

Rethinking Revolution

The Time of Change

The current conjuncture requires a profound rethinking of revolution. Such a task is not an endeavor external to the revolutionary activity that has swept the world, from North Africa and the Middle East to Europe, North America and elsewhere. Rather than theory being an activity that is somehow naturally distinct from practice, it is essential to recognize that there is always an implicit theoretical framework operative in revolutionary activity. Drawing on the work of Antonio Gramsci, we can say that the theoretical frame often functions as a form of practical common sense whose central orientation is rarely questioned. In these terms, the task at hand is to move from common sense assumptions concerning revolution to what Gramsci calls 'good sense': critical reflection on our unquestioned presuppositions that allows us to reflexively produce alternative modes of thought and practice.

The rethinking of revolution today can help us break with two widespread, common sense assumptions that have had, and continue to have, debilitating effects. The first is what I propose to call the conservative conception of revolution, according to which a revolution is a cataclysmic event, a circumscribed rupture in time. This conception assumes that revolutions are intermittent events between established, consensual systems. Revolution, in this sense, would simply be an intermission, an entracte—or what is, literally, 'between acts'—a brief hiatus in the ongoing life of the status quo.

The conservative conception of revolution qua intermission is directly linked to what I propose to call utopian blackmail: to merit the name 'revolution,' which is still largely considered a politically incorrect term in the Euro-American world, a movement has to instigate a massive sea change all at once, an apocalyptic upheaval within the circumscribed time of an intermission. This is a form of blackmail because, strictly

speaking, it is structurally impossible to radically transform the entire complex and variegated topography of society within a finite, limited amount of time. You can remove heads of government quickly, and this can be an extremely important symbolic act, but a radical transformation of the totality of society and its structures of governance takes time: it cannot be reduced to a brief intermission between the main acts. There are many historical examples that bear this out. For our purposes here, we can simply cite the recent case of Egypt, where we see that the removal of the U.S. backed autocrat, Hosni Mubarak, has not immediately led to a fundamental transformation of the political, legal and military order. On the contrary, there is an ongoing revolutionary process whose story cannot be written simply in terms of the removal of a single leader.

Those who refuse to use the term 'revolution' for anything short of a cataclysmic but intermittent sea change succumb to utopian blackmail and the conservative conception of revolution. They accept the common sense understanding of a revolution as a social earthquake in which a sudden, apocalyptic shift in tectonic plates allows for the rebuilding of the status quo to commence immediately. 'Good sense' requires that we recognize that the simplistic opposition between the status quo and cataclysmic revolution understood as a messianic break in time is a false opposition.

Revolution is not an endgame. It is an ongoing process of social negotiation and transformation that requires time, and that often constructs its own unique temporality (not to mention its own spatiality, as is clear in the case of occupation). This is one of the features of the Occupy Movement that its critics and the corporate media have generally been unable to understand. In the attempt to script these events in terms of the climaxes and dénouements of a digestible sitcom, the mass media have

been scrambling to identify the leaders of the movement and their specific demands in order to inscribe the entire movement within the framework of representational politics and judge its relative 'success' or 'failure' in relationship to its 'official goals.' This is not only an attempt to reduce more or less unprecedented developments to the established and comfortable archive of televisual screenplays, it is also a direct attack on the unique political temporality of this movement: rather than accepting the representational logic of a circumscribed set of official goals with identifiable milestones, or even the finite temporality of traditional protests, the Occupy movement nourishes an open-ended process of collective negotiation concerning a multiplicity of unofficial objectives, and it abandons the finite and circumscribed nature of protests in the name of an endless political process of social transformation.

Moreover, regarding the supposed lack of a clear message, it is difficult to imagine a more straightforward label than 'Occupy Wall Street.' Consider, for instance, the pressure group that is often juxtaposed to the Occupy movement as being 'better organized' and 'more focused' (thanks to extensive corporate sponsorship): the Tea Party. Could anyone imagine a more confusing name for a movement than one that suggests that the central goal is to get together and drink tea? Furthermore, demands of the Occupy movement have, of course, been issued, and they far surpass any simplistic opposition to 'Wall Street greed' (see, for instance, <http://occupywallst.org/forum/proposed-list-of-demands-please-help-edit-add-so-th/>). However, none of these demands are official, nor have they been focused by corporate sponsorship. And none of them aim at stopping the process of revolutionary transformation that seeks to reinvent democracy and federate between different fronts in the struggle. This is why the criticisms of the presumed lack of Tea-Party-like focus are misguided: the ongoing process of collective negotiation between multiple concerns—economic, political, social, environmental, etc.—and explicit demands are not mutually exclusive.

In these times of revolutionary transformation, it is integral to the ongoing movement to rethink revolution itself in order to debunk utopian blackmail and the conservative conception of revolution. Revolutionary activity is an immanent action of collective social reconfiguration whose temporal horizons are indefinite. In spite of what the media pundits and defenders of representative politics would like to have us believe, this revolution is not an endgame. It is only a beginning!

-Gabriel Rockhill

