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Hamilton and Cairns, eds, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1961, pp. 790-793.

[10] David Beetham, *Democracy and Human Rights*, (Cambridge: Polity Press), 2000, pp. 4-5.

[11] Natural Resources Defence Council, "Risky Gas Drilling Threatens Health, Water Supplies," (<http://www.nrdc.org/energy/gasdrilling/> (<http://www.nrdc.org/energy/gasdrilling/>)) (accessed, October 8th, 2013).

[12] Jurgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 1990, pp. 86-109.

[13] David Schweickart, *After Capitalism*, Second Edition, (Latham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield), 2011, p. 151.

[14] The term "life-ground of value" derives from the life-value onto-axiology of John McMurtry. For formal definition see John McMurtry, *Unequal Freedoms*, (Toronto: Garamond) 1998, p. 23.

[15] John McMurtry, *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism*, New Edition, (London: Pluto Press), 2013, p. 319.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 196.

[17] I provide a systematic account of the full range of natural and social life-requirements in Jeff Noonan, *Materialist Ethics and Life Value*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press), 2012.



(<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/zap2.jpg>)

[Thank you indeed Jeff for this important essay]

The writer is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Windsor, in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. His most recent book is *Materialist Ethics and Life-Value*, (McGill-Queen's University Press), 2012. More of his work can be found at his website: <http://www.jeffnoonan.org> (<http://www.jeffnoonan.org/>)

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DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES, # EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION, # ENVIRONMENT,
ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH, # HISTORY, # JEFF NOONAN, # LIFE FORMS, # LIFE VALUABLE,
LIFE-COHERENT, # LIFE-VALUE, # MARXIAN CRITIQUE, # NATURAL LIFE-SUPPORT
SYSTEMS, # PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY, # REVOLUTIONS, # SUPPORTIVE OF LIFE

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